

“D-d-d-don’t st-st-  
trike him, he st-t-t-  
tutters s-same as as  
w-we d-d-d-do”:  
Stammering Jokes,  
Wit, and Humor  
Since the 19th  
Century

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## From The Stuttering Foundation -- <https://www.stutteringhelp.org/content/stuttering-foundation-snl>

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MEMPHIS, Tenn. (Sept. 17, 2012) — Jane Fraser, president of the Stuttering Foundation, [www.StutteringHelp.org](http://www.StutteringHelp.org), made the following comments concerning the Sept. 15, 2012, *Saturday Night Live* skit ridiculing those who stutter:

“We are deeply troubled by *Saturday Night Live*’s recent decision to make light of stuttering, a communication disorder faced by more than three million Americans and 68 million people worldwide. The release of *The King’s Speech* was a giant step forward for the stuttering community, bringing understanding and acceptance to those who stutter. SNL’s poor judgment was an equally huge step backwards.

“The most troubling part was the obvious research conducted by producers, writers and cast into stuttering, evidenced by their use of the term ‘fluency.’ They clearly did their homework but chose to overlook the pain felt by many who stutter and their families for just a cheap laugh.

“The Stuttering Foundation supported *SNL*’s Seth Meyers when Donald Trump chose to call him out as a ‘stutterer’ after the White House Correspondents’ dinner. What’s good for the goose is good for the gander.

“Not funny, *SNL*. Not funny at all.”

## From Henry Monro's *On Stammering* (1850)

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“I would say in a few words that if either of these methods is able to be adopted with success on occasions in an easy and agreeable manner, a real step has been gained towards overcoming the affection; but if the sufferer is told to persist in uttering *er*, or to sing or roar out his words on all occasions, and trust to these as his infallible remedies, he will probably fail, for the remedies are so much worse than the disease that all sensitive minds would instinctively shun them with horror, and despond the more in consequence.”

# From *The World of Wit and Humour* (1873)

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THE WORLD OF WIT AND HUMOUR.

## KINKING SPEECH.

STAMMERING, says Coleridge, is sometimes the cause of a pun. Some one was mentioning in Lamb's presence the cold-heartedness of the Duke of Cumberland, in preventing the duchess from rushing up to the embrace of her son, whom she had not seen for a considerable time, and insisting on her receiving him in state. "How horribly cold it was!" said the narrator. "Yes," said Lamb, in his stuttering way, "but you know he is the Duke of Cu-cum-ber-land."

A WAGGISH fellow, somewhat troubled with an impediment in his speech, while one day sitting at a public table, had occasion to use a pepper-box. After shaking it with all due vehemence, and turning it in various ways, he found that the crushed peppercorns were in no wise inclined to come forth. "T-t-th-this p-pe-pepper-box," he exclaimed, with a facetious grin, "is so-some-something li-like myself." "Why so?" interrogated a neighbour. "P-poo-poor delivery," was the reply.

A STRUTTING coxcomb asked a barber's boy, "Did you ever shave a monkey?" "No, sir; but if you'll be pleased to set down, I'll t-t-t-try."

"BAD AT THE BEST, AND BEAUTIFUL IN NEITHER."—Time, towards evening—place, forks of the road somewhere in North Carolina—log-cabin close by—red-headed boy whistling—enter traveller, on an old grey mare, both looking pretty well "beat out." Traveller: Say, boy, which of these

roads go to Milton? Stuttering boy: B-b-both on 'em goes thar. Traveller: Well, which is the quickest way? Boy: 'B-b-bout alike; b-b-both on 'em gets there 'b-b-bout the same t-t-time o' day. Traveller: How far is it? Boy: 'B-b-bout four miles. Traveller: Which is the best road? Boy: T-t-they ain't nary one the b-best. If you take the right-hand, and go about a m-mile, you'll wish you was back; and if you t-turn back, and take the l-l-left-hand one, by the time you have g-g-gone half a m-m-mile, you'll wish you had kept on the other r-r-road. G'lang!"

