You May Be Saying It Wrong

(But So Is Everyone Else)

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Do we Use Words Wrong?

- Have you ever been corrected for using a word wrong?
- You’re not alone, and you might not even have been wrong.
- These corrections are more common than you might think, and with good reason.
- But before feeling embarrassed about word misuse, consider that even these "corrections" exist within a language that's constantly evolving.
- Our personal experiences with being corrected mirror the larger story of English itself, a language of contradictions, exceptions, and continuous change.

How English Got So Weird

- English is a language that, by many linguistic standards, probably never should have developed.
- It's a fascinating patchwork of Germanic, Norse, French, and Latin influences, evolving through dramatic historical shifts over the last 1,500 years.
- This complex heritage explains why so many English words don't follow consistent patterns or maintain their original meanings, and why you shouldn't feel too bad if you occasionally use a word "incorrectly."

How English Got So Weird

Old English (450-1100 CE):

- A Germanic language brought by Anglo-Saxon settlers that would be nearly unrecognizable to modern speakers.
- Words like "mann" (man) and "hūs" (house) survive from this period.

Middle English (1100-1500 CE):

- Following the Norman Conquest of 1066, French became the language of the nobility, while common people continued speaking English.
- These worlds gradually merged, with thousands of French words entering everyday speech. Words like "beef" (from French boeuf) supplemented the Germanic "cow."

How English Got So Weird

Early Modern English (1500-1800 CE):

- The Great Vowel Shift (a major pronunciation change where vowel sounds shifted upward in the mouth) changed how words sounded.
- For example, "mice" was pronounced more like "mees" before the shift. The Renaissance also brought a flood of Latin and Greek terms into the language.
- Shakespeare’s works during this period, both followed and broke linguistic rules.

Modern English (1800-present):

- Colonization, globalization, and technological advancement have continuously expanded English vocabulary with borrowings from languages worldwide.

How English Got So Weird

Fun Fact:

- Consider the word "nice" as a perfect example of English evolution. When borrowed from Old French in the 13th century, it meant "foolish" or "silly."
- By the 16th century, it had shifted to mean "precise" or "careful." Only in the 18th century did it begin to acquire its modern meaning of "pleasant" or "agreeable."
- With all that linguistic baggage in mind, it’s no surprise that we get tripped up.
- Let’s look at some of the most common culprits, and why their misuse might not be entirely your fault.

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

(Even When We Think We're Right)

Peruse

- Origin: From Latin “per” (thoroughly) + “uti” (to use)

Common misuse: To skim or glance over something quickly Actual meaning: To read thoroughly and carefully

- If a book lover goes to a bookstore and peruses the entire selection, they'll be there until closing time. That's because while many folks use "peruse" as a synonym for "to skim," it means the exact opposite.
- To peruse something implies reading it thoroughly, carefully, and in great detail, not quickly glancing over a few pages.

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

Peruse

Example of correct usage:

- "She perused the contract for hours, making sure she understood every clause before signing."

Modern Context:

- In business communications, this misuse can create significant confusion. If your boss asks you to "peruse" a report before a meeting, they're actually asking for a thorough review, not a quick glance!

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

Empathy vs. Sympathy

- Origin: "Empathy" from Greek “empatheia” (passion, state of emotion); "Sympathy" from Greek “sympatheia” (feeling together)
- Common misuse: Using these words interchangeably
- Distinction: Empathy is understanding feelings without sharing experience; sympathy involves shared experience or pity
- Showing empathy for another person is different from having sympathy, though many people use the words interchangeably. To have empathy for someone means to be able to understand the emotions they're feeling, even if you haven't been in their position.
- You can empathize with the sadness someone feels after losing a loved one, or the happiness they exude after a promotion at work, without having personally experienced similar situations.

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

"Sympathy"

- Has two common usages. First, it can mean understanding emotions because you have experienced a similar circumstance.
- Perhaps you can sympathize with your neighbor after they lose their job because you were laid off last year.
- The second usage relates specifically to misfortunes, as it means to feel pity for someone.

Example of correct usage:

•"Though she had never experienced homelessness herself, she could empathize with their struggle. Her father, having lived on the streets in his youth, could truly sympathize."

