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# Coda

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## When I use a word . . . Misunderspellings

*They misunderestimated me.*
*George W. Bush*

I'm not sure what 'Dubya' meant when he said that he had been 'misunderestimated'. Perhaps he meant 'misunderstood'; perhaps 'underestimated'. But the word he actually used is a portmanteau word that has the feeling of both these meanings and perhaps a little more. Lewis Carroll encapsulated the phenomenon in his introduction to 'The Hunting of the Snark' (1876): 'Supposing that, when Pistol uttered the well-known words—''Under which king, Bezonian? Speak or die!'' Justice Shallow had felt certain that it was either William or Richard, but had not been able to settle which, so that he could not possibly say either name before the other, can it be doubted that, rather than die, he would have gasped out ''Rilchiam!''' Carroll seems to have been the first to use the word 'portmanteau' to describe such words; he used it twice (as a noun) in *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871), putting it into the mouth of Humpty Dumpty as he explains 'Jabberwocky' to Alice:

> Well, 'slithy' means 'lithe and slimy' . . . You see it's like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed up into one word.
> 'Mimsy' is 'flimsy and miserable' (there's another portmanteau for you).

There is something so attractive about Bush's portmanteau word that, taking a lead from the exy Prexy, I propose using the term 'misunderspelled' to refer to words that have been consistently misspelled specifically because of a misunderstanding.

A good example of a wrong spelling from a false etymology is 'foetus'.[1] The Indo-European root DHEL means to suck, suckle or nourish, and hence to be fruitful. This gives the Greek word for a nipple θηλή (thēlē), from which we get all the words that end in—thelium (endo, epi, meso). And θῆλυς (thēlus), meant female, giving obsolete words such as thelykaryotic (having a female complement of chromosomes), thelytokous (producing female offspring only, as some parthenogenetic animals do), and Thelyphthora, the title of a 1780 work by Martin Madan, whose subtitle is 'A Treatise on Female Ruin, in its Causes, Effects, Consequences, Prevention, and Remedy'. In Latin, DHEL became FE-, giving femina, a woman, and its diminutive, femella, giving female. Sucking and suckling are implicit in filius, a boy, and filia, a girl, not to mention fellatio. And fecund means fertile. From the same root we get feto, I breed, and hence fetus; effete means worn out from breeding. But the etymologically incorrect spelling 'foetus' has been around since at least the beginning of the seventh century. St Isidore, Archbishop of Seville, in the first section, 'De homine et partibus eius', of Book XI, 'De homine et portentis', of his *Originum sive etymologiarum libri* (*Books of Origins or Etymologies*), commonly known as the *Etymologiae* (published in about 620 AD), incorrectly wrote that it was derived from foveo, I keep warm: 'Foetus autem nominatus, quod adhuc in utero foveatur' (XI, 1, 144).

And if the lone *e* in fetus is troublesome, consider the *e* in words ending in -penia.[2] The Greek word πενία (penia) meant poverty. So thrombocytopenia is a deficiency of thrombocytes, leukopenia of leukocytes, neutropenia of neutrophil leukocytes, and so on. Yet some persist in spelling it -paenia, thinking mistakenly that -penia is an American spelling that needs to be corrected, the phenomenon known as hypercorrection.

Vowels can give other kinds of problems. Take minuscule. It comes from the Latin 'minus', which is both the comparative form of 'minor' and a noun meaning 'a smaller number or amount'. Now add the diminutive suffix '-culus' and you get minusculus, meaning a bit smaller or rather small. In its English form it has come to mean very small or tiny. It was originally used, at around the start of the 18th century, as a noun meaning a small letter (the opposite of a majuscule, a letter that was a bit larger than others) or a SMALL BLOCK CAPITAL. It was typically pronounced with the accent on the first syllable, with the first *u* pronounced short and

therefore indeterminately, opening the way to the misunderspelling 'miniscule', presumably influenced by 'mini'. The earliest instance of 'miniscule' in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is from 1871, coincidentally the same year in which Carroll coined his usage of 'portmanteau'. This error is rife. Here is Hugh Rawson, an author of several books about words, who should know better, in the preface to *The Unwritten Laws of Life* (Carbolic Smoke Ball Co, 2008): 'Typically [rules and regulations] are printed in miniscule type and presented in seemingly endless sections and subsections.' The error is so common that some have given up on it. Thus, William Safire, writing in the *New York Times Magazine* of 8 June 1980: 'The old-fashioned spelling is ''minuscule'', but trendy people are pronouncing it 'mi-NIS-kyool', so what the hell.'

The mistaken substitution of an *i* for a *u* also occurs in 'pruritus',[3] one of those uncommon fourth declension Latin nouns. It means 'itch', without the connotation of inflammation. But it is frequently spelled 'pruritis', presumably by those who think that inflammation must be involved, as it sometimes may be, and that -itis is the correct ending. Other less common errors of this sort include 'crepitis', 'decubitis', 'detritis', 'tinnitis' and 'vomitis'. Again, the error is encouraged by the fact that the final *u* in each case is pronounced short and therefore sounds indeterminate.

Sometimes an *i* is substituted for a *y*. Consider 'aneurysm'. It comes from the Greek word ἀνεύρυσμα (aneurusma) and should therefore be spelt with a y, with which the Greek letter upsilon is represented when it occurs on its own. But the spelling 'aneurism' occasionally occurs, and the earliest citation in the *OED* (from Ridgley's *Practical Physic* of 1656) actually uses this variant. The dictionary notes that 'the spelling with *y* is etymological; but that with *i*, by form-association with the ending -ism, is more frequent.' This may have been true in 1884, when the first fascicle of the *OED*, A–ANT, was published, but it is wrong today. A Pubmed search shows that the spelling 'aneurysm' is almost universally used in the bioscience literature, only 0.3% of instances being, as it were, 'aneurismal', and some of those may be typographical errors rather than true misunderspellings.

Another *i* to *y* conversion is even rarer but more amusing. An algorithm in mathematics, a 20th century invention, is a process or set of rules that is used in computing, machine translation and linguistics. The *OED* defines its medical use as 'a step-by-step procedure for reaching a clinical decision or diagnosis, often set out in the form of a flow chart, in which the answer to each question determines the next question to be asked.' 'Algorithm' comes from 'algorism', the Arabic system of counting, named after the ninth century mathematician Abu Ja'far Mohammed Ben Musa al-Khowarazmi. In the 17th century algorism became algorithm, by confusion with arithmetic, another type of misunderspelling. But it is sometimes further misspelled 'algorhythm'. Occasionally this is deliberate, as in the title of a 1994 record album by the Australian group Boxcar and the name of the indie company Algorhythm Records. However, I recently came across a misunderspelt reference to an 'advanced paediatric life support algorhythm for malignant ventricular arrhythmias' in a paper about amiodarone.[4] And there was I thinking that amiodarone was antialgorhythmic!

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## References


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