



Dear Reader,

This month's issue looks at *eggcorns*. If you've ever wondered whether *duck* tape should really be called *duct* tape (or is it the other way around?), this topic's for you.

Happy spring!



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Eggcorns

An *eggcorn* is the mistaken substitution of a common word or phrase by a similar sounding word or phrase. Eggcorns usually make a quirky kind of sense in the original context, making them more than just a humorous slip. The name was coined by the linguists at the Language Log blog (itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languageblog) after they noticed someone using the word *eggcorn* for *acorn* an acorn is similar to both an egg and a corn kernel in different ways).

1. **Bated breath / baited breath.** Unless you're the protagonist of the children's book *How to Eat Fried Worms*, the expression is *bated breath*, not *baited breath*. *Bated* is a contraction of *abated*, which means *lessened*. But don't hold your breath waiting for everyone to get this right.
2. **Tongue in cheek / tongue and cheek.** This phrase refers to sticking one's tongue in one's cheek to try and avoid laughing. This tactic is often used after telling some outrageous lie to a gullible listener. *Tongue and cheek* could even serve just as well, since one could also imagine sucking in one's cheeks to avoid laughing.
3. **On tenterhooks / on tenderhooks.** Wet wool used to be pulled taut across frames called *tents* to be dried. Those who did this were called *tenters*, and the hooks they used to hold the cloth were thus called *tenter hooks*. So, if you're waiting and stressed out, you're *on tenterhooks*. Compared to that, being *on tenderhooks* sounds almost pleasant – presumably they're softer.
4. **All told / all tolled.** Thanks to the quotation "for whom the bell tolls," *all tolled* seems to have an air of final judgment for fans of John Donne, Ernest Hemingway and Metallica alike. However, the expression actually comes from an old sense of *tell*, meaning *counted*. Thus, *all told* means *all counted*.
5. **Toe the line / tow the line.** To *toe the line* means to fall in line, like soldiers on inspection parade. If you're *toeing the line*, you're conforming. However, some writers mistakenly conjure up images of pulling a rope by using *tow the line*, which is a real drag.
6. **Make amends / make our mends.** To *amend* means to correct. When you *make amends*, you're making up for something you did or didn't do – essentially *mending fences*. So *make our mends* does tend to ring true.
7. **Champing at the bit / chomping at the bit.** The verb *champ* means *to bite or chew noisily*. Thus, a horse *champing at the bit* is so eager to get galloping that it's chewing at the bit in its mouth. *Champ* is now mostly confined to this expression. *Chomp*, a regional variant, has evolved into a more common colloquial term for biting or chewing. So it looks like *chomp* is now the champ, which really bites.
8. **I couldn't care less / I could care less.** If you couldn't care less, you literally mean just that: you care so little that it would be impossible to lower your level of interest further. Some speakers use *I could care less* to mean the same thing. But if you *could* care less, it means you *do* care, at least a little bit. The intended meaning is identical, yet the literal meaning is the opposite. In fact, it's as bad as when people use the word *literally* to mean *figuratively*.

Buzz Off : 24/7

Hard as *EC Buzz* works to rid the language of annoying buzzwords, it never pretends to be working 'round the clock. Frankly, it's hard to believe claims such as "available 24/7" are strictly true in every case. People do have to sleep sometime.

Outsourcing to faraway places may have created a 24/7 culture of availability. But doesn't it still feel inconsiderate to call anyone on business in the middle of the night?

Which buzzword is your pet peeve? Send your suggestion to writer@ecwriting.com, then look for your buzzword and name in an upcoming issue.

Parting Words

"It doesn't take rocket appliances to realize [this]."

– Ricky from *Trailer Park Boys*