STATING MY CASE

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'Meunor Zanoni' has done some fine work on interesting state names in "The Assault on Logology" in the November 1980 Word Ways; my favorites among his examples are ID IN IA NY OR SD WA WI. It is, however, regrettable that he felt the need to preface his listing with a page and a half of useless invective; this article contains my reply to a few of his points.

This variety of 'interestingness' is, of course, only one form of interest, not intended to be universal any more than, say, palindromicity. The following discussion may be somewhat clearer if I offer some of my own criteria for a good 'interesting' quality in this restricted sense. You may like to compare them to your own feelings.

1. All else being equal, a uniqueness property like 'only numerical tautonym' is more striking than an extremal one like 'fewest different letters'. I also prefer the extremality to be inherent in the quality, e.g. 'Xiest state' rather than 'longest state with property X'.

2. All else being equal, a property is less interesting if it is based on a subset of the original set, such as two-word states. This is in line with my observation in "On the Inter(e) state" that it is easier to find unique or extremal properties for a set with few members. Thus 'NY is the shortest two-word state' is less impressive than a simple shortest-of-all-states property would be. Arizona and New Jersey are the only one-word and two-word states, respectively, with letters shared by no other states, but I would be happier to have only one such among all the states.

3. A property is of less interest if it is one of a large group of analogous properties. For example, DE is the only state beginning with the letter D. But the 50 states are few enough that six other states (FL GA HI LA RI UT) have similar properties, making the DE example much less striking. A less obvious example is provided by Jeremy Morse's properties for NJ NM NC SD in the November 1980 Colloquy; they all fall into the form 'two-word state with extremal value of (relation) between (mathematical function) of the two words'. Such a property can specify either the largest or the smallest value of the relation; the relation can be either the difference between the functions of the two words or the ratio of the functions. The function can be letter sum (weight), letter product, density, center of gravity, normalized center of gravity, spread, average spread, or zigzaggingness; others (such as number of ined. Then ratio of zig...
The number of Morse bits or geometric mean of the letters) can be imagined. There can thus be at least 32 such properties, such as 'largest ratio of zigzaggynesses of the two words', which rather detracts from the singularity of any given one. The one that both authors used for NC (smallest weight difference) is one of the most natural, but by no means the only good one. It should also be noted that these properties sin against criterion 2 as well; the 32 properties are to be divided among a mere ten two-word states, so it is hardly interesting to learn that a given state exhibits at least one of them. (Some might argue that eight mathematical properties, each with maximum and minimum, are too many for 50 states.)

This example points up one of the questions that a subjective concept like interestingness can raise. If a property of a state is interesting at first glance, does it remain interesting after all closely-related properties are elucidated? (If I say I find something interesting, I don't expect to be overruled: chacun a son gout.) Would the phonological examples for NJ and SD be devalued if a host of additional ones (most different fricatives, longest state with no labials, etc.) were introduced? Other things being equal, I prefer properties that stand up to such analysis.

4. I care less for properties that refer to another set of words than the one under discussion, such as CA (chemical elements) or Morse's DE OR (words in MWPD).

The two articles differ in one fundamental respect. In "On the Inter(e)state", all properties referred to the state names only as logical entities, as a group of words. There was no reference to their meanings; the article would have been equally valid if the 50 names had been varieties of lizard or surnames of the kings of Oregon. The properties in "The Assault on Logology" come closer to ordinary notions of interestingness (rather than purely logological ones), and so are well worth stating -- but it does make the job easier. Of the 50 properties, thirteen depend upon statehood (CO LA MD MI MN MS NE NV OK PA UT VT WV), and a further five refer to other word groupings (CA FL GA MO NM).

In fact, a first draft of "On the Inter(e)state" contained a number of properties that were later eliminated in the interest of logological purity:

- as only Louisiana contains USA, so only Maryland contains a month, only Tennessee a number, and only Massachusetts the letters in STATE
- Ohio is the only state with repeated letters that has an isomorphic county (Erie)
- only South Dakota has no letters in common with its capital (Pierre)
- Oklahoma has the most letters in common with its capital (Oklahoma City)
- Texas has the commonest transposal (taxes)
- As only Maine cannot be imbedded in a state-name chain, so only
Wyoming has a postal code (WY) that cannot be imbedded in a state postal code chain.
- taking every fourth letter of Virginia produces four US postal codes (VI IN R I GA), the only state that can be so broken up.

A 68 per cent solution with good answers is better than a 100 per cent solution with bad ones because it provides greater stimulus for others to produce a 100 per cent good solution. Some criticisms of specific solutions are valid (double use of the VerMONTana overlap is a flaw); on the other hand, no one ever claimed Maine has only one homonym. If properties like 'rarest most common letter' are obscure, even with the illustrations given, the discredit is not the deviser's. The war between words and numbers exists only in Borgmann's brain. Finally, in a field as amorphous and dependent on individual taste as 'interestingness' it is arrogant to claim one has a 'single best solution' -- I much prefer to give all that I find good in hopes that everyone will find at least one property of interest in each case.

The properties for AK and CO seem contrived, and those for AK and IN are extremal properties disguised as uniqueness ones by phrases like 'of six letters and over'. The one for AK, like many constructed properties, is probably not true, although I have no counterexample (can anyone do something with Nevada/dealer or Nevada/casino?). To show that the word square Alaska/Eskimo is not unique, I offer Iowa/corn in the double square at the right, and Idaho/tater in the one below it. The four-letter overlap of VerMONTpeller is overshadowed by those of OKLAHOMA City and INDIANAPolis, and these overlaps are words, not just combining forms.

Although much progress has been made, the problem of finding a unique logological property of interest for each state name is not yet fully solved. I hope others will continue to give it thought and send in their ideas.