THE DEMON CHAMPIONSHIP

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The most conspicuous attribute of our language, one of which all its students and practitioners are keenly aware, a characteristic that is an endearing frailty from the logological point of view, is the tremendous disparity between sound and sight in English words. Put succinctly, spelling English words correctly is unreasonably difficult, yet provides logology with much of its fodder.

What are the 50 or 100 most difficult words to spell correctly? Most English textbooks include a list of so-called spelling demons, but 90 per cent or more of the words on such lists aren't really difficult if one has any sort of feel for the language. Our concern is to ferret out the real spelling demons, those worthy of contending for the championship in their field.

After much hesitation, I have drawn up a preliminary list of 60 words that merit consideration. As the discussion following the list will show, it is a most unsatisfactory list, and needs thorough revision. It is, however, a starting point in our search, and there has heretofore been no starting point. Here are the 60 candidates for the international demon championship:

1. accommodation 21. cynosure 41. oeil-de-boeuf
2. allotting 22. eighth 42. orrhorrhoea
3. antiszyzygy 23. eleemosynary 43. pachisi
4. autochthonous 24. euouae 44. pensile
5. banlieues 25. eyey 45. phlegm
6. bo's sun 26. feuilleton 46. postphthisic
7. bouillon 27. fo'c'sle 47. propaedeutic
8. brouhaha 28. gneiss 48. pseudonymous
9. cachinnation 29. guillotine 49. psychologically
10. caoutchouc 30. hauteur 50. reconnaisance
11. chamoix 31. homolousia 51. reminiscences
12. chastis 32. hypocrispy 52. Renaissance
13. cholecystectomy 33. idiosyncrasy 53. scacchic
14. chthonian 34. kjehldahlize 54. scorlacious
15. cnemial 35. Leicester 55. shillelagh
16. coccycgeal 36. maleutics 56. stercoraceous
17. concinnity 37. miaoued 57. subpoenaed
18. connoisseur 38. mnemonic 58. synonymy
19. conscientious 39. occasionally 59. vichysoisse
20. copacetic 40. occurrence 60. Worcestershire
There is the list. What's wrong with it?

The first criticism concerns its mechanical esthetics. The distribution of words along the alphabet is out of whack. More than a third of the words on the list start with the first three letters, A-B-C, while only two words begin with any of the last seven letters of the alphabet, among which is included the second most common of all the letters, T. This lopsidedness needs somehow to be remedied.

Second, a good many of the words on the list can be spelled otherwise without being spelled incorrectly. Thus, 27 may also be written FORECASTLE, and 6 BOATSWAIN. The alternatives are much more logically structured, but it is the illogical forms that arouse our interest. How do we explain to someone else that we want the word MIAOUED, not the word MIAOWED or the word MEOWED or the word MEOWED or the word MEWED? How do we invest with an identity of its own SHILLELAGH, as distinct from SHILLALAH or SHILLELAI or SHILLALA or SHILLALY? If a word has more than one spelling, should that fact be sufficient to bar it from consideration as a spelling demon, unless the requirement is imposed to master all its variants, arranged in the order of use frequency? There is a problem here the solution to which is not at all clear.

Third, too many of the words are relatively uncommon. Most of us do not know that ORRHORRHOEA (less interestingly also spelled ORRHORRHEA!) is a watery or serous discharge, that ANTISYZGY is the union of opposites, that OEL-DE-BOEUF is a circular window. Ideally, a list of demons should consist entirely of very common words, EIGHTH being a splendid example. In striving for commonness, we run into resistance, unfortunately. Very common words, precisely because they are common, seldom present spelling problems. Because they are common, their spelling is well-known to most of us. To ask for an everyday word difficult to spell correctly is almost like asking for the impossible. Perhaps the solution lies in effecting a compromise, selecting words of a moderate degree of unknownness, measured against standards yet to be formulated.

Fourth, words of French origin are conspicuous for their presence on the list - 5, 7, 11, 18, 26, 29, 30, 41, 50, 52, 59, and perhaps one or two others. For an English word list, this wholesale invasion from French seems more than we can bear. Some words of French origin have been absorbed into English to such an extent that it would be improper to exclude them from consideration -- GUILLOTINE and RENAISSANCE, for instance. Where do we draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable words of French origin? Also, why raise a barrier against French words while accepting words of Latin and Greek origin? If we are going to be purists, we should have to reject any vowel word three consecutive or more. Once again, only because it is more than being a fact that every acceptable word from our list. If we are going to be purists, we should have to reject any vowel word three consecutive or more. Once again, only because it is more than being a fact that every acceptable word from our list.

Fifth, GNEISS (geological) is not consonant with the esthetics of our list. What's wrong with it?

