EROTEMES

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If you have turned to this article expecting a discussion of erotic themes, you had best look elsewhere. Erotemes, you see, are question marks, and you are going to see a lot of question marks here.

Astute observation over a period of time has convinced me that most of the material published in Word Ways concerns words. The clever originators of this material are experts in all sorts of problems centering around words. It is to be presupposed that they know what words are. Do they? Does anyone? What, exactly, is a word?

Most of us have little difficulty in deciding that FORMULA is a word while JQMUUFFH is not. Other decisions are not so obvious to make. Thus, we might be tempted to decide that SEMISLAVERY is a word while ZZXJOANW is not. As a matter of fact, it's the other way around: SEMISLAVERY is not a word (at least, it has never appeared in any dictionary in spite of the inclusion of its close relative, SEMISLAVE, in a number of dictionaries), whereas ZZXJOANW is another name for a musical conclusion, entered and defined on page 717 of the Music Lovers' Encyclopedia by Rupert Hughes, published in 1954.

How, then, do we decide whether a group of letters laid before us is or is not a word? What makes a word a word?

Our first inclination is to say that letter groups entered and defined in the dictionary are words, and that other letter groups are not. Which dictionary? There are so many of them! If we select a particular one -- Webster's Third Edition, for example -- we are immediately in dire trouble. Consider the word OVERFLUTTER. It isn't in the Third Edition. Does that make it a nonword? Hardly! You will find it in Webster's Second Edition, defined as "to flutter over" (naturally -- what did you think it meant, an orange and purple bikini?). If the Third Edition is the criterion for the existence of a word, then 200,000 of the entries in the Second Edition were never words. That is a self-evident absurdity. Thinking about the problem, we conclude that there is only one way around it: to admit as words all words that have ever been included in any published dictionary.

Applying this criterion in practice is impossible. No one, not even the Library of Congress, owns copies of all English dictionaries ever published. If anyone did, the task of searching all of them to establish the reality or fictitiousness of a particular letter combination would be prohibitive in terms of the time required.
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The clever problems center on what words made. Ls a word way ever appeared in the dictionary, SEMI-W is another page 717 of the Third Edition in 1954.

Before us is the word SUPERSEPTUAGINARIAN. Does that make it an English word? No: it is merely a misprint for SUPERSEPTUAGENARIAN, a legitimate word never included in any dictionary.

Conversely, the word YUCCALIKE has never been included in any dictionary. Does that make it a nonword? Look up the definition of SOTOL in the Second Edition: it is described as a "yuccalike" plant. Clearly, the editors of "the Supreme Authority" would not define the words in their dictionary with nonwords. Therefore, YUCCALIKE is a word, merely one that no one ever bothered including in a dictionary.

SUPERSEPTUAGINARIAN and YUCCALIKE are not isolated freaks. Diligent study of dictionaries turns up many analogous examples in both categories. Dictionaries make errors, and they are incomplete.

Some of those who swear by dictionaries have gone a step further, and insist that a word is not a word unless it appears in the dictionary in boldface type. Consequently, IDIOT is a word because it is printed in the dictionary in boldface type, but IDIOTS is not a word, for it does not so appear. Similarly, the adjective NEAR is a word, but its comparative and superlative forms, NEARER and NEAREST, are not. Or, the verb THUMP is real, but its inflectional forms, THUMPING, THUMPED, and THUMPS, are unreal. The fact that all of these inflectional forms are indicated in lightface type, the endings only being shown for the sake of economizing space in the dictionary, is irrelevant to these oddballs.

There is yet a further reason for discarding dictionaries as the criterion for the admissibility of words. What is a dictionary? Where do you draw the line between dictionaries and non-dictionaries? Do you include dictionaries published before 1800? Do you include specialized dictionaries, such as those in medicine, law, and biology? Do you include biographical and geographical dictionaries? Do you include the English-to-foreign halves of foreign-language dictionaries? Do you include English dictionaries and glossaries published in foreign countries? Do you include dialectal and provincial dictionaries? Do you include dictionaries of Scottish, Welsh, and Irish, all of them languages spoken in the nation that is the motherland of English? Do you include dictionaries of slang and colloquial English? Do you include Bible dictionaries? Do you include works that call themselves glossaries, or encyclopedias, or thesauruses, but which seem to be organized like dictionaries? You can go on and on, listing unusual dictionary categories. The more categories you consider, the hazier your conception of a dictionary becomes, and the further away you are from defining your supposed standard.
If we dismiss dictionaries as our authority for passing on the qualifications of would-be words, what is the alternative? The Third Edition defines words as speech sounds or their written or printed representations symbolizing and communicating meanings without being divisible into smaller independent units. That is an excellent definition, but who is going to apply it as a yardstick? With dictionaries scrapped, we become our own sole judges. What we need is a set of guidelines that will enable us to make the necessary judgments.

