

# BIENAPROPISMS

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Long-time Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley was known for his frequent beheadings of the English language with such phrases as "I resent your insinuedoes" and "We shall reach greater an greater platitudes of achievement." Mr. Daley's creative word choices must have been contagious because another Chicago politician was heard to shout, "I don't want to cast asparagus at my opponent!"

At the installation of a Dartmouth College president, a former governor of New Hampshire declared, "I am privileged to speak at this millstone in the history of this college," and a recent Boston Globe feature reported that "the mountain is named for the Rev. Starr King, who was an invertebrate climber and author of the book The White Hills."

When people misuse words in an illiterate but humorous manner, we call the result a malapropism (French, mal a propos -- "not appropriate"). The term springs from the name of a character in Richard Sheridan's comedy The Rivals, written in 1775. Mrs. Malaprop was "an old weather-beaten she-dragon" who took special pride in her use of the King's English: "Sure, if I reprehend anything in this world, it is the use of my oracular tongue and a nice derangement of epitaphs." In Sheridan's play, Mrs. Malaprop urges her niece, who is "as headstrong as an allegory on the banks of the Nile," to "illiterate" a gentleman from her memory and to acquire a knowledge of the "contagious" countries.

It has been more than 200 years since Mrs. Malaprop first strode the stage, but time has not dulled our malapropensity for miscreating malapropisms. Among my favorite specimens of linguistic maladroitness are "medieval cathedrals were supported by flying buttocks," "we can't be a pancreas to all the world's problems," "they were singing without accompaniment--you know, acapulco," and "they've decided to raise my benefits, and they're making it radioactive!"

Now that you've become enamored of malapropisms, allow me to close my inquisition with the most pyrotechnical examples of the genre. The best malapropisms are those that leap across the chasm of absurdity and land on the side of truth. Staying with French roots, I propose that these tour de farces be labeled bienapropisms.

For instance, the student who wrote, "The automobile has had a beneficiary effect on the American family" illuminated reality

more brightly than he or she could have imagined. The same goes for the creator of "there's so much pornographic rubbish in print it buggers the imagination." Note how the following bienapropisms manage to snatch truth from the jaws of absurdity:

- \* In the Strategic Defense Initiative, America has come up with the penultimate defense system
- \* They've put her in an exhilarated class
- \* We sold our house and moved into one of those pandemoniums
- \* The defendant pleaded exterminating circumstances
- \* The cookbook is being compiled--please submit your favorite recipe and a short antidote concerning it
- \* The hills were worn down by eroticism
- \* You have to be beautified to become a saint
- \* Every morning my father takes exercises to strengthen his abominable muscles
- \* Demon is a nasty little film about the dead coming back and reeking havoc on the living
- \* He sees things from an unusual vintage point
- \* The incumbent mayor exhumed confidence before the polls closed
- \* Certainly the pleasures of youth are great, but they are nothing compared to the pleasures of adultery
- \* Most readers will find this scholarly book to be obtuse
- \* He suffered from unrequired love
- \* I didn't tell them who I was--I used a facetious name
- \* In the early Sixties, we were strong and virulent
- \* Both movies were stinkers that Indiana Jones could sue for deformation of character
- \* We have so emaciated our laws that the young hooligan is immune from punishment
- \* The specialist charged exuberant fees
- \* The doctor had to use his biceps to deliver the baby
- \* Salary commiserates with experience
- \* Don't tell them who sent it--I want to remain magnanimous
- \* I have been a prostrate patient for many years
- \* Life begins at contraception
- \* She's been dwindling in the stock market
- \* I don't like swimming in that pond because it has too much of that green allergy
- \* To be a leader, you have to develop a spear de corps
- \* Senators are chosen as committee chairmen on the basis of senility
- \* I wish someone would make a decision around here--I'm tired of just hanging around in libido
- \* "The immediate impact was quite bombastic," recalled Dr. Luther L. Terry, the surgeon general responsible for the famous 387-page report