Even the lopsidedness of the list itself centers on the fact that CONC. CENTRE is a logical word with a solution relatively easy to find. A seventh criticism that is not immediately apparent is that ORRHORRHOEA (less interestingly also spelled ORRHORRHEA!) is a watery or serous discharge, that ANTISYZGY is the union of opposites, that OEL-DE-BOEUF is a circular window. Ideally, a list of demons should consist entirely of very common words, EIGHTH being a splendid example. In striving for commonness, we run into resistance, unfortunately. Very common words, precisely because they are common, seldom present spelling problems. Because they are common, their spelling is well-known to most of us. To ask for an everyday word difficult to spell correctly is almost like asking for the impossible. Perhaps the solution lies in effecting a compromise, selecting words of a moderate degree of unknownness, measured against standards yet to be formulated.

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The distribution of technical terms on the list -- words like GNEISS (geology), CNEMIAL (anatomy), KJEHDAHLIZE (chemistry), POSTPHTHISIS (medicine), HOMOIOUSIA (theology), PROPDEUTIC (educational theory), and so on. Our ideal list would consist exclusively of standard, literary, nontechnical words. Again, because such words are more common, they shy away from becoming candidates for our list. How do we resolve the dilemma? Exactly where do we divide technical from nontechnical words?

Even the standard, literary words on our list are tainted by remoteness from our accustomed vocabulary. How many of us know that CONCINITY is studied elegance of design, that CYNOSURE is a center of attraction, that PENSILE is suspended, that CHTHONIAN is infernal? Here is a sixth criticism of the list, in line with some of the earlier ones, and no more easily answerable or resolvable.

A seventh point of attack focuses on a number of words in the list that are normally capitalized: LEICESTER (a hard cheese), RENAISSANCE (an enthusiastic cultural revival), and WORCESTERSHIRE (a pungent sauce). There is a widespread feeling that capitalized words are names, and are consequently not real words. The obvious reply to this criticism is that the elimination of proper names from our language would make communication impossible: we could not even identify ourselves! Possibly, a quota system could be instituted, limiting capitalized words to some specified and not very high percentage of the entire list.

The fetish for standard, literary terms also inveighs against colloquial and slang vocabulary. This becomes criticism number nine, directed specifically against the word COPACETIC (fine and dandy). Spelled also COPASETIC, COPASETIC, and COPASETIC, this is a good example of a common word with a simple, ordinary, literary, nontechnical meaning. Must we fault it on a new ground?

A tenth criticism, if that is what we choose to call it, concerns the fact that some of the words on our list have logologically interesting qualities. To cite some illustrations, POSTPHTHISIS uses six consecutive consonants, while MAOUEH includes the five vowels consecutively; EYEY is a short tautonym, and EUOUEA is an all-vowel word; PHLEGEM has both an invisible F and a silent C, while three consecutive letters (RCE) are silent in WORCESTERSHIRE. Once again, we are moved to ask, is it fair to condemn a word merely because it possesses logological interest for some reason other than being a spelling demon? Actually, it is an easily demonstrable fact that every word and name in the English language, with not a single exception, possesses intense logological interest of some kind or other. If we were to make such interest a reason for exclusion from our list, there could be no list at all.

We have constructed a Decalogue of Complaints about our word list. Are all of the criticisms valid? To what degree? What are we
going to do about them? Which words should be removed from our list, and by which words should they be replaced?

The help of readers in restructuring our word list is earnestly sought. However, a condition must be enunciated and enforced: no one may suggest removal of a word from the list, however cogent the reasons for its removal may be, unless he can offer an immediate replacement for it that is demonstrably superior, viewed in the light of the entire Decalogue. Subject to this indispensable condition, readers are urged to send all suggested substitutions to the editor, for possible future publication.

It will be interesting to study the revised list that results from this process.

CHEMICAL WORDS

Something new has appeared on the ever-expanding horizons of logology: the chemical word. Consider the following:

FELUCCAS = Fe + Lu + C + Ca + S
PARANOIACS = Pa + Ra + No + I + Ac + S
CHAMBERLAINS = C + H + Am + B + Er + La + In + S

Each of these words has been divided into a group of symbols representing chemical elements, with no elements repeated. Several elements -- arsenic, iron, neon, phosphorus, silicon and xenon -- are themselves element words, but surely the most unusual is CARBON which can be factored into elements not including itself (Ca + Rb + O + N). An easy task: find chemical words which can be spelled by elements in two (or three) alternate ways. A harder one: find chemical words containing each element symbol in turn. An impossible one: find a group of chemical words using all element symbols exactly once. (D. A. B.)