# Susie Dent says mispronunciation of mischievous is now acceptable as language evolves



Susie Dent, the renowned lexicographer from the long-running television quiz show *Countdown*, has sparked discussions around the evolving nature of language by asserting that the widely debated mispronunciation of "mischievous" as "mischiev-i-ous" has now entered the realm of acceptability. While the pronunciation "mischiev-i-ous" is categorised as 'non-standard' in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, Dent believes it exemplifies a natural linguistic evolution, reflecting how English speakers adapt language over time.

Reflecting on her studies and experiences, Dent observed that the pronunciation of “mischievous” has transformed, attributing this shift to the influence of words like "devious" and "previous." Speaking at the Hay Festival, she noted, "Something which used to rile me was people pronouncing 'mischievous' as 'mischiev-i-ous'. But now it's everywhere and there is a very good reason why people do." Dent elaborated that with fewer instances of "ievous" words in current usage, speakers instinctively shift to a familiar phonetic structure. This insight highlights not only the fluidity of language but also the ways in which it mirrors societal changes and user habits.

Despite Dent’s perspective, many purists maintain a strong aversion to this mispronunciation. Prominent figures such as Richard Dawkins and author Frank Cottrell-Boyce have voiced their frustrations on social media. Dawkins, a well-known evolutionary biologist, upbraided the alteration, stating, "Mischievous has no third 'I' and is pronounced with the stress on the first syllable," and questioned the genesis of this linguistic change. His remarks echo a broader concern about the dilution of language standards, which he feels is precipitated by unclear public discourse and perhaps by trends among celebrities.

Moreover, the historical context of "mischievous" adds intrigue to the debate. As traced back to the 16th century, its pronunciation aligns with a traditional understanding of rhythm and stress in English language. The evolution of the word and its sound prompts a wider reflection on shifts in linguistic norms. Dent’s observations open up an exploration of other words that may be subsequently impacted by similar patterns, reinforcing the notion that language is a living entity, shaped by those who use it.

During her appearance, Dent also embraced the opportunity to reminisce about words she believes deserve a comeback. Among these is "respair," a term from the 16th century meaning to regain hope. She also highlighted "nodcrafty," a delightful descriptor for individuals who appear to be actively engaged in a conversation while genuinely tuned out. Such reflections serve as delightful reminders of the richness of the English language, often overlooked in favour of newer terms and phrases.

In a contemporary climate saturated with rapidly evolving vernacular due to social media and global communication, Dent's definitions of "eggcorns"—misheard expressions that become entrenched in usage—offer insights into this phenomenon. She notes that such linguistic "mistakes" contribute to the adventure of language, urging a more forgiving stance towards varied pronunciations and their origins.

Thus, as discussions around the pronunciation of “mischievous” continue to surface, they highlight deeper issues related to language, identity, and the interplay of traditional and modern influences. The interplay between linguistic rigidity and fluidity, as embodied by Dent's reflections, presents a fascinating panorama of the ever-changing landscape of English.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14759603/Mispronouncing-mischievous-acceptable-Susie-Dent.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2023/sep/23/susie-dent-english-has-always-evolved-by-mistake)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14759603/Mispronouncing-mischievous-acceptable-Susie-Dent.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://www.inews.co.uk/opinion/columnists/susie-dent-mistakes-are-part-of-the-adventure-of-language-to-all-intensive-purposes-186140), [[4]](https://www.inews.co.uk/opinion/susie-dent-slips-tongue-english-language-2431363)
* Paragraph 3 – [[5]](https://www.inews.co.uk/essentials/countdowns-dictionary-corner-queen-susie-dent-im-actually-quite-spontaneous-28618), [[6]](https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/susie-dent-countdown-b1886092.html)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14759603/Mispronouncing-mischievous-acceptable-Susie-Dent.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[6]](https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/susie-dent-countdown-b1886092.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://www.inews.co.uk/opinion/columnists/susie-dent-mistakes-are-part-of-the-adventure-of-language-to-all-intensive-purposes-186140), [[4]](https://www.inews.co.uk/opinion/susie-dent-slips-tongue-english-language-2431363)
* Paragraph 6 – [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2023/sep/23/susie-dent-english-has-always-evolved-by-mistake)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14759603/Mispronouncing-mischievous-acceptable-Susie-Dent.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2023/sep/23/susie-dent-english-has-always-evolved-by-mistake> - In this interview, Susie Dent, the lexicographer from 'Countdown', discusses the evolution of the English language through mistakes. She highlights how mispronunciations and misunderstandings, such as the misnaming of the Jerusalem artichoke, contribute to linguistic change. Dent also reflects on her career and the joy she finds in exploring the depths of language, emphasising that English has always evolved by mistake.
3. <https://www.inews.co.uk/opinion/columnists/susie-dent-mistakes-are-part-of-the-adventure-of-language-to-all-intensive-purposes-186140> - Susie Dent explores how language evolves through mistakes, discussing 'eggcorns'—misheard phrases that make internal sense, like 'to all intensive purposes' instead of 'to all intents and purposes'. She provides examples of such linguistic errors and reflects on their role in the natural progression of language, suggesting that these mistakes are part of the adventure of language.
4. <https://www.inews.co.uk/opinion/susie-dent-slips-tongue-english-language-2431363> - Susie Dent examines how slips of the tongue contribute to the evolution of the English language. She discusses 'eggcorns'—misheard phrases that make internal sense, such as 'to all intensive purposes' instead of 'to all intents and purposes'. Dent reflects on how these linguistic errors are part of the natural progression of language, suggesting that mistakes are part of the adventure of language.
5. <https://www.inews.co.uk/essentials/countdowns-dictionary-corner-queen-susie-dent-im-actually-quite-spontaneous-28618> - An interview with Susie Dent, the lexicographer from 'Countdown', where she discusses her spontaneous approach to language and her linguistic bugbears, including the mispronunciation 'mischievious'. She also talks about her relaxed attitude towards language evolution and her work on a Radio 4 show in praise of American English.
6. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/susie-dent-countdown-b1886092.html> - Susie Dent addresses viewers' concerns about her appearing 'drunk' on 'Countdown', attributing it to caffeine intake causing her to slur her words. She explains that caffeine affects her body, leading to shivering and slurred speech, and recalls instances where viewers mistook her for being intoxicated.
7. <https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/entertainment/in-dictionary-corner-with-countdowns-susie-dent-the-dominatrix-of-words/> - An article featuring Susie Dent, the 'dominatrix' of words on 'Countdown', discussing her role in Dictionary Corner, her approach to language, and her experiences on the show. The piece highlights Dent's expertise and her contributions to the programme.