

GIFTS FROM A HOMONYMOUS BENEFACTOR

Another Gala Gallimaufry of Original Puns in Real-Life Situations

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One fine morning some years ago, my phone rang. It was a fellow freelance copywriter with a problem: “My printer just died.” I replied sympathetically: “I’m so sorry to hear that. When is the funeral?”

I wasn’t joking, just confused. More recently, I experienced a similar misinterpretation.

I was visiting a friend in another city. “Let’s go to your hotel room and run lines,” she suggested. Huh? The situation was soon clarified. She was performing in a community-theater production and needed someone to help her practice by taking the parts of other characters and feeding her dialogue. Even though I’m an enthusiastic lifelong theatergoer, I had never heard the expression “running lines.” So in all seriousness, I said, “I’m not into cocaine.”

In both of these cases, ambiguities were created by misconstrued homonyms. Such chance occurrences are serendipitously amusing, but my primary focus is on *intentional* punning, especially my own creations, a new chrestomathy of which is below.

As is my policy, while preparing this article, I Googled a long list of candidates to determine if I had really invented them or if—*gulp!*—someone had beaten me to the punch lines. There are now more than three billion Internet users, some of whom are pretty clever, so it’s increasingly challenging to come up with puns that are genuinely original.

In many instances, searching did turn up earlier sources, ranging from a single match (a phenomenon known as a *Googlewhack*, though the term has faded into desuetude) to dozens of citations.

A sampling of the disappointing duplications: *deferential calculus, go thou and spin no more, he dodged a pullet, I lost my brain of thought, it isn’t amateur hour but amateur half-hour, it’s all water under the fridge, mind: the gap, once bitten twice sly, sugary finery, the bland leading the bland, their prices are astrocomical, what’s good for the goose is good for the pander, you’re barking up the wrong me.*

Further, I was amazed to discover that *discretion is the better part of pallor* was coined by journalist Heywood Broun in a 1922 book. And most irritating of all to find anticipated was this altered aphorism: *If youth is wasted on the young, then truth is tasted on the tongue.*

The above qualifiers and disclaimers having been made, I’m reasonably confident that the following puns are original. None appeared in searches, at least not with the specific meanings here presented. As in several past articles in this series, all were deployed in correspondence or conversation.

- About a past achievement: “I’ve been resting on that laurel for so long, it could almost be a sofa!”
- Reporting on a meeting with two others: “They had so much to talk about that I felt like a third spiel.”
- Commenting on a writer whose style I dislike: “He affects a just-plain-folks persona, an affectation that in my view is *non grata*.”
- The difference between persistence and annoyance can be a fine line. Thus, I sometimes say that I will take a break from following up, which hiatus I call a *pester sequester*.
- Gloating about a victory: “That was then; this is won.”
- On committing an excessive number of items to memory: “And then I rote. . . .”
- Used judiciously, e-mail subject lines can be an ideal place for puns. When responding to a forward or other useful message, I endeavor to reciprocate, adding the mischievous subject line “quid pro oho!”
- “I’ll leave the decision to you,” said a friend. “In that case,” I replied, “I’ll use my *best fudgment*.” (A neologism blending *judgment* and *fudging*.)
- In an e-mail message: “This was primarily intended for Jim, but I’m copying you as a cc: rider.”
- To someone who had perspicaciously noticed small details: “You’re certainly observant—if not orthodox.”
- In response to effusive praise: “You’re gushing; I’m blushing!”

Two more true stories:

I was strolling on Lafayette Street in my home town of New York when a touristy-looking couple asked me how to get to Lafayette Street. Without hesitation, I exclaimed, “Lafayette? We are here!”

For a conference in Las Vegas this past summer, the panjandrums had hired veteran celebrity impersonator Rich Little as the banquet entertainer. Just beforehand, I overheard one attendee remark to another: “I didn’t even know he was still alive.” Breaking into the conversation, I quipped, “If people have already forgotten him, he must be a post-Impressionist.”

This one isn’t original, but I’ll conclude with it anyway: Though some claim to dislike wordplay, I’m sticking to my puns!