POSSESSIONLESSNESS PLURALIZED?

DAVID G. ARMSTRONG
Brunswick, Maine

I cannot let pass without protest the use, in Susan Thorpe's otherwise excellent article (**Word Ways**, Aug 1995) of POSSESSIONLESSNESSES. People who have possessions may have a wide variety of kinds and numbers of possessions and so there may be said to be an infinitude of different possessionfulnesses. But if several such persons were to lose their possessions one by one until none were left, then the kind and number of their possessions would all be reduced to the null set and they would share in common a unique and singular possessionlessness, for which no plural is admissable.

It may be argued that this proposition is too mechanical and fails to take into account the social and psychological considerations affecting the protagonists. Surely the possessionlessness of one who has never had possessions is far different from that of one who has had vast possessions and lost them. Are not these two very dissimilar possession-lessnesses? Let us expand this idea.

Here is a formerly wealthy merchant who staked his entire fortune, and all he could borrow besides, on a commercial venture which would have made him immensely wealthy when his ship came in. Unfortunately, his ship is not coming in; it was destroyed in a tempest at sea and now rests, with its precious cargo, on the ocean floor. He has had to forfeit all of his possessions to satisfy his creditors. He rages against fate and is totally unable to come to terms with the disaster which has befallen him; he is thinking of ending his life rather than living it out in poverty.

Here is a medieval serf. The hut he lives in, the land he works, and the tools with which he works it all belong to his master. It was the same for his father and his grandfather before him; it is impossible for him to imagine having any possessions of his own. He is resigned to his condition. His master treats him fairly kindly and when he compares his life to the lives of other serfs, he considers himself fortunate indeed.

Here is a young man whose friends and associates have long envied him his flashy sports car, his enormous diamond ring, etc. Now it has been determined by a jury of his peers that most of his possessions have been obtained by stealing them from others, and these have been returned to their rightful owners. He is deeply repentant for his sinful life and has given his remaining possessions to the charismatic leader of a mes-sianic cult, who has convinced him that only thus can he have acceptamce and love in this life and escape eternal damnation in a life to come.

Here is another formerly wealthy merchant who has voluntarily sold all

of his possessions and given the proceeds to the poor. He goes about garbed as a holy man and carrying a begging bowl--dependent for his sustenance on the kindness of strangers. He attempts to cure diseases (most of his successes are with psychosomatic complaints) and he gives copious wise advice to young people who are in need of it--most of which is ignored, in part at least, because much of it is embedded in riddles which they have neither the wit nor the patience to decipher. He believes that his calling is the highest and best of which a human being is capable and his days are suffused with serenity and joy.

So we see possessionlessness evoking rage, resignation, repentance, and religious fervor. Are these not four different possessionlessnesses? I think not. Some people are poisoned by the same milk that nourishes others; it is not the milk but the individual reaction to it that is different. Similarly, I hold that these people are reacting individually to the same identical, irrevocably singular, possessionlessness.

A Program to Find a Ten-Square

The August 1995 issue of Ted Clarke's **Wordsworth** contains a lengthy article describing his COMCAL program to search for ten-squares. Starting with a user-specified word for the top line, it systematically tries on the second line each word in the 66,000-word database to see if all ten vertical bigrams are legitimate beginnings of ten-letter words. Each time such a word is found, the program then tries the 66,000 words on the third line, checking that all ten starting trigrams are usable--and so on. Although he has found no ten-squares yet, he occasionally succeeds in adding seven words to the starter, with the last two lines gibberish. Runs based on a single start-word take from a few minutes to several hours to complete; the whole database could be checked in about two years. If the database were 250,000 words--a number that may well be needed to ensure success--it would take far longer.

Ted Clarke's top-down search for a ten-square counters a century of experience of National Puzzlers' League formists searching for eight-squares and nine-squares. Experimental verification of whether top-down or bottom-up searches are more efficient (faster) could be conducted by also running COMCAL on the 66,000 reversals of ten-letter words. Such a study might require thousands of starter words, each tried both normally and in reverse, to determine average run times that are statistically distinguishable. More quickly, Eric Albert (**Word Ways**, Nov 1991) could compare the times his program takes to process all nine-letter words in the two formats, or any computer owner could try the COMCAL program on a reduced set of (say) 20,000 ten-letter words. (The editor has a copy of COMCAL on a floppy if anyone wants to try.) If ten-square hunters cannot unite, perhaps they can individually shed light on Ted Clarke's assertion that top-down is superior to bottom-up.