Despite the promise of the title, this article is not concerned with the intelligibility of dictionary words without vowels (that is, with the letters AEIOUY removed), but instead with that tiny group of words which contain no vowels at all. For the sake of completeness, we include a considerably larger group of words which appear vowelless, but in reality are not -- words which use the letters V or W to represent vowel sounds. On the other hand, we do not include two burgeoning classes of vowelless words quite familiar to the average reader -- abbreviations such as MR., MRS. or DR. which are pronounced as if the full word were present, and acronymic words such as TV, DDT, MPH or TNT, usually printed in capitals and invariably pronounced by spelling out the individual letters. A crossword puzzle using all these types of vowelless words (of three letters only) was presented by Darryl Francis in the August 1975 Word Ways.

Our examples are drawn from two sources, the Oxford English Dictionary and the Merriam-Webster Unabridged (Second and Third Editions). We do not claim completeness, but feel that we have located most of the examples in boldface type, together with occasional textual examples. Additions are welcome, as well as extensions to other dictionaries.

Perhaps the commonest class of vowelless words are interjections which onomatopoetically represent various sounds -- usually human-produced, but occasionally by animals or inanimate objects.

**BBRRR** a sound of shivering
**GRRR** sound of a dog
**HM H'M** expression of assent
**HSH** hush
**PST** to attract attention, or enjoin silence
**SH** hush
**ST** silence, quiet
**TCH** vexation and disgust
**TCK** surprise and displeasure
**TPRW** imitation of the sound of a horn
**TST** hissed sound enjoining silence

Of these, BBRRR and TPRW are found only in the OED (the latter in a quotation from 1430). The difficulty with onomatopoetic words is in accurately representing "Hark the birds can be heard!" Even the OED has "shshshsh, shshshsh!" counter a fair amount of skepticism.

A second class, usually (but probably incorrectly) represented by the words 'CH', 'LL', 'SH', 'TH', 'V', 'W', consists of contractions which onomatopoetically represent various sounds. Even the OED has "shshshsh, shshshsh, shshshsh!" counter a fair amount of skepticism.

In addition, the contraction "Hark the birds can be heard!" probably includes the following:

**CH** pronunciation
**'LD** collocations
**'LL** collocation
**'NT NT** collocation
**'RT contractible
**'SH' elision
**'ST contractible
**'TH' elision

Nearly all the examples in this category can be represented by W to represent the full word. V is used to represent the pronunciation.

These are found in the OED:

**BKW 5v** to be heard: an example is "BRWK Vv" [1410, used by Chaucer and others].
**CRWD, CRWO, CRWHT**
**DRW 5v** draught [1300, used by Chaucer and others].
**DRW 6v** draft [1300, used by Chaucer and others].
**FL'W 5v** flute [1300, used by Chaucer and others].
**GRW 5v** gruff [1300, used by Chaucer and others].
**HV 3v** howl [1300, used by Chaucer and others].
**HWR 6v** hoor [1300, used by Chaucer and others].
**MV 5v** meow [1300, used by Chaucer and others].
**MVK 6v** meow [1300, used by Chaucer and others].
**MWTHT**
**NV 5v** neigh [1300, used by Chaucer and others].
**PLWCH 6v** plech [1300, used by Chaucer and others].
accurately representing the underlying sound; as Maxey Brooke showed in "Hark the Bark!" in the February 1975 Word Ways, the same sound can be represented in substantially different ways by different nationalities. Even within a nationality, variation is encountered; for example, the OED has under SH illustrative quotations spelling it s-s-sh, 'sh, shshshsh, sh-sh-sh and s-s-s-s-s-s-sh. Readers of comic strips encounter a far wider variety of idiosyncratic spellings of sounds.

A second class of vowelless words is represented by contractions, usually (but not always) written with an apostrophe. The following list, probably incomplete, is taken from the OED and Webster's Second.

- CH pronoun, an aphonetic form of ich
- 'LD colloquial contraction for would or should
- 'LL colloquial contraction of will
- N'T NT colloquial contraction of not
- 'RT contraction of art
- SH' elision of she, as in sh'as (she has)
- 'ST contraction of hast
- TH TH' contraction of the

In addition, Webster's Third explicitly lists all the letter plurals, both with and without apostrophes (BS, B'S).

