

SESQUIPEDALIANISTS, SEEK NO LONGER

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Most actual and incipient logologists seem to pass through a phase of being fascinated by long words, and raising such questions as what is the longest word in English or American. One reason for the eventual passing of this phase, for most of us, is the eventual realisation of the fact that, as incisively demonstrated by Ross Eckler in the introduction to his book *Word Recreations* (1978), it is by no means simple to decide what counts as a word.

Another is the fact that it becomes clear, after a while, that only moderate ingenuity is required to construct words of virtually any length, especially if length is the only criterion. This is not to say that the creation of charming words of great length may not be a fun exercise all the same. The word SUPERCALIFRAGILISTICEXPIALIDOCIOUS (34 letters), and HIPPOPOTOMONSTROSESQUIPEDALIAN (30), for example, were surely worth the effort.

A third, and flattening, discovery is that some of the best candidates for longest word are almost certainly frauds (PNEUMONOULTRAMICROSCOPICSILICOVOLCANOCONIOSIS (45), in Webster's 3rd Edition).

A fourth realisation, and one that seems to take much of the point out of the exercise, is that some scientific disciplines, for instance chemistry, can construct perfectly regular terms which reach any specifiable length—up to thousands of letters. Even rather less technical disciplines such as psychology (ELECTROENCEPHALOGRAPHICALLY (27)) and philosophy (PHILOSOPHICOPSYCHOLOGICAL(25)) can be somewhat disheartening in this way.

Finally, there doesn't seem much point in looking for exceedingly long words which we are unlikely ever to encounter, except in some rare and possibly specialised circumstance, especially since such words tend to become abbreviated or otherwise transmogrified for regular use. Thus most people, after visiting their E.N.T. specialist, would be surprised to discover they had just left their OTORHINOLARYNGOLOGIST (21)).

In spite of all these interest-damping factors I, for one, retain a little of my initial fascination with word length, and cannot help wondering what are the longest words which are likely to be encountered in daily life—perhaps in conversation, or in the newspaper. It appears others share this more circumscribed interest, as I have come across several writers who raise, and attempt to answer, some approximation to the question of what is the longest word in general use. The most popular answer is rather surprising—the word DISPROPORTIONABLENESS (21). To describe this word as being in general use seems to me inappropriate. I do not recall ever having met it, except in the current context, and would have to go to some trouble to find an excuse to use it.

And there are, in fact, a number of far better candidates of this length. The words COUNTERPRODUCTIVENESS, INDISTINGUISHABLENESS, INTERDENOMINATIONALLY, MICROMINIATURIZATIONS and COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY spring easily to mind. Without going very far into technological and specialist areas, bearing in mind our implied embargo on such specialisation, one could add such terms as PSEUDOHERMAPHRODITISM, PSYCHOPHARMACOLOGICAL and ELECTROENCEPHALOGRAPH, with all of its longer deriva-

tives. There are even a few longer words we might often see in our daily newspapers, words such as COUNTERREVOLUTIONARIES (22).

Nevertheless, there do not, in fact, seem to be very many words of more than twenty letters which would meet a very strict criterion of non-technicality. This is surprising, since there seems to be quite a large number of 20-letter words that are clearly nontechnical and unarguably in common use—words such as UNCHARACTERISTICALLY, COMPARTMENTALIZATION, CONTRADISTINGUISHING, INCONSEQUENTIALITIES, INDISTINGUISHABILITY, INSTITUTIONALIZATION, INTERNATIONALISATION, OVERENTHUSIASTICALLY, OVERINTELLECTUALIZED and UNREPRESENTATIVENESS which none of us would be surprised to encounter. One of these, INSTITUTIONALIZATION, is of particular interest, as it forms the basis of a series of word developments leading to what must surely be the best current candidate for the longest word which could plausibly be used in casual conversation.

Several Western nations are currently operating a policy of closing residential establishments for the mentally ill, and encouraging the absorption of their inmates into the general community. The policy goes under the name of DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION (22). Some people, of whom I am one, are strongly opposed to this policy. I am, in fact, an ANTIDEINSTITUTIONALIZATIONIST (29). Indeed, ANTIDEINSTITUTIONALIZATIONISTICALLY (35) speaking...