

THE LETTER REBUS (PART 1)

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The term **rebus** has, during the past century, been applied to several different types of word puzzles. This multipart article examines the varieties of the **letter rebus**, a puzzle form which has been extensively featured in the pages of the *Enigma*, the official publication of the National Puzzlers' League, during the past sixty years. In fact, counting such varieties as the **suber** (or **reversed rebus**) and the **rebus alternade**, a hybrid puzzle combining the basic rebus with a puzzle taking every nth letter from a word, there have been more than 5500 such puzzles published.

General Properties of the Rebus: Taxonomy, History, Ambiguity

Briefly defined, the letter rebus is a type of code in which a word or phrase is represented by an array of letters or symbols, such as B for **abalone** (a B alone) or SR for **rafters** (R after S). The parenthesized versions, with spacing rearranged to clarify the rebus meaning, are called rebus descriptions. A rebus can be either literal, as the above examples illustrate, or partially or wholly phonetic, such as II for **two black eyes** (two black ls), or U for **after tea** (after T). In this article, words, syllables or letters labeled with an asterisk are to be given phonetic values before spaces are rearranged to give the rebus description; common phonetic changes include c*(see), sea*(C), eye*(I), eyes*(Is or II), you*(U), are*(R), ate*(8), for(e)*Xs(XXXX), to(o)*(2), and won*(1).

Not surprisingly, a great deal of ambiguity can be introduced by such extreme compression of a message; some single-letter rebuses correspond to dozens of possible words. As a consequence, the rebus is usually followed by an additional clue in a short verse to point to the word intended by the constructor.

When one is encoding a phrase instead of a single word, the rebus description need not preserve the same word-divisions as the original phrase, as it did in **two black ls**. **TEHEERS**, the rebus form of **tea**, it **cheers**, is described as **Te,aitch,EERS** which preserves letter-order but not spacing, making a more interesting puzzle. Surprisingly, it took several years for NPL rebus-makers to recognize this possibility; the above example, the first one in the *Enigma*, appeared in 1927.

Broadly speaking, rebuses can be sorted into a number of different classes:

Letters as components of words: replacement of a word with a synonym or a specific example of a class

Letters as sounds

Letters themselves

Characteristics of individual letters (existence, faintness, capitalization, script, fanciness, mutilation, rotation)

Position of individual letters (with respect to verse, title, page, etc.)

Relative position of individual letters to each other (before, after, up, down, diagonal, inside, outside, first, last)

Groups of identical letters (cardinal and ordinal enumeration)

Groups of different letters (rearrangement, alignment, spacing)

Cancellation and replacement of letters (including rebuses with no letters); partial descriptions of words

Specialty rebus treatments (mathematics, chemistry, music, etc.)

Vocabulary: names of letters, symbols, etc.; names of general operations (visualization, placement)

In this taxonomy, the word **letter** can mean a number or other symbol as well. Naturally, the edges of these categories are a bit fuzzy, and it is not always easy to decide in what category a rebus belongs. Many rebuses have components belonging to two or more categories. All of these categories are described and illustrated in detail in this article.

Several different techniques have been evolved over the years for presenting the rebus. This is best illustrated by showing the various ways that a missing letter can be clued. For example, **about** (AB out) might be indicated by:

- 1) A~~B~~
- 2) the letter A standing alone
- 3) the entire alphabet, omitting the letter B
- 3) an easily-identifiable word or phrase with B missing, such as REMEM ER PEARL HAR OR
- 4) removal of B from all words in the accompanying verse
- 5) removal of B from the title, with A in front: ARE US

It is worth noting that the rebus description can be ambiguous; in the example above, is the letter B to be removed, or both the letter B and the letter A? This type of ambiguity crops up often in the relative positioning of letters; for example, is **thinks** to be represented by KTHS (TH in KS) or TKHS (T;H in KS)? If one were to develop a set of rules governing rebus construction (an endeavor which, if carried out, would fill an article of many pages) one would presumably opt to have an operation govern only the minimum necessary letters.

