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Introduction

Why study eggcorns?

The question has never been far from my thoughts since I began to work on this book. The easiest answer I can give—the one that kept me writing from day to day—is that eggcorns are so much fun. Not to write this book would have been keeping to myself a really good joke.

As the chapters of this book scrolled out of the printer, however, another answer to this question began to form in my mind. While the journey in this book takes us through several divisions of modern linguistics, at heart I am a meaning person, a semanticist. The study of eggcorns, it occurred to me, alters the way we think about how we acquire new words and meanings.

For the last few centuries, ideas about meaning have been dominated by two models. One is the modern dictionary. Meanings, we assume, have some crucial correspondence to how they are handled in dictionaries. The dictionary perspective on meaning is popular and only a rabid contrarian would deny that there is some reality in it. But the model also has much that doesn't ring true and in recent decades we have become aware how far this model can lead us astray. The more we have studied how words interact in our speech, the more we have found the dictionary model of meaning to be static and isolating. When we preface all of our thoughts about meaning with the dictionary, we sacrifice our ability to see the dynamic processes behind meaning.

The other model that has exerted a strong influence on meaning is formal logic. While formal logic, say logicians, is not an exercise in meaning—a well-formed logical formula should be valid no matter what mean-

ings get plugged into the variables—logical analysis still makes demands on meanings. For one thing, it molds them into logic-shaped units. Listen too much to the logicians and you can end up in a quest for mysterious "truth propositions" that bear little resemblance to real-world sentences. An even more perfidious contribution to semantics, however, has been the logicians' assumption that we think—or should think—in logical categories. Computer hardware may work this way, but our brains have more flexible ways to connect meanings.

These two models of meaning, that of the dictionary and that of the logician, have begun to lose some of their traditional force in recent decades. We now believe that minds, as they seek to understand old meanings and try to construct new meanings, tend to follow the flow lines of analogy and metaphor. Psychologists were perhaps the first to notice this. In recent years, philosophers and semanticists have also begun to take analogy and metaphor more seriously.

The first time I came across a modern argument for including metaphor in discussions about garden-variety meaning was in Owen Barfield's famous book, *Poetic Diction*. When I read it—some forty years ago now—it shook my world. This was the mid-1970s and I had just emerged from a graduate program at the University of Chicago. When you studied philosophical reasoning at Chicago (and many other North American institutions) in those days, you studied a lot of formal logic. The effort it took to follow the complex calculus of formal logic dulled my sense of the larger world of semantics and human thought. Reading Barfield was one of my first steps toward restoring a human framework to the study of semantics.

Barfield's book appeared the late 1920s. In the decades following its publication, many other thinkers and philosophers have crossed the same river that Barfield did. But not always on the same bridge. For me, the next step was wrestling with George Lakoff's work on metaphor. He first presented his ideas on meaning in *Metaphors We Live By*, a 1980 book that he wrote with Mark Johnson. He later expanded his thesis in several other books. Even a single sentence, Lakoff argues, appeals to a dense matrix of metaphor. In his books, he gives us analytic tools to unpack metaphors. The tools he employs seem overly mechanical at times, but they do broaden our understanding of how we make meaning.

Since Lakoff's work, many other authors have taken up the same theme—far too many writers for me to begin to list here. I've enjoyed following Douglas Hofstadter's journey into this new perspective on meaning. His most recent (2013) run at the topic can be found in *Surfaces and Essences: Analogy as the Fuel and Fire of Thinking*, a book that he wrote with the psychologist Emmanuel Sander. Hofstadter and Sander state the thesis of their big book in the title of the volume's prologue. Analogy, they say, is the

"core of cognition." Hofstadter, without (it appears) having read Barfield, arrives, some ninety years later, in the same semantic country.

The outcome of this long turn in how we think about thinking has revitalized the study of meaning. The human brain, we now believe, is not a tool for shifting around hard nuggets of dictionary meaning with the rules of logic. It is more like a machine for churning out metaphors. The actual mechanisms of metaphor machine can be complicated—dip into studies of metaphor over the last half century and you will find much disagreement about how metaphors work and how they contribute to meaning. My own preference is to think about metaphor as a sort of folding, a way to lay patterns of discourse side by side and let them influence each other.

