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
2. allotting
3. antisyzygy
4. autochthonous
5. banlieues
6. bo'sun
7. bouillon
8. brouhaha
9. cachinnation
10. caoutchouc
11. chamoix
12. chassiss
13. cholecystectomy
14. chthonian
15. cnemial
16. coccigeal
17. concinity
18. connoisseur
19. conscientious
20. copacetic
21. cynosure
22. eighth
23. eleemosynary
24. euouae
25. eyey
26. feuilleton
27. fo'c'sle
28. gneiss
29. guillotine
30. hauteur
31. homolousia
32. hypocresy
33. idiosyncrasy
34. kjehldahlize
35. Leicester
36. maleutics
37. miaoued
38. mnemotechny
39. occasionally
40. occurrence
41. oeil-de-boeuf
42. oorrhorrboea
43. pachist
44. pensile
45. phlegm
46. postphthisic
47. propaedetic
48. pseudonymous
49. psychologically
50. reconnaissance
51. reminiscences
52. Renaissance
53. scacchic
54. scorlaceous
55. shillelagh
56. stercoraceous
57. subpoenaed
58. synonymy
59. vichyssoise
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? How do we invest with an identity of its own SHILLELAGH, as distinct from SHILLALAH or SHILLELAH 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 OEIL-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 other. If we are going to be purists, we should have to reject any word not derived from Old English. Speech confined to such words would be poverty-stricken and cumbersome. French words, because they reflect spelling patterns different from ordinary English, make ideal candidates for our list. Here we see another clash of forces pulling in opposite directions.

Fifth, GNEISS (a pungent smell), CHTHONIC (education of students), and 22 words are for our list.

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A seventh that are not OMSANCE (an a good example, a nontechnical)

The set of loquial and directed speech.

A tenth the fact respecting qualities.

Once again, the fact that in English, consecutive vowel words are three consecutive.

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Fifth, there are too many technical terms on the list -- words like GNEISS (geology), CNEMIAL (anatomy), KJEAHDAHLINEZ (chemistry), POSTPHTHISIC (medicine), HOMIOOUSIA (theology), PROPADAUTIC (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 CONCINNITY is studied elegance of design, that CYNOSURE is a center of attraction, that PENSILE is suspended from above, 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, COPESETIC, and COPESETTIC, 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, POSTPHTHISIC uses six consecutive consonants, while MAOUED includes the five vowels consecutively; EYEEY is a short tautonym, and EUOVAUE is an all-vowel word; PHLEGOM has both an invisible F and a silent G, 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.)

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