TELEPHOMNEMONICS

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Telephomnemonics, a portmanteau or blend word coined by Dave Silverman in his August 1970 Kickshaws column, can be defined as the choice of letters on the telephone dial to form a word or phrase, as an aid for remembering seven-digit telephone numbers. Although there are three different letters for each number, permitting in principle the formation of \( 3^7 = 2187 \) different 'words', most of these are likely to be gibberish; a telephone number which forms a common seven-letter word is somewhat unusual. (In fact, any telephone number containing either 0 or 1 is automatically disqualified, for no letters correspond to these.) With luck, a two- or three-word meaningless phrase can be formed: HOLY PIG, ON A SONG, I DECIDE and UP STICK have all been used by telephone subscribers, according to the February 2, 1970 issue of Time magazine. Some telephomnemonics showed considerable ingenuity: Los Angeles mathematician Angela Dunn created the 'word' GRADLUP for a pharmacist friend, who was so charmed that he invented the 'Gradlup Vermouth and Scotch'; San Francisco producer-director Alan Myerson answered GOLLYGO instead of 'hello' to his callers; and author Don Mankiewicz argued that his telephomnemonic, TNT BYRD, was the answer to the question "What do you use to blast your way through the ice, Amundsen?" If one cannot form a suitable telephomnemonic from his present telephone number, what are the prospects for requesting a new number with a better pattern? By analogy with automobile license plates, one might call such numbers 'vanity numbers'; it is a little surprising that the Bell System has not yet recognized that these could be promoted as a new source of revenue. Perhaps people have discounted the possibility of telephomemonics because of the fact that one is apparently restricted to a single telephone exchange -- the first three digits are specified, greatly reducing the mnemonic possibilities. For the handful of people who can create a mnemonic by altering the last four digits of their telephone number, the telephone company could charge a modest fee of A dollars for a simple line-rearrangement in the central office.

However, matters are not quite as bad as they appear. In larger towns or cities, several different telephone exchanges are located in the same building (in Manhattan, some buildings contain a dozen or more). It is only a little more difficult for the telephone company to substitute one three-digit exchange for another in the same building; for this service, the telephone company could charge B dollars (greater, of course, than A). Finally, or telephone through a 'for a fee' for of C dollars for the distant exchange be levied upon covered by the telephomnemonic of recall) -- of a cost for a

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Finally, one can ask the telephone company to re-route one's telephone through an exchange in another building (in telephonese, through a 'foreign exchange') via a tie line. Of course, the charge of C dollars for this service is even greater than B; further, unless the distant exchange is in one's toll-free calling area, toll charges will be levied upon many incoming and outgoing calls that were formerly covered by the flat monthly rate. In short, deciding upon a suitable telephomnemonic is a balance of economics and appropriateness (ease of recall) -- one ought to be willing to put up with more inconvenience and cost for a really good mnemononic than a poor one.

Although the choice of a mnemonic is rather subjective, it seems clear that certain ones are more valuable than others. The best, it seems to me, are those involving one's name, making it easy for others to recall one's 'telephone number'. The ideal is a seven-letter surname: "if you want to call me, just dial J-A-C-K-s-o-Nil. However, people with six- or five-letter surnames can use their initials (P.W. Smith, J.A. Jones) and some can use their first names as well (Ed Walsh, Bob Dole, Jay Ames). The first name alone is also a possibility (Roberta, Thomas, Charles).

If a name-mnemonic is unavailable, consider using one involving one's job or hobby. Dave Silverman suggested Polymer for an organic chemist, and one can easily construct many more: Surgeon, Pitcher, Geology, Justice, Codicil (for a lawyer), Fashion, Haircut, Bassoon (for a musician), Cashier, Keyhole (for a detective), Dentist, Numbers (for an accountant), Florist, Chemist, Teacher and Plumber.

