

## The dickens of a dictionary to die for

David Crystal

Talk given at the launch of the 4th edn of the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*.  
London, 2003

You will want an explanation for my title.

In *Nicholas Nickleby*, the Yorkshire headmaster Wackford Squeers describes the death of one of his boys: 'A candle in his bed-room on the very night he died - the best dictionary sent up for him to lay his head upon.'

For some children, that was the only way in which they might get access to their own dictionary. It was, quite literally, a dictionary to die for. Without question, if Wackford Squeers were Minister of Education today, he would have a supply of LDOCE4s at his disposal.

Another way to get a dictionary was to leave school. In Victorian times, children attending the best academies were often presented with a copy of Johnson's Dictionary or Murray's Grammar when they left, to help them manage their lives. We know this because Thackeray tells us, in the opening chapter of *Vanity Fair*, of what happens when the independent-minded Becky Sharp is given a copy of Johnson as she leaves Miss Pinkerton's academy for young ladies. She throws it out of her coach window. If she had left with LDOCE4, of course, she would not have done this, and then what would have happened? The course of English literature would have been altered for ever.

Why am I so positive about LDOCE4? Dictionaries are there to look things up in. And the only way I know of testing a dictionary is to do just that. To give it a road-test. The metaphor is not original to me. Anthony Burgess:

'A word in a dictionary is very much like a car in a mammoth motorshow - full of potential but temporarily inactive.'

Awaiting an Activator, one might say.

So, thinking of what to say in this brief talk, I let my mind wander and road-tested as I went along, looking out of course for the words I wasn't expecting to be find.

Charles Dickens. What the dickens shall I say? Sounds a bit colloquial, and dated. I was frankly doubtful about that one - but it is there, with the appropriate gloss.

*Spoken, old-fashioned.*

(that's me to a T, I thought - to a T? **to a T/tee** *informal*, perfectly or exactly)

Where was I?

**dickens 1 what/who/where the dickens...?** used when asking a question to show that you are very surprised or angry: *What the dickens is the matter with her?* 2 **as pretty/smart etc as the dickens** *AmE* very pretty, clever, etc: *Isn't she as cute as the dickens!*

And if you don't like those examples, there are three more in the bank.



The entry also gives you a note on etymology, by the way - 1500-1600 - that is correct, not from Dickens, though many think so - its first recorded use is in Shakespeare - *Merry Wives* - a euphemism for 'what the devil'.

(**what/who/why etc the devil?** *old-fashioned spoken* used to show that you are surprised or annoyed *How the devil should I know what she's thinking?* - something which occurred to me when Della first asked me to do this talk)

Where was I?

A dictionary to die for. Why does that make me think of Nicole Kidman? Probably there are some here who would not need a reason. 1995 film. *To Die For*. Is that rather youthful idiom there?

**to die for** *informal* if something is to die for, it is extremely nice, attractive, or desirable: *She had hair to die for.*

There are another three examples in the bank.

Kidman - very popular among the youth of today - or *yoof* - they'll never have that - yoof of today?

**yoof** *used humorously*, British English, young people considered as a group

Where was I?

Kidman - got a Golden Globe this year for *The Hours*. Jack Nicholson for *About Schmidt*. Nothing interesting about *hours* - what about *about*? Nice multiple meaning there.

LDOCE4 give the appropriate senses: **about 1** = concerning or relating to a particular subject, But this is where I really take my hat off. In sense 2 they even anticipate the film in the examples:

**about 2** used to show why someone is angry, happy, upset, etc. *I'm really worried about Jack*

Jack Nicholson brilliant also in *As Good As It Gets* 1997),. Nice one. (Nice one?)

(**nice one!** *BrE* used when someone has just said or done something clever, amusing, or helpful.)

Where was I?

*As good as it gets?* One of no less than 65 entries on the uses of **good** - *spoken* If a situation is as good as it gets, it is not going to improve. *Enjoy yourself while you can. This is as good as it gets.*

I refer not to this reception.

Is LDOCE4 as good as it gets? No - there will be LDOCE5 one day, though heaven knows how they are going to improve on this edition. For the moment, this dictionary is certainly as good as it gets.