WHAT'S THE GOOD WORD?

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"What is an acceptable word?" has been the topic of a number of Word Ways articles. Answers range from "a Pocket Dictionary main entry" (for certain problems) to "anything remotely wordlike" (see "The Ultimate Adventure" elsewhere in this issue). I think, however, that it makes more sense to change the question to "what is acceptability?" noting that (1) words vary in acceptability, (2) the "unacceptability" line will be drawn at different points in the continuum by different people, or for different problems, and (3) a word's acceptability has at least two dimensions, centrality and reliability, which depend strongly on its source. Clearly defined scales of acceptability will not resolve the question, since people will disagree on the importance of this factor or that, but they should at least clarify discussions of the problem.

Centrality is a measure of the closeness of a word to the core of standard English. The centrality of a word correlates roughly with the works in which it can be found; words in the Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary are, on the average, more basic than those in the 8th Collegiate. The 8C is more basic than Webster's Third, NI3 than the Times Index Gazetteer, the TIG than the Handbook of American Indians. This is only approximate -- "Fred" is surely more central than "Idiosepiidae", but only the latter is in NI3 -- but it is a useful measure. Distinctions between dictionary words are of course possible as well: for me, unmarked words -- slang and technical terms, dialect words, obsolete spellings, and reformed spellings are in order of increasing unacceptability.

Reliability is much less often referred to in discussions of word acceptability. I define it as the likelihood that a putative form actually exists. Dictionary words have high reliability (but not 100 per cent, as articles on Websterian errors have shown); gazetteer names have lower reliability. For example, I have discovered hundreds of mistakes in TIG alone. Most are minor misalphabetizations, but the misprints (Gwmpie for Gympie, Chrudmka for Chrudimka, etc.) are frequent enough to cast doubt on interesting names like Ckotol.

Made suspicious by such discoveries, I have been increasingly reluctant to accept odd-looking words and names without checking. Unfortunately, checking has proved one of my favorite words to be a fake.

"Zzxjoanw" has been well-known to logologists since Borgmann mentioned it in Language on Vacation in 1965. I recently decided to
check out the reference, Rupert Hughes’ *Music-Lovers Encyclopedia* (any edition from 1914 to 1956 will do). The entry reads:

**zxzjoanw (shaw) Maori. 1. Drum. 2. Fife. 3. Conclusion**

There are a number of odd points here: the pronunciation, homonym­ous with ‘pshaw’ and little related to the spelling; the strange diver­sity of meanings; and the curious appropriateness of ‘conclusion’ as the last meaning of the last entry in the dictionary section. (Could ‘drum’ and ‘fife’ convey something, too?) But the clincher comes when we look at Maori. A typical sentence, from Harawira’s *Teach Yourself Maori*, is "Ataahua ana ki te titiroatu". Maori has no closed syllables or consonant clusters, let alone the conglomerations of ‘zxzjoanw’, nor even an ‘s’ or ‘sh’ sound. The available Maori dictionaries give words for ‘drum’ and ‘end’, but they haven’t the slightest resemblance to ‘zxzjoanw’ or ‘shaw’.

A hoax clearly entered somewhere. It’s not certain where, since Hughes cites no sources, but I suspect it began and ended with him. (Could it be that he had a wife or a daughter named Joan? He was married three times.) He probably intended the hoax to be obvious, but he reckoned without logologists, made credulous by experience with other outlandish words.

Whatever his motives, I, for one, feel betrayed. I thought that ‘zxzjoanw’ was the perfect example of an amazing-but-real word; there is no other one cockeyed enough to replace it. (A philosophico­logological question: does a hoax word gain legitimacy from 42 years’ unchallenged appearance in a standard reference, and citation else­where? An error, no, but ‘zxzjoanw’ approaches the status of a suc­cessful coinage -- successful, at least, among logologists.)

‘Zxzjoanw’ illustrates some of the methods available to the logol­gist for checking the authenticity of a word. There are others; for example, one may look for similar but more plausible forms of a word in the same work. When one finds both ‘Opuandt’s Ace Hardware’ and ‘Quandt’s Ace Hardware’ in the Chicago telephone direc­tory, or ‘Cgo C Col’ and ‘Chgo (Chicago) City College’, in each case sharing address and phone number, one can obviously infer a computer hiccup (or a keypuncher’s daydream) during the prepara­tion of the directory. A similar example is given by ‘Pvilll’, cited in *Beyond Language* as coming from the index to Chemical Abstracts; the abstract itself shows the author’s name to be ‘Prilll’. The town of Gigx, in the gazetteer of Black’s 19th-century General Atlas of the World, turns out on the map to be Glys. Apparently someone had terrible handwriting.

