DUTCH PALINDROMES

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Editor's Note: This is a translation of an article by G. van Buren entitled "Nepapen" (fake monkeys) published in the June 30, 1979 NRC Handelsblad (the New York Times of the Netherlands). H. B. Corstius of Amsterdam sent it to Martin Gardner, who passed it on to Word Ways. In the translation, palindromes (and reversals as well) are given in Dutch and emphasized with capital letters; the parenthetical remarks following have been added to aid the understanding of the non-Dutch reader. Many of the palindromes are made-up words, much in the spirit of Dmitri Borgmann's "The Evolution of a Palindrome" in the February 1970 Word Ways.

Sitting on our enclosed porch of steel plate we rapped on the window with our AVRO-LEPEL (AVRO-spoon, named for the Dutch broadcasting company which gave them out as a bonus). As the gardener did not hear us, we tried using our KRO-VORK (by analogy, a non-existent bonus of a fork from the other Dutch broadcasting company) instead. Now he looked up; we indicated that he should place a DOORROOD (full red) colored PLUTO-TULP ("Pluto" variety of tulip) to the left of the PARTERRE-TRAP (first floor stairway). Our gardener knows well our predilection for symmetry -- did he not once give us a package of detergent with the title ECCE OMO (Omo is a well-known Dutch detergent, and the double palindrome is a pun on "ecce homo", behold the man)? We were not amused.

Thanks to our good relationship with an advisory committee member of PTT (the Dutch telephone company, run by the government), our telephone number reads the same from right to left as it does from left to right. Do you have such a mirror number, too? At least one hundred readers of this newspaper should happily nod yes, for there are at least 100,000 telephone subscribers with six-digit numbers, and with a six-digit number there is one chance in a thousand of having a symmetric one. Please, do not call these lucky one hundred people. Soon we shall receive from the authorities a ten-digit personal identification number. Since the probability of a symmetrical number is only one in 100,000, only 150 out of 15 million Dutchmen will receive one. But alas! to avoid confusion, no two adjacent digits are allowed to be the same; in particular, the fifth digit cannot be equal to the sixth, preventing mirror numbers from occurring.

In the world of demons and ghosts, it is important to have a name which cannot be reversed to cast a spell. Poor REPELSTEEL (Repel-
steeltje, the Dutch Rumpelstiltskin, an unlucky gnome whose name was supposedly a secret) was obviously first called LEEDSLEEPER (an imperfect reversal meaning dragger of misery).

Other examples abound. The Arabic tales are not by chance labeled "1001 Nights". In Amsterdam, the god Zeus is palindromically pronounced /Su{iS} (ui is a Dutch vocal). And of course the first powerful magicians for each of us are MAM (Mom) and PAP (Pop).

Before the war, the colonial masters in our Dutch Indies gave their bastard children their own surnames spelled backwards. As we are reminded in "Tong-tong" (literally, a gong -- the name of a Dutch East Indies former periodical), we remember DNARBELLIH, KJUDSEMR, SNIRP, RENREW and KNOV (reversals of common Dutch surnames). The last of these names can be considered an acronym for Koninklijk Nederlands Ondernemers Verbond (Royal Netherlands Employers Organization); Mr. Vonk, the president, recently appeared on TV with a banner at the level of his navel emblazoned VONK (KNOV). Men who were surname SNORFRONS or SNERTTRENS (both probably made-up surnames), however, kept to the straight and narrow path!

This raises the question of whether the fate of those who bear a mirror name might differ from that of other people. We think, if the reader will pardon our reminiscing, of ANNA who married the Prince of Orange, a descendant of OTTO von Nassau, in 1551. A later ANNA of Austria joined a convent in 1661. ADA, a duchess of Holland, died in 1221, and Sultan ALA received the Ottoman crown in 1331, King ASA reigned in Judah from 909 BC to 868 BC. REINIER the Third was exiled by OTTO the First in 959. ABBA the Second, a predecessor of AGA NASAN, became the second in a line of SHAHS in 1661. In the same year, the Chinese KOK conquered our Formosa. (Except for Asa and Otto the First, these are extremely obscure personages; it is likely that the author has modified or embellished history.)

