

WHAT'S THE GOOD WORD?

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"What is an acceptable word?" has been the topic of a number of Word Ways articles. Answers range from "a Pocket Dictionary main entry" (for certain problems) to "anything remotely wordlike" (see "The Ultimate Adventure" elsewhere in this issue). I think, however, that it makes more sense to change the question to "what is acceptability?" noting that (1) words vary in acceptability, (2) the "unacceptability" line will be drawn at different points in the continuum by different people, or for different problems, and (3) a word's acceptability has at least two dimensions, centrality and reliability, which depend strongly on its source. Clearly defined scales of acceptability will not resolve the question, since people will disagree on the importance of this factor or that, but they should at least clarify discussions of the problem.

Centrality is a measure of the closeness of a word to the core of standard English. The centrality of a word correlates roughly with the works in which it can be found; words in the Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary are, on the average, more basic than those in the 8th Collegiate. The 8C is more basic than Webster's Third, NI3 than the Times Index Gazetteer, the TIG than the Handbook of American Indians. This is only approximate -- "Fred" is surely more central than "Idiosepiidae", but only the latter is in NI3 -- but it is a useful measure. Distinctions between dictionary words are of course possible as well: for me, unmarked words, slang and technical terms, dialect words, obsolete spellings, and reformed spellings are in order of increasing unacceptability.

Reliability is much less often referred to in discussions of word acceptability. I define it as the likelihood that a putative form actually exists. Dictionary words have high reliability (but not 100 per cent, as articles on Websterian errors have shown); gazetteer names have lower reliability. For example, I have discovered hundreds of mistakes in TIG alone. Most are minor misalphabetizations, but the misprints (Gwmpie for Gympie, Chrudmka for Chrudimka, etc.) are frequent enough to cast doubt on interesting names like Ckoto1.

Made suspicious by such discoveries, I have been increasingly reluctant to accept odd-looking words and names without checking. Unfortunately, checking has proved one of my favorite words to be a fake.

'Zzxjoanw' has been well-known to logologists since Borgmann mentioned it in Language on Vacation in 1965. I recently decided to

check out the reference, Rupert Hughes' Music-Lovers Encyclopedia (any edition from 1914 to 1956 will do). The entry reads:

zzxjoanw (shaw) Maori. 1. Drum. 2. Fife. 3. Conclusion

There are a number of odd points here: the pronunciation, homonymous with 'pshaw' and little related to the spelling; the strange diversity of meanings; and the curious appropriateness of 'conclusion' as the last meaning of the last entry in the dictionary section. (Could 'drum' and 'fife' convey something, too?) But the clincher comes when we look at Maori. A typical sentence, from Harawira's Teach Yourself Maori, is "Ataahua ana ki te titiroatu". Maori has no closed syllables or consonant clusters, let alone the conglomerations of 'zzxjoanw', nor even an 's' or 'sh' sound. The available Maori dictionaries give words for 'drum' and 'end', but they haven't the slightest resemblance to 'zzxjoanw' or 'shaw'.

A hoax clearly entered somewhere. It's not certain where, since Hughes cites no sources, but I suspect it began and ended with him. (Could it be that he had a wife or a daughter named Joan? He was married three times.) He probably intended the hoax to be obvious, but he reckoned without logologists, made credulous by experience with other outlandish words.

Whatever his motives, I, for one, feel betrayed. I thought that 'zzxjoanw' was the perfect example of an amazing-but-real word; there is no other one cockeyed enough to replace it. (A philosophicologological question: does a hoax word gain legitimacy from 42 years' unchallenged appearance in a standard reference, and citation elsewhere? An error, no, but 'zzxjoanw' approaches the status of a successful coinage -- successful, at least, among logologists.)

'Zzxjoanw' illustrates some of the methods available to the logologist for checking the authenticity of a word. There are others; for example, one may look for similar but more plausible forms of a word in the same work. When one finds both 'Qpuandt's Ace Hardware' and 'Quandt's Ace Hardware' in the Chicago telephone directory, or 'Cgo C Col' and 'Chgo (Chicago) City College', in each case sharing address and phone number, one can obviously infer a computer hiccup (or a keypuncher's daydream) during the preparation of the directory. A similar example is given by 'Pvill', cited in Beyond Language as coming from the index to Chemical Abstracts; the abstract itself shows the author's name to be 'Prill'. The town of Gigx, in the gazetteer of Black's 19th-century General Atlas of the World, turns out on the map to be Glys. Apparently someone had terrible handwriting.

