For All “Intensive” Purposes: A Primer on Malapropisms, Eggcorns, and Other Rogue Elements of the English Language

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[Interior shot, local restaurant, day.]

Diner One: Is that all you’re ordering for lunch? This new diet must really curve your appetite.

Diner Two: I certainly hope so—it’s costing me a nominal egg!

Diner One: Well, you’d better eat more at the office holiday party, or you’ll be a social leopard, for sure.

Ah, there is nothing like the satisfying Schadenfreude that washes over you when you overhear this little exchange one booth over at the local Applebee’s.¹ Not so satisfying is the feeling you get when you read a record of trial and realize that the court reporter accurately noted that you referred to your client as an escape goat.²

As members of the legal profession, words are the tools of our trade, our weapons of choice, our allies in battle. Unfortunately, the English language can be a fickle friend, quick to trip our tongues and tangle up our prose. Nothing is worse than that sinking feeling you get when you realize that you wrote in a memo that the accused should get his just desserts,³ or that you just appraised⁴ your boss of a pending legal issue.

An axiom of military strategy is that you must know your enemy to succeed in battle.⁵ The same holds true for conquering the English language—you must identify and understand these rogue elements to avoid becoming their victim. This article will orientate⁶ you to several categories of confusing words: malapropisms, eggcorns, and mondegreens. In addition to those scattered throughout this article, several commonly misused words and phrases appear in the appendices. By this article’s conclusion, you will be equipped to circumvent these pitfalls and avoid appearing more troglodyte than erudite.⁷

Malapropisms

“She’s as headstrong as an allegory on the banks of the Nile.”

–Mrs. Malaprop, The Rivals⁸

Richard Sheridan’s 1775 play The Rivals provided not only a memorable character, but also the origin of a term to describe misused words. In The Rivals, Mrs. Malaprop litters her dialogue with humorous errors in usage, such as “He is the pineapple of politeness.”⁹ Her name is derived from the French mal à propos, meaning “mal, ‘badly,’ à, ‘to,’ and propos,


¹ Schadenfreude is German for “malicious joy at another’s misfortune.” LE MOT JUSTE: A DICTIONARY OF CLASSICAL AND FOREIGN WORDS AND PHRASES 105 (John Buchanan-Brown et al. eds., 2d ed. 1991) [hereinafter LE MOT JUSTE].

² Which of course should be scapegoat, unless your case involves a heist on a farm.

³ Just desserts should actually be just deserts; “[i]t comes from the French for deserve.” BILL BRYSON, BRYSON’S DICTIONARY OF TROUBLESOME WORDS: A WRITER’S GUIDE TO GETTING IT RIGHT 113 (2002).

⁴ The correct word is apprise, meaning “to inform”; appraise means “to assess or evaluate.” Id. at 16.

⁵ See, e.g., SUN Tzu, THE ART OF WAR bk. 3, at 52 (J.H. Huang trans., William Morrow & Co. 1993) (6th cent. B.C.) (“By perceiving the enemy and perceiving ourselves, there will be no unforeseen risk in any battle.”).

⁶ Believe it or not, “orientate” is an actual word. See RANDOM HOUSE WEBSTER’S UNABRIDGED DICTIONARY 1366 (Sol Steinmetz et al. eds., 2d ed. 1998) [hereinafter WEBSTER’S] (defining orientate as “to orient”).

⁷ Or avoid appearing deliberately ignorant versus well educated.

⁸ RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN, THE RIVALS act 3, sc. 3 (1775).

⁹ Id. (instead of pinnacle).
The popularity of *The Rivals* led to the eventual adoption of the term malapropism, defined today as “an act or habit of misusing words ridiculously, esp. by the confusion of words that are similar in sound.” Although malapropisms can be amusing, it all depends on your point of view. It is one thing to chuckle when Johnny Soprano refers to the *albacore* around his neck, it is another to find yourself *floundering* in a sea of your own mistakes.

