

Current Comments®

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The Crime of Pun-ishment

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Not long ago I received a letter from a reader who expressed appreciation for the wordplay used in *Current Comments*® titles. Apparently such immortal titles as "stalking celery's secrets"¹ and "from starch to finish...ironing out some pressing problems" on drycleaning^{2,3} appealed to his and my need for a break in the often serious matters we discuss regularly.⁴ There is nothing to laugh about in AIDS, world hunger, or whatever, but even some of the serious health problems we've discussed have provided opportunities for wordplay. Our essay on cholera, for example, highlighted the research of Dr. Shambu Nath De of Calcutta.⁵ When the essay was reprinted in the Indian science magazine *Science Age*, a table of his most-cited papers bore the title "All in a De's work."⁶

Although the foregoing examples of wordplay may already have caused some readers to groan and head for the *ISI*® *Press Digest* section, this report is devoted entirely to puns—a punitive action indeed. The subject is somewhat reminiscent of another humorous device, the one-liner, which I joyfully discussed previously.⁷ Despite being reviled in some circles as the lowest form of wit, a pun can be a very effective means of communicating ideas. Or, as Walter Redfern, University of Reading, UK, expressed it, puns, like contraceptives, can be labor-saving devices.⁸ (p. 26) And puns, like metaphor and poetry,⁹⁻¹¹ also have a connection with scientific communication and creativity, which I'll discuss.

A pun, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, is "the use of a word in such

a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations, or the use of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect."¹² Of course, the words "humorous effect" might be subject to debate, not quite applying to the rolled eyes, shaken heads, and mumbled threats that occasionally follow the delivery of an especially pungent pun.

Just as informal polling might find disagreement as to whether chronic perpetrators of puns should be, say, flogged, or sent into exile, etymologists do not seem to agree on the origins of the word "pun." As Redfern notes, some theories posit that "pun" is a shortened form of the Italian word *puntiglio*, meaning "quibble."⁸ (p. 16) There is also speculation that the word may derive from antecedents of the French word *pointe*, which can refer to a sharp expression or witticism.¹³

Whatever the word's derivation, it is undeniable that puns have been around for a long time. (There is no evidence, however, that the Punic Wars of circa 200 BC were occasioned by particularly irksome wordplay. I suppose, however, that the conflict may have been caused by the Romans casting aspersions on the national character of the Carthaginians—accusing them, for example, of being incapable of Phoenician what they started.) Anyway, Harold T. Davis, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, in *The Fine Art of Punning*, discusses puns that go as far back as the Old Testament. In a passage in Jeremiah, for example, the sight of a sprig of an almond tree

portends the coming of evil and the necessity for vigilance.¹⁴ (p. 10) Since the pun depends on knowledge of the Hebraic words *shāquēd* for almond and *shoquēd* for watchful, this passage might not induce gales of laughter at your next dinner party. But it does demonstrate that wordplay and punning have been around for a long time.

Davis also mentions one of the earliest known literary puns, from the *Odyssey* of Homer, which dates from the ninth century BC. When Odysseus and his crew are captured by the one-eyed giant Polyphemus, Odysseus identifies himself to the cyclops as "Nobody." Later, when Odysseus succeeds in blinding Polyphemus, the giant calls to his brothers for help, crying, "Nobody is killing me." They fail to assist him, responding that if "nobody" is responsible, it must be the will of the gods.¹⁴ (p. 10-1) (Here, in admiration of Homer's facility¹⁵ with words, I might pose the question, "Odysseus do it?—make all those puns, I mean." But I wouldn't want to make my readers feel illiad.)

Victor Margolin, in his article "The pun is mightier than the sword," discusses another notorious literary punster, William Shakespeare. Writing in *Verbatim*, Margolin bills the Bard as "great shakes and without peer" in the art of punning.¹⁶ The character Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, mortally wounded in a duel, still manages this quip to his comrades: "Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man."¹⁷ Kenneth Muir, University of Liverpool, UK, exploring wordplay in *Macbeth*, notes that many of the puns in Shakespeare produce ambiguity, leaving some passages open to several interpretations. As Muir points out, modern scholars can only speculate as to whether or not Shakespeare was aware of all the meanings implicit in his wordplay.¹⁸ And there has been abundant scholarly speculation. One example is *A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sexual Puns and Their Significance* by Frankie Rubinstein, more than 300 pages of explication regarding Shakespearean punography.¹⁹ (We might ask: Were Shakespeare writing today, would he be bard from in-

cluding such material in the bawdy of his work?)

