

## PUTATIVENESS - WHEN IS A WORD NOT A WORD?

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In an earlier article (Zipwords – aka Alternades), I noted the word PUTATIVENESS as a 3-ply zipword. That is, if the letters are written zigzag fashion, as below, every third letter can spell out a genuine shorter word. Thus:

P A V E  
U T E S  
T I N S

The three shorter words are PAVE, UTES and TINS.

As far as I can tell, PUTATIVENESS first appeared in Dmitri Borgmann's *Language on Vacation*. But I wouldn't be surprised if it had previously appeared in a trinade puzzle in *The Enigma*, the journal of the National Puzzlers League, a source which Borgmann plundered extensively for his book.

In my earlier article, I noted that PUTATIVENESS isn't listed in any dictionary. It's not in *Websters Second and Third Editions*, the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, the *Random House Dictionary*, *Funk & Wagnall's New Standard Dictionary*, the *American Heritage Dictionary*, nor even on the bang up-to-date Unabridged Merriam-Webster website ([www.unabridged.merriam-webster.com](http://www.unabridged.merriam-webster.com)).

I note that the Alpha Dictionary website ([www.alphadictionary.com](http://www.alphadictionary.com)) says "the noun *putativeness* is available, if needed".

How do dictionaries define PUTATIVE, and from those definitions can I figure out a reasonable definition for PUTATIVENESS? *Webster's Third* defines PUTATIVE like this: "commonly accepted or supposed: reputed: assumed to exist or to have existed: hypothesized: inferred". And the *OED* has this: "that is commonly believed to be such; reputed, supposed; imagined; postulated, hypothetical." Further, *Webster's Third* has this definition for the suffix -NESS: "state: condition: quality: degree". More extensively, the *OED* defines -NESS in this way: "forming abstract nouns from adjectives, participles, adjectival phrases, and (more rarely) nouns, pronouns, verbs, and adverbs."

Putting all this together, I think that PUTATIVENESS could reasonably be defined like this: "the state or condition of being reputed, supposed, commonly believed, imagined, postulated or hypothetical."

In passing, it's worth noting that the *OED* lists the noun PUTATION, with the definition "The action of considering or reckoning; supposition, estimation". *Webster's Second Edition* also lists PUTATION and has a similar definition, but *Webster's Third* doesn't see fit to include the word. Perhaps PUTATION and PUTATIVENESS should be considered synonyms...

So, is PUTATIVENESS a real word or not? No major dictionaries have it listed, but it can be found in a variety of quotes on the internet. Let's take a look at some of these, and see if they accord with my definition. Here are some of the occurrences found.

1. The first occurrence of PUTATIVENESS that I found was in a book entitled *Subjects, Citizens and Law: Colonial and Independent India*, edited by Gunnel Cederlöf and Sanjukta Das Gupta (published by Routledge India, 2017). Part way through the book is this sentence: "The **putativeness** of the formation also manifests once we move away from the normative and instrumental understanding of measurement and see it 'in action'." I wondered what was meant by "the formation" in the quote, and managed to figure out that it was the "putative formation of juridical agro-ecological subjecthood based on the idea of proprietorship (aided by measurement)". I was still none the wiser given this tortuous academic phraseology, so decided to give up trying to embellish it further!
2. PUTATIVENESS can also be found in a 1985 opinion filed by the Supreme Court of Kansas. The law.justia.com website has this: "The statute before the Court embodies elements of **putativeness** and discrimination which violate the rights of citizens to equal treatment under the law."
3. Dan Graur is the author of a book entitled *Molecular and Genome Evolution* (2016). Dan has a very low threshold for hooey, hype, hypocrisy, postmodernism, bad statistics, ignorance of population genetics and evolutionary biology, and hatred of any kind. He writes about these subjects on his tumblr blog, which is a diary of his peeves, dislikes, antipathies, annoyances, and random feelings of contempt. It can be found at [judgestarling.tumblr.com](http://judgestarling.tumblr.com). On part of his blog he has written: "For a valid publication of a species (sans *Candidatus*), bacteria must be isolated, cultured, described, and deposited in a bacteriology culture collection. Please note that there is no requirement that the genome of a bacterium needs to be sequenced in order for the name to be valid or *Candidatus*-less. If a bacterium cannot be maintained in a collection, it is slapped with the prefix *Candidatus* as a mark of temporariness and **putativeness**."
4. Drowning in Eternity is a website dedicated to the review of English syntax – check it out at [www.drowninginetyernity.estranky.cz](http://www.drowninginetyernity.estranky.cz). In a discussion about clauses on the website can be found this quote: "Result clauses: introduced by subordinators *so that* and *so*. From purpose clauses they differ by absence of modal auxiliary, that purpose clauses need for because of their **putativeness**." (Is the text slightly mangled there? Is there an unnecessary word *for* in that quotation?)
5. In 2004, one Roxanne Mitchell submitted a paper for her doctor of education degree at Oklahoma State University. Her paper was entitled *The Effects of Trust on Student Identification and Academic Performance*. The paper can be found at [digital.library.okstate.edu](http://digital.library.okstate.edu). The paper uses PUTATIVENESS twice. Its first appearance is in this lengthy sentence: "Empirical research in the area of student identification with school has focused on antecedent conditions necessary for the development of

