

## On the damnable idea of a misspelled word

Jonathan Malino  
Guest Writer

As a confirmed (and perhaps overzealous) stickler for correct spelling, I was horrified last Sunday to discover that Ms. Marilyn vos Savant ("Ask Marilyn," *Parade* magazine), noted in the "Guinness Book of World Records" for the highest I.Q., failed to answer adequately an earnest inquirer who bet a case of beer on his having discovered an ontological disproof of the existence of misspelled words. Knowing that Guilford students would immediately recognize Ms. Savant's failure, and fearing that they would, thereupon, begin misspelling words with a philosophic abandon borne of desires whose legitimacy has the imprimatur of a *priori* proof, I have penned the following reply to Ms. Savant. It would please me if you would share it with your readers.

Dear Marilyn vos Savant,

Though I have no taste for beer, and though I quite agree (to the disappoint-

ment of all of my students) with your sober view that there are misspelled (and mispronounced) words, I believe you have done a disservice to the earnest fellow who tried to demonstrate *a priori* that there are no such things. Having lost his bet and his beer, he deserves, at least, to know what is wrong with his argument. This you have failed to explain. I believe the answer goes something like this.

The expression "misspelled word" is actually ambiguous. Consider, for example, the claim (which, I suspect, is false) that "misspelled" is the most frequently misspelled word in English. In this sentence, to say that something is a misspelled word is to say that it is a word of English (and surely one which appears in the dictionary) which people, in their writing, intend but fail to spell correctly. (This account isn't quite correct, since sometimes we intentionally misspell a word, but we can leave this complication aside.) But suppose I look at the newspaper and comment "There are five misspelled English words in one paragraph: "Misspelled," "seperate," .... In this sentence, to say that something is a mis-

spelled word is to say that it is a bit of writing which is a misspelling of some English word which the writer (author or inscriber) intended to spell correctly. Both of these ways of understanding the expression "misspelled word" are, of course, quite coherent and unproblematic, and both reveal that "misspelling" is a relation between words and inscriptions which are made with specific intent.

Having demonstrated the coherence, if ambiguity, of the idea of a misspelled word, we are left only with the question of where your earnest inquirer went awry in his argument. The core of his argument was this: a misspelled word is a word that is misspelled; but if a word is misspelled, then it won't be in the dictionary, and therefore it's not a word. Given the above-noted ambiguity, we must ask how to understand this argument. Not surprisingly it can be read two ways. Read according to our first account, the misspelled word is a word that is misspelled. It is an English word which someone intended, but failed, to spell aright. and more than likely, it will turn up in the dictionary.

If, however, we read the argument according to our second account, the misspelled word is a bit of writing, which is a misspelling of an English word the writer intended to spell correctly. Now here's the nub of your inquirer's point: How can

this bit of writing be a word of English, if it is a misspelling of some English word: The answer actually is twofold: the first answer is that to call this bit of writing a misspelled word doesn't (by our second account) require that it be a word at all, only that it be a misspelling of a word. In assuming that a misspelled word is a word that is misspelled, your inquirer simply misunderstood the second account. But the second answer is that a bit of English which is a misspelling of an English word can indeed be a word of English: My students often misspell "affect" by writing "effect." To be sure, this is not the most common occurrence with misspelled words, but it happens. We are left, then, with this summary diagnosis of the fallacious argument: your inquirer misunderstood the second account of "misspelled word," interpreting it to imply "something that is itself both a word and a misspelling of a word," and then incorrectly judged that nothing could meet this description.

There is, however, a remaining puzzle: Is there a "reasonable" way to misinterpret "misspelled word" which does make a misspelled word something that nothing can be? Perhaps this will do: something is a misspelled word just in case it has become a word simply by virtue of being a misspelling of another word. I leave it for you to decide.

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## Figures show the facts of sex discrimination

Katharine Statham  
Guest Writer

"I am pissed! I am so damned pissed!" said Lorretta Ross, panelist from the Feminist Futures Conference, Nov. 1989. Why is she pissed? Because at all economic levels and in all activities women are discriminated against.

- The yearly median income of families maintained by a working woman is \$16,909; those families which are maintained by a man have an income of \$26,008. *The Economics of Men, Women and Work*

- The national average weekly pay of female union members in 1987 was \$388; the average weekly pay of male union workers was \$494. *The New Haven Advocate's Annual Images of Women Edition, July 17, 1989*

- The 1987 media average pension benefit for women was \$370 as compared

to \$670 for men. *Pensions: Worker Coverage and Retirement Income*

- Percentage of all Fortune 500 companies that receive complaints about sexual harassment: 90 percent. Percentage of offenders given a verbal warning without discharge: 80 percent. *The New Haven Advocate's Annual Images of Women Edition, July 17, 1989*

- According to the FBI, forcible rape is one of the fastest growing violent crimes committed in the US. Reported rapes increased 94 percent between 1970 and 1980. *Minnesota Department of Correction Program for victims of Sexual Assault Annual Report, 1982*

The examples aren't simply statistics, they are the realities of sexual discrimination. Many women and men seek to change this reality by taking their anger and turning it into power. We, I am a feminist. We, I will continue to be a feminist until true equality and non-oppression prevail.