GERMAN-ENGLISH WORD SQUARES

GEORGE J. GRIESHABER
Wyoming, Ohio

In the last paragraph of "Russian-English Word Squares" in the February 1977 Word Ways, I suggested that readers might want to form some other bilingual word squares, possibly German-English or French-English. In these languages the complete alphabets are practically the same -- not just twelve mutual Russian-English letters. On an impulse, I decided to try my hand at German-English squares, since my surname befits that foreign language more than Russian. The results are shown at the end of this article, following a bit of discussion on these two-language squares.

The question arises: why form these unorthodox squares, so different from the full English ones that started a century or so ago? Well, like Mount Everest, they are there to be formed, and no one has done it before. Regular formists tired of the simplicity of four- and five-letter squares, so they progressed to six-letter, seven-letter and eight-letter ones, and Word Ways recently published an "almost" ten-letter square! My approach to less simplicity was the two-language square, not bigger ones.

Here is what this type of square entails. To start, I went through my Langenscheidt's German-English dictionary (623 German pages) for all five-letter words. (Since I had all 26 letters of the alphabet to work with instead of the 12 Cyrillic-English look-alikes, I hoped that I could exceed the four-letter Russian-English squares.) When these were checked with a booklet of 14,900 five-letter English words taken from Webster's Second Edition, I had only 617 words left.

Have you ever constructed a five-letter square from only 617 words? (Try it!) I could count on additional English words by adding an S to four-letter nouns and verbs, but what I really needed was a larger German word list. So I tackled Wildhagen's German-English dictionary (1242 pages), and also De Vries's German-English Medical Dictionary. After checking these against the Websterian list, I had a total of nearly 1,300 five-letter words that were spelled the same in both German and English, but did not necessarily mean the same. Had I allowed umlauted German words the list would have been larger, but this did not seem kosher to me.

The list was extremely unbalanced with respect to word-endings. I had 387 words ending in S, 273 in E, and 101 in N, but on the other hand I had no words ending in J or Q, one word each ending in C, V

and W, two words in B, three words in Z, four words in P and U, five words in G, and six words in Y.

Our English nouns as a rule stubbornly give only two forms, the singular FLAG plus the plural FLAGS. German is kinder to formists by having four cases, singular and plural, which furnish several spellings for the same noun. The word ASSES (used in one of the squares below) is interesting. It is essentially a two-letter word, AS, meaning "ace" (as in spades). Its genitive singular requires an -ES ending, but like some of our English words (travel, deter, etc.) which double the final consonant before an ending, AS becomes ASSES, meaning that a two-letter word has grown to a five!

It was a unique pleasure checking the De Vries dictionary because it went so rapidly. The bold-faced German word was followed by only the English translation, sans definition, so my eye could scan the whole half-page in an instant. German doctors seem unable to treat short diseases like flu, gout, or ague! They must run symptoms and syndromes together to get words of 20, 25, and 30 letters. While not seeking nor claiming records, I did notice two words of 35 letters each. Such sesquipedalia made my little five-letter words stick out like a sore thumb. Yes, that cliché is appropriate because DAUMENBALL-ENGROSS, one German word of seventeen letters, needed eight English words for translation into "as large as the ball of your thumb".

During the preparation of this article, I had the pleasure and good fortune of a nice long visit by Palmer Peterson as he drove from South Dakota to relatives in Kentucky. Palmer, a fine gentleman of good Norwegian stock, is one of the few expert formists left, and he is still going strong. When I compared my 1,300 German-English words with his list of 105,876 five-letter English words (with few duplications), I realized the enormous advantages English-language formists have. Why, he had over 20 words ending in Q alone (and by alone, I mean without even a U). This great advantage naturally accrues from his large collection of reference works, from dictionaries to postal guides to plant, fish, Indian and saintly women's names. I had thought it was de rigueur to use only standard dictionary listings!

Here are the five five-letter German-English word squares that I was able to find (German meanings first, then English meanings):

P A S T A	paste	spaghetti
A U T O S	autos	autos
S T A R S	starling (gen. sing.)	stars
T O R T E	fancy cake	cake or pastry
A S S E S	ace (gen. sing.)	beasts of burden

R I P P S	old hag (gen. sing.)	Scot. var. of "reaps"
I D I O T	idiot	idiot
P I A N O	piano	piano
P O N O S	a disease	disease (kala azar)
S T O S S	a push, shove	facing toward glacier

K A M A S	hartebeests (pl.)	var. of camas
A R O M A	fragrance	odor
M O R E S	manners	fixed customs
A M E N S	amen (gen. sing.)	hearty approvals
S A S S E	tenant	archaic: sluice or lock
L A M A S	Tibetan monks	llamas
A M I D E	amides (pl.)	ammonia compound
M I L A N	kite (bird)	of lace or needlepoint
A D A M S	Adams (pl.)	Adams (pl.)
S E N S E	scythe	meaning
F R A S S	animal feed	debris by insects
R O U T E	route	travelled way
A U G E N	eyes (pl.)	plural of auge (rocks)
S T E R N	star	rear of ship
S E N N E	pasture land	obs. var. of sen

All German words can be found in Langenscheidt's and Wildhagen's German-English dictionaries, except PONOS from De Vries's (and other) medical dictionaries. All English words can be found in the Second or Third Editions of Webster's Unabridged, except PONOS which is in most medical dictionaries. The synonym for PONOS is "kala azar "(from Hindi, meaning "black disease"), found only in the Third.

Before you old formists laugh at these little five-letter squares, try them yourselves. Send me one dollar to cover postage and Xeroxing costs, and I'll send you my list of German-English and Russian-English words, arranged by final letter to aid in form-building (PO Box 15081, Wyoming, Ohio 45215). I'm sure that additional five-letter squares can be found (and not just trivial variants, such as KIPPS for RIPPS). For new worlds to conquer, who will wrestle with the French-English five-letter square?