

Words Are Like Roller Skates

By Dennis Payton Knight

Vice President Dan Quayle once talked of “the importance of bondage between a mother and child.” That is an example of a classic malapropism, and it serves to introduce the point of this article, which is that strapping on words is like strapping on a pair of roller skates. You may dash elegantly by the swooning ladies, but there is every chance you will land on your keister.

Malapropisms got their name from a character named Mrs. Malaprop in *The Rivals*, a 1775 play by Richard Sheridan. She was a moralistic lady who affected enlightenment with stylishly big words that never quite hit their target. The play is full of linguistic roller skating like “hydrostatics” when she meant “hysterics,” “pineapple” for “pinnacle,” and “allegory” for “alligator.”

My favorite Mrs. Malaprop line is her proud declaration, “Sure, if I reprehend anything in this world it is the use of my oracular tongue, and a nice derangement of epitaphs!” For that one sentence she must have strapped on four pairs of skates.

The famous Yankee Yogi Berra played in more World Series games than any other player, and he was such a master of the malapropism that he unwittingly created his own form of the art, known as Yogisms. Once, on being told he looked cool, Yogi answered, “You don’t look so hot yourself.” When asked what time it was, he pondered, “You mean now?” As a baseball coach he instructed his players to “Pair off in threes.” The obituaries were full of Yogisms when he died in September of 2015 at the age of ninety, but he had already pronounced his rejoinder to all of them, “I really didn’t say everything I said.”

Yogi’s boss on the Yankees was “The Old Perfesser,” the great Casey Stengel, and he was apparently Yogi’s mentor in the sport of fracturing English. On the field Casey ordered the team to “line up alphabetically, according to your height.” He told a reporter “The team has come along slow but fast;” regretted “I got players with bad watches – they can’t tell midnight from noon;” reflected “There comes a time in every man’s life, and I’ve had plenty of them;” and professed, “Never make predictions, especially about the future.”

I had an acquaintance, a Twentieth Century Mrs. Malaprop, who I served with on a school accountability committee. At one meeting, after she had returned from conferring with politicians at the statehouse, she urged us to “Write your legislators. They are very receptacle to your letters.”

Now for a confession and a boast. On roller skates I will never succeed, and I stopped trying after insulting my tailbone once too often and suffering a hairline fracture of my elbow. Conversely, with language I power through paragraphs like a jammer at the roller derby. Maybe you have noticed all the fancy words I wounded into this artifice. I do not disbelieve I have remitted a single malapropism in the entire receptacle.