Nonetheless, the entertainment value of malapropisms has guaranteed their frequent occurrence in both classic literature and popular culture. In addition to Johnny Boy Soprano, several fictional characters have exhibited an endearing penchant for malapropisms over the years. William Shakespeare provided characters like the Nurse from *Romeo and Juliet* (“she will *indite* him to some supper”) and Dogberry from *Much Ado About Nothing* (“O villain! Thou wilt be condemned into everlasting redemption for this.”). Lovable bigot Archie Bunker of *All in the Family* also stumbled his way through the English language, resulting in memorable sayings like “he is making *suppository* remarks about our country.” More recently, the titular characters of the popular Australian television show *Kath & Kim* scatter malapropisms about in their quest for middle-class *effluence*.

**Eggecorns**

*Chazz: Mind-bottling, isn’t it?  
Jimmy: Did you just say mind-bottling?  
Chazz: Yeah, mind-bottling. You know, when things are so crazy it gets your thoughts all trapped, like in a bottle?*

Like malapropisms, eggecorns involve the substitution of one word for a similar sounding word. Eggcorns, however, have two characteristics that set them apart from malapropisms. First, eggcorns usually involve homophones or near homophones, compared to malapropisms, which usually involve similar (not identical) sounding words. Second, eggcorns—although technically incorrect—are logically correct in the universe of the speaker. As explained by The Atlantic’s Ms. Grammar, eggcorns are “spontaneous reshapings of known expressions’ which seem to make sense.” The *Blades of Glory* example above illustrates these principles. *Bottling* is only a near-homophone for *boggling*; the feature that distinguishes this eggcorn from a malapropism is that *mind-bottling* makes its own sense, as explained by Chazz.

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10 *WORD HISTORIES AND MYSTERIES: FROM ABRACADABRA TO ZEUS* 170 (Patrick Taylor et al. eds., 2004) [hereinafter *WORD HISTORIES*].
11 *WEBSTER’S*, supra note 6, at 1163; *WORD HISTORIES*, supra note 10, at 170–71.
12 *The Sopranos: Down Neck* (HBO television broadcast Feb. 21, 1999). In this episode, Johnny Boy Soprano meant to refer to the *albatross* around his neck—an allusion from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.
13 Another fishy situation arises when you substitute *flounder* for *founder*. “To founder is to sink; to flounder is to struggle clumsily, like a fish out of water.” *Bill Walsh, LAPSING INTO A COMMA: A CURMUDGEON’S GUIDE TO THE MANY THINGS THAT CAN GO WRONG IN PRINT—AND HOW TO AVOID THEM* 139 (2000).
14 *WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, ROMEO AND JULIET* act 3, sc. 1 (emphasis added). The Nurse meant to say *invite*; *indite* means “to compose or write, as a poem.” *WEBSTER’S*, supra note 6, at 973.
15 *WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING* act 4, sc. 2 (emphasis added). Here, Dogberry substitutes *redemption* for *damnation*.
18 *BLADES OF GLORY* (Dreamworks SKG 2007).
19 Homophone means “a word pronounced the same as another but differing in meaning, whether spelled the same way or not, as *heir* and *air*.” *WEBSTER’S*, supra note 6, at 916. Compare *homonym*—“a word the same as another in sound and spelling but different in meaning.” *Id.* (emphasis added).
As you have probably noticed by now, the word *eggcorn* is also an eggcorn—for *acorn*. The term was developed by “[l]anguage geeks,” namly, linguistics professors Mark Liberman and Geoffrey Pullum. On his blog *Language Log*, Liberman explains why the eggcorn could not be properly defined by one of the existing categories of language errors:

“It’s not a folk etymology, because this is the usage of one person rather than an entire speech community.

It’s not a malapropism, because “egg corn” and “acorn” are really homonyms (at least in casual pronunciation), while pairs like “allegory” for “alligator,” “oracular” for “vermacular” and “fortuitous” for “fortunate” are merely similar in sound . . . .

