

MEAN WORDS

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*Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world... --William Butler Yeats*

Moderation in all things. --Publius Terentius Afer

The English language contains many words describing extremes. For example, VACUUM describes the extreme state of complete emptiness, while PLENUM describes the extreme state of complete fullness. What word describes the normal state of partial emptiness (or fullness)? If MYOPIC means nearsighted and HYPERMETROPIC means farsighted, what means normal-sighted? If TACHYCARDIA means fast heart beat and BRADYCARDIA means slow heart beat, what means normal heart beat?

Adrian Room has recently published a book, Dictionary of Contrasting Pairs (Routledge, 1988), containing many examples of extreme words. It is interesting that few of these pairs can be amplified to triples with the addition of a middle or mean word (I am indebted to Henry Picciotto for suggesting this term). One possible explanation for this is that the language has evolved to maximize the amount of information conveyed by a word. Words that convey little or no information are shortened, and the ultimate shortening is complete absence. Information theory tells us that the information content of a message varies inversely with the probability of the event it reports. Since words describing extremes are messages reporting unusual events, they carry more information than words describing normalcy. Is it possible that mean words have been linguistically optimized out of existence?

A mean word is closely related to a **neutronym**, introduced by Howard Bergerson in the August 1980 Kickshaws. A neutronym is a special case of a mean word, for the extremes must be antonymic as well; in many of the examples below, this is not the case. The Dictionary of World Literary Terms calls a mean word a **meronym** (see Word Ways, November 1989 Colloquy).

Because mean words are so rare, it is fun to try to find them. The list below gives two extreme words of a triple; the reader is challenged to provide the mean word. For example, the mean word corresponding to the extremes BASE : ACID is NEUTRAL, since the chemical state which is neither base nor acid is neutral. Another example: the mean word corresponding to FLAT : SHARP is NATURAL, since a musical note that is neither flat nor sharp is natural. How many can you get? See Answers and Solutions at the end of this issue.

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| 1. SYN- : XENO- | 9. TEE : GREEN |
| 2. DISTAL : PROXIMAL | 10. WOOFER : TWEETER |
| 3. HOLIDIC : OLIGIDIC | 11. STORM : HURRICANE |
| 4. SYMBIONT : PARASITE | 12. HYDROPHYTE : XEROPHYTE |
| 5. ACTIVE : EXTINCT | 13. MONOPHAGOUS : POLYPHAGOUS |
| 6. AEROLITE : SIDERITE | 14. LENTO : PRESTO |
| 7. LOWBROW : HIGHBROW | 15. HYPOTENSIVE : HYPERTENSIVE |
| 8. FICTION : DOCUMENTARY | 16. PREORBITAL : POSTORBITAL |

MODERN ALLUSIONS

The Facts on File Dictionary of 20th Century Allusions (1991; \$24.95), by Sylvia Cole and Abraham Lass, is a sequel to the 1987 Facts on File book on classical, literary and Biblical allusions (see November 1987 review). The new book contains approximately 1000 allusions: Ingmar Bergman and Ingrid Bergman, big lie and big stick, double dipper and doubleheader, Magritte and Maigret, Munch and Munchkins, paper chase and paper tiger. The latest? Tiananmen Square.

Commendably, this book recognizes the essential components of a definition of an allusion: the original impetus, the allusive essence, and a contemporary quote. Alas, not all definitions follow the ideal; often components are omitted. For example, *loose cannon* starts with the allusive essence but fails to indicate the nautical origin. The system more often omits the second or third components, especially if the impetus is a specific event, a person, a book, a movie, a TV show or a comic strip. Perhaps these entries are so multifarious that one is hard-pressed to extract the proper essence. Does an allusion to Groucho Marx focus on his punnery, his lechery, his manner of walking, his Goldwynesque illogic - or all of these? If the allusion is instead a word or phrase adapted to a new field, the system works better - but I was surprised to see no discussion of the sexual allusion of score.

Compilations like these are by definition incomplete; I missed allusions for *Murphy's Law* and the *Saturday Night Special*. And the authors don't always have their facts right: Dorothy got her red shoes from the *Wicked Witch of the East*, the *Sundance Kid* jumped from a cliff into a mountain river, not the ocean, and *George Bailey's* guardian angel (in *It's a Wonderful Life*) showed him how the world would have been had George not been born, not the consequences of his suicide. One of the Collyer brothers was Langley, not Langelly. While these flaws do not vitiate the essential information, they do suggest carelessness or haste in preparation. Most readers will enjoy browsing through this book, admiring the vitality and mutability of the English language.