

PLACENAME ISOGRAMY

DAN TILQUE

Beaverton, Oregon

Out in the far reaches of Long Island lies the town of Bridgehampton. This name, being a fairly long isogram, has often caught my attention in my periodic perusals of various atlases. It is, as far as I know, the longest solidly written placename isogram in the United States.

Checking the literature, one finds that in the May 1985 Word Ways Dmitri Borgmann summarized most, if not all, of the known isograms of 15 or more letters. Among the other isograms, Borgmann listed five placenames: Bougy, Switzerland; Ouchy, Switzerland; Big Flats, New York; Flatbush, New York; South Cambridge, New York. While these were all valid isograms of 15 or 16 letters, they suffered from the defect of being multiple-word examples. Worse, they all combined the name of the city with their state or country, necessitating an intrusive comma.

I find it interesting that all the long isograms in the United States are in New York. I know of no other solidly written ones in other states longer than 11 letters, and the next longest multi-word example is only 14 letters. Apparently there's something especially isogramic about New York!

Besides these five, he also used two 13-letter English placenames to construct longer isograms. One of them, Rumboldswyke, Borgmann had learned of from Leigh Mercer but did not know where it was. I have located it; it is in West Sussex, near the town of Chichester. Personally, I find that this name, along with Borgmann's other example, Buslingthorpe, to be more attractive than the longer examples. Solid word isograms are simply more aesthetically pleasing than multiword ones.

Having established a baseline of three 13-letter solidly written and five multi-word nonpattern placenames, I set forth to see how far I could exceed it. Having searched lists of United States placenames many times in the past, I was fairly sure that there were no other good examples there. I checked some international atlases, but these tend to not cover the smaller villages. So I turned to more specialized references. England seemed to be a likely place and so I searched in several gazetteers of that country. But to find the best examples, I concluded that the best hunting would be in German-speaking areas. Place names tend to follow the language of their inhabitants in their frequencies of letters, lengths, and other characteristics.

Since there are only 5 or 6 vowels to 20 or 21 consonants, nonpattern words will most likely occur in a language with a high ratio of

consonants to vowels. Clearly the Romance languages compare very unfavorably to the Germanic in this regard. Other major language families are also generally inferior to Germanic. Among the Germanic languages, German itself seems to have the best ratio, and its propensity towards long words is also a favorable factor. Checking the library for a German gazetteer or atlas, I turned up a 1905 copy of Ritters Geographisch-Statistisches Lexikon, a large German-language gazetteer.

To supplement Ritters, I also checked a number of Michelin 1:400,000 maps of Germany, Austria and Switzerland, all dated from the 1990s. Unfortunately, I was unable to find the southern Germany map in this series.

While I was mainly interested in solidly written examples, I also noted others that I came across. The letter in square brackets indicates the reference it was found in; if no letter, then it can be found in many modern atlases. The region or country is given as in the reference (except that the German names have been translated), even though that region may no longer be a political entity.

12 and 13 Letters In my searches, I recorded dozens of 12- and 13-letter isograms; only the more notable are listed here.

Buckfastleigh England (Devon) This is the only new 13-letter solidly-written isogram that I found in England. (I did, however, find another Bridgehampton there.)

Champforguiel France [R] (Sâone-et-Loire Province), the longest isogram found in France.

Falconbridge Ontario, the longest isogram in Canada. Notable in that it contains all the letters from A to G.

Faulconbridge New South Wales, the longest in Australia. Since it differs from Falconbridge only in its additional U, it shares the property of having the letters from A to G.

Nimptschdorf Moravia [R] Notable in that it only uses two vowels.

Polnisch Jamke Silesia [R] contains nine adjacent letters, HIJKLMNOP.

Unfortunately, the internal space flaws this example.

14 Letters At the 14-letter level, the number of finds becomes small enough that it is convenient to list all solidly written examples.

Bricklehampton England [T] A place in Worcestershire, some three miles SE of Pershore. It is the longest solidly written isogram in an English-speaking country.

Kleindöbschütz Saxony [R]

Kleinhaugsdorf Austria [RM]

Kleinpötzschau Saxony [R]

Kleinschmograu Silesia [R] Considering that 'klein' uses up two vowels, it's amazing that so many with that placename element were found.

