

SPOONERISM NAME GAME, REDUX

More Onomastic Reversals . . . and a Sidebar

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Does Kal Penn have a *pal*, *Ken*? Would Paula Cole *call a Pole*? Is Piper Hardison *hyperpartisan*?

Such are the conundrums posed by spoonerizing proper names. According to my rules, such names may be of real people, or well-known characters in fictional works, or even invented, if plausible. These criteria distinguish the proper from the improper. Let's consider some other possibilities. But first, a relevant digression....

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When I began researching my 1991 spoonerism book, *Cruel and Unusual Puns*, I knew I would need to consult the writings of Victoria Fromkin (1923-2000), a UCLA linguistics professor and a leading authority on speech errors, including spoonerisms. The big idea guiding her research was that slips of the tongue reveal secrets about how the brain organizes language, such phenomena not being readily observable by other means.

After reading Dr. Fromkin's books and articles, I contacted her and she agreed to a brief telephone interview. Among other questions, I asked if she and her colleagues ever took account of spoonerisms that are constructed intentionally as jokes. She said no. Emphatically. My impression was that she regarded these creations as trivial and irrelevant to her research.

I was surprised. After all, humor is always welcome. More importantly, I deemed this attitude a mistake. Here's why. If inadvertent spoonerisms and other speech errors supply a valuable "window into the mind," as she claimed, then could not deliberately invented specimens also serve as heuristic devices?

Fromkin's speech-error database contains such genuine and accidental (if not especially amusing) spoonerisms as "poppy of my caper" and "I broke the whistle on my crotch." Mistakes like these provide insights about the nature of language, grammar, learning, and cognition.

But when someone invents or hears or reads a deliberate spoonerism, isn't something similar going on? Why do we chuckle at "Pin Tweaks"? Or "Heed the foamless." Or "Please say when perved." Because the mind automatically reverses the phrases to the "right" versions.

Hence my conclusion that *deliberate spoonerisms are the other side of the coin*. With accidental examples, the mind travels from "correct" to "incorrect." With clever intentional ones, the navigation is in the other direction.

I sometimes wonder what the speech-error specialists might discover if they didn't harbor this apparent bias. It might be an instance of the more general prejudice against "treating humor seriously." Humor studies have long constituted an interdisciplinary academic field, embracing linguistics, psychology, art, literature, history, and other subjects. Today, fortunately, it's more respected than in the past.

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Now to return to our theme. In a previous article (*Word Ways*, August 2015), I noted the kerfuffle involving the child whose celebrity parents inexplicably named her *Shiloh Pitt*. And the remarkable number of real people I found online named *Cass Miller*. Imaginative play with names often generates more felicitous and interesting results. For example:

- At least 39 people on Facebook are named Robert Lahr. If one chose to become a Vegas hotel lounge singer, the announcements would proclaim: *Bobby Lahr in the Lobby Bar*.
- Hypothetical movie credit: *Story line by Laurie Stein*.
- Potential self-help book: *Start Over with Art Stover*.
- Scott Pruitt, former E.P.A. honcho, is politically conservative. Thus, if he were asked for his position on the legalization of marijuana, he might testily exclaim: "*Pot? Screw it!*"
- Auction of memorabilia of Olympic ski champion: *Killy, the Bid*.
- News report on reclusive baseball player: *Bunter, hidin'*.
- If a Richard Brode had been an Army officer dishonorably discharged for cowardice, his biography could be titled *Follow the Yellow Rick Brode*.
- Similarly, if director Stanley Kubrick had served in the military, his guard post might have been identified as *Manned by Your Stan*.
- Query to pack animal just in from a downpour: "*O llama! Been sodden?*"

Directory of Apposite Occupations: Anthropologist *Gunter Hatherer*. Mafia capo *Bob Moss*. Rancher *Keefe Battleman*. Well-known performer *Amos Factor*. Pianist *Gaby Brand*. Picky beer connoisseur *Fuss Rheingold*. K-9 Corps hero *Tooth Barkington*.

In conclusion, one might say that we have just taken the game to a whole . . . *Lou Neville!*

CREDITS: Here are the results of the usual Google checks. Some of my "invented" names are in fact possessed by real people, though most have apparently not been officially spoonerized. I'm relatively confident about the originality of most of the above, while acknowledging the following antecedents, where contexts and setups often differ or are absent. Pal Ken: a 2019 *Family Guy* musical number. Call a Pole: submission by April Fleming on amirite.com, a pop-music humor site. Pot: various, sans my context. Killy: in Shel Silverstein's children's book *Runny Babbit*; see my review, *Word Ways*, August 2005. Bunter: Tweet by A. Goldman, 2019. Stan: Emily Lime, amirite.com again, and website of David Warren, a U.K. musician and humorist. Bob Moss the Mob Boss: Reddit, Twitter, elsewhere. Tooth: multiple sources, but an Australian magazine called *Stead's Review*, July 20, 1903, was probably first!