

ON THE DEFINITION OF A VOWEL

A. ROSS ECKLER

Morristown, New Jersey

On page kd of *Opperlans! Taal- & letterkunde* (Querido, 2003), Battus (the pen name of Hugo Brandt Corstius) presents a new way to define a vowel in the Dutch language. He originally presented this argument in the journal *Spektator* (1972). The following is an adaptation to the English language.

Take the following collection of 27 English words that collectively contain all the letters of the alphabet:

- add, all, am, an, pa, as, ax
- coo, go, jo, or, woo, zoo
- id, if, inn, qi, xi
- he, eke, lee, eve
- up, us, tutu
- by, my

All words can be found in Webster's Tenth Collegiate except for qi, a Chinese loanword meaning 'physical life-force'.

Obviously, the six letters AEIOUY collectively appear in all 27 words (i.e., they span the 27 words). Are there any other sets of six letters that have this property? Assume A is not in the set; then the minimum set must contain at least the seven letters DLMNPSX. Therefore, A is in the set. Assume O is not in the set; then the minimum set must contain at least A plus CGJRWZ, a total of seven letters. Therefore, E is in the set. Similar arguments show that I, O, U and Y must also be in the set; there is no set of six letters other than AEIOUY that span the 27 words. One defines the members of this minimum spanning set as 'vowels'.

This argument can be readily applied to larger word collections such as dictionaries, as long as they do not include words such as cwm, hm or shh. On the other hand, any collection of 26 or fewer words is conjectured to allow alternative 'vowel' sets.