Klein, which means "little", is often prepended to the name of a German village to name a smaller village nearby.

Kobitzschwalde Saxony [R]

Mischljenovatz Serbia [R]

Unterwolfsbach Saxe-Coburg-Gotha [R]

15 Letters At this level, all examples are shown

Gumpoldskirchen Austria. An outstanding isogram. The number of solidly written 15-letter isograms is small, and this is a welcome addition to their ranks. This town is located not too far south of Vienna. The Times Index-Gazetteer has it but misspells it Gumpoldskchen (leaving out the IR), and this no doubt contributed to its not having been found before.

The other 15-letter examples are all flawed in that they combine the name of the town with that of the country.

Bückwitz, Germany

Döcklitz, Germany [M]

Dütschow, Germany [M]

Holtwick, Germany [M]

Plüschow, Germany [M]

Schildow, Germany [RM]

Suckwitz, Germany [M]

Wölkisch, Germany [RM]

16 Letters The three 16-letter placenames in Borgmann's list were the longest known isograms that are sanctioned by any reference work. But as I pointed out above, they suffer from flaws which make them less than satisfactory. Thus the importance of the following discovery.

Malitzschkendorf, Saxony [R] While most atlases do not show this town, it is listed in the Official Standard Names Gazetteer of the German Democratic Republic, published by the US Board on Geographic Names. The Michelin map of eastern Germany has it, but spells it without the Z.

Other 16-letter isograms are all German towns, all formerly in East Germany.

Döschwitz, Germany [M]

Löbschütz, Germany [M]

Loschwitz, Germany [M]

Puschwitz, Germany [M]

17 Letters This is rarified atmosphere indeed. Borgmann's list of 17-letter examples contained all inferred terms. Of those, only subdermatoglyphic (Word Ways February 1991) is at all reasonable. So again the following is a very important discovery.

Wildschütz, Germany [M]. Also found in the Official Standard Names Gazetteer. Amazingly, this name does not contain an O!

I was going to Borgmannesquely extend the list to longer examples by coining potential placenames based on existing names combined with other words (Gumpoldskirchen Bay, an unlikely body of water considering that the town isn't even on a lake, much less the ocean), but I fear such an exercise will seem anticlimatic after the real discoveries above.

References

- M Michelin 1:400,000 series of maps
 R Ritters Geographisch-Statistisches Lexikon, Johannes Penzler, 1905
 RM Rand McNally Road Atlas & City Guide of Europe, 1983
 T Times Index-Gazetteer, 1965

THE CONCISE DICTIONARY OF TWO-LETTER WORDS

Privately published by Word Ways author Jeff Grant, this 37-page booklet is a type-collection of all 676 two-letter words, from AA (a rough, scoriaceous lava) to ZZ (a short buzzing or snoring sound). An extended introduction mentions the 24 common two-letter words as well as various classes tapped for the lexicon: given names, surnames, (204 different ones from telephone directories of Sydney, Melbourne, Auckland, Toronto, Montreal, Chicago and Manhattan) and place names (there are sixteen rivers named AA, which literally means 'flowing water'). The introduction also discusses the criteria for inclusion: words such as TV and TB are allowed if dictionaries list them as parts of speech (noun or adjective) in addition to abbreviations. Some abbreviations are accepted if they are clearly used as a part of speech in a citation: 'They can not keep up the HP [Hire Purchase] payments'. Early English spellings are acceptable as are apostrophized entries like X'D, but pairs found only in phrases (as 'BC soil'), nonce-spellings, prefixes or suffixes, or words only in foreign dictionaries are not.

What practical use is all this? The author points out that most of the words are inadmissible for Scrabble, although more than 300 are at least theoretically acceptable. The possibilities for 2x2 word squares are endless, as are book titles that can be printed horizontally on the spine. These words are mostly to admire and savor for their oddness. An extremely limited number of copies are available from Word Ways at \$4 postpaid.

MY JO

Oh, to be up at th' ho
 By an ol' ea wi' my jo,
 No ex or ox an' no wo'
 If it is in us, we go.