After this OTTETTO (an Italian word for octet) of royal personalities with mirror names and dates, let us examine some intellectuals bearing such names. In 929, the PAAP (Papist) ODO became the second abbot of Cluny. Nicolas LEBEL invented in 1881 the gun which still bears his name. In the same year, the German engineer OTTO invented the ROTATOR for the four-stroke engine, Pierre LAVAL was born, ONNO Koekkoek, the son of J. H. Koekkoek, created the painting entitled "The EETSTEE" (eating place, or dining room), and Maurits SNELLENS' POOLLOOP (a made-up word meaning polar trek) captains the first and only Dutch polar expedition, was found. (Here, it is clear that history is being invented -- Laval was born in 1883, not 1881; there was no Dutch polar explorer Snellens; and the only Dutch painter named Koekkoek lived from 1803 to 1862.) When one looks at all these bearers of mirror names and their dates, one thinks "how RAAR (strange)". But is it not clear that strange coincidences can, and often do, occur in all parts of the world?

Let us now come to the point of this rambling discussion. In the Dutch language, that invisible and rich structure in which we all live, there
exist a total of 303 mirror words, from simple ones like PAP (porridge) to remarkable ones like KORNETTENROK (a made-up word meaning, perhaps, the uniform of a servant to an officer in the colonial East Indian army). 101 of these mirror words have an even number of letters, such as TOPKOOKPOT (a made-up word meaning a cooking-pot cover or top) or REKKENNEKKE (a made-up word for someone who stretches necks). But 202 are odd, such as TRANSMASHERT (a made-up word meaning perhaps a streetcar anguish, a variety of commuting blues) or LEVERWREVEL (a made-up word meaning liver spite, perhaps alluding to biliousness). What is the longest known crab word? According to the Dutch edition of the Guinness book of world records, this would be PARTERRETRAP (the previously-encountered first floor stairway). Long ago at the University of Delft this was improved to PARTERRESERRETRAP (first floor stairway leading to an enclosed porch). Subsequently, the formidable lettersmith Piet Burger created the word EDELSTAALPLAATSLEDE (sledge of noble steel plate) which has 19 letters. The reader expects more from us than this --- and we will give it to him. The creation of PARTERRESERRETRAP out of PARTERRETRAP by squeezing a word in the middle is one way to lengthen a mirror word. Our enclosed porch happens to be made of steel plate, so this method leads to PARTERRESTAALPLAATSERRETRAP, with 27 letters.

However, there is a second way to extend mirror words: place something in front, and its reversal at the end. The prefix "nep" (fake) can be placed in front of any Dutch noun, since anything can be a fake. However, the suffix "pen" cannot always be put at the end of a word. Sometimes it fits nicely, as in the dubious palindrome MALAGA-LAM (a made-up word meaning a lamb from Malaga), which is lengthened and improved to NEP-MALAGALAMPEN (a made-up word meaning fake lamps from Malaga). Sometimes a real fountain pen is possible, as in NEP-STAALPEN (fake governmental pen), the pen that Carter did not use to sign a treaty. Sometimes "pen" can create a plural (when a noun ends in a P); for example, PAP (doll) becomes NEP-POPPEN (imitation dolls), and PILSIP (a made-up word meaning beer-flecked lip) becomes NEP-PILSLIPPEN (fake beer-flecked lips, as those on a Halloween mask).

You didn't believe us when we told you that we NEDERTREDEN (came down) into our garden by a PARTERRESTAALPLAATSERRETARP? Then you must assert that these belong to the class of NEPPARTERRESTAALPLAATSERRETAPPEN (fake stairways leading from an enclosed porch made out of steel plate), a crab word of 33 letters.

For the time being this is enough. However, the nice thing is that the nep-method leads us automatically to ever-longer mirror words. Once the 33-letter palindrome mentioned above has acquired general fame and recognition, the pen which we used to write this word will find a niche in the Van Buren Museum, with a sign identifying it as the "Nepparterestaalplaatseretappenen-pen". We will then confess that we did not use a pen but a typewriter, so the museum curator will be obliged to add the word "nep" in front of the long word on the sign, creating NEP-NEP a palindrome itself every fifteen inhabitants with no better.
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