

# A Regular Army of Hippopotami

## Looking It Up in 'The' Dictionary

Julie Blake explores the idea of the dictionary as a fascinating source for language investigation, argues that the Complete Oxford English Dictionary (available free online) is a vital tool for teaching English, and demonstrates how it can be used effectively.



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A student in your class asks you the meaning of a word in a passage of text they are reading: what do you say? The first response that comes to mind might well be, "who do you think I am, Carol Vorderman?" but you're more likely to say "look it up in the dictionary". Which dictionary? **The** dictionary. This might refer to a specific dictionary you have copies of in your classroom, but it is also a fixed, formulaic phrase<sup>1</sup> we use to wave our hand more loosely in the direction of a bigger idea: the idea that there is a single authoritative dictionary somewhere "out there" to which any and every word in English might be referred for sense, meaning and often also spelling, though as students have said to me more times than I care to recall, "how can I look it up in the dictionary, miss, if I don't know how to spell it?" As always, they have a point ...

So, what happens if we follow our own advice and look a word up in "the dictionary"? Take, for example, the word <hippopotamus>.

### My Little Picture Dictionary

First (Figure 1), here is our word in Roger Priddy's (2006) *My Little Picture Dictionary*, published by Macmillan and described as suitable for children aged three and upwards. We find the head word <hippopotamus> printed in large letters, a bright red page border, a colour photograph of a hippopotamus that seems to have a shadow of a smile on its face, a sentence showing the word in use, and a brief basic definition telling the reader four facts: it is an animal, the animal is large, it has skin, the skin is thick. It is instantly recognisable as a text written for children, but what purposes do three year olds have with a dictionary? How do these compare with our own, or those of a 14 year old in our class?

### Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary

Here it is again (Figure 2, next page) in the 2008 third edition of the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* published by Cambridge University Press and suitable for advanced learners of English as a Foreign Language. This time, the words that <hippopotamus> keeps company with in this dictionary are shown. In *My Little Dictionary*, the words that appeared on the same page were <horse>, <house> and <hug>. How do these imply a very different group of users and the mix of purposes they might have in using this dictionary? In this more elaborate dictionary entry we are also given a phonemic representation of the pronunciation of the word in British and American English, the word class that <hippopotamus> belongs to,

two variations of the plural form, its clipped informal variation, and additional information about the size of this animal's legs, the colour of its skin, its preferred habitat, and the part of the world in which it is found.

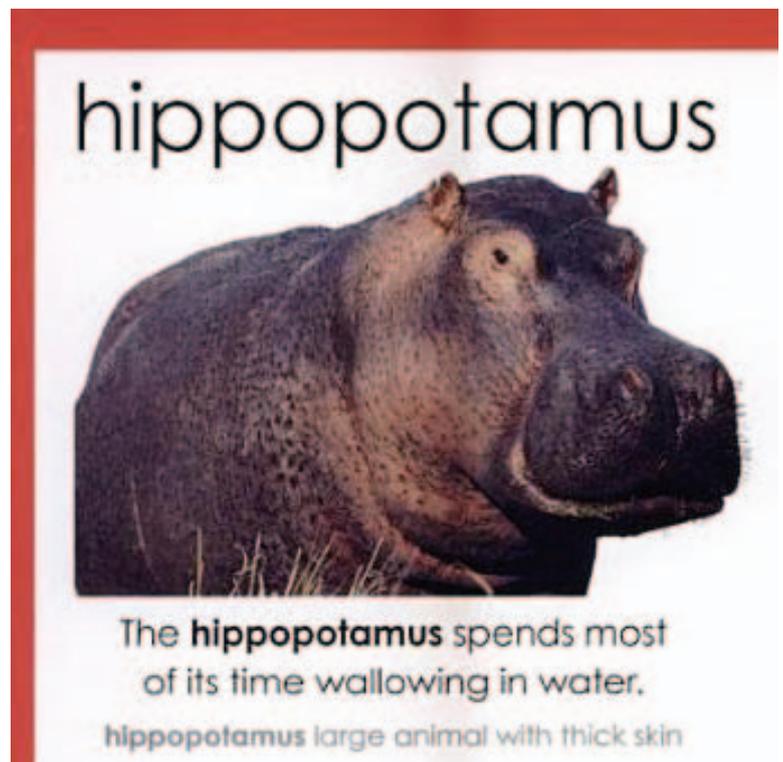


Figure 1: *My Little Picture Dictionary*

**'hip flask** *noun* [C] a small flat bottle that is used to carry alcohol in your pocket

**hip-hop** /'hɪp.hɒp/ ⓘ /-hɑ:p/ *noun* [U] a type of popular music in which the subject of the songs is often politics or society and the words are spoken rather than sung

