REVISITING THE PANGRAMMATIC HIGHWAY

FAITH W. ECKLER
Morristown, New Jersey

In the August 1988 **Word Ways**, Udo Pernisz introduced the concept of the pangrammatic highway. To refresh your memory, I will briefly describe the game as he plays it with his family. The object is to find all the letters of the alphabet, in sequence, on signs visible from the highway. These may be official highway signs, or billboard and other stationary advertising signs; however, signs on cars themselves, such as bumper stickers and license plates, are excluded. In the basic game only one letter from each sign may be counted.

Pernisz calls the mileage it takes to find all the letters in order a pangrammatic distance. With tongue in cheek, he suggests that pangrammatic distances be noted on maps with up-to-date information about newly-erected or removed signs. Finally, he calls for someone to codify the rules of the game so that it can achieve logological respectability.

Pernisz specifically rejects what he calls the "opportunistic" version of the game in which one can collect as many letters from one sign as desired and out of sequence, because he calls it "too easy." Nevertheless, the editor and I tried this version, increasing the difficulty by restricting ourselves to only permanent official highway signs. Thus, all advertising signs (which often have a limited lifetime) were off limits, as were temporary (though official) highway signs associated with road construction. Our aim, like Pernisz's, was to find the shortest pangrammatic distance.

We first played the game on I-81 in Virginia and found it not as trivial as Pernisz had thought. We wrote down all the highway signs for miles. Our best sequence lacked only F and J in 3.7 miles:

STATE POLICE DIV. HDQS, SALEM CITY LIMITS, STATE POLICE MONITOR CHANNEL, CHRISTIANSBURG, WYTHEVILLE, BRISTOL, EXIT, TRUCKS 55

Like Pernisz, we quickly discovered that the most difficult letters to find were Q and J, with K and Z not far behind, so we adopted a new strategy. We waited until we neared an area where we knew, or suspected, there would be a Q or J and started writing down signs there. On a trip south on I-95 in Maryland, we suspected that the region of the Susquehanna River would prove fruitful. And, voilà! A pangrammatic distance of only 2.4 miles:

JFK HIGHWAY MONITOR CHANNEL, AUTHORIZED VEHICLES ONLY, BRIDGE SUBJECT TO CROSS WINDS, EXIT, SUSQUEHANNA STATE PARK

We thought that distance might be hard to reduce until we realized how easy it was going to be to find a J in our home state of New Jersey. When it also occurred to us that there is a Squirrelwood Road exit in Paterson on I-80, we took to the road to check it out. Traveling eastbound, we achieved the remarkable (so we thought) pangrammatic distance of 1.7 miles:

INTERSTATE NEW JERSEY 80, SQUIRRELWOOD RD., WEST PATERSON, EXIT 1 MILE, PASSAIC RIVER, BRIDGE FREEZES BEFORE ROAD SURFACE, EXIT 25 MPH, GARDEN STATE PARKWAY

Was it possible that we could do even better traveling westbound in the same area? We turned around and found an astounding pangrammatic distance of only 1.3 miles:

INTERSTATE NEW JERSEY 80, SQUIRRELWOOD RD., WEST PATERSON, PATERSON, EXIT 25 MPH, BRIDGE FREEZES BEFORE ROAD SURFACE, PASSAIC RIVER, NO TRUCKS IN LEFT LANE

We offer a challenge to **Word Ways** readers to reduce the pangrammatic distance yet further -- perhaps, collect the whole alphabet in one mile or less.

Highway signs come in various colors: destination signs in green, traffic signs (such as SLOW or YIELD) in yellow, informational messages (AUTHORIZED VEHICLES ONLY) in white, historic or scenic attractions in brown, facilities notification (REST AREA) in blue, and temporary construction signs in orange. If you restrict yourself to signs of one color, the game becomes infinitely harder -- perhaps impossible for some colors. I would like to find the best pangrammatic distance using only the green signs, but that would eliminate such immensely useful sources of Z as BRIDGE FREEZES BEFORE ROAD SURFACE and AUTHORIZED VEHICLES ONLY. There is no consistent policy on sign nomenclature; in some states, the signs mentioned above may say instead BRIDGE MAY BE ICY and NO U TURNS, killing my chances of finding a Z.

Another variation is to find the shortest pangrammatic distance with the fewest total number of signs. Or, a real tour de force would be to find the group of signs at one location which includes the most different letters of the alphabet.

We've seen single-location signs with three Xs (SPORTS COMPLEX NEXT EXIT), three Zs (TOLL PLAZA, HAZARDOUS MATERIALS AND OVERSIZED VEHICLES PROHIBITED), and two Qs (TAMAQUA, QUAKERTOWN). If we could just find a sign containing three Js!