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**Blunder, Error, Mistake, Pitfall, etc.: trawling the OED with the help of the Historical Thesaurus**  
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# Blunder, Error, Mistake, Pitfall, etc.: trawling the *OED* with the help of the Historical Thesaurus

## 1 Introduction

‘Those are the most eloquent speakers who deviate least from the written language.’ Dr Johnson’s famous dictum, tying together eloquent speech and written discourse, immediately prompts memories of stories told of his verbosity.<sup>1</sup> He was, for example, once heard to pronounce that a new comedy had not ‘wit enough to keep it sweet’ and then to give his second thoughts, that it had not ‘vitality enough to preserve it from putrefaction’.<sup>2</sup> Doubtless his reputation as a witty speaker owed much to an ability to manipulate register, as these contrasting judgements suggest. He was praised by Lord Chesterfield as ‘the man who conferred stability on the language of his country’, as if at last all the attempts of the previous century or so to correct, improve and ascertain the English language had been achieved. His *Plan of an English Dictionary* (1747) reads almost like a programme for an English Academy, for just such a body as in France and Italy ruled on matters of language usage. There had long been campaigns for an English Academy, numbering among its supporters men such as Chapman, Cotton, Cowley, Drayton, Dryden, Defoe, Evelyn, Swift, Waller, Wilkins. By 1755, when Johnson published the two massive folio volumes of his dictionary, he must have relished with a certain sense of irony the adulation heaped upon him by his contemporaries, not just by Chesterfield, but by Garrick, Boswell, Sheridan and many others. Johnson knew that a language is never stable, and in the preface to his dictionary he famously observes:

[...] when we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, from century to century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no examples of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Brittain writing in 1788 quoted in Lynda Mugglestone *Talking Proper: The Rise of Accent as Social Symbol*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> Boswell includes this assessment and its correction in his *Life of Samuel Johnson* quoted in Richard A. Lanham *Analyzing Prose*. London: Continuum, 2003, p. 160.

from corruption and decay, that it is in his power to change sublunary nature, or clear the world once from folly, vanity, and affectation.

It is a considered statement, at odds with some of the aims so confidently advanced less than a decade before, and within a year Thomas Sheridan was to point out that a society instituted for the purpose of ‘correcting, improving and ascertaining our language’ was ‘liable to numerous objections’, culling objections from Johnson’s introduction to his dictionary.

## **2. Attitudes to blunders, errors, mistakes and pitfalls in the history of English writing**

Like so of many his forerunners in the making of grammars and dictionaries, Samuel Johnson had been a schoolmaster. Earliest to pronounce in English on the issue of what is correct in English was Ælfric of Eynsham, author of a Colloquy to teach boys Latin through role-playing. His attention to speaking Latin as well as writing it is evident from the Latin grammar he wrote, which he ended with a summary of the thirty divisions of the art of grammar. His English for the *grammatica artis* is *stæfcraeft*, a compound made from the words for ‘letter’ and ‘art’. First he names *vox* or *stemn*, and second *littera* or *stæf*, going on to list in turn the syllable, the eight parts of speech, etc. His sixteenth division is *ortographia* or in Latin *recta scriptura*, which he translates by ‘riht gewrit’ (correct writing). The twenty-first is *barbarismus*, ‘þæt is anes wordes gewemmednyss, gif hit byð miswriten oððe miscweden of þam rihtan cræfte’ (that is the error of a word if it is miswritten or mispronounced from the correct grammar). Next comes *solocismus*, ‘þæt is miscweden word on endebyrdnyssse þære rædinge of ðam rihtan cræft’ (that is a word mispronounced from the correct grammar in the regular way of reading aloud). These two faults are further distinguished: *barbarismus* is ‘on anum worde’ (within one word) whereas *solocismus* is ‘sum leas word on ðam ferse’ (an incorrect word within what is said) – not that they belong properly to the art of grammar, though they are incorrectly named or written by the half-taught (‘Swa ðeah ne gebyriað þas twegen dælas to ðam cræfte, ac hi becumað of þam samlæredum leaslice geclypode oððe awritene.’). Errors (‘leahtras’ or *vitia*) come next, ‘on manegum wisum miswritene oððe miscwedene’ (miswritten or mispronounced in many ways).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Zupitza, J. 1880 *Ælfrics Grammatik und Glossa*, Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung. All quotations from p. 294.

Although Ælfric put his Grammar in English, he noted modestly in his Preface, ‘Ne cweðe ic na for ði, þæt ðeos boc mæge micclum to lare fremian, ac heo byð swa ðeah sum angyn to ægðrum gereorde, gif heo hwam licað’ (And therefore I do not at all say that this book can greatly help for learning, but it is nevertheless a beginning for both languages, if it pleases anyone). The sentence indicates that beginners were being taught to write and read both English and Latin and it provides sample paradigms for both. With Ælfric, English has the look of a ruled language. He had himself been taught by Æthelwold of Winchester, who was remembered as taking the trouble to explain in English the Latin books from which he taught.<sup>4</sup> The Preface ends, as do others of his English writings, with a plea to anyone who makes a copy of his Grammar to correct it properly according to the exemplar (‘þæt he hi gerihte wel be ðære bysne’). Ælfric, who worried that his book might be brought into error because of unreliable scribes (‘to woge . . . þurh lease writeras’), finishes with the stern statement ‘Micel yfel deð se unwritere, gyf he nele his woh gerihtan’ (The inaccurate scribe does great wrong, if he will not correct his error).<sup>5</sup> Here we see him commenting on the sources of error in communication, on mispronunciation and inaccurate copying and on inaccurate scribes (a good scribe is a *rihtwritere*).