As previously mentioned, short rebuses are especially ambiguous. To illustrate, consider the rebus PS, which over the years have represented PleadingS 1926, PaddingS 1929, backSPread 1976, post-PoneS 1976, posts crypt*ic* [P.S. = postscript] 1976, past PresidentS 1977, PlaterS 1977, short PIECES 1978, printemPS 1978, Pin-beforeS 1978, PSoitis 1978, planisPHEREs 1978, turnSPit 1978, aPhere-

Sis 1974, seePS 1978, PandanS 1978, oPSiform 1978, afterPlayS 1982 and PtoSis 1983! (Surprisingly, the trivial PatS has never been used.) At the 1981 convention of the National Puzzlers' League, attendees were challenged to construct rebuses for the bigrams HI, BU, WR and CZ and came up with good examples for each. Can rebuses or reversed rebuses be devised for all 676 bigrams? Nearly 250 different bigrams have, in fact, appeared in the Enigma.

Ambiguity in rebus construction can arise as the result of uncertainty in which order various positional operations are to be performed. In computer programming, such ambiguity is resolved by the use of parentheses; this device is used below to show the possible alternatives:

ST		ST
TH under (ST on E)	E	vs. (TH under ST) on E
	TH	TH
(C ere M) on Y	CM	vs. C ere (M on Y)
	Y	C ^M _Y
		E

Rebus descriptions can be ambiguous in other ways as well. Often, the rebus description is so awkward that it is not clear what rebus illustrates it. This problem is best illustrated with the use of the preposition *on* in a rebus of relative position. This little word can appear in many places:

- 1) at the beginning: on Y X is; on I, ON
- 2) in the middle: H on K; PR is on ER
- 3) at the end: C, O on; V is l on; P O is on

Among these, the third offers the greatest scope for misinterpretation; is C, O on to be interpreted as a short form of C; O is on it, leading to an O placed above C, or C on O, leading to a C placed above O? Unfortunately, both interpretations have coexisted in the Enigma, the second being more often encountered in the early years and the first more recently. (At least once, the same word was encoded both ways - P, O is on was represented by O over P in 1928 and P over O in 1933!)

Often, a word in a rebus description can be interpreted in rebus form in several different ways. An excellent example is provided by the little word *in*, which has been used to mean

- 1) between other letters in a horizontal line: TLARH (LA by R in TH)
- 2) part of a larger word: BRAN (RA is in BRAN)
- 3) alternating letters with the enclosing word: AWPOPLME (a WORM in an APPLE)
- 4) surrounded on all sides by other letters: DVI (a V is in DI-CA)
- 5) between other letters in a vertical alignment: (G on E with the W in; D)
- 6) outlining the shape of a letter: A M (A MUT in Y)
- 7) enclosed by a large letter: U

G

The standard format for the *in* instruction is YXZ: X in YZ; thus,

problems arise not only when *in* is at the end of a word, but also when *in* is followed by a single letter (typically, a word ending *-ing*). One solution to the latter problem is given in the seventh example above; another solution is to interpret XYZ as XZ, *in* Y (for example, HPSP is the rebus for H, a P, P, *in* eSS). Unfortunately, the penultimate *in* has been interpreted in another way as well: FLG is the rebus for F, L *in*, G.

