WEBSTERIAN WEIRDIES

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In the course of our logological ramblings, we have noticed a number of strange entries in both the Second and Third Editions of Webster's New International Dictionary. The purpose of this article is to draw the reader's attention to some of these strange entries. To be more precise, we are going to pose a number of questions and let the reader have the pleasure of trying to answer them. It may be that the reader will be able to come up with answers that are as equally valid as the answers that we shall proffer. This is all to the good. For our answers, the reader is referred to Answers and Solutions at the end of this issue.

1. Find a word that is pronounced with an initial J sound but begins with (a) the letter C, (b) the letter D, and (c) the letter K. The three words that we shall offer as the answer to this problem have the added attraction that they are all pronounced in the same way. Can the reader find these three words?

2. The main body of Webster's Third Edition lists OSINO CYTE in boldface type. However, this entry does not appear in the section devoted to words beginning with the letter O. Why not? Under which letter is it listed? OSINO CYTE has never before appeared in any dictionary. Why not?

3. For many years, the Guinness Book of Records has pointed out that the Polish word for a may bug, CHRZASZCZ, is one of the most unpronounceable words to an English-speaking person. While the word may be difficult to pronounce correctly, it nevertheless possesses an accepted "correct" pronunciation. To go one better than the Guinness Book of Records, we ask the reader to give us a word (more precisely, one word of a two-word term) from Webster's Third Edition which is labeled as having an unknown pronunciation, a word which the editors of the monumental Third Edition, with the vast resources they commanded, were completely in the dark about. (As a matter of interest, the word is also labeled as being of unknown origin.) Can the reader find the word we are referring to?
4. Quick as a flash, give us six words which are all identical in spelling but are all different in pronunciation and meaning. All six can be found in Webster’s Second Edition.

5. The layman is often deluded into thinking that dictionaries are strictly alphabetically ordered with regard to the words they contain. This is, of course, nonsense. There are numerous instances when words, for quite legitimate reasons, do not occur in their rightful alphabetical order. For example, both the Second and Third Editions of Webster’s make great use of run-on entries. Such entries are placed at the end of a paragraphed entry. These run-on entries are usually derivative adjectives, adverbs and nouns. They are of such a character that their meanings are easily inferred from the definitions of the words to which they are attached. This means that valuable space can be saved by not defining each word when its meaning is easily inferable. Here is an example from Webster’s Second Edition: the words CONNECTEDLY and CONNECTEDNESS both occur between the main entries CONNECTED and CONNECTED ASSEMBLAGE because they are run-on entries for CONNECTED.

Apart from run-on entries, words in Webster’s Second Edition may occur out of their correct alphabetical position if they are given in a list of self-explanatory combinations and phrases. The words POSTPHTHISIC and POST-JOHNSONIAN both appear in just such a list under the entry POST-. The next main entry after POST- is POSTABDOMEN. Thus, both POSTPHTHISIC and POST-JOHNSONIAN precede POSTABDOMEN while strictly they ought to come after it.

Besides the two types of out-of-place entries that we have described above, there are other words that do not appear in their alphabetically correct positions for the simple reason that the dictionary compilers have erred. In Webster’s Second Edition, the words REREIGN, RE-REITERATE and RE-REITERATION (all below the line, by the way) are listed out of their correct order. They all appear between the entries REREGISTRATION and REREGULATE, whereas they ought to appear between RE-REHEARSAL and RE-REJECT. Can the reader provide us with a similar example above the line in the Second Edition?