

# TO DISSECT A BUTTERFLY

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To study the pun in depth is much like dissecting a butterfly. Once the scalpel is applied, the beauty vanishes. Nevertheless, here is a clinical survey.

Question: When is a pun not a pun? Answer: When it is disguised under the name Spoonerism, Stutterance, Literal Word, Pig Latin Word, Anglo-French, Anguish Languish, or some other type of Phonic. Perhaps this is because the distractors of the pun have so vehemently classified it as the lowest form of humor, that practitioners feel obligated to disguise it.

Few forms of word play have a more ancient or more honorable history than the pun. There are dozens in the Old Testament, but Hebrew puns do not translate well into English. In the ninth book of the Odyssey (circa 1200 BC), we find the wily Odysseus has given his name as Outis (Greek for "nobody") to the giant Polyphemus. When Odysseus later attacks Polyphemus in his cave, the giant calls for help to his fellow Cyclops, crying "Nobody is killing me!" His friends take his plea literally and make no attempt to help.

The word "pun" or "punnet" seemingly entered the English language about 1660, shortened from "pundigron", whose origin is uncertain. It may be an illiterate attempt at the Italian puntiglio which was used of a verbal quibble on fine distinctions. Incidentally, the word "quibble" from "quarterquibble" entered the language about the same time. For a number of years, pun and quarterquibble were synonyms, but the shorter word won out. Other names for puns have been "paronomasia" and "carriwicheit".

A pun seems to be a simple thing. Actually it can be quite complex. Perhaps the simplest is the identical word pun or antanaclasis, which depends upon two definitions of the same word: She was a good little girl as far as good little girls go, and as far as good little girls go, she went.

Then we have the homonym pun, using words of the same sound but different spelling: Pat and Mike were employed to separate the small potatoes from the large ones. When the doctor called upon Pat to treat him for a sore throat, he discovered he had made a mistake. Mike was the indisposed one -- a hoarse of a different culler.

The paragram pun, or Spoonerism, involves the interchange of init-

ial sounds: Pat and Mike attend school to learn how to shell peas and beans. Their classes met at different times. Sometimes they got mixed up; Pat attended Mike's class and vice-versa -- a course of a different huller.

The parasonancy pun involves a consonant change: Pat and Mike sound Irish, but actually their mother was a red-headed Scandinavian -- a Norse of another color.

Last, the metaphonic pun involves a vowel change: Pat's and Mike's father was an undertaker who used a lavender vehicle to transport his customers -- a hearse of a different color.

These basic forms can be combined and permuted. For example, a metaphonic parasonancy: The father used a green block-and-tackle to lower the coffins -- a hoist of a different color. Or, a paragrammatic-metaphonic-parasonancy: Pat and Mike would frequently go to Coney Island to yell at each other. One time they went to Long Beach instead -- a coast of a different holler.

Another type of pun classification is given by Clifton Fadiman in his essay "Small Excellencies: A Dissertation on Puns". There is the single pun such as Fadiman's own:

The prideful Tern, about to be a mother,  
Reflects that two good terns deserve another.

The double pun, like Sterling North's "A bustle is like a historical romance: Both are fictitious tales based on a stern reality." And the rarer triple pun: Punch's comment on the wit who complained that he was always hearing his own stories told back to him was "A plain case of the tale dogging the wag". A more famous example is the story of the mother who suggested that her sons name their Texas cattle ranch Focus -- where the sons raise meat. Lynn Ashby has published quadruple and quintuple puns which are much too involved to repeat here.

Floor putterby!