Illustrated at the left is a word ladder, converting the word LESS into the word MORE, one letter at a time. The example happens to be a perfect one, since the conversion of a word of "n" letters has been accomplished in "n" moves, the theoretical minimum. Such an ideal word ladder is easiest to construct when the vowel-consonant patterns of the beginning and ending words are identical. Where there is a significant difference in vowel-consonant patterns, a longer ladder is almost invariably required.

A few years ago, we set out to find the shortest word ladder capable of transforming WRONG into RIGHT. Our first completed ladder connecting the two words did so in 40 steps, obviously a very roundabout tour. As we kept working on the problem, one shortcut after another came to light, and we eventually reached what seems to be the irreducible minimum, a nine-step ladder, shown below:

WRONG
PRONY
PIONS
SIGNS
SIGNS
RIGHT

Since disposing of the problem of RIGHT and WRONG (a problem that has vexed philosophers and theologians for thousands of years, incidentally), we have tried several further word ladders, with varying results. For instance, we have tried to manage SEVEN into EIGHT. In arithmetic, it is but one step from the former to the latter, but verbally the feat is much more difficult, and we have done it in eleven steps, as follows:

WORD WAYS

SEVEN
SEVER
REVER
REVERT
RELET
RELIT
REMIT
DEMIT
DIMIT
DIGIT
DIGHT
EIGHT
S O B E R
S O R E R
S U R E R
P U R E R
P U R E E
P U R S E
N U R S E
N O R S E
H O R S E
H O U S E
D O U S E
D R U S E
D R U P E
D R A P E
C R A P E
C R A N E
C R A N K
D R A N K
D R U N K

Most words that form two separate word ladders, such as REPUBLIC and CRATIC into Aocratic, are pleased to harbor of TEGUCIGALPA.
SOBER to DRUNK

The ladder shown is not a meritorious one, and can, most likely, be shortened. The trouble is, there is no a priori way of knowing what the minimum number of steps is, in any given case. Neither is there any systematic procedure for tackling such a problem. One must simply experiment until one finds a shortcut somewhere.

Given at the left is a ladder in even worse shape. As you can see, we have succeeded in transforming SOBER into DRUNK, but in eighteen steps. It is a matter of common sense that the conversion of one into the other can probably be effected in half that number of steps, if only one stumbles on the right chain of words. We haven’t done it yet.

A third problem has stumped us entirely. We wanted to change ABOVE into BELOW, but have been stymied, and haven’t found any word chain at all to connect these two words. This is ridiculous—any two words of equal length can be linked, with sufficient perseverance.

Readers, help us please!

THE CAPITAL OF HONDURAS

Most words and names consist of letters that can be subdivided and rearranged to form two separate words unrelated to the original term. For instance, the word REPUBLICAN can be turned into ALPINE + CURB, and the word DEMOCRATIC into ACRID + COMET.

A prominent name that has shown fantastic resistance to such a transformation is TEGUCIGALPA, the capital of Honduras. However, it has finally succumbed to the relentless pressure applied to it by leading logologists (word experts). We are pleased to announce, therefore, that A PELAGIC TUG has sailed into the harbor of TEGUCIGALPA, a city stricken with a CAGIT PLAGUE. (PELAGIC means “ocean-going”; a CAGIT is a green parrot.)

Try subdividing the next word you see!

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