

Wordplay

The goal of this lecture is to relax a little and examine how humans enjoy language and play with it. No accompanying audio here, nothing to memorize or take notes on! Just sit back and have fun wallowing in a little linguistic insanity.

People like to play. Almost anything we touch, we play with. Language is no exception. There's even a term for it: paronomasia. Can you etymologize that? The prefix is *par(a)-* — here in the sense “wrong” — plus the base ONYM-, ONOMA(T)-, meaning “word,” and the suffix *-sia* (“the act of”). So paronomasia is “the act of ‘mis-construing’ words,” often intentionally, but as you'll soon see, not always.

There are at least five distinct types of paronomasia:

- first, *amphibology*, a term that breaks down into “double (*amphib-*)” and “meaning (*-ology*).” Amphibology is the application of two or more meanings to a single word or phrase — in other words, a pun;
- a second type of paronomasia is *malapropism*, the misunderstanding of one word for another word which is similar in sound, most often an unintentional confusion;
- third is *spoonerism*, the inadvertent transposition of sounds within a word or phrase, in other words, an accidental pun;
- fourth is *anagram*, the rearrangement of the letters of a word so as to spell another word or words — this is an intentional type of wordplay;
- and finally, *palindrome*, a term which etymologizes as “run (*-drome*) back/again (*palin-*),” meaning a word or sentence which is spelled the same way backwards and forwards.

Amphibology. Let's begin by examining amphibology, which is when a word or phrase carries double meaning. That can be the result of intentional or inadvertent misuse, for instance, a notice in a restaurant which reads “Customers who think our waiters are rude should see the manager.” The British Prime Minister Disraeli was famous for having written to a person who'd sent him a book he'd published: “Thank you so much for the book. I shall lose no time in reading it.” Another Brit, Samuel Johnson, in reviewing a publication, said: “Your work is both good and original. Unfortunately, the parts that are good are not original, and the parts that are original are not good.” Johnson apparently didn't trust his reader to understand the amphibology.

One rich source of amphibologies is church newsletters, where many are found, such as:

- “Don't let worry kill you. Let the church help.”
- “For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs.”
- “This afternoon there will be a meeting in the north and south ends of the church. Children will be baptized at both ends.”
- “Thursday at 5 pm there will be a meeting of the Little Mothers Club. All wishing to become Little Mothers, please see the minister in his private study.”
- “This being Easter Sunday, we will ask Mrs. Lewis to come forward and lay an egg on the altar.”

- “The ladies of the church have cast off clothing of every kind and they may be seen in the church basement.”
- “At the evening service tonight, the sermon topic will be ‘What is Hell?’ Come early and listen to our choir practice.”
- “Weight Watchers will meet at 7 pm at the First Baptist Church. Please use the large double doors at the side entrance.”
- “The Associate Minister unveiled the church’s new tithing campaign slogan last Sunday: ‘I upped my pledge! Up yours!’”

Well, let’s *hope* those are all inadvertent.

Malapropism. A second form of paronomasia is malapropism, “the misunderstanding of one word for another which is similar in sound.” The term comes from a famous comedy, *The Rivals* by Richard Sheridan, which features a comic character named Mrs. Malaprop, a pretentious woman who in trying to sound educated and well-read often ends up using a word which sounds like the right one but isn’t, as when she lauds someone as “the very pineapple of politeness.” She means, of course, “the pinnacle of politeness.” In similar fashion, an Australian politician is reported to have said: “No one, however smart, however well educated, however experienced, is the suppository of all wisdom.” Ow, education can be really painful. No wonder so few people bother.

The term malaprop derives from the French phrase *mal à propos* (“bad[ly] to the purpose”). Here are some examples:

- a wealthy typhoon — it should be tycoon, right?
- she put massacre on her eyes — and sometimes mascara does resemble a form of genocide
- you could have knocked me over with a fender — you can knock anyone over with the fender
- or this one taken from a handbook on etiquette: “If a young man makes an indecent proposal, the well-bred young lady will politely recline to accept it.” — always check for typos!
- Children often struggle with the Pledge of Allegiance and end up saying, “I pledge a legion (or ‘I led the pigeons’) to the flag of the United States of America, . . .
 - “. . . and to the republic for Richard Stans, . . .” — lucky guy! —
 - “. . . one nation under guard . . .”
 - “. . . in a dirigible . . .”
 - “. . . or “and a vegetable, with liberty and justice for all.” I don’t know about you, but I feel safer.

