COMPOUND FRACTIONS

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The Oxford English Dictionary defines **logology** as "the science of words" and Dmitri Borgmann playfully adopted the term to describe certain aspects of his wordsmithery. Since then, it appears to have been misapplied to all and every form of recreational linguistics. I feel that, in the Borgmann tradition, it should be restricted to the pseudo-academic wordplay that the founding editor of **Word Ways** pioneered so brilliantly, but not at the expense of the conventional word-based amusements he also graced with his genius, nor any other inventive wordplay which came from his impish pen.

In contrast to my more recent **Word Ways** writings, I now claim to pontificate as a logologist, delivering a sermon on the words of science or, more specifically, the shorthand of chemistry.

Chemists employ one-letter and two-letter symbols for the elements. As a logological chemist I wish to pioneer the creation of compounds employing those symbols. For example, a combination of lanthanum (La) and tungsten (W) produces the LaW of this study, and CuBa is perceived as being based on copper (Cu) and barium (Ba) whilst the additon of nitrogen (N) gives us the adjectival compound CuBaN.

Logological chemists need to take care to mix their elements in the correct sequence, just as the old alchemists would have counselled, because there is a world of difference between StRu (a Middle English form of **stroy**, to destroy) and RuSt, even though they share strontium (St) and ruthenium (Ru).

Sadly, not all the elements have equal potential for this pseudo-science: witness such intransmutable substances as curium (Cm) and its fellow artificial metal, neptunium (Np).

Before I am accused of plagiarism, I am aware that Chris Cole's study of word records based on Webster's Third included NoNRePReSeNTaTiONaLiSm (misspelled in the February 1993 Colloquy!) as 'the longest in chemical symbols'. Discovering superlative words is but one aspect of this pseudo-science that I leave to fellow logologists. The genuinely scientifically-minded reader might well find it more rewarding to explore the potential of known compounds. Do any exist which have synonyms - that is, whose chemical names spell out words?

As a logological chemist, I offer a solution to one of the oldest scientific (etymological?) mysteries of all time: what constitutes the substance SERICON?

SERICON is one of ten different names (the others are no longer extant) given by alchemists to a substance which, they believed, assisted in the transmutation of a base metal into gold. In one of its more ludicrous entries, Chambers English Dictionary carried the following definition: "conjectured to be a red (or black) tincture in alchemy". This conjecture is based upon someone's concept of the etymology of the word SERICON, totally ignoring the fact that it is but one of ten different names for a single mystery substance. In Pears Advanced Word-Puzzler's Dictionary, my entry for the word carries the footnote commentary

> If the mediaeval alchemists had one particular chemical in mind they would be bound, by the very nature of the subject, to be utterly secretive about it. Most definitions are based on the 'etymology' of that surviving word which is only one of ten different names. If the word does contain any clue it is probably cryptic and, if it is as simple as an anagram, which language would it be in?

Those of you who wish to pursue a serious investigation of SERICON are advised to commence with the OED, which mentions the missing nine names. But, those who take logological claims seriously can relax in the knowledge that by starting with sulphur (S), then adding erbium (Er), followed by iodine (I), then cobalt (Co), and finally nitrogen (N), they have the formula for an essential aspect of the philosopher's stone!

DEVIOUS DERIVATIONS

Who hasn't heard that ***posh*** *is an acronym for Port Out, Starboard Home (a stateroom location on the England-India steamship line), or that a* ***tip*** *is To Insure Promptness? These and a thousand more false etymologies of some 400 words and phrases are entertainingly presented by Hugh Rawson in his book* ***Devious Derivations*** *(Crown Publishers, 1994; $22.50). It is true that Thomas Crapper patented a valveless water waste preventer in 1882, but the term crapping-case to refer to a water closet was in use earlier in the century. One can appreciate how false etymologies arise when reading about Rev. Edwin Johns' "Dolphin" toilet at the 1876 Philadelphia exposition, but the name* ***john*** *is found at least a century earlier. Two erstwhile* ***Word Ways*** *contributors (Martin Gardner, Willard Espy) are cited on the back cover, along with one current one (Richard Lederer): "a great snorting gallop of a book...you'll be astounded twice per page... an exciting etymological exploration". Is it as good as they say? You be the judge!*