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Coda

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When I Use a Word . . .
Words misheard: medical mondegreens

A girl with colitis goes by.
With apologies to John Lennon and
Paul McCartney

I recently heard a Radio 3 announcer mention 'Kodaly's *Buttocks Pressing Song*'. Could he have been referring to the great Hungarian composer's oratorio, the *Psalmus Hungarsicus*? Or was it '*Bartok's Precious Song*', a homage to his illustrious contemporary, born in the year before him? Neither, as it turned out—it was 'O could I but express in song' by the Russian composer Leonid Malashkin. This kind of homophonic error is called a mondegreen.

I expect that few will have heard of the American journalist Sylvia Wright. In her day, she was a well-known contributor to magazines such as *Harper's*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*, a sort of female James Thurber, a comparison that the title of one of her articles, 'Whose world?—And welcome to it', made explicit.

Sylvia Wright coined the word 'mondegreen' in an article published in *Harper's Magazine* in November 1954, 'The Death of Lady Mondegreen'.[1] 'When I was a child,' she wrote, 'my mother used to read aloud to me from Percy's *Reliques [of Ancient English Poetry]*. One of my favorite poems began, as I remember:

> Ye Highlands and ye Lowlands,
> Oh, where hae ye been?
> They hae slain the Earl Amurray, [*sic*]
> And Lady Mondegreen.'

'By now,' she went on, after a digression or two,

> several of you more alert readers are jumping up and down in your impatience to interrupt and point out that, according to the poem, after they killed the Earl Amurray, they *laid him on the green*. I know about this, but I won't give in to it. Leaving him to die all alone without even anyone to hold his hand—I won't have it. The point about what I shall hereafter call mondegreens, since no one else has thought up a word for them, is that they are better than the original.

She quoted other examples: 'Surely Good Mrs. Murphy shall follow me all the days of my life' (Psalm 23). [But surely that should be Shirley?] And 'the wild, strange battle cry ''Haffely, Gaffely, Gaffely, Gonward'' ' (*The Charge of the Light Brigade*).

How many know the hymn about Paddington's cousin, 'Gladly, the cross-eyed bear'? Are American journalists, authors and playwrights cock-a-hoop when they win a 'Pullet Surprise'? And how do you rate Bob Dylan's claim that 'The ants are my friends'?

'Mondegreen' is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'A misunderstood or misinterpreted word or phrase resulting from a mishearing, esp. of the lyrics to a song.' And Jon Carroll, who has written about them frequently in the columns of the *San Francisco Chronicle* (where Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* were first serialized), calls them 'Mishearings of the lyrics of popular songs, the words of popular prayers, the slogans of popular corporations.' They are, he writes, 'the breakdowns in meaning that occur somewhere between the sound source and your ear'. Incidentally, Stephen Pinker, in *The Language Instinct*, mistakenly attributed the invention of the word mondegreen to Jon Carroll.[2]

It is certainly true that many mondegreens are mishearings of songs, particularly pop songs, whose lyrics are not always clearly enunciated by their performers and may in any case be drowned out by the backing music. But English is full of words and phrases that have arisen through mishearings. 'Spitting image', for example, comes from a

mishearing of 'spit and image' or perhaps 'spitten image'; spit means likeness or may be a euphemism for ejaculate. The phenomenon of metanalysis, for example calling a naranj an orange or an ekename a nickname,[3] is a form of mondegreen. As are the many folk etymologies that litter the language.[4] Such as cockroach (from the Spanish cucaracha, after cuco, a caterpillar, and nothing to do with either cocks or roaches), penthouse, which is not a house, but originally a pentice (an *appendix* to a building), and straight and narrow (from the tautological doublet strait and narrow).

That delicious fruit the avocado comes from the Spanish word for a lawyer, when Spanish explorers misheard the Aztec word ahuacatl. Another name for it, the alligator pear, comes from the corrupt form avigato.

The crayfish is not a fish but a crustacean. The original Middle English word was crevice (modern French écrevisse), related to the word crab (German Krebs, which also means cancer).

A forlorn hope is one that is desperate. 'Forlorn' certainly means desperate or hopeless, but 'hope' has nothing to do with hope. The phrase comes from the Dutch verloren hoop, which means a lost troop of soldiers. They were lost, not in the sense of being missing, but being about to be sacrificed—they were the soldiers who were picked to lead the charge, the storming party.

Plants whose flowers are scented like cloves, such as *Dianthus caryophyllus*, are called gillyflowers through homophonic folk etymology. The original Greek was κἄρῠοφυλλον (karuophullon, literally a nut plant), the bud of the clove tree, *Eugenia caryophyllata*. In French that became girofle or, by metathesis, gilofre, which in English became in turn gillofer, gilloflower and gillyflower. 'Make your garden rich in gillyvors' says Polixenes in *The Winter's Tale*.

The plant feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium*), which has been used in modern times to prevent attacks of migraine, should properly be called feverfuge, since it is from the Latin febris a fever + fugare to drive away; hence febrifuge. An older name for it was featherfew, because its leaves resembled feathers; featherfoy and featherfoil were alternative forms, as if it came from folium, a leaf (cf. trefoil from trifolium).

A hangnail is a small piece of partially separated skin next to a finger-nail. Of this word the *Oxford English Dictionary* says 'A word of which the application (and perhaps the form) has been much perverted by pseudo-etymology', to which I would add 'partly of the mondegreen variety'. The word was originally 'agnail', from the Gothic word nagls, an iron nail. It therefore came to mean a hard nail-like growth and thus a corn in the foot (first recorded in 950 AD). Later, however, (by 1578) ag-nail was thought to be something attached to a nail and became confused with the Latin word for a finger-nail or toenail, unguis; it therefore became any painful swelling or other lesion related to the nails. It was specifically identified with a whitlow or paronychia, which in Greek literally means next to the nail. There may also have been some confusion with the mediaeval Latin word anguinalium, a carbuncle. Later, still (1742), agnail became hang-nail, with its modern meaning.

Here are some medical, or quasi-medical, mondegreens.

- The sanatorium specialized in the treatment of the Berkeley locusts (US pronunciation please).
- Now, if a cyst turns out benign, I don't mind, I don't mind (Jimi Hendrix, 'If 6 was 9').
- The whole liver dissection was a portal gland (think Elvis).
- I'll be loving you, internally.
- Black toast intolerance.
- Very close veins.
- Meaty urologists.

The last reminds me (or did I only dream it?) that some years ago, at a dinner party, a distinguished Baron fell forwards on to the table, clearly choking. 'Quick', said the large pompous wife of a pompous little politician, 'get him on the floor'. I rushed from the far end of the table, slapped him on the back a few times, and then applied the so-called 'abdominal thrust'.[5] The offending piece of meat shot out. The Baron took a deep breath in and the rest of us let a deep breath out. Later, I discovered that the politician's wife had intended to perform what she called 'the hind lick manoeuvre', perhaps emulating her husband's political method. Which shows, if demonstration were necessary, that politics and the practice of medicine do not mix.

Jeff Aronson

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