

GAG ME WITH A SPOONERISM

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Perhaps you know somebody (and that somebody could be you!) who occasionally says **pascetti** for **spaghetti**, **aminal** for **animal**, and **revelant** for **relevant**. Each of these mispronunciations bespeaks a tendency to anticipate and, hence, to switch sounds between words.

When the effect of such a transposition becomes comic, we call the result a spoonerism, named after the Rev. William Archibald Spooner, dean and later warden (president) of New College, Oxford. He lectured on history, philosophy and divinity, but he was best known around the yards of Oxford, where he spent 60 years, for his hilarious slips of the tongue that became tips of the slung.

"Did you hear the latest spoonerism?" Oxford wits would ask one another. In this manner, Spooner entered the immortal company of the likes of Charles C. Boycott, the Earl of Sandwich, and Amelia Jenks Bloomer, who have had their names eponymously enshrined in our vocabulary.

Spooner was born in Grosvener, England on July 22, 1844, with a silver spoonerism in his mouth. It is only fitting that we celebrate here the sesquicentennial of the man who bequeathed us so much whiz and witdom.

We could say that, in the process of generating English terrors and tinglysh errors, William Archibald Spooner set out to become a bird watcher but ended up instead as a word botcher. The first of Spooner's spoonerisms, and one of the few that have been authenticated, was spoken by the great man in 1879, when he was conducting a service and announced the hymn as "Kinkering Kongs Their Titles Take". Perhaps his most famous switch occurred when, while lifting a tankard of ale to Queen Victoria, he bellowed "Three cheers for our queer old dean!"

Seeing a woman parishioner in his space in church, he is said to have said "Mardon me, padam, you are occupewing my pie, may I sew you to another sheet?"

Yet another Spooner classic has him admonishing a misbehaving student thusly: "You have hissed all my mystery lectures. You have tasted a whole worm. Please leave Oxford on the next town drain."

Additional tongue tangles attributed to Spooner, most of them spuriously, include the following:

* Officiating at a wedding, he informed the groom that "it is kisstomary to cuss the bride"

- * He announced a hymn in chapel as "The Lord is a Shoving Leopard", preached a sermon about the "tearful chidings" of the evangelists
- * The words of the Gospel have "delivered a blushing crow" to evil
- * "We all know what it's like," he once explained murkily to a congregation, "to carry within us a half-warmed fish"
- * He rode "a well boiled icicle" around the Oxford grounds, and took students to task for "fighting a liar in the quadrangle"
- * He attended a naval review and marveled at the vast display of "cattleships and bruisers"
- * Visiting a friend at his country cottage, he said cheerfully "You have a nosey little crook here"
- * After dropping his hat, he asked "Will nobody pat my hiccup?"
- * He told a gathering of patriots during World War I "When the boys come home from France, we'll have the hags flung out"
- * Paying a visit to a school official, he asked "Is the bean dizzy?"
- * He addressed a group of farmers as "Ye noble tons of soil"

"All his life, Spooner looked like a white-haired baby," Sir William Haytner tells us in his 1977 biography, aptly entitled **Spooner**. "He was small, pink-faced and an albino, with a disproportionately large head and very shortsighted pale blue eyes." It may be that this albinism activated a minor aphasia that caused Spooner's penchant for reversing sounds.

But most critics believe that, as is the case with Samuel Goldwyn ("I'll give you a definite maybe"), Yogi Berra ("No wonder nobody comes here - it's too crowded") and Dan Quayle ("I'm studying Latin so I can communicate in Latin America"), legend outstrips reality. Let someone commit a few verbal fluffs and flubs, and the public starts hanging any goof or gaffe in the same category on the hook of that person's persona.

As the New York Times observed in an editorial, "Dan Quayle has made so many quotable bloopers that he gets tagged even for things he didn't say." As the great Yogi himself pronounced, "I didn't say all those things I said!"

Haytner writes "It is certainly ironical that the man who received and merits tributes from eminent men should now be chiefly remembered for trivial absurdities, most of them apocryphal." Whether or not Spooner spoonerized as creatively and hilariously as in the above examples, spoonerizing has been raised to the highest level of verbal art. In presenting some of the most pyrotechnic examples, we can identify three basic categories of spoonerisms. The most common method is to switch initial consonants:

- * One blackbird to another: bred any good rooks lately?
- * Trashy paperbacks come from the trite side of the racks
- * Psychologist: a person who pulls habits out of rats
- * Combined charity puts all the begs in one ask-it
- * What do you call a Salt Lake City carpenter? a Mormon nailer
- * A father waited in line with his daughter for the chance to sign the White House guestbook. Impatient to get her turn, the little girl pushed in front of a Catholic sister. The father restrained the little girl and admonished "Wait till the nun signs, Shelly"

A second popular type of spoonerizing is the reversal of syllables:

- * A good masseur leaves no stern untuned
- * A man who hated sea birds left no tern unstoned
- * A baker invented a special, multi-bladed cutting instrument, the four-loaf cleaver
- * Sign on a bar: Our customers enter optimistically and leave misty optically
- * A Dorothy Parker classic: I'd rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy
- * A fisherman carelessly dropped his wallet into the water and was amazed to see a school of carp deftly tossing it from one fish to the other. "Gosh," he exclaimed, "that's the first time I've seen carp-to-carp walleting!"
- * A stout woman entered a room, and an elderly gentleman did not rise. She was not amused and huffed at him "Well, I see you're not so gallant as when you were a boy." He shot back "I see you're not so buoyant as when you were a gal!"

Finally, we create spoonerisms by transposing whole words:

- * What's the difference between a cat and a comma? One has paws at the end of its claws, while the other has pause at the end of its clause
- * Hangover: the wrath of grapes
- * Snuff salesman: one who sticks his business in other people's noses
- * Alimony: the bounty of mutiny
- * Invention is the mother of necessity
- * A Groucho Marx classic: time wounds all heels
- * An Oscar Wilde gem: work is the curse of the drinking classes
- * Walter Winchell said that he never panned the opening show of a new theater season because he didn't want to stone the first cast
- * Slogan for a radio news team: no sooner done than said
- * Watch commercial: there's no present like the time
- * A bunch of cattle put into a satellite was called the herd shot round the world
- * Those of us on eternal diets know that a waist is a terrible thing to mind
- * A cannibal gave his wife for her birthday a box of Farmer's Fannies

Have you found this little disquisition on spoonerisms to be a truly rewording experience? Good. As one frog said to another, "Time's fun when you're having flies!"

Let us close, then, with one swell foop - a toast to The Reverend Doctor William Archibald Spooner, the man who had such tonerous rubble with his tin-sax:

"Here's champagne to our real friends - and real pain to our sham friends!"