

The Contra Connection

Should contra terminology be standardized?

by Dan Pearl, Larry Jennings and Ted Sannella

Dan Pearl: There is a good case for using standard terminology to refer to figures, people, formations, and positions. Dancers can dance anywhere to any caller and react with confidence and comprehension to the walk-thru and calls. This principle has been embraced by Modern Western Square Dance (MWSD) activity. It has served them well; why couldn't traditional contra and square callers do the same thing?

For one thing, it would be hard. There is no overseeing body like MWSD's Callerlab or Sets In Order to designate official terminology. Some well-known books like Ted's *Balance and Swing* and Larry's *Zesty Contras*, although authoritative, don't claim to present definitive terminology for everyone to use everywhere; they merely present the terminology to be used within the book. The similarity of the glossaries of those two books imply that the authors live very nearby to each other. Which brings up the real point.

Callers within one locale tend to use the same words. Dancers have been trained to respond to these words, and callers have been trained to use those words to elicit the most comprehension from the dancers. The set of terms will be colored by the history and culture of the region. The terms from other indigenous dance forms may spill over into the contra realm. The contra caller merely selects the words that will do the most efficient job, given the setting.

Like the dances we do, the calls themselves tend to evolve and migrate. More dancers are being trained to understand the term *Becket formation*, but in other areas *Bucksaw formation* is firmly entrenched. *California swirl* might be understood in some locales, but *box the gnat* (despite its imprecision for Modern Western Square Dancers) might serve just fine in other locales. Other synonyms that might be locality-based are *neighbor/opposite/the one below*, *trail buddy/shadow/corner*, and *grand right and left/grand chain*, among others.

As the Folk Process does its job, you find that good terminology will displace poor terminology (where "good" means "effective here"). The evolution of the language of dancing is almost as fascinating as the evolution of the dancing itself. Standardization would gain something, but at a terrible price.

Larry Jennings: I consider that, as we look for new words to suit the new concepts and actions of modern contras, the most important concern is to keep the concepts straight. Dancers, within reason, can adapt to different words so long as the caller is not inconsistent about concepts. However, as pointed out by Ted, if a caller uses *neighbor* sometimes to mean a "different person" in each change and sometimes to mean "always the same dancer" he is asking for trouble.

I also call attention to the distinction between what appears in print and what is useful in the dance hall.

For example, in *Zesty Contras*, I used #3 to represent (speaking roughly) an individual or couple next beyond your *neighbor(s)*, who, in turn, were your non-partner(s) in the minor set. *Neighbor* has come into fairly general use. #3 was never intended to be used in the dance hall; it is the caller's problem to find substitutes.

I feel, therefore, that as new nomenclature is developed to suit the new dances (for instance, those with shadow interactions or those in Becket formation), those people who write about contra dancing should be very concerned with a careful exposition of what they are talking about. They should look as far ahead as possible when suggesting definitions for these concepts. A consensus about names for the concepts may then develop. Meanwhile, whether *buddy* or *shadow* is used for one such concept doesn't matter to me, nor to the dancers, in my opinion.

My opinions on details? I agree with Dan about standardization. In contrast to Ted, I like *shadow* for the dancer who is lurking in a nearby minor set, following you or leading you around, waiting to be invoked by a clever choreographer. My pet peeves? A caller insisting that beginners should get *improper* (whoever thought of that terminology?); reference to a *corner* when it is not at all clear who is clockwise from a man, counter-clockwise from a woman; and as voiced before in this column, use of *opposite* to refer to a dancer who cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be considered to be opposite you. (I understand that some local definition of *opposite* allows this, but I advocate revising such local definitions, without insisting on standardization.)

Ted Sannella: Recently I watched a caller teaching a group of new dancers. He got them into Becket formation for a dance walk-thru, then he told them that their *partner* was on one side of them and their *neighbor* was on the other side. He explained further that, in this particular dance, at the beginning of each repeat, the same neighbor will always be in that spot.

This got me to thinking about terminology. Not too long ago, in this same formation, I was referring to the non-partner beside you in line as your *corner* and to a recurring corner as your *special person*. More recently, while retaining the *corner* designation, I have begun to use the word *buddy* instead of *special person*. I know of some callers who expand this to *trail buddy* and others who use the word *shadow* for this recurring person. Likewise, in duple formation, I have heard callers use the words *corner* and *neighbor* interchangeably almost at random. If callers can't agree on terminology, I wonder if contra dancers (especially beginners) are confused by this inconsistency? In my opinion, they are. New dancers have enough problems without being exposed to conflicting terminology.

