

## WORDPLAY IN 1929, BELIEVE IT OR NOT!

A. ROSS ECKLER

Morristown, New Jersey

Starting in the 1920s, the column "Believe It Or Not" by Robert Ripley appeared in more than one hundred newspapers by 1930. Reading this as a boy, I was fascinated by oddities such as the English lad who died of old age before his seventh birthday, the Hindu who hung head downward for three hours at a stretch, and the girl born with a single eye in the middle of her forehead. I was also beguiled by the 310-letter word coined by monastic writers in the Middle Ages to enumerate the varieties of divination using birds, oracles, the Bible, ghosts, crystal-gazing, etc., ending with wine and shoulder blades. (The word is reproduced in full in the August 1978 Word Ways.)

I believe that Ripley's first book, based on the newspaper column, was published by Simon and Schuster in 1929. The first printing, a minuscule 2000 copies, sold out in a few days, and within a month four more printings of 2000, 3000, 5000 and 5000 copies appeared.

What sorts of wordplay caught Ripley's eye? Surprisingly, he presented only one palindrome, PA'S A SAP, as well as two palindromic word squares, the famous ROTAS square and one contributed by Doc Applegate of Ogallala, Nebraska: NOMAD OCANA MADAM ANACO DAMON (Ocaña is a town in Spain or Peru, and Anaco a town in Venezuela).

Ripley was more impressed by long words, particularly German ones:

The English language is quite frugal with the letters of the alphabet as compared to the prodigality of foreign tongues. How the Germans do squander the alphabet! Among modern German words of cumbersome formation is Schützengrabenvernichtungsautomobile, which contains thirty-six letters to express what the English indicate by the word "tank" in its military sense. There is also the "Turkish Association of Constantinopolitan Bagpipe Makers," which is designed in German by Constantinopolitanischedudelsackspfeifenmachergesellschaft. Bismarck always spoke of a druggist as Gesundheitswiederherstellungsmittelzusammenmischungsverhältnisskundiger. When he was angry he vented his spleen with this expletive—Himmelherrgottkreuzmillionendonnerwetter! Damenmantelschneiderinnungskrankenkassenhauptvorstandsmitgliederversammlung is a nice German way of saying "Assembly of the all-highest direction of the sick fund of the union of female cloak tailors." And there is a club of Vienna called Donaudampfschiffahrtselecctricitaetenhauptbetriebswerkbauunterbeamtengesellschaft, which contains 81 letters. A revenue agent in Germany is called by this name: Obertranksteuerdonativcautionszinsgelderhauptcassir which may be literally translated "First Main Cashier of Duty on Drinks and Bail Rent Moneys." Hinterladungvetterligewehrpatronenhülsenfabrikarbeiterverein translates as "Society of workers in the factory of bullet cartridges for back loading Vetterli rifles."

In the English language, Ripley came up with honorificabilitudinity from Shakespeare's "Love's Labor Lost". He credited the Puritan divine Byfeld with incircumscribteness, Doctor Benson with antidisestablishmentarians, and William Gladstone with disestablishmentarianism. He also cited the chemical terms paraoxymetamethoxyallylbenzene and tetrahydroparamethyloxyquinoline. And, speaking of chemical terms, he noted that a French newspaper advertised that paraminobenzoyldiaethylaminoethanolumphydrochloricum ought to be in every medicine chest.



In the 1929 book the longest word in the world contained 184 letters. Found in Aristophanes *Ecclesiazousae* 1169, it meant "hash."

Lepado-temacho-selacho-galeo-kranio-lepisano-drim-hypotrimmato-silphio-karabo-melito-katakechymeno-kichl-epikossypho-phatto-perister-alektryon-opto-kephallio-kingklo-pepeio-lagoio-siraio-baphe-tragano-pterygon

Ripley was also intrigued by long personal names:

The longest name yet wished on a helpless infant was bestowed some years ago upon the little daughter of Arthur Pepper, a Liverpool laundryman. The child's initials exhausted the alphabet, and her christening occupied half a day. They called her Anna Bertha Cecilia Diana Emily Fanny Gertrude Hypatia Inez Jane Kate Louise Maud Nora Ophelia Prudence Quince Rebecca Sarah Teresa Ulysis Venus Winifred Xenophon Yetty Zeno Pepper. She was usually called Alphabet Pepper for short.