Many other authors have employed puns. Jonathan Swift, for example, wrote on the art of punning.²⁰ He also offered "A modest defence of punning," a playful attempt to refute the idea that "where a pun is meant there follows a punishment."²¹ As Redfern points out, Swift is renowned for the marathon wordplay in his works.⁸ (p. 54) Among modern authors, Lewis Carroll and James Joyce are particularly noted for intricate punning.

Davis discusses puns in history. One famous example concerns the British general Sir Charles James Napier (1782-1853), assigned to India in the 1840s. Reporting the successful outcome of a battle that gave his troops control of the region near Sind, the general allegedly sent a one-word dispatch to the British War Office: the Latin word "Peccavi," meaning "I have sinned." If this story sounds too good to be true, it apparently was; the anecdote was later found to have originated in the British humor magazine *Punch*.¹⁴ (p. 110-1) No word, however, on whether the magazine ever rescinded the story.

As I mentioned above, puns have received serious scholarly attention. Linguists and others have proposed various theories and constructs to explain how puns work. Louis G. Heller, for example, Department of Classical Languages, City College of New York, has written about puns in terms of what he refers to as "meanings" and "signals." He offers as an example a brief poem about a doctor who falls into a well, breaking his collarbone. "He should have tended to the sick," the poem concludes, "and left the well alone."²² It is the correlation between the signal word "well" and its two meanings that makes the pun work.

As Heller notes, "Puns differ among themselves by virtue of the structural details of the correlation or by the devices employed to bring about the correlation." Puns, he observes, can have a visual as well as a lingual signal. He offers the example of a man who follows a young woman into an auditorium in which an auction is taking

place. Attempting to get the woman's attention, the man waves at her, unaware that each gesture is being dutifully recorded by the auctioneer. Before he knows it, the man finds that he has bid successfully on an art object costing thousands of dollars.²² Using the various patterns of signals and meanings involved in punning, Heller has suggested a general typology of the pun.²³

In *Visual Puns in Design*, Eli Kince, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, considers the history of the pun as a communications tool.²⁴ Visual puns, he notes, can be found as far back as the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt and the letterforms of ancient China. In the art of the twentieth century, visual puns began to appear frequently in painting, sculpture, and architecture. Kince mentions the witty, iconoclastic work of the Dada artists in the years following World War I and the surrealist painting of Belgian artist René Magritte.²⁴ (p. 20-5)

Visual puns can also be found in the cartoons of Sidney Harris, whose work is familiar to *Current Contents*[®] readers.²⁵ The accompanying cartoons from Harris's *Science Goes to the Dogs*²⁶ provide two examples of canine puns that our readers can sink their teeth into.

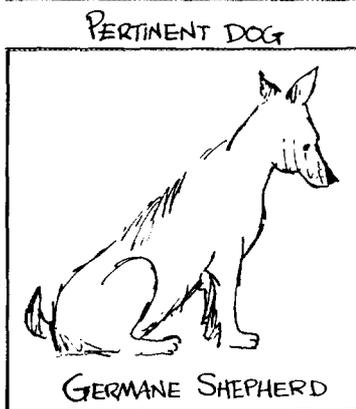
The *Journal of Irreproducible Results* is an excellent source of scientific wordplay and puns. One recent article, for example, discusses "continental drip," a hitherto unknown geologic phenomenon. The author points out, quite reasonably, that the world's

continents are roughly teardrop-shaped and do appear to be oozing toward the North Pole. This proves, of course, that conventional notions of cartography have been grossly mistaken and that north is in fact "down" while south is "up."²⁷

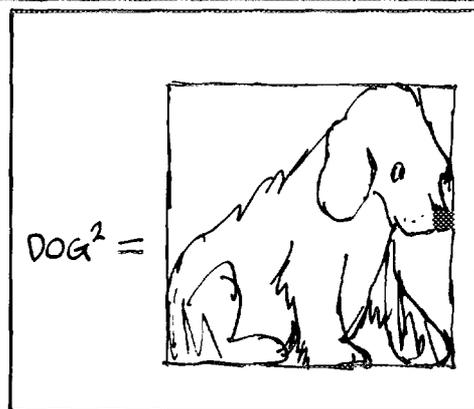
It is worth acknowledging (but certainly not dwelling on) the argument that "less is more" when it comes to punning. Bernard Dixon, for example, European editor of *The Scientist*[™], points out that when the British medical publication *World Medicine* began in 1965, its relentlessly punning headlines (in imitation of its US sister publication *Medical World News*) upset readers and advertisers to the point where circulation was affected. Only when *World Medicine*'s editors decided on a more judicious, sparing use of puns did the magazine become a commercial success.²⁸

Joel Sherzer, Department of Anthropology, University of Texas, Austin, writes of the role that puns play in what he calls "discourse cohesion," linking various utterances or parts of a discourse to each other. Puns, he notes, can be "indexical expressions." Like indexes, puns are "pointers whose meaning only becomes clear by seeing where the pointing leads."²⁹

In his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud writes that puns pass as "the lowest form of verbal joke, probably because they are the cheapest—can be made with the least trouble."³⁰ (p. 45) They are, so to speak, for the emotional cheapskate.