The true gold mine of malapropisms is, however, student writing, as in the young scholar who composed an essay on the Spanish classic, *Don Coyote*. Among other notable student malapropisms are:

- Moses went up Mount Cyanide, . . .
- . . . but he died before he ever reached Canada. — and who can argue with that?
- David was skilled at playing the liar. — read the Bible! He was.
- He fought with the Finckelsteins, a race of people who lived in Biblical times.

- Solomon, one of David's sons, had 300 wives and 700 porcupines. — If he invites you over, watch where you sit.
- The Greeks invented three kinds of columns: Corinthian, Ironic and Dork.
- And they built the Porntheon . . .
- . . . on the Apocalypse. — where do you even begin correcting that?
- Greek myth tells about the mother of Achilles who dipped him in the river Stynx . . .
- . . . until he became intolerable.
- Socrates died of an overdose of wedlock. — well, that's according to Plato.
- In the Olympic games, the Greeks ran, jumped, hurled the biscuits, . . .
- . . . and threw the java.
- The Roamins are called this name because they never stayed in one place for long. — Somebody spent five minutes doing their homework.
- Julius Caesar extinguished himself on the plains of Gaul. — or so many of his contemporaries wished.
- And when he died, he said, "Teehee, Brutus!" — no, he said, "Ouch."
- In the Middle Ages King Alfred conquered the Dames. — but later they conquered back.
- Medieval victims of the Bluebonnet plague . . .
- . . . grew boobs on their necks. — this student is struggling with history and biology.
- During this time people put on normality plays about ghosts, goblins, virgins and other mythical creatures. — I always suspected.
- English government was a constitutional mockery. — and still is.
- When Queen Elizabeth exposed herself before her troops, they shouted "Hurrah!" and defeated the Spanish Armaddillo. — Then she put her clothes back on and they defeated the Armada.
- Sir Francis Drake circumcised the world . . .
- . . . using a one-hundred-foot clipper. — no wonder nature hates us.
- John Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*. Then his wife died and he wrote *Paradise Regained*. — party at Milton's!
- One cause of the Revolutionary War was the English put tacks in their tea. — iron is good for you.
- Lincoln freed the slaves by signing the Emasculation Proclamation. — which is exactly the way the South saw it.
- Louis Pasteur discovered a cure for rabbis. — it's called the Vatican vaccine.

Another good source of malapropisms is the excuse notes parents write for their children's absence from school, such as:

- My son is under a doctor's care. Please execute him. — gladly!
- My daughter was absent yesterday because she had her periodicals, or . . .
- . . . her first menopause, or . . .
- . . . she was administrating. — I'm speechless.
- Please excuse Connie from gym. She's having trouble breeding. — good!
- Ann could not come to school. She was bothered by very close veins. — I'll bet that hurts. And finally...
- Please excuse Tom. He had diarrhea and his boots leak.

That last one actually isn't a malapropism. I just thought it was hilarious and wanted to put it in somewhere.

Spoonerism. A third type of paronomasia is spoonerism, “the humorous transposition of sounds within a phrase or sentence,” for example, instead of “Time heals all wounds,” “Time wounds all heels.” The technical term for this is metaphasis, literally “a changed (*meta-*) result of (*-sis*) speaking (PHA-).” Here are a few examples of spoonerisms:

- a well-boiled icicle (a well-oiled bicycle)
- in one swell foop (in one fell swoop)
- under the affluence of incohol (under the influence of alcohol)
- a scoop of boy trouts (a troop of boy scouts)
- don't pet the sweaty things! (don't sweat the petty things!)

The name for this type of wordplay comes from a real person, the Reverend William Spooner, an Anglican scholar who was the warden of New College, Oxford, from 1903 to 1924. He was famous for his very boring lectures and his work on the Roman historian Tacitus. He was also an albino. But what made his name famous throughout the world was his habit of saying accidental spoonerisms in public, usually hilarious inversions of words or phrases. The linguist Richard Lederer summed it up neatly: “Spooner set out to be a bird watcher and ended up a word botcher.”

