

Language At Play: Linguistic Terms

Puns etc...

- **homophones: words which sound the same but have a different meaning & spelling.**

**Surely** you can do something!  
I can, but don't call me **Shirley!**  
(Airplane)

What's black and white and red all over?  
A newspaper.

What illness do retired pilots get?  
Flu.

What does the garden say when it laughs?  
Hoe, hoe, hoe.

- **homophonic phrases: syllable for syllable, phrases sound alike, but the sum of the meaning is different. Not frequently found in English - have to be forced.**

Where did Humpty Dumpty leave his hat?  
Humpty dumped 'is 'at on a wall.

What happened to the snake with a cold?  
She adder viper nose.

What did the electrician's wife say when he came in late?  
Wire you insulate?

- **homonyms: words which are spelled the same but have different meanings.**

How do you hire a horse?  
Put a brick under each foot.

What's the lady copper doing up a tree?  
She's working for the Special Branch.

Is the tomb of Karl Marx just another Communist plot?

Bloodnok: You can't come in, I'm in the bath,  
Seagoon: (off) What are you doing in the bath?  
Bloodnok: I'm watching television.  
Seagoon: (off) What's showing?  
Bloodnok: Nothing, I've got a towel round me.

Which plant makes money?  
Mint.

Whether life is worth living depends on the **liver**.

The **small** of my back is too big doctor.

Where do fish learn to swim?  
In a school.

What runs along every street in town?  
The pavement

Can I interest you in a nightcap?  
No thanks, I don't wear one. (Naked Gun)

How do you get down from an elephant? (get down=phrasal verb)  
You don't, you get down from a swan. (get down = verb + object)

There was a record number of births in Kilburn this week. Apparently, it was due to the Irish sweep.  
He has now moved to Camden Town.

Of a neon display in STOPPARD'S "REAL INSPECTOR HOUND" :  
**Moon:** It has scale, it has colour, it is, in the best sense of the word, electric. (p11)

- **homonymic phrases: whole phrases can be turned into homonymic puns.**

'I have designs on you' as the tattooist said to his girlfriend.  
What did the needle say to the thread?  
I've got my eye on you.

- **mimes: phonetic similitudes, usually rhymes, with the appeal of homophones.**

What do cannibals play at parties?  
Swallow my leader.

What is pink, wobbly and flies?  
A jellycopter.

What do policeman have in their sandwiches?  
Truncheon meat.

What did the duck say as it flew upside down?  
I'm quacking up..  
What do hedgehogs eat for breakfast?  
Prickled onions.

- **mimetic phrases: as mimes, but based on well known phrases.**

Hollywood, land of mink and honey.

Your honey or your life.

Your honey - or your wife?

Are Eskimos God's frozen people?

A cannibal came home to find his wife cutting up a boa constrictor and a small native. 'Oh, no', he said, 'not snake and pygmy pie again.'

- **deconstruction or pseudomorphs: false word forms.**

Seagoon: A penguin please  
Sellers: Certainly, I'll look in the catalogue.  
Seagoon: But I don't want a cat, I want a penguin.  
Sellers: Then I'll look in the penguin-logue

What do you do with a wombat?  
Play wom.

Samson was terribly dis-tressed by Delilah.

Be alert!  
Your country needs lerts.

What do you give an injured lemon?  
Lemon-aid

Which bird always succeeds?  
A budgie with no teeth.

- **Bilingual puns: where a foreign words is made to bear the sense of an English word by homophonic accident or literal translation.**

What do Frenchmen eat for breakfast?  
Huit-heures bix. (Weetabix)

Here lies Willie Longbottom Aged 6.  
**Ars** longa, vita brevis

'Je t'adore', he whispered passionately in her ear.  
'Shut it yourself' she shouted back at him.

### **Other forms of word play**

- **playing with rules of conversation**

At customs -  
Customs officer: Cigarettes, brandy, whisky...  
Girl: How kind you are in this country. I'll have a coffee please.  
(Request for information mistaken for offer- same form covers different functions.)

You know your great great great great grandfather?  
Yes?  
No you don't, he's dead!  
(Conversation markers taken literally).

Where did King John sign the Magna Carta?  
At the bottom.

Waiter, your thumb is in my soup.  
Don't worry, Sir, it's not hot.

How do you stop a skunk smelling?  
Hold his nose.

- **malapropism: the use of a word in mistake for one sounding similar to comic effect (Named after Mrs Malaprop in Sheridan's play *The Rivals* who made many such mistakes.)**

**Illiterate** him, I say, quite from your memory.  
He is the very **pineapple** of politeness!  
She's as headstrong as an **allegory** on the banks of the Nile. (all Sheridan)  
Dot Cotton, Eastenders - Why don't you go & do some **aerobatics**? (aerobics)  
Heat is generated internally by **eccentricity** and distributed through **conviction**.  
(electricity, convection)

- **portmanteaux: Lewis Carroll's term for two words and meanings packed into one word.**

If buttercups are yellow, what colour are hiccups?  
Burple.

