On Chasing One's Tail

There are at least two characteristics of mathematical logic that might arouse the contempt of those who follow other disciplines. Whether these other disciplines are immune from what their practitioners probably regard as "defects", logicians recognize them, not as defects, but simply facts of life, interesting, but certainly not demoralizing:

1. Within the framework of a mathematical system, it is impossible to prove that the axioms, postulates, and rules of inference are consistent. In other words, it has been demonstrated to be impossible to prove that the tools of proof are not, themselves, self-contradictory and hence, invalid. Put into everyday English, it is impossible for a mathematician to know for certain that a theorem he has just proved is really true.

2. Every mathematical system is based on certain fundamental, undefined terms (e.g., point, integer) from which all other definitions flow. Thus every mathematical term in the system, such as "ellipse" or "matrix" is definable, ultimately, only in terms of the primitive, undefined terms. If the immediate definition consists only of words also capable of definition, then follow all the words of those definitions and you will find that you are eventually led to undefined terms such as "point" or "integer". Again putting it into standard English, whether a mathematician believes what he is saying is true or false (see the above paragraph), it is demonstrably true that he never knows what he is talking about.

If you look for a definition of "point" or "integer" in a dictionary, mathematical or otherwise, you will find it, all right, but if you persist in looking up every word in the definition and continue the process, you will discover that there is circularity. Not as obvious as in the following fictional example, but only because it will take more than three look-ups to expose the circularity:

Widget: Franist
Kamme

The circularity, but of words, is "true definition". The only extensive definition of "handing" is that it is a "judo chops", every word, etc., are those of the dictionary.

In the dictionary of raftman, the Webster's printings are intriguing, you see how low in the order the words eventually consists of. It follows that it will take using MW more than three look-ups to expose the circularity:

1. MONT
2. SOM
3. AS:
4. MET
5. CUR
6. ACC

...and so it will before the day we decide that none of you will ever exercise the circularity.
The circularity condition is true not only of mathematical words but of words in general. If we set a certain reasonable criterion on "true definability", we will find that no dictionary word meets it. The only words that are really "truly defined" are done so via an ostensive definition. If you answer a child's "What's a banana?" by handing him one, you need not worry about circularity. Likewise for a "judo chop", but do it lightly. A dictionary word is truly defined if every word in its definition, every word in the definition of these words, etc., are all defined in a non-circular way, unlike "widget". Since the language is finite, we may be assured that regardless of the size of the dictionary we use, none of its words can be truly defined.

In the February 1973 Kickshaws, we quoted Paul Remley's discovery of an outrageously circular Web II definition: "raftman", a raftman. Apparently this gaffe was quickly brought to the attention of the Websterian editors, for several Kickshavians pointed out that their printings of Web II had been corrected to "raftman", a raftsman. Intrigued, we set out with a handier dictionary, Merriam-Webster's Pocket Dictionary, and a randomly-chosen starter word, MONEY, to see how long it would take to show circularity. Numbering the words in the order in which they occur in the definitions, the definitions of the words in those definitions, and so on, the process will terminate eventually. The last word in the list (i.e., the word whose definition consists only of words with smaller numbers) is clearly circular, and it follows that all the earlier words are not "truly defined". How long will it take to reach this end? Here is a progress report on MONEY, using MWPD and primary definitions, always in context. (By this, we mean that if a word such as "exchange" appears in a definition as a noun, its noun, rather than verb, form must be looked up.)

0. MONEY: something (1), as (2) metal (3) currency (4) accepted (5) as (2) a (6) medium (7) of (8) exchange (9)
1. SOMETHING: some (10) undetermined (11) or (12) unspecified (13) thing (14)
2. AS: for (15) instance (16)
3. METAL: any (17) of (8) various (18) opaque (19), fusible (20), ductile (21), and (22) typically (23) lustrous (24) substances (25)
4. CURRENCY: general (26) use (27) or (12) acceptance (28)
5. ACCEPTED (ACCEPT): to (29) receive (30) or (12) take (31) willingly (32)
6. A: one (33), some (10) -- used (34) to (29) indicate (35) an (36) unspecified (13) or (12) unidentified (37) individual (38)

