

Contents

Introduction / 1

PART I: Arranged Wit

CHAPTER 1

Puns / 7

CHAPTER 2

Spoonerisms / 39

CHAPTER 3

Irish Bulls / 47

CHAPTER 4

Word Definitions / 51

CHAPTER 5

Oxymoron / 58

CHAPTER 6

Aptronyms / 63

CHAPTER 7

Tongue-in-Cheek Acronyms / 69

CHAPTER 8

Riddles / 74

CHAPTER 9

Creative Insults / 84

PART II: Deranged Wit

CHAPTER 1

Malaprops / 99

CHAPTER 2

Mondegreens / 115

CHAPTER 3

Mangled English / 119

CHAPTER 4

Typos & Editorial Bloopers / 128

CHAPTER 5

Pleonasm / 135

Conclusion / 141

Answers / 145

Select Bibliography / 149

About the Author / 153

Index / 155

Introduction

NOTWITHSTANDING THE millions of dog and cat owners who (like me) robotically scoop poop and change litter, some misguided souls regard our species as the dominant one on the planet. I suppose this delusion is based on our ability to employ language, allowing us to communicate far more efficiently than other animals. We thus control the planet and, perhaps, will eventually destroy it. Language, however, also performs a far less “serious” purpose.

I’m referring to the propensity of *Homo sapiens* for language play. Most people cavort with their mother tongues, revelling in the sounds and their various meanings. Because language serves a recreational purpose, many people also often “re-create” words for their amusement. John Crosbie, who founded the International Save the Pun Foundation in 1978, succinctly expressed the process of manipulating language when he

said, “Puns are their own rewords.” The proclivity to pun is hardly an elitist process. Walter Redfern, in his book *Puns*, tells us that “Punning is a free-for-all available to everyone. . . . It is the stock-in-trade of the low comedian and the most sophisticated wordsmith.” Redfern adds that puns appeal particularly to people of a “certain temperament.” It is my hypothesis that the *inability* to play with language, in one form or another, may augur some form of pathology (or, at the very least, a proclivity to believe that Adam and Eve lived in an exotic garden replete with dinosaurs).

I will admit that pronouncing definitively on what constitutes true wit is a subjective endeavour. Complicating matters even further is the fact that the employment of language wit occurs not only wittingly, but also unwittingly and sometimes even half-wittedly. When we manipulate language for the purpose of wit, I designate this process *arranged wit*. At times, however, humour comes from mistakes that one has made when it appears that we are dealing more with a twit or a nitwit than with a wit. This form I designate *deranged wit*. Ergo, I am making the case that language that is not *arranged* is thus *deranged*.

But how is this manipulation of our language achieved? The arrangement and “derangement” of words in English is facilitated by the multiplicity of meanings many words enjoy. For example, much wordplay treats homonyms as if they were synonyms, as in *Romeo and Juliet* when Romeo asks for a torch and says, “Being but heavy I will bear the light.” The flexibility of English aids greatly in this process. A case in point is the fact that over 20 percent of verbs started out their lives as nouns. If you take a gander at your body, you will find that virtually every part, formerly only a noun, has been adapted as a verb, so that from head to toe you can head a committee, face the music, knuckle under, foot the bill, and toe the line.

Also, starting in the twelfth century, the English language underwent a process that eliminated so many declensions and conjugations as well as precise syntax locutions that sometimes it seems that virtually any word can be interpreted in many ways, and often lewdly. For this reason, the verbs “come,” “do,” “fix,” “have,” “know,” “make” and “put” are all replete with sexual innuendo. These factors contribute to a greater pro-

pensity for wordplay in English than in many other languages that are more highly inflected.

Schadenfreude aside, even the kind-hearted enjoy hearing people mangle language. We even revel when they pretend to commit some language screw-up. In fact, the difference between a pun and a fabricated screw-up is not always apparent. Hence, the distinction between *arranged* and *deranged* wit is often murky. Sometimes one pretends that language has been mangled when the reality is that the process of the “mistake” is rather deliberate, and quite cleverly constructed. Such is the case of spoonerisms, which we will consider in Part I, Chapter 2.

Also, many a pun is without wit either because it has been used ad nauseam or is not inherently funny, but here again subjectivity raises its ugly head. We can find some patterns that show how it is that a particular group of people like a particular joke, but to a large extent the process is an individual one affected by a host of factors such as education, gender and class level. Like many other people, I have enjoyed a belly laugh from a text being so badly written that it is riotously amusing. Students in particular often commit mistakes that are rather hilarious. (See malaprops in Part II, Chapter 1.)

In *Wordplay* I have included many of the wittiest examples of language play from known punsters and literary greats. I have also injected much in the way of my own play on words in the form of word definitions (occasionally pictorial) as well as a bevy of new types of word puzzles to delight the reader and to make reading this book and the process of wordplay, in general, a collaborative effort.

