ONCE MORE: WHAT IS A WORD?

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In recent issues of Word Ways, Dmitri Borgmann and Richard Lederer struggled with the age-old linguistic question "What is a word?" without coming to any very satisfactory conclusions. In fact, both authors convinced me what a word is not: a collection of letters strung together (with or without spaces), or simply a collection of morphemes. This note attempts to shed a little further light on the problem.

Briefly put, I believe that meaning is crucial to a word's status. I subscribe to a subjective interpretation of meaning which I encountered in Douglas Hofstadter's landmark book, Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid (Basic, 1979). According to Hofstadter, a printed (or spoken) word is in itself a passive symbol, devoid of meaning; the meaning resides not in the word, but in the way in which a neural network is excited in the brain of a listener when he reads (or hears) it. (Metaphorically, does a tree falling in the forest make a sound if there is no one to hear it? Borgmann and Lederer, I think, would say yes; Hofstadter says no.)

Although intuitively satisfying, this characterization of a word is not of much use to a lexicographer: how is he to examine the way in which the neural nets of many different listeners are excited by a certain set of marks on a piece of paper? The definition which he puts in a dictionary is an approximation, a greatest common divisor if you will, of a significant portion of the people who will use the dictionary. And, presumably, a word is not entered in the dictionary unless some threshold of neural nets is activated uniformly (i.e., enough people give the same definition explicitly, or implicitly through usage).

Furthermore, the words to be entered in a dictionary must have a property of distinctness: that is, if word A triggers one neural response, and word B triggers another, a word consisting of A + B should be allowed as a dictionary entry if and only if its neural response is greater than the sum of its parts. For example, the phrase LOCK, STOCK AND BARREL should be counted as a dictionary word because it triggers a different response than its constituent parts do. On the other hand, while JAI ALAI will be in a dictionary, its components JAI and ALAI will not because they do not trigger common neural responses in a sufficiently large number of people.

If words are to satisfy the twin criteria of neural net activation and distinctness outlined above, it is very unlikely that a simple, objective definition of "what is a word?" can be given: I, for one, do not plan to

try. Hofstadter's theory implies that gray areas not only seem to exist, but must exist since neural networks form a tangled recursive arrangement. Logophiles have great flexibility in these gray areas to admit "allowable" words, but they should be cognizant of the game they are playing. For most of us, a word is a word if it activates the neural nets of our listeners or readers in the way we intended it to -- be it enshrined in Webster's, or an outright coinage.

GAMES MAGAZINE LOGOLOGICAL COMPETITIONS

At the 1978 National Puzzlers' League convention, Harry and Mary Hazard presented a competition in which the object was to find the longest Pocket Dictionary words beginning with each letter of the alphabet which were beheadable to other Pocket Dictionary words. This was later presented as "Heads You Win" in the January/February 1979 Games; the best solution (with reader improvements) is given below.

a-pathetically	j-unction	s-peculation
b-rightness	k-nightly	t-reasonable
c-hastening	l-imitation	u-praise
d-enunciation	m-eagerness	v-indication
e-numerating	n-evermore	w-hereabouts
f-rightfulness	o-esophagus	x-
g-astronomical	p-rearrangement	y-ourselves
h-airbrush	q-	z-one
i-slander	r-evolutionary	

The competition "Balderdash" was presented in the January/February 1980 issue of Games in three parts:

1. Broken Record: most dots in a row, most dashes in a row
   -../../.../.../././../.../././... disseisees (21)
   -..../---/-/-/---/--/--/---/..../. bottommost (15)

2. Twins: longest sequence of dots/dashes standing for two different words
   -.../...../.-../---/.../---/....,/..../-..-/..../..../
   ../-./... chlorophyllins, chlorophyllites (48)

3. Palindromes: longest palindromic sequence of dots/dashes standing for any word
   --/.-/.--/..../.-/././.-../././.../---/..-/.
   raphaelesque

All words were boldface entries from Webster's Third or clearly implied derivative forms, in the main section, without hyphenation or capitalization. Related studies can be found in "Re: Morse" by Philip Cohen in the November 1975 issue.