

DISCUSSION AND CORRESPONDENCE

ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION FOR THE METRIC SYSTEM

DOUBTLESS practically all scientific workers favor general use of the decimal or metric system of weights and measures. Obviously there are certain unavoidable difficulties, both psychological and economic, which must be overcome before this end can be attained. It seems inconsistent, then, for users of the system to add unnecessarily, even in small degree, to the popular prejudice against the change.

Just such an unnecessary minor difficulty is produced by a common American practise in the pronunciation of metric names containing the prefix *cent-*. As a matter of history, it is true, these names came to us from the French; they could just as well, however, have been taken directly into English from the Latin and Greek. In most respects these words are already, by common consent, fully Anglicized; we never employ the French syllabic stress, nor do we use the French sound of the *r* or the *i* or the second *e* in *centimeter*. Why, then, should we ever say "sänt" (sänt), approximating the sound in *centime*, for the straightforward English "sënt" (as in *center*)? Although this hybrid pronunciation is (for example) not recognized by the Funk and Wagnalls "New Standard Dictionary," it is certainly widely prevalent in this country, and it doubtless adds a little to the unthinking popular prejudice against the metric system as a "high-brow" foreign innovation. The same considerations apply to the word *centigrade*, which has come into English by the same route.

In various other English words, such as *cental*, *centipede*, and *centenary*, *cent* is regularly pronounced as in the case of the name of our monetary unit. The only excuse for a different practise for the metric system is the fact that these words were first used by the French. They are truly international words, however, and as a matter of practical convenience they should be naturalized in each

language in which they are used. Any attempt at precise international uniformity for such words is obviously predestined to failure, except as this uniformity comes with the general adoption of an international auxiliary language such as Esperanto—and even when this happens the usage of "national" languages will probably remain unchanged.

And while we are about it, in conformity with the definite trend of modern English usage, can we not all agree to drop the "me" from *gram(me)*, and to write *meter* rather than *metre*?

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EXTRAMUNDANE LIFE

TO THE EDITOR OF SCIENCE: In SCIENCE for March fourth an eminent astronomer speaks of the "strong probability that intelligent life exists in abundance throughout the universe." May I inquire where I can secure any *evidence* in support of this statement? I should like to know upon what grounds I may assert that life exists anywhere but upon this earth. Secondly, how may I know it is intelligent? And thirdly, how may I know that it exists in abundance? The whole assertion savors to me of newspaper pseudo-science.

HUBERT LYMAN CLARK

WILLIAMSTOWN, MASS.,
April 11

TO THE EDITOR OF SCIENCE: On April 4 I had the pleasure of suggesting by letter directly to Professor Hubert Lyman Clark that he read Professor Simon Newcomb's superb essay of thirteen printed pages on this very old subject, entitled "Life in the Universe," and contained in his volume, "Side-Lights on Astronomy" (Harper and Brothers), pp. 120-132, 1906. One of Newcomb's concluding sentences (p. 132) reads, "It is, therefore, perfectly reasonable to suppose that beings, not only animated, but endowed with reason, inhabit countless worlds in space."

W. W. CAMPBELL

MOUNT HAMILTON, CALIFORNIA,
April 25