The art of logology is a curious one: it encounters word problems seldom met in ordinary speech and writing. Consequently, there is a continual need for making judgments that seldom pose problems outside the sphere of logology. Let us consider some of these problems.

The Third Edition, hereinafter referred to as the dictionary for brevity, shows some inflectional forms (irregular ones) fully in boldface type, others partially and in lightface type, and still others not at all. Those inflections not shown at all are frequently of crucial importance in logological concerns. Examples follow.

How many AND'S are there on this page? To ask that question and to answer it, you must use quotation noun or citation form plurals: the plurals of words used as words. The option of adding an apostrophe and an S to any word or name whatever produces logologically interesting results. For example, it permits you to take a word like OUTSHINE, splitting it into one all-consonant and one all-vowel word: NTH'S + QUIE (another name for a sound hole, according to the Music Lovers' Encyclopedia).

Do you watch the COMINGS and GOINGS of your neighbors? In addition to being nosy, you are sanctioning gerundial plurals: present participles of verbs used as nouns and pluralized. Every present participle can be so employed, sometimes to the advantage of logology. Thus, EATINGS (successive acts of consuming food) is an apposite anagram of INGESTA (food), and SHANGHAINGS (multiple instances of kidnapping onto ships) is a fine 12-letter pair isogram.

"A-hunting we will go," proclaims a poem by Henry Fielding. Technically, the A may be prefixed to any present participle, although esthetes prefer to limit the practice to those participles accented on the first syllable. There's potential in that prefix: A-TRAVELLING is another fine anagram, of GALLIVANTER, to cite a case.

In this critical time, thou PRAYEST, and he PRAYETH, but CANST thou be confident of a devine response? In solemn and poetic discourse, the otherwise archaic inflectional endings -EST or -ST, and -ETH, are still acceptable, much to the satisfaction of logologists: the words CANST, PRAYEST, and PRAYETH can all be transposed, into SCANT, YAPSTER, and THERAPY!

Some adjectives are compared by affixing -ER and -EST (PALE, PALER, PALEST), others by placing "more" and "most" in front of the positive. Yet, there are words in which the endings may be transposed: correctness, expounded by the choice of rhythm, and exploited by the transposition of EUDAEMON into EUDAEMON.

All adjectives have words "less," some one word at a time, that match the fact, unrequited BEING into SUBJACENT.

The contractions, are yet another matter. The word WALL, for example, is different from WALL. In the same way, the correct plural of BIRD is BIRDS, not BIRD, and the correct plural of book is books, not book.

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Third Edition representing divisible partition, but who, we believe, will be appalled, we believe, will be.

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question and in plurals: the apostrophe specially interesting like OUT-
velle word:

The correct plurals of foreign words, when not shown in dictionar-
ies, are yet another delight. The Second Edition includes the German word WALPURGISNACHT, without a plural. The correct plural is WALPURGISNACHT. Recognizing that the umlauted A is a letter different from the regular A turns this plural into a 15-letter isogram. In the same dictionary is the Spanish word SERON, without a plural. The correct plural is SERONES, a reversal of SENORES. Also in the Second Edition is the Italian word TAMBURONE, without a plural. The correct plural is TAMBURONI, a transposal of UMBRATION and of other words.

The converse of the omitted plural is the omitted singular. The Second Edition includes the plural form MAHLITES, but not its singular form. That singular, MAHLITE, transposes into MAILETH.

Then there are words the existence of which is clearly implied by information given in dictionaries, even though they are not explicitly shown. Thus, the Second Edition includes the entry: "EUDAIMONIA, EUDAIMONISM, EUDAIMONIST, etc. Variants of EUDAEMONIA, EUDAEMONISM, etc." We immediately infer from this entry that another word in the Second Edition, EUDAEMONY, may also be spelled EUDAIMONY, and we suddenly have a very short word featuring each of the six vowels once.

Let's examine an entirely different aspect of words now. Some words are single ones, independently used, and written solidly, with no internal punctuation. A meritoriously long example is SUPERCALIFRAGILISTICEXPIALIDOCIOUS, using 34 letters. Other words in this category appear only as parts of a two or more word phrase: the SUEY in CHOP SUEY, for instance. Still others are marred by internal punctuation -- hyphens (LONG-WINED), apostrophes (SHOULD-N'T), and periods (ST. LOUIS). Purists feel that such word formations are inferior to single, solidly written words and should be excluded from consideration in logological investigations. They feel even more strongly about two or more word phrases, and reject them unreservedly.

