MAGIC SPELLS

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Magic spelling tricks have a special appeal to those of us with a passion for recreational linguistics and mathematics. Provided of course that they are well done. This means that the mathematics should be subtle (sometimes the performer does not even fathom it) and the dénouement should be dazzling. In a recent letter to us Martin Gardner indicated his top two choices. He was commenting on his Word Ways article “An Amazing Spelling Trick.” (Ref. 1)

I’ve written a history of this trick, which has had up to all variations, in a long, as yet unpublished article, titled “The World’s Second Best Spelling Trick.” It is the best presentation of dozens of different versions that have appeared in magic journals over the past decade or so.

In the same letter Gardner adds: “The best is a nine-card trick invented by California magician Jim Steinmeyer.” Steinmeyer’s effect was written up in Gardner’s August 2009 Word Ways article “Word Magic” (Ref. 2). Both of Gardner’s articles with our extension in the November 2009 Word Ways issue (Ref. 3) will be posted on the website www.wordways.com for interested readers to review.

Jim Steinmeyer’s remarkable career began years ago in Chicago when he became a member of the Junior Magician’s Club at the late Jay Marshall’s Magic Inc. He later became a prolific inventor and author and has developed tricks for Doug Henning, Orsen Welles and David Copperfield. He is responsible for Copperfield’s vanishing Statue of Liberty trick for instance. His website is www.jimsteinmeyer.com.

Inspired by several of Steinmeyer’s books (see References) we have devised our own spelling trick which we present as:

A MAGIC SPELL

EFFECT: From an ordinary deck of cards the magician hands a portion of the stack to the spectator.

MAGICIAN: “Please shuffle and mix these cards as much as you please. While you are doing that, I am going to write a prediction on this slip of paper.”

The magician places the prediction slip on the table and anchors it with the remaining deck of cards. The spectator completes his shuffling. The magician takes the packet of mixed cards.

MAGI: “I want this packet to have the cards face up like so. Now I want you to think of any single coin.”

SPECTATOR: “Does it have to be an American coin?”
MAGI: "I suppose not. Any coin you can spell will do -- and you don’t need to tell me what it is."

The magician hands the face-up packet to the spectator.

MAGI: "We are now going to use your freely selected word in a repeated spelling effect. Spell your word and for each letter, place the current top card on the bottom of the packet. After you complete spelling your word turn the very next card over and place it on the bottom of the packet. Got it?"

SPECTATOR: "Yes that seems easy enough. There I’ve done it."

MAGI: "OK, I want you to do the same thing again and again and again until I tell you to stop. As you are spelling and run into a face-down card, treat it as any other card and spell it to the bottom."

The Spectator continues the process until the magician interrupts.

MAGI: "Stop now and spread the packet out. Notice there is exactly one face-up card. Recall that you shuffled the packet, you chose a random coin, and before all of this I had written a prediction. Please read my prediction now."

Amazingly the prediction has matched the Spectator’s last card up!

METHOD: Give the Spectator exactly 12 indifferent cards. As you begin to write your prediction, secretly palm, face-up, any card. This card will be your prediction.

When you take back the packet after the Spectator shuffles, place your selected card at the bottom of his face-up packet. There will now be 13 cards in the packet. From here on out the trick is self-working. When the Spectator has turned down exactly 12 cards, the 13th will be your selection.

The reason this trick works is that 13 is a prime number and is therefore “relatively prime” to any number that is not a multiple of 13. This means that all numbers that are not multiples of 13 have no common divisors with 13 except for the number one. In such relatively prime cases the 13 cards will cycle through, turning a new card in each of 12 spells until the original bottom card remains. The only thing that could go wrong is if the Spectator chose a 12-letter coin so that 12+1=13. An unlikely occurrence.

There can be many variations. Instead of coins, any word (not 12 letters) can be used, i.e., names, towns, etc., and the number of cards in the packet can vary. Any p=n+1, p prime can yield a packet of size n for the Spectator to use. Professional magicians with their repertoire of false cuts, false shuffles, and peeks will be able to vary the method also.
If necessary the magician could demonstrate the spelling sequence using the remaining cards of the
deck spelling, say, SOU for the Spectator. This could reinforce the lie that “I never touched your
packet of cards.”

Back to Martin Gardner for a moment. In a phone conversation in late January he told us that his
article “The World’s Second Best Spelling Trick” will be published soon in Gibecière, by William
Kalush’s magic history “The Conjuring Arts Research Center” (www.gibeciere.com).

In addition, this “second” best trick has recently appeared in four sources, two are by Gardner
himself, one in Games magazine (Ref. 6) and another in the Swedish mathematics journal Normat
(Ref 7).

Richard Kaufman, editor of Genii, the Conjurers’ Magazine (geniimagazine.com) has authored a
wonderful book Magic Tricks (Ref. 8) where he includes both the First and Second best tricks.
And in the latest issue of the magic journal Linking Ring the Canadian author Peter Marucci has a
version of the Second “Fear the Eye of Horus.” (Ref 8)

It is often difficult to pinpoint precisely the origin and inventor of magical effects and the case of
Second is no exception. Kaufman claims Paul Curry is the source of the trick while Marucci says
it is Larry Becker. We asked Martin Gardner for an opinion and we take his comment to be
authoritative:

The effect was invented by the American Howard Adams. It was first published in his now
rare 1984 booklet with the strange title OICUFESP (Oh, I see you have ESP).

Gardner added that Adams had first suggested that Second could be performed using five cards torn in
half. Kaufman uses this version in his book and it can be quite effective (but hard on decks).

REFERENCES:


(3) Farrell, J. “Martin Gardner’s Word Magic Enthralls Broad Ripple Teens”, Word Ways: The

(4) Steinmeyer, J. Impuzzibilities. 2nd printing 2009, Hahne, Burbank, CA.


