

# THE "V-14" PROBLEM

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In a previous article, we explored the problem of finding 14-letter words and names beginning with the letter C and alternating their consonants and vowels regularly: words such as COLONIZABILITY and CAPACITATIVELY. Although C is a very common first letter in English words and we exerted herculean efforts, we were able to find only 14 single, solidly-written words conforming to the conditions imposed on the problem, and 12 two-word terms. Those conditions excluded obsolete, dialectal, slang, and colloquial words, and outright coinages.

In the article, we suggested casually that an examination of 14-letter words beginning with V might prove to be more fruitful. We immediately rejected that suggestion on the ground that more than 5 times as many English words begin with C as begin with V. Subsequent investigation, however, caused us to doubt the validity of the obvious conclusion. For one thing, the 5-to-1 ratio of available words was misleading. Large numbers of C words have one of three consonants (H, L, or R) as their second letter, disqualifying them from consideration, whereas only a scattered few V words are so disqualified. If we deduct the CH, CL, and CR words from the total of all C words, the ratio of C words to V words reduces to only a little more than 4-to-1 -- admittedly, a still seemingly decisive advantage. Yet, the only way to resolve a nagging doubt was to make an actual comparison. We therefore used the same principles, methods, and sources in searching for V words that we had previously used in searching for C words. The results were astonishing.

The 14 solid C words are outclassed by 26 solid V words, and the 12 broken C terms are overshadowed by 16 broken V terms. The 450,000 most common English words include no C-14 words whatever, whereas they include 5 V-14 words, 2 of which are also among the 60,000 most common English words (they are in the current Merriam-Webster pocket dictionary, which has only 57,000 entries). A detailed examination of our findings follow.

The two pocket-dictionary V-14 words are VERISIMILITUDE and VITUPERATIVELY. The three additional words in Webster's Third Edition are VANADOSILICATE (within the definition of the combining form VANAD-), VENOMOSALIVARY, and VOMEROPALATINE. Four other solidly-written V-14 words spelled out in standard dictionaries are VENENOSALIVARY (in Webster's Second Edition: an exact synonym for VENOMOSALIVARY); VELOCIPEDEWISE (within the text of an 1869 quotation in the Oxford English Dictionary: in the manner of a

velocipede); VINYLACETYLENE (in the 4th Edition of Hackh's Chemical Dictionary, within the definition of MONOVINYLACETYLENE); and VASOMOTORICITY (in Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary: the power of producing change in the caliber of a blood vessel).

Four of these 9 words are pleasingly free of the vowel Y. One of these, VELOCIPEDEWISE, is hyphenated (VELOCIPEDE-WISE) in the source from which we culled it. The text in which it occurred is, however, more than a century old, and the English language has changed -- words ending with the combining form -WISE are written solidly nowadays (for example, COUNTERCURRENTWISE, SUICIDALWISE, and VEGETABLEWISE, all of them also five-syllable words in Webster's Second Edition). In order to write VELOCIPEDEWISE as the word is used today, we had to eliminate its former hyphen.

As in the case of the C-14 search, Latin struck us as a language with a potential for V-14 words. After all, the medieval Latin 13-letter word VICE-COMITATUS (a vice-retinue or vice-company, so far as we can determine) and its 15-letter dative and ablative plural form VICE-COMITATIBUS hinted strongly that Latin might also include an actual V-14 word. It did, as a matter of fact: VERISIMILITUDO (also written VERI SIMILITUDO), the etymon of the English VERISIMILITUDE.

Our 9 dictionary V-14 words have topped the 7 dictionary C-14 words that we found in our first search. Once again, we thirst for greater success and begin reading between the lines of dictionaries. In Webster's Second Edition, we find 9 12-letter adjectives which can routinely be converted into corresponding 14-letter adverbs by attaching the suffix -LY. All of the resulting words meet our V-14 specifications:

VAGINICOLINE to VAGINICOLINELY  
 VALETUDINARY to VALETUDINARILY  
 VATICINATORY to VATICINATORILY  
 VEHICULATORY to VEHICULATORILY  
 VERIFICATIVE to VERIFICATIVELY  
 VERIFICATORY to VERIFICATORILY  
 VITUPERATORY to VITUPERATORILY  
 VIVIFICATIVE to VIVIFICATIVELY  
 VOCIFERATIVE to VOCIFERATIVELY

In addition, Dorland's includes the adjective VASODILATIVE ("producing vasodilatation"). The corresponding V-14 adverb is VASODILATIVELY.

