

Words Worth Learning

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/77665891) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/77665891>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander
Additional Tags:	Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander , POV Ilya Rozanov , Established Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-14 Words: 1,700 Chapters: 1/1

Words Worth Learning

by [Hatchigo](#)

Summary

When Ilya is asked a simple question for a team Q&A he finds himself spiraling.

"What's your favorite word or sentence in English?"

English was never something he loved. It was something he learned to survive, to leave, to play hockey at the highest level. It brought embarrassment, ridicule, and the constant feeling of being reduced.

But it also brought Shane.

Notes

English is not my first language.

Speaking English out loud still sometimes comes with shame, the fear of mistakes, of accents, of not sounding “smart enough”. But English also opened many doors for me. It let me meet people, tell stories, and love things I might never have discovered otherwise!

I wanted to explore what that relationship with language might feel like for Ilya. Someone who looks confident and extraverted, but who still carries the shame of being laughed at, misunderstood, or underestimated.

Thank you for reading!

The camera light was still on when Ilya decided he hated the question.

Harris sat across from him on a tall stool, tablet balanced on one knee, the team logo glowing softly behind them. He'd been doing this long enough that his smile never felt threatening, friendly, professional, reassuring. The kind that made players forget this was content, not conversation. The Q&A had been easy so far. Favorite road city, best song ever, least favorite rink, pregame superstition. Ilya had been charming, sarcastic, generous with smiles. He always was.

Then Harris glanced down and read the next one.

"Okay," he said. "This one's fun. What's your favorite word or sentence in English?"

Ilya blinked.

Harris waited.

The silence stretched, not awkward yet, just long enough to feel deliberate. Ilya tilted his head, eyebrows pulling together.

"My... favorite?" he asked slowly.

"Yeah," Harris said. "Like something you like saying... Or hearing. A word, a phrase. Whatever comes to mind."

Ilya opened his mouth.

Closed it again.

His tongue felt thick, heavy, as if English itself had lodged there and refused to cooperate. He searched his head for anything. Something clever, something charming, something that would make sense.

Harris's smile faltered just a little.

"I don't..." Ilya stopped, frowned. He searched the ceiling as if the answer might be written there. "I don't know. This question doesn't... make sense."

Harris laughed lightly. "Totally fair. We can skip it."

"No," Ilya said immediately, reflexive. Skipping felt like losing. Like admitting defeat. "Just. Give me moment."

But there was nothing there. No single word floated to the surface. English, to him, was a tool. A ladder. A locked door he'd kicked down with stubbornness and flashcards and years of being laughed at.

He shrugged finally. "I don't have favorite."

“That’s okay,” Harris said, already tapping notes. “We can edit that out.”

Ilya hesitated. “Don’t post yet.”

Harris looked up. “Yeah?”

“I want to answer later.”

“Sure,” Harris said easily. “Just let me know.”

The camera shut off with a quiet click.

Harris packed up and thanked him, but Ilya barely heard it. He stayed seated for a few seconds too long, jaw tight, pulse buzzing under his skin. The question replayed in his head, irritating and insistent.

Favorite word.

What a stupid question.

What kind of person had a favorite word?

“Favorite word or phrase?” Shane repeated, laughing as he leaned against the kitchen counter. “That’s what’s got you pacing like a caged tiger?”

Ilya shot him a glare that didn’t have much conviction behind it. “It’s stupid.”

Shane grinned. “I didn’t say it wasn’t.”

They were in Shane’s apartment, late afternoon light slanting across the floor. Ilya had been pacing since they got back from practice. Back and forth between the couch and the window, running his hands through his hair like he could physically shake the thought loose. Replaying the moment over and over like he’d missed a trick.

“It’s just a random question,” Shane said gently. “Like favorite color. Or favorite song lyric.”

“I don’t have favorite color either.” Ilya muttered.

“Yes, you do. You just pretend you don’t.”

Ilya snorted despite himself. “What is yours then?”

“My favorite word?” Shane hummed, considering. “Probably ‘okay.’ It’s very versatile.”

“That’s boring.”

Shane gasped. “Rude. Or maybe ‘home.’ Or ‘family.’”

Ilya stopped pacing.

The words hit harder than they should have.

Shane noticed immediately. His expression softened, eyes warm. “See? You have one.”

“No,” Ilya said quickly. “That’s not... mine.”

But the words lingered anyway, uncomfortable and heavy. Warm and complicated.

Shane pushed off the counter and stepped closer. “You don’t have to answer it, you know.”

“I want to.” Ilya said.

And that was the problem.

He hadn’t learned English because he loved it.

He learned it because he had no choice.

Hockey had always been his escape. His proof. His way out. Russia had taught him early that talent was currency, but not always enough. To leave, to be taken seriously, to play where the best played, he had to be undeniable.

That meant the NHL.

And the NHL meant English.

Because talent wasn’t enough, he needed interviews, endorsements, charm in a language that bent your mouth the wrong way.

English started as just words scribbled in notebooks. Flashcards. Videos he half-understood. Coaches who spoke too fast, teammates who laughed when he answered wrong.

At first, English had felt like punishment. Every sentence took effort. Every mistake felt public. He was loud and fast and clever in Russian. In English, he was clumsy. Slow. Reduced.

