



Clipped Names

► OUR unwillingness to name things by their full names sometimes results in rather impossible abbreviations.

We call chrysanthemums simply "mums" and gladioli merely "glads", in blithe disregard of the fact that the former is hardly more than the Latin ending for a neuter-gender word, and the latter actually an enlargement rather than a diminution of the name. For "gladiolus" is Latin for "little sword" (the reference is to the shape of the leaves), whereas if you drop the diminutive ending, "-olus", what remains is the root-word for a whole, big sword.

We don't truncate all plant names thus, even where lack of common English names forces us to use Latin or Greek polysyllables. Nobody, for example, calls an aspidistra an asp, or a nasturtium a nasty, or a ginkgo a gink, or a magnolia a mag. And nobody would dream of referring to a heliotrope by only the first syllable of its name, whether with long or short pronunciation of the vowel.

We have the same curious habit of chopping animal names in two, with similarly absurd results if we stop to think of original meanings. Thus, we call a hippopotamus a "hippo." Well, the full-length word means "horse of the river"; *hippo* means merely horse—which the animal certainly doesn't greatly resemble. Rhinoceros is commonly shortened to "rhino." But the full name means "nose-horn"; *rhino* means just nose. The shortened name would seem to be more appropriate if applied to a tapir or an ant-eater or an elephant.

Perhaps the height of absurdity is reached in shortening orang-utan to orang. *Orang* is a Malay word meaning

man; *utan* means forest or woods. Orang-utan therefore signifies man-of-the-woods. But *orang*, taken by itself, is the designation for human beings.

Even in the microscopic world, we have the same tendency to clip names regardless of mangled meanings — and that by the scientists themselves. Thus, bacteriologists commonly use the abbreviations "strep" and "staph," when they mean respectively streptococcus and staphylococcus.

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