

S- UNFRIENDLINESS

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In surveying the dictionary for S anagrams I was reminded of the remarkable “friendliness” of S as an initial letter. Of all consonants it accepts the most second letters. It’s also by far the busiest initial overall in dictionary pages. I shall deal only with initial S- but assume that -S is also the friendliest terminal letter because of plurals, verbs, -ness, -less, -ous, et ceteras). Yet it’s ordinary enough as an internal letter that it’s only the 7th most common letter overall (etaoin Shrdlu).

Defining “friendly” second letters as those that produce an abundance of words, there are 16 for S: the 6 vowels plus 10 consonants: -CHKLMNPQTW. For comparison, the number of friendly second letter consonants following other consonants are: 5 after PT, 4 GK, 3 BCD, 2 FW, 1 R, 0 HJLMNQVXZY. Aside: Vowel Y- accepts 13 consonants, none friendly. The other five vowels can accept Scrabble words with every consonant in second spot, many unfriendly, except Iq Uq Uw Uz.

As “unfriendly” (S-BDFGJRSVXZ) I count M.E. and other archaic and obsolete spellings, several only in OED (thanks to Jeff Grant), but exclude abbreviations, capitalised words, and initial ‘S, S’ and S-hyphen words. It turns out that S can form words with any second letter except X. It can form Scrabble words (listed below) with all but 3 second letters: SXZ. Many unfriendlys are unaltered foreign words listed in English dictionaries. Most others (eg, minerals) are eponyms of proper names: Sz-, E. Europe; Sv-, Scandinavia and Caucasus; Sr-, India.

The friendliest letters have between 80 (Sq-) and over 600 (St-) basic Scrabble words, excluding inflections. S-T (ie St-) has more than any S-vowel words. S-CHP have more than any vowel except S-A (roughly 400), which they nearly match, surpassing S-EIOUY at 100-300 words. Aside: the most popular second consonant overall is H, with L and R close behind. Yet H is not a friendly second after any of the vowels except A at 25 (E 2, I 1, O 6, U 3, Y 0).

These (+ inflections) are all the Scrabble S words with unfriendly second letters.

sbirro Italian police officer

sdain/e, sdayn, sdein, sdeign/e obs. forms of disdain, <Ital.

sdrucciola antepenultimate accent placement in rhyme, Ital.

sferics spherics: 1. spherical geometry/trigonometry; 2. a storm detector; 3. “atmospherics”

sforzando, sforzato in music: strong accent, Ital.

sfumato interbleeding colour edges in painting, as used eg by DaVinci, Ital., Ital.

sgraffito a carved pottery style or technique, Ital.

sjambok (n., vb) (to) rhino-hide whip, S.Af.

sjoe! S.Af. exclamation of surprise

sraddha, sradha Hindu ceremony and faith, = Shraddha

sri = Shri, Hindi Sir or sir

svarabhakti inserting a vowel sound, esp. between R or L and a consonant, in Sanskrit, etc.

svaraj swaraj, self-government in British India, < Sanskrit

svastika swastika, Sanskrit for well-being (!)

svedberg ultracentrifugation time unit, a Swedish eponym but uncapitalised

svelte gracefully slim, French < Ital.