I illustrate the tradeoffs with a study of my own telephomnemonic alternatives. My number, 538-4584, is quite poor for mnemonics (even though it contains no 0s or Is): the best I can find are pronounceable nonsense-words like Levijug or Jetilvi. If I were to seek other numbers in the same exchange, I could use Letters, moderately appropriate in view of Word Ways. (If I were a truck-gardener, Lettuce might be even better; but Jetport is utterly useless.) In the same building in Morristown there are also telephone exchanges 539, 267, 285 and 455 suitable for mnemonics; were I to shift to 539, I would have available the quite apt words Lexicon or Lexical. Surveying the nineteen exchanges outside of Morristown but within my toll-free area, I could find none that gave a name-mnemonic such as R. Eckler or A. R. Eckler.

I have ignored one other problem associated with telephomnemonics: what if the telephone number you desire is already in use? I doubt that the telephone company wants to be the middleman in persuading someone to change their number; this is best left to direct negotiation between the parties involved (a cash offer to the owner of a desired number might overcome his initial reluctance). If the present owner cannot be persuaded to change, the telephone company could be asked (for a small fee) to reserve the number for your future use when it comes free.
Note that the telephone company could make the option of choosing vanity numbers more visible, if it chose to, by allowing the subscriber to use the mnemonic as his directory listing. As the practice caught on, these letter-mnemonics would catch the eye of other people looking up numbers in the directory, alerting them to the possibility of this wordplay.

How frequently can high-quality telephomnemonics be formed? To get some notion of this, I surveyed the number of people in the Morris County telephone directory with seven-letter surnames matching certain exchanges; in exchanges with a high proportion of residential subscribers (that is, not used by businesses with large private branch exchanges, or PBXs), I found an average of four people bearing 2.5 different surnames (one man actually had six out of his seven digits correct!).

267 Borelli, Coppess, Corbett (2 people), Cornell, Cornish, Cortese (2 people)
335 Delancy, Delaney, Fieldman (5 people), Fellows
366 Donahue (3 people), Donetti, Donhowe, Donovan
538 Lutter, Lervett
539 none
635 Melcher (2 people), Melillo
647 Nissley

If transfer to other exchanges were allowed, these numbers would be increased by a factor of perhaps 20 in a suburban area like Morris County, and even more in a large city. I have no idea of the number of people with names of six letters or less that could avail themselves of telephomnemonics, but I would not be surprised by another factor of 5 or so. Extending these results to the 38 Morris County exchanges, there might be 4(38/7)(20)5 = 2200 telephone subscribers in Morris County with name telephomnemonics.

Of course, not all of these can be simultaneously satisfied. Only one person with a given surname can be accommodated in a numbering plan area (identified by the three digits preceding a seven-digit telephone number, used for long-distance calls). One can speculate that the competition for the number 564-6766 (spelling Johnson) would be intense; Social Security records of this surname suggest that, in a fully-loaded residential exchange with 10,000 subscribers, one can on the average expect 75 people with this surname. Put another way, less than 100 of the approximately 1.8 million Johnsons in the United States can be accommodated (there are about 100 numbering plan areas in the United States, but some of the 564-exchanges have never been assigned). Present owners of the telephone number 564-6766 ought to be able to hold out for substantial cash payments to yield it; speculators not named Johnson might even want to invest in this number for future return! Similar arguments of course apply to other common surnames such as Jackson, Roberts, Stewart, Collins or Edwards.

In addition, there is a certain amount of competition between different surnames for the same telephone number: Barrett/Bassett, Pick-
Telephomnemonics ought to be especially useful for various Dial-It and Emergency services supplied by the telephone company. The Time magazine article cited earlier reported that POPCORN would get the correct time in San Francisco, and LOST DOG the SPCA; in Los Angeles, HELP NOW reached Suicide Prevention, and GODDAMN a recorded mini-sermon from the First Methodist Church! Does anyone remember dialing WEATHER for the weather? In recent years, it has been 976-1212 (WE only) in the New York area, and the company is changing it over to 936-1212 (W only) as part of a plan to consolidate all Dial-It services in a single exchange. (To remember the 976 exchange, Glenn Collins' Metropolitan Diary in the September 24, 1980 New York Times asks "...how about dialing -- Weather Right Now? Or -- Wind, Rain Mud?"

