



of knowledge that can be remedied by education, while “idiot” suggests an irremediable mental deficiency. The difference between “idiot” and “stupid” seems subtler, and involves attitude. I’d also put “moron” in that cluster, which I was surprised not to see on the list of nearly 50 words.

It was Roget’s Thesaurus that encouraged me to differentiate among synonyms. When I first bought it, I hadn’t a clue how to pronounce “Roget” or “thesaurus,” but a note from Mrs. Bustard on a book report — she had beautiful handwriting — persuaded me that the 35-cent pocket Roget’s, though it cost a dime more than Mad Magazine, was worth it.

Early in the 19th century, British physician Peter Mark Roget invented an ingenious system to categorize the meanings of tens of thousands of words and phrases in a hierarchy of classes and sections. His taxonomy, like Carl Linnaeus’s organization of the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms, revealed distinctions among related items that an alphabetical system didn’t.

Today, with synonyms just a click away, Roget’s project seems sadly antiquarian, unlike the log-log slide rule, also invented by Roget, which Miss Bialecki, my AP physics teacher, made us master, and which fully merits its obsolescence. It’s Roget’s lifelong obsession with word lists that makes me want to organize the Quinnipiac answers.

Second on the Trump list, after “idiot,” comes “incompetent.” “Unqualified” is fifth; below that, “disaster” and “inexperienced” show up. Each of those accurately describes the president. It would not be redundant to use them adjectivally — “incompetent ignoramus,” for example — since technically there’s a difference between being a dummkopf and being a screwup.

“Liar” comes in third in the poll; the related “dishonest” and “con-man” turn up lower down. To me, this trio suggests moral culpability, as do “racist,” “bigot,” “dictator,” “evil” and “greedy.” The effect that those traits cause in us is captured by another cluster: “disgusting,” “despicable” and “embarrassment.”

I would draw a distinction between the 10th place word, “egotistical,” and — lexicological trigger warning — the 11th, “asshole.” “Egotistical” strikes me as a clinical diagnosis, as do “bully,” “narcissist” and “aggressive,” which are also on the list, as do the regrettably stigmatizing “crazy” and “mental.” On the other hand, I’d put “asshole” in the same group as “arrogant” (13th), along with “clown,” “buffoon” and “blowhard,” all of which imply volition or agency; all narcissists are not necessarily assholes. (The absence from the list of “juvenile,” “impulsive” and “unstable” puzzles me.)

To be sure, the poll reports positive words, too. “Leader,” “strong,” “successful,” “great,” “good,” “smart,” “decisive,” “negotiator” and “patriotism” turn up, roughly in proportion to his favorability with his base. But I don’t know what spin to infer from the answers “president,” “businessman,” “business,” “American,” “money” and “rich” — I can’t tell if they’re meant to be merely factual, like calling him a golfer or a husband, or slyly ironic, like calling him a golfer or a husband.

As the poll makes clear, Americans see Trump as an idiot, a liar and an — um, and a clown. That's the baseline. There was no fresh news about his character in his tweet assaulting Mika Brzezinski, co-host of MSNBC's "Morning Joe"; we already knew he's irredeemably disgusting. His indifference to Vladimir Putin's sabotage, his complicity in savaging Medicaid, his vendetta on truth and journalism: nothing new there, either. We already knew his narcissism is sociopathic.

The only thing we don't know is if he can be pulled down before he pulls us down with him. Will some behavior of his be so despicable that even his toadies and enablers gag on the shame he makes them swallow? Will some evidence emerge that's so irrefutably damning that Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell are compelled to care more for country than for power? On the brink of exposure and ridicule, in the vise of global crisis, in the panic of mental meltdown, will Trump clutch — and quit? The suspense of following those storylines is mesmerizing. But the stress of it is traumatizing our psyches.

Roget knew from trauma. His father and wife died young. His depressed mother dominated him. His sister and daughter were wracked by mental illness. A beloved uncle killed himself in his arms. Roget's biographer, Joshua Kendall, says that as a boy, Roget "stumbled upon a remarkable discovery — that compiling lists of words could provide solace, no matter what misfortunes may befall him."