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A poll of the BBC's global audience reveals the appeal of quotations that mix sound and meaning

David Crystal

"The memories of childhood," said Dylan Thomas, "have no order and no end." And, as the BBC World Service's recent Moving Words poll demonstrated, so it is with quotations. Proposals flooded in from all over the world, juxtaposing politics and cinema, philosophy and literature, science and religion. Woody Allen rubbed shoulders with the Dalai Lama, St Augustine with Mae West.

It's an impossible task, really, comparing quotations, for they are such personal, intimate things. When we use a quotation, we encapsulate a thought of particular significance to us, and show through its use our interests and opinions. Quotations call to mind shared moments, memorable events, favourite experiences of reading and listening. They bond people. To adapt George Eliot, "A different taste in quotations places a great strain on the affections."

Quotations are the ultimate in cheek and the ultimate in respect. We have taken over someone else's words, without even a by-your-leave. And we have allowed them a special place inside our heads — often a permanent place. Some quotations never leave you. Why is that? What is it that makes a quotation memorable?

It's not so much what you say, as the way that you say it. The same linguistic features turn up in the most popular quotations. Take Woody

Allen's "To you, I'm an atheist; to God, I'm the Loyal Opposition." This displays all the requirements for impact and memorability: a balanced rhythmic structure, grammatical parallelism, neat vocabulary counterpoint, and the whole thing well within our short-term memory preference for seven content-bearing words.

The winner of the poll was Lao Tzu's "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step". I was not surprised. Utterances become quotations because they mean something to people. They come to "own" them when they find something in their personal lives to which the quotation relates. Everybody likes to own this one. Type it into a search engine and you will find thousands of hits ranging from scientific research to commercial advertising, from national politics to personal therapy.

The appealing content is reinforced in this translation by its structure. Two rhythm-units, each with three strong stresses. A contrast between the phonetic pace of each unit: the leisurely long vowels and liquid consonants in "journey", "thousand", and "miles" vs the punchy monosyllabic "single" and "step", with short vowels and a striking "s" alliteration.

Note how different the quotation would feel if we were to replace "step" by, say, "stride" or "pace". The force of this quotation lies in the phonetic impact of its last word. It was a worthy winner.

David Crystal is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor and a celebrated writer on language. His latest book, Words, Words, Words, is published by Oxford University Press

The runner up
Mahatma Gandhi

"An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind"



Lao Tzu's 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step' was the most popular quotation Photo: David Mansell

Nuala O'Sullivan

BBC Learning English has created a Moving Words website that can be used by teachers of English with learners. Here are some activities to use in conjunction with the website in class and others that can be used without a classroom internet connection. You can find Moving Words at www.bbclearningenglish.com/movingwords

A treasure hunt

You and your students create comprehensions questions based on the text on the Moving Words website. For example, where was Nelson Mandela born? What kind of stamps did Tony Benn want to introduce in Britain? Students navigate around the site to answer the questions.

Make your own fridge magnets

Students write out their favourite quote, chop up the words and leave them on their desk. Students move to new desks and try to put the words they find into the correct order. They write down their answers before moving to another desk to do the activity again. After a set period of time students compare their answers with the original quote. An interactive version of this activity is available by following the link to "fridge quiz" on the Moving Words website.

A class survey

Students think of their favourite quote and write it down on a piece of paper. Quotes are posted around the room and students move around the room, reading each one. Give students time to think about the quotes and then hold a class

vote to find the most moving words. The student whose quote gets the most votes explains to class why they chose it.

Translations

Ask students to think of the most moving thing anyone has said to them. They write it in their first language and then translate it into English. Students then swap quotes with a partner who has to try to guess who said the quote, what the circumstances were, etc.

Rent a quote

Ask students to take turns calling out emotive words (love, respect, death, etc). Write the words on individual pieces of card. Students choose six words from a hat and create a new moving words quote which must include at least four of their key words.