Other phone directory errors are obvious even without cross-checking: 'Xfat Albert's Funland', 'Bvoeing Corp.' But such inferences are less certain with personal names. One may presume 'Bxnum' to be an error for 'Bynum', but (in the absence of a Bynum having the same address and phone number) who can tell? (The Bynum in question may have moved away some time earlier, but the er-

roneous listing, its existence unsuspected, remains.)

Finding the same name in two different directories is good evidence for its reality, but not conclusive; I have seen 'Hguyen' as a misspelling of 'Nguyen' in a phone directory, a chemistry abstracts index, and the National Union Catalog of the Library of Congress.

Other references allow external cross-checking. One may go to the original source of a word, if one is given; compare other reference works of the same type; look at foreign-language dictionaries to see if the word's form is plausible; and so on. This may even succeed if the word is not found. For example, I have not found a second source for the Egyptian place name 'Sopd', cited in Darryl Francis' article "Zero Redundancy Rides Again" in the August 1970 Word Ways. However, other sources show 'Sopdu' and 'spd' for this name. Given the variations and uncertainties in transliterating Egyptian vowels, 'Sopd' can confidently be pronounced a variant, rather than an error.

The moral, I think, is clear. Outré words should be looked on with suspicion. If internal evidence casts doubt on a word, the logologist should make every effort to check it externally.

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Telephone directory names are an interesting class, having moderate centrality but low reliability. A fair number of surnames are well-known to almost all English speakers, but even the rarest have the potential (much more so than rare words) of becoming well-known. Who was familiar with 'Comaneci' before the 1976 Olympics? Unfortunately, telephone directories are not the most desirable sources for names. They offer no hooks for cross-checking with other sources; they become unavailable swiftly when superseded; their turnover of entries is much greater than that of other references; and they are prepared by computers (i.e., idiots) and inadequately proofread.

The only way I know of to check the trustworthiness of an entry is to ask the person whose name one wonders about. Writing hasn't worked, and long distance is expensive, so I'm turning to Word Ways readers for help. Please, if you live in any of the cities listed, call the numbers shown and ask the people the following questions:

(1) Is the name correct as shown in the book? Be prepared for incomprehension, since the person may have a correct listing as well and not know about the incorrect one -- or, if it's right, may not speak much English. Ask about umlauts and other diacritics if they seem likely.

(2) If the name is right, can the person suggest a source for the name more permanently available (preferably nationwide) than phone books? You will probably have to suggest possibilities, since this isn't a question people normally think about. A few are: a) announcement of a birth/marriage/death or award in the family, from a large-

circulation newspaper (papers are unreliable, too, but are OK as cross-checks); b) a letter to the editor of a national magazine or a newspaper; c) listing as plant foreman in Illinois Directory of Businesses, or the like.

(3) If nothing is forthcoming on the above verifications, can the person suggest the origin of their surname, or say in what other towns it might be found?

If you live quite near the person, a personal visit is likeliest of all to produce results, since imperfect English is much less a problem, and the person's suspicions as to your motives can be more effectively allayed. No one will do this, I'm sure, but I can dream.

ATLANTA: Jos. Bpuscia 469-9408; E. M. Fmeets 766-8648

BALTIMORE: Thomas Fpitnale 725-5297

CHICAGO: Mary E. Fb 685-1293; E. Fbeswalter 239-6131;

C. Wxsmhersji 238-2062; Vaughn Wvertz 878-0348

CLEVELAND: Douglas Fvenz 232-6469; Robert Hgan 381-6552;

D. Pxeifer 249-7136

COLUMBUS: Jeanette Fmura 252-4851; Joe Fmura 237-9784

DALLAS: Anna Belle Bparnell 331-1098

HOUSTON: Robert D. Pplanck 522-9515; Arun Pvongnak 921-3287

LONDON: Mr. HcYiani 01 733 4110

MANHATTAN: Edith Wfoulkes 690-1698

MINNEAPOLIS: Olaf S. Pveitane 870-7069

MONTREAL: Fernand Fbacher 324-4283; G. PpoLin 259-7483

PERTH AMBOY: Diana Ppuskota 225-1207; A. Pxeiffer 246-3971

SAINT LOUIS: Eleanor M. Bxnum 436-0967; Roy B. P'Pool
426-6118

SAN DIEGO: Alex E. Jvirblis 459-8524

SAN FRANCISCO: M. G. Xzylt 566-2307

TORONTO: R. Bpr 534-2194; Jos. Fvlop 654-4963; G. Fwx

923-7043; Mrs. J. Q'Part 421-0959; G. Vpangnilan 534-8332;
May Vpierce, 921-5396

My thanks to the editor and to Dmitri Borgmann for comments on an earlier version of this article. My thanks in advance to anyone who can help with the telephone directory names listed above.