Cartoons by Sidney Harris



Freud also notes that "it is worthwhile paying attention to the kind of jokes that are told one as puns." He tells the story of a friend, "a model of discretion where his serious achievements in science are concerned," who could "for considerable periods of time" answer every remark addressed to him with a pun. Despite his admiration of the punster's ability, Freud concludes that puns "merely form a sub-species of the group which reaches its peak in the play upon words proper."³⁰ (p. 47)

There has been speculation that in some instances the compulsion to pun has an organic cause. A 1929 article by psychiatrist A.A. Brill in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* discussed the condition known as *Witzelsucht*, or "punning mania."³¹ Brill wrote of a few cases, including that of a 31-year-old man, suffering from a brain tumor, who began to pun "about anything and everything." Citing disagreement about the condition's causes and manifestations, Brill concluded that "so-called *Witzelsucht* hardly deserves to be designated as a diagnostic phenomenon."³¹ The condition is listed in *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary*, which defines it as "a mental condition characteristic of frontal lobe lesions and marked by the making of poor jokes and puns...at which the patient himself is intensely amused."³² We were, however, unable to find a single reference published in the past 30 years that had cited Brill's paper.

As mentioned earlier, there is an aspect to puns that involves scientific communication and creativity. Scott F. Gilbert, Department of Biology, Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, whose work on scientific and medical imagery was included in our essay on metaphor, has also written about scientific puns. "The basis of punning," he says, "is the destruction of categories that separate one word or concept from another.... Punning makes forbidden connections, uniting what should rationally be kept separate."³³

At the same time that they destroy boundaries between ideas, notes Gilbert, puns create new boundaries among people. In scientific or academic circles, puns serve to

validate one's learning and create bonds between people with similar backgrounds and interests. For example, during a lab exercise on insect metamorphosis, Gilbert asked the class if they had heard of the new blockbuster film on the eradication of the gypsy moth. The name of the movie? *Instar Wars*. The students had only recently learned that "instar" is the scientific term for the life-cycle stages of certain insects. Their laughter at the pun demonstrated appreciation at understanding a joke they would not have understood before. According to Gilbert, the more esoteric the pun, the greater the bond between people who understand it. "Responding to a pun," he writes, "is a form of mutual congratulations." And the form of the response—whether a groan or a chuckle—is not important. What matters is that the pun has been understood.³³

While it may be interesting to talk about how puns work and about their larger psychological and sociological implications, it is more amusing to talk about the restaurant on the moon that failed because it had great food but no atmosphere. Or about the Marx Brothers movie in which Groucho, informed that "Jennings is waxing wrath" outside his office, replies, "Well, tell Roth to wax Jennings for a while."³⁴ Or about Groucho expounding on the difficulty of removing elephant tusks, observing that, "In Alabama, the Tuscaloosa."³⁵

I could continue, but I wouldn't want to be accused of pun-tificating. In the postscript to this essay, however, we present a small selection of puns contributed by members of ISI's Science Advisory Board and our own staff. If you are a punster or have a favorite pun, please send it to me on a postcard or via the telephone. We'll provide punctual, punctilious publication of the punniest puns in *The Scientist*.

* * * * *

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Postscript: A Selection of Puns

An old French mathematical play on words, proving that Cicero and Poincaré are the same person:

Si c'est rond, c'est point carré, ce qu'il fallait démontrer!

What do you say to a bacteriologist who constantly cracks jokes?

Will you *B. cereus* for once in your life!

A fisherman was floundering about in his turbot-charged V-8 car because he'd lost his plaice.

Storekeeper: The photo lab lost your negatives.

Customer: Someday my prints will come.

Where is the corporate seal?

In the corporate swimming pool.

The dolphins at the aquarium are having a whale of a time (not accidentally, but on porpoise).

Some immunologists are very religious—they believe in the *Generator Of Diversity*. But parasitologists pray to the Lord of Hosts and offer toasts with crème de helmenthe.