Other phone directory errors are obvious even without cross­checking: ‘Xfat Alberti’s Funland’, ‘Bvoeing Corp.’ But such infer­ences are less certain with personal names. One may presume ‘Bxnum’ to be an error for ‘Bynum’, but (in the absence of a Bynum having the same address and phone number) who can tell? (The By­num in question may have moved away some time earlier, but the er­raneous list continues.

Finding evidence for it is not impossible; it is the mis­spelling, index, and other errors.

Other name errors in the original reference works are rather harder to see if they don’t succeed in getting into the second source. Francis’ *Word Ways* contains this name: ‘Pvilf’, an Egyptian verb rather than a personal name.

The moral: beware of shifting suspicion with suspicious names! The telephone directory is a veritable cornucopia of errors, of which the logologist should take full advantage.

Telephone directories contain a veritable cornucopia of errors, of which the logologist should take full advantage. The following errors are obvious even without cross-checking:

1. ‘Xfat Alberti’s Funland’, ‘Bvoeing Corp.’

2. ‘Bxnum’ to be an error for ‘Bynum’, but (in the absence of a Bynum having the same address and phone number) who can tell? (The Bynum in question may have moved away some time earlier, but the error persists.)
Telephone directory names are an interesting class, having moderate centrality but low reliability. A fair number of surnames are well-known to almost all English speakers, but even the rarest have the potential (much more so than rare words) of becoming well-known. Who was familiar with Comaneci before the 1976 Olympics? Unfortunately, telephone directories are not the most desirable sources for names. They offer no hooks for cross-checking with other sources; they become unavailable swiftly when superseded; their turnover of entries is much greater than that of other references; and they are prepared by computers (i.e., idiots) and inadequately proofread.

The only way I know of to check the trustworthiness of an entry is to ask the person whose name one wonders about. Writing hasn't worked, and long distance is expensive, so I'm turning to Word Ways readers for help. Please, if you live in any of the cities listed, call the numbers shown and ask the people the following questions:

(1) Is the name correct as shown in the book? Be prepared for incomprehension, since the person may have a correct listing as well and not know about the incorrect one -- or, if it's right, may not speak much English. Ask about umlauts and other diacritics if they seem likely.

(2) If the name is right, can the person suggest a source for the name more permanently available (preferably nationwide) than phone books? You will probably have to suggest possibilities, since this isn't a question people normally think about. A few are: a) announcement of a birth/marriage/death or award in the family, from a large-
circulation newspaper (papers are unreliable, too, but are OK as cross-checks); b) a letter to the editor of a national magazine or a newspaper; c) listing as plant foreman in Illinois Directory of Businesses, or the like.

(3) If nothing is forthcoming on the above verifications, can the person suggest the origin of their surname, or say in what other towns it might be found?

If you live quite near the person, a personal visit is likeliest of all to produce results, since imperfect English is much less a problem, and the person's suspicions as to your motives can be more effectively allayed. No one will do this, I'm sure, but I can dream.

ATLANTA: Jos. Bpuscia 469-9408; E. M. Fmeets 766-8648
BALTIMORE: Thomas Fpitnale 725-5297
CHICAGO: Mary E. Fb 685-1293; E. Fbeswalter 239-6131; C. Wxsmhersji 238-2062; Vaughn Wvertz 878-0348
CLEVELAND: Douglas Fvenz 232-6469; Robert Hgan 381-6552; D. Pxeiffer 249-7136
COLUMBUS: Jeanette Fmura 252-4851; Joe Fmura 237-9784
DALLAS: Anna Belle Bparnell 331-1098
HOUSTON: Robert D. Pplanck 522-9515; Arun Pvongnak 921-3287
LONDON: Mr. HcYiani 01 7334110
MANHATTAN: Edith Wfoulkes 690-1698
MINNEAPOLIS: Olaf S. Pveitane 870-7069
MONTREAL: Fernand Fbacher 324-4283; G. PpoLin 259-7483
PERTH AMBOY: Diana Ppuskota 225-1207; A. Pxeiffer 246-3971
SAINT LOUIS: Eleanor M. Bxnum 436-0967; Roy B. P'Pool 426-6118
SAN DIEGO: Alex E. Jvirblis 459-8524
SAN FRANCISCO: M. G. Xzylt 566-2307
TORONTO: R. Bpr 534-2194; Jos. Fvlop 654-4963; G. Fwx 923-7043; Mrs. J. O'Part 421-0959; G. Vpangnilan 534-8332; May Vpierce, 921-5396

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