Are there any no-vowel words that are neither onomatopoeic nor contractions? We know of only one: NTH, found in both Webster's and the OED.

Nearly all of the apparently vowelless words -- those that use V or W to represent vowel sounds -- date back several centuries; the only modern examples we know of are:

- CWM /koom/, a Welsh word meaning 'circus'
- CRWTH /krooth/, a variant of 'crowd', a Celtic stringed instrument

These are found in both Webster's and the OED. The other examples are purely OED, and are given below with their century of citation (minus 10). V is an abbreviation for 'variant of'.

- BRWK 6v brook; BWRCH 5v burgh
- CRWD, CRWTH v crowd (Welsh fiddle); CWM cirque
- DRW 5v drew; DRWN 5-6Scv drown; DW 6Scv do; DKW 5v duke;
- DRW 6Scv door
- FLW 5v flue (fishing-net); FRWT 6Scv fruit
- GRW 5v grow
- HV 3v how; HVNT MEv hunt; HW 3-4v how; HWNT 4Scv hunt;
- HWR 6v whore; HWS 6Scv house; HWSZ 6Scv house
- MV v mew (in 1440 quote); MWF 5v move; MWK 6Scv muck;
- MWNK 6Scv monk; MWR 4-5Scv moor; MWT 3-6Scv moat;
- MWTHT 6Scv mouth
- NV 2-3v now; NW 4v now; NWN 5Scv nun
- PLWCH 6Scv plough; PRW 3-4v prow (profit); PWF 6Scv puff;
PWL Scv pool; PWN Scv pun; PWNT Scv point; PWT 6Scv put
RNV 6Scv run; RWCH 6Scv rough; RWD 5Scv rood
SCHW 6v she; SCHWLL 5Scv shovel; SCHWT 5Scv shoot; SCWCH 6v such; SKWFF 6Scv scoff; <NKW 4-5v snook (promontory);
SPRWS 4v spruce; SPVRN 6v spurn; SPWRN 5Scv spurn; STW 5v stew; SWK 4-5Scv suck; SWLC 3v such; SWLCH 3v such;
SWLD v should; SWM 5cv some; SWN 4v sun; SWRD 6Scv sword; <WT 6v suit; SWT 6v soothe
THR4 4Scv through; THRWC 6v through; THWS 4Scv thus; TRW 6v true; TRWMP 4Scv trump (sound a trumpet); TVV v two
(950 quote); TWCH 6v tough; TWM 8cv toom (vacant); TWN 5-7Scv tun; TNG4 4-6Scv tongue; TWRN 4-6Scv turn; TWRSS 5v truss; TWT 6Scv tooth
VCH MEv each; VD v uds (an oath, in 1611 quote); VDS v uds (an oath, in 1607 quote); VG, VGG 5-6v ug (inspire with disgust);
VH v uh (a coughing sound, in 1605 quote); VLM v elm (in 1382 quote); VM v um (them, in 1606 quote); VMB v umbe (around,
in c1400 quote); VMH v umph (in umph, in 1614 quote); VMFF v umph (in c1568 quote); VN v on (in c1400 quote); VNCT v unct
(anoint, in 1596 quote); VND v und (wave, in 1592 quote); VP '4.7v up; VPP 4-6v up; VR v our (in c1300 quote); VRN 5v urs;
VSt 3.7v us; VSS 7v us; VSSH 5v ush (come out); VSSS 6v use; VT v out (in c1250 quote)
WGC 6v ug (inspire with disgust); WLF 3-4v wolf; WLT 5-6v vult (face); WNT 4-5Scv wont; WP 5-6Scv up; WR 4v our; WRD 3v
word; WRM 3.5v worm; WRN 6Scv urs; WRS 3v worse; WST 3-4v worst; WRT 3v worth; WS 7Scv us; WSCH 5-6v ush (come
out); WSS 5-6Scv use; WSZ 6Scv us
XWLD 5v should

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