There have been many spoonerisms attributed to the man, such as when he accused a student of “fighting a liar in the quadrangle” — he meant to say “lighting a fire” — and to another student he is reported to have said, “You have hissed my mystery lectures. You have tasted your whole worm!” (You have missed my history lectures and wasted your whole term.) To that could be added the immortal question: “Who of us has not felt in his heart a half-warmed fish?” (a half-formed wish). There are indeed so many of these spoonerisms recorded in his name it's hard to believe the dear Reverend would have had the time to say them all.

Other spoonerisms attached to the man but of questionable authenticity are

- “Three cheers for our queer old dean!” (dear old queen)
- “When our boys come home from France, we'll have the hags flung out.” (flags hung out)
- “The Lord is shoving leopard.” — and probably he is
- “It's now kiss-tomary to cuss the bride.” — it is where I come from.

Poor Spooner hated his own tendency to “spoonerize.” One night when drunken students had collected below the balcony of his suite on campus and demanded a speech from him, he said, “You don't want to hear a speech. You just want to hear one of those . . . things!” Creeple can be so pool.

Anagrams. A fourth type of paronomasia is the anagram, “the rearrangement of the letters within a word so as to spell another word or words.” Etymologically, an anagram is an “upside-down (*ana-*) word (*-GRAM*).” So, for instance, an anagram of “parental consent” is “no prenatal cents.” See how in creating this anagram every letter was used once and no letter has been omitted? But more than that, the anagram ideally reveals the “secret” or “true” meaning of the word. After all, there can be more than one anagram for a word, but usually one stands out as

truer. Here's a good example. What's an anagram of "angered." Well, one is "derange," but a better one would be "enraged," because it means the same thing.

Now let's test your anagrammatical skills. See if you can figure out the best anagram for the following words. Don't be shy about pausing the presentation to give yourself time to scramble — or Scrabble — the letters. [*And rather than ruin the fun by giving you the answers here in the transcription, I'll let the slides do the talking for once. To see the anagrams, you'll have to watch the Powerpoint.*] Okay, here's your first anagram:

- train =
- the eyes =
- endearments =
- lawyers =
- a shoplifter =
- conversation =
- desperation =
- bathing girls =
- the Morse code =
- Western Union =
- panties =
- punishment =
- French Revolution =
- Is pity love? =
- Presbyterian =
- marriage =
- slot machines =
- Ten Commandments =
- Madame Curie =
- Southern California =
- Ivanhoe by Sir Walter Scott =
- Rocky Mountains =
- the piano bench =
- astronomers =
- hibernated =
- The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere =
- mother-in-law =
- Ronald Wilson Reagan =
- George Herbert Walker Bush =
- two plus eleven =
- anagrams =
- *quid est veritas?* =
- A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! =

Palindromes. The last type of paronomasia we'll examine is the palindrome, a term that means "a word, phrase or sentence which is spelled the same way backwards and forwards." The

etymological elements in the word palindrome are the prefix *palin-* (“backwards”) and the base *-DROME* (“run”). The English writer Ben Jonson coined the term palindrome in 1629, though he was far from the first to notice the phenomenon or give it a name. Palindromes have also been called “recurrents,” “bifrontals,” “encyclics” and “diabolics.” In antiquity, they were referred to as “sotadics” so named for a poet Sotades who wrote poetry, most of it very bad, in palindrome form. Indeed, the ancients were enchanted with palindromes. The Romans even constructed a pair of side-by-side temples: one dedicated to their city Rome (*Roma* in Latin); the other to divine love (*Amor*). *Roma* and *Amor* are palindromes. To highlight these names, the temples were built as mirror images of each other.

The principal rule about palindromes is that they must have the same letters running in both directions, but everything else — punctuation, word-breaks, pronunciation — may, and in fact should, be different. Here are some simple palindromes with their center point underlined to make it easier for you to see how the letters run forwards and backwards: noon, deed, toot, peep, radar, level, civic, repaper. Names can be palindromes, too: Eye, Otto, Aнна, Hannah.

But those palindromes are too basic to make much of an impression on anyone. The real art of palindroming lies in the construction of long phrases and sentences, for instance, what is purported to be the first sentence ever spoken, what Adam said to Eve when they first met: “Madam, I’m Adam.” Or perhaps the slightly more complicated: “Madam, in Eden I’m Adam.” Yes, apostrophes are fair game here, and they don’t have to be balanced, only the actual letters of the words. And that’s not the only aboriginal palindrome. To Adam’s bifrontal welcome, the crafty Eve replied: “Sir, I’m iris.” Why do they always lie to you?