**hippie, hippy** /'hɪp.i/ *noun* [C] a person, typically young, especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s, who believed in peace, was opposed to many of the accepted ideas about how to live, had long hair, and often lived in groups and took drugs

**the Hippocratic oath** /ðə,hɪp.ə.kræt.ɪk'əʊθ/ ⓘ /-kræt.ɪk'əʊθ/ *noun* [S] a promise made by people when they become doctors to do everything possible to preserve human life and to keep high working standards

**hippopotamus** /,hɪp.ə'pɒt.ə.məs/ ⓘ /-'pɒ:t.ə-/ *noun* [C] (*plural hippopotamuses or hippopotami*) (*INFORMAL hippo*) a very large animal with short legs and thick, dark grey skin which lives near water in Africa

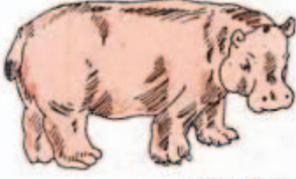


**hill** (*ਹਿਲ*) *n.* small mountain ਪਹਾੜ, ਪਹਾੜੀ

**hint** (*ਹਿੰਟ*) *n.* an indication, helpful suggestion ਸੰਕੇਤ, ਇਸ਼ਾਰਾ

**hippopotamus** (*ਹਿੱਪੋਪਟਾਮਸ*) *n.* large African quadruped animal living in rivers etc., river horse ਦਰਿਆਈ ਘੋੜਾ

**hippopotamus**



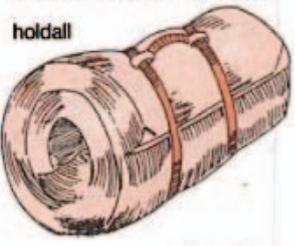
ਦਰਿਆਈ ਘੋੜਾ

**history** (*ਹਿਸਟਰੀ*) *n.* systematic study of past events ਇਤਿਹਾਸ

**hit** (*ਹਿਟ*) *v.t.* to strike, to come against something with force ਮਾਰਨਾ, ਚੇਟ ਮਾਰਨਾ, ਚੇਟ ਪਹੁੰਚਾਣਾ; *n.* stroke, blow, success ਝਲਾ, ਚੇਟ, ਸਫਲ ਜਤਨ

possession, grasp, space below deck for cargo ਅਧਿਕਾਰ, ਕਬਜ਼ਾ, ਪਕੜ, ਜਹਾਜ਼ ਵਿਚ ਸਮਾਨ ਰੱਖਣ ਦਾ ਤਹਿਖਾਨਾ

**holdall**



ਬਿਸਤਰਬੰਦ

**holdall** (*ਹੋਲਡਾਲ*) *n.* canvas bag to hold bedding etc. ਬਿਸਤਰਬੰਦ

**hole** (*ਹੋਲ*) *n.* empty or hollow space, home of a small animal, aperture ਮੋਰੀ, ਸੁਰਾਖ, ਛੇਦ, ਬਿਲ

**holiday** (*ਹਾਲੀਡੇ*) *n.* time of rest from work, time of recreation ਛੁੱਟੀ

**holy** (*ਹੋਲੀ*) *adj.* religious, pious, sacred ਧਾਰਮਿਕ, ਪਵਿੱਤਰ, ਰੱਬੀ

**home** (*ਹੋਮ*) *n.* one's dwelling place, native place, asylum ਘਰ, ਜਨਮ ਭੂਮੀ, ਨਿਵਾਸ ਅਸਥਾਨ, ਸੇਵਾ-ਆਸ਼ਰਮ; *adj.* pertaining to home or country ਘਰ ਦਾ, ਗ੍ਰਹਿ...

Figure 2: Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary

Figure 3: Bharat Junior English-Punjabi Dictionary

### Bharat Junior English-Punjabi Dictionary

In the third example (Figure 3), we find the word as it appears in the *Bharat Junior English-Punjabi Dictionary* published in India in 1996 by Pitambar Publishing Company. Like the first it is published for children, like the second it is for learners of English, but it is distinctly different too, using a line drawing of a hippopotamus for illustration, the Punjabi word, and the more complex term “quadruped” to refer to the number of its legs. What is interesting is that it also uses the phrase “river horse” as part of its definition, a phrase, as we shall see, that is inextricably linked with the word's linguistic and cultural roots, its etymology. This, too, is translated into Punjabi.

### Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Biological Sciences

Next (Figure 4) is the entry from the *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Biological Sciences* by K. Narang, R. Rani and M. Prakash, published in 1991, also in India, by Annol Publications. The intended audience for this dictionary is described as “Those Who Have To Deal With Different Aspects Of Biological Sciences In Colleges, Universities And Research Institutes”. We see here how this shapes the words our <hippopotamus> keep company with, the style used, and the information included, such as the animal's Latin name and its dietary preferences.

### Urban Dictionary

And finally (Figure 5, next page), for now, is part of the entry from the *Urban Dictionary*, accessed online at [www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com) in January 2010. This is a “Web 2.0” site, in which users create and rate definitions of words, with minimal moderation, an enthusiasm for the outer edges of bad taste, political incorrectness, arch youth sociolect, creative wordplay and – sometimes – an

**Hipbone.** The os coxae or innominate bone consisting of three fused bones, the pubis, ischium, and illium, forming the lateral half of the pelvic girdle. In some mammals, it includes the cotyloid or acetabular bone.

**Hip Joint.** The articulation between the head of the femur and the hip bone, a ball and socket joint.

**Hippocampus.** A part of the vertebrate brain consisting of two ridges, one over each of the two lateral ventricles. It is highly developed in advanced mammals (primates and whales) and its function appears to be related to the expression of responses that generate emotion (such as fear and anger).

**Hippopotamus.** The river horse, a large, herbivorous mammal (*Hippopotamus amphibius*) inhabiting rivers and lakes of Africa.

**Hirsute.** Hairy, shaggy; covered with hair, bristles, or hairlike structures.

Figure 4: Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary

hippopotamus hippo fat fuck overweight large and in charge whale  
porcupotamus slutapotamus porcupine obese lardgina chimera hungry  
animal slut muffin top omega mu biggies ugly lights bash and dash ffb big  
flat fatty secret internet fatty bbw luva buffeteers badonkadonk moped bird  
love handles juggernaut whale tagger buffet queen fatslapper bikini whale  
plumpadunk blockormore full as a fat girls socks buffalo butt smuggling play  
doh plumper pumper ham and bangers bazooms big booty bitches big boobs  
heavy duty beauty buffet bang manatee heavy weight honey bacon-up that  
ass feeder hippo cups

**1. hippopotamus** 53 up, 12 down  

buy hippopotamus mugs, tshirts and magnets

a fat woman

*"damn she a hippopotamus"*

by scott doman Apr 13, 2003 share this

Figure 5: Urban Dictionary

interesting and insightful window on contemporary language change. The site currently displays the banner message “Urban Dictionary is the dictionary you wrote. Define your world”. The user can interact with the site via RSS feeds, Facebook, mobile phone, Twitter and Google Calendar. We learn nothing at all about the animal defined in the previous entries, but a figurative extension its creator, Scott Doman, asserts as recognised use, providing a citation below the definition to show the word in its typical context. We also see this definition in the context of keywords connected in some way or other to the headword. Charming, I know...

### The dictionary?

What we can see from these small samples is that there is no such thing as “the dictionary”. As with any other kind of text, a certain set of genre and stylistic conventions has evolved over time,<sup>2</sup> but exactly how these are employed, adapted, resisted and innovated depends upon a complex set of contextual factors including audiences, purposes, and the contexts of production and reception. Despite our in-the-moment reaching for the general idea of “the dictionary”, we know this context specificity: we will almost certainly have sets in our classrooms of a specific schools version of one of the

major dictionary publishers; we may have smaller numbers of bilingual or TEFL dictionaries to support children for whom English is a relatively new additional language; your school or college library may offer one of the weightier editions of your classroom set, and may well have a good selection of student-friendly alternatives, including online and CD-ROM versions. This is all good, but these are resources primarily available to support young people’s curiosity about words and their literacy needs. In this sharply differentiated publishing market, who stands up for English teachers?

You could probably start answering that question by looking at the shelf in your departmental cubbyhole, or on your desk at home. Perhaps there are dictionaries of literary and linguistic terms, and for those who keep up with the publishing times, Ben and David Crystal’s *Shakespeare’s Words*. You might have a large desk dictionary, the web-happy will have bookmarked Wiktionary or some such, collaboratively produced or otherwise. All this is good, too, and in different situations each of these resources will prove valuable. But the dictionaries of literary and linguistic terms will only help you out with a very particular kind of enquiry, Crystal father and son won’t help you much with Chaucer, a desk dictionary will give little sense of changing use or cultural valuing of words over time, and it is often very

difficult to even read online dictionaries for all the advertising flashing at you. As a profession concerned with language, literature and the wider dimensions of culture, and with all its history, diversity and change, we need a tool that is up to the professional job. You wouldn't expect a doctor to work with the Dorling Kindersley dictionary of anatomy, or a lawyer to work with the *Which Guide to Divorce*, so, taking ourselves seriously as professionals, irrespective of how anyone else in education, politics or public discourse might wish to frame us, what should we be using? What is "the dictionary" for English teachers? There is only one answer: the complete Oxford English Dictionary. Stop!