The emergence of the eggcorn phenomenon, it occurs to me, is another step in this decades-long reorientation of how we think about meaning. Eggcorns are, in essence, a kind of metaphor. From a purely semantic view, of course, they are broken metaphors, but even their brokenness is an important element in the larger picture of how one thought leads to another.

This, then, is a reason *why* we need to study eggcorns. To have fun, sure, but also to remind ourselves about the role of analogy in thought and to keep in front of us a living picture of how serendipitous the mental mechanisms of analogy can be.

And now, after a bit of history, the *what*, the *where*, and the *how* of eggcorns.

1 The Great Eggcorn Hunt Begins

Recently transferred to Alaska, a young couple rave about their first encounter with the northern lights: "We stood on the side of the road and watched them for close to an hour in aah of the beauty of the world." On a web health forum, a young woman promotes a food supplement that "has helped keep my dietbetes under control." Another web page tells us that a divorced man went to court "to get his alimoney reduced."

What do these three writers have in common? An interplay of sound and meaning has altered their vocabularies, slipping in words that most people would consider mistakes. The interjection *aah* may be a way of expressing awe, but it isn't an accepted replacement for the noun *awe*. A diagnosis of diabetes often means going on a strict diet, but there is no *diet* in the word. Nor is the word *money* in *alimony*. Such accidents may be mistakes, but they do make a kind of sense, and the sense they make is often more vivid and charming than the words they replace.

These three mistakes are examples of *eggcorns*, a type of language slip that has attracted a good deal of attention over the last decade. In this book, I'll explain what counts and what doesn't count as an eggcorn. I'll follow eggcorns through a number of topical areas and look at eggcorns through the lens of linguistics. At the end, I'll look at what will become of the quest to find all of our English eggcorns. Along the way, I will select what I believe are the hundred best eggcorns.

We could pick up the narrative line that leads to eggcorns at several places. The thread to seize first is perhaps the one that starts in September 2003 at Language Log, an internet blog launched by the linguists Mark Liberman and Geoffrey Pullum. The Log is still in operation. Its contribu-

tors, a *Who's Who* of English language theorists, attract tens of thousands of readers every day.

In a Language Log post on September 23, 2003, Mark Liberman puzzled over *egg corn*, a phrase that he had found substituted for the word *acorn*. The switch of words, he noted, was oddly appropriate. *Corn* could be a general term for a seed, and an acorn, especially with its cap removed, looked a bit like an egg. Liberman ran through a list of received terminology for this sort of speech error and found each of them to be wanting. A few days later, his colleague Geoffrey Pullum suggested that Liberman's term become an eponym, a name for itself. Liberman and Pullum, assisted by several other Language Log mavens, refined the meaning of the new term over the next few months. They also mashed it—within weeks, the binomial *egg corn* had become a single word, *eggcorn*.

By 2004, a full scale hunt for words and phrases covered by the new term was underway. Chris Waigl, a software engineer, lent her skills in the fall of that year to set up the web-based Eggcorn Database as a repository for the words that had been found. The initial version of the database had only a primitive mechanism for discussion and comments, so at the end of 2005 she built and launched the Eggcorn Forum, a place to evaluate candidate eggcorns. With these two websites in place, *The Great Eggcorn Hunt* was off and running. Contributors to Language Log and the Eggcorn Database/Forum would go on to find, over the next decade, thousands of words and phrases that fit the definition of Liberman and Pullum's new word.

As the search for eggcorns progressed, the term *eggcorn* emerged from its cybercradle and made its way into the larger world. The new term debuted in a number of newspaper columns and books through the late twenty-oughts. In 2010, during an electronic update to the *OED*, the word *eggcorn* put in its first dictionary appearance. Since then, it has been adopted by several other dictionaries. News of the neologism continues to spread—hardly a month goes by without some article or book introducing the novel term to its readers.

Eggcorn, as a name for eggcorns, is well on the way to becoming a standard English word. Still, its future is in no way secure. The term is still an explain-it term—a word or phrase that can't be used for general audiences without explaining what it means. Explain-it terms, however clever and self-explanatory, are always a bit tenuous. They can disappear from languages almost as quickly as they appear. For now, though, the momentum behind the new word is impressive. *Eggcorn*, we can hope, will one day be an explainer word. Until then, treatments of the term must begin, as ours does, with the inevitable definition.