And so it goes, with, we fear, a good chance of reaching 1000 words before the complete circularity of the word-set is revealed. We hope that none of you will waste time pursuing this exercise, but in case one of you is so misguided as to do so, notice that discretion should be exercised, both in choice of definition (context should govern) and with

Widget: the third power of a franistan
Franistan: any number that can be formed by adding two kammers
Kammer: the average of two adjacent widgets

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It would be interesting to know, with respect to any dictionary, what word has the shortest defining set. The latter term designates the complete list (in the case of MONEY, starting with something, as) terminating with a word whose definition consists only of words that appear earlier in the list. We have a gnawing suspicion that regardless of the dictionary (provided that it does not use a word in a definition that is not itself defined), all the words of the dictionary will have defining sets of virtually the same size and content (except for order of appearance) and that this common defining list will be in effect an expanded version of basic English. In other words, it will be a vocabulary that is essentially the minimum a computer would require for clear communication to humans. If we make allowance for the fact that a really complete dictionary might cross-reference DABOIA, JESSUR, KATUKA, RUSSELL’S VIPER, and TICPOLONGA, thus giving rise to a universal defining list that is a bit more than necessary even for highly technical communication, when trimmed of synonymous technical words (and perhaps of all synonyms), the remainder of our hunch may not be as intuitive to some readers, namely that every word will use, virtually if not entirely, the same defining set, viz., the universal defining list.

Naturally, we make an exception of RAFTMAN (Web II) whose defining set contains only one word, the second word of the definition carrying the index zero, and thus closing the circle. Also, if (as seems just) the articles A and AN are regarded as synonymous, then the defining set of A would consist of only five words and that of MONEY (see above) would have consisted of 35 words. Since A and AN are, indeed, synonyms, the definitions of each should avoid the other. The definition of A above should really be: one, some — used to indicate some unspecified or unidentified individual. Our hunch is based on the assumption that whatever dictionary is used, the definiens contains neither the definiend nor a synonym of it. When synonyms appear (as in the definition given for A) consider them as not being part of the definition.

The Bard on Wordplay

Many issues back, we reported on the low opinion that Joseph Addison, the brilliant co-editor of what the Earl of Oxford called "the indispensable Spectator", held of us logomachists, word-twisters, kickshavians, and assorted logomongers. For solace we turned to Shakespeare, but as the following quotations attest, there is no comfort to be had there; Shakespeare was even more outspoken than Addison:

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Shall quip awe a A kind of
Here will
Engles
They hath
scraps
He hath stu
vents
A snapper

IV, 2)
Zounds! I
my br
A deal of
A compos
Athen
Words wi

Those readers who
right. As the Bard talks so
get a pretty

Shakespeare
some reade
commend to
on or even
Shakespeare:
Repentance
than to see a

Dear Abby

Jules Let your son ma
domestic ar
how do you
in-law! N<
I want you to
meet our
Buren's pro

The Common

The verl
TEACH, TE
lish verb po
assuming.

The ans
tenses and p
Shall quips and sentences and these paper bullets of the brain awe a man ... ? (Much Ado About Nothing, II, 3)

A kind of excellent dumb discourse ... (The Tempest, III, 3)

Here will be an old abusing of God's patience and the king's English ... (The Merry Wives of Windsor, I, 4)

They hath been at a great feast of languages and stolen the scraps ... (Love's Labor Lost, V, I)

He hath strange places cram'd with observation, the which he vents in mangled forms ... (As You Like It, II, 7)

A snapper-up of unconsidered trifles ... (The Winter's Tale, IV, 2)

Zounds! I was never so bethump'd with words since I first called my brother's father Dad ... (King John, II, 1)

A deal of skimble-skamble stuff ... (Henry IV, Part I, III, 1)

A composture stolen from general excrement ... (Timon of Athens, IV, 3)

Words without thoughts ... (Hamlet, III, 3)

Those readers who feel The Bard has been quoted out of context are right. As readers of the old Saturday Evening Post will recall (The Bard talks about Baseball, Bowling, Father's Day, etc.), you can get a pretty fair body of Shakespearean opinion on any subject at all.

