

SPEAKING OF FINGERS

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Have you thought about your fingers lately? Have you taken a long, hard look at them, assessing their relative strengths and weaknesses?

Your ability to think, speak, and write intelligently and competently about your fingers - or anyone else's, for that matter - depends on your logological expertise. How many names for fingers do you have at your fingertips (if you'll pardon this play on words)? If you are content with thinking about your fingers in the most general sort of way, you can squeeze by with the word FINGER, occasionally diversifying your vocabulary with DIGIT and DACTYL. The disadvantage of using the two alternate terms is that each of them can refer to a toe just as easily as to a finger.

The merits of these words are, however, beside the point if you wish to get down to specifics about your fingers. What you need in that case is names for specific fingers. That's where I come in. Over the years, I've been collecting fingers. Not real ones, of course - that requires both sadism and the ability to elude the authorities. No, what I've been collecting is names for the individual fingers of the human hand. Since you have anxiously been awaiting my release of that treasure, here it is.

The human hand has five fingers, and each of them has a diversity of names by which it can be designated. Numbering the fingers from 1 to 5, beginning with the thumb, here are those names, in alphabetical order for each finger:

1. Allus Pollex, Allus Pollux, Digitus I, Pollex, Thumb
2. Digit Didactic, Digitus Demonstrativus, Digitus II, Forefinger, Index Finger, Inscriptive Finger, Pointer, Pointing Finger, Trigger Finger
3. Digitus III, Digitus Medius, Fool's-Finger, Long Finger, Medius, Middle Finger
4. Annular Finger, Annularis, Annulary, Digitus Annularis, Digitus IV, Digitus Medicinalis, Digitus Medicus, Leech-Finger, Marriage Finger, Medical Finger, Physic-Finger, Physician Finger, Ring Finger, Ringman
5. Auricular Finger, Digitus Auricularis, Digitus Minimus, Digitus Minimus Manus, Digitus Quintus, Ear-Finger, Little Finger, Minimus, Pinkie, Pinky, Pirlie

Some of the names of Latin origin in the foregoing list number the fingers from 1 to 5, inclusive. An alternative numbering scheme does, however, exist. If the thumb is regarded as an entry in a class by itself, then the forefinger can be called the FIRST FIN-

GER; the middle finger, the SECOND FINGER; the ring finger, the THIRD FINGER; and the little finger, the FOURTH FINGER. Some dictionaries do, as a matter of fact, include these alternate numbered finger names. I have omitted them from the list above in order to avoid confusion - and because I am a strong proponent of the theory that the thumb is a finger just like any other one, making it, not the forefinger, the true FIRST FINGER.

Your thorough familiarity with fingers and their names should save you from FINGERAGNOSIA - an inability to recognize, name, or choose the individual fingers of your hand, or of someone else's hands. It will also help you identify your problem accurately if you happen to fall victim to DACTYLOLYSIS (or DACTYLOSIS) SPONTANEA, a condition more colorfully known as AINHUM - the linear constriction and contraction of a finger, a process which gradually amputates it spontaneously.

How many fingers do you have on each hand? If the number is an odd one, then you are PERISSODACTYLOUS or PERISSODACTYLIC. If, as the result of ainhum or for other reasons, the number is an even one, then you are ARTIODACTYLOUS or ARTIODACTYLIC. More specifically, if you have four fingers on each hand, you are QUADRIDIGITATE or TETRADACTYL; if five fingers, QUINQUEDIGITATE or PENTADACTYL (a word also spelled PENTADACTYLE); if six fingers, SEXDIGITATE or SEDIGITATE (a variant spelling designed for pruders). If you have more than five fingers on each hand, regardless of their exact number, you are POLYDACTYLOUS or HYPERDACTYLOUS, and those fingers in excess of the customary five are SUPERNUMERARY - although, if you prefer a euphemism, you are likely to call them ACCESSORY or ADJUVANT.

What about the size and shape of your fingers? If they are approximately equal in length, you are ISODACTYLOUS or EQUIDIGITATE. If your fingers are long, you are MACRODACTYLOUS; if short, BRACHYDACTYLOUS. If you have slender fingers, you are LEPTODACTYLOUS; if thick ones, PACHYDACTYLOUS. If your fingers are large, you are MACRODACTYLOUS or MEGADACTYLOUS; if small, MICRODACTYLOUS.

You may have been wondering what to call the tip of your middle finger. Wonder no more: it is your DACTYLION. Or, you may wish to discuss the ball of your thumb at great length. Know that it is your THENAR, more fully described as your THENAR EMINENCE. Be certain to discriminate carefully between it and the ANTITHENAR or HYPOTHENAR EMINENCE, which designates the ridge of your palm along the bases of your fingers.

Are you inordinately interested in your fingernails? Both your fingernail and your toenail may be called an ONYX. If you wish to refer unambiguously to your fingernail, call it a CHIRONYX or an UNGUICULE. The crescent-shaped white area at the base of your fingernail or thumbnail - what you may have been calling your HALF-MOON - is really your LUNULA or LUNULA UNGUIS. Your cuticle, that external investment secreted by your epidermal cells, is your EPONYCHIUM or PELLICLE. Differentiate rigorously between

your eponychium and your PERIONYCHIUM, which is the skin behind and at the sides of your fingernail or thumbnail. Do you have an uncontrollable urge to touch or finger your hangnail? I'm afraid that you're a PHANEROMANIAC. You may, however, be able to alleviate your problem by thinking of your hangnail more amiably - as a BACKFRIEND.

The space between any two consecutive fingers of yours is known as an INTERDIGIT. The space between your extended forefinger and your thumb is, however, a PURLICUE (which rhymes most conveniently with CURLICUE). As for your knuckles, the proper term for those is METACARPOPHALANGEAL ARTICULATIONS, or - if you wish to sound really scientific - ARTICULATIONES METACARPOPHALANGEAE. I have never known a logologist who didn't prefer a 15-syllable term to one of only two syllables.

There are, of course, many other technical terms that you need to know to be considered finger-articulate. Do you spend much of your time studying the patterns, markings, and/or sculptured ridges on the undersides of your hands, including your fingers? If so, you are a practitioner of DERMATOGLYPHICS (a delightful 15-letter word using 15 different letters of the alphabet). Have you been examining the markings in prints made from your fingertips? In that case, you have been engaged in DACTYLOSCOPY. Have you been talking with your fingers, using the finger alphabet? Such employment of your fingers is properly known as DACTYLOLOGY. Do you make it a habit to count on your fingers? You are guilty of DACTYLONOMY! Do you practice a form of divination involving finger rings? That's DACTYLIOMANCY. Have you been pointing at someone with your finger? Your gesture is a DACTYLODEIKTOUS one. For that matter, do you have fingers? If you do, you are DACTYLOSE.

This necessarily brief introduction to your fingers - they have, I assume, been virtual strangers to you until now - should hold you until I can prepare a more extended treatise on the subject. Watch for it, coming in a future issue of **Word Ways**.