2 Slippery Eggs

On these pages, I will describe many hundreds of eggcorns. The first one, of course, must be the word **EGGCORN* itself.[1] We can call the word *eggcorn* an eggcorn with some confidence because, if it is not an eggcorn, the foundation crumbles. But this will be our only freebie. To find other eggcorns, we need to hammer out some kind of definition. We'll begin our quest for a definition by cataloging some of the essential features of eggcorns. Then we'll contrast eggcorns with words that are partial synonyms.

The first feature we should note is that eggcorns are not standard terms in the languages in which they occur. They are, we might say, **established nonstandards**. Users of eggcorns believe that they are employing a correct term, while others—usually the vast majority of English speakers—believe that the term is not correct. Most of the eggcorns mentioned in this book are in regular use by only a small fraction of 1% of English speakers.

The size of the user population for an eggcorn can only shrink so far, however. Really low frequency eggcorns, while they may be genuine, struggle to rise above the noise of misspelling and mispronunciation in the body of data that we examine to find and establish our eggcorns. In these low frequency cases, clear confessions by reliable speakers that they have made a mistake can help bolster the case for eggcornicity, even though, paradoxi-

[1] The first mention of any eggcorn in the body of this book is rendered in small caps. A prefixed asterisk indicates that the eggcorn is in the top hundred. Eggcorns in the top hundred are also highlighted in sideboxes.

cally, the act of confession forces us to remove these speakers from the cluster of people who have adopted the eggcorn.[2]

The second essential feature of eggcorns is that they **sound similar to, sometimes even identical to, the words they replace**. The vast majority of eggcorns, as we will see, are ear-detectable eggcorns—we can hear the difference between them and their acorns (their source words, the words that they replace). We will, however, also encounter eggcorns whose similarity to their acorns is based, not on their sounds, but on the way they look when written on a page. They are *eyecorns* rather than *earcorns*.

eggcorn

Acorn (source word): *acorn*

Sample: Description of a Washington County, Utah, headstone picturing acorns: "eggcorns and leaf."

Sound transition: Voicing (buzzing the vocal cords during) the */k/* phoneme in the middle of *acorn*.

Meaning change: Importing the name of an object, an egg, that resembles a capless acorn and assuming the *corn* in *acorn* is a reference to a kind of seed.

Notes: *Eggcorn* is the eponymous name of its own figure of speech.

The third feature, **semantic re-imaging**, leads us into firm eggcorn territory. Eggcorns play around with the meanings of their acorns, offering plausible images that differ from the semantics of their source words. In some cases this remapped image can be more evocative than the original image. Take, for an example, the word *redundant*. Most speakers use the term without thinking about the image embodied in the etymology of the word. *Redundant* comes from the Latin *redundare*, which meant "to overflow," a term that was constructed from smaller terms meaning "again" (*re*) and "wave" (*unda*). Even in Roman times, however, the meaning of *redundare* reached beyond its component parts to the idea of "being left over." When English speakers lifted the word from Medieval Latin in the sixteenth century, the meaning "superfluity" was there for the taking. How much more vivid and ready-to-hand, though, is the image behind **REDONEDANT*, a hybrid with Latin (*re*) and Anglo-Saxon (*done*) parentage. A Caesar salad served at a meal that already

[2] Curiously, admitting that word is an error does not always remove it from our vocabulary. We can have *mumpsimuses*. The term *mumpsimus* comes to us from a story popular during the Reformation. The tale seems to have first been told in a 1516 letter by Desiderius Erasmus. Erasmus mentions a priest who, after twenty years of intoning the Latin mass with the meaningless *mumpsimus* in place of *sumpsimus* ("we have received"), refused to give up the bad habit when corrected by his learned colleagues. The priest and his strange word became an icon for the stubborn rejection of ecclesiastical change in the era of the Reformation.

includes a garden salad is redonedant because the salad course has been redone. A few speakers have taken this reimaging one step further, replacing *redundant* with the self-referential *redonedone*. While we can fault the philology of those who write *redonedant* and *redonedone*, we can only applaud their imagination.