BEN HOLMES had an impediment in his speech—not a stammer, but a sticking fast when he wanted to speak quick. He was a horse-trader on the Mississippi; went down to New Orleans with a flat-boat load; finally succeeded in getting clear of all his stock but one inferior pony, which he had concluded, rather than be longer detained, to sell for the very low price of sixty dollars. In a short time a Frenchman came to the boat and asked the price of the pony. Holmes worked his lips and face violently, endeavouring to say "Sixty dollars," but no word could he get out. The Frenchman, becoming impatient, said, "I'll give you a hundred dollars." This loosened Holmes's tongue. "That is just what I was going to say." This, Mr. Holmes says, is the first and only instance in which his impediment was a profit to him; but he lied about it at that.

## ELOCUTIONARY EXERCISES.

SMILING Selina Seamstitch was sewing superfine scarlet satin. So, as smiling Selina Seamstitch was sweetly singing, while sewing superfine scarlet satin, smiling Selina Seamstitch's small steel scissors slipped softly down; and in seizing her small steel scissors, smiling Selina Seamstitch slipped off the sofa, and broke her splendid silver spectacles in superfine shagreen cases, which made smiling Selina Seamstitch look sad and sulky.

A RAPID and emphatic recital of the following is said by a provincial paper to be an infallible cure for lisping:—Hobbs meets Snobbs and Nobbs; Hobbs bobs to Snobbs and Nobbs; Hobbs nobbs with Snobbs and nobbs Nobbs's fobs. "That is," says Nobbs, "the worse for Hobbs's jobs," and Snobbs sobs.

A FRIEND, phoeeling phunnily phigurative, phurnishes the phollowing—4ty 4tunate 4esters 4tuitously 4tifying 4lorn 4resses, 4cibly 4bade 4ty 4midable 4eigners 4ming 4aging 4ces.

A LOVE SCENE.—Overheard and phonographically reported by Phrederick Phinephun.—"Phairest of the phair," sighed the lover, "phancy my phaelings, when I phoresee the phearful consequences of our phaelings phrom your phather's phamily. Phew phellows could have phaced the music with

as much phortitude as I have; and, as phickle phortune phails to smile on our loves, I phind I must phorego the pleasure of becoming your husband. Phairest Phrances, pharewell phor ever." "Hold, Phranklin, hold!" screamed Phrances; "I will phollow you phor ever." But Phranklin had phled, and Phrances phainted.

REPEAT without stopping: Bandylegg'd Bonachio Mustachio Whiskenfusticus the bold and brave Bombardino of Bagdad helped Abomilique Blue Beard Basha of Babelmandab to beat down a Bumble Bee at Balsora.

HERE is a long sentence of thirty-two words, which some ingenious person has got up with just the letters found in the word "maiden:?"—Ida, a maiden, a mean man named Ned Dean, and Media, a mad dame, made me mend a die and a dime, and mind a mine in a dim den in Maine.

