WORD SQUARES USING MANY LETTERS

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What is the largest number of different letters that can be used in a word square? For word squares of size three, many are known which employ nine different letters; the editor suggests that the one at the right uses the commonest words (the rarest one, DOT, appears 13 times in Kucera and Francis's million-word sample of American prose).

George Ropes is the constructor of the finest square of size four. First published in the MIT Technology Review of July/August 1974, it was reprinted in the November 1974 Word Ways. All words can be found in Webster's Second, and all but YPIL (a variant spelling of ipil, a Philippine tree) are in Webster's Third as well. 'Can a Webster's Third square with sixteen different letters be found?'

Although it is theoretically possible to construct a square of size five with 25 different letters, it is most unlikely such a square will ever be found. The best solution to date is my square in the May 1979 Word Ways using 22 different letters of the alphabet (omitting G J Q X); all words can be found in the OED or its Supplement.

The purpose of this article is to present a square of size six that uses 23 different letters (omitting Q X Z); the words, defined below, are drawn from three different dictionaries.

FJORCK jocular name for a very small person (EDD Supp.)
LUVIAN variant of Luian, an ancient language of the Hittite empire (Ni2)
ADEPTI adepts, persons proficient in something -- see adept in OED, 1704 quotation: 'Unintelligible to all but Adepti'
GERMAL a rare synonym of germinal (Ni2)
HOBALL a clown, fool, idiot (OED)
TWYNES early spelling of twins and twines (OED)
FLAGHT variant of slaught, a sudden flight (EDD)
JUDEOW variant of Judew, an old word for Jew (OED)
OVERBY across the way (Ni2)
RIPMAN early variant of reapman, a reaper (OED)

A DICTIUM

Abraham A. Roback, unpublished author of the paper below, has been a dictionary compiler at Waukesha for 40 years.

The boards of the American English Dictionary have been a lengthening list of the millions of English words. For me, the word is a word, its meaning and its spelling, or a phrase. The devil is in the details: the status of the word, the status of the spelling, and the meaning.

A J R.

Helen Roback
In A DICTIUM

Even though Helen Roback had completed the dictionary, the book was never published. It was completed in 1979 and is now available online at the American English Dictionary (AED). The dictionary includes over 100,000 words, each with its own definition, spelling, and pronunciation.

CATALE KNILLS

It is exceeded by a vast number of different letters that can be used in a square.
CATALE 15th century spelling of cattle (OED)

KNILLS early form of knells (M12)

It is exceedingly unlikely that one can devise a square containing all 26 letters of the alphabet. Since double squares larger than size six are very difficult to construct, even without alphabetic constraints, the best hope of a closer approach to this goal almost certainly lies with the six-square.

A DICTIONARY OF VINTAGE SLURS

Abraham Roback’s A Dictionary of International Slurs, privately published by the author in 1944 in an edition of only 700 copies, has been photographically reproduced by Maledicta Press in paperback for $15 (available from 331 South Greenfield Avenue, Waukesha, WI 53186).

The book consists of three parts: a short dictionary of slurs (54 pages of slurs in English, 70 pages in 20 other languages); a dictionary of derogatory proverbs, arranged by nationality insulted; a lengthy essay on the psychology and sociology of ethnic insult. For me, the first two sections were the most interesting, containing a wealth of insults and proverbs from past centuries. In English, one finds most of the familiar one-word slurs like kike, hop, chink, darkie and paddy, together with a host of two-word phrases of the form nationality + noun: Dutch courage (foolhardiness induced by liquor), Irish promotion (a decrease in pay or status), Jewish engineering (business administration), Nigger heaven (a theater balcony), Scotch coffee (hot water flavored with burnt biscuit), Yankee heaven (Paris). Although there are a vast number of proverbs about the Germans (18 pages) and the Jews (20 pages), there are only three relating to Americans:

A Jew will dispose of three Christians, and a Yankee will outwit three Jews
Help me to betray the Indians, and I’ll give you half
In America the hour has forty minutes

Even the Saxons, Lithuanians and Osmanlis have more!

Roback’s book has been criticized on various grounds — inappro-