



‘Deck the halls with Buddy Holly’ is what you call a mondegreen



IN AN earlier column we looked at some of the mishearings people make when listening to others. One type we mentioned was mis-segmentations such as “disguise” as “the skies”, or even the opposite, as in the misperception of the Lennon-McCartney song as “Lucy in disguise with diamonds”.

There’s a name for some of these: mondegreens. The name comes from an article in *Atlantic Monthly* from 1954, where Sylvia Wright relates mis-hearing some lines in a Scottish folk song when she was five. The lines were “They hae slain the Earl of Moray / and laid him on the green”, which she heard as “They hae slain the Earl of Moray / and Lady Mondegreen.”

For language researchers these mishearings are interesting, because they tell us something about how listeners process speech.

We tend to put in word boundaries before stressed syllables (“dis**GUISE**” becoming “the **SKIES**”), and to delete them before unstressed syllables (“**LAI**D him” heard as “**LADY**”).

These are cases of making things fit the patterns we are most used to, since more English content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives) start with a stressed syllable than with an unstressed one.

Similarly, there is a tendency for the results of mis-hearings to be words that are more common in the language than the intended word. But these are tendencies only; the examples above show that there are exceptions.

For a seasonal flavour, here are some lines from Christmas carols that might

be mondegreens, or maybe they are just made-up examples, a type of deliberate word-play. “The cattle are lowing” in *Away in a Manger* has been reported as “The cattle are lonely” or “The catalogue glowing”. “Lonely” for “lowing” is a good example of a more familiar word replacing a less familiar one. “Catalogue” for “cattle are” illustrates the deletion of a word boundary before an unstressed syllable, as is the reported “Deck the halls with Buddy Holly” (for “boughs of holly”).

How about “Get dressed you married gentlemen” for “God rest ye merry gentlemen”, or “Good King Wences’ car backed out / On the feet of heathens?” See how “a one-horse open sleigh” could become “one horse, soap and sleigh” or “one horse sloping sleigh”.

WHILE we’re on the subject of mondegreens and carols, let’s not forget the classic example of “Gladly the cross-eyed bear” for the line “Gladly the cross I’d bear” in the hymn *Keep Thou My Way*. There are plenty of amusing examples from secular music too. Apparently Jimi Hendrix occasionally deliberately mis-sang the lyrics of his song *Purple Haze* as “Scuse me while I kiss this guy” instead of “Scuse me while I kiss the sky”.

Similarly the Creedence Clearwater Revival song *Bad Moon Rising* has a line “There’s a bad moon on the rise”, misheard as “There’s a bathroom on the right”, and then playfully mis-sung as that by John Fogerty.

One that I have recently heard is in



The Dominion Post
29-Dec-2010
Page: 11
Opinion
Market: Wellington
Circulation: 88100
Type: Metro
Size: 304.25 sq.cms
MTWTF--

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Norah Jones' song *Toes*, where I am convinced she is singing "my toast just touched the water" (it's actually "my toes just touch the water").

Mis-segmentations are not limited to songs, and can be cleverly manipulated for humorous or cynical effect. The brilliant Two Ronnies 1976 television sketch *The Hardware Shop* is riddled with misperception, such as when Ronnie Corbett mishears Ronnie Barker's request for "fork handles" as "four candles".

George Bush Sr famously declared "Read my lips: no new taxes" as part of his 1988 presidential campaign. As president he subsequently raised taxes, and his campaign statement was parodied with posters and bumper stickers with "No newt axes".

As we have observed before, newts also feature in historical changes that involve re-segmentation. The word start-

ed out as "eft", which is still sometimes used for the post-tadpole stage of the newt's life. "Eft" developed into "euft" and later to "ewt".

Re-segmentation of the "n" from "an ewt" to "a newt" gives us the present form, as well as "a notch" from "an otch" and "a nickname" from "an ekename". The "n" went the other way to produce "an adder" for "a nadder" "an apron" from "a napron". In an earlier column I commented on what happens with "another", but that's a whole nother story.

Paul Warren is at the school of linguistics and applied language studies at Victoria University.