

SPOONERGRAMS

JIM PUDER

Saratoga, California

Spoonerisms are usually thought of as involving the switch of initial sounds in a pair of words, as in *prairie schooner/scary pruner*. But as Susan Thorpe points out in her article “Spooneristic Variations” in the May 2007 Word Ways, there is no reason why a spoonerism cannot involve three or more words. She proposes that, to regularize such constructions, the words’ initial sounds should be assumed to shift left or right along the line of words in a stepwise, circular manner, giving these examples of the process in three-word spoonerisms:

Max fells tree	Wyn sent Milly	Gill waits here
Fax tells me	Min went silly	Hill gates weir
Tax Mel’s fee	Cyn meant Willy	Will hates gear

Is there any practical limit to the number of words that can participate in such a multipartite spoonerism? Before exploring that question, let me propose some additional ground rules for the exercise:

- 1) As may be seen, multipartite spoonerisms give rise to rectangular word arrays of n words by n lines, where n is the number of initial or end sounds involved; for the nonce, at least, let us call such arrays *spoonergrams* (1).
- 2) Note that in Susan’s examples, every horizontal line constitutes a complete sentence; for spoonergrams to hold any great interest for wordplayers, I think that this needs to be a standard requirement of the form. The problem arises, however, especially in larger spoonergrams, that it is quite difficult to maintain normal grammar and syntax throughout the array. I would therefore propose that the spoonergram be held only to the lower-order syntactical standard typically exhibited by newspaper headlines. Imagine, e.g., a slightly inebriated Rev. W. A. Spooner attempting to read aloud the headlines of the tabloid newspapers racked nearby as he waits in line at a supermarket checkout stand, and you get the idea.
- 3) As an aid to sentence comprehensibility, I propose that punctuation be permitted.
- 4) Lastly, an appropriate rule would seem to that no beginning or ending sound should occur more than once in any horizontal line of a spoonergram.

My plan for attempting to ascertain the spoonergram’s maximum feasible size was this: first, I would determine how large a set of different ending sounds I could assemble for which a similar set of different beginning sounds could be found which would produce reasonably common words in all combinations. This would establish the size of my trial spoonergrams. Then the strategy would simply be to apply the creative use of punctuation and the free substitution of homophones to the resulting word strings in an effort to them into sentences which at least achieved the relaxed syntactical standards described above. If this could be done, it would demonstrate that the largest feasible spoonergram was at least as large as my trial size, and probably not much more.

After some experimentation, I settled upon this sequence of nine ending sounds, which is the

same in each line of the four trial spoonergrams below: *-arries, -oh, -ad, -awls, -ors, -old, -ates, -aze, -ils*. (Note that six of the nine sounds terminate in “s” sounds; I found that, up to a point, “s” endings work to facilitate sentence formation.) To these ending sounds I matched the nine beginning sounds *b-, d-, f-, g-, h-, k-, m-, p-* and *s-*, whose order of appearance changes in a stepwise way from line to line in the four trials. Although it would have been technically possible to attempt ten-word spoonergrams instead, the nine-word variety looked to be the largest that I could assemble without having to resort to exotic vocabulary and/or uncommon personal names, which I was hoping to avoid.

Having decided upon my sets of beginning and ending sounds, the question remained as to what order the beginning sounds should take for optimal results (i.e., to produce the most natural-sounding sentences). Unfortunately, a nine-word spoonergram takes a fair amount of time to construct and syntactically polish, and consequently investigating a large number of them isn’t a practical option. And yet, when homophones are taken into account, well over a hundred thousand different spoonergrams can be generated simply by varying the order in which the nine beginning sounds are sequenced. What to do? In the end, I had to settle for using arbitrary, externally-determined beginning-sound sequences, which meant that my trials would represent only a tiny random sampling of the spoonergram possibilities.