What do you call an overweight pumpkin?  
A plumpkin.

- **Spoonerism: transposition, usually accidental, of the initial letters etc of two or more words. Named after Rev W. A. Spooner, English scholar, died 1930 - reputed to have made such errors in speaking.**

You have hissed the mystery lectures.

The Lord is a shoving leopard.

You have deliberately tasted two worms (wasted two terms) and will leave Oxford on the town drain (down train).

pillified and villoried (STOPPARD'S "REAL INSPECTOR HOUND")

When I pick you up, I'll heap my porn outside your door.

**A type of joke is based on this kind of wordplay:**

What's the difference between a night watchman and a butcher?  
One stays awake, the other weighs a steak.

What's the difference between a barber in Rome and a mad circus owner?  
One is a shaving Roman and the other a raving showman.

- **axial clash: where a word changes in grammatical function creating another meaning.**

How do you make a cat drink?  
Put it in a liquidizer.

Why did the window box?  
Because it saw the garden fence.

How do you make a sausage roll?  
Give it a push.

How do you make a Maltese cross?  
Tread on his toes.

How do you make an elephant float?  
Take two scoops of  
ice-cream, some lemonade, and add one elephant!

- **playing with word boundaries**

Steven, you have acute appendicitis.  
I came here to be treated, not admired doctor.

How could you say in one word that you had come across a doctor?  
Metaphysician.

Knock Knock  
Who's there?

Felix  
 Felix who?  
 Felix-ited all over!

Keep Fit by Jim Nastics  
 Hospitality by Colin Anytime  
 Keep it up by Lucy Lastic

Is a Buddhist monk refusing an injection at the dentist trying to transcend dental meditation?  
 Why can't you starve in the desert?  
 Because of the sandwich is there.

Why did the man throw the butter out of the window?  
 Because he wanted to see the butterfly.

- **playing with syntax**

The surgeon told the man that **he** would be in a deep sleep throughout the operation.

She took the stethoscope from round his neck and twisted **it** nervously in her hands.  
 (unclear what the pronoun refers to)

Mummy, Mummy, I don't **like** Daddy.  
 Then leave him on the side of your plate and eat your vegetables.

A Scotsman takes all his money out of the bank once a year for a holiday; once it's had a holiday he puts it back again.

Mummy, can I go out to play?  
 With these holes in your trousers?  
 No, with the girl next door.

Is it bad to write on an empty stomach?  
 No, but it's better to write on paper.

- **mocking language of certain groups**

In STOPPARD'S "REAL INSPECTOR HOUND", 'critic- speak', including their tendency to refer to other texts and to sprinkle their comments with foreign phrases, is mocked throughout, e.g.:

**Moon:** Let me say at once that it has *elan* while at the same time avoiding *eclat*.

**Moon:** *Je suis*, it seems to be saying, *ergo sum*. .... I think we are entitled to ask - and here one is irresistibly reminded of Voltaire's cry, '*Voilà!*' - I think we are entitled to ask - *Where is God?*

- **inappropriate register**

**Radio :** Here is another police message. Essex county police are still searching in vain for the madman who is at large in the deadly marshes of the coastal region. Inspector Hound, who is masterminding the operation, is not available for comment but it is widely believed that he has a secret plan.... Meanwhile police and volunteers are combing the swamps with loud-hailers, shouting, 'Don't be a madman. Give yourself up.'  
 (STOPPARD'S "REAL INSPECTOR HOUND" p14)

**Birdboot :** ...I can't... I'm not alone.... All right! I love your little pink ears and you are my own fluffy bunny-boo.... (STOPPARD'S "REAL INSPECTOR HOUND" p32)

- **sexual innuendo**

**Birdboot:** Of course, she lacks technique as yet- (STOPPARD'S "REAL INSPECTOR HOUND" p36)

**Magnus:** Well I think I'll go and oil my gun. (STOPPARD'S "REAL INSPECTOR HOUND" p38)

- **ambiguity - playing with rules of conversation**

'This car has had one careful owner Sir', said the salesman.  
'But it's covered with dents and scratches!'  
'I'm afraid the other owners weren't so careful'.

**Hound :** You never know, there might have been a serious matter.

**Cynthia:** Drink?

**Hound:** More serious than that, even.

(STOPPARD'S "REAL INSPECTOR HOUND" p27)

- **hyperbole: exaggeration for effect, often comic.**

- **bathos: an anticlimax; a change in mood from the sublime to the absurd or trivial.**

**Moon:** Pistachio fudge? Nectarine cluster? Hickory Nut Praline? Chateau Neuf de Pape Ô55  
Cracknell?

**Birdboot:** I'm afraid not.. Caramel?

**Moon:** Faced as we are with such ubiquitous obliquity it is hard, it is hard indeed, and therefore I will not attempt, to refrain from invoking the names of Kafka, Sartre, Shakespeare, St. Paul, Beckett, Birkett, Pinero, Pirandello, Dante and Dorothy L. Sayers.