

A Defense of Puns

Richard Lederer

Believe it or not, around this time of year, a number of organizations dedicated to preserving and promoting puns get together to celebrate the art of punnery. About such occasions Dan Carlinsky has observed, “Most folks will probably think that celebrating the pun is about as worthwhile as celebrating a hangnail or a full garbage pail. The pun is the most misunderstood and most beset upon form of humor.”

Scoffing at puns seems to be a conditions reflex, and through the centuries a steady barrage of thud and blunder has been directed at the practice of punnery. Three hundred years ago John Dennis meanly sneered, “A pun is the lowest form of wit,” a charge that has been butted and rebutted by a mighty line of pundits and punophiles.

Henry Erskine, for example, has protested that if a pun is the lowest form of wit, “it is, therefore, the foundation of all wit.” Oscar Levant has added the tagline “A pun is the lowest for of humor – of you don’t think of it first.” And I, your faithful pun pal, have summed up the controversy suchly: “A bun is the doughiest form of wheat.”

Samuel Johnson, the self-appointed custodian of the English language, once thundered, “To trifle with the English language, which is the vehicle of all social intercourse, is to tamper with the currency of human intelligence. He who would violate the sanctities of his Mother Tongue would invade the recesses of the national till without remorse.”

If language is money and language finaglers are thieves, Dr. Johnson was a felon, for to him is attributed the following:

*I should be punishéd
For every pun I shed.
Do not leave a puny shred
Of my punnish head!*

Thus proving the truth of Joseph Addison’s pronouncement: “The seeds of Punning are in the minds of all men, and tho’ they may be subdued by Reason, Reflection, and Good Sense, they are very apt to shoot up in the greatest Genius, that is not broken and cultivated by the rules of Art.”

Edgar Allan Poe (of all people) perspicaciously analyzed the situation when he wrote, with all his tell-tale heart, “Of puns it has been said that those most despise who are least able to utter them.”

Punnery is largely the trick of compacting two or more ideas within a single word or expression. Punnery challenges us to apply the greatest pressure per square syllable of language. Punnery surprises us by flouting the law of nature that pretends that two things cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Punnery is an exercise of the mind at being concise. Punnery is a rewording experience.

The art of punnery does indeed demonstrate that two meanings can occupy the same wordspace at the same time: What did the Buddhist say to the hot dog vendor? “Make me one with everything.” That’s the same Buddhist who never took Novocain when he had teeth extracted because he wished to transcend dental medication.

Robert Greenman offers a spot-on glimpse into the seat of punnery: “Punsters’ minds work like Las Vegas one-armed bandits, with plums and cherries and oranges spinning madly upon someone’s utterance, searching for the right combination to connect on a

pun.” That sounds like a Mensan mind to me, naturally and constantly questing for connections, for patterns, for smart laughs. Maybe that’s why almost all Mensans enjoy puns. The word *Mensa* itself is a triple prey on *mentis* (“mind”), *mens* (“month”), and *mensa* (“table”). That’s Mensa, where people sit at a table each month using their minds. That’s Mensa, “where we get your jokes.”

Incorrigible pun-gent that I am (don’t incorrigible me!), I love sharpening my pun cells for those moments that do indeed make me one with everything, when everything comes together to form an incisive and contextual prey on words: As Phyllis McGinley has advised, “On the making of puns: One must strike while the irony is hot.”

When I was engaged to Simone, already a Mensan, I decided to take the Mensa test and had to wait five weeks to see if our marriage would be M & M. During that eternal interim I experienced a horrible case of pre-Mensa syndrome.

During my first tour of our San Diego Wild Animal Park, I went to an area where giraffes lean forward over a parapet and accept food from visitors. I suggested to the keeper that the area be named Giraffic Park, which it now is, informally.

Watching an Imax film about volcanoes from Fiji to Hawaii, I noted the title, *Ring of Fire*, turned to my long-suffering wife and commented, “They’ve missed the best title for this movie – *Ash from a Hole in the Ground*.”

At an airport security area I removed and then placed my shoes in one of the small tubs because my size 14s are supported by large steel shanks that unfailingly set bells a ringing. When, after a long wait, the attendant finally returned my shoes, I thanked her for “the shoe shank redemption.”

Recently, my nephew Jan, a divorce attorney in San Antonio, called me to ask if I could provide him with a slogan for his business card and other advertising venues. “Let’s see, Jan. You’re a divorce attorney and you live in San Antonio. How about *Remember the Alimony!*?” My nephew is now using that slogan.

Referring to ages such as the English Renaissance, sociologist G. C. Lichtenberg contends that “where the common people like puns, and make them, the nation is on a high level of culture.” If this is true, American civilization in the early twenty-first century is in full bloom. All around us puns spring up like flowers (the scoffers would say weeds), and our lives become more fragrant and colorful for their beauty and abundance.

A pun is indeed the lowest form of humus – earthy wit that everybody digs.