Before you say, "yes, I know, that's what I've got in my classroom", look again: the **complete** *Oxford English Dictionary*. Not the pocket, not the concise or compact, not the shorter. The *complete Oxford English Dictionary* consists of twenty volumes and three supplements, or a subscription to the online edition (available free in your classroom – see page 44 for details).

Some English teachers are using it, especially the online version and particularly those who teach A Level English Language, as it is a source of data sometimes set in the examinations,<sup>3</sup> and an important reference source for the study of language change. Let's look at our <hippopotamus> again.

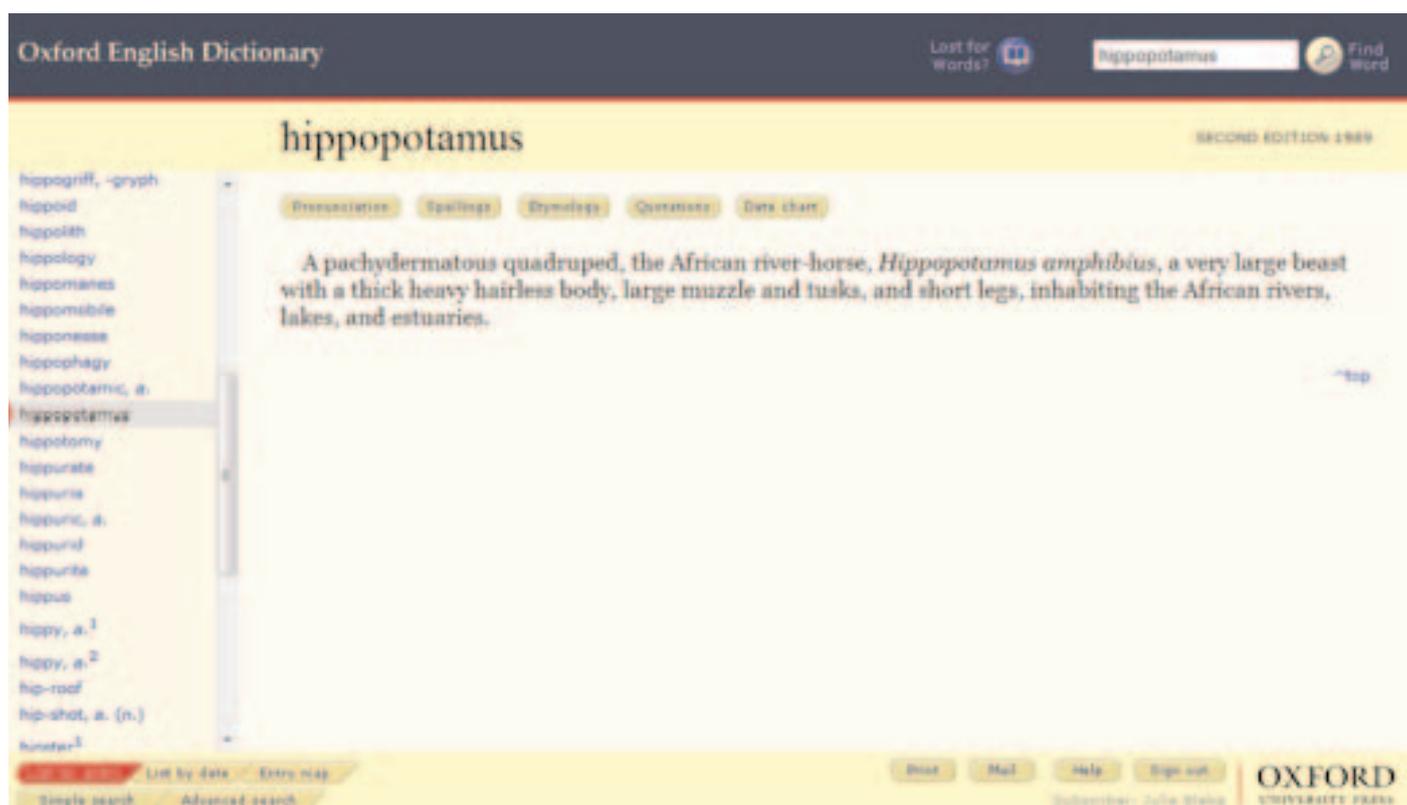


Figure 6: The Oxford English Dictionary online

### The Oxford English Dictionary

This (Figure 6) is how the basic entry looks in the online edition of the complete *Oxford English Dictionary*, giving us information about type of skin, number and length of legs, popular and Latin alternative names, size, weight, bodily appendages, habitats and part of the world. It is concise, monolingual, and not illustrated.

