

A NEW TYPE OF REFERENCE WORK

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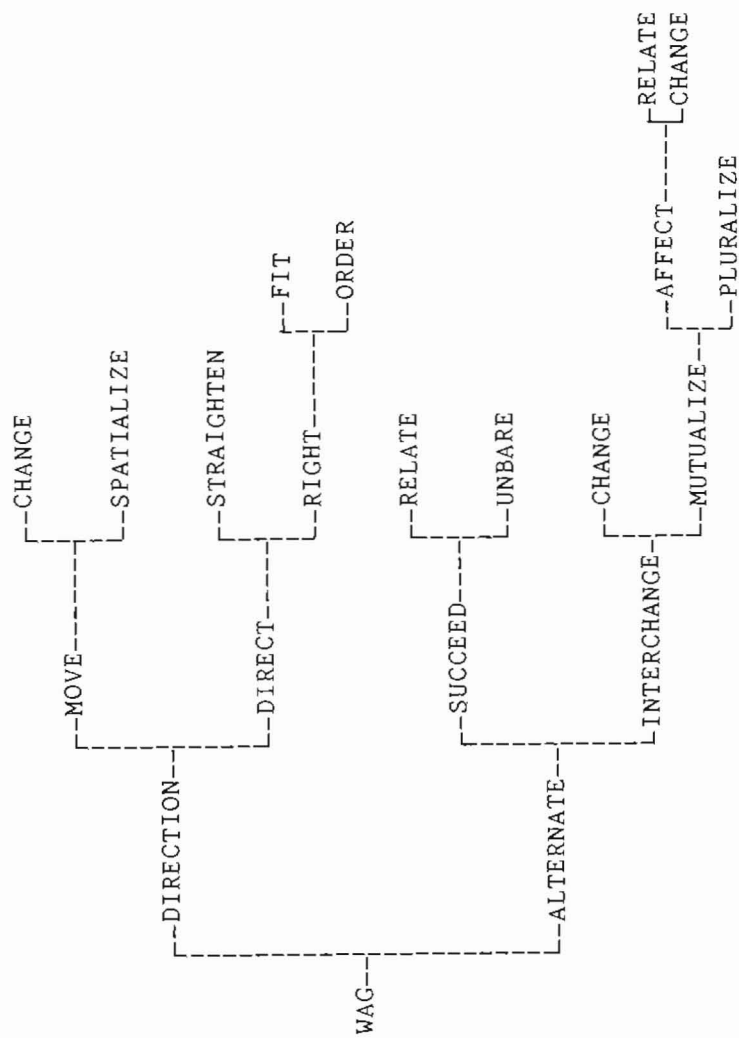
Henry Burger's The Wordtree [®], a 28-year labor of love privately published in August 1984 at 7306 Brittany, Merriam KS 66203 and available from him for \$149, is a reference book based on a novel idea: that one can express any transitive verb as the sum of exactly two other transitive verbs, as RAP = HIT + INTERRUPT, or VIBRATE = HANG + WAG. The core of his book consists of a 130-page Hierarchy, in which 24,600 transitives are listed and related to each other according to equations of this nature. Using the Hierarchy, one can successively decompose a transitive into ever-simpler parts until one ultimately arrives at transitives that Burger considers irreducible. Most of the rest of the book consists of a 185-page alphabetical Index directing the reader to the proper place in the Hierarchy. The entire book is photo-reduced; the word-count is that of a normal-sized volume of some 1800 pages.

The flavor of the Hierarchy is best given by the tree of the fairly simple transitive WAG, diagrammed on the following page. Most of the trees thus generated have a rather uneven development, for there is usually a main branch much longer than the others before the irreducible transitives are reached. (For some words, this main branch is more than 40 steps long.) This merely reflects the fact that a transitive is not usually broken into two equally-complex parts; one of the transitives in the equation, a near-synonym, deliberately carries the bulk of the meaning associated with the original. In numerical terms, this is like noting that 1000 is the sum of 999 plus 1.

This system of binary division seems to work best for simple transitives expressing mechanical action, such as VIBRATE or RAP above; for highly complex or abstract transitives, it is not always clear what split should be made. For example, Burger posits that LOVE = LIKE + DESIRE and KILL = DEVITALIZE + DISINVIGORATE, both logical enough but hardly inevitable. Similarly, the main branch for SQUEAL seems rather arbitrary:

SQUEAL = YELP + PROLONG
 YELP = SCREAM + SHRILL
 SCREAM = SCREECH + STRENGTHEN
 SCREECH = YELL + INTENSIFY
 YELL = CRY + LOUDEN
 CRY = SOUND + EMOTIONALIZE
 SOUND = AUDIBILIZE + SEND
 AUDIBILIZE = ATMOSPHERE + AGITATE, etc.