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

Ambivalent

- Origin: From Latin “ambi” (both) + “valere” (to be strong)
- Common misuse: Being indifferent or not caring Actual meaning: Having mixed, contradictory feelings about something
- Some people may say they're "ambivalent" about a topic to suggest they don't care, but this misses the word's true meaning. To be ambivalent is to have mixed or contradictory opinions on the matter at hand.
- Let's say someone is watching a TV show with brilliant writing but terrible acting. In this case, their opposing feelings show true ambivalence, they genuinely don't know whether they like the show or not because they have strong feelings in both directions.

•Example of correct usage: "I'm ambivalent about the job offer, the salary is excellent, but the commute would be terrible."

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

Travesty

- Origin: From French “travestir” (to disguise), ultimately from Latin trans (across) + “vestire” (to dress)
- Common misuse: A tragedy or terrible event Actual meaning: A mockery or absurd distortion of something
- People often misuse the word "travesty" as a synonym for "tragedy," implying a situation is filled with suffering or distress. But the true usage of "travesty" is better suited to describe an absurd or distorted representation of something.
- If a lenient sentence is a "travesty of justice," that doesn't necessarily mean it will cause distress. Rather, it suggests that it's a mockery of what justice should be. Originally, a travesty was a literary or artistic parody, emphasizing its nature as a distortion rather than a disaster.
- Example of correct usage: "The film adaptation was a travesty of the beloved novel, changing the plot so dramatically that it became unrecognizable."

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

Poisonous vs. Venomous

- Origin: "Poison" from Latin “potio” (drink); "Venom" from Latin “venenum” (poison)
- Common misuse: Using "poisonous" for any toxic creature
- Distinction: Poisonous toxins are absorbed or ingested; venomous toxins are injected
- Snakes, spiders, and other creatures can be both poisonous and venomous, but the terms mean different things.
- Something that's poisonous may cause illness if a toxin enters the body through consumption or absorption. Something that's venomous, however, will cause suffering if the toxin is forcefully injected through a bite or sting.

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

Poisonous vs. Venomous

- In other words, biting into a toxic frog makes it poisonous, whereas being bitten by a cobra makes it venomous.
- Many venomous animals aren't poisonous to eat (once their venom glands are removed), and many poisonous plants don't actively inject their toxins.
- Example of correct usage: "While hiking, she carefully avoided the venomous rattlesnakes and made sure not to touch the poisonous ivy along the trail."
- Modern Context: This distinction matters significantly in medical contexts.
- Treatment for venomous bites often requires antivenin, while poisoning may require different interventions like induced vomiting or activated charcoal.

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

Jealousy vs. Envy

- Origin: "Jealousy" from Latin “zelus” (zeal); "Envy" from Latin “Invidia” (looking upon with malice)
- Common misuse: Using them interchangeably for wanting what others have Distinction: Jealousy fears losing what one has; envy desires what one lacks
- Though they've come to mean the same thing in modern parlance, "jealousy" and "envy" aren't quite identical.
- Historically, jealousy implies fear of losing something one already has; for instance, someone may feel jealous when their spouse receives flirtatious attention.

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

Jealousy vs. Envy

- "Envy," on the other hand, implies a desire for something currently lacking, such as good health, money, or a partner.
- Shakespeare understood this distinction well in Othello, where Iago says: "O, beware, my lord, of jealousy; It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on." Othello wasn't envious, he was jealous, fearing the loss of Desdemona's affection.
- Example of correct usage: "She felt envious of her friend's new car, while he felt jealous when others admired his prized possession."

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

Bemused

- Origin: From be- + muse (to be absorbed in thought) Common misuse: Amused or entertained
- Actual meaning: Confused, puzzled, or bewildered
- When someone says they were "bemused" by a comedy show, they're likely misusing the term. To be bemused is to be confused or bewildered, not entertained.
- This confusion likely stems from the similar sound to "amused," despite the different meanings.
- Example of correct usage: "She was bemused by his cryptic message, unable to determine what he really meant."

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

Nonplussed

- Origin: From Latin “non plus” (no more, no further)
- Common misuse: Unimpressed or unfazed Traditional meaning: Confused to the point of not knowing how to proceed
- In a curious development, "nonplussed" is now commonly used (especially in American English) to mean "unaffected" or "not bothered," which is nearly the opposite of its traditional definition. Traditionally, if you're nonplussed, you're so confused that you're unsure how to respond.
- Example of traditional usage: "The sudden change in plans left her completely nonplussed, she had no idea how to adjust her presentation on such short notice."