Not all the words Ælfric used in discussing error and correction appear in areas of the *Thesaurus of Old English* specifically devoted to error in speech and writing.<sup>6</sup> Words such as *leahtor*, *leas*, *riht*, *gewemmednes* and *woh*, larger in extension, appear in more general categories. Yet, *leahtor* looks central to the description of grammatical error at this time. The adjective *leahtorlic* could be used of faulty, ungrammatical or ungrammatical wording, and *stæfleahtor* was coined to gloss *barbarismus*.<sup>7</sup> There is, however, little continuity in forms used when later writers begin again to comment on the use of their own language, apart from *writ-* and *miswrit-* forms. Before the modern period few word senses are recorded that are specific to incorrectness in language use. The anchoresses of *Ancrene Wisse* are told how to behave in time of prayer if thoughts should be wandering (‘flotinde’) – what to do if an anchoress ‘þurh □emeles gluffeð of wordes, oðer misneomeð uers’ (slips up in words or

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<sup>4</sup> This was recorded by Wulfstan Cantor in his life of Æthelwold (Michael Lapidge and Michael Winterbottom ed. *Wulfstan of Winchester. The Life of St. Æthelwold*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 46). Æthelwold was abbot of Abingdon c. 954-63 and bishop of Winchester 963-84.

<sup>5</sup> OE cited from Zupitza pp. 2–3.

<sup>6</sup> See in particular 09.03.02.04 A slip of the tongue, 09.03.07.02 To make a mistake in writing and 09.03.07.03 A scribe, copyist. The *Thesaurus of Old English* was developed as a pilot study for the *Historical Thesaurus*,

<sup>7</sup> Also, two incomplete glosses seemingly draw on *leahtor* to cope with the misuse of the letters *m* and *n*: *elleahtor*, *emleahtor*.

makes a mistake in a section through carelessness) and how anchoresses should make reparation ‘for mucche misneomunge’ (for a big blunder). The Titus text, copied in the middle of the thirteenth century, substitutes forms more familiar in English today: ‘mis taken of’ and ‘mis takinge’. Noteworthy in this passage is ‘gluffeð of’ meaning ‘make a slip in’ (in the Titus reading ‘gliffen of’ showing a more northerly vowel), for which see *gliff*, *v.*, †1 in the *OED*; the Pepys copyist offers ‘forgluffeþ’, with an intensifying prefix.<sup>8</sup>

In the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, no one form of English for formal use was general. Differences did attract notice. About 1387, John of Trevisa, a west-country man, famously commented ‘Al þe longage of þe Norphumbres, and specialych at □ork, is so scharp, slytting, and frotyng, and vnschape, þat we Souperon men may þat longage vnneþe vndurstonde’. If accents were hard to understand, written English that more or less reflected dialect usage was hard to read. Nevertheless, an upsurge of English literature in the second half of the fourteenth century reflects the gathering prestige accorded English and major authors emerged. In London there was Chaucer, Gower had come in from Kent, and Langland from the west country: all had an enthusiastic London following, if the numbers of manuscripts are anything to go by. In the west midlands and in the north alliterative poetry rapidly took on a new lease of life, just as did the composition of new writings in all parts of the country. West-midland landowners deliberately fostered a growth of literature among their followers, the duke of Hereford for example commissioning a translation of the French romance *William of Palerme*, the beginning of a new alliterative tradition. And the alliterative poetry that was to follow was by no means provincial. Rooted in a stressed metre, traditional and archaising in technique, it could throw up, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a romance as courtly and polished as any of Chaucer’s. Across time, texts that were popular were transliterated into more widely distributed ways of writing, thus providing evidence of a growing awareness of norms to be observed in three identifiable incipient standards of the fourteenth century,<sup>9</sup> even before the emergence of Standard English early in the next century. Of these, the body of writings from the Central Midlands is by far larger and more normative than the small corpus of documents and manuscripts written in London in the last decades of the fourteenth century and *c.* 1400. Alliterative poetry was not confined to the west: the most famous poet to use this metre, Langland, spent most of his writing life in London, and the

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<sup>8</sup> For the alternate forms, see *Ancrene Wisse: a corrected edition of the text in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402, with variants from other manuscripts*, ed. Bella Millett. 2 vols. EETS os 325, 326. 2005–2006, II, p. 177.

