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Spoonerism in Burmese

By U WUN

Spoonerism is defined as: “The interchange of initial sounds or syllables of two or more words, either deliberately or accidentally. (E.g., “I fool so feelish” instead of “I*feel so foolish”.)”¹ In Burmese it is called [zəgəlein]², “transposed word”, and its use can be traced back to the golden age of Burmese literature of the 15th century Ava. I shall here attempt to show, however, some representative examples which have been more or less orally preserved.

[ŋo. ba.], [bu:yɔ], [auncuju] and [maməshein:] are derogatory words, but spoonerised and used euphemistically. [ŋo.ba.] is [ŋa.bo.]³ which literally means “for self”, i.e. a self-seeker, a timeserver. [bu:yɔ] is [boyu:]⁴, “mad about English customs”, i.e. an Anglomaniac. [auncuju] is [ucaunjaun]⁵, which means a blockhead, a nincompoop. [maməshein:] is [mein:məsha]⁶, an effeminate man, a sissy. As occasion arises such spoonerised “neologisms” will be popping up always, because spoonerism is a game in Burmese and the genius of the language lends itself comfortably to its formation.

There are innocent and delightful spoonerisms, too, which are used as riddles in a guessing game. After sunset and in the cool of the evening young people, especially in the rural areas, meet in a quiet corner and play charade. This is how and where most of them are born.

Here is a spoonerised riddle popularly used at such a rendezvous. It describes an open-air scenery — a rustic landscape painted with a minimum of simple strokes.

[thin-1ε - byaun
cwe - the :
lədε : - wa.
lədaun - t'a.
lədi. - məma.
di. - gə - maun:]

Its solution and literal translation is:—

[thaun - 1ε - byin	(On) the sand flat
cw : - the	a dead buffalo.
ləda. - wε :	A vulture hovers about.
ləda. - t'aun	A snare is set for it.
ləda. - məmi.	It is not caught.
daun: - gə - mi.] ⁷	A peacock is caught instead.

It may be just a nonsensical rhymed riddle. Or it may have some hidden meaning embedded deep inside it. One cannot say for certain. Instead of the apparent, ugly vulture, the alien, beautiful peacock is caught. Why? Is it made so just for the sake of *sound*, and not for any *sense*? Or is it to suggest that the simple carrion feeder, a friend of man, being keen-eyed and cautious, goes unharmed and unhurt, while the strutting peacock, being ostentatious and unwary, is caught in the set snare? The men of old were very shrewd in being didactic.

The next one is enjoyed by our young people not only as a riddle, but also as a tongue-twister. And, when read out, it sounds like Pali, the sacred language of Theravāda Buddhism.

[toun - yɔ :
 tuʔ - p'ɔ :
 taʔ - pəɔ :
 tɛʔ - cɔ :
 yeʔ - c'ɔ :
 taun: kɛ]

Its solution and literal translation is:—

[tɔ : youn	Jungle-hare,
tɔ : p'uʔ	jungle-guana,
tɔ : pəɔʔ	jungle-lizard,
tɔ : cɛʔ	jungle-fowl,
yɔ : c'ɛʔ	(when) cooked together,
tɛ kaun:] ⁸	very delicious indeed.

This zodiac of a riddle reflects the life of the young men of the Dry Zone of Burma. Occasionally they go out in groups, with their trained dogs, nets, traps and sticks, into the scrub-jungle round about their villages. They beat the bushes and chase the jungle-fowl and small animals that come out frightened and breathless. It is a pastime as well as a food-gathering for the poor folk of the arid land.

Here is a pastoral riddle couched in the guise of a Pali sentence.

[nəmu. - dəza.
 nu - pe
 nəc'uʔthan - ti.]

It is to be solved and rendered into English as follows.

[nəma. - dəzu.	A herd of cows,
ne - pu	sun (being) hot,
nəc'an thuʔ - ti.] ⁹	is put in the pen.

Cows and buffaloes play a very important part in the life of the Burmese people. They work with them in the open paddy-fields, rain or shine. Some Burmans, therefore, turn non-beef-eaters in gratitude for their bovine benefactors. This riddle is reminiscent of this sentiment.

Last but not least is a love song sung by a love-lorn lass of a village. It is self-explanatory. The spoonerised portions and their counterparts are placed side by side. The anonymous author deserves our admiration for his or her ingenuity in weaving such an intricate pattern. And the translator, as ingenious as the author, was Dr. J.A. Stewart, the late professor of Burmese at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London.

[shwe-la. yε. tha
 p'yin: go k'a-lo./p'ya - go k'in:
 ya-go c'i[?] - lo./yi[?] - ko c'a
 bin - go ḡain: - lo./ bain: - go ḡin
 tha.win - youn: - lo./ thoun: - win - ya.
 yaun - go t'i[?] - lo./ yi[?] - ko t'aun
 yaun - shwe - yi[?] - kε. / yi[?] - shwe - yaun
 ma - məlaun - dε. / maun - məla
 pyo. shwe - nə p'a zu:/ maun.shwe- nə p'u: za]¹⁰

The moon is bright.
Plat the mace and place the mat,
Reel the whun and run the wheel,
Dread the thraw and draw the thread,
Foom for lit and fit for loom,
Seel the whet and set the wheel.
Why stads my lay, why stays my lad?
Lad of the hot nair, lad of the hair knot.
My love and life, my life and love.

1. *Dictionary of Linguistics* by Pei and Gaynor, 1970.
2. The phonetic transcription of Burmese is according to the system adopted for (Biruma-go On-in no Kiso) by Harada and Wun, Osaka University of Foreign Studies, 1977.

3. ငို့့ဘ = ငို့့ဘို့့။ ။

4. ဗူး : ဂို = ဗိုလ် ဂူး ။

5. အေဘင်ကြွကြွ = အိုကြေဘင်ကြေဘင် ။

6. မာမဂ္ဂိန်း = မိန်း မလ္လာ။

7. သင်လယ် ပြောင်၊ ကျွဲသေ၊ လဒဲဝ၊ လဒေါင်ထ၊ လဒီမမ၊ ဒီဂမောင်း
= သောင်လယ်ပြင်၊ ကျွဲသေ၊ လင်း တဲ၊ လင်း တထောင်၊ လင်း တ
မမိ၊ ဒေါင်း ကိုမိ။

8. ဂုံပျော၊ တောပွေ၊ ကပ္ပဒေါ၊ တကြော၊ ရချော၊ တောက်ယ် =
တောယုန်၊ တောဖွတ်၊ တောပုတတ်၊ တောကြက်၊ ရောချက်၊ တယ်
ကောင်း ။

9. နမုတစ၊ နူပေ၊ နချောသန္တီ = နွား မတစု၊ နေပူ၊ နွား ခြံသွတ်
-တိ။

10. ရွှေလရယ်သ။ ဖျင်း ကိုခါလို့ = ဖျာကိုခင်း ။ ရာကိုချစ်လို့ = ရစ်ကို
ချာ။ ဗင်ကိုငိုင်း လို့ = ဗိုင်း ကိုဝင်။ သဝင်ရုံး လို့ = သုံး ဝင်ရ။
ရောင်ကိုထစ်လို့ = ရစ်ကိုထောင်။ ရောင်ရွှေယစ်ကဲ့ = ရစ်ရွှေ
ယောင်။ မာမလောင်တဲ့ = မောင်မလာ။ ပျို့ ရွှေနဖါစူး =
မောင်ရွှေနဖူး စာ။