SYNONYM PUDDING

A. ROSS ECKLER
Morristown, New Jersey

Webster’s Tenth Collegiate dictionary lists synonyms of headword adjectives in two ways: in small caps in the main definition set, and at the end with the heading syn followed by a group of additional small cap synonyms. (The latter are selected to highlight the distinctions among the synonyms; for example lazy, indolent and slothful all mean “not easily aroused to activity”, but lazy suggests a disinclination to take trouble, indolent suggests a love of ease, and slothful, a temperamental inability to act promptly.) Approximately 220 of the headword adjectives merit the syn treatment, and the one thousand synonyms they dissect represent about one-sixth of the headword adjectives.

Using this data, one can readily construct synonym chains (B is a synonym of A, C is a synonym of B, etc.) and such chains can be connected into immensely complicated directed networks (B is listed as a synonym of A, but A is not necessarily listed as a synonym of B). In “Synonym Chains” in the May 1988 Word Ways, I showed how chains could be constructed to connect antonyms, such as LIGHT-bright-cunning-furtive-sly-furtive-secret-hidden-obscure-DARK and DARK-obscure-vague-vacant-empty-foolish-simple-easy-LIGHT.

In this article, I focus instead on the syn groups. Certain ones have words in common; in the most extreme case, a set of sixteen have such an entanglement. These overlaps are diagrammed below. Selected adjectives in the same syn group are connected by 01, 02, 03, ... or 16; the full groups are listed at the end of this article. In addition, if one examines the synonyms in the main definition set of each word in a synonym group, one finds that 38 of these connect with other syn groups (labeled 21, 22, ... 37, 42); connections are indicated by < or >. The most notable of these is the word empty in the syn group VAIN-nugatory-otiose-idle-empty-hollow, which has the synonym foolish in the main definition set. This is part of the syn group SIMPLE-foolish-silly-fatuous-asinine, which in turn is linked with six other syn groups (40, 41, 43, 44, 45, 46). Among the remaining syn groups, there is one linked group of five and two of four; most of the rest are isolated.

The word sensible is found in four different syn groups: AWARE-cognizant-conscious-sensible-alive-awake, MATERIAL-physical-corporeal-phenomenal-sensible-objective, PERCEPTIBLE-sensible-palpable-tangible-appreciable-ponderable, and WISE-sage-sapient-judicious-prudent-sensible-sane.

Why “Synonym Pudding”? I regard the syn groups as highly-connected subsets of synonyms, much like plums in a pudding; the other five-sixths of adjectives form the pudding filling.

Which two adjectives are farthest apart in the pudding? More precisely, each pair of adjectives can be connected by a minimum-length chain; for what pair is this minimized? This extraordinarily-difficult question can only be answered with the aid of a computer. What do the corresponding synonym puddings for nouns or verbs look like?
21 foul < rank 03 musty > antiquated 22
    02 > trite 23
    02
24 crude > ribald 04 vulgar 04 gross > ignorant 25
    05
    05 > individual 26
05 seeming 05 separate > detached 27
    06 07 > autonomous 28

clear 08 apparent 08 plain 08 distinct
09 10 amenable 16 tractable > malleable 37
09 10 11
09 29 low < open 12 prone 12 liable 12 sensitive > delicate 30
09 10 13
09 frank supine 14 idle 14 inactive > lazy 31
transparent 10 15 > latent 32
candid > fair 33 otiose > futile 35
    > blunt 36 15
    34 empty > foolish
    42
    banal 46 flat 42
    45 42
smooth 40 simple 40 easy
    43 41
advisable 44 politic comfortable

02 FLAGRANT glaring gross rank
03 MALODOROUS stinking fetid noisome putrid rank fusty musty
04 COARSE obscene gross vulgar ribald
05 COMMON plain ordinary familiar plain vulgar
06 APPARENT illusory seeming ostensible
07 DISTINCT separate discrete
08 EVIDENT manifest patent distinct obvious apparent plain clear
09 CLEAR transparent translucent limpid
10 FRANK candid open plain
11 RESPONSIBLE answerable accountable amenable liable
12 LIABLE exposed open subject prone susceptible sensitive
13 PRONE supine prostrate recumbent
14 INACTIVE idle inert passive supine
15 VAIN nugatory otiose idle empty hollow
16 OBEDIENT docile tractable amenable

40 EASY facile simple light effortless smooth
41 COMFORTABLE cozy snug easy restful
42 SIMPLE foolish silly fatuous asinine
43 SUAVE urbane diplomatic bland smooth politic
44 EXPEDIENT politic advisable
A POEM

MARTIN GARDNER
Norman, Oklahoma

This is an excerpt from Gardner’s 1969 book *Never Make Fun Of A Turtle, My Son* (Simon and Schuster, illustrated by John Alcorn).

**Speak Clearly**

You're old enough to know, my son,
   It's really awfully rude
If someone speaks when both his cheeks
   Are jammed and crammed with food.

Your mother asked you how you liked
   The onions in the stew.
You stuffed your mouth with raisin bread
   And mumbled, "Vewee goo."

Then when she asked you what you said,
   You took a drink of milk.
And all that we could understand
   Was, "Uggle gluggle skwil."?

And now you're asking me if you
   Can have more lemon jello.
Please listen carefully. "Yes, ifoo
   Arstilla ungwy fello."