

A LITERARY WORD-SEQUENCE DEBUT

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The term word-chain is used when describing word series in which the last letter from one word repeats the beginning letter contained in its successor; for illustration, consider the phrase "shimmering, gleaming, glistening glow -- winter reigns, splendiferous snow" from Mary Youngquist's poem printed in an earlier Word Ways issue. Recently, John Muirhead (a Canadian reader) proposed the term word-sequence for word series in which adjacent word-pairs always have at least one common alphabetic letter. Note the similarity between word-sequences and overlapping word-progressions such as NUTS, SUIT, GIST, GILT, GILD, GOLD, LODE, DOPE, COPE or REMIND, LIMNED, DOLMEN, MELONS, AMOLES, MOLARS, SAILOR.

Muirhead has seldom encountered in literature word-sequences exceeding ten consecutive words. Do longer ones exist? In David Kahn's treatise The Codebreakers, the chapter "Messages From Outer Space" contains a remarkable word-sequence: "...like electrons, have insufficient range. Morrison has made the imaginative suggestion that a civilization fling an opaque screen, perhaps consisting of ...". Note that this consists of twenty-one words.

Random sampling reveals that approximately sixty out of one hundred word-pairs exhibit letter overlap. However, given letter overlap between two consecutive words, overlap between the second word and an adjacent (third) word occurs approximately three times out of four. Long word-sequences thus have a larger chance than one naively expects. As an example, word-sequences twenty-six words long ought to occur one-thousandth as readily as word-sequences two words long (assuming independence).

It is interesting to determine whether or not one can construct word-sequences in natural English, not employing strained or obviously artificial phraseology. Hear, then, selected thoughts about this sort of composition. One-letter or two-letter words are especially annoying; it is necessary that the writer avoid short words (such as IS, IT, I, IN, ON, AN and A) as zealously as possible. Instead, he should use sesquipedalian terminology to construct with high probability sentences in which successive words share letters with each other. Words from Romance languages (such as Latin, French, etc.) are far better than those having Anglo-Saxon origins.