

# Problem #3

## Humpty Dumpty.

Had our ovoid friend lived only three years longer, and been born (or is it laid) one third of his age at the time of his demise earlier, he would have died when he was as old as he would have been if he had lived to the age of five years less than twice the age at which he died. How old was he when he had his fatal fall?

## Solution:

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the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration's plan for 4 July 1976: "The afternoon is to be devoted to town meetings and speeches, and at 4 p.m. (11 a.m. Hawaii time) all the bells will ring out simultaneously." Regarding this last item, Darlene C. Schmidt (Letters, 26 Sept. 1975, p. 1045) raises the question: "Has anyone considered what the effect might be of all that simultaneous sound vibration?"

This brings to mind a report of another experiment along the same lines. I quote the report in extenso:

Once on a time, a notion was started, that if all the people in the world would shout at once, it might be heard in the moon. So the projectors agreed it should be done in just ten years. Some thousand shiploads of chronometers were distributed to the selectman and other great folks of all the different nations. For a year beforehand, nothing else was talked about but the awful noise that was to be made on the great occasion. When the time came, everybody had their ears so wide open to hear the universal ejaculation of Boo—the word agreed upon—that nobody spoke except a deaf man in one of the Feejee Islands, and a woman in Pekin, so that the world was never so still since creation.

This report is from "The autocrat of the breakfast table (Everyone his own Boswell)" by Oliver Wendell Holmes.

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### References

1. O. W. Holmes, *The Writings of Oliver Wendell Holmes* (Houghton Mifflin/Riverside, Boston, 1891), vol. 1, p. xi.

### "Greenhouse Effect": Definition

The discussion of the term "greenhouse effect" in the letters section of *Science* (12 Dec. 1975, p. 1042) provides an example of a popular lexicographic fallacy. The etymology of a word should not be confused with its meaning. No matter that the coinage of "greenhouse effect" may have been based on an incomplete analogy between the processes of heating by natural radiation of a greenhouse and of the earth's surface and lower layers of atmosphere. Once the word is in use, meaning is determined by usage and not by its derivation. Of the 41 citations for "greenhouse effect" in the Merriam Company research files, 28 apply to heating of the earth's surface and surrounding layers of atmosphere, and seven refer to a supposed similar phenomenon on other planets. Only six citations are inexplicit or can be construed as including the heating of a greenhouse itself. Based on this evidence of usage, the term "greenhouse effect"

was entered in Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary and will be included in the forthcoming addenda to Webster's Third New International Dictionary. The discussion in *Science* was particularly useful, since it brought to light the fact that the definition needs to be revised to emphasize the earth's surface as well as the lower layers of the atmosphere, as follows.

: warming of the earth's surface and the lower layers of atmosphere that tends to increase with increasing atmospheric carbon dioxide and that is caused by conversion of solar radiation into heat in a process involving selective transmission of short wave solar radiation by the atmosphere, its absorption by the earth's surface, and re-radiation as infrared which is absorbed and partly reradiated back to the surface by carbon dioxide and water vapor in the air.

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### Maytenus: A Folk Medicine

Interested in both *nomina generica* and folk medicine, I was curious about Kupchan's reference to "ack-ack" (Letters, 14 Nov. 1975, p. 612) as the only common name found for any species of *Maytenus* (in Africa?). Uphof (1) notes that African *Maytenus* (alias *Gymnosporia*) *senegalensis* has several colloquial names, among them *bazimo*, "confetti tree," *kisambila*, *mmoza*, and *umiviesa*. It is reportedly used as an aphrodisiac, for treating blennorrhagia, and for wounds.

In Brazil, *Maytenus* (alias *Nemopanthus*) *ilicifolius* is called *cancerosa* (2). It is sold in markets and is recommended for ulcers and stomach disorders. In Argentina, it is called *congorosa* and *sombra de toro*. It is also called *congoasa* and *mayteno*. It has been called "holy thorn tree" in English. Containing tannin, the foliage is used as an analgesic, aperient, astringent, cicatrizant, and stomachic. Sometimes the leaves are used to adulterate maté, the Paraguayan tea. Remillard *et al.* (19 Sept. 1975, p. 1002) reported that maytansine, which comes from *Maytenus*, inhibits mitosis. Is the name *cancerosa* a coincidence?

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### References

1. J. C. Th. Uphof, *Dictionary of Economic Plants* (Cramer, Lehre, Germany, ed. 2, 1968), p. 334.
2. C. Stellfeld (G. M. Hocking, translator), *Q. J. Crude Drug Res.* 8, 1301 (1968).