We can access more information than this by clicking on the tabs above the definition. Let's take them in order.

### Pronunciation

If we click the pronunciation tab, the word appears in phonemic transcription as we have seen in some of the previous dictionaries. Here, hippopotamus is represented

as  $h\text{ɪ}p\text{ə}p\text{ə}t\text{ə}m\text{əs}$ , though where I come from you might hear something more like  $\text{ɪ}p\text{ə}p\text{ə}t\text{ə}m\text{əs}$  with a 'dropped' <h> at the start, the second syllable an 'uh' instead of an 'oe' as in go, and a glottal stop where others might say a <t>. Most of us are unlikely to spend much time correcting student accent features, but if we want to explore spoken language variation, now that it has a formal place in the National Curriculum and a place in the new GCSE specifications, this kind of information might make a useful starting point for discussion. Although people with accomplished literacy practices around standard spelling – teachers and 'good' students – often find phonemic transcription a challenge to their world view and identity, those who more usually adopt a sound-spelling approach usually "get it" much more quickly, though they too have to contend with the

Pl. -muses, -mi. Forms:  $\alpha$ . 4 ypotame, -tamos, -tanos, -tanus, 5 ypotam, ipotayne, (pl. ypotamy), 6-7 hippotame, (6 hyppotame, hippotamon).  $\beta$ . 6-7 hippopotame, (7 hippopotum, -potamy, hypopotamus), 7- hippopotamus, (8-9 -os).

Figure 7: Spellings Tab, OED

unusual symbols. Why do you say  $\text{hip}\epsilon\upsilon\text{pot}\epsilon\text{m}\epsilon\text{s}$  and I say  $\text{ip}\epsilon\text{pot}\epsilon\text{m}\epsilon\text{s}$ ? There's a lesson starter already and a Gershwin song to boot. Though I don't think they actually mentioned hippos...

## Spelling

Next, we might click on the spellings tab. This gives us all the different ways in which the word has been spelled over time in the printed publications that form the empirical basis of the dictionary. For the word <hippopotamus> we are given the information in Figure 7 (above).

First, we are given the plural "Pl." forms, hippopotamuses and hippopotami. That immediately settles the timeless debate about which is correct: both are, but if we were working with pupils on the roots of our language, including why spelling in English is so very strange, we might explore why: the -mi ending emulating the word's etymological roots in Latin and Greek, the -muses ending showing the influence of the vernacular local context, this being a more regular Anglicised s/es plural form.

Then we have the different spellings over time: 14 of them, not counting plurals. These are organised chronologically. In a Second Edition entry such as this, 1 means a word documented in use before 1100, 2 a word documented in use in the 12th century ie 1100-1200, 3 is 1200-1300 and so on. So, here, in subsection  $\alpha$ , we have ypotame, ypotamos, ypotanos and ypotanus existing in print publications between 1300 and 1400; ypotam and ipotayne from 1400 to 1500; hippotame dominant 1500-1700, with more variation 1500-1600 with hyppotame and hippotamon. Other variations are shown in subsection  $\beta$ . If we were to combine this information with my non-standard pronunciation of our pachydermatous quadruped, we might see that though my mother may still threaten to send me to elocution lessons, my pronunciation is almost certainly rooted in a longer history than the Early Modern affectation with hypercorrected initial /h/ sounds. Or, in brief, I'm right! It can also be a liberating experience for students who struggle with spelling to see, in an authoritative source, that spelling is neither fixed nor divinely ordained, but a matter of cultural and historical shifts. Understanding why it matters that they attempt to master standard forms is an important lesson in language and power, and how they

might want to equip themselves for that ceaseless struggle.

## Etymology

The next tab is etymology, and this tells us about the linguistic roots of the word. Our classroom dictionaries may do this in brief, with abbreviations in brackets such as (OE) for Old English or (L) for Latin. You can do quite a lot with this information: I had my class explore how many words in their everyday contemporary English were derived from Old English roots<sup>4</sup> using nothing more than the *Oxford Concise*, but the complete *Oxford English Dictionary* will help with more demanding word-root puzzles than simply the language of origin. The etymological roots of our muzzled and tusked friend are shown in Figure 8.