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

Irony

- Origin: From Greek “eironeia” (feigned ignorance)
- Common misuse: Any coincidence, especially if humorous Actual meaning: An outcome contrary to what was expected
- Thanks in part to Alanis Morissette's 1996 hit song "Ironic", which ironically misused the concept in most of its examples, "irony" might be one of the most confused words in English.
- The song describes situations like "rain on your wedding day" as ironic when they're merely unfortunate coincidences, inadvertently becoming a cultural reference point for misunderstanding the term.

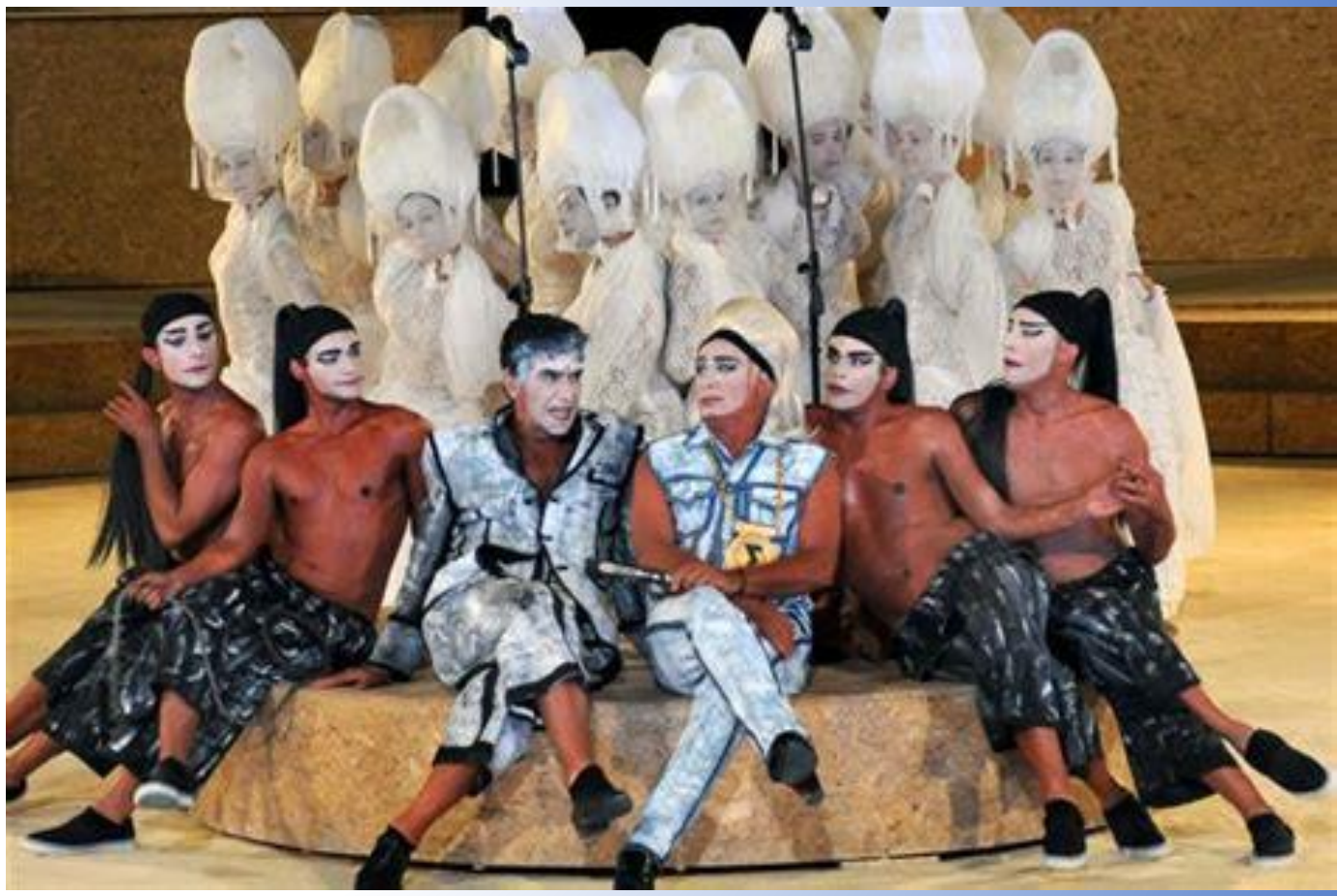
Words We Keep Getting Wrong

Irony

- While irony can be humorous by coincidence, that's not its defining feature. The word "irony" signifies the opposite of what was expected.
- One example of irony would be a marriage counselor filing for divorce; in this case, it's not inherently funny, but the situation is contrary to what might be anticipated.
  A fire station burning down is ironic.
- Rain on your wedding day is usually just unfortunate, not ironic (unless you specifically chose your wedding date because historical weather patterns indicated it would be dry).
- Example of correct usage: "In an ironic twist, the professor who wrote the book on punctuation made a typo on the first page."

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

- Fun Fact: The word "irony" comes from the character of the “Eiron” in an ancient Greek comedy, a character who pretended to be less intelligent than he really was, and triumphed over the Alazon, who was pretentious and self-deceiving.



The Clouds by Aristophanes - National Theatre of Greece Summer Tour.

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

Chronic

- Origin: From Greek “chronikos“ (of time)
- Common misuse: Severe or intense pain/condition Actual meaning: Persistent over a long period
- Someone who says they have a "chronic" injury is not necessarily implying they're suffering from great pain. "Chronic" relates to the duration of an issue, not its severity.
- Think of "chronic" as "recurring" or "persistent" instead of "very bad," as it's possible to have a chronic ailment that's merely a mild discomfort.
- The opposite of "chronic" is "acute," which refers to conditions that come on suddenly and typically don't last long, though they may be severe. A chronic cough might be a mild but persistent irritation, while an acute respiratory infection could be briefly life-threatening.
- Example of correct usage: "His chronic back pain was mild but had persisted for decades, unlike the acute agony he felt when he broke his arm."

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

Literally

- This word is one of my pet peeves. I have endured young people misusing this word for years, when they should be using figuratively.
