Simplifying Agronomic Terminology with the Prefix “DE”

Carleton R. Ball

A scanning of recent agronomic and other scientific literature shows opportunity for simplification in at least one particular. Certain long and cumbersome phrases may be replaced largely by a single simple word, used either as verb or adjective.

The words under consideration are verbs used to express the removal of an object, organ, substance, or quality. These words also are used as adjectives describing the processes of removal or the original objects after such removal has occurred. Pertinent examples are such words as “deflower” (to remove flowers), “dehull” (to remove hulls), “desilt” (to remove silt), “desprout” (to deprive of sprouts), and “dewater” (to remove water).

Unless such terms are employed, the idea can be stated only in a much longer phrase. Scientific papers contain many such phrases. For example, “the plants from which the flowers had been removed”, “removal of the hulls from the kernels”, or “the process of removing the sprouts”. These would be replaced by such simple phrases as “the deflowered plants”, “dehulling the kernels”, and “the desprouting process”, respectively.

There can be no objection, of course, to the longer phrases if used only occasionally or if printing expense is no object. When such phrases must be used from 10 to 100 times in a single paper, however, both expense and wearisome repetition may be worth considering.

Many groups of technical workers besides agronomists are interested in this problem because of the growing demand for brevity in abstracts as well as in original papers. Both this interest and the resulting trend are indicated by a survey of recent usage. The number of terms so used and the frequency of their use definitely are increasing.

Table 1 contains a list of such terms compiled merely by jotting down examples met with in ordinary reading and in editing agronomic abstracts. No special study was made of literature in any technical field. The list, however, contains words used by agronomists, animal husbandmen, aviators, chemists, economists, engineers, foresters, horticulturists, manufacturers, military men, pest exterminators, tax officials, and general writers.

The first column in Table 1 contains the infinitive, whether it was noted in use or not. The letters in parentheses indicate inclusion of some form of the word in the Standard (S) and /or Webster’s International (W) dictionaries. The second column contains those forms of the root word actually observed in use. The numerals in parentheses record the number of times each form of the word was noted.

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2 Executive Secretary, Coordinating Committee, U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, Tennessee Valley Authority, and the Valley States Agricultural Colleges, Washington, D. C.