FOUR OUT OF FIVE

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In Beyond Language (p. 279) Dmitri Borgmann says, "... (The) word AZOXY is a milestone of sorts in the field of wordplay: if we write the alphabet along the circumference of a circle... then four of the five letters in AZOXY -- the letters X, Y, Z, A -- appear consecutively in our circular alphabet. Very few, indeed, are the five-letter words that can make such a claim!" Mr. Borgmann was referring to The American Illustrated Medical Dictionary where AZOXY is given as the first part of the two-word entry AZOXY COMPOUND. We can accept AZOXY as a word on its own merits, however, since Webster's Third New International (NI3) gives it sanction.

In such a circular alphabet there are twenty-six four-letter groups ranging from ABCD to ZABC, and it is only natural to wonder how many of these groups can be represented with a five-letter word. If no five-letter word is possible for a particular four-letter group, we might try to determine the shortest English word that does contain all four letters of that group. It should be noted that for one four-letter group a four-letter word exists; the letters RSTU are found in RUST or RUTS. By extending RUST to a five-letter word and including AZOXY, I can find a total of eleven four-letter groups that can be represented by five-letter words:

ABCD - CABDA  IJKL - KALIJ
BCDE - CUBED  LMNO - LEMON, MELON
CDEF - FACED  RSTU - TRUST, CRUST, etc.
DEFG - FUDGE  STUV - VOUNT
EFGH - FEIGH  XYZA - AZOXY
FGHI - FIGHT

CABDA is in Webster's Second New International (NI2) as an ancient Arabian measure and is notable in that all five letters are taken from the one four-letter group. The same is true of TRUST. FEIGH is in NI2 as a Scottish exclamation of disgust or a variation of FAY and is notable for consisting of five consecutive letters of the alphabet, the only such five-letter word I have found. In FIGHT and TRUST the four letters in question occur in a cluster. KALIJ

is a creation of the British word

Several five-letter words are

GHIJ
HJKL
KLMN
MNOP

A JIKAIS is given as the name given to the four-letter variant of BLUDE in that the five-letter SQUIRT word has a five-letter word.

Four-letter words are

NOPQ
PQRS

PQRU in NI2 as an artifact of the word SQUIRT. No five-letter word appears in the dictionary.

One can write

JIKL

JIRKM as a variation of SQUIRT alphabet.

I am not the first person to have been able to find these words. My best effort is EXHAUST. For VXW in alphabet.
is a crested Indian pheasant, and VOUST is found in NII as a Scottish word for boast or vaunt.

Seven more of the four-letter groups can be disposed of with six-letter words:

- GHIJ - JAGHIR
- HIJK - HIJACK
- KLMN - KIMNEL
- MNOP - EPONYM
- OPQR - QUERPO, QUIRPO
- QRST - SQUIRT, QUIRTS
- YZAB - BYZANT

A JAGHIR is a grant of public revenues in India or Pakistan; a KIMNEL is a large wooden tub for processing meat; EPONYM means name giver; QUERPO and QUIRPO are NII words and are obsolete variants of CUERPO which means the body; and BYZANT is a variant of BEZANT, the Byzantine gold solidus. HIJACK is unusual in that the four letters in question appear in alphabetical order. SQUIRT and QUIRTS are six-letter words containing five consecutive letters of the alphabet.

Four more groups are taken care of with seven-letter words:

- NOPQ - PONTACQ
- PQRS - PIQUERS
- TUVW - OUTWAVE
- ZABC - ZEBRAIC

PONTACQ is a proper name (the only one so far) and is given in NII as the name of a French wine; PIQUERS means sugar punch according to NII; and NII lists OUTWAVE below the line with no definition. ZEBRAIC, meaning zebralike, is given in both NII and NIII. In PIQUERS not only are the four letters in alphabetical order, they are distributed evenly throughout the word.

One eight-letter word fills out my list:

- JKLM - JIRMILIK

JIRMILIK is listed in NII as a variant of YIRMILIK, a Turkish coin. With the I, the word contains five consecutive letters of the alphabet.

I am left with three four-letter word groups for which I have been able to find no dictionary word: UVWX, VXWY, and WXYZ. My best effort for UVWX is WOE-EXHAUSTIVE. NII gives WOE-EXHAUSTED but unfortunately does not list WOE-EXHAUSTIVE. For VXWY the word OVERWAXY (with the four letters appearing in alphabetical order) would appear to be a logical coinage, but the dictionaries have omitted it. The group of WXYZ appears to be the
most difficult of all, and I have not even been able to come up with a good coined word for that combination. A braver man than I might offer EX-WAYZGOOSER, defined as a former printer (see WAYZGOOSE), but I forbear. No doubt Word Ways readers can help me out with some legitimate words for these three combinations.

I would be most interested in hearing from any reader who can supply shorter words for any of the four-letter groups, or who can supply words of any length for the three combinations that have eluded me. Perhaps someone will even be inspired to start collecting six-letter words that contain five consecutive letters of the alphabet. I leave that task to those more capable than I.

QUERY

Stefan Burr, Parsippany, New Jersey, conjectures that paragraphs of moderate length are uniquely characterized by the lengths of the successive words in them. For example, the preceding sentence is summarized by the pattern 6 4 10 3 6 11 4 10 2 8 6 3 8 1 3 2 3 7 2 3 10 5 2 4; it is unlikely that there exists another sentence in English literature having this exact pattern. Is it possible, he wonders, to select a short paragraph, and construct a second short paragraph (on a completely different topic) having the same word-lengths -- but which sounds so natural that the reader finds it impossible to decide which twin has the Toni? (For the moment, let's not insist that the punctuation must also match.) If readers wish to try their skill at writing a paragraph to match another paragraph, the editor will try out the pair on various guinea pigs and report the fraction of time the counterfeit was detected.

I know of no logological term for such creations. People for many years have engaged in the closely-related activity of constructing sentences to remember long strings of digits; for example, the August 1968 Word Ways reprinted a 31-word poem for remembering π to 30 decimal places. Sentences of the form 1 2 3 4 5 ... are known as rhopalic or snowball sentences; Dmitri Borgmann gives examples in Language on Vacation (Scribner's, 1965).