

THE UGLIEST WORDS IN ENGLISH

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More than twenty years ago, Wilfred Funk proposed chimes, dawn, golden, hush, lullaby, luminous, melody, mist, murmuring and tranquil as the ten most beautiful words of the English language. More recently, Willard Espy generated gonorrhoea, gossamer, lullaby, meandering, mellifluous, murmuring, onomatopoeia, Shenandoah, summer afternoon and wisteria for the Book of Lists #2 (1980). In the February 1971 and February 1972 Word Ways, Philip Cohen listed (among others) baralepton, barquentine, carioca, eclectic, jeremiad, nimbostratus, opodeldoc, pimperlimplimp, rumramruf and zinfandel. Richard Lederer devoted several pages of Crazy English (Pocket Books, 1989) to the same topic. Most such words have positive connotations contributing to their choice, but exceptions such as nevermore, diarrhea and cuspidor have also been nominated.

Curiously, the inverse problem - that of identifying the ugliest words in English - seems not to have been addressed. (The Book of Lists (1977) did consider a closely-related problem: the "worst-sounding" English words according to the National Association of Teachers of Speech in 1946. Their ten examples were cacophony, crunch, flatulent, gripe, jazz, phlegmatic, plump, plutocrat, sap and treachery.) When Willard Espy was asked by the editors of The Book of Lists to prepare a list of ten ugliest words, his initial reaction was "I know no ugly English words. I consider them all bundles of shimmering loveliness.." but finally agreed to assemble "the most abhorrent stench of words that ever made its way to the human brain through the human nostril". He at once turned to the wordsmiths of Word Ways for suggestions, and this article is the result.

The ugliness (or beauty) of a word is, to put it bluntly, elusive. Is it completely in the eye (ear?) of the beholder, or can criteria be formulated for deciding such matters? I tentatively suggest that ugliness relates to the sound and the meaning of a word, not to its printed appearance (or can one rank letters of the alphabet in terms of their ugliness?). Ugly words may be worst-sounding, but the finest examples are more than that: ugly words should ideally have both unpleasant sounds and repellent meanings.

One genre of ugly words ought to be those that are difficult to pronounce because of a cluster of clashing consonants. My favorite example is TEXTS, with PUTSCH, MOLYBDENUM, HASHISH and

ANGST runners-up. More generally, ugly words seem more likely than others to contain several different hard consonants (hard C, hard G, B, D, P, T) and eschew liquid ones (soft C, soft G, L, M, N, R). There are many examples: GOBBLEDYGOOK (my favorite), BANKRUPTCY, WINDBAG, TIGHTWAD, CARBUNCLE, SPUTNIK, BUTTOCK, CRACKPOT, TROGLODYTE, CUCKOLD, FLAPDOODLE and CLOD-HOPPER. These, it should be noted, all have two or more syllables; one-syllable words such as GOB, SKUNK, WRETCH, FUNK (what would Wilfred say?) and CORPSE don't quite scale the heights of super-ugliness. (Should one make an exception for the archetypical four-letter words?) Perhaps one should seek a mixture of hard consonants and hissing ones (F, S, SH, V, X) as in SHISH-KEBAB, KVETCH and EXPECTORATE. And can one posit that the short-U vowel sound is also more likely to appear, as in MUGWUMP, BEDBUG or PLUG-UGLY?

What should one do with words having split personalities - liquid sounds but vile meanings such as SLUDGE, SYPHILIS or DIARRHEA, or hard sounds but innocent meanings such as JUKEBOX, DEBUTANTE, TURBOPROP or PIGGYBACK? If sound and sense are not in synch, either sound-alone or sense-alone should be especially abhorrent if the word is to qualify as genuinely ugly.

Finally, one ought to avoid obscure words that nobody knows (medical jawbreakers come to mind), but I would not like to exclude a fine example like BROBDIGNAGIAN thereby. And, one should probably exclude proper names, although in this election year it is hard to refuse KENNEBUNKPORT, a K-B-K-P-T combo that sounds like a trunk falling down a flight of stairs!

Your candidates?