

WORD-ORDER SPOONERISMS: A REPLY

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In the May 1993 **Word Ways**, Kickshaws editor David Morice asked "Have you every run across any sentences that switched words around to achieve a different effect - a kind of word-order spoonerism?"

Yes, I have.

The "different effect" can be surprisingly meaningful and even profound. Consider "The wrath of grapes" (a neat definition of a hangover) or "The hand that cradles the rock must not rule the world." By admitting homophones to the party, we encounter such classic puns as "Britannia waives the rules" and (as noted by Morice) "Time wounds all heels."

Cruel and Unusual Puns (Dell, 1991) is arguably the semi-definitive work on spoonerisms and other forms of transpositional wordplay. While researching and writing the book, I found that no standard vocabulary or taxonomy existed to describe this kind of language play. Terminological confusion was rife.

Some (although not all) dictionaries and scholars maintain that spoonerism refers only to the exchange of initial sounds, not whole words. Other authorities insist that the term should be restricted to accidental transpositions. (One cannot always be sure if an utterance was truly inadvertent, especially where apocryphal attributions to the eponymous Dr. Spooner are concerned.)

Clearly, the term **spoonerism** cannot adequately characterize or subsume all types of scrambled wordplay. Yet the various species are clearly related. How then to categorize them? With some terminological advice from lexicographer Frank Abate, I created a taxonomy that tries to distinguish among these linguistic creatures.

An exchange of initial sounds (usually consonants) I called a **phonemic** transposition. If the syllables are switched, it's a **syllabic** transposition. And the reversal of whole words (the subject of the present discussion) I dubbed a **lexical** transposition.

As the above examples demonstrate, however, lexical transpositions themselves can assume several forms. Let's examine another intriguing sub-species.

When a sentence contains two parallel clauses, the sequence of words in the second repeating but reversing that of the first, the resulting literary device is called a **chiasmus**. Because the chiasitic form resonates emotionally, it is a venerable and powerful rhetorical device. The switch often, though not always, creates

a punned meaning.

A classic chiasmic quotation is Mae West's "It's not the men in my life that count - it's the life in my men." Among others: "Many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first." "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." "Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate." "If you don't have what it takes, they'll take what you have."

Other terms for literary inversion or reversal abound, some of which are more useful than others. For example, the word **meta-thesis** goes back to 1608 and is still around. But we've already forgotten **reversible raincoat sentence**, an excessively cute and gratuitous coinage. (The term is cited in Neo-Words, a lexicon compiled by David K. Barnhart.)

Since the publication of Cruel and Unusual Puns, I've discovered lots of additional lexical/chiasmic transposition puns. A few samples:

"The Odds Are Good The Goods Are Odd" (headline of a column for coin collectors in the New York Times)

"Will more cash on the books turn more books into cash?" (report in the Wall Street Journal on a deep-pocketed corporation seeking to acquire a major publisher)

"Women don't want dates on their condoms; they want condoms on their dates" (Jay Leno on a proposal to require expiration notices on packaging for prophylactics)

Now ponder these deep thoughts:

"It is not enough to stare up the steps; we must step up the stairs" (Vince Havner)

"No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care" (source unknown)

Hmmm. Indulgence in this sort of thing is obviously a labor of love, which (as they say in the maternity wards) is better than a love of labor. But as we conclude, heed this word of advice: instead of searching for the meaning of life, find yourself a life of meaning.

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*The author index and the subject-matter index of **Word Ways** have both been updated through 1993; each one is available from Spring Valley Road, Morristown NJ 07960 for five dollars (both for ten dollars). For details, see page 60 of the February 1991 issue of **Word Ways**.*