  Origin: From Latin “litteralis” (of or belonging to letters)
- Common misuse: Used for emphasis or exaggeration Traditional meaning: Actually, happening as described, not figuratively
- "Figuratively" means using language in a non-literal way, often for dramatic or expressive effect.

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

Literally

- "Literally" traditionally rejects such figurative devices. It asserts: “This statement is factual, not symbolic or exaggerated.”
- Example of traditional usage: “The building literally collapsed during the earthquake” = The building physically fell down (no metaphor).
- Contrast with misuse: “I literally died laughing” (impossible; here, “literally” is used figuratively for emphasis).

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

Why the Distinction Matters:

- Traditionally, “literally” anchored statements to reality (e.g., legal or scientific writing).
- Over time, it evolved as an intensifier in informal speech (e.g., “I’m literally starving”), which ironically uses the word figuratively.
- Debate Over “Correctness”: Purists argue that using “literally” to mean “figuratively” undermines clarity.
- Linguists note that this hyperbolic usage has existed for centuries (e.g., Dickens wrote “literally paved with children” in Nicholas Nickleby).

Words We Keep Getting Wrong

Takeaway:

- The phrase “not figuratively” underscores the original role of “literally” as a safeguard against ambiguity. It ensures the reader understands the statement is factual, not metaphorical, even though modern usage often blurs this line.
- Few words generate as much debate as "literally." Traditionally, it means something that actually happened exactly as described, the opposite of "figuratively." However, it has been used as an intensifier for emphasis since at least the 18th century, even by respected authors like Charles Dickens and Mark Twain.
- Today, many dictionaries include both definitions, noting the second as informal usage. This evolution perfectly illustrates how language changes over time, sometimes in ways that appear contradictory.
- Example of traditional usage: "The building literally collapsed to the ground during the earthquake, I'm not speaking metaphorically."

When "Wrong" Becomes "Right"

The Evolution of Language

- One thing to keep in mind is that the English language is always evolving. Some of these "misuses" are based on centuries-old usages, and new meanings have become accepted in casual conversation and are even listed in the dictionary as secondary definitions.
- This evolution highlights the ongoing tension between two approaches to language:
- Prescriptive linguistics focuses on how language "should" be used according to established rules and traditions. Think of grammar textbooks and style guides that establish "correct" usage.