So far, our routine reading between the lines has produced 10 additional V-14 words, compared with only 4 analogous words during the course of our C-14 search. That first search, however, also used more skillful methods to extract another 3 C-14 words from major dictionaries, and we now apply similar skills to V words in those dictionaries.

The first observation we make is that the words VERIFICATIVE and VERIFICATORY bear a certain obvious relationship to the words VERIFY and VERIFICATION. What words bear precisely the same

relationship to the words VILIFY and VILIFICATION? It is the words VILIFICATIVE and VILIFICATORY, producing the V-14 adverbs VILIFICATIVELY and VILIFICATORILY!

Next, the modern English 11-letter words in the unabridged Oxford include the adjectives VELOCIPEDEAL, VATICANICAL, and VERISIMILAR. What abstract nouns correspond to these adjectives? The V-14 nouns VELOCIPEDEALITY, VATICANICALITY, and VERISIMILARITY! How do we know? By logical inference from the following precise analogues, all in Webster's Second Edition:

PEDAL to PEDALITY  
 BIPEDAL to BIPEDALITY  
 SESQUIPEDAL to SESQUIPEDALITY

MECHANICAL to MECHANICALITY  
 ECUMENICAL to ECUMENICALITY  
 CONICAL to CONICALITY

SIMILAR to SIMILARITY  
 UNSIMILAR to UNSIMILARITY  
 DISSIMILAR to DISSIMILARITY

What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

We also notice that the noun VASODILATION has the alternate form VASODILATATION (in the 5th Edition of Gould's Medical Dictionary, as well as in Dorland's). Since the form VASODILATION produces the adjective VASODILATIVE (in Dorland's), the form VASODILATATION produces the V-14 adjective VASODILATATIVE.

The unabridged Oxford includes the adjective VENOSO-RETICULATED (having the veins [of a plant leaf] disposed so as to form a network). Webster's Third equates RETICULATED with RETICULATE, authorizing us to produce the V-14 word VENOSO-RETICULATE. By strict analogy with words such as SEMIRETICULATE and FIBRORETICULATE (both in Webster's Second), we know that the current spelling of our new V-14 word is solid: VENOSORETICULATE.

A skillful reading between the lines of dictionaries has, accordingly, netted us another 7 V-14 words, compared with only 3 such C-14 words. The overall score now stands at 16 solid V-14 words against only 14 solid C-14 words.

Our original search found not a single hyphenated C-14 word. We are more fortunate in our current search. Webster's Second lists VICE-PALATINE (someone assuming the office of a palatine in certain cases). The Funk & Wagnalls Unabridged defines the word PALATINATE as the office of a count palatine or of an elector palatine. By meticulous analogy, it follows that the office of a vice-palatine is a VICE-PALATINATE -- our first (and only) hyphenated V-14 word. Yet once more, the underdog V's have beaten the lordly C's!

Next on the agenda are two-or-more-word dictionary V-14 entries. We had previously found only two such C-14 terms. Our examination of the V's yields 5 such terms. Two are in Howard W. Sam's Modern Dictionary of Electronics, a work not available to us: VOLA-

TILE MEMORY and VOLUME LIFETIME. A third is in Paul W. Thrush's A Dictionary of Mining, Mineral, and Related Terms: VOLUME VELOCITY ("the rate of alternating flow of the medium through a specified surface produced by a sound wave"). The last 2 are in Stedman's Medical Dictionary: VAGINA CAROTICA (the dense, fibrous covering of the carotid artery, internal jugular vein, and vagus nerve) and VENA CANALICULI. The latter term represents the first 2 words of the 3-word term VENA CANALICULI COCHLEAE (the vein of the canal of the cochlea). We note that the first 2 words are a grammatically and semantically complete thought ("the vein of the canal"), permitting us to use them as a V-14 term.

