

THE BORGMANN APOCRYPHA

A. ROSS ECKLER

Morristown, New Jersey

Dmitri Borgmann's *Language on Vacation*, published by Scribner's in 1965, is widely recognized as the Bible of logology; it is the first nonpuzzle book entirely devoted to letter-play. Long out of print, it has been eagerly sought by logologists in second-hand bookstores where, fortunately, it can often be purchased at prices of five to ten dollars.

Few people know that Borgmann originally prepared a longer book. The manuscript that he submitted to Scribner's contained two additional chapters, inserted between "Geometric Forms" and "Numerical Logology". One of these was entitled "The Sound of Language" and the other "Meanings and Synonyms". Sound-play and meaning-play have always been underdeveloped in comparison with letter-play, and Scribner's may well have decided to sharpen the focus of the book by devoting it exclusively to the latter topic. (Thirty years later, the author made the same decision in *Making the Alphabet Dance*.)

Are there any lost Borgmannian gems to be found in this unpublished material? Some topics were recycled by Borgmann into his second book, *Beyond Language*, published by Scribner's in 1967; others saw the light of day in various Word Ways articles. This article summarizes what is found in the original chapters.

The sound-play chapter begins with two 26-item quizzes on silent letters such as the A in HOARSE or the K in KNAVE, and follows with a third devoted to the inverse phenomenon, the letter that is sounded but not written, as F in TELEPHONE. Both ideas were presented in *Beyond Language*, the first as Problem 50: The Silent Host, and the second as Problem 108: The Invisible Alphabet.

Next Borgmann challenges the reader to supply 25 words in which the insertion of a single letter converts it into another word with two additional syllables (ARE to AREA, SMILE to SIMILE); this challenge appears in Problem 64: A Syllabub of Syllables, where fifteen more have been included.

Focusing on more specialized homonyms, Borgmann then asks the reader to find 25 in which the word-pairs do not share even a single letter (such as YOU-EWE or AIX-ECKS, the latter referring to people having the surname Eck). This sound-play appeared in Problem 98: Coffee, Anyone, but with some of the more outrageous ones such as W-DOUBLE U, ATE-8, and CANINE-K9 omitted. He finished off this section by observing that CHOU is a word with two pronunciations sharing not a single sound in common: "joe" (the name of an imperial Chinese dynasty), and "shoe" (cabbage).

In the next section, Borgmann demonstrates that the words AIR and OWE are both members of ten-homonym sets, later presenting these finds in Problem 13: Homonymic Humdingers. He then notes that some homonyms are achieved by letter subtraction (TOO-TO, KNOT-NOT, TOWED-TOED), including the four-letter subtractions QUEUE-Q and AITCH-H. Although he apparently never followed up on this idea, it was discussed by Charles Bostick in the February 1977 Word Ways.

Next Borgmann considers sentences in which the same homonymic sound is repeated a large number of times. Most examples of this genre, which long predates Borgmann, consist of the same word, usually AND, THAT or HAD. By introducing a character surnamed HADD, Borgmann devises a sentence using 16 consecutive HAD sounds; this is repeated in Problem 84: Repetitive Homonymy. Pure homonymic sentences (Ba ba ba ba, Malo malo malo malo, Buffalo Buffalo buffalo Buffalo) appear there also.

A brief excursion into numerical homonymy, illustrated by “100204180” (translated as “I ought nought to owe, for I ate nothing”) was not recycled. Sentences composed of words having the same initial sound but different initial letters (Pneumatic gnomes knew mnemonic names), or sentences composed of words having the same initial letters but different initial sounds (Pshaw! Psychotic Peiping philosophizes Pnom-Penh’s ptomaine poisoning), do appear in Problem 58: Sight and Sound.

Finally, Borgmann presents three triple heteronyms: SLOUGH (sloo, slou, sluff) and TRIPLY (tripp-lee, tripp-lye, tri-ply). This, of course, is the inverse of the AIR and OWE multiple-homonym problem mentioned previously.