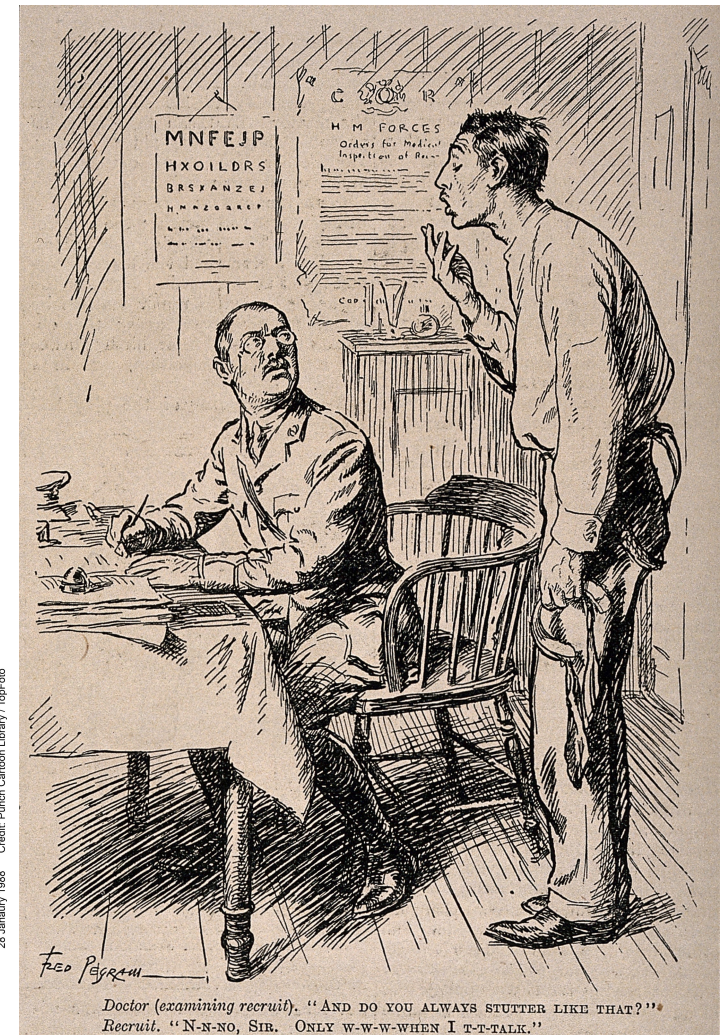
THE old difficulty of applying rules to the pronunciation of our language may be illustrated in two lines, where the combination of the letters *ough* is pronounced in no less than seven different ways, namely, as *o*, *u*, *of*, *up*, *ow*, *oo*, and *ogh*:—Though the tough ough and hiccough plough me through, O'er life's dark lough my course I still pursue.



# Stuttering Humour in *Punch*



Caption: A Sense of Proportion  
 "Wa-wa-wa-wather fa-fa-fa-ha-ha-hoggy, eh, Tom?"  
 "Rather foggy? Yes. But, my dear Jack, you stammer ten times more in London than you did in Newcastle, even! How's that?"  
 "La-la-la-london's ta-ta-ta-ten times as ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-big a p-p-place, you know!"  
 28 January 1888 Credit: Punch Cartoon Library / Topfoto



# Other Examples of Stuttering Humour in Victorian Culture

- Humorous songs such as “The Stuttering Lass”
- Minor characters in Victorian popular fiction.
- The celebrated theatrical character of Lord Dundreary performed by Edward Sothorn. First appearance in the play *Our American Cousin* (1858). “Dundrearyism” in the periodical press.

From James  
Malcolm Rymer's  
*The Unspeakable: Or,  
the Life and  
Adventures of a  
Stammerer* (1855)

"P - p - p - pl - ple - p -"

We then gazed at each other in silence. The most unfortunate of all conjunctures had taken place. Two stammerers had come together, and we mutually embarrassed each other. At length I pointed to the milk pails, and made a motion to drink. The countryman nodded, and unhooked a small measure from the side of the pail, and helped me to a hearty draught of milk. \* I offered the sixpence. He shook his head. I then opened my mouth, and pointed to it, to signify I wanted something to eat, but my pantomime was not sufficiently expressive, for he thought I wanted more milk, and filled the measure again. I put it aside, and tried to say something,

"I - I - I - w - w - w -"

"W - w - w -" stammered the countryman, almost dislocating his vertebræ, in an effort to articulate. It was all in vain. We could neither of us get out a word, so I tried to pass it off with a smile, and walked on, but, on glancing back, I saw him, with a very red face, shaking his fist at me. The idea had just crossed his mind, that I might have known his infirmity, and been mocking him. It was strange, too, that at that moment a vague doubt arose in my mind that he might have been amusing himself at my expense, and I felt the warm blood rush to my cheeks. I turned and made threatening gestures, and then we both went our different routes in mutual defiance.

I look back now at the ludicrous side of this little adventure, but it exemplifies the sensitive character of a stammerer, and as such I have recorded it.