The principal focus of this article is on the elaboration of the letter rebus since 1921 in the pages of the *Enigma*. Although a full history of the letter rebus since its origin in the nineteenth century remains to be researched and written, a brief summary will be given here. During its earlier heyday in the early 1880s, the letter rebus was generally regarded as a difficult, even sometimes unfair, puzzle, and it fell into disfavor for a generation or so; in 1896 William P. Bourke (writing under the pseudonym of Kosciusko McGinty) wittily derided the rebus, saying

I met a Rebus, to my great discomfiture, in one of our departments the other day. I thought I had rid myself of its presence forever when I had entered our puzzledom. I had been rather chummy with it in my younger days, but for nine years had forgotten it - or tried to ... I have frequently tried to convince myself that Puzzledom treated the Rebus rightly in ostracizing it; that it was a feeble, puerile composition, all well enough for us when school-boys, but "to be laid aside with the toga praetexta" ... Never was puzzle invented, approachable in so many glitteringly unsuccessful ways; so long on possibilities and so short on performance. When I first made its acquaintance, though, it was fresh and open. As TH under ER, or D is C over, or PO is on ED, it scorned deceit, and I had a deal of respect for it. Then it was a simple statement of fact; its answer evidence as incontrovertible as the defendant's letters in a breach of promise suit. But in a few months it developed a capability for quibbling ... It acquired an irritating habit of putting "See!" in every sentence ... some time after, it patiently tried to explain things to me and its "See!" became "You see." I was not overpleased with the variation.

His disaffection with the rebus reached its climax when he failed to solve a rebus characterized by a high narrow letter A, with the answer Innocents Abroad (in no sense A broad).

I know that the Rebus and I cannot float down the stream of existence together. We are like the iron and the earthen pot in *Esop*; and I am not sure that I am the iron one. At all events, I am willing to retire in the Rebus' favor. I am not going to risk a collision.

Sixteen of these early rebuses were reprinted in the *Enigma* in 1928; it is hard for the present generation to see what all the fuss was about, for they are indistinguishable from the modern variety. Most of the variations in the taxonomy suggested above had not yet been thought of. Ten of the rebuses can be characterized as showing relative positions of letters, and three more, ad-

jacency (ME and ER, B and EAU, a B and an A); only three (B right on B each, tu* Be rose*, sure tis HIP) used other devices.

For many years, the Enigma banned (or printed with great reluctance) rebuses termed enigmatic. Never carefully defined, this word apparently referred to rebuses in which only part of the answer was present: V for the center of gravity, or ∇ for part Y. Since 1970, these have been accepted without dissent.

Rebus Variations

Over the years, the rebus has spawned several variations. The first to appear was the **suber** or **reversed rebus**, introduced by Morton Lewis Mitchell (Molemi) in the Enigma in 1938 (however, IIV was given as the rebus for **neves** in 1925). In the suber, the letters in the word or phrase are read from right to left to obtain the rebus description; for example, **hammock** reverses to **K, comma, H** which generated the rebus **K,H**. The suber enjoyed a modest popularity in the pages of the Enigma in the late 1940s and early 1950s, but then died out; it was not until 1972 that Philip Cohen (Treesong) revived the technique, christening it a **suber**. Not surprisingly, words can be found for which both a rebus and a suber can be constructed. The 1973 **catalineta** yields the rebus description **C TA: C at a line; TA**, and the suber description **XILC: a ten, I, L at a C**.

Philip Cohen was also the father of the **rebus alternade** (later shortened to **rebade**), introducing it in a composing contest in 1974.

In the rebus alternade, a set of input words is presented in a list, and the rebus description is read off column by column from left to right in this array. For example, the array at the left reads **look, I write eN**, for which the rebus is **N**. At the same time, he invented the suber alternade in which the rebus description is read up the columns from right to left, and the **bigram rebus alternade**, in which pairs of letters are taken out in columns.

An example of the latter is given at the left; the rebus description is **near AR, RO by WS**, for which the rebus is **ARROWS** (the same as the second input word, a minor tour de force). In 1978 Gary Pischer (Uniqorn) constructed a rebus alternade in which the four input words were tere transposals (**TINSEL, ENLIST, SILENT, LISTEN**) and in 1983 Edward Wolpow (Newrow) constructed one which was a word square (**OMIT, MONO, INKS, TOSS** with the rebus description **omit M, O no ink, S toss**).

