

# Nifty Fifties Swifties

Martin Eayrs

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A game which developed amongst language lovers back in the fifties was based on Tom Swift, the hero in a series of boys' adventure books who never simply 'said' anything, but always said it 'morosely', 'resignedly', etc. This adverbial inclination led to the 'Tom Swiftie', a kind of word game in which you have to link an adverb to the meaning of a phrase in such a way that it has a double meaning.

For example, if poor Tom is hobbling around after a skiing accident and has mislaid his crutches we might say:

*I've lost my crutches', said Tom lamely.*

where the word 'lamely' has the double meaning of a poor excuse and the difficulty Tom experiences in walking.

If you like playing with words and their meanings this kind of thing can be immense fun and highly addictive. Like all puns the more outrageous it is the better: few Tom Swifties arise accidentally.

The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1st edition (1966) defines Tom Swifties thus:

Tom Swiftie, a play on words that follows an unvarying pattern and relies for its humor on a punning relationship between the way an adverb describes a speaker and at the same time refers significantly to the import of the speaker's statement, as in 'I know who turned off the lights,' Tom hinted darkly. [named after a narrative mannerism characteristic of the Tom Swift American series of adventure novels for boys].

In actual use, 'Tom Swiftie' seems to have a somewhat broader meaning, and includes the form sometimes called 'croakers' or 'groaners', where a verb rather than an adverb supplies the pun, e.g.

*I'm dying', Tom croaked.*

*Who is this Tom Swiftie character anyway?' asked Tom unselfconsciously.*

Tom Swift first appeared in the eponymous series 'Tom Swift' written by Edward L. Stratemeyer and first published in 1894 and later revived to continue (under different writers) until about 1935.

In these stories Tom never merely 'said' anything; he asserted, asseverated, averred, chuckled, declared, ejaculated, expostulated, grinned (plainly or mischievously), groaned, quipped, or smiled. In particular, sentences of the form 'xxx, Tom said xxx-ly' were used *ad nauseam*. Over time a person or persons unknown decided to satirize the mannerism by using puns, and the Tom Swiftie was born.

The following examples (courtesy Mark Israel) will demonstrate how they work. Let's start by taking an adverb such as 'abstractly' and look at three sample Swifties we can make:

*I like modern painting', said Tom abstractly.*

*Now that's worth stealing', said Tom abstractly.*

*This is the first step towards my thesis', said Tom abstractly.*

Here we can relate the concept 'abstract' to, in turn, 'modern art', 'the verb abstract' (meaning 'to steal') and the kind of 'abstract' you make of an academic paper.

Here are some more complicated ones (with hints in brackets)

*The executioner has received the tool he needs', said Tom with a heavy accent. (Axe end)*

*Let's all play an A, a C#, and an E', cried the band with one accord. (A single chord consisting of the notes A, C# and E)*

*I got this ballpoint pen from a Yugoslav friend', said Tom acerbically. (A Serb BIC)*

If you found these painful, the whole point of Tom Swifties is that – because they are puns – they are contrived (the more contrived the better) and make you groan rather than laugh.

Here are some better known Tom Swifties. You may have fun making up your own examples and are invited to contribute these in the comments box.

*I seek the Great White Whale', pronounced Captain Ahab, superficially.*  
*In the ad it says '3 bdrm 2 bth tel. c.h. ', said Tom aptly.*  
*I really have no idea', replied Tom thoughtlessly.*  
*Won't you help me get out of prison ?' said Tom balefully.*  
*Out, out, damned spot!' muttered Lady Macbeth disdainfully.*  
*I get confused with all these French street names', complained Tom ruefully.*  
*Are you sure you wouldn't prefer a puppy', he asked doggedly.*  
*Can I get you a drink', the waitress asked fetchingly.*  
*I build bridges', he said archly.*  
*I hate fairy tales', she declared grimly.*  
*No thanks, I'm on a diet', he said stoutly.*  
*The results of my ECG were reassuring', he said wholeheartedly.*  
*Watch out for the kerb', he shouted gutturally.*  
*Would you like a Pepsi', he asked coaxingly.*  
*You'll find supper in the freezer', she replied icily.*  
*I've bought you a negligée', he said transparently.*  
*. . . and a lovely bikini', he added briefly.*

And a couple more croakers ...

*How I long for the Forest', pined the lumberjack.*  
*My pants are too tight', Tom burst out.*

Yes, they are very bad puns but that's the point – the reaction is supposed to be a groan, not a laugh.

In fact there is more than one kind of Swiftie. The kind we've looked at so far is the adverbial kind ('They say I overuse adverbs,' said Tom, swiftly). But there is another kind which uses a verb instead of an adverb. An example might be 'What a lovely brook,' Tom babbled, where babbled refers both to what Tom says and the noise of the running water. Here are some more 'verbal' Swifties:

*Don't you get angry with me,' Tom growled.*  
*I think there's a hole in the road ahead,' Tom hazarded.*  
*What? Me? A drinking problem?' Tom gulped.*

There is a rarer third type, using a prepositional phrase:

*I'm leaving you, Rupert,' said Rodney in gay abandon.*

These are rather harder to construct than the other two (and my apologies for the stereotyping here).

Another variant of the Tom Swiftie matches a person's name with an appropriate adjective. We might for example speak of *the hasty Mr Swift*, where the adjective hasty picks up on an attribute contained in the name Swift. Some more examples: thinking of ELT authors, we might refer to

*the brutal Mr Harmer*  
*the festive Ms Revell*  
*the towering Mr and Mrs Soars*

where the 'harm' is associated with the idea of brutality or violence; with revised pronunciation 'revels' are parties; and to 'soar' is to shoot up high into the air. I'm sure you get the idea.