



Heave your goosnargh into the fridge, not the hiffin, y' billy sitch



Dianne Bardsley
WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

IT GOES without saying that language is an indispensable component of humour, irrespective of one's age and experience. Playing with words is a lifetime and sometimes unfortunate habit of some punsters, the name known to have existed in the English language since the early 17th century.

There is more than one type of pun. Sam Weller and his father in *Pickwick Papers* developed the habit of making puns in a way that they became a sub-type of proverb, a warning, or sometimes a social comment. This type of word play is known as wellerism. Wellerisms have a structure, where speaker or writer and situation are always identified, as in "‘Genius will work its way through’, said the poet when he saw the hole in the elbow of his coat”.

A spoonerism is a slip of the tongue which is usually unintentional, but which punsters will exploit. In a spoonerism, a consonant or vowel, usually an initial one, is swapped. The term is derived from the Reverend William Spooner, a Warden of Oxford's New College, who was well-known for such slips, two of his most famous being "queer old dean" instead of "dear old queen", and "the Lord is a shoving leopard". Most of us are familiar with the intentional Rindacella and the Prandsome Hince along with the attempt to be polite with billy sitch.

Another unintentional utterance that can have a long lexical half-life is the malapropism which, though amusing, is also damning for the speaker or writer. The term comes from Mrs Malaprop, a character in Sheridan's play *The Rivals*. Sarah Palin has made herself even more well-known with her unintentional coining of "refudiate", which is semantically a blend of "refute" and "repudiate". The *American Oxford Dictionary* blog named this novelty word in its Word of the Year for 2010, while stressing that it will probably not warrant a dictionary entry. It will, however, always remain a Palinism.

A more common form of word-play is the coining and usage of nicknames for people, places, and objects or events. New Zealanders use the term "hiff" almost synonymously with "heave". A

correspondent informed me that when she and her family have something to toss or hiff, it goes into the hiffin, a cupboard of miscellaneous objects. Most of us probably have a hiffin without giving it a name. The parking warden who chalks car tyres is known as a "walk and chalk". Politicians are the butt of humorous but typically unkind nicknames. An area well-known for the coinage of nicknames and slang in New Zealand is the criminal domain. Prominent are the names for cannabis, such as electric puha, New Zealand green, and wacky backy. Rhyming slang and the use of irony are other forms of word fun here. Currant cake is rhyming slang for homebake, and hollow log is sniffer dog. Bed and breakfast is a short prison sentence, to do a John Walker is to "do a runner" and Paremoremo top-security prison is known as the big top.

Margaret Mahy and Lynley Dodd are among New Zealand children's authors who have created fun with the word sounds. Mahy expressions such as ultra-violet catastrophe and seismological singularity, used in unlikely contexts, convey a sense of sheer nonsense for kids, just as Dodd's Hairy Maclary and Donaldson's Dairy will be memorable for many young Kiwis. Children soon learn that improbability is a significant ingredient in humour. They find nothing funnier than matching an unlikely adjective with a noun, as in a reluctant cheese or chatty sock.

For adults, Douglas Adams and John Lloyd showed how much fun can be made from inventing words in *The Deeper Meaning of Liff* (1983) subtitled *A dictionary of things that there aren't any words for yet*. Most entries are nouns for very familiar objects or situations, an example being the term "goosnargh" for something that is left over from a meal or its preparation and is stored in the fridge in the knowledge that it will never likely be used. Very familiar! But all in all, with words it is the unfamiliar that has the potential to be really humorous.

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