

COVER PHOTOGRAPH: MATT WRIGHT

A large vocabulary isn't just useful – it can be sexy too, Ben Macintyre says

THE MORE WORDS YOU know, the higher you climb the evolutionary ladder. Don't take my word for it. Ask God – or Darwin.

Professor Erich Jarvis has studied the "vocabulary" of songbirds and concluded that the more complicated the syntax of the song, the more "words" and phrases it contains, the more attractive that bird seems to the opposite sex.

Words, in other words, are sexy. Increase your word power and you increase your chances of mating with other members of your species similarly evolved, and thus have offspring with even larger vocabularies who will thrash you at Scrabble.

Words are power, and pleasure. They are the individual cells that make up the body of language, the capacity for complex communication that sets us apart from other animals (our nearest rival being Kanzi, a male bonobo ape at Georgia State University, who is said to have mastered 3,000 words; the *OED* contains 300,000).

Words make us human: knowing more words makes us more human. Bishops, broadcasters, grammarians, prescriptive punctationists and the like tend to bemoan the decline of language, but the word bank has



(sleep) that would not be improved by the addition, not of more words, but of better ones. Whether one is a novelist, politician or kidnapper, finding the right words for the novel, the speech, and the ransom note is essential. Even traffic wardens need a healthy store to parry the others thrown at them.

Words can be deceptive. The apparently gentle word "purr", in Scottish Gaelic, means "to headbutt". Words can be hijacked and misused. Powerful men, for good or ill (both Hitler and Churchill), have understood the might of words. In 1940, a 12-year-old boy wrote to President Roosevelt, asking for help expanding his English vocabulary: "I don't know English but I know very much Spanish and I suppose you don't know very Spanish but you know very English because you are American." The boy's name was Fidel Castro.

Words extend the horizon, and our knowledge of ourselves. When Hamlet in Act II, scene 2, is asked what he is reading, he replies "Words, words, words". He may seem dismissive, but words are part of Hamlet's quest through words, he is seeking the answer to the question of to be, or not. Word power is not about using a complicated and obscure word where a short or familiar one is already at hand. It is not about waving your vocab around to attract a mate. It is about the discovery of a word to describe something in a new and unexpected way. Adopt a new word. Take it home. Add it to your word family and introduce it to the others in your collection. They will play with each other, form new patterns and meanings, making the world a little bigger, a little clearer.

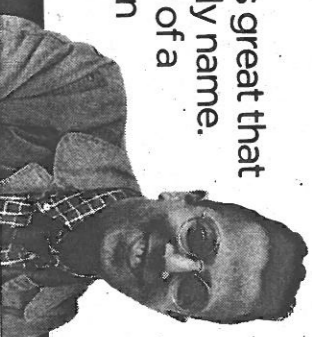
Tom Stoppard observed: "Words are innocent, neutral, precise, standing for this, defining that, meaning the other, so if you look after them you can build bridges across incomprehension and chaos... They deserve respect. If you get the right ones in the right order, you can nudge the world a little or make a poem which children will speak for you when you are dead."

Quality of words is more important than quantity. Jane Austen used 6,798 different words in her books, rather fewer than the 7,500 considered necessary today to write and speak fluently. James Joyce deployed 19,903. There is no human activity (except

My favourite word

GOOGOL (as opposed to Google): it is great that such a big number (10¹⁰⁰) has such a silly name. Invented by the nine-year-old nephew of a mathematician, it's certainly better than the alternative, ten duotrigintillion.

SIMON SINGH, SCIENCE WRITER



Don't confuse these words

Are you feeling sensual or merely sensuous? If you don't want to be misunderstood, be careful with these commonly confused pairs of words

abjure adjure

"Abjure" means "to renounce an oath" or "to abandon or abstain from". By contrast, adjure means "to command by exacting an oath" or, more commonly now, "to request earnestly".

eg He had *abjured* all religious beliefs. They were all *shouting* at once, *adjuring* each other to have a pint.

adverse averse

are related in origin but do not have the same meaning. "Adverse" means "unfavourable or harmful" and is normally used of conditions and effects. "Averse" is used of people, nearly always with "to", and means "having a strong dislike or opposition to something".

The crew had to deal with *adverse* weather conditions. She is *averse* to change.

amoral immoral

While "immoral" means "not conforming to accepted standards of morality", "amoral" implies "not concerned with or ignorant of morality".

The client pays for the *amoral* expertise of the lawyer. The council judged the film to be *immoral* and obscene.

biannual biennial

"Biannual" means "twice a year". "Biennial" means "taking place every two years". A biennial plant lives a two-year cycle, flowering and producing seed in the second year. To avoid confusion, rephrasing is often better.

Congressional elections are a *biennial* phenomenon.

The solstice is a *biannual* event.

bravado bravery bravura

"Bravado" means "ostentatious

courage or boldness", often concealing fear or reluctance,

whereas "bravery" is a general word for "courageous action or character".

"Bravura" is a brilliant or showy style of playing music or of performance in some other field. His defiant words were mere *bravado*. The knight was renowned for his *bravery*.

The recital ended with a blazing *bravura* display.

complacent complaisant

are similar in pronunciation and both come from the Latin verb *complacere* "to please". In English, "complacent" is commoner and means "smug and self-satisfied". "Complaisant" means "willing to please".

With his *complacent* attitude, he was no fun to work with. The people in our village proved *complaisant* and cordial.

complement compliment

As a verb "complement" means "to add to something in a way that enhances or improves" (it is related to "complete"). "Compliment" means "to admire and praise someone for something". Complimentary means "expressing a compliment". From this comes the sense of "given free". The relaunched website will complement the radio programmes.

He paid her a charming *compliment*. Honeymooners receive *complimentary* fruit and flowers.

decry descri

"Decry" means "to belittle or disparage". "Descri" means "to catch sight of". He takes every opportunity to *decry* contemporary morality. She described two figures on the horizon.

dependence dependency

"Dependence" means "a state of depending"; "dependency" can mean this but is more usually "a country

or province that is dependent on another". The use of dependency to

mean dependence has been popularised by the term "dependency culture", "a way of life determined by being dependent on state benefits".

His *dependence* on his mother's support was *pathetic*. *Gibraltar* is a British *dependency*.

derisory derisive

"Derisory" usually means "ridiculously small or inadequate". "Derisive" is used to mean "expressing contempt".

His reaction to the *derisory* salary increase was a *derisive* laugh.

discrete discreet

are pronounced in the same way and share an origin but they do not mean the same thing. "Discrete" means "separate", while *discreet* means "careful and circumspect". A finite number of *discrete* categories. You can rely on him to be *discreet*.

elicit illicit

"Elicit" is sometimes confused with "illicit" because both words are pronounced the same.

"Elicit" is a verb meaning "to extract (an answer, admission, etc.)", whereas "illicit" is an adjective meaning "unlawful, forbidden".

She managed to *elicit* a confession out of her cheating husband. After his wife had thrown him out of the house, he got arrested for *illicit* drinking.

endemic epidemic

An "endemic" disease is one regularly or only found among a particular people or in a particular region, whereas an "epidemic" disease is a temporary but widespread outbreak. Both words have extended meanings in relation to things other than diseases. *Skiving* and *malingering* have reached epidemic proportions.

Corruption is *endemic* in many financial institutions.