It’s not a mondegreen because the mis-construal is not part of a song or poem or similar performance.23

Since its coinage in 2003, the term eggcorn has *spread like wildfire* throughout the language geek community. A search for “eggcorn” on Google turns up about 45,500 results, including references in *Psychology Today*,26 *The Boston Globe*,27 and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.28 A brief look at some of these sites yields gems such as “far-gone conclusion,”29 “antidotal evidence,”30 “mute point,”31 and “girdle one’s loins.”32 Other examples are included in the appendices.

**Mondegreens**

*Olive, the Other Reindeer, used to laugh and call him names . . . .*

An entire generation may have grown up wondering why Olive was so cruel to poor Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. A mistake such as this is a mondegreen—a misheard lyric, phrase, or verse, resulting in the listener substituting words or phrases for similar-sounding words or phrases. In other words, mondegreens are eggcorns in very specific contexts—musical lyrics, poems, and such.34

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21 Id.

22 Mark Liberman is a linguistics professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and Geoffrey Pullum is a linguistics professor at the University of California-Santa Cruz. See *Language Log*; About, http://languageblog.lcd.upenn.edu/nll?page_id=2 (last visited Nov. 3, 2008). They started a blog called *Language Log* in 2003, to which twenty-three authors now contribute. Id.


24 Versus *spread like wildfire*.


29 Peters, supra note 26 (foregone conclusion).


31 Id. (moot point).

32 Peters, supra note 28 (gird one’s loins).


35 See, e.g., Liberman Posting, supra note 23. Like eggcorns, mondegreens tend to make their own sort of sense—compared to malapropisms, which are simply incorrect.
Author Sylvia Wright coined the term in a 1954 Harper’s Bazaar article. She wrote that “[a]s a child she had heard the Scottish ballad “The Bonny Earl of Murray” and she had believed that one stanza went like this:

Ye Highlands and Ye Lowlands
Oh where hae you been?
They hae slay the Earl of Murray,
And Lady Mondegreen.”

Wright later discovered that what she heard as “Lady Mondegreen” was actually “laid him on the green.” Thus was born the term mondegreen to describe this phenomenon.

Christmas carols (like the “Rudolph” example) seem especially prone to mondegreens, perhaps because they often have “seldom-heard words and phrasings and clever wordplay” and are usually sung by children. For example, to the juvenile ear,

See the blazing Yule before us
Strike the harp and join the chorus

can become

See the blazing Yulbie forest
Strike the heart, enjoy the florist.

Note, however, that mondegreens are unintentional misinterpretations of a song’s lyrics. Therefore, the classic “Jingle bells, Batman smells” ditty would be properly classified as a parody, not a mondegreen.

Where to Go for Help, or How to Avoid Cutting Off Your Nose Despite Your Face

Malapropisms, eggcorns, mondegreens—it is enough to make the heartiest of souls take to a chaise lounge with the vapors. Fortunately, there are myriad resources you can consult before you wreck havoc upon the English language. Bryson’s Dictionary of Troublesome Words provides an A to Z list of commonly confused words, as well as other advice on spelling, usage, and so forth. It would benefit even the sharpest critic to consult Bryson’s Dictionary before honing in on a perceived error in another’s writing. Additionally, the Internet is a virtual cachet of blogs, lists, and rants concerning the

