
Metathesis - Transposed or Inverted Syllables

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Words with Transposed or Inverted Syllables

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In its definition of sideburns, Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Eleventh Edition (2003) refers to the spelling as an "anagram of burnside's." But since derubniss, sisburden, and ubersnids are likewise anagrams of burnside's, the term anagram doesn't get at the most interesting aspect of sideburns, which is its transposition or inversion of complete syllables from the original word. (The Eleventh Collegiate dates burnside's to 1875 and sideburns to 1887.)

Similarly, tagrag goes back at least as far as 1599, when Shakespeare has Casca say (in act 1, scene 2 of Julius Caesar) "If the tag-rag people did not clap him and hiss him, according as he pleased and displeased them, as they use to do the players in the theatre, I am no true man"; ragtag, meanwhile, has a first-occurrence date of 1820, according to the Eleventh Collegiate. And finally the Eleventh Collegiate dates woodpecker to circa 1530 and peckerwood to 1904.

The closest descriptive terms for sideburns, ragtag, and peckerwood that I've been able to find are metaplasma ("moving from their natural place letters or syllables of a word") and metathesis ("transposition of letters out of normal order in a word")—both definitions quoted from Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (1968). But is there a term that specifically refers to whole-syllable transpositions and not to partial or augmented ones (like the anagrams/metaplasms bass-ackwards, erewhon, and spandex)?

And secondly, are there other examples of English words that fall into this class? I'm looking for words that reverse syllables while (at least at first) retaining the original meaning of the word, not words (like passover and overpass) that happen to have mirrored syllables.

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asked Oct 24, 2013 at 20:20

Sven Yargs

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It's some type of metathesis. In this book it's given no special name, but is referred to as metathesis of morphemes.
– Talia Ford

Oct 24, 2013 at 22:01

Here it's termed contiguous lexical metathesis.
– Talia Ford

Oct 24, 2013 at 22:08

What's wrong with "transposed"?
– MrHen

Oct 25, 2013 at 16:36

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3 Answers

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1

The example you give aren't just transposed syllables. They're all compound words. I.e. words that are composed of two or more individual words and the words are reversed. Doing a search, I can't find anyone with details on that

phenomenon, other than the wikipedia entry on Compound words, discussing copulative compounds (where both parts have equal precedence and add to form a word).

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answered Oct 24, 2013 at 21:19

Michael Brown

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I think "syllable inversion" would be appropriate to describe most of the examples you provided.

in·ver·sion - a change in the position, order, or relationship of things so that they are the opposite of what they had been.

Some quick research on "syllable inversion" brought up results for a form of French slang called Verlan which matches up very nicely with the examples you provided.

According to wikipedia, Verlan is defined as "transposing syllables of individual words to create slang words."

The term "verlanised" is used repeatedly in the Wiki article, and while it is French in origin, it appears we would not be the first to adopt its use to describe this phenomenon in English.

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answered Oct 24, 2013 at 21:20

Lumberjack

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1

I just came across a discussion of examples of syllable inversions in *Dialect Notes*, volume 4, part 1 (1918), in a comment titled, "Transposition of Syllables in English." The note includes several interesting early examples:

An example some centuries old, of syllable-inversion applied to proper name is furnished by one of the Arthur legends. As narrated by Gottfried von Strassburg, Sir Tristan disguises himself as a harper under the name Tantris. The same disguise, through name inversion, is narrated of Mallory's Sir Tristram when he styles himself Tramtryst. Similar transpositions may have taken place in the compound word walrus, Dutch walrus, German walross, beside the Old English horshwæl, Old Norse hrossvalr. Within our own time the dialect word sockdologer has won currency until it now has a foothold in the dictionaries. This word had its origin in a transposition of doxology (doksologer); a sockdologer is something that comes at the end and settles the matter. The irregularly formed gramophone, the name of an instrument for permanently recording and reproducing sounds, was perhaps made by inverting phonogram, a symbol representing spoken sound, especially in Ditman's phonography.

The article goes on to point to hoppergrass and hockholler ["Used in Somersetshire for hollyhock"] as additional examples—and a followup note mentions flutterby.