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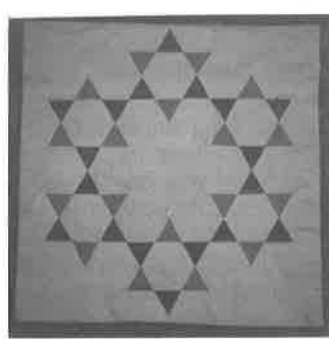
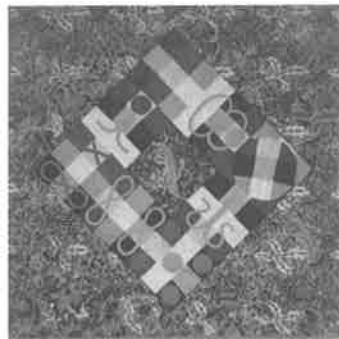
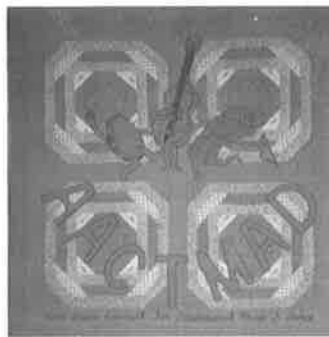
More CDSS Wallhangings

Paint Creek Folklore Society's banner (below, top left) was made by Rita Brown, Jenni Burke, and Joann Shulte. The right corner shows a map of Michigan with location highlights: the Michigan Dance Heritage Weekend in Lexington, Lovett Hall dances in Dearborn, the Ark Folk Club in Ann Arbor, Elderly Instruments in Lansing, and others.

Carol Dexter made **AACTMAD**, the banner for **Ann Arbor Council for Traditional Music and Dance** in shades of peach, pale green, and white. Notice the embroidered and appliquéed instruments dancing up a storm.

Fandango for Those Who Know (bottom, left) is from **Mary Beth Goodman**, Brainard, New York. It is done in blues, yellows, reds, and greens, and you can see the floor pattern of the dance, "reading" clockwise. The background batik fabric was left over from an earlier project and came from Cathie Draine, a CDSS member who was living in Indonesia at the time.

Judy Gatland of Sunderland, Massachusetts sent us her banner, based on an Amish quilt design. The six-pointed longsword lock design is made with rich turquoise, purple, and cranberry colors, the colors of Swift River Longsword, a local sword team.



There are now 29 wallhangings which are available for display. They are colorful and fun, traditional original. Write for details on displaying the wallhangings at your events or in making one.

They will be at the **Ralph Page Weekend** in New Hampshire on January 19-20; at the **Hands Across the Valley Quilt Show** in Amherst, Massachusetts on March 16-17; and at the **Playford Ball** in New York City on April 6.

Connection, continued

Let's discuss that recurring person who appears in so many of our modern contras these days. Would it be helpful to agree whether this individual should be called your *buddy*, *shadow*, *trail buddy*, or whatever? I think that agreement among all callers in a given area would be beneficial. My preference is for *buddy* because I consider this person to be one who is nearby to assist when needed. Proponents for *shadow* argue that this is the best word for one who follows wherever you go, while *trail buddy* advocates point out that their choice embraces both of the other concepts. Is there a consensus opinion for one of these terms, or perhaps a better word that hasn't come to my attention?

Consider this: In some parts of the country, contra dancing is still an emerging phenomenon. Many callers learned to call squares before knowing anything about contras. Likewise, there are many experienced square dancers who are struggling to understand contras. In squares, your partner, corner, opposite, etc. are identified by position. Frequently they change during the course of a square dance sequence. In a square, if a caller says to swing your partner, he means your *current* partner. Not so in contras. If, during the course of a contra dance, the caller says to swing your partner, you are expected to seek out the person who began the dance with you. This person may be on your right or your left, across from you, or perhaps approaching from a nearby minor group. Depending on the background of the dancers, in the context of a contra, the words *partner*, *corner*, and *opposite* may mean different things to different people, and the words and concepts such as *neighbor*, *buddy*, *shadow*, *trail buddy*, *contra corner*, *neutral corner*, and *imaginary (ghost) couple* may be foreign to some pretty good dancers in certain parts of the country. Perhaps more effort should be made to point out the differences in the ground rules between square and contra terminology.

Granted, there is no ruling body in the contra dance world that can dictate and enforce "correct" terminology. However, it may be possible to arrive at some consensus among the callers and dancers who read this column. Perhaps we are opening a can of worms and such diverse opinions will be expressed that no consensus is possible. We'd like to think that a dialogue on this subject would be interesting and might even be productive. Does anyone out there have an opinion to share?

Callers **Dan Pearl**, **Larry Jennings**, and **Ted Sannella** live in New England. *The Contra Connection* is a series of articles written to help beginning callers and organizations. "Standardized Contra Terminology?" is the tenth article in the series. Reprints of previous articles are available from CDSS; write for details.



Hey there! What do you think about standardizing contra terminology? We're curious. Send your letters to *The Contra Connection*, c/o CDSS News, 17 New South Street, Northampton, MA 01060.