

Don't Take This Pullet Surprise Column For Granite

Some PESA persons, albeit less than the fast majority, have been waiting with baited breath for this column on eggcorns, so I shall try to stay on the straight and narrow, as hard as that is sometimes. Matthew 7:14 says 'Straight is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there are who find it'.

Lest Matthew's wisdom seem already off the beat and path, bare in mind there is an eggcorn buried therein. 'Strait is the way', sayeth Matthew, not 'straight'. *Strait* means 'tight' or 'strict', as in 'strait-laced', and is also used geographically, as in Torres Strait.

Yet when 'straight' is used in this expression, it makes sense – the seaway straits are straight, and so is Matthew's path – which makes 'straight', though now the more commonly used, an eggcorn.

But I'm getting the cat before the horse here, and we should look at how the term evolved, before we get down to examples.

In 2003, a reader wrote on the website *Language Log* that he'd heard a woman using 'eggcorn' instead of 'acorn' and he asked what the linguistic term was for such a mistake.

It wasn't a malapropism, the experts concluded, because 'eggcorn' and 'acorn' were homonyms, and malapropisms require sufficient difference in pronunciation to make the mistake obvious and thereby create the humour. The name comes from the French *mal à propos* (literally, 'ill-suited') and was popularised by the character Mrs Malprop in Sheridan's 1775 play *The Rivals*. Among many gems from Mrs Malprop is 'She was as headstrong as an allegory on the banks of the Nile'.

It wasn't a mondegreen either, because these are mistakes made by people mishearing words in songs or poems. The term was coined in 1954 by American writer Sylvia Wright who had been saddened all her childhood by the early death of Lady Mondegreen in the Scottish ballad *The Bonnie Earl of Moray*: 'They have slain the Earl of Moray, and Lady Mondegreen'. She was greatly relieved to learn later in life that it was only the Earl who was slain, and that his killers had 'laid him on the green'.

'Round John Virgin' and 'Gladly the cross-eyed bear' are two of the most commonly mentioned mondegreens. One of my favourites is 'Dead ants are my friend' from Bob Dylan's 'Blowin' in the wind'. I also like Angel's commitment to dental hygiene, even as her heart is breaking, in Chip

Taylor's *Angel of the Morning*: 'Angel, just brush my teeth before you leave me'.

It certainly wasn't a Colemanball because this term, named after BBC commentator David Coleman, is specifically for verbal gaffes perpetrated by sports commentators. The first designated Colemanball was by Ron Pickering when he announced at the 1976 Montreal Olympics that Cuban gold medallist Alberto Juantorena, nicknamed El Caballo (the horse), was 'running down the back straight, opening his legs and showing his class'. (At the Sydney Olympics, you will recall, similar displays of class by gymnasts were dubbed 'Hello Sailor'.)

Nor was it, on a more learned note, a folk etymology, this being the term used in historical linguistics for a change in word pronunciation or spelling resulting from erroneous popular beliefs about its derivation. Thus we have *sand-blind*, meaning 'partly blind' but actually deriving from the Old English *sam-blind*, with *sam* the then common prefix for 'half'. As *sam* fell into disuse, 'sand' was substituted because it made more sense.

Since no existing term came within a hare's breath of fitting 'eggcorn' precisely, Geoff Pullum, a Professor of Linguistics, and a regular contributor to *Language Log*, suggested that such mistakes should be called eggcorns – and the term stuck, albeit with one qualification: that the new expression make a sort of sense not out of keeping with the correct expression.

Consider cheese in 'cut to the cheese'. Obviously, it should be 'cut to the chase', but 'cheese' makes sense because of the after-dinner meaning that you don't want to fiddle with all the sweet details; you just want to go straight to the cheese bored!

Or 'curving your enthusiasm', with its nice image of gently nudging your behaviour so that it arcs seamlessly into your next trite and true fascination. There's also 'curled up in a feeble position' and 'sick as hell anaemia'. Probably the most commonly cited is 'old timer's disease'.

Now I know someone will fire a shot over my bough about 'eggcorn' not really being an eggcorn, in that it doesn't make sense. Well, some folks think it does, and they offer some antidotal evidence to show it's not just a pigment of their imagination: an acorn seed is shaped like an egg, they say, and 'corn' can mean seed, (as in peppercorn). It's a stretch, but the term is established and not to use it is just cutting off your nose despite your face.

Geoff Pullum cautioned in *Language Log*, 22 March 2004, that eggcorns are not to be dismissed as 'signs of illiteracy and stupidity'; rather they should be seen as 'imaginative attempts at relating something heard to lexical material already known'.

For example, called on to write about someone taking charge, many people find a metaphorical image of kings more logical than that of horse-riding, and they reflect that in their spelling: 'the reigns of power', rather than 'the reins...'. For all intensive purposes, 'reign' is as good as 'rein' in this expression, but an eggcorn nonetheless.

People carry on like ten-year-old professors on the details of eggcorn identification but, in lame man's terms, the fundamental point is this: a 'true' eggcorn must sound like the correct word and have a similar meaning or connotation. Hence using 'their' for 'there' is mis-spelling, but *marshal law* is an eggcorn.

It's a far-gone conclusion that people will find funny eggcorns everywhere if they keep their eyes peeled, so let me nip this in the butt right now: just because it's funny doesn't make it an eggcorn: 'pre-Madonna' for example, or 'power mower' (as in *Camilla was Charles' power mower when he was married to Diana*), are not eggcorns. The latter might be funny, and minds dirty enough will find the metaphor quite clever, but it isn't a logical lexical substitution for 'paramour'.

I warn PESA persons still reading that once you wet your appetite for eggcorns, you start to develop strong opinions. You'll become adamant, for instance, the 'old wise tale' is an eggcorn but you won't accept 'old wives' tail' because it is a mis-spelling. You'll find that some websites about eggcorns are a real doggy-dog world when opinions start flying.

I can only advise you to take the debates with a grain assault, and if it all comes to not and they can't see your point of you, just accept a friendly parting of the waves before it becomes a pain in the never region.

That's how it is with words: people have deep-seated opinions and will give you their two sense worth whether you want it or not. Just don't let them lead you down the isle with their half-asked ideas.

Though I do think it all goes well for the future to have such interest in our language, and I close without further adieu.

Peter Purcell ■

PS. This column has 45 eggcorns!