

The Jingle Book

Tongue twisters at Belong Chester care village

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Where the Arts Belong
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During lockdown, myself and four other artists from the *Where the Arts Belong* project are invited to deliver online sessions with *Belong at Home* and apartment residents in ‘bubbles’ across seven care villages. Throughout the project I have been working with sound, as opposed to music, setting up ‘orchestras’ in homes and Villages, using only what is at hand to make compositions and soundtracks – plastic rulers, whistles, rubber bands, megaphones, spoons, bubble machines, bicycle bells, pasta in jars or squeaky floorboards.

I video call with staff under intense pressure during Covid and tenants suffering from isolation, lack of family visits and almost zero ‘fun’ activities. As we know, video calls can be tricky ways to communicate as we suffer delays, echoes, bad acoustics and signals can disappear completely – in essence, language breaks down. I want to explore this phenomenon using words but also to have fun in these darkest and most worrying of times. The obvious solution is tongue twisters.

I am humbled and taken by the zest with which *Belong* staff jump into these Covid sessions, and as myself, staff and tenants read these well-known tongue twisters, we laugh, stumble and marvel at the strange sounds coming from our mouths. Where do we first hear these cheeky little sentences and rhymes – primary school? I become enamoured by them and collect more. M in Crewe is superb at them, as are B and G in Chester. We find harder and harder ones to

practice and one of the Belong staff even recites some in Italian for us, all as part of a soundtrack for the canal we develop in Chester (the village is on the banks of the canal) from home-made sounds. We even attempt what is officially the world's hardest tongue twister:

The sixth sick sheikh's sixth sheep's sick.

Tongue twisters date back to John Harris' *Peter Piper's Practical Principles of Plain and Perfect Pronunciation* (1836) that includes a twisty tongue tango for every letter of the alphabet. The book helps children learn the fundamentals of speech mechanics and gains wider appreciation. I test some of the popular ones out with my 5-year-old grandson and he starts writing his own in fits of giggles, one of which I proudly invite the Chester group to read out:

Anna's bananas are Alan's apples!

Tongue twisters are amazing. Reading them quickly, we know a stumble or stutter is approaching, but like the Grand National we summon up tiny moments of determination to push on over tricky fences and get the little adrenalin rushes. I like this as a metaphor for life. We tell our brains to say 'she' rather than 'sea' and yet we feel the words tripping us up as our mouths struggle to get into the right shape to identify a lorry and not a lolly. We become so aware of our tongue and lips and the way our eyes send signals

to our mouth via our brains, whatever capacity we have. Edward Chang, a neuroscientist at the University of California, notes, “The sounds ‘ss’ and ‘sh’ are both stored in the brain as front-of-the-tongue sounds, for example, so the brain probably confuses these more often than sounds that are made by different parts of the tongue. *Sally sells seashells* is tricky. *Mally sells sea-smells* is not.” Daily tongue twisters stretch and strengthen the muscles we use to speak, helping the brain remember patterns in a different way from singing.

In Chester, we incorporate some into our canal soundtracks alongside impersonating animals we meet along the towpath, the creaking of the locks, a distant Neil Diamond concert, the soft lolloping of still waters and the thrills of Chester Races. One week, our journey takes a wrong turn and we end up cruising through Venice singing *The Cornetto Song*.

I say “Let’s do the next tongue twister in the style of...” and we come up with hilarious options, such as in the style of Chester’s Town Crier, as a 6-year-old, as someone very posh, whispered or with a Scottish accent in an overlapping Frère Jacques ‘round’ style (half the group begin before the other half joins in a few seconds later).

When we receive our Markel Third Sector Care Award for our lockdown work, myself and some Belong colleagues find ourselves on

stage with host Angela Rippon. She thrusts the microphone towards me and asks about the tongue twisters and despite all ones we've done, the only one I can recall is *Eddie edited it*. I look into Angela's famous eyes as we all start reciting it, suppressing the inevitable giggles. What I should have suggested is one of the longer ones that becomes our favourite and one that can be traced back to Carolyn Wells' *The Jingle Book* (nice title!) from 1899: *Betty Botta bought some butter; "But," said she, "this butter's bitter! If I put it in my batter, It will make my batter bitter."*

On BBC Radio 4 recently, poet Michael Rosen and literary scholar Noreen Masud celebrate 'nonsense' language, defining it as "existing in some way in relationship to sense" and "an alternative world that is a refuge from our boring everyday structure and language." Noreen continues: "I think that nonsense language has long offered us space for people who are culturally or socially marginalised, to find a sense of home and belonging."

So, what do tongue twisters have to do with using contemporary art to gain new knowledge about care for those living with dementia? That is the next stage of this project, collaborating with the Centre for Dementia Research at Leeds Beckett University to better understand why some people excel at reading tongue twisters - and what happens in the brain - when other facets of everyday language may have declined.

Is there a difference between reciting ones we've known since childhood (*She sells ...*) and tackling brand new ones? More of this soon, plus the one new tongue twister we look forward to trying in Chester for the first time is particularly pertinent given the Grosvenor's knowledge of the wildlife (mammoths!) that used to roam these very lands: *Chester cheetah chews a chunk of cheap cheddar cheese, if the chunk of cheese chunked Chester cheetah, what would Chester cheetah chew and chunk on?*

Meanwhile, we're really proud to present some of our recorded tongue twisters here for you and have left gaps between each one for you can try them out yourself. And, finally, a note for your diaries - International Tongue Twister Day this year is on Monday 13 November, for us all to speak plenty of nonsense as a way towards a sense of belonging.

Full list of tongue twisters recordings

Red lorry, yellow lorry - group, whisper, Frère Jacques 'rounds' style

She sees cheese – B, J, H (Belong), J and L

Scissors sizzle thistles sizzle – B (Belong) and L (Bluecoat)

Betty Botta bought some butter – J (artist's grandson, age 6)

Peter Piper picked – group (posh accent)

Betty Botta – group (whisper)

Can you can a can as a canner can can a can? – group (loud)

She sees cheese – group (in a Scottish accent)

Red lorry – group (whisper, ladies only)

Anna's bananas are Alan's apples (written by J) – H, artist's daughter, age 26 then group in style of a 6-year-old

Red lorry – group (in the style of a town crier)

She sees cheese – H (via video call)

Red lorry – group (whisper, ladies only)

Peter Piper – group

Red lorry – group (whisper)

Can you can a can - artist, H and J

Betty Botta – artist (with drum roll then whispered)

She sees cheese – group (read backwards = Cheese Sees She)

Red lorry – group (whisper for one minute)

Truly Rural and *Scissors Sizzle* – group (first ever efforts)

She sells sea shells on the sea shore (group warming up)

The sixth sick sheik's sixth sheep's sick – group (the world's hardest ever tongue twister!)

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