## From “The Two Stammerers” in *The Museum of Mirth; Or Humourist's Pocket Book* (1840)

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- Anthologized throughout the nineteenth century in numerous anthologies of wit and humor, as well as recitation manuals.
- In many of its incarnations, the “two stammerers” joke concludes with two people who stammer coming to blows because they each misperceive the other’s stammer as mockery.

### THE TWO STAMMERERS.

WHILE others fluent verse abuse,  
And prostitute the Comic muse ;  
In less indecent manner, I  
Her Comic Ladyship will try.  
Oh ! let my prayer, bright maid, avail,  
Grant inspiration to my tale !  
A tale, both comical and new ;  
And with a swingeing moral too !  
In a small quiet country town,  
Liv'd Hob ; a blunt, but honest clown :  
Who, spite of all the school could teach,  
From habit, stammer'd in his speech ;  
And second nature, soon, we're sure,  
Confirm'd the case beyond a cure.  
Ask him to say, hot rolls and butter ;  
“ A hag-a-gag, and splitter-splutter,”  
Stopp'd ev'ry word he strove to utter.  
It happen'd once upon a time—  
I word it thus, to suit my rhyme ;  
For all our country neighbours know,  
It can't be twenty years ago—  
Our sturdy ploughman, apt to strike,  
Was busy delving at his dyke ;  
Which, let me not forget to say,  
Stood close behind a public way :  
And, as he lean'd upon his spade,  
Reviewing o'er the work he'd made ;  
A youth, a stranger in that place,  
Stood right before him, face to face.  
“ P-p-p-p-pray ;” says he,  
“ How f-f-f-f-far may't be,  
To-o”—the words would not come out—  
“ T-o Borough-bridge ; or, thereabout ?”  
Our clown took huff ; thrice hemm'd upon't,  
Then smelt a kind of an affront.  
Thought he—This bluff, fool-hardy fellow,  
A little crack'd, perhaps, or mellow,  
Knowing my tongue an inch too short,  
Is come to flier and make his sport ;  
Wauns ! if I thought he meant to quarrel,  
I'd hoop the roynish rascal's barrel !  
If me he means or dares deride ;  
By all that's good I'll tan his hide !



## From Alexander Bell's Stammering, and Other Impediments of Speech (1836)

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Nor are painful attempts at utterance, the only evils, which may arise from this broken speech. A poor fellow, who was afflicted in this way, was travelling in quest of employment. Not knowing the road to Cupar,—a town in Scotland,—he thought, that he might civilly inquire of a person, who was engaged in repairing the highway. He *tried* to put the following question—“Can you tell me the gate to Cupar?” The man of whom he asked this, happened to be afflicted in a similar way; and he, not thinking that this uncouth address, was a habit in the questioner, but, that he stuttered in derision, essayed to reply, “You, Sirrah, I’ll *gee* you the gate to Cupar!” “Do you mock me?” stuttered the first. “I’ll mock you!” spluttered the second. So they commenced pummelling each other, until a gentleman, came up, who soon found, that defective articulation, in both the combatants, was the cause of this breach of the King’s peace.

A Stammerer of less pugnacious temper, was thus addressed by a traveller—“I say, my friend, How far is it to Hendon?” (The parties, were on an eminence about six miles from the place inquired after.) The man, pointing to the place in the distance, stuttered out “Y—y—y—you’ll b—b—be th—th—*there* b—before I can tell you!”

From  
“Sound and  
Sense,” *The  
Galaxy*  
(1866).