When used before a language name, the abbreviation <a.> means <adopted from>. So, this entry tells us that the word hippopotamus was adopted from the late Latin (L) *hippopotamus* and, via Galen, from the late Greek (Gr) words for river and horse. Now we have an etymological explanation for the "river horse" found in the definitions of some of the other dictionaries we have looked at. But the word didn't come into English in any simple one-channel way: it also entered the language via Old French (OF) *ypotame*, itself adopted from medieval (med) Latin *ypotamus*, and that, in turn, a corruption of the older Latin form *hippopotamus*. We are also shown how the Old French form *ypopotame* has evolved in its own language to become modern French *hippopotame*. In a linguistic nutshell, we have here a concise introduction to a number of language themes and issues we might want to explore with different pupils: the idea of loan words as a source of the English lexicon, and also as a source of spelling challenge, and the connections that often exist between morphologically complex words and Latin and Greek. Of course we could do that by telling them, but there is something else that is important in the representation here in the linguistically diverse environments we are all teaching in. I don't speak or read ancient Greek and I rarely have any need for the French words I learned at school for zoo animals, but the fact that English is situated in this dictionary within a wider linguistic context is important in the recognition and celebration of diversity. English may be the global language of power, but no language is an island entire

[a. late L. *hippopotamus*, a. late Gr. *ἵπποπόταμος* (Galen), f. *ἵππος* horse + *πόταμος* river. (The earlier Gr. writers used *ὁ ἵππος ὁ ποτάμιος* the riverine horse.) The earlier Eng. forms were a. OF. *ypotame* (13th c. in Hatz.-Darm.), ad. med.L. *ypotamus*, corruption of *hippopotamus*. The mod.Fr. is *hippopotame*.]

Figure 8: Etymology Tab, OED

unto itself, as I'm sure John Donne would have said if he'd only lived a few hundred years longer. When the leader of the National Front<sup>5</sup> is an elected member of the European Parliament, this representation matters, as all our languages and all our diversities matter.

### Quotations

The next tab (Figure 9) is the quotations tab. This practice of citing examples from reputable printed publications was introduced by Samuel Johnson for his *Dictionary of the English Language* first published in 1755. It is a practice which builds the meaning and, in the case of the OED, the history of the word by empirical evidence.

This is the part where some teachers and students start backing away nervously but for teachers at least, it really is just a matter of condensed formatting that can be a little overwhelming at first sight. Here's how it works. There are two sets of quotations here, set  $\alpha$  and set  $\beta$ . Let's take set  $\beta$ . This consists of eight quotations, starting with one from 1563, then one from 1600 and so on through to 1865. After the date, underlined, is the name of the author from whose book this quotation is taken, and then, in italics and abbreviated, the title of the book. Here "tr." is an additional detail, meaning that this source is a translated version of a book in another language. Clicking on LIVINGSTONE for example, leads us to this information:

Livingstone, David  
*Last journals in Central Africa 1865–73* (1874)

*Missionary travels and researches in South Africa 1857*  
*Narrative of an expedition to the Zambesi 1865*

We can see that this is, as we may already have guessed, Doctor Livingstone, I presume, and the nature of the source text is 19th century observational scientific/travel writing. The numbers (Roman and Arabic) after the title show which page the quotation appears on, and then a sentence is quoted showing the word in use. The source texts might be criticised for implying a whole set of cultural judgements about what is valued and considered authoritative, but as English teachers the range of fiction and non-fiction they are drawn from is useful. We deal in cultural judgements and if you work with the idea that texts can always be read against the grain, even authoritative reference sources, then we begin to open up some really interesting questions about culture and power. This will be explored further in this article in the TART case study. For now, here we have a little snapshot of language change over time in the form, meaning and use of the word hippopotamus from 1563 onwards, or from some time in the 1300s if we use both data sets shown here. Working out the modern English equivalents of each sentence would provide a good starting point for a simple class investigation. Invite some students to decide what the difference is between data sets  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ , and see where you get to with that.<sup>6</sup> My hypothesis (I don't know either ...) is that the first set is fantastical, references by people who have never seen a hippopotamus, the second are from sources much closer to natural history.

**hippopotamus** SECOND EDITION 1989

$\alpha$  **13..** K. Alis. 5166 Ypotamos comen flyngynge..Grete bestes and griselich. *Ibid.* 5184 Ypotame a wonder beest is More than an olifaunt, I wis. *Ibid.* 6554 He sleth ypotanos, and kokadrill. **1340-70** Alex. & Dind. 157 Dredful dragonus..Addrus and ypotamus, and opure ille wormus. **1398** TREVISA Barth. *De P.R.* XIII. xxvi. (1495) 460 Some fysshe seke theyr meete oonly in water and some by nyghte vpon the londe, as Ypotanus, the water horse. **1400** MANDEVILLE (1839) xxvi. 268 In that Contree ben many Ipotaynes [*Roxb.* ypotams]. **1563** T. HILL *Art Garden.* (1593) 26 The hide of the riuer Horse, named Hippotamon. **1572** J. BOSSEWELL *Armorie* II. 65b, The water Horssse of the Sea is called an Hyppotame. **1658** W. SANDERSON *Graphice* 22 Monsters, Chimeraes, Hippotames, and others such, which Heraulds undertake to bestow upon Gentlemens Buryings.