Shakespeare was, in fact, quite a wordsman himself, as we hope some reader will demonstrate in a future article. For starters, we commend to his attention Act V, Scene 1 of Love's Labor Lost. He was enough of a punster to be mauled by Addison in Issue 61 of The Spectator: "The Sermons of Bishop Andrews and the Tragedies of Shakespeare are full of them (puns). The Sinner was punned into Repentance by the former, as in the latter nothing is more usual than to see a Hero weeping and quibbling for a doze~ Lines together."

Dear Abby

Jules Leopold of New York writes: "In these permissive days, your son may bring home the girl with whom he has set up a complete domestic arrangement though without benefit of clergy. Problem: how do you introduce the girl to friends and relatives? 'My daughter-in-law'? No ... that's not quite right ... " Leopold's solution: I want you to meet my daughter-out-law. Our solution: I want you to meet our daughter-in-common-law. Ann Landers' and Abby Van Buren's probable cop-out solution: I want you to meet Barbara.

The Common Property Game

The verbs BRING, BUY, CATCH, FIGHT, FREIGHT, OWE, SEEK, TEACH, THINK, and WORK share a common trait that no other English verb possesses. What is it? Pause for two minutes before resuming.

The answer is that, though none of these words rhyme, their past tenses and participial forms all rhyme with TAUT. If we go back in
history, we even find that TAUT is the past participle of TUG. If we
go forward, we will find in Webster's Fourth Unabridged that
WROUGHT is not only the past tense and past participle form of WORK;
it is likewise for WREAK. Though no dictionary shows it, we believe
that a large proportion of English-speaking people prefer "wrought
havoc" as the past tense of "wreak havoc" to the ugly "wreaked ha­
voc". Someday, perhaps, the past forms of fling, snatch, light,
preach, and peek will all rhyme with TAUT, too.

The query "What is the present tense of WROUGHT?" is an old
wheeze. Now you know it has two solutions, WORK and WREAK
(see Chadwick's Dictionary). But if someone asks you this chestnut,
ask them what the present tense of FRAUGHT is and see how many of
them know the answer is FREIGHT.

Variety Headlines

Walter Penney of Greenbelt, Maryland proposed a new type of quiz
in which events of the past, real or fictional, are reported as if by one
of the show business trade journals. Compare your "translations" of
the following headlines with the ones that appear in Answers and Solu­
tions. If you like this sort of thing, send in some of your own:

1. Queen Hocks Ice To Angel Far-Out Trip
2. Stock-Raiser Clobbered By His Truck-Farming Brother
3. "All In The Family" Gets Zero Rating In Thebes
4. Zookeeper Climbs Mountain The Hard Way
5. Muscle-Man Recuperating From Ammonia Fumes
6. Taurillophiles Blow Lid Off Richter Scale

Walter refuses to take responsibility for any entries other than the first.

Univocalics

In the last issue we mentioned the topic of univocalics in which only
one of the five vowels appears, e.g., "Orthodox Oxford dons know good
port from poor". We asked for help in univocalizing the two difficult
vowels I and U. Faith Eckler obliged us with a remarkable poem, uni­
vocalic on I. Note how the narrative unfolds with the inevitability of an
epic poem, while the charming earthiness is pure Chaucer. As the
great Bard sang: Of all New Yorker poems count me a heckler / I'd
trade two dozen for just one by Eckler.

I. Bright night
   Limpid light
   Mist rising
   List, I sing.
   Virgin willing
   Chills instilling.
   Limbs inclining
   Silk lining.