<sup>9</sup> See M. L. Samuels, ‘Some Applications of Middle English Dialectology’, *English Studies* 44 (1963): 81–94.

best manuscripts of the B-text of his *Piers Plowman* are transcribed in the same sort of London English, as are the best Chaucer manuscripts. Scribes put a fair deal of energy into correcting English works, but, as Daniel Wakelin has pointed out, it is not easy to distinguish ‘correction from variance’.<sup>10</sup> In his close examination of English writings across the period 1375–1510, Wakelin points out that people other than scribes seem not to have made corrections in the books they read, apart from ‘one coherent group of corrections . . . in three manuscripts of works connected to the Wycliffites or Lollards.’<sup>11</sup> In a period when most readers of English must have been fairly tolerant of regionally based variation, Lollard books were remarkable: ‘in these, the language is predictable often from a mere glance at the hand, and it is nearly always some internally consistent sub-variety of Central Midland Standard’.<sup>12</sup>

Standard English has not changed radically since its appearance early in the fifteenth century as the vehicle of official business and administration, for from that time it has had a written form as its basis. Its dissemination was helped along by print from 1476, when Caxton came home from the Netherlands to set up his press at Westminster. The morphological basis of today’s English remains essentially that found first in chancery documents of the 1430s.<sup>13</sup> The emergence of a national standard in fifteenth-century England is the emergence of a written standard. How people actually spoke is a very different matter. Of course, as Caxton put it, then as now, the ‘comyn englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother’. We have no evidence that this was a cause for concern in the Middle English period, but the first rumblings are recorded towards the middle of the sixteenth century, when Sir Thomas Elyot suggested that children’s nurses should be chosen carefully:

hit shall be expedient, that a noble mannes sonne in his infancie have with hym continually, onely suche as may accustome hym by little and little to speake pure and elegant latin. sembably the nourises and other women aboute hym, if it be possible, to do the same: or at the leste way, that they speke none englysshe but that, whiche is cleane, polite, perfectly, and articulately pronounced, omittinge, no lettre or sillable, as

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Wakelin, *Scribal Correction and Literary Craft. English Manuscripts 1375–1510*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 302.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Benskin and Margaret Laing, ‘Translation and Mischsprachen in Middle English manuscripts’, in *So meny people longages and tonges philological essays in Scots and mediaeval English presented to Angus McIntosh*, ed. Michale Benskin and M. L. Samuels. Edinburgh, 1981, pp. 55–106 at 90.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Benskin, ‘Some New Perspectives on the Origins of Standard Written English’, *Dialect and Standard Language in the English, Dutch, German and Norwegian Language Areas*, ed. J.A. van Leuvensteijn and J.B. Berns. Amsterdam, 1992, 71–105.

folishe women often times do of wantonnesse, wherby divers noble men, and gentilmennes chyl dren (as I do at this daye knowe) have attained corrupte and foule pronounciation. This industry used in fourminge litel infantes who shall dought, but they (nat lackyng naturall witte) shall be apt to receyve lerninge, whan they come to mo yeres?<sup>14</sup>

By Shakespeare's day speaking well in English had become a worry. A short interchange from *As You Like It* indicates that in the Forest of Arden ~ of all places ~ Orlando is rather overwhelmed by the people he meets. He questions the duke (a seeming forester):<sup>15</sup>

Speake you so gently? Pardon me I pray you,  
I thought that all things had bin sauage heere,  
And therefore put I on the countenance  
Of sterne commandment. (II.vii.112-114)

And when he comes across the sprightly young attendant of a pretty shepherdess he asks him (well, her, for it is Rosalind, who had been playing him up with the manners of a 'fawcie Lucky')

*Orl.* Are you natiue of this place?

*Ros.* As the Conie that you see dwell where shee is kindled. (III.ii.328-329)

Orlando's reply is revealing: 'Your accent is something finer, then you could purchase in so remoued a dwelling.' (III.ii.330)

Issues of copiousness and purity dominate sixteenth-century discussion of the English language, even though, early in the century, the author to the prologue of a translation of Terence's *Andria* found English 'plenteouse now':<sup>16</sup>

For we kepe our englyssh contynually  
And of other tongis many wordis we borow  
Which now for englysh we vse & occupy

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<sup>14</sup> Donald W. Rude ed. *A Critical Edition of Sir Thomas Elyot's The Boke named the Governour*. London: Garland, 1992, pp. 32-33.

<sup>15</sup> The wording of Shakespeare quotations is taken from a facsimile edition of the First Folio.

<sup>16</sup> Anon., trans., *Terens in Englysh* (Paris, c.1520).

These thingis haue gyuen corage gretly  
To dyuers & specyally now of late  
To them that this comedy haue translate.

The long-lasting affection felt by English speakers for the Authorized version of the Bible, whether the 1611 text or its revised form from Victorian England, owes much to its inheritance from Tyndale's translation, made at the outset of the humanist period and therefore before the new influx of Latinate vocabulary. Copiousness was achieved naturally as more and more translations of learned works were made. In his choices of up-to-date vocabulary in the two editions of his *The Governour* Sir Thomas Elyot, for example, showed himself to have a good sense of what words had already become naturalized in the language.<sup>17</sup> In his *Toxophilus* (1545) Roger Ascham very sensibly expressed worries about the growing use of 'straunge wordes as Latin, French & Italian'. Observing that they 'do make all thinges darke & harde', he pointed to 'thys councill of Aristotle, to speake as the common people do, to thinke as wise men do'.

