

A PLURALITY OF SINGULAR VERSE

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In the November 1973 *Word Ways*, Will Shortz quoted George Canning's famous eighteenth-century conundrum involving the words cares and caress. There are many other words exhibiting this property, as the following verse suggests:

"My s's grow s's, alas!" cried a lass;
"Handles turn handless, and bras turn to brass.
Cinema posses ride out to possess,
And a girl, if she cares, may be quick to caress.
An as with an s is an ass, and no less
When asses add s's, those asses assess.
Add s's to mas and they worship at mass;
Add s's to pas, and the pas make a pass."

Axes is the plural form of both ax and axis; similarly, bases is the plural of both base and basis. This leads to the following ambiguous situations:

Paul Bunyan swung his ax, with view
To sundering the earth in two;
The ax that made that mighty probe
Stuck at the axis of the globe;
Pray tell, Larousse, pray tell, Bowditch,
Of those two axes, which is which?

The base of a basis from the basis of a base
Is easy to distinguish in the singular case;
But the bases of bases I can't define as yet;
The more I think about them the more I get upset.

The inconsistency of English-language plurals is the despair of foreigners learning the language but the delight of versifiers:

Two staffs make staves;
Two giraffes don't make giraves.
One giraffe
Makes one laugh.

The following conceit is constructed around the fact that four English words ending in S -- species, congeries, shambles, and kudos -- are identical in their singular and plural spellings.

The drunken Species homeward reels,
Or reel; it sets the mind ajar
That Species is and Species are.

A Congeries of conger eels
Is either are or is a bunch;
Are either is or are for lunch.

A Shambles of new-slaughtered seals
Is either are or is deplorable;
Are either is or are abhorrible.

No Kudos for this verse, one feels,
Is either are or is in view;
Nor is, are, it, he, she, they, due.

TRUE BALANCE

We can determine the numerical value of a word by replacing its letters with their positions in the alphabet (A = 1, B = 2, etc.), and adding up the resulting numbers. If we number the letters in reverse order (Z = 1, Y = 2, etc.) and repeat the process, a quite different total generally results. Thus, the prospective numbering of BABBLE gives us a total of 24, whereas the retrospective numbering produces a total of 138.

A truly balanced word is one for which the two totals are identical. All balanced words consist of an even number of letters, and the totals are always the number of letters multiplied by $13\frac{1}{2}$. Examples of balanced words include BY = 27, ROPE = 54, HONEST = 81, and OVERLAPS = 108.

Various properties of balanced words have been examined in some detail in Dmitri Borgmann's Beyond Language (Balance and Beauty). However, no one has ever attempted to draw up a dictionary of balanced words, or compose a sensible paragraph consisting exclusively of them.

The search for balanced words is materially aided by constructing pairs of vertical strips, one with the alphabet in normal order, the other with the alphabet in reverse order. Each pair can be aligned so that the sum of two adjacent letters has any desired value. The sum of these values, taken over all pairs of strips, is set equal to $27(\text{number of pairs of strips})$; letters are then read off in pairs and anagrammed into words.