THE "V-14" PROBLEM

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In a previous article, we explored the problem of finding 14-letter words and names beginning with the letter C and alternating their consonants and vowels regularly: words such as COLONIZABILITY and CAPACITATIVELY. Although C is a very common first letter in English words and we exerted herculean efforts, we were able to find only 14 single, solidly-written words conforming to the conditions imposed on the problem, and 12 two-word terms. Those conditions excluded obsolete, dialectal, slang, and colloquial words, and outright coinages.

In the article, we suggested casually that an examination of 14-letter words beginning with V might prove to be more fruitful. We immediately rejected that suggestion on the ground that more than 5 times as many English words begin with C as begin with V. Subsequent investigation, however, caused us to doubt the validity of the obvious conclusion. For one thing, the 5-to-1 ratio of available words was misleading. Large numbers of C words have one of three consonants (H, L, or R) as their second letter, qualifying them from consideration, whereas only a scattered few V words are so disqualified. If we deduct the CH, CL, and CR words from the total of 11 C words, the ratio of C words to V words reduces to only a little more than 4-to-1 -- admittedly, a still seemingly decisive advantage. Yet, the only way to resolve a nagging doubt was to make an actual comparison. We therefore used the same principles, methods, and sources in searching for V words that we had previously used in searching for C words. The results were astonishing.

The 14 solid C words are outclassed by 26 solid V words, and the 12 broken C terms are overshadowed by 16 broken V terms. The 450,000 most common English words include no C-14 words whatever, whereas they include 5 V-14 words, 2 of which are also among the 60,000 most common English words (they are in the current Merriam-Webster pocket dictionary, which has only 57,000 entries). A detailed examination of our findings follow.

The two pocket-dictionary V-14 words are VERISIMILITUDE and VITUPERATIVELY. The three additional words in Webster's Third Edition are VANADOSILICATE (within the definition of the combining form VANAD-), VENOMOSALIVARY, and VOMEROPALATINE. Four other solidly-written V-14 words spelled out in standard dictionaries are VENENOSALIVARY (in Webster's Second Edition: an exact synonym for VENOMOSALIVARY); VELOCIPLEDEWISE (within the text of an 1869 quotation in the Oxford English Dictionary: in the manner of a
velocipede); VINYLACETYLENE (in the 4th Edition of Hackh's Chemical Dictionary, within the definition of MONOVINYLACETYLENE); and VASOMOTORICITY (in Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary: the power of producing change in the caliber of a blood vessel).

Four of these 9 words are pleasingly free of the vowel Y. One of these, VELOCIPEDEWISE, is hyphenated (VELOCIPEDE-WISE) in the source from which we culled it. The text in which it occurred is, however, more than a century old, and the English language has changed — words ending with the combining form -WISE are written solidly nowadays (for example, COUNTERCURRENTWISE, SUICIDALWISE, and VEGETABLEWISE, all of them also five-syllable words in Webster's Second Edition). In order to write VELOCIPEDEWISE as the word is used today, we had to eliminate its former hyphen.

As in the case of the C-14 search, Latin struck us as a language with a potential for V-14 words. After all, the medieval Latin 13-letter word VICE-COMITATUS (a vice-retinue or vice-company, so far as we can determine) and its 15-letter dative and ablative plural form VICE-COMITATIBUS hinted strongly that Latin might also include an actual V-14 word. It did, as a matter of fact: VERISIMILITUDO (also written VERI SIMILITUDO), the etymon of the English VERISIMILITUDE.

Our 9 dictionary V-14 words have topped the 7 dictionary C-14 words that we found in our first search. Once again, we thirst for greater success and begin reading between the lines of dictionaries. In Webster's Second Edition, we find 9 12-letter adjectives which can routinely be converted into corresponding 14-letter verbs by attaching the suffix -LY. All of the resulting words meet our V-14 specifications:

VAGINICOLINE to VAGINICOLINELY
VALETUDINARY to VALETUDINARILY
VATICINATORY to VATICINATORILY
VEHICULATORY to VEHICULATORY
VERIFICATIVE to VERIFICATIVELY
VERIFICATORY to VERIFICATORILY
VITUPERATIVE to VITUPERATORILY
VIVIFICATIVE to VIVIFICATIVELY
VOICIFERATIVE to VOICIFERATIVELY

In addition, Dorland's includes the adjective VASODILATIVE ("producing vasodilatation"). The corresponding V-14 adverb is VASODILATIVELY.