There was one practice early on, his first season, where a teammate had leaned over and said, not unkindly, “Man, you sound way smarter when you’re chirping.”

People thought it was funny.

He laughed with them. Always did.

Extraverted. Loud. Cocky. That was the role he played well.

That night, alone in his apartment, he practiced pronunciation until his throat hurt.

The early interviews were the worst. The way reporters would exaggerate their expressions when he didn’t understand. The way they’d repeat words louder instead of simpler. Sometimes they exchanged glances, amused, when he missed a joke or an expression. The comments online about his accent, his grammar, his intelligence.

Online, it was merciless.

Can he even read?

Someone get him a dictionary.

Love the accent, hate the brain.

He pretended not to care. He chirped back harder. Played the villain louder. If they wanted something to laugh at, he’d give them teeth.

But it stung anyway.

Sometimes he could tell when people were using big words on purpose. Speaking faster than necessary. Testing him.

He pretended not to notice.

It was easier than admitting it hurt.

Shane never laughed. He waited.

If Ilya didn't understand, Shane rephrased. If Ilya asked a question, Shane answered without making him feel like it was obvious. If Ilya made a mistake, Shane corrected him gently, or not at all.

Once, early on, after a brutal media day, Ilya had thrown himself onto Shane's hotel bed and groaned, face buried in a pillow.

"I sound like idiot," he muttered.

Shane had looked genuinely offended. "You sound like someone speaking a second language."

That had been it. No pity. No reassurance. Just truth.

And something in Ilya had loosened, just a little.

Later, Shane admitted he'd cry if Ilya ever lost his accent.

"That's part of you," he'd said earnestly. "I'd miss it."

Ilya hadn't known what to do with that. He still didn't, sometimes.

Three days passed.

The Q&A video sat unposted. Harris sent a polite follow-up. Ilya ignored it.

The question followed him everywhere.

At practice, he listened more closely. Not to coaches, but to the language itself. The way words changed depending on who said them. The way tone mattered more than grammar.

The way Shane's voice changed when he was tired. Or teasing. Or careful. The way it softened at night. The way "okay" meant everything from "I'm fine" to "don't push me".

English had taken so much from him. His confidence, ease, the ability to be effortless.

But he started thinking about the first time English had given him something instead of taking.

Shane.

Not the name itself, but the sentences.

Are you okay?

Stay.

I'm not going anywhere.

Late one night, unable to sleep, Ilya sat at the kitchen table with a pen and a stack of neon post-it notes. He wrote and crossed out words, Russian mixing with English, arrows and question marks everywhere.

Fuck: no. Too easy.

Win: boring.

Hate: not true.

Finally, something clicked.

He took a fresh note.

His handwriting was messy, letters slanted, but the list felt right immediately.

1 – Will you marry me?

2 – I love you

3 – Will you come to my cottage this summer?

He stared at it for a long moment.

Then he laughed.

It bubbled out of him, sudden and unrestrained, echoing through the apartment. He clapped a hand over his mouth, still grinning like an idiot.

Of course.

The two best things he'd ever heard in English.

And one he hoped, really hoped, to hear someday.

Shane emerged from the bathroom, drying his hair with a towel. "What did I miss?"

Ilya turned the post-it around and held it out proudly. "My answer."

Shane took it.

His face did something remarkable in the span of about five seconds.

Confusion.

Realization.

Color flooding his cheeks.

"I..." He laughed weakly. "I don't get it. I mean... I get the last two, but..."

"That's the best things I heard or will hear in English," Ilya said simply.

Shane looked up at him, eyes bright and a little overwhelmed. "You're serious."

"When am I not?"

Shane swallowed. "Why am *I* the one proposing?"

Ilya tilted his head, considering seriously. "You are right. If I wait for that, it could take decades."

"Hey!" Shane protested immediately. "That's not true!"

Ilya raised an eyebrow. "Are you not already panicking thinking about the best way to do it?"

Shane opened his mouth.

Closed it.

"...A little."

Ilya nodded solemnly. "Right. So I will do it."

He reached out to take the post-it back.

"Wait..." Shane started, flustered. "I mean...are you...this isn't..."

Ilya crossed out the first line and rewrote it, slower this time. Carefully.

Shane leaned in, reading.

I- ~~Will you marry me?~~ Yes, I do.

Shane exhaled a laugh that sounded suspiciously like a sob. "Yeah," he said softly. "That's... that's probably better."

Ilya grinned, triumphant. "English is amazing language."

Shane stepped forward and kissed him, gentle and sure. "It really is."

Harris got his answer the next day.

The video went up that evening.

Ilya watched the comments scroll by, people laughing, people melting, people tagging each other frantically. Someone clipped the moment and added soft music. Someone else slowed it down. Someone wrote, This is the most Ilya answer ever.

For once, no one was laughing at him.

Shane curled into his side on the couch, phone buzzing nonstop. "You know they're never going to stop asking now."

Ilya shrugged, smiling. "Good."

He pressed a kiss into Shane's hair, warmth spreading through his chest.

Favorite words, it turned out, were easy to find.

You just need the right person to share them with.

1 - ~~Will you marry me?~~

Yes, I do

2 - I love you

3 - Will you come to my
cottage this summer?

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