English was again being used in books for teaching Latin with John Colet's *Accidence* (1509) and William Lyly's *Rudiments of Syntax* (1513), and as early as 1528 a schoolmaster in Reading, Leonard Cox, published the first book of rhetoric in English, aimed at a wider public than schools. In 1553 Thomas Wilson, in his *Arte of Rhetorique*, criticized 'rurall language' just as much as he poked fun at the use of 'inkpot terms to get a good parsonage', but not all were so temperate. Dispute raged furiously in Cambridge. Bishop Gardiner, calling for a revised translation of the New Testament, pronounced ninety-nine words sacred and not able to be translated by English words. Sir John Cheke, no friend of Gardiner, set about a new translation using for the most part 'old denisoned words',<sup>18</sup> but he was to express himself fairly intemperately in a letter published posthumously: 'I am of this opinion that our tung shold be written cleene & pure, unmixt and unmangled with borrowing of other tungen, wherein if we take heed not bi tijm, every borrowing & never payeng, she shall be fain to keep her house as bankrupt'. A more upbeat note was sounded in the first grammar of modern English, Richard Mulcaster's *Elementarie* (1582), who declared that 'this period, in our time, semth to be the perfitest period in our English tung, & that our

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<sup>17</sup> John M. Major, *Sir Thomas Elyot and Renaissance Humanism*. London, 1964, esp. pp. 15–20.

<sup>18</sup> H. Meritt, 'The Vocabulary of Sir John Cheke's Partial Translation of the Gospels', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 39 (1940): 450-55.



custom has alreddie beaten out his own rules redie for the method, & frame of Art'.<sup>19</sup> Despite such debate, others had already accepted and approved the new copiousness early in the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, the first English-English dictionary, Robert Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabeticall* (1604) was a listing of hard words, a genre that was to expand. In the Preface to his dictionary, *A New World of English Words* (1658), Edward Phillips defends the influx of foreign terms, arguing that 'forrainers instead of detracting ought from our tongue, add copiousnesse and varity to it'. He emphasizes the necessity of his dictionary when he observes that even persons 'addicted to the reading of books' frequently lack knowledge of Latin and other foreign languages and so are at a loss when they encounter unusual words, 'and some people if they spy but a hard word, are as much amazed as if they had met with a Hobgoblin'.<sup>20</sup>

Many were, however, alarmed by the range of inconsistency usual in spelling: Smith, Hart and Bullokar, whom we therefore call orthoepists (both *orthoepist* and *orthoepy* are first recorded in 1640), even wished to augment the alphabet as a way of making spelling simpler. Concern for *orthography* was not a new worry. As early as 1460 the author of *Knyghthode & Bataile* had cautioned 'Thi writer eek, pray him to taken hede Of thi cadence and kepe Ortographie, That neither he take of ner multiplie'. The phrase *true orthography* for some time served where we would use *correct spelling*; and the concept was even dignified with a title

c1475 *Court of Sapience* (Trin. Cambr.) (1927) 1808 Wyth Gramer was foure ladyes well beseene, Of whyche the furst hyght Dame Ortography.

Yet for some, as poets had long known, a carefully judged misspelling could prove useful

1589 G. Puttenham *Arte Eng. Poesie* ii. v, It is somewhat more tollerable to help the rime by false orthographie, then to leaue an vnpleasant dissonance to the eare, by keeping trewe orthographie and loosing the rime.

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<sup>19</sup> E. T. Campagnac, ed., *Mulcaster's Elementarie*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925, p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Phillips, *The new world of English words, or, A general dictionary containing the interpretations of such hard words as are derived from other languages ... together with all those terms that relate to the arts and sciences ... : to which are added the significations of proper names, mythology, and poetical fictions, historical relations, geographical descriptions of most countries and cities of the world ... / collected and published by E.P.* London: Printed by E. Tyler for Nath. Brooke ..., (1658).

Conversely, a twentieth-century scholar could look to rhyming words for other information

1943 C. L. Wrenn in *Trans. Philol. Soc.* 32 The orthography of the rhyme-words in a poem..may point the way to an original reading.

The first recorded use of *misspelling* is by Mulcaster in his *Elementarie* (1582)

1582 R. Mulcaster *1st Pt. Elementarie* xviii. 125 *Har-den, wri-ten*, for *harden, writen*, two syllabs by misspelling for, two monosyllabs in natur.

Print had brought with it a specialized terms, *misprint* ‘An error in the printing of something; a typographical error’, recorded from 1622:

1813 Byron *Lett. & Jrnls.* 22 Nov. (1974) III. 170, I can't survive a single *misprint*—it *choaks* me to see words misused by the Printers.

1982 F. Raphael *Byron* (1988) 86 Vladimir Nabokov's observation of the mere misprint that divides ‘incest’ from ‘nicest’.

and *typo* a ‘misprint or typographical error, originally and especially of a letter’ (labelled ‘slang’).

The term *literal* is less often met with today despite the final attestation from 2000; most people would probably not recognise it as a noun at all. The term has an earlier attestations in the *OED* with almost the same meaning but including the earlier technology of writing, ‘Of a misprint (occas. of a scribal error): relating to or affecting a letter. Cf. B. 1. Also *fig.*’,<sup>21</sup> with citations from 1591 onwards:

1591 R. RABBARDS in *Ripley's Compound of Alchymy* Note to Rdr. sig. \*4<sup>v</sup>, If anie literall fault be past, amend it with your pens.

1699 R. BENTLEY *Diss. Epist. Phalaris* (new ed.) 112 'Twas a literal fault in that Copy of him that *Casaubon* used.

1748 B. ROBINS & R. WALTER *Voy. round World by Anson* Introd. 6, I know of none but literal mistakes, some of which are corrected in the table of Errata.