What attitude should we take? Shall anything short of the ideal be
banned? No. One cannot deny that divided and punctuated letter sequences are esthetically inferior to solid sequences, but they do have virtues that cannot be ignored. The word ENDOLYMPHATICUS, found only as part of the two-word term DUCTUS ENDOLYMPHATICUS, is a 15-letter isogram. The hyphenated word TERROR-STIRRING is perhaps the only literary English word spelled with five Rs. The two-word term SACRIFICIAL STONE is a transposal of RECLASSIFICATION. The logic of the situation compels us to accept verbal triumphs involving members of these inferior classes.

What of capitalized words? May we accept proper names? There are those who seem to feel that names are not part of our language, and must be spurned in logology. How would these individuals react if we proscribed the use of their names, prohibiting them from appearing either in speech or in writing? Is it possible to conceive of English without names such as JOHN and MARY, or SMITH and MILLER, or NEW YORK and LONDON, or AMERICA and ENGLAND? Can we be indifferent to the name of a hill in New Zealand that is spelled with 85 letters? Or to MALAYALAM, the name of a language that is a perfect palindrome? Or to the name of an individual somewhere, ALLEN I. GALES, that is a reversal of the word SELAGINELLA? No. Names are an inescapable part of our linguistic environment, and we cheerfully accept the discoveries we make in onomastic fields.

In our forays along the frontiers of language, we meet "coined" words. These are words formed in accordance with the standard rules governing the construction of English words, using regular prefixes, suffixes, and combining forms, sometimes using hyphens, and conveying a simple, unmistakable meaning. The only crime with which these words can be charged is the crime of never having been included in any published dictionary.

We have already seen that inclusion in dictionaries is a meaningless virtue. The dictionary-makers themselves, in defining their words, use words not included in dictionaries. If those who set themselves up as the authorities may coin words, so may we.

By using coined words freely, we are merely availing ourselves of the resources that our language offers us, untrammeled by the artificial restrictions that dictionaries vainly seek to impose on us. Our only concern must be to limit our coinages to words that are both natural and meaningful. It is easy to deviate from that standard.

In his enthusiasm, one logologist once transposed the word PRACTICALITIES into RECAPITALISTIC. A 14-letter pair is a shining example of the transposer's handicraft, but what is RECAPITALISTIC supposed to mean? It takes a lot of thinking about the word to assign some sort of plausible meaning to it. It might be construed as meaning "capitalism anew", as in the sentence, "After a short period under communist domination, Guatemala is now recapitalistic." Sorry, but it just doesn't sound right.
Aside from such malformations, which must assiduously be guarded against, the coined word is the key to a wealth of logological gems, which it would be unconscionable to ostracize. The term WHEAT BREAD, in the dictionary, is discovered to be a transposition of another term, BAD WEATHER. This latter term is not in the dictionary, but is so natural a phrase that excluding it would be preposterous. Incidentally, research uncovers the fact that The Oxford English Dictionary uses a quotation from Thackeray, dated 1862, in which the phrase "bad weather" appears (in lightface type, of course).

The most remarkable example of a truly English palindrome is a coined one: DETARTRATED, a grafting of the prefix DE-, common in chemistry, to the chemical term TARTRATED. Both of the elements we have used are in the dictionary, and the meaning of the compound, "separated from tartaric acid", is self-evident. Another common prefix, RE-, attached to a common English word (one in the pocket dictionary), gives us our longest authentic reversal: RE-REVILED, a backward spelling of DELIVERER. Again, both of the elements we have used are in the dictionary, and both are Latin in derivation, providing etymological consistency. EDIBLE is, basically, an adjective, but it has been made into a noun with the standard plural EDIBLES. Working with COPYRIGHTABLE, a word in the dictionary, we first negate its meaning by attaching to it the most common of all English prefixes, UN-, to form the adjective UNCOPYRIGHTABLE. We then convert it into a noun and pluralize it by attaching the suffix -S, giving us the word UNCOPYRIGHTABLES (materials that cannot be copyrighted), for the longest bona fide English isogram.

The three examples just cited illustrate the power of the coined word, a power that it our responsibility, our sacred obligation, to apply constructively for the advancement of logology. To refrain from wielding that power is nothing short of treason to the cause.

We have sketched, in broad outline, a set of guidelines in accordance with which logological inquiries ought to be pursued. They do not include slavish acceptance of the limitations inherent in some particular dictionary, or in all dictionaries combined. Such acceptance would be a mark of mediocrity, and cannot be tolerated by those of us who know that dictionaries are compendia of errors and omissions. To use a dictionary properly, your knowledge of the language must be superior to the level of knowledge represented by the dictionary itself. How, otherwise, can you detect the errors in it? Once you realize that you are superior to the dictionary you are using, never again can you accept its dictates. It's that simple!