Among other historical moments which have been memorialized palindromatically, Napoleon is said to have remarked about his career as a general: “Able was I ere I saw Elba.” I don’t think he actually did say this — his English wasn’t that good — but that’s not the point. He could have and it would have been a palindrome, a good but not a great one. The word breaks coincide on each half of the palindrome which makes it look rather blocky. Clearly, someone just realized that the name of the island Elba where Napoleon was exiled is the word “able” spelled backwards, and then pieced the palindrome together with “was” and “saw” and the small palindromic word “ere.” I give it C+, mostly for effort.

Here’s another famous and much better palindrome about our president Teddy Roosevelt during whose administration the Panama Canal was created: “A man, a plan, a canal: Panama!” Wow, now that’s a manly palindrome! Note how the word breaks come at very different points on each side of the palindrome. True, it has all a’s, but fitting “plan” and “canal” into this palindrome? That’s pure genius.

To show how much the ancient world admired palindromes, here’s one in ancient Greek which was carved onto a fountain: *Nipson Anomemata Me Monan Opsin*, meaning “Wash your sins not only your face.” I put the **ps**’s in bold because the Greeks wrote those sounds as one letter, so the palindrome works in Greek. More than that, it was inscribed in such a way that it reads the same whichever direction you were walking around fountain.

From antiquity also comes a palindromic riddle in Latin: *in girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*. It means “We go in a circle at night and are eaten by fire.” So what are “we” in this riddle? Well, the answer depends on a phenomenon you may have encountered when camping out in the woods but it’s not as common a thing as it once was. Today, we see the same phenomenon around lightbulbs at night. What flies around them? Moths! If those bulbs were candles or oil-lamps, a major source of lighting at night in antiquity, you would have seen many a moth “consumed by fire.”

One of the earliest attested English palindromes is “Lewd did I live & evil did I dwell.” Not particularly well-crafted, is it? “Dwell” requires an alternate spelling, which was probably valid in the day, but the ampersand is not acceptable by any standard. Today that would be considered cheating. Still, this primitive attempt shows the instinct to play with English words recurrently.

Modern language offers many better examples. Here are but a few:

- No lemons, no melon!
- Poor Dan is in a droop.
- Em, sex at noon taxes me.
- Too far, Edna, we wander afoot.
- Was it Eliot’s toilet I saw?
- Norma is as selfless as I am, Ron.
- Straw? No, too stupid a fad! I put soot on warts.
- Are we not drawn onward, we few, drawn onward to new era?
- Satan, oscillate my metallic sonatas!

Wow! Is not that last one impressive? Whoever saw that “metallic” and “oscillate” could fit together into a palindrome has pure satanic genius.

As far as anyone can tell, wordplay is as old as words themselves. The tendency is visible in every age. Mayan scribes punned when carving inscriptions. Christ himself had fun with the name Peter when he said, “On this rock (*petros*) I will build my church.” *Petros* is, of course, the Greek form of his disciple Peter’s name. Shakespeare was a master of wordplay, making more than three thousand puns, and that’s assuming we’ve found them all. Moreover, in a day and age when video games rule, crossword puzzles still captivate many, and Scrabble continues to be one of the most popular board games. It’s found in nearly every society that uses an alphabet. We just can’t help but play with words.

So why is paronomasia so prevalent? Surely one reason is that it’s part of the joy itself inherent in speaking and reading language. As we’ve seen so often in this class, many words like “okay” begin as jokes. Thus, humor based on language appears to be essential not only in our fundamental delight in creating language but is also instrumental in the process of linguistic change. Playing with words is not a waste of time. It can be very productive and can lead to important and useful linguistic innovations. While there is so frustratingly little we can be sure of about our Indo-European ancestors — their homeland, their conquests, their customs — of this I am sure: they punned.

And that's it for this video presentation. Remember there's nothing in this video you need to know for the final exam. This is only for your enjoyment and edification. Along the same line there's one more presentation for you to listen to if you like — again, it's optional — a video about neologism, the process of creating new words. Please watch that if you have the time and inclination.

Happy Mis-Etymologizing!