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37 Jon Carroll, Mondegreens, SF Gate, http://www.sfgate.com/columnists/carroll/mondegreens.shtml (last visited Nov. 3, 2008). At this site, San Francisco Gate columnist Jon Carroll has a repository of columns discussing and cataloguing various mondegreens. Id.
38 E.g., Freeman, supra note 36.
39 Christmas Carol Mondegreens, supra note 33.
40 Id.
41 Id.
42 Another eggcorn (“cut off your nose to spite your face”).
43 The correct term is hardest of souls, but this eggcorn turns up with alarming frequency. See, e.g., Rachel Wimberly, Chicago Hotel Strike Averted, TRADESHOW WK., Sept. 18, 2006, available at http://www.tradeshowweek.com/article/CA6371826.html (“a possible strike by 7,000 hotel employees in the host city would test even the heartiest of souls”).
44 The term chaise lounge is commonly used in American English to refer to a chair long enough to support the legs; however, it is technically an eggcorn. The actual French term is chaise longue, meaning “long chair.” See LE MOT JUSTE, supra note 1, at 64.
45 Vapors: “a. mental depression or hypochondria. b. injurious exhalations formerly supposed to be produced within the body, esp. in the stomach.” WEBSTER’S, supra note 6, at 2105.
46 The proper idiom is wreak havoc. “To ‘wreak’ is to inflict, to cause, to bring about. To ‘wreck’ is to ruin or destroy or dismantle.” Posting of Patricia T. O’Connor to The Grammarphobia Blog, http://www.grammarphobia.com/blog/2008/10/old-hungarian-goulash.html (Oct. 31, 2008).
48 See Bryson, supra note 3, at 97. “Home means to sharpen . . . or, more rarely, to complain or yearn for.” Id. Thus, the proper idiom is home in on. Id.
use and abuse of the English language. For example, Professor Bruce W. Hauptli of Florida International University has compiled a list of over 200 malapropisms collected from students over the years. Word enthusiasts who wish to slack their thirst for eggcorns can consult sites such as The Eggcorn Database, a virtual “eggcornucopia” with over 600 entries. Yogi Berra quotes are also ripe with humorous eggcorns and malapropisms, such as “It’s not the heat, it’s the humidity.” Finally, the appendices further explain several commonly confused words and phrases.

Conclusion

On a whim and a prayer, you have reached the conclusion, the veritable coup d’état of this article. Some of you have anticipated this moment with baited breath, while others are completely disinterested in the whole thing. Irregardless of the camp into which you fall, this article should have spurned you to take a new tact in your writing and to insidiously strive to avoid desiccating the English language. If anything, you have hopefully gleamed from this article some methods to flesh out errors in your writing and reign them in. I command to you one last bit of advice: Be discrete when choosing to condone the mistakes of those around you. Nothing is worse than a word snob with illusions of grandeur.

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49 The word cache is often mispronounced “ka shə” (as in cachet) instead of “kash.” Cache means “a hiding place, esp. one in the ground, for ammunition, food, treasures, etc.,” whereas cachet means “superior status; prestige.” WEBSTER’S, supra note 6, at 291.


53 Or delusions of grammar! For an explanation of the sixteen errors in this paragraph, see Appendix B.
Appendix A

Attorney. “A person with a law degree is a lawyer. A person who acts on behalf of another person is that person’s attorney.” Thus, attorney is not an exact synonym for lawyer. A Judge Advocate might act as an attorney when representing an accused at a court-martial, but would not be described as an Army attorney. “When in doubt, use lawyer.”

Bemused. “Martha watched the play with a bemused expression on her face.” This does not mean that Martha was amused or entertained; most likely, she was “confused or bewildered.”

Empathy, Sympathy. Empathy is “the intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another.” Sympathy means “a general kinship with another’s feelings, no matter of what kind . . . .” The word sympathy is therefore broader; empathy implies “deep emotional understanding,” while “sympathy can apply to any small annoyance or setback.”

Enormity. If the enormity of a task overwhelms you, it is not due to its size. Rather, enormity “refers to something that is wicked, monstrous, and outrageous . . . .” In other words, enormity is not a synonym for enormousness.

Flout. This word is often mistakenly replaced by flaunt, as in flaunting authority. To flaunt means to show off; to flout means to defy.

Imply, Infer. “Something implied is suggested or indicated, though not expressed. Something inferred is something deduced from evidence at hand.” In other words, a speaker might imply something, which the listener could then infer from the speaker’s words.

Jury-rig. Often confused as jerry-rig, jury-rig means “made in haste, with whatever materials are at hand, usually as a temporary or emergency measure . . . .”

On tenterhooks. This is the proper spelling of the idiom meaning “in a state of uneasy suspense or painful anxiety”; often misspelled on tenderhooks.

