LOGOPOEIA

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Logopoeia (a coined word meaning 'word-coinage') is a natural activity of English-language speakers; this paragraph, in fact, contains three words in addition to logopoeia that are probably not in any dictionary. But the word-coiner, if not being deliberately nonsensical, is constrained by the desire to get a message across. The practice is more suspect in logology, where the only acknowledged constraint may be the logological goal. Here it is easy to slip from coining words to coining 'words' and thence to words?.

Examples of all these coinages can be found in two articles by Dmitri Borgmann which recently appeared in Word Ways: "The Parallel transposition" in May 1978, and "Elementary Transpositions" (ET) in August.

Word?-coining has been defended with at least two arguments: (1) those who dislike a particular coinage can ignore it, and (2) some thing is better than nothing. There may be some point to these arguments if the coinages are reasonable, but words? are worse than nothing: an unfilled hole is more of a psychological spur to improvement than a badly-filled one. (In passing, I note that a badly-filled hole masquerading as a dictionary entry, such as 'hordynge' in ET, is even worse -- one is led to believe that this unattested non-standard spelling has a citation somewhere.) Indiscriminate coining leads the coiner of a word? to spend time trying to justify it, rather than find an actual instance or try something else. Some words? are not words, or even lexical items, by any sensible definition. Word?-coining cheapens logology -- inventing one is a far simpler task than the dedicated reference-combing needed to identify a genuine word having a rare property. And finally, in terms of the actual processes by which words enter English, words? like 'tulilhim' and 'shako-vocalized' seem to me little different from out-and-out fantasies such as 'hilmut' (dog veterinarian) and 'Schizolokdeva' (the god of booby hatches), respectively. (Don't bother looking for these in a dictionary; I just made them up.)

The following objection to word?-coining is more personal, but others may agree: when all logological problems are (in principle, at least) solvable with a little fantasy, and hence reduced to a common level, much of the interest is removed ('when everyone's somebodee, nobody's anybody').
In coining words, I think the best precedent for logologists to follow is that of lexicographers. But we must be clear about this. In the August 1978 Colloquy, Borgmann refers to the fact that some words in some dictionaries are not in Webster's Second, but are 'implied' there -- 'steeple' and 'let' but not 'steeplet,' for example. He continues:

All that the other dictionaries have done ... is to actualize some of the potential residing in Webster's Second. When individuals actualize potential in this fashion, they are excoriated for making words up; when dictionaries do it, they are hailed for practicing lexicography of the finest sort.

It is amusing to contemplate lexicographers busily flipping through Webster's Second, cobbling together new words. But the final claim is not merely silly, it is the diametric opposite of the truth. From as long ago as Johnson, and particularly in the last century, lexicographers have understood that their highest duty is to record usage, not to make it. A lexicographer who includes a word without having a source for it (possibly a source others lack) is unconscionably misrepresenting the data, probably to inflate the dictionary's word count for advertising purposes.

Lexicographers do not rely totally upon citations. Inflectional endings are regular in English, with an enumerable set of exceptions, so lexicographers can justifiably present them without proof from citations. But, even here, problems can arise. Plurals of recently-borrowed foreign words can be uncertain, and er/est cannot be added with impunity to all adjectives. Darryl Francis, in the February 1978 issue, cites some dictionaries' attempts to distinguish between er/est and more/most comparisons on the basis of literary usage and phonology, together with many counterexamples. He passes over the problem of adjectives that semantically do not admit of comparison. 'Unique' is the favorite example, along with 'pregnant', but thousands more -- 'steam-dried,' 'twentieth-century,' 'stone' -- can be adduced at will.

Francis's conclusion is that "in the right context any adjective or adverb can form an -ER comparative and an -EST superlative." This is in a sense true, but it is a counsel of despair. I can imagine contexts where 'establishmentarian' or 'half-and-halfer' would be used. I can also imagine contexts for 'Me gonéd cities yestermidnight' or 'Androgyné borscht gmélinité annihiléd sandalwood assumptions' or 'Praise Schizolokdeva!' or 'Phwundxrcizp!' There may be no sharp boundary between ordinary language and anything-can-happen language, but there are usages that clearly fall into the latter category: a fuzzy boundary is not a nonexistent one. If nothing else tells us the status of an item, we can always fall back on the lexicographic question: what's the citation?

If inflectional suffixes can be troublesome, derivational affixes are worse. I doubt that there is a single derivational affix that can be indiscriminately applied to any member of a given part of speech: not even the adverbial '-ly' (earthenly? fively?) or the preadjectival 'un-' (ungalore? unnonhuman?). The restriction on these affixes may not be
clearly statable, nor intuitively obvious, nor even known -- in which case the dictionaries' citations of actual coinages are the best data available.

Consider 'unheat', not in the dictionaries, but seemingly innocuous. Benjamin Lee Whorf writes in Language, Thought and Reality (MIT Press, 1956) on page 71 of a class of transitive verbs of a covering, enclosing, and surface-attaching meaning ... [defined by the fact] that UN- may be prefixed to denote the opposite. Hence we say 'uncover, uncoil, undress, unstack, unfold, unlock, unroll, unangle, untie, unwind' but not 'unbreak, undry, unhang, unheat, unlift, unmelt, unopen, unpress, unspill'. With the exception of a few words mostly semiaficial, e.g., 'unsay, unthink, unmake', the use of UN- as a reversive prefix in true verbs coincides with the centripetal enclosing and attaching meaning.

Like most semantics-based rules, this has fuzzy edges (unbalance, undo), but 'unheat' is still a lot closer to 'shako-vocalized' than it first looks. ('Unheated' is irrelevant, since it doesn't mean 'cooled from previous hotness' -- in any event, the structure is un+ heated rather than un + heated.) I can, of course, find a context for 'unheat'; I can find a context for anything. But it is not normal English.

Even semantically allowed combinations may be unreasonable. Intensive 'y-' went out of use even in pseudoarchaisms (unlike '-eth' and '-est' on verbs) centuries before 'fluoridate' appeared, so 'y-fluoridated' would be absurd.

Admittedly, my Word Ways articles also contain some off-the-wall words. My terminal bigram article in the August 1975 Word Ways contains names like 'Ompflaxt' (from a Popeye comic strip) and 'Voxx' (from a comic book). In defense, I note that (1) I didn't coin these -- they were coined by a non-logologist for purposes unrelated to my article, (2) even with such words, a full solution remains perhaps impossible, (3) all unsatisfactory items are clearly shown as such, and listed in a final summary to spur improvement.

Finally, I comment on Borgmann's use of contrived forename-surname combinations in ET. As the editor points out, there are no restrictions on such combinations, and they are not single words, so 'one is not so much coining words as creating non-dictionary phrases'. Put another way, 'John Adams' is to 'Uthi Ulm' as 'white mouse' is to 'gridelin eyagushe'. The latter is not a lexical item, although Borgmann with his logopandocie (readiness to admit words of all kinds, a nonce-word from the OED) might disagree. 'Uthi Ulm' deserves equal doubt; the fact that 'Dmitri Borgmann' exists does not increase the infinitesimally small probability that 'Uthi Ulm' can be found.

I hope the message is clear. We need standards to avoid absurdity, and the best standard is the usage of people with no logological axe to grind.