

Fun with Language

After Taylor Swift's hit song "Blank Space" came out in 2014, one line in particular had many listeners baffled. Why was she singing about "Starbucks lovers"?

Turns out she wasn't. The line "got a long list of ex-lovers" was frequently misheard as "all the lonely Starbucks lovers". Even Swift's mother admitted she had misheard the line several times!

"Starbucks lovers" is an example of a *mondegreen*, a misinterpreted word or phrase. Song lyrics are especially prone to becoming mondegreens; the history of music is littered with them. Queen's 1975 hit song "Bohemian Rhapsody" is especially full of misheard lyrics, with people even insisting the title is really "Bohemian Rap City"!

Ed Sheeran's "Thinking Out Loud" was another recent victim of mondegreen mayhem. The line "take me into your loving arms" is often garbled by listeners who think it is "take me into your eleven arms"!

Mondegreens occur because what we understand from words comes both from the sound we hear in our ears and our brains' expectations of the meaning those sounds will produce. When a sound comes into our ears that is unexpected or hard to hear, our brains usually translate that sound into something that makes sense to us.

What song lyrics have you and your friends misheard lately?

History

The term "mondegreen" was coined by American writer Sylvia Wright in a 1954 column for Harper's magazine. In her column, Ms Wright wrote about how when she was a child, her mother used to read to her a Scottish folk ballad from a book of poetry. The ballad, called "The Bonny Earl of Murray", ended with "They have slain the Earl of Murray / And they laid him on the green". As a child, Ms Wright misinterpreted this as "They have slain the Earl of Murray / And the Lady Mondegreen".

Ms Wright was embarrassed when she discovered that she had misinterpreted this line for years, believing that two people had died in this poem. She coined the term "mondegreen" to refer to other words, phrases or lines that had been similarly misunderstood by many.

Nuts & Bolts

Pick the correct sentence:

1. What is the moral of the story?
2. What is the morale of the story?

The correct answer is #1. A "moral" is a lesson about what is the right thing to do, usually from a story or a recounting of an experience. "Morale" refers to the enthusiasm that a person or group of people possess while working on a task. Look up the pronunciations of these two words so you can be sure never to pronounce them the same way!