Commercial organizations occasionally use telephomnemonics. Time magazine reported THE MOST for Giovanni's Pizza in Berkeley, CARPETS for the Walton Carpet Company in Chicago, WANT ADS for the Houston Post classified department, FREEDOM for a Dade County mortgage company, and GO GO FUN for a Los Angeles Pontiac dealer. LeRoy Meyers passed along a card giving 263-SING as the number of a Columbus singing telegram service, and an 1890's-style restaurant in Long Island City can be reached by the mixed mnemonic YES-1890. For several years Channel Lumber in the New York area has urged readers of its advertisements to dial CHANNEL for help in home handyman projects. I noted that Johnson Realty in the Los Angeles area has preempted one of the precious 564-5766 numbers. On November 15, 1979 an article in the Morris County Daily Record told of two New Jersey massage companies contending for 627-7243; Superior Court Judge Samuel DeSimone, calling the telephone number "unique", forbade either one to use the number pending a judicial hearing. Perhaps Word Ways readers have seen others.

Residential use of telephomnemonics, however, is extremely rare. In a survey of the commonest 40 or so seven-letter surnames in 25 large-city telephone directories across the United States, I found only one example: Laurie L. Johnson of San Francisco has telephone number 564-5766. She wrote:

I (moved) into a location served by the correct telephone exchange by chance, and as a result, there was no charge or fee to get the service ... it was also my luck that the number was available. Had it been in use, all I could have done is request that I be contacted upon the number's availability. Had I not been so fortunate in being in an area serving the exchange I wanted I still could have obtained the telephone number, but I would have had to pay a fee as a monthly charge based on how many miles I was located outside the proper area ... It has been fun to have a personalized telephone number ... The reactions of some are amusing ... I'll tell you one thing for
Readers with chutzpah may prefer a faster (although more expensive) way of conducting this search — pick a seven-letter surname, dial it, and ask for Mr. X when it is answered. (If the answerer appears confused, apologize for a wrong number and hang up!)

If vanity telephone numbers became commonplace, what impact would they have on unlisted phone numbers? I believe that an easy-to-guess vanity number would not be used by someone who prized his privacy, for it would be too easy for strangers to take advantage of it. For example, would Senator Edward Kennedy or his sister-in-law, Ethel Kennedy, both of whom live in the McLean, Virginia area, be tempted to use the telephone number 536-6339, available in the McLean exchange?

A final logological question: how should the letters on the telephone dial be rearranged in order to make telephonomnics as easy as possible to achieve? The simplest modification of the alphabet on the telephone dial is to insist that letters must appear in alphabetical order, but with arbitrary split-points, such as AB/CD/EFG/HIJK/LMN/OP/OR/ST/UV/WXYZ which uses all ten digits and all 26 letters. A more radical restructuring would allow letters to be scrambled on the telephone dial as well. Alas, the Bell System is most unlikely to consider any such changes, no matter how beneficial they might be to telephonomnics!

NI HEURES SOURIS RAMES (NURSERY RHYMES)

This is the title of a delightful book by Ormonde de Kay (Clarkson N. Potter 1980, $7.95), containing forty nursery rhymes homophonically imitated by French words. Naturally, the French doesn’t make much sense, but de Kay has provided a set of learned footnotes for each rhyme, purporting to “interpret” the meaning. The book is a companion to Mots D’Heures: Gousses, Rames (Mother Goose Rhymes), written by Luis d’Antin Van Rooten a decade before (Grossman Publishers 1967, $4.95); none of the forty rhymes from the earlier book are repeated in the later one. As it is not always easy to “sound out” the French, the author has thoughtfully provided the English version of each rhyme in the back of the book.