When "Wrong" Becomes "Right"

The Evolution of Language

- Descriptive linguistics examines how language is actually used by people in real-world contexts. Descriptive linguists document how people actually speak and write, without judgment about correctness.
- Neither approach is inherently superior. Formal contexts like academic writing, legal documents, and professional communications generally benefit from adhering to prescriptive standards for clarity and precision.
- But rigid adherence to outdated rules can sometimes hinder effective communication, especially as language naturally evolves.

When "Wrong" Becomes "Right"

The Evolution of Language

- Consider these examples of words whose "incorrect" usages are now officially accepted in major dictionaries:
- *Literally*: The Oxford English Dictionary now includes the definition "used for emphasis while not being literally true" alongside its traditional meaning.
- *Hopefully*: Traditionally meaning "in a hopeful manner," it's now accepted as meaning "it is hoped that."

When "Wrong" Becomes "Right"

The Evolution of Language

- *Decimate:* Originally meaning specifically "to reduce by one-tenth" (from Roman military punishment), it's now widely accepted to mean "destroy a large portion of."
- *Fantastic*: Once strictly meaning "existing only in imagination," it now commonly means "extraordinarily good."
- Words like "*nice*" (which originally meant "foolish" or "ignorant") and "awful" (originally meaning "inspiring awe") have completely reversed their meanings over centuries of usage.
- Today's "misuses" might be tomorrow's standard definitions.

Word Evolution Timeline

"Awful"

- 14th century: Inspired reverence, full of awe
- 16th century: Worthy of respect or fear, sublime
- 17th century: Beginning to have negative connotations, frightening
- 18th century: Very bad, frightful
- Modern usage: Extremely unpleasant or of very poor quality

When Does It Matter?

- So, should you worry about using these words correctly? It depends on the context:
- In formal writing, job applications, or academic work, precise usage demonstrates attention to detail and can prevent misunderstandings.
- In casual conversation, the evolving meanings of these words are often widely understood and accepted.
- In creative writing, understanding both traditional and contemporary usages gives you more tools for precise expression.
- The next time someone corrects your word usage, you might gently remind them that you're not wrong, you're just ahead of the linguistic curve!

When Does It Matter?

- Or perhaps you'll simply become more aware of these nuances yourself, appreciating the rich complexity of the English language.
- We like to consider ourselves lifelong students of language, and we're always open to seeing how vocabulary changes.
- After all, English has survived precisely because of its adaptability, its willingness to borrow, evolve, and reinvent itself across centuries.
- What words have you been using "wrong" all along? And which evolving definitions do you think deserve formal recognition?
- The answers may change even as we ask the questions, such is the beautiful, frustrating, ever-changing nature of English.

Test Your Knowledge

Before we conclude, let's test your understanding of these commonly misused words:

1. If you peruse a document, you are:
   a) Giving it a quick glance
   b) Reading it thoroughly
   c) Editing it for errors

2. A chronic condition is characterized by its:
   a) Severity
   b) Duration
   c) Treatability

3. If you're ambivalent about something, you:
   a) Don't care about it
   b) Are angry about it
   c) Have mixed feelings about it

- 4. A travesty is best described as:
  a) A mockery or distortion
  b) A tragedy or disaster
  c) A celebration or triumph
- Being bemused means you are:
  a) Confused or puzzled
  b) Amused or entertained
  c) Bored or uninterested
- 6. If something is ironic, it is:
  a) Unfortunate
  b) Contrary to what was expected
  c) Coincidental but not important

Test Your Knowledge

Before we conclude, let's test your understanding of these commonly misused words:

7. The word “literally” traditionally means:
   a) Exactly as stated, without exaggeration
   b) With great emotion
   c) Something imaginary

8. Someone who shows empathy is:
   a) Sharing the same experience
   b) Feeling pity
   c) Understanding without shared experience

9. A venomous animal:
   a) Must be eaten to be harmful
   b) Injects toxins through a bite or sting
   c) Is always fatal if touched

10 To be nonplussed means:
   a) Unfazed or unaffected
   b) Angry or offended,
   c) So confused you don’t know how to respond

Test Your Knowledge

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