FOUR-LETTER WORD NETWORK UPDATE

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A word network is a set of words of a given length in which any two words differing by only one letter in a single position (such as aunt and runt, or hire and hare) are connected by a line. Using these lines, one can trace out a path leading from any word in a network to any other word in the same network. The terminal words, together with the intermediate words in the path, form a word ladder, well-known since the days of Lewis Carroll. This article updates a number of recent articles in Word Ways describing the properties of four-letter word networks and ladders.

Network Size and Span

In the February 1989 Word Ways, I stated that 3550 of the 3686 four-letter words in the Official Scrabble Players Dictionary are in a single network. This should be corrected to 3554; the quag-quai-quay-quey island can, in fact, be connected with the main network via quad-duad.

In the same article, I showed that the span of the main network (i.e., the number of steps needed to connect the two most distant words in the network to each other, using the shortest possible ladder) was 14. This can be compared with the 18-step span of the main network based on the 4060 words in Chambers Words

stie-stir-sair-pair-pats-oats-orts-ores-ures-urds-urde
stye
scye
unde-unce
unco
onto-inco=unto
otto info

The combined OSPD-Chambers list contains 4700 words; here is its 15-step span:

scye
stye-stie-stir-amir-amis-anis-ants-ante-ance-unce-unco-unci
snye
unto
inro-info-into

In order to solve various word problems, I have added a number of words from Webster's Second, Webster's Third and (mainly) the Oxford English Dictionary to the above list, for a total of 6060 words. The span of the 5979 words in the main network, 18, is diagrammed on the next page. Of the 81 words not in the main network, the only non-solitaries are odor-otic and oboe-obol, all in both the OSPD and Chambers. Of the 68 solitaries listed in the February 1989 article, 28 remain so:
Carrollian Word Ladders

In the November 1989 Word Ways, I presented word ladders joining evil-good and iron-lead requiring transposal links to do the job. With the expanded word list, transposals are no longer necessary:

EVIL-evel-ever-eyer-gyer-goer-goor-GOOD
IRON-tron-trod-trad-tead-LEAD

The same article showed a number of improvements of Carroll’s word ladders using OSPD words; the May 1990 Colloquy shortened some of these using OSPD and Chambers words. Here are further improvements:

HARE-hore-sore-soue-SOUP
TREE-tred-toed-woed-WOOD
COMB-come-came-hame-haie-HAIR
BLUE-slue-siue-sine-pine-PINK
MINE-cine-cone-cont-coat-COAL
LOAF-leaf-lear-liar-lier-oier-over-OVEN

Some of the above ladders are examples of computer-human interaction discussed by several people in Word Ways. Finding minimum-length ladders is ideally suited for the computer, but searching a dictionary like the OED for usable words is not. However, when the computer finds a ladder that is only one or two steps longer than ideal, it is easy to see what word(s) are needed to shorten it, and (for four-letter words) OED is quite likely to have them. In fact, that approach is what has produced my hybrid list of 6060 words. Otherwise, perusing OED for four-letter words can be dreary indeed. With the computer, of course, there is a bonus; words found while searching for solution to one problem often turn up in solutions to another (see the next section).

Tours Through Subnetworks

In the August 1989 Word Ways, the editor and I discussed the problem of finding tours through subnetworks. Each subnetwork was defined as having words with common consonant-vowel patterns. The letter Y was considered a vowel except when in first position; thus, year and fear are in the same subnetwork.

Sixteen subnetworks are theoretically possible, but I do not have any all-vowel words (yoyo, for example, is defined as starting
with a consonant). A closed tour (Hamiltonian) of 16 nodes (vertices) on a hypercube is mathematically possible, but with one node absent the best possibilities are a 15-node open or a 14-node closed tour. Here are the best ones I was able to find:

swad-swld-sild-sile-ails-awls-awes-awme-twme-twee-tyee-tyes-eyes
owes-ores
awes oras-bras---bias---aiaa---aiaas---aiasts---alts---alto
awe---swee---swte---swth---sith---siths---suth---suto---auto
site---siue

The site-siue appendage illustrates how the fifteenth subnetwork (cvvv) can be joined to the closed loop of the other fourteen.

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