The most recent development in the rebus field is the **progressive rebus**, devised in 1982 by Steve Wilson (Stitch). Here, the word for one rebus is the rebus for the next, as in

grunt (G runt), leading to the rebus g
grand aunt (GR and a UNT), leading to the rebus GRUNT

A final rebus variation, the so-called **in-and-out rebus**, never caught on. A single example by Philip Cohen survives from 1974. The accompanying verse text contained the word **dALLY**; the solver was supposed to discover the phrase **read real IT** from the

jacency (ME and ER, B and EAU, a B and an A); only three (B right on B each, tu* Be rose*, sure tis HIP) used other devices.

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letter rebus IT, and replace dALLY with "dread reality".

The infinite richness and variety of the modern letter rebus is best illustrated by examples, and this article contains many hundreds of them. A more-or-less standard format is used. The phrase encoded by the rebus is given, with the letters actually appearing in the rebus highlighted by capitalization; sometimes the rebus itself is given preceding the phrase (for example, SGT: outSTandinG and .U: spec*Ulator*). If part of the phrase is phonetically interpreted to obtain the rebus description, this is signalled by an asterisk; furthermore, those parts of the phrase for which a synonym or example must be found are underlined (for example, XReno: tenacity). In almost every case, the earliest-known two or three Enigma examples of the rebus device being discussed are illustrated. To conserve space, only the last two digits of the year are given, and the author is not identified, and later appearances of the same rebus are not recorded.

Characteristics of Individual Letters

One of the earliest popular rebus types in the Enigma was a description of the physical nature of the letter or symbol serving as a rebus. The simplest description of a letter is an assertion of its existence:

Visit 21, oTitis 22, myoSitis 23, anAitis 24, aBaTis 25
 tisanE 21, tisSA 27
 aWaTaWare 25, areNA 26, areAs 35, weareRs 35
 betheL 25, thisTle tUbe 83
 Siam 21, aZiam 22, amazed 22, imaGe 24, imP 24, Limit 31
 heresY 19, aDhere 21, Where 21, hereFORD 21
 theresA 19, isOthere 27

Lie 24, DIXie 55, Widest 75, anXieTies 83, frontisPieCe 80 [i.e.]
 geronimO 73, egOtisTic* 83 [e.g.]
 perseCUTE 26, Disperse(d) 32, Aperse 27 [per se]
 terPsicHorE 72, music 75 [sic.]

thisTLE 22, PHthisis 22, thisBE 24
 a Pat hand 58, Bath and 79
 Know 50
 noNexistent 67, Sextant 71

an Ethereal thing 33, an Ethereal one 33, Etherealistic 33
 realisM 61, realist 62, areal WaY 61
 everY 21, Lever 31, ENDeavor* 34, Sever 72, CLever 78
 Fissure 23, INsure 29, sureX 48, shoQ 57, areal MEasureMENT 72
 ASertain 66, aPpositively 67, Tactually 25, Factual 78
 Disaffirmed 70, intentionalisM 75

Erebus 21, rebush 60, DEsire bus 73
 rub ricE 75, rubricatED 79, to* rue* brick* 81, rub ricHaRD 79
 characterY 74, characterisTic* 79, characterisaTION deleted 74
 enSign 54, Teething 81

Discontent 67, Disembodied 79, callitHUMP 60, termitE 83

Discounted 38, Enumerated 31

Sometimes, the rebus existentially stutters: MT: theMaTisT 25, H: HasHisH 22, ST: aneStheTisT 24, M: MisoneisM 77, IT: c*anITisT 80, V: Vis-a-Vis 69.

Beyond mere existence, a wide variety of properties have been described. The degree of clarity or darkness of a letter was specified quite early:

INvisible 22, one NaTion INDIvisible 43
 unobscureD 25
 NUclear 54, macronUclear 79, NUclear Blast 81
 manifestO 25
 Poverty-stricken 78, overtone 55
 dark eyes* 52, darkeNinG 80
 blackEN 19, blackBall 26, black Knight 27, black eye* 28
 Kissable 24, Usable 76

Even more emphasis was clued by a set of rays emanating from the letter I in DI: DhotI 80, or by underlining in N: underlineN 78 or NOOP: dessertsPOON 72.