1770 P. LUCKOMBE *Conc. Hist. Printing* 441 What is chiefly required of a Corrector, besides espying literal faults, is to Spell and Point.

1841–8 F. MYERS *Catholic Thoughts* II. III. viii. 26 There are just the same kind of literal imperfections in them [*sc.* the books of the Bible] that there are in all others.

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<sup>21</sup> The *OED* entry for B. 1 is cited in the ‘Concluding Observations’ below.

1880 *Athenæum* 25 Sept. 398/1 It is..vexatious that, through the inattention of the printers, any literal errors should have crept into it.

1954 J. D. WILSON in J. Garrett *Talking of Shakespeare* 255 My suggestion is that both these were due to..the F proof-reader's miscorrection of a 'literal' misprint by the careless compositor.

1999 C. ANDREWS *Poetry & Cosmogony* iii. 167 A literal error in the original edition of the poem transformed the nonce-word *omniumnaire*..into *onmiunmaire*.

It is difficult, reading these citations, to spot a figurative use despite the hint given in the definition; indeed, the term *literal* seems to argue against such a possibility, though the inverted commas in the 1954 citation below point towards a sliding of meaning towards 'real' rather than figurative. The term may be less used nowadays because of its wide extension of meaning: it begins at sense 1 by referring to 'the nature of a letter, or the letters, of the alphabet', and here we find the citations quoted above. The following two senses, however, offer the vast landscape of 2. 'Of or relating to literature' and 3. 'Of or relating to letters or epistles; epistolary'. A search through the *HT* for *literal* in the 'misprint, error' sense takes the reader to 02.01.12.08.06.02.01|07.04 n Incorrectness of language :: error in written mode :: misprint of letter. This category contains only the single word, *literal* 1622--.

All these three words can co-occur effectively:

2000 S. Fallon & M. Rothschild *World Food: France* 230 The book is..filled with typos, literals and misspellings.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast, Coleridge's *misscript* didn't take root, for only one other instance of its use is recorded:<sup>23</sup>

1817–19 S. T. Coleridge *Marginalia* (1998) IV. 807 In treating this 'path' as a mere misprint or mis-script for 'put'.

1873 F. Hall *Mod. Eng.* 175 (*note*) These mis-scripts [*analyze, paralyze*] look as if descendants of ἀναλύζω and παραλύζω, which are nothing.

Was Coleridge trying to tease out the lines of responsibility between writer and printer here? Mispronunciation, considered in respect of deviation from written forms, could draw attention from late in the sixteenth century. In *Love's Labour's Lost* (V.i)

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<sup>22</sup> Quotations from *OED* are presented as found there including conventions such as the two dots signifying elided material.

<sup>23</sup> See *OED* under *mis-script*, *n*.

the schoolmaster Holofernes, in tune with the raging controversies among contemporary men of letters. rails against what he considers mispronunciations:

1598 Shakespeare *Love's Labour's Lost* v. i. 19 Such rackers of ortagriphie, as to speake dout fine, when he should say doubt.

although he was old fashioned in his choice of a form resembling *debit* more than *debt*.

The making of grammar books, handbooks of rhetoric, inventories of hard words and bigger and bigger dictionaries went on apace, finding ever-growing markets. Too often the concern to rule and ascertain is foremost, with the prescription of past norms rather than the recognition of variation according to context:

But, malice and partiality set apart, let any man, who understands English, read diligently the works of Shakespeare and Fletcher, and I dare undertake, that he will find in every page either some solecism of speech, or some notorious flaw in sense; and yet these men are revered, when we are not forgiven.' [Dryden, 'An Essay of Dramatic Poesy' 1668]

### 3. Some data from the *Historical Thesaurus of English (HT)*<sup>24</sup>

Whose standards were to be obeyed? Whose varieties tolerated? And how were problems in language usage discussed and described?

The categories of the *Historical Thesaurus of English*, established through bottom-up as well as top-down sorting and resorting of word senses from the *OED* supplemented with Old English materials, offer information about the expression of the idea of incorrectness of language use and attitudes towards it over time. The most general category expressing this idea contains 10 words:

#### **02.01.12.08.06.02.01 n Incorrectness of language**

solecism 1583– · absonism 1593 · peccancy c1611 · acyrology 1656 Dict. + 1839 · incorrectness 1672– · incorrection 1788 · barbarizing 1861 · solecizing 1895 · abusage 1942 · ill-formedness 1972–

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<sup>24</sup> We draw both on the materials now incorporated into the *OED online* and the University of Glasgow *HT* database at <<http://historicalthesaurus.arts.gla.ac.uk/category-selection/?qsearch=w%C3%A6stm>>.

