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Most of the time, we feel fairly sure that the person we are talking to understands what we say to them. This is quite amazing when you consider how many things can go wrong.

When they do, it is noticeable – although not always at the crucial moment. There are many tales about misunderstandings which probably become more elaborate as they get circulated.

Sometimes, it is purely a matter of not hearing properly (or perhaps, not articulating clearly enough over a bad phone or Skype line). The person who asked for *Sixteen tins of whale meat* and got 16 tonnes of whale meat, or the person who wanted *Thirty sows and pigs* and got 30,000 pigs – if these people actually exist – must have been overwhelmed by the dangers implicit in a simple misunderstanding.

On other occasions, speakers have to blame themselves. How often do we hear people say, “Oh, but you know what I mean”, when we may or may not really know what they mean.



Former US secretary of state Hillary Clinton once gave Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov a gift that included a mistranslation. Fortunately, Lavrov took it in good part. GETTY IMAGES

Know what I mean?

Language Matters

The idea that, as long as we use a word that is near enough, the message will get through is potentially dangerous. A climatic change (to do with the climate) could be climactic (leading to a climax), but probably isn't; a dialectal expression (one restricted to a particular dialect) is probably not dialectical (pertaining to logical discussion).

Some people still distinguish between *continuous* (going on all the time) and *continual* (having breaks in the progression), while others do not. Confusion of like-sounding words is the definition of a malapropism.

Sometimes the English spelling system means that two words which sound the same are spelt differently, and the malapropism is perceptible only in writing. Examples include *elicit/illicit*, *stationary/stationery*, and in America *make due/make do* and in England *their/there*.

Words which have a range of meanings can be problematic. *Fulsome* can mean “overly flattering” (as in *fulsome praise*) but can also mean “plentiful, large, voluptuous” (as in *a fulsome meal*). If you think *fulsome praise* means “great praise”, you are probably misunderstanding something.

If you speak more than one language, then you are in a privileged position and

can interpret messages in all of them. But if you have to rely on translators, however gifted and careful they may be, there is the extra danger of a kind of bilingual malapropism.

There is an old story of a computer translating *Out of sight, out of mind* into something meaning “invisible idiot”. I recently got three distinct translations of the Spanish *porta ventana* from my computer: “bay window”, “shutter” and “French door”. I doubt that they are all correct: don't trust translating apps!

St Jerome is credited with misunderstanding the Hebrew of the Old Testament and having Moses come down from the mountain with the 10 commandments “wearing horns” rather than being “radiant”: because the Hebrew words had the same consonants and the vowels were not written in Hebrew, the error was easy.

When US secretary of state Hillary Clinton gave Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov a present to “reset” the US-Russian relationship, the word *reset* was translated as Russian *peregruzka*, meaning “overload”, instead of *perezagruzka* “reset”. Clinton even commented on how hard they had worked to get the right translation. Fortunately, Lavrov took it in good part, and no real damage was done.

Misunderstandings abound, and care is needed if they are to be avoided. They do not all involve malapropisms: much of the dispute about the Treaty of Waitangi concerns the accuracy of the translation and what each version implied.

Got a question?

Email opinion@stuff.co.nz with your language query. Not all will be answered.

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Bizarre appointment to House committee

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by Stuff newspapers.

What were House Republican leaders thinking in assigning Marjorie Taylor Greene to the House Education and Labor Committee? It's bad enough that Greene, a newly seated representative from Georgia, has been a proponent of QAnon and supported calls for violence against Democrats. But her relationship to education is especially disturbing as someone who has spread the cruel and dangerous lie that the Sandy Hook and Parkland school shootings were “false flags” staged by gun-control advocates.

GOP leaders would be within their rights to deny Greene any committee assignments at all. She's especially unfit for this one.

Viewpoint

Greene's extremism goes far beyond policy issues. In the recent past, she has promoted QAnon, the online right-wing conspiracy hub that believes mainstream Democrats are Satan-worshipping paedophiles. As recently as September, she posted a Facebook picture of herself holding a gun next to images of Democratic representatives Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

GOP leaders could deny Greene any committee assignments at all. They did exactly that in 2019 to Steve King of Iowa, in response to white-supremacist comments he'd made. Yet those same leaders have decided Greene should have a say in setting US education policy. She shouldn't.