identification such as prior academic achievement, student's prior experience of participation in school and school related activities, the structural environment of the school (school size and racial/ethnic composition of the school), and the regulatory environment of the school (degree of rigidity of school rules and disciplinary **putativeness**)". And the word crops up a second time in this quote: "The findings from these studies have shown that most of these factors do matter and do have a significant effect not only on student identification with school but also on academic performance. Interestingly enough Finn and Voelkl (1993) found that disciplinary **putativeness** did not have an effect upon student identification."

6. In its fall 2006 review, the Long Island Education Review (at [www.scopeonline.us](http://www.scopeonline.us)) carried a similar item about student identification. It ran: "Empirical research in the area of student identification with school has focused on antecedent conditions necessary for the development of identification such as prior academic achievement, student prior experience of participation in school and school related activities, the structural environment of the school (school size and racial/ethnic composition of the school), and the regulatory environment of the school (degree of rigidity of school rules and disciplinary **putativeness**)." You'll not be surprised to find that the author of this item was the same Roxanne Mitchell mentioned in item 5 above!
7. In 2007, the Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal Association published an article entitled *When the Price is too high: Rethinking China's Deterrence Strategy for Robbery*, by Peter Nestor. Check it out at [digital.lib.washington.edu](http://digital.lib.washington.edu). The article carried this sentence: "Another scholar noted that the investment in 'sheer **putativeness**' in strike-hard campaigns is a 'futile strategy' to deter crime; rather, the Party uses it to appear tough on crime and shore-up its legitimacy."
8. Market Place Troy Media ([www.marketplace.troymedia.com](http://www.marketplace.troymedia.com)) is a website dealing with business and recruitment issues. In 2016, it ran a piece by one Allan Bonner which said: "But many quotes are unattributed, interviewees' alleged quotes go unchallenged, and so do apparently made up quotes from hypothetical oil and pharmaceutical company spokespeople – ersatz **putativeness**."
9. Laird is a smart technology company based in Missouri, US, and London, England. On its website ([www.lairdtech.com](http://www.lairdtech.com)) it has extensive terms and conditions of sale, presumably for prospective customers. One of the paragraphs runs thus: "17.4 If any provision of these Conditions or a Contract/Order formed pursuant to it is found by any court, tribunal or administrative body of competent jurisdiction to be wholly or partly illegal, or invalid, void, voidable, putative (futile), ineffective or unenforceable it shall, to the extent of such illegality, invalidity, voidness, voidability, **putativeness** (futility), ineffectiveness or unenforceability, be deemed severable and the remaining provisions of the Contract and the remainder of such provision shall continue in full force and effect."
10. And finally, there is a Facebook public group named Algarve Portugal Rare Birds. In April 2017, Martin Hodges commented on the possible sighting of the bird *Limicola*

*falcinellus* with this short message: “I agree with the **putative-ness!!!** Better to be safe than sorry.”

So there we have it – real world examples of the word PUTATIVENESS, all unrelated to its logological property of its three zigzag words PAVE, UTES and TINS. From these quotes, I think that my definition of PUTATIVENESS as “the state or condition of being reputed, supposed, commonly believed, imagined, postulated or hypothetical” is reasonable.

Further, do these internet quotes for PUTATIVENESS make it a real word? If so, does that highlight the deficiency of dictionaries in not listing and defining such a word? What makes a word a real word? Over to the reader ...