ON SEARCHING FOR VOWELLESS WORDS

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In the November 1977 issue of Word Ways, Philip Cohen suggested that a collection of all-consonant words would be useful in various logo­logical investigations. In the August 1980 issue, Jeff Grant and Ross Eckler answered with a list of all-consonant words from the Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary (Second and Third editions) and the Oxford English Dictionary. This article presents the results of a further search I conducted for such words. In this search, I allowed

1) additional dictionary entries -- in particular, certain words that Grant and Eckler disallowed as acronymic in character
2) place-names and personal names, often found only in non-diction­ary sources such as gazetteers, encyclopedias or telephone di­rectories
3) word coinages found in books, magazines or comic books

Of course, a complete search through such a wide variety of sources is impossible; this article merely gives illustrative examples.

As in the earlier article, the word 'vowelless' is used here simply to indicate the absence of the letters AEIOUY; many OED words use W or V as a vowel sound. Further, I have not included one-letter words, nor any plurals of vowelless words, unless the plural form only is used (such as PJs).

To begin with, other dictionaries can be searched. The official Scrabble Players Dictionary (G & C Merriam, 1978) yielded a surpris­ingly rich harvest: CRWTH, CWM, NTH, PSST, SH, SHH, PHT, PHPHT, TSK and TSKTSK. Of these, SHH and PSST are variant spellings of onomatopoeic words in Grant and Eckler, but the last four are new.

In Webster's Third Edition (and its supplement, 6000 Words), there are a number of words which, although acronymic in character, are identified as parts of speech -- usually nouns, rarely verbs or ad­verbs. Additional words are relegated to a somewhat lower class, being identified as 'abbr. or (part of speech)'. Although I have ruled out pure abbreviations in this survey, these words of mixed parentage have some claim to consideration as legitimate all-consonant words. (Note, however, that many of these may be identified solely as abbreviations in other dictionaries.) Words labeled as parts of speech are given in the first group, and 'abbr. or (part of speech)' in the second.
Some very common words (CP, DJ) do not appear above because they are listed as pure abbreviations by Webster. Certain other military ranks (Pvt, Cpl, Sgt, Cpt) are also pure abbreviations. MABE, the only college degree in 6000 Words, is also a pure abbreviation, unlike its relatives in Webster's Third. And why is PT a noun, but MTB an abbreviation or noun? Consistency is impossible to achieve!

Unfortunately, the other two American unabridged dictionaries - Random House and Funk & Wagnalls - do not allow this tactic: the former attaches no labels to its acronyms and abbreviations, and the latter labels them all 'abbr'. However, J. S. Farmer and W. E. Henley's Slang and its Analogues (Arno Press reprint, 1970) labels several apparent abbreviations as 'substantive' or 'substantive phrase': B.C. (one who brings a libel suit), B. K. S. (barracks), L. S. D. (money), N. F. (a knowing tradesman), N. H. (a bug), P. D. (a mixture used in adulterating pepper), and W. F.'s (wild cattle).

The Scrabble Players Dictionary lists sinh (hyperbolic sine) and sec (secant) as nouns, suggesting by analogy that CSC (cosecant), CTN (cotangent), CSCH (hyperbolic cosecant) and CTNH (hyperbolic cotangent) would be similarly treated if included. Three of these are actually entered in the American Heritage Dictionary, without identifying labels.

The letters JHVH or JHWH require special consideration. Neither the American Heritage Dictionary nor Webster's Third gives these a part of speech. However, either of them may be referred to by the term 'tetragrammaton' which means 'four-letter word'.

Titles: Mr., Mrs., Ms.
Computer terms: RPG, BCD
Chemical compounds (insecticides, poison gases, explosives, etc.): BZ, DDD, DDT, DFP, DMT, DPN, FMN, GB, GR-S, PCB, PCP, PDB, RDX, STP, THC
Miscellaneous: BB (shot), BVDs, DTs, BX (base exchange), FF (first family), GC (grand touring car), MC (master of ceremonies), PCV (type of valve), PBX (private branch exchange), PDO, PJs, PT (boat), QT, RV (recreational vehicle), Rx (prescription), SST, TB, TD (a clay pipe), and WF (withdrawn, failing grade)
Military ranks and titles: Pfc, JG (lieutenant junior grade), JP (justice of the peace)
Chemical compounds (insecticides, explosives, etc.): DFP, DPN, TCP, TMB, TMT, TMD, TPN, TCC
College degrees: BCL, BD, BS, BSc, DCL, DD, DDS, DSc, DMD, DPH, DS, JCB, JCD, JCL, JD, JSD, LLB, LLD, LLM, MD, ML, MS, MSc, PhD, SB, ScB, ScD, ScM, SD, SJD, SM, STD, STL, ThD
Miscellaneous: BM (bowel movement), DX (distance), KP (kitchen police), LP (record), MP (military police), MTB (motor torpedo boat), SP (shore patrol), TBS (talk between ships), TD (touchdown), TV, RC (Roman Catholic), PX (post exchange), PD (post exchange), CTN (cotangent), CSCH (hyperbolic cosecant), CTNH (hyperbolic cotangent)
Place-names offer a potentially rich source of vowelless words. KRK, an island and town in Yugoslavia, and LLWCHWR, a place in Wales, appear in the Gazetteer of Webster's Second. (According to Dmitri Borgmann in Language on Vacation, KRK means 'throat' in Slovak.) The Encyclopedia Britannica (1969) adds RHWNG, the first part of Rhwng Gwy a Hafren, another Welsh locality, and TRST, a variant spelling of Trieste. In addition to KRK, the Times Atlas of the World index yields BWLCH, a Welsh village, KRN, a mountain in northwestern Yugoslavia, and VRCH ZD'ARSKA, a mountain in Czechoslovakia. The word KHR is prefixed to several mountain range names on the Chinese-Soviet border near Alma Ata, but curiously only KHR SAUR is indexed. Webster's Geographical Dictionary has CWNSGWT in Wales, and Language on Vacation reports another Welsh place-name, CWMTWRCH.