Previously, we had synthesized 4 common personal first-and-last name C-14 combinations. Here, too, we surpass ourselves with 6 such V-14 combinations:

VERONICA LOWERY  
VERONICA MALONE  
VERITY, CAROLINE

VERITY, MADELINE  
VERITY, ROSEMARY  
VERITY, VERONICA

VERITY is a common enough English word. Its use as a surname is less common, but it does appear in that capacity in sources as diverse as Charles Wareing Bardsley's A Dictionary of English and Welsh Surnames (1901); P. H. Reaney's The Origins of English Surnames (1967); The New York Times Obituaries Index 1858-1968 (1970); and Who's Who in America: 38th Edition, 1974-1975 (1974). What VERITY gives the appearance of being but is seemingly not is one of the Puritan feminine "virtue" names such as CHARITY, PATIENCE, PRUDENCE -- and VIRTUE itself. As in our C search, all of the synthesized combinations are feminine names, because all of the first names are structurally required to end in vowels -- a characteristic typical of feminine, not masculine, given names.

Are there any V-14 geographic names in atlas indexes and gazetteers? We had found only one such C-14 name, but fortune smiles on us again and we locate 4 such V-14 names -- forbiddingly foreign ones -- all in The Times Index-Gazetteer of the World: VELIBARA TEPESEI (a mountain in Asiatic Turkey, east of the seaport city of Zonguldak); VELIKA SEJANICA (a village in southeastern Yugoslavia, near the town of Leskovac); VELIKO ROPOTOVO (another village in southeastern Yugoslavia, near the town of Kumanovo); and VILA DE MANATUTO (a village on the now Indonesian island of Timor, near the town of Dili).

Can we synthesize real geographic location names? In the C search we synthesized 5 names of the form CALUMET, ALABAMA. For the first and only time, the V's let us down -- we are unable to synthesize a single name, either in the United States or in Canada, although the Province of Manitoba may have some unexplored potential remaining in it.

As in the case of our C search, we could expand our collection of V-14 terms quite easily by adding the suffix -LIKE to 10-letter nouns such as VETERINARY, VISIBILITY, and VOCABULARY. We desist from that exercise because it does not represent a logological

challenge -- doing so is too easy.

Despite our failure to synthesize North American geographic names at the tail end of our V-14 quest, we have succeeded in accumulating 16 broken V-14 terms as opposed to only 12 such C-14 terms, and the final score is 42 to 26 in favor of the lowly V's. This outcome flies in the face of statistical logic, making a mockery of it. How could such a thing have happened? What is the hidden life force, the *élan vital*, within the V's that gives them the drive needed to demolish the powerful C's? Or is the C-14/V-14 anomaly merely a minor, random statistical fluctuation in the larger picture embracing all 26 letters of the alphabet and all word lengths from 10 to 18 letters? We leave these and related questions to readers to pursue.

### **READ MY LIPOGRAMS**

Remember the article on *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (OuLiPo) by member Harry Mathews in the May 1976 **Word Ways**? In passing, he mentioned that fellow-member Georges Perec had written *La Disparition* (The Disappearance), the first E-less novel since the 1939 *Gadsby* -- "an elaborate, funny story of unbelievable virtuosity" so well-written that some French critics failed to notice its lipogrammatic character. For a quarter-century, non-French readers have had to take Mathews' word for it.

This lamentable state of affairs has at last been rectified with Gilbert Adair's translation *A Void* (HarperCollins 1995; \$24). English-language critics are rapturous: "a rollicking story, wildly amusing ... a whodunit [in which] E done it" and, lipogrammatically, "an astounding Anglicization of Francophonic mania, a daunting triumph of will pushing its way through imposing roadblocks to a magical country, an absurdist nirvana, of humor, pathos and loss." There is not even a Chapter Five!

Why do it? Someone once said "only within severe, almost crippling restraint do we find freedom". The trick is to define the right degree of constraint -- the omission of E is significantly less crippling than, say, the construction of a palindrome in which half the letters of the message are dictated. Although palindromists have also written novels (see Stephens' *Satire: Veritas* or Levine's *Dr. Awkward & Olson In Oslo*, both privately published in limited editions), the stories are so disjointed that they are unlikely ever to enjoy *A Void's* degree of critical acclaim. Perec implores one to invent, to come along and play the game of literary constraint. Perhaps there is a commercial market for such **Word Ways** recognized fancies as homoliteral or heteroliteral prose, of chain-link writing ("some men enjoy oysters..."), or of vocabularyclept literature (rearrange the words of one text to create another, to be written by Gary Gray or Edna Dean).