

A SOUND-ALIKE DICTIONARY

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Alan Frank's article, "Consonant-Characterized Words," is related to a topic of considerable logological interest, that of characterizing spoken words by their consonantal sounds. This is best illustrated by rearranging the 150 words that he found containing the consonants NRST plus an assortment of vowels into 24 groups, one for each possible order of consonants. Within each group, words have been arranged by increasing number of syllables.

- NRST nearest, unrest; oneriest
 NRTS nerts; enroots, inerts, unroots, norites; inertias, neuritis
 NSRT insert
 NSTR instar, nester, nestor; anestri, nastier
 NTRS antres, enters, entires, entries, entrees, inters, intros, natures, neuters, niters, nitres, nitros, nitrous, noters; antiars, nitroso, notaries, nutrias; notorious, intarsia, unitters
- RNST earnest; ironist, rainiest
 RNTS rants, rentes, rents, runts; aroints, aroynts, rainouts, runouts; aeronauts, orients, urinates, uranites, reunites, ruinate
- RSNT resent; arsenate, arsenite, resinate, resonate
 RSTN earstone
 RTNS ratans, ratines, rations, ratoons, retains, routines, retenes, retunes; aerations, orations, ratanies, retinues, retinas
 RTSN artisan, retsina
- SNRT snort; senorita, seniority, sonority
 SNTR santir, santour, sinter, saunter, sentry; senator, snoutier, snoutier; sanitary; sanitaria, sanitoria
- SRNT serenata, serenate, serenity, esurient
 SRTN serotine
 STNR stainer, stoner; stonier
 STRN strain, stern; astern, eastern, estrin, estrone, yestern, yestreen, oestrin, oestron, eyestrain, sauterne, seatrain, styrene, stearin, stearine, sterna
- TNRS teeners, toners, tuners, tenors, tenours, tenures; atoners
 TNSR tensor, tensor, tonsure; teensier
 TRNS ternes, terns, tarns, trains, trans, trines, trones, turns; outruns, taurines, tourneys, trainees, trienes, triens, triunes, tronas, tureens; eternise
- TRSN torsion, treason; tyrosine
 TSRN tsarina
 TSNR outsnare

Note that all 24 groups are represented. It is almost certainly impossible to find a set of five different consonants (used solely with vowels, as above) which generates Websterian examples for all 120 categories; however, it might be possible if one allows other consonants to appear in the words as well.

The striking feature of this word arrangement is the juxtaposition of words that sound somewhat alike; in fact, even a few homonyms appear. It can be plausibly argued that the pronunciation of words is characterized by the pattern of consonants; many pronunciation variants of the same word are due to regional changes in vowel enunciation. This being so, a dictionary of words that is arranged by consonant groups might be useful in identifying those words that are likely to be confused with one another when heard over an imperfect communications channel (a bad telephone connection, or more typically a walkie-talkie). One possible use: telephone information operators might be supplied with a list of surnames arranged by their consonant patterns (like KHN: Kahn, Cohen, Cohn, Kuhn, Kahan, etc.) as an aid in trying to locate the telephone number associated with a spoken name. Of course, such a dictionary would require certain modifications of a strict consonantal arrangement: soft G should be classified with J, soft C with S and hard C with K; X might be set equivalent to the bigram CS, and doubled consonants like LL, RR and ZZ treated as single occurrences. Beyond this, there might be some merit in creating a hierarchy of groups of similar sounds; for example, M and N, P and B, F and V as done in the Soundex system used by the Bureau of the Census. Thus, the consonant group RMT would be placed adjacent to RNT, and FGR next to VGR.

MORDER GUSS REIMS: THE GUSTAV LEBERWURST MANUSCRIPT

Some years ago, Luis d'Antin van Rooten elevated fractured French to new heights with Mots d'Heures: Gousses, Rames, a collection of strange French verses, purportedly from a medieval manuscript, furnished with mock-scholarly annotations. Only reading them aloud (Un petit d'un petit / S'etonne aux Halles.. = Humpty Dumpty / Sat on a wall) revealed that they were nursery rhymes in disguise. Ormonde de Kay followed this with N'Heures Souris Rames.

More recently, John Hulme has done the same thing for German, in a 1981 book with the above title published by Clarkson N. Potter. Alas, German is not as amenable to this sort of treatment, nor does Hulme seem as good an annotator. The syntax tends to be forced, elisions rife, notes incomplete and not always very funny. Here is a short and fairly successful example:

*Denk, Herr Tell, er solch Erzähler!
Ritsch' man, bohr' man, bäger' man tief.*

Perhaps this seems better if one's German is better. (PC).