

THE LAST WORD **Christmas**

"Garlic in hyperlipidaemia: a multicentre randomised, controlled trial", *Cardiology in Practice Supplement*, June 1991, p 12;

"Lowering of blood lipid values with standardised garlic powder drug—long-range, multicentre study, *Cardiology in Practice Supplement*, June 1991, p 18.

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Stop talking

Q What parameters, if any, limit the number of different words available to us in English (or any other language)? Are we near to running out of words?

A There is no sensible limit, in theory, to the number of possible words in a language, although the constituents which make up words (the sounds and syllables) are indeed strictly limited. The remarkable thing about language is that it makes infinite use of these finite means.

Take British English as an example.

There are only 44 contrasting sound units (phonemes) in that dialect—consonants and vowels such as /p/, /t/, /k/, /e/, and /i/, which can combine in certain ways to make different words, such as /pit/, /pet/, /kip/, /pik/ (conventionally spelled pick), and so on. A large number of possibilities suggest themselves, therefore, but all languages have phonotactic rules limiting the ways these units combine. For example, in English we can have words beginning with the phoneme /h/, but there are none ending with it, or words ending with the /ng/ sound, but none beginning with them. There are only about 300 vowel plus consonant combinations making up the syllables of English—the most complex consisting of three consonants at the beginning of a syllable (in such words as string) and four at the end (in such words as twelfth).

With these limited resources, English then makes up words of increasing complexity—of two syllables (butter), three (discover), four (publication), five (innumerable), and so on. And so on? There are long words in English, all children know antidisestablishmentarianism, and the syllabic length grows significantly when we take compound items into account, such as science terms—neurolymphomatosis, deoxyribonucleic, and the like (if DNA was given in its fully explicit form, it is said to be more than 200 000 letters in length).

Therefore, there is no theoretical limit. Whatever you think is the longest word in the language, I can always make it longer by adding another element—an extra prefix, such as anti- or non-, or an extra element to make a new compound. Whether these words make

any real sense is another matter. In practical terms, we just don't need so many words and we're also nowhere near running out of words.

So the number of actual words in English is relatively quite small. There are some half a million words recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and a similar number in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*. However, the two books do not contain exactly the same words—many British dialect words do not appear in the US book (*Webster's*) and vice versa. There is as yet no "super dictionary" which includes all the words in English, including all dialect, slang, and specialised words. And when we reflect on the way in which English is spreading around the world, in the process borrowing thousands of words from other languages in such places as India, South Africa and Malaysia, it is obvious that keeping up with the vocabulary of the language is an enormous task. So nobody knows exactly how many words there are in English, although there are at least a million.

The only real limiting factor on the growth of a language's vocabulary is the power of the human imagination. People invent words all the time, although not all of them actually get into the standard language. A few years ago, on a BBC Radio 4 programme, I ran a competition in which listeners were asked to invent words to express concepts of importance to them. The winner was the word we need to express the feeling we have when we are at an airport waiting for our luggage to appear on the carousel, and everyone else's luggage is appearing except ours: we chose "bagonize".

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