

Is this the most powerful word in the English language

‘The’. It’s **omnipresent**; we can’t imagine English without it. But it’s not much to look at. It isn’t descriptive, **evocative** or inspiring. And yet this **bland** and **innocuous**-seeming word could be one of the most potent in the English language.

omnipresent 无处不在的

omnipotent 无所不能的

evocative 唤起的

bland 平淡的; 温和的

innocuous 无害的

‘The’ tops the league tables of most frequently used words in English, accounting for 5% of every 100 words used. ‘The’ also lies at the heart of English grammar, having a function rather than a meaning.

Although ‘the’ has no meaning in itself, “it seems to be able to do things in subtle and **miraculous** ways,” says Michael Rosen, poet and author. Consider the difference between ‘he scored a goal’ and ‘he scored the goal’. The inclusion of ‘the’ immediately signals something important about that goal. Perhaps it was the only one of the match? Or maybe it was the clincher that won the league? Context very often determines sense.

miraculous 神奇的

This simplest of words can be used for dramatic effect. At the start of Hamlet, a guard’s **utterance** of ‘Long live the King’ is soon followed by the apparition of the ghost: ‘Looks it not like the King?’ Who, the audience wonders, does ‘the’ refer to? The living King or a dead King? This kind of ambiguity is the kind of ‘hook’ that writers use to make us **quizzical**, a bit uneasy even. “‘The’ is doing a lot of work here,” says Rosen.

utterance 说话; 表达

quizzical 古怪的; 戏弄的