

## EPISTOLÆ

The discussion of *-oon* words (VERBATIM Vol. I, No. 3) reminded me of a family word game that began years ago when a teacher of my wife's, Olive Cahoon, married a man named Cahoon and became Olive Cahoon Cahoon, a name so melodious we have set about constructing an entire rhyming Cahoon family. The culmination of this is a fine family tree drawn up by a friend, Mary Lycan. It shows the stock beginning with Baboon Cahoon, properly separated from his modern descendants by a long dotted line. These start with Patroon Cahoon, the New Amsterdam colonist, and his four sons, Tycoon Cahoon (the New York banker), Walloon Cahoon (the Brussels merchant), Dragoon Cahoon (militiaman, grandfather of Quadroon Cahoon, and great-grandfather of Octoroon Cahoon), and Triune Cahoon (the Trinitarian divine).

As you can see, we are not afraid to stoop to rhyme. Lycan's family tree, as a matter of fact, includes ringers like High Noon Cahoon (a sheriff), Clair de Lune Cahoon (the interpreter of Debussy), and my favorite, the child of love, Too Soon Cahoon.

Although it is perhaps wicked to inflict word games on your readers, some might be able to bear two others. The first is Conjugated Nouns, on the models

*I steal the keel.*

*I stole the coal.*

*I have stolen the colon.*

*They choose the hues.*

*They chose the hose.*

*They have chosen the hosen.*

*They mow the banks of the row.*

*They mowed the banks of the road.*

*They have mown the banks of the Rhone.*

*I do it with the buoys.*

*I did it with the biddies.*

*I have done it with the bunnies.*

The second is, strictly speaking, more like collecting bizarre sorts of rocks than like playing a game; it involves finding examples of phrases that are bilingually redundant, like Mount Fujiyama (literally, 'Mount Fuji-mount'). Roast beef with *au jus* (literally, 'with with juice') is offered by many restaurants these days, but the ultimate was attained by a waitress in a local steak house who asked a friend of mine if he wanted his prime rib *with au jus sauce* ('with with juice sauce'). My favorite, however, is the California tourist attraction, *the La Brea tar pits* ('the the tar tar pits'). Anglo-Saxon/Norman French couplings like *without let or hindrance* do not count.

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As a postscript to the late Professor Hughes' note on the English suffix *-oon* [VERBATIM Vol. I, No. 3], it should be pointed out that, insofar as the corresponding Romance suffixes are concerned, while the Spanish *-ón* and the Italian *-one* are, indeed, generally used with augmentative meaning, as he says, the French equivalent *-on* is much more often used as a diminutive. W. D. Elcock, in *The Romance Languages* (London, 1959, p. 160), cites the example of *vallon*, a small *val* ('valley'). To this may be added *peloton*, a small *pelote* ('ball of string,' etc.), *dindon* 'turkey,' originally the diminutive of *dinde* (though now its masculine), and doubtless many more, both common and

not-so-common. It is hard to say why this linguistic turn-about took place, much as one might be tempted to see it as an example of ornery Gallic contrariness, even 'way back then.

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The additional examples supplied in the Editor's comment appended to John Hughes's note on *-oon* teach us a little lesson in brief scope. We are of course familiar with the fact that in language an element, e.g., a suffix, may productively spread beyond its original range both in distribution and in value or function. Here, however, we may observe how narrow the surviving base may be and how tenuous the connections become.

Of the formations mentioned, the source of only one seems to be unclear—*gadron*; here the French origins are ambiguous, but Provençal < Latin *guttus* seems less than likely. Setting this one aside, the remaining sources seem reasonable and agreed.

Now of all these only *buffon(-e)*, *marron(-e)*, *fes-ton(-e)*, *maccaron-e*, *poltron-e*, *carton-e*, *vinagrón*, and *cuarterón* seem to qualify as Romance items with the suffix and value mentioned by Hughes. *Dragoon* < French *dragon* has superficially the same phonetics, but really involves the old underived stem form with a changed meaning, and hence strictly not this suffix. Presumably, *cocon*, *harpon*, *peloton*, and *rigaudon* contain a diminutive and therefore do not show the same original value. The rhyming of *laguna* < *lacuna* is simply accidental, and the semantics is really inverse in origin. And *patrónus* contains a somewhat similar but totally separate suffix.

We may now turn to the sheer chance convergences, where folk etymology (contamination) may have worked in part: *lampons* (if a verb form), *babouin* (what relation to *babiller*?), Japanese *taikun*, Chinese *tai fung*, Arabic *semüm*, the Algonquian original of *raccoon*. The case of *Pantal(e)one* is particularly interesting. Not only is the suffix fortuitous, but the semantics would be virtually untraceable without a long history of proper name documentation: the costume *from* the comic character *from* a type of person *from* the term for a Venetian *from* a saint's name. Consider then the difference in meaning between Britain and the US for a pair of pants! And, finally, observe the quaint grammatical peculiarity of the modern plurale tantum *pants*.

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I enjoyed my first issue of VERBATIM, especially "An Intolerant View of Intolerance." I have become totally impatient with the smug—if not bitchy—prescriptiveness of a number of recent crabs who are wholly ignorant of the dynamics of language and unable to distinguish between imaginative usage and illiterate aberration. But who the hell is Austin?

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Sorry, Austin was a typo for Austen. Please see "Corrigenda" on page 2.

—Editor



We received a critical letter from Miss Jean Stafford in response to our article, "An Intolerant View of Intolerance," but she declined permission to publish it. —Editor