SPEAKING OF FINGERS

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Have you thought about your fingers lately? Have you taken a long, hard look at them, assessing their relative strengths and weaknesses?

Your ability to think, speak, and write intelligently and competently about your fingers - or anyone else's, for that matter - depends on your logological expertise. How many names for fingers do you have at your fingertips (if you'll pardon this play on words)? If you are content with thinking about your fingers in the most general sort of way, you can squeeze by with the word FINGER, occasionally diversifying your vocabulary with DIGIT and DACTYL. The disadvantage of using the two alternate terms is that each of them can refer to a toe just as easily as to a finger.

The merits of these words are, however, beside the point if you wish to get down to specifics about your fingers. What you need in that case is names for specific fingers. That's where I come in. Over the years, I've been collecting fingers. Not real ones, of course - that requires both sadism and the ability to elude the authorities. No, what I've been collecting is names for the individual fingers of the human hand. Since you have anxiously been awaiting my release of that treasure, here it is.

The human hand has five fingers, and each of them has a diversity of names by which it can be designated. Numbering the fingers from 1 to 5, beginning with the thumb, here are those names, in alphabetical order for each finger:

1. Allus Pollex, Allus Pollex, Digitus I, Pollex, Thumb
2. Digit Didactic, Digitus Demonstrativus, Digitus II, Forefinger, Index Finger, Inscriptive Finger, Pointer, Pointing Finger, Trigger Finger
3. Digitus III, Digitus Medius, Fool's-Finger, Long Finger, Medius, Middle Finger
4. Annular Finger, Annularis, Annulary, Digitus Annularis, Digitus IV, Digitus Medicinalis, Digitus Medicus, Leech-Finger, Marriage Finger, Medical Finger, Physic-Finger, Physician Finger, Ring Finger, Ringman
5. Auricular Finger, Digitus Auricularis, Digitus Minimus, Digitus Minimus Manus, Digitus Quintus, Ear-Finger, Little Finger, Minimus, Pinkie, Pinky, Pirlie

Some of the names of Latin origin in the foregoing list number the fingers from 1 to 5, inclusive. An alternative numbering scheme does, however, exist. If the thumb is regarded as an entry in a class by itself, then the forefinger can be called the FIRST FING-
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GER; the middle finger, the SECOND FINGER; the ring finger, the
THIRD FINGER; and the little finger, the FOURTH FINGER. Some dic-
tories do, as a matter of fact, include these alternate numbered
finger names. I have omitted them from the list above in order
to avoid confusion - and because I am a strong proponent of the
theory that the thumb is a finger just like any other one, making
it, not the forefinger, the true FIRST FINGER.

Your thorough familiarity with fingers and their names should
save you from FINGERAGNOSIA - an inability to recognize, name,
choose the individual fingers of your hand, or of someone else's
hands. It will also help you identify your problem accurately if
you happen to fall victim to DACTYLOLYSIS (or DACTYLOSIS) SPON-
TANEA, a condition more colorfully known as AINHUM - the linear
contraction and contraction of a finger, a process which gradually
amputates it spontaneously.

How many fingers do you have on each hand? If the number is
an odd one, then you are PERISSODACTYLOUS or PERISSODACTYLIC.
If, as the result of ainhum or for other reasons, the number is
an even one, then you are ARTIODACTYLOUS or ARTIODACTYLIC.
More specifically, if you have four fingers on each hand, you are
QUADRIDIGITATE or TETRADACTYL; if five fingers, QUINQUEDIGITATE
or PENTADACTYL (a word also spelled PENTADACTYLE); if six fin-
gers, SEXTIDIGITATE or SEDIGITATE; if seven or more, your hand is
POLYDACTYLOUS or HYPERDACTYLOUS, and those fingers in excess of the customary five are SUPER-
NUMERARY - although, if you prefer a euphemism, you are likely
to call them ACCESSORY or ADJUVANT.

What about the size and shape of your fingers? If they are ap-
proximately equal in length, you are ISODACTYLOUS or EQUIDIGI-
TATE. If your fingers are long, you are MACRODACTYLOUS; if short,
BRACHYDACTYLOUS. If you have slender fingers, you are LEPTO-
DACTYLOUS; if thick ones, PACHYDACTYLOUS.

You may have been wondering what to call the tip of your mid-
dle finger. Wonder no more: it is your DACTYLION. Or, you may
wish to discuss the ball of your thumb at great length. Know that
it is your THENAR, more fully described as your THENAR EMINENCE.

Be certain to discriminate carefully between it and the ANTITHENAR
or HYPOTHENAR EMINENCE, which designates the ridge of your palm
along the bases of your fingers.

Are you inordinately interested in your fingernails? Both your fin-
gernail and your toenail may be called an ONYX. If you wish to
refer unambiguously to your fingernail, call it a CHIRONYX or an
UNGUICULE. The crescent-shaped white area at the base of your
fingernail or thumbnail - what you may have been calling your
HALF-MOON - is really your LUNULA or LUNULA UNGUICULE. Your cuti-
ble, that external investment secreted by your epidermal cells,
is your EPHONYCHIUM or PELLICLE. Differentiate rigorously between
your eponychium and your PERIONYCHIUM, which is the skin behind and at the sides of your fingernail or thumbnail. Do you have an uncontrollable urge to touch or finger your hangnail? I'm afraid that you're a PHANEROMANIAC. You may, however, be able to alleviate your problem by thinking of your hangnail more amiably - as a BACKFRIEND.

The space between any two consecutive fingers of yours is known as an INTERDIGIT. The space between your extended forefinger and your thumb is, however, a PURLICUE (which rhymes most conveniently with CURLICUE). As for your knuckles, the proper term for those is METACARPOPHALANGEAL ARTICULATIONS, or - if you wish to sound really scientific - ARTICULATIONES METACARPOPHALANGEAE. I have never known a logologist who didn't prefer a 15-syllable term to one of only two syllables.

There are, of course, many other technical terms that you need to know to be considered finger-articulate. Do you spend much of your time studying the patterns, markings, and/or sculptured ridges on the undersides of your hands, including your fingers? If so, you are a practitioner of DERMATOGLYPHICS (a delightful 15-letter word using 15 different letters of the alphabet). Have you been examining the markings in prints made from your fingertips? In that case, you have been engaged in DACTYLOSCOPY. Have you been talking with your fingers, using the finger alphabet? Such employment of your fingers is properly known as DACTYLOLOGY. Do you make it a habit to count on your fingers? You are guilty of DACTYLocYMY! Do you practice a form of divination involving finger rings? That's DACTYLIOMANCY. Have you been pointing at someone with your finger? Your gesture is a DACTYLODEIKTOUS one.

This necessarily brief introduction to your fingers - they have, I assume, been virtual strangers to you until now - should hold you until I can prepare a more extended treatise on the subject. Watch for it, coming in a future issue of Word Ways.

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