In contrast, it took awhile to hit on a system for indicating lightness or faintness. Vindicated 40 was clued by a V made out of dots; a similar strategy was used for α in 1977 (alpha particles), E in 1973 (all of the scoring took place in the last quarter of the GAME), T in 1980 (stibniTE), D in 1982 (shredDeD wee*T). However, the commonest strategy has been to print the letter more lightly:

THunder and lightNinG 75, lightHOusekeepinG 81, a light EatER
 83
 very lightS 80
 RonSon lighterS 73, CandLElighter 74
 YES, depress YOUR dimmer switchES 73
 SCylla i trap 73
 Stop on a dime 72
 yours of tHe NinTH inST. received .. 82

One rebus achieved lightness by a negative instruction; the first and last letters of LIFE were darkened, the phrase being it's a great LIFE IF you don't weaken 81.

How simply or elaborately can a letter be presented? On the one hand, there is:

simpleX 21, simpler 30
 plainT 21, plainTIFF 28, plainTIVE 29, plane*T 56, eXplain 58
 bareD 24, the bare IDEA 25
 commonS 25, the ordinary commonS 39
 pie*bald 77
 nakedweed 80
 Denude 26
 star-kisT 81

On the other, one can see:

RUBY tailed Flies 24
 barbarA Walters 80
 wildEbeestS 79
 odd MAN out 79, .. Sweeney Todd 82
 isotherM 81
 eXplain A fancy 83
 floridA 74
 germanE 44

The completeness of a letter is another relevant characteristic:

Consolidate* 41, solidl 43, solidUs 64, solidArnoSC 82
 jol*O 30
 perfectO 25, perfectlonS 29, BE perfect and entire wanting nothing⁴³
 perfectionistT 72
 pureE 24, COVER-up 77
 conStrue 30
 natural Gas is 76

When only part of a letter is shown in a rebus, it has usually been called an enigmatic rebus. The first example was, in fact, a non-example: LE clued bustLE in 1924, but in fact the letters were intact and the verse advised the reader to "break up these letters". Perhaps the most obvious letter-fragmentation is the halving of W, producing a V. V was clued by the phrase halfWit in 1935. VKE by half aWaKE in 1973, VY by meet halfWaY in 1981, VVYS by the parting of the WaYS in 1983, and VV by splitsaW in 1979. The top (or bottom) half of B has been exhibited with several clues: the bottomless Pit in 1936 (Pitt in 1983), topless Bit in 1969, and Behalf in 1981. This rebus is indistinguishable from the top half of R, clued by semiRamis's in 1975 and semiRamiS (accompanied by an S) in 1983. Probably the commonest instruction for letter-mutilation is part, as evinced by TF: tea* partY* 57, TV: tea* partY 57, Y: partY 70, and S^c: SpartS 74, plus the similar F: partialLY* 63 and 'Y: partialLY 83. Other techniques are:

oo: pieces of eight 34
 IVI: take theM apart 57
 INl: quarterN 83
 DY: after the break of DaY 80, r AA TTTT: breakFASt cereal* 82
 PMG: PeMbrokeS 83
 R^c: doRSalmost 83
 P: Bb-gun* 62
 A_SY: A raised and sunken SYstem 75
 ?_S: a pointless question, mark 80
 O 44P
 B S/: on Behalf Of our sPonSor 83
 f: marT 83, F: marPlots 81
 II A: piAno bar 82

The 1973 rebuses lF (l was cut off in the northeast, and 'e was cut off in the south) and iCA (nearly the entire eastern half of AFRICA) were subtle, but the most enigmatic one was = in 1980, clued by double-cros*Tic* -- in other words, the horizontal bars belonging to two lower-case Ts!