WEBSTERIAN SYNONYM CHAINS

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In Beyond Language (Scribner's, 1967), Dmitri Borgmann presents two synonym chains in "Beauty in Ugliness" on pages 38-9 and 191:

black~dark~obscure~hidden~concealed~snug~comfortable~easy-simple~pure~white
ugly~offensive~insulting~insolent~proud~lordly~stately~grand-gorgeous~beautiful

In each chain, each word is alleged to be a synonym of the one immediately preceding or following it, yet the ends of the chain are opposites. He doesn't specify his sources for synonymy, other than "dictionary investigation". The first chain can be constructed using a combination of the Merriam-Webster Second and Third editions, although neither one alone suffices: Webster's Third does not allow black-dark, snug-concealed, or pure-white as synonyms, and Webster's Second does not allow pure-simple, simple-easy, or easy-comfortable (although it does equate the nouns ease and comfort). Some of the links are less than perfect: for instance, Webster's Second lists dark as a synonym of black, but does not list black as a synonym of dark.

The topic of synonym chains is also mentioned in A. K. Dewdney's August 1987 "Computer Recreations" column in Scientific American magazine. He reports work by Ron Hardin, a research scientist at the Murray Hill, New Jersey branch of Bell Telephone Laboratories, who used a digital computer to construct several thousand synonym chains based on The New Collins Thesaurus. Apparently the Collins definition of a synonym is looser than the Websterian one, for Hardin's chains are typically only a few steps long (four to seven for the ten examples given in the article, but the "great majority" are no longer than three).

It is time to introduce a greater degree of exactness and rigor to such investigations. Specifically, it is desirable to restrict a synonym chain to a single dictionary; further, one should take into account that synonym chains are not necessarily reversible, and construct a chain not only leading from Word A to Word B, but a second one leading from Word B to Word A to complete the demonstration of synonymy. We illustrate what can be done by using the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, Ninth edition, restricting ourselves to boldface adjectives flush left in the column. Such adjectives have two types of synonyms listed:

1) Synonyms introduced at the end of the entry, indented a single space, are in the form "Synonym 1; Synonym 2; Synonym 3."

2) Synonyms followed by a single number, are in the form "Synonym; Synonym2."

In the following table, "two-way" synonyms are followed by a small parenthetical letter:

two-way synonym list:
true-just=fa\text{false-unwise}
real-ge\text{b}
bad-poor-me\text{cunning}
good-clever\text{sharp-ir}
light-bright\text{dark-obscur}

Several questions are possible to construct a two-way synonym chain. Second, do the synonyms, with a small parenthesis, in the table word with the minimum-length chain? (These words are essential for a two-way synonym chain.)

The example presents the same question with their dictionary page numbers.
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