As we move up the semantic hierarchy, we discover that the *HT* editors consider **02.01.12.08.06.02.01 n Incorrectness of a language** to be a subcategory hanging off the idea of **02.01.12.08.06.02 n Inaccuracy, inexactness**, and that this idea is a subcategory of the category **02.01.12.08.06 n Disregard for truth, falsehood**. Thus, incorrectness in language is part of a nexus of ideas which are governed by a notion of ethical behaviour. The semantic hierarchy suggests that making a mistake in the use of language is an effect of not being careful, and that this lack of care is a result of evincing recklessness about the truth or lack of it that amounts to misrepresentation. The subcategories (without the sub-groupings of terms below these headings) containing terms for errors of language accommodate more specific words:

**02.01.12.08.06.02.01|01 n Incorrectness of language:: resulting from bilingualism**  
interference 1940–

**02.01.12.08.06.02.01|02 n Incorrectness of language :: instance of**  
stæfleahator OE · scape 1565–1705 · solecism 1577– · soloecophanes 1583 + 1727 Dict.  
· slip 1620– · cacemphaton 1622 + 1721/90 Dict. · acyrological 1626 Dict. · impropriety  
a1674– · incorrectness a1771–1838/9 · Kiplingism 1803–1950 · ingrammaticism 1888

**02.01.12.08.06.02.01|03 n Incorrectness of language:: user of**  
solecizer 1693 · solecist 1725

**02.01.12.08.06.02.01|04 n incorrect application of words**  
abusion 1553–1636 · abuse 1589–a1716 · catachresis 1589–1810 · miswording 1804

**02.01.12.08.06.02.01|05 n Incorrectness of language :: incorrect speech**  
mispronunciation 1530 + 1832– · cacology 1775 Dict. + 1826–1856 · cacoëpy 1880 ·  
mis-speech 1895

**02.01.12.08.06.02.01|06 n Incorrectness of language:: error in grammar**  
uncongruity c1449 + 1587 · breaking Priscian's head 1589 · ungrammaticalness 1698–  
· ungrammaticality 1961–

**02.01.12.08.06.02.01|07 n Incorrectness of language:: error in written mode**  
pseudography 1580–1804

Altogether, the terms which appear under the heading of the main subcategory, **02.01.12.08.06.02.01 n Incorrectness of language**, and the terms in the sub-groupings which hang off it, appear to be quite high register; they are mostly polysyllabic, and the lexical

items are predominantly borrowed terms. In the main subcategory, the vocabulary items almost all draw on roots borrowed from or through Latin:

Latin	French
solecism 1583–	abusage 1942
absonism 1593	ill-formedness 1972–
peccancy c1611	
acyrology 1656 Dict. + 1839	
incorrectness 1672–	
in correction 1788	
barbarizing 1861	
solecizing 1895	

Table 1: **02.01.12.08.06.02.01 n Incorrectness of language**

There are, in total, twenty-seven lexical items in the sub-groupings that appear below this subcategory. Two of these are derived from proper names: *Kiplingism* 1803–1950 is ‘a sarcastic term for the errors and solecisms alleged to occur in the edition of the ‘Codex Bezae’ (1793) by Thomas Kipling’ (*OED1* 1933 s.v. *Kiplingism* n.) and *breaking Priscian's head* 1589 refers to ‘post-classical Latin *Priscianus*, the name of a celebrated Roman grammarian’ (*OED3* 2007 s.v. *Priscian* n.). Of the remaining twenty-five terms, the etymologies in the *OED* inform us that eight are of French origin, seven are of Latin origin, one is from Latin or French (it is not possible to be sure which language the borrowing into English came from), four are borrowed from Greek, and one is made up of a compound, one part of which is Greek and one part French. The four remaining terms in this category have a native look to them: *stæfleahator* OE is a compound recorded once in a running gloss (*barbarismi* *stæfleahtres*); *slip* 1620– (to be derived either from the verb *slip*, v.<sup>1</sup> of obscure Germanic origin or from Old English as supported by the words *slipeg*, *slipor*, *slipornes*); and formed within English *miswording* 1804 and *mis-speech* 1895. The terms in this category, then, are mostly borrowed from French or the classical languages. It should also be noted that five ill-attested terms have their origins in dictionaries, suggesting that they are likely to be learned items for which no textual source has been traced.

We may compare the category of terms expressing incorrectness in language with the more general subcategory **02.01.12.08.06.01.01 n An error, mistake**. This hangs off the category **02.01.12.08.06.01 n Lack of truth, falsity**, which is also a daughter of the category **02.01.12.08.06 n Disregard for truth, falsehood**. This section of the semantic hierarchy again reflects increased culpability as we move upwards. When we go down a level from the category **An error, mistake**, we come to **02.01.12.08.06.01.01|05 n An error, mistake :: serious error, blunder**, which contains 16 terms:

**02.01.12.08.06.01.01|05 n An error, mistake :: serious error, blunder**

blunder 1706– · blunderbuss 1726 · floor 1841–1842 colloq. · bull 1846– US · howler 1872– slang · atrocity 1878 colloq. · (a bad) break 1884– · bloomer 1889 Dict. + 1902– slang · boner 1912– slang · bish 1937– slang · black 1939–1943 slang & colloq. · blue 1941– Austral. & NZ slang · cock-up 1948– slang · piss-up 1950– slang · blob 1952 + 1960 · screw-up 1960– colloq.