Mind inspiring
Will tiring.
Rising spirit.
Sliding limit.
Tilting nigh.
Riding high.
Illicit thrill
Shining still.
If we i that form of WORK; t, we believe wrought wreaked ha- h, light, (is an old WREAK his chestnut, how many of

"" is an old WREAK this chestnut, how many of

2. Hind sight
   Rigid fright.
   Wind brisk.
   Big risk:
   Pill missing
   Midst kissing.
   Hips thick:
   I'm sick.

   Sit hiding
   Vigil biding.
   Lid flipping
   Wit slipping.
   Climbing girth
   Giving birth.
   Vivid thing,
   First Spring.

Mary Youngquist sent us three poems, one univocalic on U, the other two on I, a downer followed by an upper, proving that Mary is Word Ways' answer to Ben Burroughs:

I. Dumb plug runs punk -- turns turf,
   Jumps brush, scuffs shrubs, slurps surf.
   Gulps dust (burps much), hurts rump,
   Churns mud (hurls chunks), bumps stump.
   Spurs tug, cuffs pull -- lurch, plunk!
   Dumb stunts gum up Bud's spunk.
   Huff, puff! Crunch, whump! Dull thud.
   Turf tumult stuns, dumps Bud.

   Such ruckus! Dumb mutt bucks,
   But Bud just murmurs, "Shucks!"
   Rubs hurtful cuts, curbs cuss,
   "Thus bug-stung lug must fuss!"

II. I'm living nigh grim civic blight;
   I find its victims, sick with fright.
   In Mississippi, kids will ntp
   Iciclic pills, think this is hip.
   Insipid drips with dimwit minds
   Mix trifling thrills with sickish kinds.

III. In Mississippi it is spring,
   Birds, lilting, chirping, trilling, sing.
   Wind whips birch limbs; twigs, swirling, twitch,
   Inviting spring's intrinsic itch.
   Slim girl in skin-tight mini-skirt,
   With impish winks is winning flirt;
   Chic chick in vivid bright pink rig,
   Shins kicking high, trips Irish jig.

   Kids mimic whistling birds with skill,
   Frisk skipping, tripping -- Dick, Jim, Bill.
   I think wild whims in spring's first flight;
   In brimming spirits, whirl till night.
The Challenge of the Permutated Alphabet

Mary Youngquist holds several word-records, but one of them has now been broken -- by Mary. In the May Kickshaws we challenged readers to permute the 26 letters of the alphabet into an arrangement that would permit long words to be read in either direction. To be specific, one word must read from left to right in the permuted alphabet and must have no repeated letters. The other word, which also must have no repeated letters, is required to be read from right to left in the permuted alphabet. The score is the sum of the letters in the two words. Mary raised Garry Crum's record of 22 letters to 24, and now she has increased her score to 25 with the words UNCOPYRIGHTABLE and DEFLATIONS, using, among several possible permutations, the following: JKMQVWXZSUNCOPYRIGHT ABLFED. The challenge now is to raise the record score to 26, probably by finding words of respective lengths 12 and 14, or 13 each, which are capable of being "interwoven", one to the other from inferred inflectional forms from any Webster's Dictionary are allowed.

If you confine your word list to main or secondary entries appearing in Webster's Collegiate, can you better Mary's QUESTIONABLY and ANCHORITE, yielding a score of 21?

Backchat on the Mammal Game

Last issue, we disclosed a startling fact, whose reverberations are still being heard in every corner of the English-speaking world: the first letter of the alphabet that is likely not to be the initial of a land mammal known to a reader who has not seen this item previously is N. NILGAI and NUTRIA were the only ones we could think of, while much more common examples can be dredged up easily for all the letters in the first half of the alphabet. A month ago, the Junior Pedant wrote us that there are at least two very common land mammals with initial letter N: Nag (horse) and Nanny Goat. Yes, indeed, and though it does not appear in MWPD, "nitpicker" is another example of a common land mammal.

On reflection, we've decided that N is the letter least likely to stump a contestant in the Mammal Game.