More specialized geographical lists would undoubtedly reveal additional names; for example, I examined the English translation of the Mabinogion (a collection of medieval Welsh folk tales) and found the proper names BWLCH, DWRG, DWRST, CWRGWST, LLWCH, LLWNG, TWRCH and WLCH.

There are more than one million different surnames in U. S. Social Security Administration files, an immense logographical resource which is not available to the public. Most of these can, no doubt, be found in city or telephone directories, but a search of these is not practicable except with a computer. According to the editor, the 1979-80 Manhattan directory (a potentially rich source of exotic foreign surnames) yielded nearly 500 people with the surname of NG; this is unquestionably the most common vowelless surname in this country. All others occurred once apiece; in the absence of corroborative data, they must be regarded as potential typos. Listing the surname first as is normally done, one has KRCS Paul, WG Kwok Chang, NGH Chouk, NJ Tak Sin, and NP Wilson Julia. Perhaps Word Ways readers would like to search their home directories for other examples?

The Encyclopedia Britannica indexes WRWD, the Parthian spelling of the Iranian personal name Orodé (three Parthian kings of the first century B.C.), SNTRWK, the Parthian spelling of Sanatruces (a Parthian king of the same era), and MKRB, a synonym for 'king' in early Saba (in southwestern Arabia).

Pseudonyms are a related source of vowelless words: HH for Soren Kierkegaard and HB for John Doyle (from the Encyclopedia Britannica) and ZZ for Louis Zangwill (Encyclopedia Judaica).

Words with dashes replacing certain letters, such as H-L, D-N, SH-- and the like, are occasionally encountered in literature when the author wishes to Bowdlerize a vulgar or obscene word. These convey the same information as contractions, a class of vowelless words discussed by Grant and Eckler.

I turn finally to word coinages as a source of vowelless words. By
far the largest source of examples can be found in comic strips. John McClellan’s "Comic Book Coinages" in the August 1980 Word Ways contains thirteen examples: BRRRR, BZZZ, CRRRZZZ, GRR, GGG, HRMPF, M-M-M, MRMF, RRRRR, SKNK, SKNNXX, TCH and Z-Z-Z. Other onomatopoeic coinages, noted in recent Peanuts and Mad issues, include BRRRNG (telephone ring), BR4F78 (a Bronx cheer), BR8 (whirr of movie camera), BZZZ and ZZZ (fly buzzing), BZ4 (a buzzer), BZ5 (an alarm clock), F5S8H (a flare gun), F2S10 (champagne during boat christening), HM27 (an electric watch), HMG, RSCHL or GRFL (Snoopy mumbling to himself), MMM (gustatory approval), M4MPF (talking with one’s mouth full), MMP (a groan), NNNGHRLH (a grunt), PHFFT (sound of a silenced gun), PSHT (be careful!), R4 (sound of an automobile), VR4WM (a souped-up engine), WRRZZ (a jig saw), WWRRR (an electric heat-air comb), Z4T (electrical short circuit), and Z5T (electric chair in operation).

Comic strip artists and other authors are partial to all-consonant names for exotic people or places: Mr. BTFSPLK (from Li’l Abner), Mr. MXZPTLK (Superman Comics), ZFRX and HZRSKN (personal names in Mad magazine), PBLRBLSFT (an ovation for the King of Id, in Mad), KLTPZXM (password to the fifth dimension, in Superman), and KRSH (an alien race, in P. J. Farmer’s Jesus on Mars). No doubt many similar names can be found in Science Fiction.

Newspaper and book titles offer a few vowelless sequences: PM (a defunct New York newspaper), SPQR (by Paul Hyde Bonner, 1953), The CTZ Paradigm (by Yves Francois), and GP (by William A. Block).

Some authors deliberately modify the spelling of words in sentences according to various rules; one example is Robert Bloch’s "The World Timer", in which vowels (except for Y) are left out of two sentences for plot purposes. A similar device was used by Edgar Allan Poe a century before, in "X-ing a Paragrab", hinging upon an editor’s fondness for the vowel O, substituting X for certain other vowels. A third source is identified by Philip Cohen in the August 1975 Word Ways: Hal Draper’s "MS Fnd in a Lbry". Isolated vowelless coinages can be found in many places in literature -- for example, James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake contains MBV (p. 568) and the thunderclap PTHWNSXRLZP (p. 284).

Other sources of vowelless words exist. In probable decreasing order of acceptability, I suggest several:

1. Company names in Standard and Poor’s or Thomas’s
2. Radio station call letters
3. Any consonant followed by -TH (in mathematics, jth, pth, etc.)
4. Musical nomenclature (pp, ppp, ff, fff)
5. Bra or shoe sizes (BB, DDD, etc.)
6. Roman numerals
7. Chess-move nomenclature (KBPxQN)
8. Mathematical formulas such as mnxnp for the volume of a box
9. Typographical errors

Elsewhere in his study to a month prior...