"Aldiborontephoscophornio, where left you Chrononhotonthologos?" is a burlesque pomposo in Henry Carey's farce. When traveling in Argentina, I met a man in Buenos Aires whose name was Señor Don Juan Iturriberrigorrigoi-coerota-berricoechea. Pe Maung, in his "The Glass Place Chronicle of the Kings of Burma," mentions the name of King Siritaribhavanadityapauaraanditasudhammarajamahadhipatinarapatis-ithu. His subjects were compelled to pronounce the entire 69 letters whenever they were permitted to address him. The thirteenth holder of the title of "Living Buddha," or Dalai Lama, of Lhasa, Tibet, was called "Ahwangloputsangtoputanchiatachichiwangchuchuehlelangschieh." This name was comparatively easy for his worshipers as it only contains 58 letters. Mark Twain speaks of a holy man in Benares, India, who had 109 names—the last of which contained 58 letters. He writes it this way Sir 108 Matparamahansa-parivrajakacharyaswamibhaskaranandasaraswati. A little Honolulu lady bears this appellation: Miss Kalani Kaumehamehakahikikalanyakawahinekuhao. The late Western Empress Dowager, of China, that ancient dame who hated the "foreign devils" with such celestial severity, was named Tzu-hsi-tuan-yu-kang-hsi-chao-yu-chuang-cheng-shou-kung-chin-hsien-chung-hsi-huang-tai-hou. Sultan Hamengkoeboewonoseno-paitingalgongabgurrachmansaydinpanotagomodev is the name of the Sultan of Djocjokarte.

From long names Ripley segued to short ones. Ed Ek of Brockton, Massachusetts claimed to own the shortest name in the United States. However, Mr. I of Hangchow, China had an even shorter name, for it was only one letter long and that letter displaced less space than any other in the alphabet. Mr. I was a graduate of the Johns Hopkins Medical School in Baltimore.

Ripley admired short placenames as well:

There is a river Aa in Pas de Calais, France. There is a lake called Oo, and a town called Oo in the Department of Haute Garonne. There is a city called A in Sweden. I have been in a bay called Y in the Zuyder Zee.

The pronunciation of words formed the basis of several items.

You can give your tongue a rest by pronouncing this little Czech phrase—Strc prst skrz krk. That twister is literally translated into "thrust finger through neck." This one should be easy for you—Chrzaszcz szumi w trzcinie. It is the Polish way of saying that "the bug buzzes in the reeds."

Ripley claimed that there are 58,366,440 different ways of spelling the word SCISSORS phonetically. Specifically, he argued that the vocal (phonetical) value of the word is S-I-Z-E-R-S, and there are 17, 36, 17, 33, 10 and 17 ways to spell these six sounds in English. He referred all doubting Thomases to pages 35-39 of *Plea for Reformed Spelling* by Alexander John Ellis.



He related that the letters O P Q R S T, sent by Hué in 1867, were correctly interpreted by the French to read "au Pecu arrêté" (arrested at Pecu). In a related story, Professor Netomeff, an Assyriologist who wrote a book about Nebuchadnezzar, the ancient King of Babylon, was sentenced to perpetual exile in Siberia because the caption of his book, "Nebuchadnezzar," was the same in the Russian language as "Ne boch ad ne tzar" which meant "No God and no Tzar."

Ripley challenged his readers to translate the following poem, "Epigram Upon Nothing," by Rev. R. Egerton of Warburton:

U O A O but I O thee,	(You sigh for a cipher, but I sigh for thee,
O O no O but O O me;	Oh, sigh for no cipher but, oh, sigh for me;
Let not my O a mere O go,	Let not my sigh for a mere cipher go,
But O my O I O thee so	But sigh for a sigh, for I sigh for thee so)

He presented three pangrams for the delectation of his readers: A quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog; Pack my box with five dozen liquor jugs; John P. Brady gave me a black walnut box of quite a small size.

He noted that "that" is used seven times in succession in the sentence "It is true for all that, that that that that that signifies, is not the one to which I refer, and challenged the reader to put a comma in the sentence "The King and and and and and Queen." (The modern version of this is that a sign-painter is instructed to put a space between "King" and "and," and "and" and "Queen".) He also related how a comma saved a human life:

Maria Feodorewna accidentally caught sight of the following note appended to the bottom of a death warrant. It was in the handwriting of her husband, Alexander III. It read as follows: "Pardon impossible, to be sent to Siberia." Maria transposed the comma so that it read "Pardon, impossible to be sent to Siberia," whereupon the convict was released a free man.

Two of the shortest poems in the world are "Hired. Tired? Fired!" and the following lines written on the antiquity of microbes: "Adam Had 'Em."

All the names of God have four letters: Lord in English, JHVH in Hebrew, Deus in Latin and Portuguese, Dieu in French, Adat in Assyrian, Godt in Dutch, Gott in German, Godh in Danish, Goth in Swedish, Soru in Persian, Alla in Mohammedan, Rama in Hindu, Deva in Sanskrit, Dios in Spanish, Odin in Scandinavian, Teos in Greek, Zeus in Greek mythology, Thor in Viking, Amir in Arabic, Amon in Egyptian, Papa in Inca, Aton in Canaanish, Agla in Cabalistic, Inca in Quechua, Baal in Phoenician, Istr in Persian, Illu in Syrian, Elah in Aramaic, Kami in Japanese, Hakk in Hindustani, Nebo in Chaldean and Bram in Aryan.

Would anyone care to check Ripley's claim that PERSONALITY contains 1307 other words? What dictionary is enough to do it? Webster's Collegiate? The Official Scrabble Players Dictionary? Is there a word of equal or shorter length that does better?