Poker Words

Remember what a straight flush word is? No? A straight flush word is a five-letter word with no repeated letters, all five of its letters from the same half of the alphabet, with the letters proceeding either in alphabetical or reverse-alphabetical order. Three straight flush words -- LIFED, YUPON and ACHIM -- were reported on in the May and August 1972 Kickshaws. Murray Pearce has found a fourth straight flush word, NORUZ, in Funk & Wagnalls' New Standard Dictionary. It is not listed as a proper noun, though it means New Year's Day, as observed in Persia.
The fact that after two years we have exactly four such words enables us to update, using sound statistical methods, our estimate of the number of five-letter English words. If five letters are chosen at random, the chance that they are different but all from the same half of the alphabet is $(1/12)(1/11)(1/10)(1/9)$. The chance that they are also in alphabetical order or reverse-alphabetical order is 2 out of the 120 possible permutations. The combined probability is $1/720,000$. The fact that four have been discovered leads us to conclude that there are $4 \times 720,000$, or 2,880,000 five-letter English words, give or take a few. How about that, Merriam-Webster's editorial staff?

Murray used the pair ACHIM NORUZ to solve one of the last remaining poker word challenges, namely to find two five-letter words whose ten letters run through the alphabet consecutively. He had already solved a similar challenge involving reverse alphabetical order with the pair YUPON LIFED.

The Logophile's Bookshelf

A few issues back, we recommended a tape cartridge entitled "The Best of Bloopers", a 45-minute sequence of amusing radio and television bloopers, some of them re-created, either with a laugh track or in front of an audience. Example from a BBC broadcast featuring a British DJ with an Oxbridge accent: "This next record, 'Dancing on the Ceiling', would be found on any British hit list of the past ten years." A lot of them, like this one, are better heard than seen. Rose Eckler found a pair of LP records featuring bloopers assembled by the same collector, Kermit Schafer, recorded on the tape cartridge. A few bloopers are common to the record and the cartridge, but most appear on one but not the other.

Now a more inclusive collection is available in book form: Kermit Schafer's The Best of Bloopers, #114453 in the catalog of the Publisher's Central Bureau, Dept. 256, 33-20 Hunters Point Avenue, Long Island City, New York 11101, $1.00 plus handling and mailing charges. The loss of atmosphere suffered by imparting a Lowell Thomas breakdown to the printed page, or reading a Fairbanks weather report ("I'll take a leak out the window to see if it's still freezing"), is balanced by not having to listen to laughter, canned or otherwise, at the ones that just aren't that funny. A highly recommended buy -- perfect for giving what appears to be a $3.95 gift for only a dollar.

Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (New 20th Century, Second Edition), #026090 in the same Publisher's Central catalog, should not be confused with the Merriam-Webster Unabridged dictionaries, which it resembles in bulk (2500 pages, 8 1/2 by 11 3/4 inches in size). However, we recommend it on two counts: the price is right ($15.95, down from its 1971 publication price of $49.50), and it is reputed to have the finest collection of adverbs ever assembled.
MWPD Quiz

As a sequel to Mary Youngquist's very difficult Collegiate Dictionary Vocabulary Test in the February Kickshaws, Murray Pearce has helped us assemble an even more difficult selection of words appearing in the New Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary. Judging by the estimated frequency of look-up of some of the words listed below, we believe that when the pocket edition is updated for the next edition, as much effort should be devoted to dropping words as to adding new ones. The preface to the 1964 edition asserts that the words chosen for definition "...are based on actual recorded use or on user's highly probable need". But when we find words like BALDACHINO and ORGULOUS in our favorite dictionary, we wonder whether such tests were ever seriously applied. Qualifying score on this quiz is one right. Look up the words about whose definitions you are doubtful. If your own definition merely suggests the dictionary definition, you get a zero on that word; judge your definitions rigorously. Nobody we know has qualified.

