WORD SQUARES USING MANY LETTERS

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What is the largest number of different letters that can be used in a word square? For word squares of size three, many are known which employ nine different letters; the editor suggests that the one at the right uses the commonest words (the rarest one, DOT, appears 13 times in Kucera and Francis's million-word sample of American prose).

George Ropes is the constructor of the finest square of size four. First published in the MIT Technology Review of July/August 1974, it was reprinted in the November 1974 Word Ways. All words can be found in Webster's Second, and all but YPIL (a variant spelling of ipil, a Philippine tree) are in Webster's Third as well. Can a Webster's Third square with sixteen different letters be found?

Although it is theoretically possible to construct a square of size five with 25 different letters, it is most unlikely such a square will ever be found. The best solution to date is my square in the May 1979 Word Ways using 22 different letters of the alphabet (omitting G J Q X); all words can be found in the OED or its Supplement.

The purpose of this article is to present a square of size six that uses 23 different letters (omitting Q X Z); the words, defined below, are drawn from three different dictionaries.

FJORCK jocular name for a very small person (EDD Supp.)
LUVIAN variant of Luvian, an ancient language of the Hittite empire (NI2)
ADEPTI adepts, persons proficient in something -- see adept in OED, 1704 quotation: 'Unintelligible to all but Adepti'
GERMAL a rare synonym of germinal (NI2)
HOBALL a clown, fool, idiot (OED)
TWYNES early spelling of twins and twines (OED)
FLAGHT variant of flaught, a sudden flight (EDD)
JUDEOW variant of Judew, an old word for Jew (OED)
OVERBY across the way (NI2)
RIPMAN early variant of reapman, a reaper (OED)

A DICT

Abraham Roback, president of the publisher's association, which has been wiretapping its own employees’ phone calls in Waukesha.

The board of directors is meeting today, and may vote on a lengthy resolution to cut wages. For me, it’s just another day in the life of a word square constructor. With words like DURATION, a word that is defined in the dictionary, and JUDEOW, an old word for Jew (OED), I find myself wondering if there is a vast network of people who are interested in these words. Even though it is theoretically possible to construct a square of size six that uses 23 different letters (omitting Q X Z), the words, defined below, are drawn from three different dictionaries.
It is exceedingly unlikely that one can devise a square containing all 26 letters of the alphabet. Since double squares larger than size six are very difficult to construct, even without alphabetic constraints, the best hope of a closer approach to this goal almost certainly lies with the six-square.

A DICTIONARY OF VINTAGE SLURS

Abraham Roback's A Dictionary of International Slurs, privately published by the author in 1944 in an edition of only 850 copies, has been photographically reproduced by Maledicta Press in paperback for $15 (available from 331 South Greenfield Avenue, Waukesha, WI 53186).

The book consists of three parts: a short dictionary of slurs (54 pages of slurs in English, 70 pages in 20 other languages); a dictionary of derogatory proverbs, arranged by nationality insulted; a lengthy essay on the psychology and sociology of ethnic insult. For me, the first two sections were the most interesting, containing a wealth of insults and proverbs from past centuries. In English, one finds most of the familiar one-word slurs like kike, He of size frog, chink, darkie and paddy, together with a host of two-word phrases of the form nationality + noun: Dutch courage (foolhardiness induced by liquor), Irish promotion (a decrease in pay or status), Jewish engineering (business administration), Nigger heaven (a theater balcony), Scotch coffee (hot water flavored with burnt biscuit), Yankee heaven (Paris). Although there are a vast number of proverbs about the Germans (18 pages) and the Jews (20 pages), there are only three relating to Americans:

A Jew will dispose of three Christians, and a Yankee will outwit three Jews
Help me to betray the Indians, and I'll give you half
In America the hour has forty minutes

Even the Saxons, Lithuanians and Osmanlis have more!

Roback's book has been criticized on various grounds -- incompletion, uneven scholarship, lack of sources (documentation). Had Roback heeded his critics, the work never would have been completed. He deserves great credit for organizing and codifying a huge subject; his work on this topic has yet to be equalled by any other.