The chapter on meaning starts with a quiz to identify 25 words which have opposite meanings, such as ALOHA (greetings, farewell) or CLEAVE (unite, separate); these subsequently appeared in Problem 38: Antipodal Identities. Foreign examples include BITTE (please, you’re welcome), SAUVAGE (wild or untamed, shy or timid), and HÔTE (host, quest). Turning the coin, he looks at words with meanings encoded by two words of opposite appearance: to BEST is to WORST, FLAMMABLE is INFLAMMABLE, to SLOW UP is to SLOW DOWN. There are analogues in sound-play: a CHASTE girl is UNCHASED, and HI and LO both mean “hello”. These all appear in Problem 110: Apocryphal Antithesis. First noting twelve different meanings for BUFFALO, he challenges the reader to interpret the sentence “Time flies like an arrow” in three ways. In *Beyond Language*, he added a four-way example in the title of Problem 76: Let Your Hair Down. He illustrates the venerable prepositions-at-end-of-sentence game with the contrived question by a querulous invalid “What did you bring the book that I do not wish to be read on to out of up from Down Under for?” Unsurprisingly, this appears in Problem 90: The Preposition Proposition. Oddly, Borgmann did not recycle the following topic on parts of speech. There are three words that can be used in six different ways:

LIKE noun, verb, adverb, adjective, preposition, conjunction
 OUT noun, verb, adverb, adjective, preposition, interjection
 WHAT noun, pronoun, adverb, adjective, conjunction, interjection

However, he did recycle “yes-yes” words such as OUIJA, FISNOGA, DEMISEMI, REINDEER and LASPRING, together with repetitively-prefixed words like QUASIHEMIDEMISEMI-QUAVER, in Problem 35: Etymological Eccentricities.

He next includes a brief survey of irrelevant etymologies, words for objects or places that were mistakenly translated from an aborigine’s utterance: KANGAROO (“I don’t understand”) or LUZON (“we are rowing”).

Fascinated by lists, Borgmann strays from pure logology to challenge the reader to identify the 50 states by their former nicknames; the two quizzes in this chapter were reduced to one in Problem 27: Stately Sobriquets. After inserting a list of sobriquets used by writers to Ann Landers on affairs of the heart (always in the wrong, mad as hops, daughter of sorrows), he returns to quizzes

with two devoted to medieval terms for collections of birds or animals, later featured in James Lipton's *An Exaltation of Larks* (1968). These variously appeared in Problem 79: Advice to the Lovelorn, and Problem 44: The Collective Farm. Seizing on the odd noun FEAMYNG, a collective term for ferrets given in a 1949 crossword dictionary, he shows that it was the last in a centuries-long chain of typos from BUSYNESS to BESYNES to FESYNES to FESNYNG to FEAMYNG! From this, Borgmann draws the sweeping conclusion that "books, be they dictionaries or other reference works, are worthless from the viewpoint of accuracy and dependability." Except for this comment, the full account can be found in Problem 94: A Feamyng of Ferrets.

The chapter continues with quizzes asking the reader to identify 25 forms of divination and to construct lists of 100 names for Jesus Christ and the Devil. The first and third lists are given in Problem 116: Delving into Divination and Problem 82: How to Curse. However, he spares the reader from researching the four Gaelic names of Ireland or the 15 nicknames of Napoleon (the former topic is discussed in Problem 37: H O N). Much of this chapter is not logology, but instead a showcase in which Borgmann displays highly-specialized facts.

Borgmann concludes this chapter with a diatribe against dictionaries and dictionary-makers. He complains about the obscurity of dictionary definitions, citing NAVITE in Webster's Third and KOPHOBELEMNONIDAE in Funk & Wagnalls. (The latter definition was independently discovered by Jeff Grant, who amusingly discussed it in the August 1987 Word Ways.) He criticizes the coined word BANANALIKE in the Webster's Second definition of STRELITZIA, concluding "if the lexicographers are free to coin words, so are we, for lexicographers are only human, and there are no special privileges reserved for them." He faults Webster's Second for not including KAMANJA when KEMENDJE, KEMENGEH and KEMANTCHE are identified as variant spellings. He notes that Webster's Second defines TRESKA as equivalent in meaning to TRESKE, a word labeled as obsolete, a living word defined in terms of a dead one. His sour attitude toward dictionaries is summed up "This is typical of the lexicographic mentality, and another demonstration of the worthlessness of dictionaries and reference authorities."

Besides omitting these two chapters, the Scribner's editor refused to include 63 palindromes of eight letters or more, some quite far-fetched, in "The Glorious Glossary" (pages 19-22). Only twelve were printed, leaving the rest to languish in obscurity until "The Majestic Palindrome" appeared in the February 1985 Word Ways.