ARCHIMANDRITE JESS RIEL
Baldachino KYAT SHIPI
Chela LEV TIPPEK
Dirham MANSUETUDA USUFRACT
Eyrir NARIS VELEITY
Felly ORGULOUS WHEAL
Gris-gris PIBROCH XENIA
Handsel QURSH YEANLING
Intrados ZUCCHETTO

Imperative Nouns Revisited

In the last issue we opened the topic of Imperative Nouns, i.e., verb-noun compounds that have the appearance of commands. Examples given were sawbones, turncoat, telltale, scofflaw, and a dozen more. Killdeer, the name of a bird, was rejected as an imperative; it is an imitative word based on the presumed sound of the bird's call and has no objective relation with the meaning of the component words. Instead, we gave a bona fide imperative bird name, turnstone. To this, the Wordbotcher immediately added shearwater. Bill Cooley of Wyoming, Ohio gave us several additional imperative nouns, including tosspot, turnkey, cutthroat, breakwater, breakfast, spitfire, and spendthrift. No doubt a count of imperative nouns in Webster's Unabridged would reveal several hundred.

The Wordbotcher observed in passing that many referents have two different imperative nouns that denote them, as we implied when we invited readers to find two different imperative nouns meaning toady. See if you can find two imperative nouns, roughly synonymous with each of the definitions given below. The resulting Imperative Doubles are given in Answers and Solutions.

1. Tightwad
2. Wet blanket or party-pooper

If you happen to come hearing this

English dictionaries have formations of pejoratives in languages about which they appear to have impetus toward inherent in the languages; it is. However, it also

Flash: Webster's

Yes, it's

where it is defined

that a woman

we're on this

1973 issue when (like STUPID)
FRUMPY, SLIP,
us out with a

masculine, including

ISH and RAKI,
and, at the same

characteristic of pejoratives, studying our list

masculine. Still

adjective suffi-

cular, the Seniols

than disprove,

pejoratives pe-

More One Word

Ernst The

shaws by send-

alphabet. Several

earlier: A M (the M), N T (T here) and, at the same

important: G (no S)
P (epicenter) have an advant-

Q (cuesta*), a
3. thief specializing in surreptitiously separating you from your billfold

If you happen to find additional pairs that are synonymous, we'd welcome hearing from you.

English does not have a monopoly on imperative nouns; similar formations occur in French, German, and Italian, to name only three languages about which we've been informed by native speakers. But they appear to be much rarer in these languages. It may be that the impetus toward coinng compounds of the imperative noun variety is inherent in the structure of Indo-European and all of its derivative languages; it may even be characteristic of other language families. However, it appears that the phenomenon is peculiarly characteristic of English.

Flash: Webster's 8th New Collegiate is Sexist

Yes, it's true. The word SEXISM made the 8th New Collegiate, where it is defined as "prejudice against women". Doesn't that imply that a woman prejudiced against men is not guilty of sexism? While we're on this delicate subject, we recall wondering in the February 1973 issue why all English pejorative adjectives that are not neuter (like STUPID) seem to be feminine: BLOWSY, DOWDY, FROWSY, FRUMPY, SLATTERY, etc. Several correspondents straightened us out with a barrage of pejorative adjectives that are undeniably masculine, including BOORISH, CADDISH, CHURLISH, OAFISH, RAFFISH and RAKISH. That proves that the English language is not sexist, and, at the same time, reveals a hitherto unknown inflectional characteristic of pejorative adjectives that could be of value to foreigners studying our language: the -Y ending is feminine; the -ISH ending is masculine. So much for our boast that we have eliminated inflectional adjective suffixes based on gender. Exceptions to this newly-discovered rule are not solicited.

The Senior Pedant believes that the adjectives above prove, rather than disprove, the assertion that our language is sexist. The feminine pejoratives pertain to appearance; the masculines, to character.

More One Word One Letter Rebuses

Ernst Theimer responded to our rebus roundup in the May Kickshaws by sending in a complete set of rebuses for each letter of the alphabet. Several of his solutions are at least as good as those reported earlier: A (an A), C (C here), D (see the D), I (an I), L (itself*), M (the M), N (beholden*), O (just O), S (behold S), T (T here) and Y (the Y). Other letters are particularly rebus-resistant: G (no S in GS), H (headstart), J (J I be), K (a K I'm), P (epicenter) and Z (a Z, ole). He points out that a Frenchman would have an advantage with V (a V ici), a Spaniard with V (a V esta) and Q (cuesta*), and a Russian with T (da, da is T).