Scoffing at puns is a conditioned reflex, and through the centuries groan-ups have aimed a steady barrage of libel and slander at pun ladies and pun gents. Three hundred years ago, the playwright and critic John Dennis sneered, "A pun is the lowest form of wit." Many of you Verbatim readers know me as an incorrigible punster — please don’t incorrige! — who agrees with the witty Henry Erskine that a pun is indeed the lowest form of wit because it is the foundation of all wit. For me and my many pun pals, punning is a rewording experience that, like a good steak, can be a rare medium well done.

Whatever your opinion about puns, the art of crafty punnery has played a part in the formation of a number of compounds and expressions. Take funny bone. Technically the so-called funny bone is the ulnar nerve that causes that tingly sensation when we strike our arm. But the source of that feeling is the knob on the end of the bone running from the shoulder to the elbow. The medical name for that bone is the humerus, and back in 1840 some wag seized upon the homophonic similarity of humerus and humorous and dubbed the humerus the funny bone, a learned pun that has become part of our language.

Some etymological puns are a lot older. "Dead as a doornail" has been wheezed for more than six hundred years. In 1350 an anonymous poet, describing the hunting of a deer, wrote: "And happened that I hitt him be-hynde the left sholdire./Ded as a dorenail was he fallen." A doornail was a large-headed nail or bolt with which long-ago carpenters studded doors to strengthen and decorate them. Because metal nails were precious then, the carpenters would hook the tip of the nail back to "clinch" the nail (as we clinch a deal), making it hold fast. The nail was "dead," meaning "fixed, rigid, immovable," as in deadline and deadlock. Carpenters today still use the term "dead-nailing."

This meaning of "fixed, rigid, immovable" cried out to be punned with the older (939) and more common meaning of "not alive." The association became clinched in our language, and many of us first learned this simile in the opening of Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol, in which Scrooge himself cogitates about the deadness of doornails:

Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it. And Scrooge’s name was good upon ‘Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to.

Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Mind! I don’t mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it, or the Country’s done for. You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a door-nail.
The same kind of wordplay occurs in the simile “smart as a whip.” What’s so smart about a whip? Delving into the history of smart, we find that the word first meant “inflicting or causing pain” (1023). Gradually the adjective took on additional meanings, including “having a certain degree of integrity, force, and strength” (1184) as in “look smart!” and, by extension, “clever in thought or argument” (1639). Smart as a whip punderfully unites the original signification and the most pervasive (at least in the U.S.) meaning of smart.

Much newer is couch potato, which made its debut in U.S. slang in the 1970s. The compound compares lumpish watchers of television to lumpy potatoes: The longer couch potatoes sit, the deeper they put down their roots and the more they come to resemble potatoes. But there’s more than just a vegetable image here. The Real McCoy (Georgia Hole, ed.; Oxford University Press, 2005) explains:

The origins of the phrase are much cleverer than simply an image, however, since it actually relies on a pun with the word ‘tuber.’ A potato is the tuber of a plant, while boob tuber was an earlier term for someone watching the boob tube or television.

In some instances of semantic development, Samuel Beckett’s proclamation that “In the beginning was the pun” turns out to be true. Whether or not the pun is the foundation of all wit, the device is the foundation of some of the most sprightly word histories in the English language.

---

A POEM

SIR JEREMY MORSE

London, England

COUNTING

Numberless son,
Let me teach you
(Or you teach me)
Your natural lore.
While we’re alive
Arithmetic’s
One way to heaven –
An infinite, straight
And narrow line
From God to men.