There are four subgroupings of vocabulary below this subcategory, all representing different kinds of serious error or blunder, as follows:

**02.01.12.08.06.01.01|05.01 n An error, mistake :: serious error, blunder :: foolish**  
boo-boo 1954– slang · boob 1959– slang

**02.01.12.08.06.01.01|05.02 n An error, mistake :: serious error, blunder :: embarrassing**  
mistread 1597 · faux pas 1676– · mis-step 1854– · gaffe 1909– · blooper 1947– colloq. clanger 1948– slang · goof 1955– slang

**02.01.12.08.06.01.01|05.03 n An error, mistake :: serious error, blunder :: committing of**  
bullism 1835 · blundering 1857

**02.01.12.08.06.01.01|05.04 n An error, mistake :: serious error, blunder :: one who commits**  
hunt-counter 1597 · blunderer 1751–

As a description of an activity, the making of an error, mistake, serious error, or blunder sounds much worse than a slip-up in one's language use, particularly in view of the inclusion of the modifier 'seriously' in the subcategory heading. The terms collected under this heading

do appear more blunt, perhaps because the majority of them are monosyllabic or at most disyllabic native terms:

English	French	Unknown	Dutch
blunder 1706–	atrocitiy 1878 colloq.	bull 1846– US	blunderbuss 1726
floor 1841–1842 colloq.	blue 1941 Austral. & NZ slang	bish 1937– slang	
howler 1872– slang	piss-up 1950– slang		
(a bad) break 1884–	screw-up 1960 colloq.		
bloomer 1889 Dict. + 1902– slang			
boner 1912– slang			
black 1939–1943 slang & colloq.			
cock-up 1948– slang			
blob 1952 + 1960			

Table 2: 02.01.12.08.06.01.01|05 n An error, mistake :: serious error, blunder

Taken together, the subgroupings below this subcategory contain thirteen lexical items.<sup>25</sup> These are derived from six sources. Only four of these sources are identified as languages, however: three of the lexical items are of unknown origin (*bullism*, *blundering*, and *blunderer*), and one (*blooper*) is echoic: it is derived from a verb, which is echoic in origin (*OED2* 1972 s.v. *bloop* v.). Of the remaining terms, three are of French origin, three are English (although one of these, *mis-step* may be formed on the analogy of the French *faux pas* (*OED3* 2002 s.v. *misstep* n.)), two are borrowed from Spanish, and one from Latin. Despite the presence of ‘serious’ in the category heading, the lexical items at this level have an air of light-heartedness and teasing that is entirely absent from the set of terms describing

<sup>25</sup> |05.01 foolish: *boo-boo* 1954– slang, *boob* 1959– slang; 05.02 embarrassing: *mistread* 1597, *faux pas* 1676–, *mis-step* 1854–, *gaffe* 1909–, *blooper* 1947– colloq., *clanger* 1948– slang, *goof* 1955– slang; |05.03 committing of: *bullism* 1835, *blundering* 1857; |05.04 one who commits: *hunt-counter* 1597, *blunderer* 1751–.



infelicities of language use. This may be because of their origins. It should also be noted that while the terms for mistakes in language use have no style labels, of the sixteen terms in the subcategory **02.01.12.08.06.01.01|05 n An error, mistake :: serious error, blunder**, twelve terms have labels attached to them. A couple of these concern country of origin, but the majority of the terms are labeled ‘slang’ or ‘colloq.’ or both, as are many of the terms in the subgroupings shown above. We may interpret these differences between the two categories as indications that we think language is such an important element of human life and learning that to make a mistake in it must be viewed with great seriousness. It is also possible that this attitude derives from a kind of hypercorrection, resulting from anxiety about expressing in language the notion of errors in language. This idea seems to cause speakers and writers to reach for a learned vocabulary made up of Latinate and polysyllabic terms. The structures of the *HT* and the etymologies of the vocabulary reveal that the notion of mistakes in general is described in terms which come from slang or are colloquialisms that suggest in-group teasing. No such levity can be applied to the altogether more serious business of getting it right linguistically.

#### **4. Concluding observations**

By the middle of the sixteenth century the notion of variation in spelling seems to have entirely given way to ideas of correct or incorrect spelling; that is, conformity to or deviation from the standard orthography. As the heading above the citations quoted below makes clear, such deviations may not just be incorrect, they may also justly be labelled ‘bad’:

##### **Bad or incorrect spelling; an instance of this.**

1582 R. Mulcaster *1st Pt. Elementarie* xviii. 125 *Har-den, wri-ten*, for *harden, writen*, two syllabs by misspelling for, two monosyllabs in natur.

1695–6 *Act 7 & 8 Will. III c. 3 §9* That noe Indictment..shall bee quashed..for miswriting misspelling false..Latine.

1731 *Gentleman's Mag.* 1 213 Mis-spelling or Mistake of Clerkship.

1807 *Monthly Mag.* 24 550 Why was it called a bubble-boy? Probably the word is a misspelling for bauble-buoy, a support for baubles.

1866 C. Kingsley *Hereward the Wake* I. Prel. 21 The misspellings of English names in his work are more gross than even those in Domesday.

1898 G. Gissing *Town Trav.* xxv, Mis-spelling, he knew, would invalidate his chance.

1920 *Times Lit. Suppl.* 1 Apr. 209/3 He is no pedant, as can be seen in a moment from the many remarkable misspellings in these pages.

1990 *Times Educ. Suppl.* 26 Oct. (Review section) 22/1 'TERY' carefully picked out his name for me on his plastic communication board. The misspelling was intentional—it was quicker.

