Longest Word

What is the longest word in the English language?

But then one day I learned a word
that saved me achin' nose,
the biggest word you ever 'eard,
and this is 'ow it goes:
"Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious"
[from Walt Disney's film *Mary Poppins*]

As mentioned in the Preface, some odd properties of words are so obvious that they inevitably will be abused. No property has been abused more than word length. Every child wants to know what the longest word is. The temptation to coin a new record holder has proven irresistible. Few of these coined words make their way into dictionaries, but some do, and every few generations the canonical longest "word" changes.

In ancient Greece, Aristophanes was fond of concocting long words to amuse his audiences. His longest comes from the play *Ecclesiazusae* and basically means "hash": lopadotemachoselachogaleokranioleiosanodrimhypotrimmatosilphioparaomelitokatakechymenokichlepikossyphopattoperisteralektryonoptekephalliokigklopeleiolagoiosiraiobaphetraganopterygon.

In Shakespeare's school days he learned the longest Latin word, which the clown Costard pontificates in *Love's Labor's Lost*: honorificabilitudinitatibus.

In Sir Walter Scott's youth he learned the longest word and repeated it to his diary (though he mangled it a bit by replacing the first n with a p): floccinaucinihilipilification.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, students learned that the longest word was: antidisestablishmentarianism.

And so on.

Suppose we ignore these coined examples. Then what is the longest word? As technical knowledge accumulates, ever more complicated experimental apparatus, chemical compounds, medical conditions, etc. are invented or discovered. These need to be named, and these names tend to be quite long. Words like: anhydrohydroxyprogesterone, dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane, electroencephalographically, ethylenediaminetetraacetate, hydroxydesoxycorticosterone, octamethylpyrophosphoramide, and trinitrophenylmethylnitramine come into use. The longest medical-sounding word in the major dictionaries is the 45-letter name of a supposed lung disease: pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis.

However, it turns out that this word is a hoax perpetrated by the members of the National Puzzlers' League, the world's oldest wordplay association. The word is unknown to medical science. The League President (Everett M. Smith) coined the word at the 103rd meeting of the League, held on February 22, 1935 in New York City. It was picked up by a newspaper reporter for the *Herald Tribune* and printed the next day in the headline of an article on the League meeting. Frank Scully, author of a series of puzzle books and later one of the early UFO enthusiasts, read the newspaper article and repeated the word in *Bedside Manna; The Third Fun in Bed Book*, (Simon and Schuster, 1936, p. 87). On the strength of this citation, League members (with a wink from the editors?) got the word into both the *OED Supplement* and *Webster's Third*. There it remains even to this day.

Suppose we ignore these technical terms. Then what is the longest word? Dictionaries contain many long words such as: countercountermeasures, counterrevolutionaries, deinstitutionalization, intercomprehensibility, interdenominationalism, overintellectualization, postimpressionistically, semimicrodetermination, transubstantiationalist.

However, in order to save space, dictionaries do not explicitly list all such words, which are called "closed compounds." In the explanatory sections of most dictionaries, the editors explic-

itly state that since the meanings of these words can be deduced from their component parts, the space they would consume can be put to better use. So, for example, many verbs can have "re-" added to them to form other verbs, and many nouns, adjectives, and adverbs can likewise be modified by the application of prefixes and suffixes. If these prefixes or suffixes can be added once, why can't they be added again? "Countercountermeasures" is a word; is "countercounter-countermeasures" one too?

And so on.

Suppose we strip off the prefixes and suffixes. Then what is the longest word? The problem now is that it's not easy to say what is a prefix or a suffix, because most words were formed sometime in history by compounding shorter words. For example, in the word "alphabet," is "alpha" a prefix?

So the only reasonable conclusion is that there is no longest word. Mathematicians have known for millennia that there is no largest number. They have adjusted to the disappointment. I suppose we can too. But if a small child (or newspaper reporter) pleads with you to please, please, tell what the longest word is, perhaps a 45-letter lung disease will be good enough for a few generations.

companions, beginning with letter c [lacunetta → la cunetta]—*small channel dug in the bottom of a large channel*

curbing—closest to two million letter product for a common word (2000376-t)

curie—longest uncommon hospitable [ecurie & courie & cuirie & curnie & curiae & curies] (5-t)

curing—closest to one million letter product for a common word (1000188)

curiosity—example of a word that sounds like letters, beginning with letter q sound [QRESET]

curnie—see "curie"—*group of people*

curtainless—longest uncommon alternade [cranes & utils] (11-t)—*without curtains*

curvaceousnesses—longest uncommon word spelled with short lowercase letters (16)—*qualities of having a well-rounded body*

customizable—common word containing most consecutive letters in order after letter z (3-t)

cutter classification—longest well-mixed transdeletion for a phrase [cutter classification → facilities contracts] (20-t)—*library classification scheme*

cut the ground from under someone's feet—longest phrase containing three types of vowels (33-t)—*undermine*

cyclo—see "hexachlorocyclohexane"—*three-wheeled taxi*

cymba—longest uncommon progressive sum pair [cymba → bloc → nar → os → h] (5-t)—*boat-shaped palm seedpod*

czar—example of a word that begins with silent letter c