

Poet John Ansell is on a mission to improve our use of English by teaching young people larger words and old people smaller ones.

Words that make perfect nonsense

JOHN Ansell's hatred of incomprehensible English was exacerbated by a university sociology paper.

It asked: If bisexuality can be conceptualised as the point of insertion into and having the potential to deconstruct and displace the heterosexual/homosexual binary, how and why does psychology recuperate the potential disruption?

"My reaction to that was: If you are going to talk to me like that, I'm going to go now," says Ansell.

"If Paul McCartney and John Lennon had been to varsity when I was there, they may well have written a love song that went, 'All you need is... the cognitive-affective state characterised by intrusive and obsessive fantasising concerning reciprocity of amorous feelings by the object of the amorce'."

Ansell is a crusader for clear speech who presents talks including *Plain English as a Second Language (For People Who Call People 'Human Resources')* and *Gobbledygook—Let's Stop Talking Like Turkeys!*

The Beatles example is one he uses in his talks, an example that usually gets a laugh — or rather an "aggressive release of tension following the juxtaposition of two habitually incompatible frames of reference". Boom, boom.

Voted Most Entertaining Speaker at the 2001 Toastmasters national speech contest, and two-time winner of the poetry slam at Selby's Poetry Café in Porirua, Ansell has just released a book of verse, *I Think the Clouds are Cotton Wool*, that includes a section on grammar, punctuation and meaning.

His poetry draws on the English tradition of comic and humorous verse, typified by authors such as Ogden Nash, Alexander Pope and, Spike Milligan.

It is funny, it is clever and it rhymes.

"My first English teacher was Dr Seuss," Ansell says.

"I've always been attracted to tight rhymes with funny twists. The discipline of rhyme appeals to me. It's as much fun as you can have with your clothes on, as somebody once said about advertising."

Some of his verse is short and punchy. The limerick *There Was a Girl Boxer* from *Whitby* reads:

There was a girl boxer from Whitby / who crept up

behind me and hit me; / "You're a cowardly bitch!" / I exclaimed, after which / she agreed and barked: "Sorry," then bit me.

It's deceptively simple. While easy to read, these rhymes can be very hard to write.

"I took 12 years over this bloody thing," he says of the book. "A couple of poems in my book took months to get right, on and off. Mostly off. The important thing is that people enjoy the rhythm of it. There's one line in there that took me 48 goes."

Other poems reflect his passion for grammar, clarity of meaning, and language in general. *Keyboard Keys* explores role of letters on a typewriter, as this excerpt shows:

I'd hate to be / a keyboard key / especially / the key of E / so common! / E must never get any rest.

The key I'd be / is Zed (or Zee); / Zee's life is largely / finger-free / while poor old E / gets regularly depressed...

"I see why you'd / be me," said Zee; / "So easy / being an English Zee, / but Zees in ze EC / get really stressed.

Ve Polish, Czech / und German Zees / half never lived / ze life of ease, / viss vords like zloty, / zugzwang, und kuerzest."

The poem is illustrated with the Scrabble values of letters in Poland, Finland, Slovenia, Hungary and Italy. It's fun, but it's also educational, Ansell says.

"Good education is about making links. One thing can lead to another. A silly thing about keyboard keys can lead to Hungary. What is the Magyar language? Where does it come from?"

"I learnt a lot of what I know from Monty Python. They were serious academics and a lot of that came through in their skits. I would think, 'I like that, but I don't know what it means. I'll look it up.' It's nice to learn something from a little rhyme."

But there are limits to the educative power of poetry. Reading an anti-smoking poem in a poetry café, Ansell found himself almost powerless.

"I thought it might be the last time I performed there, because the room was full of smokers. But they all clapped and gave me a prize. Then went off and had a smoke."

Most of his fellow bards treat rhyme as optional and poetry as a medium for serious emotional discourse. At readings, Ansell is the odd man out.

"I do poetry cafes as sort of a court jester. I'm admiring of poets who can bare their souls, but I think laughter is important too. Somebody wrote to me, from Johnsonville, 'your sense of humour is like a friend to me'."

"My poetry is not deep and meaningful. I'll do that when I grow up."

That could take a while. Ansell is currently only "five years and 488 months" old.

In the meantime, he is making a career out of public speaking and poetry. He's a big hit in Probus clubs (an association of retired and semi-retired people) and hopes



that younger generations will embrace his message that plain speaking doesn't have to be boring, and that using big words doesn't make you clever.

"I think long words are fun. But they should not be used in anger."

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Aaron Watson

Sodden Art

By John Ansell
From the collection
*I Think the Clouds
are Cotton Wool*

— Dedicated to the former chairman of the British Council for Contemporary Art who was sacked for criticising the Council's awarding of £20,000 pounds to the perpetrator of an "installation" consisting of an empty room and a couple of lights.

*The exhibit resembles
A large empty room,
With a solitary cupboard
Marked TOWELS,
As through the front door
The sophisticates pour,
O-o-o-zing glamour
And elegant vowels.*

*To a volley of cheers,
The artist appears!
He's applauded
And generally feted,
Though no one's quite sure
What the towels are for;
Then the sprinklers come on,
And they get it.*