

# MAMA, ME SHEMIGHVINIANEBIA

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"Wombat, Wombat, Wombat!" muttered I, handing the list back to the amiable beast in question.

His sharp ears had not failed to pick up the sotto voce, and "Why the anadiplosis?" was his query.

Unable to answer for a moment because of the huge bite of a Prinz-Regenten-Torte that I had just taken, I reflected briefly that the good doctor seemed to be in an antic mood. Was it the recent vernal equinox, I wondered. My friend had just declaimed about the irrationality of the term 'equinox,' maintaining that it should be 'equidies' because it was the day which became as long as the night, not the night the day. Just before that he had claimed the longest English homopalindrome in captivity, one containing nineteen letters, which he had explained as follows.

"WRUCKUS is engaged in publishing accounts of bygone Australia by abo Struldbrugs."

"What's this ruckus?" I countered.

"Why, Woolloomooloo Research University Committee on Kinetic Understanding of Science, of course. Anyway, they have a prime source in a certain oldster, a native speaker of Oolooooloo, who has been giving them valuable data, filled, however, with Ooloooolooisms that, as their advisor, I counseled them to remove. They did so, but halfheartedly, and I was forced to repeat my request, this time as a behest. In response they sent me two MSS by two separate members of the Committee; of these I chose one as REDEOLOO-POOLOOEDER than the other." He chortled, and I remarked that I had never heard him chortle before.

"That may be, but have you ever seen an ox warble?"

"Of course not, they moo, they roar, they blat, but they do not warble," I rejoined.

"Of course not, dear boy. But I did not ask if you had ever heard an ox warble; I asked if you had ever seen one. On due consultation of an appropriate authority, say, Webster's Second Big Dick, you would find that an ox warble is a warble fly whose vorpal fry infest creatures bovine." Again he chortled.

Forbearing further comment I launched a counterattack. "REDEOLOOPOOLOOEDER smacks of the late Master Logologist, Dmitri A. Borgmann, with his DETARTRATED which is among those palindromes  
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impugned by such as the veteran linguist and informed logological commentator Philip M. Cohen. Are you a fourth False Dmitri?"

By that time I had swallowed my massive morsel of Prinz-Regenten-Torte and had to respond to his accusation of having committed anadiplosis, which was rather hard because I did not know what anadiplosis was, having thought that "Wombat, Wombat, Wombat" was a mere rhetorical repetition. This I told the Wombat, who replied, rather condescendingly, I thought, that not only was Webster's Second Big Dick, as he persisted in referring to WII, completely wrong about anadiplosis, the rhetorical repetition of one or several words, but woefully inadequate in regard to anaphora.

"Your authority?" I cried.

"Herbert Weir Smyth's Greek Grammar, which you need only call Smyth or Smyth's Grammar, so authoritative is it," was his reply before he hastened to ask, "What's so wrong with those lists?"

It was my turn to assume a condescending tone. "My dear Wombat, do you not realize that you have drawn up some lists of words in a fiendishly difficult and perobscure tongue and asked that the meanings thereof be guessed, guessed, mind you, by someone not even knowing what language it is?"

"But, dear boy, haven't I given a choice of meanings opposite each list, the list of choices corresponding in number to the words to be guessed so that each guess-word has one and only one guess-meaning?" His tone was aggrieved.

"True," replied I, "but you have merely reduced the chances of success from the incalculably to the ridiculously small."

"A true lover of language," replied the Wombat with asperity, "has certain guidelines which run through all languages. George K. Zipf, for instance, has determined that the commonest words, that is, those expressing the commonest and most frequent ideas, are the shortest. Others have determined that thin, high vowels often characterize small things, whereas broad, low vowels appertain to large things. Dark vowels often apply to sad things, light vowels to happy things. Liquid consonants are bright and joyous, affricates and so on dark and noisome. The music of language expresses the ideas of language. An Australian language may have A as its predominant vowel, reflecting, as it were, undifferentiated or unarticulated cerebral processes. On the other hand, Greek, the most cerebral of ancient tongues has the greatest vocalic Kolorit, coloring, or coloration of any of the antique Indo-European languages. Think of the first sentence of Poe's Fall of the House of Usher - nothing could be more dismal than its echoing 'whole,' 'dark,' 'dull' and so on. Then again, what more joyful than the Biblical command 'Rejoice evermore'? Besides, the jumbled meanings give you a Rosetta Stone to guide you."

"But," I objected, "this language is completely without congeners save in its own area, and, what is more, the most famous speaker of it is one of the most infamous men in history, more infamous, indeed, than Hitler, to my way of thinking."

"The lack of congeners may still be moot," rejoined the logothere. It does, however, have some remarkable coincidences with tongues more familiar to us. For instance, the genitive is formed with -S; -S is also the desinence of most third person singular verbs in the present tense. Many past participles are formed with -L-, as in Russian. As in Russian and the Slavic languages also, the future tense is formed with a directional prefix on the present tense, while the same device in the past changes the imperfective to the perfective aspect. Moreover, it has deponent verbs like Latin and the important pronoun me has the English meaning. I could go on, but these coincidences show that one may guess with reasonable confidence, that one is not confronted by some outlandish language with teeth eroded to the gums like Chinese, Vietnamese, and the like."

"Sounds as though your language occupies some such position as Basque," I mused.

The Wombat snapped his fingers, "A propos de bottes, as our batrachian friends say, what do 'bask,' 'surrender,' and 'rendez-vous' have in common?"

"Search me. Oh yes, they are all loan words in English."

