A dictionary is a collection of words, each one accompanied by a preferred pronunciation, an etymology and one or more definitions with citations illustrating literary usage. It seems clear that the editors of the dictionary must have spent many hours crafting clear and succinct definitions, ones that will reveal the precise nuances of meaning. Furthermore, it goes without saying that they have lavished especial attention and care on the meaning of a word as important to the dictionary-user as WORD.

Unfortunately, this is an illusion -- no dictionary has ever defined the word WORD in such a manner as to explain what that word really means. The truth of the matter is that WORD is defined in a way that leaves its actual meaning almost entirely to the imagination of the reader. To substantiate this position, let us examine some definitions of the word WORD, and draw logical inferences from such definitions.

What follows is the essence of the definition of the word WORD given in both the Second and Third Editions of Webster’s Unabridged:

A series of speech sounds symbolizing and communicating an idea or a meaning, without being divisible into smaller units capable of independent use.

For a somewhat different definition, we turn to A Dictionary of Linguistics (Philosophical Library, New York, 1954), by Mario A. Pei and Frank Gaynor:

A spoken or written symbol of an idea, usually regarded as the smallest independent sense-unit.

The first thing to note about both definitions is that they do not even mention that words consist of letters, let alone that these letters must be placed next to each other, without any intervening punctuation marks or spaces. Keeping in mind the actual definitions just quoted, let us examine some typical letter sequences, in order to determine whether or not they are words. First, let us consider the following three words:

JEWELWEED KILLJOY LOVEMATE

It does not take too long to discover that each of these letter sequences is divisible into smaller units capable of independent use:
Therefore, on the basis of dictionary definitions, we must sadly con­clude that JEWELWEED, KILLJOY and LOVEMATE are not English words.

The process can be carried even further. Here are another three:

JOINTRESS = JOIN + TRESS
KINDRED = KIND + RED
LACKEY = LAC + KEY

Distressing as it may seem, we now realize that JOINTRESS, KINDRED and LACKEY are not English words, either.

Let us now turn to a different class of letter sequences, exemplified by the following specimens:

KUALA LUMPUR (relating to a certain Oriental style)
JAI ALAI (a Spanish game resembling handball)
LONGISSIMUS DORSI (a division of a certain back muscle)

At first glance, these Websterian letter sequences appear not to be words. Indeed, each one seems to be a phrase consisting of two words. Such is most categorically not the case. Not a single one of the six individually written letter sequences that appears in these three phrases possesses an independent meaning in English, and not a single one is listed by itself in any Websterian dictionary (or, most probably, in any other English dictionary). Therefore, none of the six is an English word. What this proves is that each phrase symbolizes and communicates an idea without being divisible into smaller units capable of independent use. It follows that each of the letter sequences is actually one indivisible word, even though it may give the appearance of being a combination of words.

Can these ideas be applied to a practical problem in logology? In the November 1973 Word Ways, I presented a ten-by-ten word square consisting of a number of phrases superficially consisting of two separate, identical words (such as A SAIL! A SAIL and RABBI, RABBI). The doubling of each of the constituent words, especially when considered against the backdrop of the relevant literary contexts, invested each of the resulting phrases with a meaning distinct from the meanings of the constituent elements. This qualified the phrases as independent, single words, in the sense intended by all of our dictionary authorities. They are the ones who made this tour de force possible.