It is painful to listen to a habitual stutterer, yet the following incident must have been amusing: A gentleman with an impediment in his speech called a waiter, in a restaurant, and said: “We-w-waiter, gi-give me s-s-some r-r-oast b-b-beef.” The waiter stammered in reply, “W-w-we aint g-g-got a-any.” The gentleman was highly enraged, thinking the waiter was mocking him, and sprang up, intending to knock him down, when a third person arrested his arm and cried, “D-d-d-o-n’t st-t-trike him, he st-st-t-t-tutters s-s-same as as w-we d-d-d-do.” A person who married a stammering lady

## From Henri Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (English translation 1912).

“Our starting-point is again ‘something mechanical encrusted upon the living.’ Where did the comic come from in this case? It came from the fact that the living body became rigid, like a machine. Accordingly, it seemed to us that the living body ought to be the perfection of suppleness, the ever-alert activity of a principle always at work. But this activity would really belong to the soul rather than to the body. It would be the very flame of life, kindled within us by a higher principle and perceived through the body, as if through a glass. When we see only gracefulness and suppleness in the living body, it is because we disregard in it the elements of weight, of resistance, and, in a word, of matter; we forget its materiality and think only of its vitality, a vitality which we regard as derived from the very principle of intellectual and moral life. Let us suppose, however, that our attention is drawn to this material side of the body; that, so far from sharing in the lightness and subtlety of the principle with which it is animated, the body is no more in our eyes than a heavy and cumbersome vesture, a kind of irksome ballast which holds down to earth a soul eager to rise aloft. Then the body will become to the soul what, as we have just seen, the garment was to the body itself—inert matter dumped down upon living energy. The impression of the comic will be produced as soon as we have a clear apprehension of this putting the one on the other. And we shall experience it most strongly when we are shown the soul TANTALISED by the needs of the body: on the one hand, the moral personality with its intelligently varied energy, and, on the other, the stupidly monotonous body, perpetually obstructing everything with its machine-like obstinacy. The more paltry and uniformly repeated these claims of the body, the more striking will be the result. But that is only a matter of degree, and the general law of these phenomena may be formulated as follows: ANY INCIDENT IS COMIC THAT CALLS OUR ATTENTION TO THE PHYSICAL IN A PERSON WHEN IT IS THE MORAL SIDE THAT IS CONCERNED.”

# Bergson's theory that laughter functions as social correction

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“Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo, Listen to it carefully: it is not an articulate, clear, well-defined sound; it is something which would fain be prolonged by reverberating from one to another, something beginning with a crash, to continue in successive rumblings, like thunder in a mountain. Still, this reverberation cannot go on for ever. It can travel within as wide a circle as you please: the circle remains, none the less, a closed one. Our laughter is always the laughter of a group.”

“To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one. Such, let us say at once, will be the leading idea of all our investigations. Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a SOCIAL signification.”



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“In a public speaker, for instance, we find that gesture vies with speech. Jealous of the latter, gesture closely dogs the speaker's thought, demanding also to act as interpreter. Well and good; but then it must pledge itself to follow thought through all the phases of its development. An idea is something that grows, buds, blossoms and ripens from the beginning to the end of a speech. It never halts, never repeats itself. It must be changing every moment, for to cease to change would be to cease to live. Then let gesture display a like animation! Let it accept the fundamental law of life, which is the complete negation of repetition! But I find that a certain movement of head or arm, a movement always the same, seems to return at regular intervals. If I notice it and it succeeds in diverting my attention, if I wait for it to occur and it occurs when I expect it, then involuntarily I laugh. Why? Because I now have before me a machine that works automatically. This is no longer life, it is automatism established in life and imitating it. It belongs to the comic.”

“We begin, then, to become imitable only when we cease to be ourselves. I mean our gestures can only be imitated in their mechanical uniformity, and therefore exactly in what is alien to our living personality. To imitate any one is to bring out the element of automatism he has allowed to creep into his person. And as this is the very essence of the ludicrous, it is no wonder that imitation gives rise to laughter.”

"The gestures of a public speaker, no one of which is laughable by itself, excite laughter by their repetition.”

Alanka  
Zupančič's  
*The Odd  
One In: On  
Comedy*  
(MIT  
Press, 2008)

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Argues Bergson misunderstood the primary thrust of his theory that we laugh when we recognize the mechanical encrusted upon the living.

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The missed revelation of Bergson's theory is comedy's unceasing vacillations between the living and the mechanical.