$\beta$  **1563** WARDE tr. *Alexis' Secr.* II. 28b (Stanf.) A skin..of a Hippopotame. **1600** J. POEY tr. *Leo's Africa* I. 39 The Hippopotamus or water-horse is somewhat tawnie. **1601** HOLLAND *Pliny* I. 91 (Stanf.) The river Bambotus full of Crocodiles and Hippopotames. **1605** DANIEL *Philotas* in *Farr S.P. Jas. I* (1848) 274 Me thought a mighty hippopotamus, From Nilus floting, thrusts into the maine. **1630** J. TAYLOR (Water P.) *Praise Hempseed Wks.* III. 63/1 The Ibis, Crocodile, a Cat, a Dog, The Hippopotamy, beetles, or a frog. **1774** GOLDEN, *Nat. Hist.* IV. x. 292 The hippopotamos is an animal as large, and not less formidable than the Rhinoceros. **1833** LYELL *Princ. Geol.* III. 221 The tusks of hippopotamuses often appear on the surface. **1865** LIVINGSTONE *Zambesi* III. 81 A considerable body of bitter water containing leeches..crocodiles and hippopotami.

Figure 9: Quotation Tab, OED

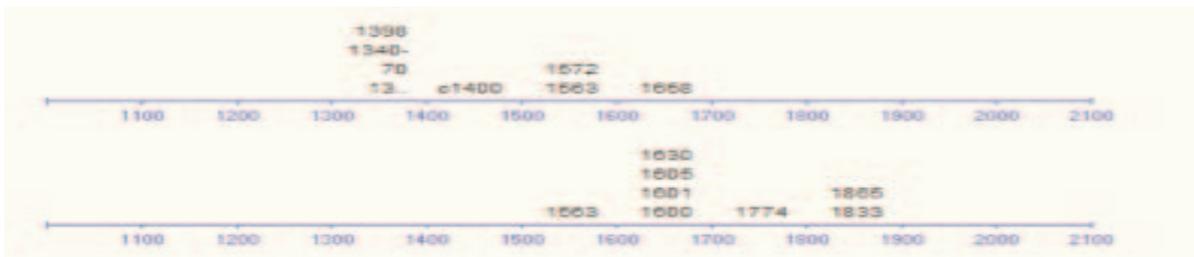


Figure 10: The Oxford English Dictionary Online - Date Chart tab

### Date chart

The final tab is clicked to produce a date chart. This logs the quotations on a timeline so that you can see the patterns over time more clearly.

What we see here is the way the first data set, arguably the more fantastical references, peters out by 1658, while the second, natural history observations, start later, in 1563 and continue up to 1865 (and, we know, beyond). We see a period of overlap in the 16th and 17th centuries, as new information refines and shapes the definition and connotations of this word, until the older sense has been replaced by the more precise scientific one. Working with timelines and data may not be the most natural preserve of English teachers, but it gives us a valuable method of working with, and visualising, patterns of language change.

### Can students work with this?

If the work is scaffolded thoughtfully and there is a relevant focus, in my experience AS and A Level students can work with OED entries quite comfortably, and there will be some contexts in which the same might be so at Key Stages 3 and 4. What you have already read here is the start of a project A2 English Language students worked on with me: their own research and investigation of how the word <hippopotamus> appears in a variety of contrasting dictionaries, followed by a guided induction to how the word appears in the online edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. We noted that the OED entry for <hippopotamus> was a Second Edition entry, which means it was revised for publication in 1989 and has not yet been amended. If you want to see how entries change, look up <marmoset>. Currently displayed is a draft entry from June 2009 and in the top right hand corner there is an <earlier> button which allows you to compare the old and the new. In the light of this idea of

the need for lexicographers to keep up with language change, the students were invited to consider and then present their recommendations for a draft revision for our grete bestes. Specific questions included:

- Is there any factual information about the hippopotamus that is missing, incomplete or inaccurate?
- Bearing carefully in mind the contextual factors shaping the text, are there any elements of language or style that need to be changed?
- Is there any linguistic information that is missing as a result of language variation or of change that has occurred since this definition was published?
- Would you add any quotations? Where might these be drawn from?