One wonders whether another investigator approaching the task



of interrelating transitive verbs would come up with a hierarchy bearing any resemblance to Burger's. Burger himself is quick to point out that his book contains many imperfections, but he apparently believes that with refinements and additions it will eventually converge to some "correct" structure.

The majority of Burger's transitives are reasonably well-known words, but he does not hesitate to include transitives that are the jargon of specific occupations, or coinages noted in books, newspapers, or magazines (such as ELMERSGLUE, MOUSEBURGER, SLIPCUE, and MICKJAGGER). Readers are encouraged to submit transitives for publication in future editions; he gives full credit in the Introduction for all ones he has used.

In experimenting with the Hierarchy, I discovered one of the flaws that the Introduction reported as "too late for First Edition correction". Many of the more complex transitives eventually home in on LIKE, but the Hierarchy (owing to a programming glitch) fails to tell what LIKE splits into. There are instructions in the Introduction how to find the missing step, but these are impossible to follow; however, the Index rescues the reader with LIKE = AESTHETICIZE + EMOTIONALIZE, enabling him to reenter the Hierarchy. Alas, this creates a closed loop; AESTHETICIZE leads back to the word LIKE after 18 steps on its major branch! The editor assures me that this will be corrected in the Second Edition - if necessary, by adding LIKE to the irreducible transitives.

I have pointed out shortcomings of this book so that potential readers or buyers can have a good idea of what they are likely to encounter. Despite its imperfections, it is possible that various users will find this linguistic tool suited to their individual purposes. Burger calls his book "a handbook of physical and social engineering, a word-system for solving physical and social problems." More specifically, he suggests, for example, that patent attorneys might find it useful for making careful distinctions in describing the scope of a new invention; by analogy, writers in search of the right word might use this to explore variants and nuances (though I would prefer the fuller descriptions of nuances provided by a good synonym dictionary such as Webster's). The book follows many transitive verbs with special cases; for example, after FASTEN one finds FASTEN GROUNDED OBJECT = STAKE, -HOOKED OBJECT = CLASP, -SEWN OBJECT = SUTURE, -STRETCHED OBJECT = RACK, etc.

Among the many potential users, Burger identifies word gamers, crossword puzzlers, linguists and wordplay therapists - all possible readers of *Word Ways*. In the Introduction, he suggests a word game: present a player with two transitives and challenge him to come up with the transitive they jointly represent. This seems feasible for JOCKEY = RIDE + MANEUVER or WALTZ = DANCE + REVOLVE, but I'll bet few people guess CRADLESNATCH for DUTY + UNPREPARE, or POTSMOKE for DEREALIZE + BEERDRINK.

Though I have long been skeptical that the "luxuriant tangle of the English word-stock" (Louis T. Milic's apt phrase, in the

Foreword) can ever be reduced to mathematical simplicity, I have a great deal of empathy with anyone who attempts this daunting task. Any first step is likely to be extremely imperfect, but it is necessary for others to build on. How nice it would be if all transitive verbs could be accurately characterized by the mixture of their irreducible transitives, just as chemical compounds are constructed out of the elements in the periodic table! (Looking at the previous example, WAG is a mixture of 9/32 CHANGE; 5/32 RELATE; 4/32 SPATIALIZE, STRAIGHTEN, and UNBARE; and 2/32 FIT, ORDER and PLURALIZE.) Then one could compare different transitives according to their elemental mix, and find out once and for all how closely TUNK (an archaeologist rapping a cave wall to detect a hidden chamber) relates to AUSCULTATE (a physician tapping a patient's chest and listening through a stethoscope).

This book is novel in other than linguistic matters. I do not recall ever reading a book containing instructions and admonishments to the reviewer; Burger's section headings are Appeal to Kuhnian, not Incremental Reviewers (a Kuhnian reviewer is one who appreciates the importance of extolling radically new ideas in preference to minor extensions of existing ones); Request for Creative Evaluation, Not Censure; Misreviewed Editors Are Not Passive (one retaliated by naming an unappealing character in his opera after the reviewer); How History Reviews Book Reviewers. Nor do I recall such a high level of editorial concern about unauthorized copying of the book's contents; Burger has inserted a hologram in the binding to identify authorized copies, and he notes that the user of a copy without this is liable to fine and/or jail. Further, the spine of the book has been designed to disintegrate if the book's pages are pressed flat on a photocopying machine, and Burger will pay a "bounty" of \$600 for evidence of copyright violation leading to conviction.

Burger somewhat immodestly compares his work with Robert Cawdrey's A Table Alphabeticall in 1604 (the first English dictionary) and Peter Roget's thesaurus in 1852 - as he says, "once every century, a new kind of word book." Although the degree of novelty may plausibly be compared to these earlier linguistic landmarks, the usefulness remains to be established: one does not guarantee the other.