We are equipped, then, with a three-part definition of *eggcorn* that will guide us in our search for some of the choice eggcorns in the English language:

> *Eggcorns are substitutions, nonstandard but firmly established within a restricted language community, for similar-sounding or similar-looking words/phrases. These substitutions offer new and plausible meanings for the words/phrases that are replaced.*

redonedant

Acorn: *redundant*

Sample: Hotel review: "The food gets a little redonedant but you can always find something to eat."

Sound transition: None, an eyecorn that inserts the homophone *done* for the *dun* in *redundant.*

Meaning change: *Redundant* means "unnecessary, superfluous." Having something redone may render the first effort superfluous.

This is, however, only a starting definition. It claims too much. Other names, as we will see, have already staked out territory inside the boundaries of our definition.

3 Tiny Little Poems

Before we look at problems with our starting definition, let's widen the base under our feet by doing a quick review of sample eggcorns. We'll focus here on early discoveries, the ones found in the first couple of years after the word *eggcorn* was coined.

This would also be a good place to mention a caveat that will apply to every eggcorn in this book. Eggcorns are verbal and written *mistakes*, at least from the standpoint of the established community of English speakers. In calling attention to these slips, it may look like we are trying to ridicule speakers who use nonstandard terms. This is certainly not my intention, nor is it the intention of the vast majority of eggcorn hunters. Geoffrey Pullum captured well the spirit of The Great Eggcorn Hunt in 2004 when he wrote:

> It would be so easy to dismiss eggcorns as signs of illiteracy and stupidity, but they are nothing of the sort. They are imaginative attempts at relating something heard to lexical material already known.

pinecomb

Acorn: *pinecone*

Sample: On a horse-riding forum, a user reports that her pony shies when it hears a noise: "It can be anything from a pinecomb falling onto the roof to a plane flying over the barn."

Sound transition: Switching one nasal phoneme (*/m/*) for another (*/n/*).

Meaning change: A pinecone, when it has projecting scales, can resemble (and replace) a comb.

Mark Liberman concurs. Eggcorns, he adds, "are tiny little poems, a symptom of human intelligence and creativity." Those who find their own words quoted in eggcorns described in this book should not take it as a criticism. We all have corners of our vocabulary into which the light of standard speech does not shine. The list of eggcorns that I have found includes several phrases that have been part of my own vocabulary.

sirname

Acorn: *surname*

Sample: From a Michigan newspaper of the 1880s: "The men who got up the petition made up this name from certain letters found in the sir-names of the signers."

Sound transition: None, an eyecorn.

Meaning change: *Surname* derives from an Old French term for "extra name." *Sir* comes into play because requesting a surname is tantamount to asking for the last name of the person's sire. (The polite address *sir* is a shortening of *sire*.)

And now, a few samples. Arnold Zwicky, a professor retired from Ohio State University and a prolific contributor to several branches of modern linguistics, was one of the earliest of the Language Log posters to take up the search for terms that fit the new eggcorn category. As his search became more widely known, other language students began sending him candidate words and phrases that they had heard. A large number of the eggcorns mentioned in his aggregating posts were word confusions that were already well known to copyeditors, phrases such as *PEAK [pique] one's interest, BAITED [bated] breath, to the MANOR [manner] born, anchors AWAY [aweigh],* and *MOTHERLOAD [motherlode]*. Some, though, were word reshapings that could surprise even experienced editors. Zwicky found vocabulary confusions, for example, around the phrases **PINECOMB [pinecone]*, *last STITCH [ditch] stand*, and *CROWN AND glory [crowning glory]*.

Mark Liberman, the co-conspirator in the coining of the word *eggcorn*, was also an active eggcorn hunter in the early years of the quest, reporting on his own Language Log posts a large number of first- and second-hand eggcorns. Among his discoveries were **SIRNAME [surname], SHOCK full [chock full], MALICIOUS FORETHOUGHT [malice aforethought]*, and *INCLIMATE [inclement] weather*.

Aging warriors in The Great Eggcorn Hunt look back on these early discoveries with envy. In these first months, all of the eggcorns were still waiting to be found. They were like ripe fruit borne on low-hanging branches—searchers could wander through the orchard of spoken English and pluck whatever they wanted. This Eden of eggcorns begat, however, the sin of careless abundance. A great many terms got plucked that a later, more sober analysis had reason to question. To sort the real fruit from the false, the definition that I have proposed needs more work.