Our debate centred on these key issues: whether or not it is legitimate for “the” dictionary to exclude regional and global diversity of pronunciation in favour of an archaic Received Pronunciation; whether or not the informalisation of language that has been an ongoing feature of language change for several decades should be recognised by including the shortened form <hippo>; whether a new sense should be added to acknowledge various slang uses; whether new quotations should be added to acknowledge the word in a wider range of sources including children’s stories and games (*Hungry Hippos*, anyone?).

After that, students moved into formal analysis of what the current entry for <hippopotamus> has to tell us about changes in language and style over time – this, the kind of question they needed to be able to tackle for their A2 exam. Here are some examples of students’ writing in response to this task. Names have been changed to protect the innocent, but otherwise they are authentic samples.

### Samira

*Throughout the definition, the hippopotamus is denoted as being a dangerous and ruthless wild animal (1774 ‘not less formidable than the Rhinoceros’). However, in the early citations the authors shown great fear within their writing, often describing them as beasts (1300 ‘Grete bestes and griselich’). This trepitation may stem from the fact that at the time of the earlier citations there was not much knowledge about the species. Many people may not have heard of, let alone seen a hippopotamus. Hippos inhabit rivers in Africa and only the selected few had the opportunity to travel such long distances. This means that in many of the cititations, the authors are, in a sense, writing about the unknown and were only reffereing to secondary sources.*

There are many versions of the word hippopotamus shown in the early extracts and gradually there becomes less variety with only one or two spellings being used in the later texts. There is also variety in the spelling of several other words within the description, suggesting a lack of standardised spelling and a disorganised language.

'Ypopotamus' and 'Ypotame' and 'ypotanos' 13., 'Ipotaynes' c1400, 'Hyppotame(s)' 1563-1658, 'Bestes@ and 'beest' 13..

The lack of standardisation of spellings evident in the extracts reflects the time which they were written. The newer texts have far less variation and the word hippopotamus begins to appear more like its modern day equivalent in the latest extracts. It is interesting to look at the origins of the word; the earliest English version was from Old French and it seems to have been mixed with the mid Latin version over time. As there were no dictionaries at the time, words were often written how they sounded and perhaps that is why the word has no 'h' at first, if it has derived partly from French, as they tend not to pronounce this sound. Standardisation seems to appear around the 15th Century and this is when dictionaries began to be printed and read by authors.

### Getting started

One way to get started is to subscribe to the free OED Word of the Day service.<sup>7</sup> By this means you will receive an OED entry by email every day. Some words will intrigue you, others won't, but if you start saving the ones you like in a folder in your inbox, you will very quickly build a treasure trove of potentially useful material. This service is entirely free to anyone, and you can also get an RSS feed Word of the Day to put on your English Department web page. Today's word is KANGAROO. And if you want something to "do" with all these words, have a look at the "Word Stories" in the (also free) Learning Resources section of the OED website, particularly the word story for <mammoth>.<sup>8</sup> This feature is written for a general adult audience with the purpose of intriguing and delighting them with a curious word history, and, with a thoughtful selection of words, could easily be adapted as a nice writing task for students of various ages and stages.

That completes our exploration of what an entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* looks like, the information it includes, and how this is shaped for a specific purpose – enabling current forms, uses and meanings to be understood in the light of their historical development – and for a specific audience – expert readers with an interest in words. If we are nothing else as a profession, surely we are that? This is our proper professional tool and, if you live in the United Kingdom, the online version is available to you now, entirely free of charge,

via your local public library anywhere where there is a computer with an internet connection – including in your classroom and from a web enabled mobile phone.

*Thanks to Oxford University Press for their permission to include extracts from the OED.*

### Notes

1. This can be demonstrated by conducting a corpus search for the phrase "the dictionary". In the British National Corpus, a substantial proportion of the "hits", and especially those in spoken genres, use "the dictionary" as a fixed expression in this way.
2. To see the historical roots of today's dictionary see the "Dictionaries and Meanings" section of the British Library's Texts in Context website at <http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/dic/meanings.html>
3. See AQA B ENB6 papers for January 2004, June 2005
4. For an account of this work, see Not So Fast! The influence of Old English on everyday language in the February 2005 edition of Emagazine, published by the English and Media Centre
5. Leopards don't change their spots.
6. Adopting Michael Rosen's principle, espoused in NATE's Classroom no 3 Autumn 2007 that the best classroom questions are the ones we don't yet know the answer to
7. To do this go to <http://www.oed.com/services/email-wotd.html>
8. <http://www.oed.com/learning/word-stories/mammoth.html>