NOT ALL ONE-LETTER WORDS ARE PALINDROMES

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Virtually any discussion of palindromes – regardless of the source – reveals a complete lack of interest in small words. In particular, one will rarely encounter a list of one-letter palindromes, presumably because that type of word should be palindromic by any definition. While this is clearly the case for the most common, garden-variety examples (e.g. A, I, O etc), the naïve view will have us believe that one-letter words with an adjacent apostrophe – typically contracted words in English – should be palindromes as well. Some representative examples of this type of word have been presented below. All are listed as separate entries in Webster's Third New International Dictionary (W3).

'D	(e.g. I'd)
D'	(e.g. d'you know)
'S	(e.g. he's)
S'	(e.g. the girls' toys)
'T	(e.g. 'twill do)
T'	(e.g. t'other)

These one-letter items are not palindromic because the reading in the right-to-left direction obtains a different word than the reading in the left-to-right direction. For example, 'D is the contracted form of WOULD, while D' is the present tense contracted form of DO. In this sense, the apostrophe in the examples in question is crucial in distinguishing lexical items and therefore cannot simply be ignored when reading the words in the backwards direction. (Note that the apostrophe in English counts as a diacritic and not as a letter, in contrast to a language like Hawai'ian, in which the apostrophe is a letter indicating the presence of a distinct sound, i.e. a glottal stop.)

The items listed above differ from the ones below because the latter lack a mirror image listing in W3 with the apostrophe on the reverse side of the letter. For example, in that source we only have only Y' (but not 'Y).

'I	(dial. var. of IN)
'M	(e.g. i'm)
'N	(e.g. sugar 'n spice)
O'	(e.g. o'clock)
Y'	(e.g. y'all)

Despite the lack of mirror image examples from W3, I would argue that the second set of words – like the former one – should not be treated as palindromes.

post scriptum: Given that palindromes have been an object of fascination for many centuries, it is quite conceivable that the observations made in this short note have either already found their way into print, or that they have simply been considered too banal to even mention. I have clearly rejected the latter view, in which case I wish to apologize for failing to acknowledge those authors who might have pointed out in print the significance for logology of English words like the ones presented above.