

Arnold Zwicky's Blog

A blog mostly about language

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The dobro

NYT obit (by Bill Friskics-Warren) for Mike Auldridge [on the 1st](#):

Mike Auldridge Dies at 73; Lent Dobro Fresh Elegance

Mike Auldridge, a guitarist who became one of the most distinctive dobro players in the history of country and bluegrass music while widening its popularity among urban audiences, died on Saturday at his home in Silver Spring, Md.

Ah, the dobro. I assumed that it was originally a folk instrument, from some Slavic land, with a name in the local language. Well, not quite, as the obit went on to explain:

A resophonic (or resonating) acoustic guitar, the dobro produces sound by means of one or more spun metal cones instead of a wooden sound board. (The instrument's name is a contraction of Dopera and brothers. Dopera was the surname of the Slovak-American brothers who patented an early version of the instrument in 1928.)

The name is what Ben Zimmer [has labeled](#) an *acroblend*, a combination of acronym and portmanteau (Ben uses *blend* to cover intentional combinations as well as inadvertent ones), for which I'd prefer the label *acromanteau*, or — naming the type from a prominent example — *Nabisco* (originally from **National Biscuit Company**)

In a simple acronym (like the classic *radar*), the initial letters of an expression are combined to form a pronounceable word. In a simple portmanteau, parts of two words — canonically, an initial part of one word and the final part of the other, with some shared material in the middle (as in the classic *spork*, *spoon* + *fork*), but there are other types — are combined (the words in question might be defined phonologically or orthographically, or some of each).

Semantically, portmanteaus are akin to compounds, while acronyms are akin to initialisms (like *FBI*). But they share the property of being combinations, or *combos* for short. So acromanteaus, or Nabiscos, are complex combos, with kinship to both acronyms and portmanteaus (hence the portmanteau name *acromanteau*).

More detail on *dobro*, from [Wikipedia](#):

Dobro is a registered trademark now owned by Gibson Guitar Corporation and used for a particular design of resonator guitar.

The name has a long and involved history, interwoven with that of the resonator guitar. Originally coined by the Dopyera brothers when they formed the Dobro Manufacturing Company, in time it came, in common language, to mean any resonator guitar, or specifically one with a single inverted resonator. This particular design was introduced by the Dopyeras' new company, in competition to the already patented tricone and biscuit designs owned and produced by the National String Instrument Corporation.

The Dobro brand later also appeared on other instruments, notably electric lap-steel guitars and solid-body electric guitars and on other resonator instruments such as Safari resonator mandolins.

When Gibson acquired the trademark in 1994, the company announced that it would defend its right to Dobro's exclusive use.

... The name originated in 1928 when the Dopyera brothers formed the Dobro Manufacturing Company. "Dobro" is both a contraction of "Dopyera brothers" and a word meaning "goodness" in their native Slovak (and also in most Slavic languages). An early company motto was "Dobro means good in any language".

Etymological (and attestational) niceties from *OED2*:

Etymology: < the name of its Czech-U.S. inventors, the *Do(pěra Bro(thers*; the coincidence with Czech *dobro* (the) good, a good thing, may also help to explain the choice of this form.

orig. *U.S.*

The name (proprietary in the U.S.) for a type of acoustic guitar with steel resonating discs fitted inside the body under the bridge, popular for playing country and western music.

1952 *Official Gaz.* (U.S. Patent Office) 26 Feb. 921/1 Valco Manufacturing Company, Chicago... Filed July 14, 1947. Dobro, for string musical instruments... Claims use since November 1929. [first cite in the *OED*]

1969 *Rolling Stone* 28 June 17/1 The traditional country sound is characterized by guitar, fiddle and banjo, augmented by harmonica, zither, dobro or bass. [first *OED* cite in text; no doubt earlier examples can be found]

Although the name is proprietary in the U.S., you almost never see it capitalized, much less marked with the registration sign ®; it's become an ordinary common noun, like *zither* or *banjo* — so it's easy to be ignorant of its history, as I was until New Year's Day.

This entry was posted on January 3, 2013 at 9:18 am and is filed under [Abbreviation](#), [Acronyms](#), [Death notices](#), [Language and music](#), [Portmanteaus](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.

3 Responses to “The dobro”

arnold zwicky Says:

January 3, 2013 at 10:42 am | [Reply](#)



Now listening to the wonderful 1972 album *Dobro / Blues & Bluegrass*. Almost surely where I heard the word *dobro* used for the first time.

Like

Tané Tachyon Says:

January 3, 2013 at 1:44 pm | [Reply](#)



I have a [Liberty brand “Shooting Stars” resonator guitar](#) ... when people call it a “Dobro” then I tell them no, that Dobro is a particular brand of resonator guitar, but maybe at some point I’ll give up on that and just accept that it’s gotten genericized.

Like

strangeguitars Says:

January 6, 2013 at 7:56 pm | [Reply](#)



I have a Johnson [AXL-998-2](#), which is wonderful, but the tailpiece is presently broken, and also my poor Johnson is in desperate need of polishing!

Like

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