

NOTE

Place Names and Meaningful Infixing

*For Frank Nuessel, with gratitude
and respect*

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Infixing and interposing are relatively new derivational processes in English, first attested in the early twentieth century. For most of the last century, the insert in items like *absofuckinglutely* and *no fucking way* — in both cases, *-fucking-* — carries no lexical meaning but serves as an “emotional stress amplifier” (McMillan 1980). However, I have found many late-twentieth-century infixings and interposings whose inserts are lexically meaningful and variously motivated, though they may also amplify emotional stress of a sort (Adams 2009, 127–44). For instance, in the animated short feature “Movie Night” (Chimendez 2005), one of the *Cheat Commando Adventures*, we encounter this conversational exchange:

First Blue Laser Minion: What’s with this guy?

Second Blue Laser Minion: Should we shoot him?

First Blue Laser Minion: Absototalutely.¹

Absolutely is infixed with *total*, such that they should totally absolutely shoot the guy. *Total* retains lexical meaning while pragmatically providing emphasis that amplifies First Blue Laser Minion’s emotional response to Second Blue Laser Minion’s question. *Absototalutely* illustrates what one amateur slang lexicographer aptly called *lexifabricography* (Adams 2009, 144).

The sauce for lexical items isn’t always sauce for names, however, and one might wonder whether names are ever infixed to similar effect. Of course, as long as they observe the relevant prosodic constraints, they can be infixed with profane inserts: *Monongafuckinhela*, *Alafuckinbama*, *Dufuckinbrovnic*, etc. (McCarthy 1982, 574–75).² But on a recent visit to Louisville, Kentucky (October 18–21, 2018), concerns about the onomastic productivity of meaningful infixing were put to rest.³ At that time, Louisville was promoting tourism and more with banners that hung from downtown lamp posts, specifically those on Main Street. One enthusiastic banner, for instance, read *Abso-LOU-tely*,

because, honestly, where would you rather be looking at such banners than in downtown Louisville?

Such an infixing works differently from those Adams collected. First, because *-lu-* and *-LOU-* are homophones, *-lu-* is like a palimpsest that *-LOU-* has overwritten — it's there but not there. *Abso-LOU-tely* conveys both *absolutely* and, what we're absolutely all for, *LOU(isville)*, and the pun saves us from a most unlikely form, **absoLOUlutely*. Obviously, other city names or their abbreviations cannot serve as inserts that pun with an adjacent matrix syllable: **Abso-CHI-lutely* (for Chicago), **AbsoMINNEAlutely* (for Minneapolis), **AbsoSEATTLElutely* (for Seattle), — without the pun, the resulting infixings are barely plausible, though some work better than others, especially prosodically (see McCawley 1978 and McCarthy 1982), for instance, **AbsoBOCALutely* (for Boca Raton). Name prosody often inhibits infixation (Yu 2007, 11 and 21–25), to avoid “morpho-phonological mismatch” (Yu 2007, 21), which may explain why we see even less onomastic infixation than we do derivational infixation in English.

Second, the onomastic infixing refocuses the relationship between matrix and insert. In *absototalutely*, the insert *-tota(l)-* modifies the matrix *absolutely* — it's totally absolute — while in the onomastic infixing, the matrix *absolutely* modifies the *-LOU(isville)-* insert — Louisville is what the city's promoting, what we're committed to liking, and not just liking but liking emphatically. The inverted focus is thus ideal for branding and marketing whenever insert and name or name abbreviation proves a good fit prosodically. As opposed to brand names for products and services, place names are given and while they may prompt affective response from those somehow affiliated with the name, the name is in most cases affectively neutral. As Marcel Danesi (2006, 17) explains, “The promotion of products in a modern consumerist culture is based on the principle that people will buy things if they perceive them as satisfying some basic emotion, desire, or social need.” *Louisville* itself may be neutral, but in the infixing, *Abso-LOU-tely* suggests alternative, slightly disruptive fun, a clever city where people like words and word games — punned infixing provides a basis for affective visitor response lacking in the name itself.

The limits on onomastic infixing, however, are narrow. Another banner hoped to convert visitors to residents: “Re-LOU-cate” it exclaimed. But *-LOU-* is not a homophone of *-lo-* and *Re-LOU-cate* is thus somewhat awkward and less persuasive. *Re-LOU-cate* is not strictly an infixing but trades on the formative process, much like Ned Flanders' *absonotly*, from *The Simpsons* (see Adams 2009, 138), which includes a lexically meaningful insert — *-not-* — while amplifying emotional “stress” — *-not-* receives a performative overemphasis — so, in the interaction of insert and matrix delivers an affective as well as a semantic message. Even though *Re-LOU-cate* and *absonotly* aren't quite infixings, they wouldn't be possible unless infixing were both an onomastic as well as a lexical formative process.

Besides the curiosity of such items and the potential role of infixed names in branding places, *Abso-LOU-tely*, especially, proves that meaningful infixing of the kind I've illustrates for words also participates in the grammar of names,

though so marginally that onomastic infixing is has been overlooked (see Anderson 2007 and van Langendonck 2007), perhaps because infixing — whether expletive or lexically meaningful — is an emerging rather than historical feature of name structure and meaning.

Notes

1. *Cheat Commando Adventures* is an Adobe Flash Web-animation series under the Homestar Runner media umbrella. At the time of writing, “Movie Night” (also known as “Commandos in the Classroom”) was available on the Web at <http://homestarrunner.com/cheatcommandos4.html>. Homestar Runner produces animated shorts, games, etc, and was conceived and mostly written and produced by brothers Matt and Mike Chapman and Craig Zobel, who live in Georgia. I have not been able to find more precise information about the place of production.
2. The syllabic and prosodic rules of infixation in English are somewhat complex and contested, but one need not get lost in the weeds of morphophonology to grasp the basics. *Alafuckinbama* works, but **Afuckinlabama* and **Alabafuckinma*
- do not, for reasons of stress and initial or ultimate syllable weight.
3. At one point, I put on my gumshoes and tried to find out when the banner program had started, who was responsible, and how long it would last. I called a certain civic agency I thought was behind it, but the dame on the other end said they weren’t and gave me the number for the one that was — so she claimed. I called the second number and spoke to a guy who shrugged it off. He gave me another number. I called it and got the same lady I’d spoken to before. Then, I gave up. I can say, though, that when my sweetheart and I returned to Louisville on March 14–17, 2019, the banners were gone. I never figured out who was responsible for those banners, but I did learn one thing: they were an ephemeral proposition.

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