

CORRESPONDENCE.

"ASSET"—"OUTGO".

To the Editor of the Journal of the Institute of Actuaries.

SIR,—Actuaries are in the constant habit of using the word "asset", in such phrases as "a valuable asset", "an unrealizable asset"; and they would find it difficult, if not impossible, to substitute for it any other word that would convey precisely the same idea. Most of your readers will therefore probably be surprised to learn that the word is one not recognized by the dictionaries, which give only the plural form "assets", and either state distinctly, or imply, that the singular form does not exist. Webster's dictionary states that "assets" is derived from French *assez* (enough), and gives the following explanation:—(1) Goods or estate of a deceased person, subject by law to the payment of his debts and legacies; called *assets*, because sufficient to render the executor or administrator liable to the creditors and legatees, so far as such goods or estate may extend. "*Blackstone*" is quoted as an authority for this use. (2) Effects of an insolvent debtor. (3) The entire property of all sorts, belonging to a merchant or to a trading association.—*McCulloch*. Skeat, in his Etymological Dictionary, gives further information as to the word. He says that the final *ts* is a mere orthographical device for representing the old sound of the Old French *z*, as in the word *Fitz* (son), and adds that this *z* was certainly sounded as *ts*, as the German *z* is to this day. He further says, "It will be observed that *assets* was "originally a phrase, then an adverb, then used adjectively, and lastly "employed as a substantive. Of course, it is etymologically in the "singular, like *alms, riches, eaves, &c.*; but it is doubtful if this "etymological fact has ever been recognized."

My attention has been drawn to the point by reading an article in the *American Exchange and Review* for May 1885. This quotes some remarks from the *Baltimore Underwriter*, from which it appears that a New York citizen has been taken to task by one of the newspapers for calling the city sinking fund "an asset". The writer defends the use of the word "asset", but states that it "has been rarely used outside of insurance expression", and implies that it is an insurance technicality. I am, however, under the impression that on this side of the Atlantic it has become well established in commercial phraseology, and I am decidedly of opinion that the word is so convenient—in fact, so indispensable—as *singular* "asset", *plural* "assets", that we may well agree to shut our eyes to the irregularity of its formation, and continue to use it without hesitation.

Another insurance word which has not yet found its way into the dictionaries, is "outgo"; used as a brief expression for the total of the payment items entered in the revenue account of a life office, as opposed to "income", which is the total of the receipt items. I find, however, that *Worcester* gives the word, with the explanation. "expenditure, outlay." Some dictionaries give the word "outgoings"

in this sense; but, although this form must be considered as well established in general use, most dictionaries do not give it. "Outgo" is not open to any etymological objection, and its general acceptance is probably only a question of time.

I am, Sir,
Your obedient servant,

Edinburgh,
5 June 1885.

T. B. SPRAGUE.