Please note that throughout *Wordplay* I use the terms wit and humour interchangeably. Although these words originally had distinct senses (“humour” referred to one’s general condition whereas “wit” referred to one’s mental capacity), by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries they became synonymous — unless their senses were being parsed by arcane philosophers. Nowadays, the distinction between them is so blurred that most people would regard it as pedantic to assign them to totally distinct categories. This being said, the eighth definition of “wit” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth, *OED*) sums up the sublimity that I associate with witmanship: “That quality of speech or writing which consists

in the apt association of thought and expression calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness; later always with the reference to the utterance of brilliant or sparkling things in an amusing way.”

I have avoided discussing humour whose intent is the degrading of a particular group because of some supposed deficiency the group possesses. Humiliation is no laughing matter, particularly when one is the nail rather than the hammer. I realize, however, that what is deemed offensive is highly personal, and if any of the wit displayed in the following pages offends someone, I am truly sorry.

And because Shakespeare informs us in *Hamlet* that “Brevity is the soul of wit,” I will keep my analysis throughout to a minimum.

Enjoy!

CHAPTER 3



Irish Bulls

“I can resist everything except temptation.”

— Oscar Wilde

“I am not afraid of death; I just don’t
want to be there when it happens.”

— Woody Allen

§ GOOD OR BAD? CHAOTIC ORDER OR ORDERLY CHAOS?

After the previous chapters on puns and spoonerisms, most readers will probably have gleaned that one can’t always distinguish a wit from a twit. Statements that are sometimes referred to as “Irish bulls,” exemplify this classification problem.

An Irish bull refers to a pregnant statement that defies logic or syntax in some manner yet still manages to be communicative. You could say that an Irish bull delivers a vast idea in a half-vast manner. Here are two examples: “It was hereditary in his family to have no children,” and the story of the Irish jury who returned with the verdict, “We find the man who stole the mare not guilty.”

The origin of this sense of “bull” is obscure. Some have conjectured that it is connected to “papal bull” or with the Icelandic *bull*, “nonsense,” but both these theories seem unlikely. My best guess is that the word is connected with either the Irish *buile*, “madness,” or the Old French *bolier/bouller*, “to deceive.” Being common in Ireland, this form of word-play is known as an “Irish” bull.

Alternate names for this phenomenon are “Goldwynism” and “Berra-ism” because of the penchant of movie mogul Samuel Goldwyn and former baseball player Yogi Berra for this type of statement.

Goldwyn (allegedly) made all of the following statements:

A verbal contract isn’t worth the paper it’s written on.

If I could drop dead right now, I’d be the happiest man alive.

A hospital is no place to be sick.

I can give you a definite perhaps.

We’re overpaying him but he’s worth it.

Don’t talk to me while I’m interrupting.

The scene is dull. Tell him to put more life into his dying.

It isn’t an optical illusion. It just looks like one.

Gentlemen, include me out!

A bachelor’s life is no life for a single man.

Anyone who would go to a psychoanalyst should have his head examined!

Berra learned his *métier* under New York Yankees manager Casey Stengel, whose observations included comments, such as “A lot of people my age are dead at the present time,” and “Good hitting always stops good pitching and vice versa.” Berra is credited with the following:

Referring to a New York nightclub: nobody goes there anymore; it’s too crowded.

Always go to other people's funerals; otherwise they won't come to yours.

90 percent of the game is half mental.

It's like *déjà vu* all over again.

It ain't over 'til it's over.

Many people think that Berra would have never employed the term *déjà vu*, it not being part of his vernacular. But Yogi swears he indeed used the French term in reference to regular home-runs hitters Roger Maris and Mickey Mantle.

§ MISCELLANEOUS IRISH BULLS

Here are some other utterances where the reader must decide if the content constitutes sense or nonsense:

Of course I can keep secrets. It's the people I tell them to that can't keep them. — Anthony Haden-Guest

The best cure for insomnia is to get a lot of sleep.
— W.C. Fields

We must believe in free will. We have no choice.
— Isaac Bashevis Singer

I must follow the people. Am I not their leader?
— Benjamin Disraeli

Hegel was right when he said that we learn from history that man can never learn anything from history.
— George Bernard Shaw

I always avoid prophesying beforehand because it is much better to prophesy after the event has already taken place.
— Winston Churchill

I am a deeply superficial person. — Andy Warhol

I wouldn't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member. — Groucho Marx

Thank God I'm an atheist. — Anonymous

Always be sincere, even when you don't mean it.
— Irene Peter



Always be sincere, even when you don't mean it! —
“Darling, it's sooo slenderizing.”

Despite the humour in such Irish bull types of statement, the *Gospel According to John* starts by acknowledging “In the Beginning was the Word.” Hence, we have Biblical assurance that everything depends on single words, and in the next chapter we will examine the wordplay hidden in the supposed root of all knowledge — the word.