In the first spoonergram, the beginning sounds are arranged on the first line in the alphabetical order of their spellings, and shift one word to the right on each succeeding line. I was momentarily much encouraged by the pseudo-coherency of the first line (something to do with sin, cereals and Beverly Sills), but it soon became clear that the typical nine-word spoonergram line was apt to exhibit a considerably more strained syntax:

B D F G H K M P S

**Barry’s “dough” fad galls whores’ cold mates—pays Sills!
 Sari’s “Beau Dad” falls, gores—hold Kate’s maize pills!
 “Perry’s *so* bad...”—“Dolls Four’s” Gold *hates* Kay’s Mills!
 Maryse Poe sad: ball’s doors fold—Gates’ haze kills!
 Carrie’s mot: “Pad Saul’s”; Bors, doled, fetes gays’ Hills!
 Harry’s Coe, mad, pawls sores; bold dates faze Gills!
 Gary’s “Ho” cad mauls pores; sold, Bates days fills!
 Fairies go—had “calls”; Moore’s “polled”—sates beys, Dills!
 Dairy’s foe—gad!—hauls Coors, mold, pates, Say’s bills...**

For the second trial, I put the beginning sounds on the first line in reverse alphabetical order:

S P M K H G F D B

**Sari’s Poe, mad, calls whores “gold,” fetes day’s bills!
 Berries so “pad” malls, cores hold—*gates faze* Dills!
 Derry’s beau, sad, palls moors—“cold hates” gaze fills!
 “Fairies” doled bad Saul’s pores, mold Kate’s hays—Gills
 Gary’s faux “dad” bawls; Sorrs, polled, mates Kay’s Hills!
 Harry’s “go” fad “dolls” bores; sold, Pate’s Maize kills!
 Cary’s hoe—gad!—falls, doors bowled; sates Paye’s Mills!
 Maryse Coe had “galls,” “fours”—doled baits, Say’s Pills!
 Perry’s “Moe”—cad!—hauls *gaurs*; fold dates bey’s sills!**

While the results so far were not particularly discouraging, I had nonetheless hoped for better. Perhaps alphabetical order, forward or backward, was simply unlucky. Trying something a little more imaginative, I arranged my nine beginning sounds on the first line of a third trial spoonergram in the order in which their spellings occur in a well-known pangram:

H K D F M P G B S (How quickly daft jumping zebras vex!)

**Harry's "co-dad" falls; "Moors polled Gates!" bays Sills
Sari's "Ho" cad ("Dolls Four's" mold!) "pates" Gay's bills!
Barry's so "had"—calls Doors "fold mates," pays "gills!"
"Gary's Beau"—sad!—hauls Coors; doled, fate's maize pills!
Peris go bad: Saul's whores' "cold" dates faze Mills!
Mary's Poe—gad!—bawls "Sores hold Cates"; day's Phil's!
Ferry's "Mot Pad" galls Bors, sold—hates Kay's dills!
Dairy's foe, mad, "pols" gores; bold, sates Hay's kills!
"Carrie's dough fad mauls pores," Gold baits Say's Hills**

Once more, this time reversing the order of the beginning sounds in the previous trial:

S B G P M F D K H

**Sari's "beau"—gad!—palls Moors' fold, dates Kay's hills!
Harry's so bad, Gauls' pores mold; fetes dey's kills!
Kerry's Ho, sad, bawls; Gore's polled mates faze Dill's!
Dairy's Coe had Saul's boars' gold pates—maize fills!
Ferry's "dough cad" Hall's "sores-bold"; Gates pays mills!
Marries foe—dad calls; whores sold baits, Gay's pills!
Parries Moe, "Fad dolls, Coors' hold sates bay's 'gills'!"
Gary's Poe, mad, falls—door's "cold"; hates Say's bills!
Barrys go, pad malls—fores doled Kate's, Hay's sills!**

Though none of the nine-word spoonergrams in this exploration could be said to have produced nine "good" sentences, there were enough such sentences scattered throughout to suggest that somewhere out there, among the millions of possible order-nine spoonergrams yet to be checked, there must reside at least a thousand or so perfect "nines." The question is how to find them. I doubt that computers would be especially well-suited to searching for such objects, given the various complexities involved; some more sophisticated human researcher, however, looking for a diverting way to kill an hour or two—well, fortune favors the bold.

Note

- 1) In his 1997 book *Words at Play* (Sterling), Ove Michaelsen reports that the term *spoonergram* was introduced by a contributor to the March 1945 issue of *The Enigma*, though he does not say what sort of object the word was used to describe. Probably it was used to designate the most familiar of the four possible varieties of the spoonerism, with the *spoonergram*-derived terms *spannergroom*, *spammergroom*, and *groomerspam*, which Michaelsen also mentions, being applied to the three less-familiar varieties. (See the aforementioned article by Susan Thorpe for a discussion of these varieties.) In any event, as the term *spoonergram* seems to be no longer current in wordplay circles, I will assume that it is available for recycling.