A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed November 30, 1932

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HIGHS AND LOWS

The terms "high" and "low", applied by the weatherman to areas of high and low barometric pressure, respectively, though they have been in use for forty years or more, have never become fully assimilated into our language. This is indicated by the fact that, to this day, they are usually printed with quotation marks around them, as if they were of recent coinage and not yet generally familiar. At one time the U.S. Weather Bureau employed the curious expedient of printing these words in small capitals wherever they occurred in a text.

The respective synonyms "anticyclone" and "cyclone" are open to some objections, which have often been discussed. Occasional attempts have been made to introduce substitutes. Thus Prof. L.W. Lyde, of the University of London, in his book "The Continent of Europe," uses the terms "wind-wyr" and "wind-whirl." "Wyr" is not found in the Oxford Dictionary, but Lyde tells us it is the name of an ancient instrument used in the defense of a city wall. "This machine," he says, "heavily weighted, moved downwards and outwards in a circle, and on the outskirts of its circuit it might and often did cause considerable disturbance " -- even as an anticyclone sometimes does.

A German writer, Dr. H. Markgraf, has proposed calling a low a "sog," and a high a "quellgebiet" (the former term expressing the idea of suction, while the latter means literally "source region"), in reference to the inflow and outflow, respectively, of the surface winds in the two pressure systems. Finally, Sir Napier Shaw, in his "Manual of Meteorology," suggests calling a high a "hypsobar," and a low a "hypobar."

Both Lyde's and Markgraf's proposed terms are beautiful examples of words that ought never to be added to the scientific vocabulary, because they are adapted to use only in one language, while Shaw's terms, correctly formed from Greek roots, are entirely suitable for international use.

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