Torturous, tortuous. Would a plaintiff drop a case to avoid torturous or tortuous legal proceedings? Either word may be appropriate, depending on the context. Torturous, derived from torture, primarily means “involving or causing torture or suffering.” Tortuous can mean “full of twists, turns, or bends” but also may refer to something that is overly complex or devious: a tortuous plot. In this example, a tortuous legal proceeding would cause the plaintiff suffering, whereas a tortuous proceeding would be overly complex or circuitous.

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54 WALSH, supra note 13, at 105.
55 Id.
56 Id. at 109. The second definition listed in Webster’s is “lost in thought; preoccupied.” WEBSTER’S, supra note 6, at 192.
57 WEBSTER’S, supra note 6, at 638.
58 Id. at 1927.
59 BRYSON, supra note 3, at 68–69.
60 Id. at 69.
61 Id. at 79.
63 BRYSON, supra note 3, at 113.
64 WEBSTER’S, supra note 6, at 1957.
65 Id. at 1999.
66 Id.
Appendix B

1. *On a whim and a prayer* is an eggcorn for *on a wing and a prayer*.\(^{67}\)

2. *Coup d’état* (violent overthrow of government) should be *coup de grâce* (“grace stroke, final stroke, finishing blow”).\(^{68}\)

3. *Baited breath* should be *bated breath*, meaning “with breath drawn in or held because of anticipation or suspense . . . ”\(^{69}\)

4. *Disinterested* should be *uninterested*. If you are *disinterested*, that means you are “unbiased by personal interest or advantage,” not “lacking interest.”\(^{70}\)

5. *Irregardless* is an irregular word; should be *regardless*.

6. *Spurned* (rejected) should be *spurred*, meaning driven forward as if by spurs.\(^{71}\)

7. *Take a new tact* is an eggcorn for *take a new tack*, derived from sailing terminology.\(^{72}\)

8. *Insidiously* (operating in a “stealthily treacherous” way) should be *assiduously* (diligently).\(^{73}\)

9. *Desiccating* (drying out) should be *desecrating* (treating with sacrilege or profanity).\(^{74}\)

10. *Gleamed* (shone) should be *gleaned* (learned or discovered gradually).\(^{75}\)

11. *Flesh out* (put flesh onto, beef up) is an eggcorn for *flush out* (drive something into the open).\(^{76}\)

12. *Reign in* should be *rein in* (restrain).\(^{77}\)

13. *Command* should be *commend*. To *command* means to direct someone to do something, while to *commend* means to recommend.\(^{78}\)

14. *Discrete* (distinct, unrelated) should be *discreet* (circumspect, prudent).\(^{79}\)

15. *Condone* (forgive, overlook) should be *condemn* (strongly disapprove).\(^{80}\)

16. *Illusions*, in this example, is a malapropism for *delusions* (false beliefs).\(^{81}\)

\(^{67}\) Posting of Ben Zimmer to The Eggcorn Database, http://eggcorns.lascribe.net/english/95/whim/ (Feb. 16, 2005).

\(^{68}\) LE MOT JUSTE, supra note 1, at 67.

\(^{69}\) WEBSTER’S, supra note 6, at 176.

\(^{70}\) Id. at 566.

\(^{71}\) Id. at 1848.

\(^{72}\) WALSH, supra note 13, at 212. One of several nautical definitions of *tack* is “the heading of a sailing vessel . . . with reference to wind direction.” WEBSTER’S, supra note 6, at 1934. Thus, to *take a new tack* is to head in a new direction (or to take a new course of action). Id.

\(^{73}\) WEBSTER’S, supra note 6, at 986, 124.

\(^{74}\) Id. at 538–39.

\(^{75}\) Id. at 811.


\(^{77}\) WEBSTER’S, supra note 6, at 1625.

\(^{78}\) Id. at 410–11.

\(^{79}\) See BRYSON, supra note 3, at 61.

\(^{80}\) See id. at 45; WEBSTER’S, supra note 6, at 425.

\(^{81}\) See WEBSTER’S, supra note 6, at 528.