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DIOPTRY or DIOPTRICS?





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DIOPTRY OR DIOPTRIC?

By H. KNAPP, M. D.

THE controversy between Dr. S. M. Burnett and Dr. E. G. Loring will, I hope, lead to the general adoption of one or other of these terms, and thus end the unpleasant confusion. The question is, Which shall it be? In former years linguistic disputes were decided by the sovereign, as is illustrated by the following famous example: Louis XIV. at one of his soirées, happened to say "*Mon carrosse.*" One of the court littérateurs was bold enough to remark that the word *carrosse* was feminine. The king, not willing to admit that he had made a mistake, authoritatively replied: "*Je veux que carrosse soit masculin!*" and since that time it is masculine. To learn whether it is proper to say *dioptry* or *dioptric*, we shall have to appeal to her Royal Majesty, for the language we speak is "the Queen's English." Until she has given her decision, the endeavor to come to an understanding need not be looked upon as a lack of loyalty. As far as grammatical analogy goes, the word *dioptric* seems to be as good as *dioptry*. To Dr. Loring's list of words ending in *ic* being used as nouns and as adjectives, I beg to add another taken from a branch of science kindred to optics. One of the most admirable researches of Helmholtz resulted in the demonstration that the quality of sound called *timbre* in French, *Klangfarbe* in German, *timbre*,

clang-tint, sound-color in English, depends on the combination of a fundamental tone with a number of "over-tones." These over-tones are now generally called "*harmonics*." One harmonic, for instance, is the octave of the fundamental tone. In the same way we might call the unit of refraction a *dioptric*. Unfortunately, the plural of this word has been used from time immemorial to designate the *science* of refraction. If we now designate the unit of refraction by the word *dioptric*, the plural of this word will have a double meaning which it is desirable to avoid, even though it cause no ambiguity. The names of certain sciences, as Dr. Loring recalls to mind, end in *y*, others in *ics*. The science of refraction *might* be called *dioptry*, but, since it *is* called *dioptrics*, it would be preferable, I should think, to designate the new acquisition by a different word. The scientific musician has long studied *harmony*; of late he has become acquainted with the *harmonics* (not the harmonies) of a tone. Conversely, the oculist who has long studied *dioptrics* has of late been invited to express the degrees of ametropia by *dioptries* (not by *dioptrics*). I say he has been invited, for the oculists of continental Europe, who, several years ago, thought it convenient for practical purposes to choose the refractive power of a lens of one metre focal distance as a unit, unanimously called this unit a *dioptry*. In my opinion there was then, and there is now, no reason why English-speaking people should not adopt this term and thus make it international. In spite of all this, I am just as willing as Dr. Loring is to adopt any word upon which the majority will agree, for language is convention.