"Special loan words, however," the Wombat informed me, "for they all include a reflexive pronoun - 'bask' from the Scandahoovian 'bathe oneself,' instance the Swedish 'bada sig'; 'surrender' and 'rendez-vous' from French 'rendre' (give up, betake) plus the reflexives 'se' (oneself) and 'vous' (yourself), respectively."

"Hm-m-m," said I, producing that sound which, like 'uh-huh,' 'uh-hunh,' and 'tsk' defy adequate representation in the Roman alphabet, "'He basks in her surrender at the rendez-vous!' Sounds vaguely pornographic to me."

"You human beings! Simple creatures! Arrogant dolts! Everything sounds pornographic to you! You have never learned to limit your couplings, hence are overpopulating the world, and driving out the divine diversity which alone makes this world worthwhile." The good doctor flushed with anger, at least as much as a Wombat can, and solaced himself with a huge Napoleon.

"Wait a minute," I replied, tongue in cheek. "I like that - you're the one with the pornographic words."

The Wombat executed a complete volte-face and, smiling widely, continued, "The language in question also has a vigesimal numerical system like the Celtic languages. It is even more thorough than the French, 53 being two score and thirteen, for example. All told, my guessing lists are of such psychologicolinguisticodivinator force that they can serve as verbal Rorschach tests, subject to the same absurd interpretations, of course, that psychologists place upon the latter."

"Enough said, my dear doctor; let us reveal them to the world. But first, perhaps a hint as to where the language is spoken."

"More than a hint," smiled the Wombat, "a hard fact, or maybe

an easy fact or a soft fact; in any case, a simple fact: it is spoken in a country whose inhabitants call it Sakharthvelo."

\* \* \* \* \*

Below are the guess-tests with aleatory information about successful guesses. If you get nothing right you are unlucky, which is bad; if you get them all right you are an inhabitant of Sakharthvelo, which is worse.

#### Common Adjectives

- |           |           |
|-----------|-----------|
| 1. kargi  | a. small  |
| 2. patara | b. ugly   |
| 3. lamazi | c. big    |
| 4. didi   | d. pretty |
| 5. tsudi  | e. good   |
| 6. ushno  | f. bad    |

#### Times

- |                |                         |
|----------------|-------------------------|
| 1. dghes       | a. this year            |
| 2. saghamos    | b. today                |
| 3. gushintsin  | c. in the evening       |
| 4. zeg         | d. in the summer        |
| 5. zaphkhulshi | e. day before yesterday |
| 6. tsleuls     | f. day after tomorrow   |

#### Names of Immediate Kin

- |          |                |
|----------|----------------|
| 1. da    | a. father      |
| 2. mama  | b. grandfather |
| 3. bebia | c. mother      |
| 4. dzma  | d. sister      |
| 5. deda  | e. grandmother |
| 6. bebua | f. brother     |

#### Simple Verbs

- |               |            |
|---------------|------------|
| 1. zis        | a. goes    |
| 2. laparakobs | b. knows   |
| 3. itsis      | c. invites |
| 4. modis      | d. talks   |
| 5. midis      | e. sits    |
| 6. patizhebs  | f. comes   |

#### Long words

- |                                |                                     |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. shemighvinianebia           | a. I'll look over from head to foot |
| 2. satsinaahgmdego             | b. I have gotten drunk, it seems    |
| 3. avathvalier-chavathvaliereb | c. it will glitter                  |
| 4. dauparispireblad            | d. I chatter                        |
| 5. velazghandaravebi           | e. without comparing                |
| 6. ichakhchakhebs              | f. contrary (to)                    |

#### Words Certainly and Possibly Related to English Words

- |           |                    |
|-----------|--------------------|
| 1. ghvino | a. yoke            |
| 2. oboli  | b. you (sg.) pluck |
| 3. ugheli | c. wine            |

- |           |                         |
|-----------|-------------------------|
| 4. mkerdi | d. he/she loves him/her |
| 5. kreph  | e. breast               |
| 6. uqvars | f. orphan               |

The transliteration is not too far off the mark, but is not entirely scientific. There are no diphthongs; all vowels are pronounced separately. The first syllables and/or the antepenults are accented.

Answers can be found in Answers and Solutions at the end of this issue. The chance of randomly guessing none out of six right is  $265/720$ ; of one,  $264/720$ ; of two,  $135/720$ ; of three,  $40/720$ ; of four,  $15/720$ ; and of all six,  $1/720$ . Of course, it is impossible to guess exactly five right if each answer is used once.

### THE INTERNATIONAL PALINDROME CLUB

The May 1986 *Word Ways* invited readers interested in foreign-language palindromes to contact Josep Maria Albaigès, Numància 87, 08029 Barcelona, Spain, who was then in the process of forming an International Palindrome Club "with the object of exchanging ideas and publishing discoveries in this field." Happily, the IPC is alive and well, having published its first newsletter of 38 pages in June 1987. Although written in Spanish, many articles have been translated into English, and of course one can appreciate a palindromic pattern in any language. Items familiar to *Word Ways* readers include Herbert Pfeiffer's "Plaudere, du Alp!" (May 1985) with a full English translation, and Chaim Fleischmann's cartoons (May 1983). Most articles merely cite various palindromes, but the editor's "EAOSNR-LIDUCT" (the Spanish analog of etain shrdlu) shows how letter-frequencies in Spanish are distorted by palindromic writing (most strikingly, in palindromes A and O both become more frequent than E). Not surprisingly, the average word-length of palindromic text is less than that of normal text. The author suggests these averages could be used to characterize the intrinsic difficulty of writing palindromes in a specified language.