The eighteenth century saw 'examples of incorrect usage' as exercises for 'Scholars to copy over correctly, as the finishing Point to prove them in all, and every Part of Grammar, as well as for its real Value and Usefulness in the conduct of Life.—The Maxims for the Ladies, taken from the Spectator, are particularly recommended to the Consideration of the Fair Sex, which in the Hands of skilful Teachers, will be excellent Topics to enlarge upon.' introduced into English grammar books by Ann Fisher.<sup>26</sup> In the present day school text books set decoding of text messages into 'normal' English, and magazines like *The Big Issue* carry advertisements for copyediting jobs which are paragraphs containing misspellings and homonyms: if you can spot the errors, you may be eligible to earn money working from home correcting commercial prose.<sup>27</sup>

Print brought with it a specialized term for misspellings

**B. n.**

**1. *Printing*. A misprint or typographical error, originally and especially of a letter.**

1622 R. Hawkins *Observ. Voiage South Sea* [170] Errata sic corrige... The litteralls are commended to favour.

1702 E. Mores *Funeral Entertainm.* 172 Some other Literals may have escaped the Press.

1763 *Mem. Bedford Coffee-House* 62 There is not much to alter, as I have corrected the literals.

1825 C. F. Partington *Printre's Compl. Guide* 243 That both [*sc.* the proof and the copy] may be put into the hands of the reader for the purpose of clearing it from the most glaring literals.

1834 *Lancet* 25 Jan. 696/2 The 'reader' at the printing office was much too delighted..to attend to 'literals', and let the word 'exhibited' stand..in place of *attributed*.

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<sup>26</sup> See Robin Straaijer, 'Codification of correctness: normative sources for Joseph Priestley's grammar', *Language & History* 59.1 (May 2016): 14–24 at 21.

<sup>27</sup> V. Jones and S. Kay, *Inside Out Upper Intermediate*. London: Macmillan, 2002.

1880 *Print. Trades Jrnl.* xxx. 6 We noticed rather a large number of literals.

1902 J. H. Harris *Young Journalist* ii. 12 Literals are easily corrected; it is over-running which takes time and vexes the compositor's soul.

2000 S. Fallon & M. Rothschild *World Food: France* 230 The book is..filled with typos, literals and misspellings.

For the more formal *misprint*, we have to wait for the nineteenth century:

**misprint, n.**

**An error in the printing of something; a typographical error.**

1813 Byron *Lett. & Jrnls.* 22 Nov. (1974) III. 170, I can't survive a single *misprint*—it *choaks* me to see words misused by the Printers.

1834 S. T. Coleridge *Notes & Lect.* (1849) I. 143 In treating this 'path' as a mere misprint or mis-script for 'put'.

1884 *Q. Rev.* Jan. 215 The bibliographical information..abounds in errors..many of them no doubt mere misprints.

1937 D. Thomas *Let.* 20 Jan. (1985) 243 Thank you so much for asking J.M. Dent whether the line 'Once in this *wind*' was not a misprint for 'once in this *wine*'.

1982 F. Raphael *Byron* (1988) 86 Vladimir Nabokov's observation of the mere misprint that divides 'incest' from 'nicest'.

These citations immediately prompt the reader to wonder about the attitudes on display here ranging from a kind of diva-ish repulsion at witnessing such a mistake shown by Byron in his letters and journals announcing that he can't survive even a single misprint and the sight of one chokes him (one assumes that it is only such *bêtises* in printed versions of his own work that have this effect) to the seemingly calm (though perhaps quite damning) response of the anonymous writer in the *Quarterly Review* who finds plenty of errors in the bibliographical information in whatever was being reviewed but reckons that many of them are almost certainly 'mere misprints'; presumably the author is exonerated and the printer to be blamed for these. Nabokov gets into this list quoted at second-hand; his typical playfulness is evident here and it seems likely that he was not actually talking about printers' errors.

And very late in that century for *typo* (labelled 'slang' whether for:

1892 I. Zangwill *Children of Ghetto* III. ii. iii. 24 My men..don't like to pass anything till it's free from typos.

1945 E. B. White *Let.* 10 July (1976) 266 As for the 'her'—'hen' typo, I guessed that it was a typo and that it would be caught.

*OED2* 1989 also has

1963 C. D. Simak *They walked like Men* vi. 36, I went through the story again and caught a couple of typos and fixed up another place or two to make language better.

1978 *Times Lit. Suppl.* 15 Sept. 1031/5 Since few proof-readers are perfect, a typo here and there is easily forgiven.

Here again we seem to trace a line from anxiety on the part of writers, though both Zangwill and E. B. White (most famous for his children's books, in particular *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*, both still in print) evince optimism about the zeal of printers and faith in their willingness and ability to catch typos. The last citation here (though the editors of *OED3* are likely to find later ones) is again from a journal and is again more sanguine. The very term *typo* is a diminutive and suggests that these are small and unimportant errors. The benefits mass printing have bestowed far outweigh the increased likelihood of errors and make those errors identified appear more forgivable. We seem to be a long way from the moral culpability of the semantic hierarchy relating to errors of language, but the inheritance categories of the *HT* suggest that our conceptualisation of such mistakes leads ineluctably back to that place: from the single term *literal*, the editors direct us up the hierarchy. Here, the order of the categories given in the *HT* is reversed so that we move upwards from that single-item subgroup. We proceed from Incorrectness of language > Inaccuracy, inexactness > Disregard for truth, falsehood > Conformity with what is known, truth > Knowledge > Mental capacity > The mind.