

THE A-E-I-O-U-Y PROBLEM

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The August 1968 Word Ways contained a short problem entitled Vowel Rotation which ran as follows:

Five common English words with an obvious letter relationship are LAST, LEST, LIST, LOST and LUST. Unfortunately, modern English does not include a word LYST. Can you, perchance, find a group of six such words all of which belong to modern English?

As no other Word Ways reader has ventured a solution to this problem, we felt it was time to come up with one. The answer to the problem as stated is "yes". But since that would fail to satisfy most, if not all, readers, perhaps we should elaborate, and describe the six words that we found.

They are MATH, METH, MITH, MOTH, MUTH, and MYTH. Five of these (all except METH) appear in Webster's Third New International Dictionary, which should prove that all are "modern English", as the problem required. The sixth word, METH, is also modern, being found in two dictionaries published in the 1970s. The word appears in The Underground Dictionary (MacGibbon & Kee, London, 1971) by Eugene Landy, and A Dictionary of New English (Longman, London, 1973) by Clarence Barnhart, Sol Steinmetz and Robert Barnhart. The latter dictionary was reviewed in the February 1974 Word Ways.

What do the six words mean? Only MOTH and MYTH are common enough not to need defining. MATH is short for "mathematics"; METH is a stimulant drug (also called "methamphetamine" and "speed"); MITH is a chiefly Scots variant of "might"; and MUTH is a Hindu temple. While these last four words are not particularly common, they can certainly all be considered as "modern English".