

A SMASHING VICTORY

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It is time to claim victory. There is, unfortunately, no prize, and no contest was ever announced. I'll rectify that soon enough. Suffice it to say that what follows wins going away.

"All right," you ask dubiously, "just what is this contest that hasn't been announced until now?" Well, as best I can say it, the contest turns on finding the **Longest List of Rhyming English Words That Have a Common Semantic Feature**.

"Dear, dear," you no doubt mutter. But your curiosity is aglow. "Just what," you ask resignedly, "is this list?"

A little fanfare, please. And here it is...

Bash * Brash * Clash * Crash * Dash * Flash * Gash
 Gnash * Hash * Lash * Mash * Pash * Plash * Rash
 Slash * Smash * Splash * Stash * Thrash * Trash

"Uh, yes," you agree more or less, "the words on the list do rhyme - but what's all this about a Common Semantic Feature?" Well, all of these words (mostly they are verbs) are words of terrible action, of great vigor and violence. Most of them are sovereign among synonyms in their connotations of crushing devastation:

Cars crash...Hopes are dashed...Faces are smashed, bashed and slashed...Lightning flashes and knives leave gashes... Beef is hashed and schools are trashed...Enemies clash, prisoners are lashed and thrashed...Boulders are pashed and hit the water with a splash and plash...Potatoes are mashed and teeth are gnashed...When you hide something vigorously, it's stashed...And rash is brash.

All right, that is a list of twenty words, all rhyming, all brothers in vigor. No other list I can think of comes close. One good contender is brush/crush/flush/gush/hush/lush/mush/rush, wherein water is a common feature of many of the words, but this list numbers only eight. And then there are all those rhyming lists, such as blink/ink/pink/stink, that appear to have no common ground.

Ergo, victory: a smashing, indeed flashing victory for the dashing twenty.

But now comes the intriguing part, for the question presents itself: What is the magic of this -ash sound? How do we explain the power of this constellation of brash and slashing words?

Until some properly qualified scholar can answer all these questions properly, I'll relay my reflections, which center chiefly on the duration of the sounds. But there are surely some onomato-

poetic machinations at work as well.

Consider the A, how it is broad-backed and sturdy - and takes a long time to say. Consider the S, how it is hissy and slippery - and takes a long time to say. Consider the H, how it is harsh and even heavy - and takes a long time to say. The resulting sound, **ash**, is hard to grasp subliminally but I would venture the description that it is swashbuckling and energetic. Still, perhaps even more fundamental is the fact that you simply cannot pronounce any of the **-ash** words quickly.

Note how long it takes you to say **trash** or **clash**. On the clock, perhaps more than a second. There's many a word said and done in a quarter the time. And if a belligerent sort were to say, "I'm going to smash your face in," he (or she) would instinctively linger over **smash**, probably more so than on the other words combined. When it comes to expressing violent actions that unfold over seconds or minutes, words with **-ash** seem peculiarly suited.

Consider a synonym for **crash**, such as **hit**. Even if you sleep over **hit**, it takes no time to say it. Similarly, if you hit a ball, it's done. But when two cars crash, there is a lengthy crumpling as the two behemoths press into each other and create new dimensions in sheet metal. **Crash** and **smash-up** capture this phenomenon of violent and sustained unfoldment and convey it from speaker to listener.

Consider that when you **gash** someone, it's no little cut. A **gash**, resulting probably from a long and vigorous **slash**, means you are laid open. And when you **dash** a bug or cigarette out, there is the decided message of thoroughness. The cigarette is gnarled, the bug is a mess.

And even though **flash** often connotes speed, it rarely connotes anything instantaneous. Even when someone flashes a message (or himself) or you see lightning flash, there is the implication of a timeful event and a lingering blur, unlike a light's blinking, which is quick for sure.

And a **bash**, of course, can last all night and even bashing someone's face can take some time. Likewise, a **lash** is no little fly-swatter; if you are lashed, it's very likely all across your back, from one set of ribs to the other. Or you might be lashed to a mast for a day. Likewise, to **thrash** someone takes time and is thorough.

When countries **clash**, as they are wont to do in better history books, they can stay at it for thirty or a hundred years. And colors that **clash** always **clash**.

Although a **dash** is a short race, it's not just a few quick steps. You have to run half a block before the word can first be applied.

People are not usually called **brash** or **rash** for one intemperance; **brash** is a title you earn by being **brash** day after day.

Hash, applied to meat, always suggests repeated cuttings and grindings until the meat is at last reduced to **hash**.

Pash, now obsolete, means a violent throw, suggesting a wind-up and delivery.

Do **splashes** and **plashes** seem short-lived to you? Note that a splash isn't over until the water has risen up, perhaps yards, and fallen back down. You cannot have an instant splash.

Trash, as in "They trashed the school," always suggests a rather protracted assault on walls and furniture. Students often passed whole afternoons trashing.

You don't **stash** money in your pocket or under a pile of magazines. No, you probably hunt for a loose board somewhere, or dig a hole under the house. Unlike hiding, stashing is an undertaking that requires time.

And nobody's **gnashing** their teeth in moderation - sometimes it goes on and on until you've worn off the points, depending on the provocation. (Gnashing is what I'll be doing if anybody comes up with a longer list!)

In short, all these words take a long time to say and generally designate activities that take a long time. In sum, all these words both rhyme and have a family resemblance in the kinds of violent time-consuming actions they denote.

Interestingly, the words come from many different ancestral languages - Norse, Scot, French, German, Middle English, and Swedish with a few Indo-European roots thrown in. But in every case they have reached their present state in what might be called the northern European smelting pot. My own way of putting it - I can't vouch for the academic accuracy - is that these words converged on the ash sound because there is something in the Anglo-Saxon brain that found this sound perfect for drawn-out violence.

My theory is that every language has a "genius" which is forever seeking more satisfying ways to say things and discarding unsatisfying ways. This genius operates, of course, in nearly un-touchable metalinguistic realms. We cannot touch the process, but we can view the resulting evidence, such as this twenty-word cluster.

Smashing!

Editor's Note: Bruce Price could have added to his list two more words, both from Scots dialect: **plash** (to splash heavily, to plash) and **stramash** (to smash, break to pieces, destroy). And two other words that suggest violence are **squabash** (a blend of squash and bash, meaning to crush, especially by criticism) and **kurbash** (an Egyptian or Turkish whip made of hide, used as an instrument of punishment).