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# A.WORD.A.DAY with ANU GARG

Courtesy of Anu Garg, curator of A.Word.A.Day at [wordsmith.org](http://wordsmith.org), here is a week's worth of terms and origins for linguistic errors. Whether you're a professional editor or just a lover of words, you can subscribe for free. *The New York Times* describes it as "the most welcomed, most enduring piece of daily mass e-mail in cyberspace."

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**Most of us** stub our toes or run into a glass door from time to time, though some of us are more prone to this than others. The same works with language. We make errors. Sometimes these are funny. Here, we've collected five words to describe such missteps.

Even though these are called slips of the tongue, "slips of the brain" may be more appropriate. The tongue does only what the brain asks it to do.

Share your own examples in our online forum [Wordsmith Talk](http://WordsmithTalk) or email [words@wordsmith.org](mailto:words@wordsmith.org).

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## Eggcorn

**MEANING** *noun*: An erroneous alteration of a word or phrase, by replacing an original word with a similar-sounding word, such that the new word or phrase also makes a kind of sense, e.g., "ex-patriot" instead of "expatriate" and "mating name" instead of "maiden name."

**ETYMOLOGY** Coined by linguist Geoffrey Pullum (b. 1945) in 2003. From the substitution of the word "acorn" with "eggcorn." Earliest documented use as a name for this phenomenon is from 2003, though the term "eggcorn" has been found going back as far as 1844, as "egg corn bread" for "acorn bread."

**USAGE** "Will eggcorns continue to hatch? This is a moot point (or is that mute?). Yet certainly anyone waiting with 'baited' (bated) breath for 'whole scale' (wholesale) changes may need to wait a while."

Bill & Rich Sones; "If Elevator Falls, Don't Jump to Conclusions"; *Salt Lake Telegram* (Utah); July 3, 2008.

## Freudian Slip

**MEANING** *noun*: An error that reveals someone's subconscious mind, e.g., "I wish you were her" instead of "I wish you were here."

**ETYMOLOGY** After Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis, who proposed the idea that errors in speech, writing, etc., reveal what is in one's subconscious mind. Earliest documented use is from 1959.

**USAGE** "The Freudian slip is invoked to explain some strange and embarrassing behavior. 'Nice to beat you,' smiles a woman when she meets the ex-girlfriend of her husband."

Jena Pincott; "Terrorized by the Tongue"; *Psychology Today* (New York); March/April 2012.

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## Malapropism

**MEANING** *noun*: The humorous misuse of a word by confusing it with a similar-sounding word, e.g., "pineapple of perfection" for "pinnacle of perfection."

**ETYMOLOGY** After Mrs. Malaprop, a character in Richard Sheridan's play *The Rivals* (1775), who confused words in this manner. Earliest documented use is from 1830.

**USAGE** "Mayor Thomas Menino is sometimes made fun of for his malapropisms; he once said the city's parking shortage was 'an Alcatraz [albatross] around my neck'."

Katharine Q. Seelye; "Ailing Mayor of Boston Says He's Still Up to the Job"; *The New York Times*; Dec. 17, 2012.

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## Mondegreen

**MEANING** *noun*: A word or phrase resulting from mishearing a word or phrase, especially in song lyrics, e.g., "The girl with colitis goes by" for "The girl with kaleidoscope eyes" in the Beatles song "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds."

**ETYMOLOGY** Coined by author Sylvia Wright when she misinterpreted the line "laid him on the green" as "Lady Mondegreen" in the Scottish ballad "The Bonny Earl of Murray." Earliest documented use is from 1954.

**USAGE** "Since I live in Thailand, the most meaningful mondegreen for me was my own mishearing of a line from The Jam's 'Eton Rifles'. Instead of the correct 'What chance do you have against a tie and a crest?' for years I heard 'What chance do you have against a Thai in a dress?'"

Richard Watson Todd; *Much Ado About English*; Nicholas Brealey Publishing; May 1, 2007.

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## Spoonerism

**MEANING** *noun*: The transposition of (usually) the initial sounds of words producing a humorous result:

"It is now kisstomary to cuss the bride." (Spooner while officiating at a wedding)  
"Is the bean dizzy?" (Spooner questioning the secretary of his dean)

**ETYMOLOGY** After William Archibald Spooner (1844–1930), clergyman and educator, who was prone to this. Earliest documented use is from 1900.

**USAGE** "As for her own red-faced moment on air, Hudson recalled how she coined a somewhat racy spoonerism in a reference to Killorgrin's Puck Fair."

Seán McCárthaigh; "AA Roadwatch Broadcasters Celebrate 21 Years"; *Irish Examiner* (Cork, Ireland); Aug. 31, 2010.

## A THOUGHT FOR TODAY

Language is a city to the building of which every human being brought a stone. — *Ralph Waldo Emerson, writer and philosopher (1803–82)* 📖