So far, our routine reading between the lines has produced 10 additional V-14 words, compared with only 4 analogous words during the course of our C-14 search. That first search, however, also used more skillful methods to extract another 3 C-14 words from major dictionaries, and we now apply similar skills to V words in those dictionaries.

The first observation we make is that the words VERIFICATIVE and VERIFICATORY bear a certain obvious relationship to the words VERIFY and VERIFICATION. What words bear precisely the same relationship?

Next, the C-14 word PALATINE included the adjective V-14 noun PALATINATE. How do we handle this?

What is the relationship of VERIFICATIVE to VERIFICATORY?

We also form VASODILATIVE, as well as the corresponding noun VASODILATATION.

The unaltered root (having the same meaning)...

A skillfully selected set of C-14 words against on the form...

Our original formation of VERIFICATIVE...

We are more fortunate in the case of...
relationship to the words VILIFY and VILIFICATION? It is the words VILIFICATIVE and VILIFICATORY, producing the V-14 adverbs VILIFICATIVELY and VILIFICATORILY!

Next, the modern English 11-letter words in the unabridged Oxford include the adjectives VELOCIPEDE, VATICANICAL, and VERISIMILAR. What abstract nouns correspond to these adjectives? The V-14 nouns VELOCIPEDEPALITY, VATICANICALITY, and VERISIMILARITY! How do we know? By logical inference from the following precise analogues, all in Webster's Second Edition:

PEDAL to PEDALITY  
BIPEDAL to BIPEDALITY  
SESQUIPEDAL to SESQUIPEDALITY  
MECHANICAL to MECHANICALITY  
ECUMENICAL to ECUMENICALITY  
CONICAL to CONICALITY  
SIMILAR to SIMILARITY  
UNSIMILAR to UNSIMILARITY  
DISSIMILAR to DISSIMILARITY

What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

We also notice that the noun VASODILATION has the alternate form VASODILATATION (in the 5th Edition of Gould's Medical Dictionary, as well as in Dorland's). Since the form VASODILATION produces the adjective VASODILATIVE (in Dorland's), the form VASODILATATION produces the V-14 adjective VASODILATIVE.

The unabridged Oxford includes the adjective VENOSO-RETICULATED (having the veins [of a plant leaf] disposed so as to form a network). Webster's Third equates RETICULATED with RETICULATE, authorizing us to produce the V-14 word VENOSO-RETICULATE. By strict analogy with words such as SEMIRETICULATE and FIBRORETICULATE (both in Webster's Second), we know that the current spelling of our new V-14 word is solid: VENOSORETICULATE.

A skillful reading between the lines of dictionaries has, accordingly, netted us another 7 V-14 words, compared with only 3 such C-14 words. The overall score now stands at 16 solid V-14 words against only 14 solid C-14 words.

Our original search found not a single hyphenated C-14 word. We are more fortunate in our current search. Webster's Second lists VICE-PALATINE (someone assuming the office of a palatine in certain cases). The Funk & Wagnalls Unabridged defines the word PALATINE as the office of a count palatine or of an elector palatine. By meticulous analogy, it follows that the office of a vice-palatine is a VICE-PALATINATE -- our first (and only) hyphenated V-14 word. Yet once more, the underdog V's have beaten the lordly C's!

Next on the agenda are two-or-more-word dictionary V-14 entries. We had previously found only two such C-14 terms. Our examination of the V's yields 5 such terms. Two are in Howard W. Sam's Modern Dictionary of Electronics, a work not available to us: VOLA-
TILE MEMORY and VOLUME LIFETIME. A third is in Paul W. Thrush’s A Dictionary of Mining, Mineral, and Related Terms: VOLUME VELOCITY (“the rate of alternating flow of the medium through a specified surface produced by a sound wave”). The latter term represents the first 2 words of the 3-word term VENA CANALICULI COCHLEAE (the vein of the canal of the cochlea). We note that the first 2 words are a grammatically and semantically complete thought (“the vein of the canal”), permitting us to use them as a V-14 term.

Previously, we had synthesized 4 common personal first-and-last name C-14 combinations. Here, too, we surpass ourselves with 6 such V-14 combinations:

VERONICA LOWERY
VERONICA MALONE
VERITY, CAROLINE
VERITY, MADELINE
VERITY, MADALINE
VERITY, ROSEMARY

VERITY is a common enough English word. Its use as a surname is less common, but it does appear in that capacity in sources as diverse as Charles Wareing Bardsley’s A Dictionary of English and Welsh Surnames (1901); P. H. Reaney’s The Origins of English Surnames (1967); The New York Times Obituaries Index 1858-1968 (1970); and Who’s Who in America: 38th Edition, 1974-1975 (1974). What VERITY gives the appearance of being but is seemingly not is one of the Puritan feminine “virtue” names such as CHARITY, PATIENCE, PRUDENCE — and VIRTUE itself. As in our C search, all of the synthesized combinations are feminine names, because all of the first names are structurally required to end in vowels — a characteristic typical of feminine, not masculine, given names.

Are there any V-14 geographic names in atlas indexes and gazetteers? We had found only one such C-14 name, but fortune smiles on us again and we locate 4 such V-14 names — forbiddingly foreign ones — all in The Times Index-Gazetteer of the World: VELIBARA TEPESI (a mountain in Asiatic Turkey east of the seaport city of Zonguldak); VELIKA SEJANICA (a Village in southeastern Yugoslavia, near the town of Leskovac); VELIKO Ropotovo (another Village in southeastern Yugoslavia near the town of Kumanovo); and VILA DE MANATUTO (a Village on the now Indonesian island of Timor, near the town of Dili).

Can we synthesize real geographic location names? In the C search we synthesized 5 names of the form CALUMET, ALABAMA. For the first and only time, the V’s let us down — we are unable to synthesize a single name, either in the United States or in Canada, although the Province of Manitoba may have some unexplored potential remaining in it.

As in the case of our C search, we could expand our collection of V-14 terms quite easily by adding the suffix -LIKE to 10-letter nouns such as VETERINARY, VISIBILITY, and VOCABULARY. We desist from that exercise because it does not represent a logological challenge —

Despite our eschewing of the railway suffix at the tail of the train, we were limited to generating 16 basic combinations. How can we overcome flies to the ointment. What happens in the future remains uncertain. How can we be sure of merely a temporary breather when, for example, from 10 to 12 million Americans are expected to pursue

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Remember those Oulipo Ways? Perec can afford to be funny. It is not necessary for him to take his reader with him.

This is not the case with Gaddis. He writes, "it" and "it" and "it." Of Frank, it is his way to "it" and it is not enough.

Why do we use this word? To define a crippled word? It is a sign of a part of a sentence that is divided (see Olson). We might enjoy some one to construe prose. Or of one text, or one text, or Edna Della
Despite our failure to synthesize North American geographic names at the tail end of our V-14 quest, we have succeeded in accumulating 16 broken V-14 terms as opposed to only 12 such C-14 terms, and the final score is 42 to 26 in favor of the lowly V's. This outcome flies in the face of statistical logic, making a mockery of it. How could such a thing have happened? What is the hidden life force, the élan vital, within the V's that gives them the drive needed to demolish the powerful C's? Or is the C-14/V-14 anomaly merely a minor, random statistical fluctuation in the larger picture embracing all 26 letters of the alphabet and all word lengths from 10 to 18 letters? We leave these and related questions to readers to pursue.

READ MY LIPOGRAMS

Remember the article on Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle (OuLiPo) by member Harry Mathews in the May 1976 Word Ways? In passing, he mentioned that fellow-member Georges Perec had written La Disparition (The Disappearance), the first E-less novel since the 1939 Gadsby — "an elaborate, funny story of unbelievable virtuosity" so well-written that some French critics failed to notice its lipogrammatic character. For a quarter-century, non-French readers have had to take Mathews' word for it. This lamentable state of affairs has at last been rectified with Gilbert Adair's translation A Void (HarperCollins 1995; $24). English-language critics are rapturous: "a rollicking story, wildly amusing ... a whodunit [in which] E done it" and, lipogrammatically, "an astounding Anglicization of Francophonic mania, a daunting triumph of will pushing its way through imposing roadblocks to a magical country, an absurdist nirvana, of humor, pathos and loss. II There is not even a Chapter Five!

Why do it? Someone once said "only within severe, almost crippling restraint do we find freedom". The trick is to define the right degree of constraint -- the omission of E is significantly less crippling than, say, the construction of a palindrome in which half the letters of the message are dictated. Although palindromists have also written novels (see Stephens' Satire: Veritas or Levine's Dr. Awkward & Olson In Oslo, both privately published in limited editions), the stories are so disjointed that they are unlikely ever to enjoy A Void's degree of critical acclaim. Perec implores one to invent, to come along and play the game of literary constraint. Perhaps there is a commercial market for such Word Ways recognized fancies as homoliteral or heteroliteral prose, of chain-link writing ("some men enjoy oysters..."), or of vocabularyclept literature (rearrange the words of one text to create another, to be written by Gary Gray or Edna Dean).