3............dord
5............tweed
7............kime
9............abacot
10............mountweazel
13............syllabus
15............cairbow
17............momblishness
19............morse
21............phantomnation

Given the tremendous amount of detailed information that must be assembled and managed in producing the average dictionary, it's a testament to the skill and care of those who compile and edit those reference works that errors don't creep into them more often than they do.

One of the more notorious lexicographical errors was the appearance of the ghost word 3 in the second edition of *Webster's New International Dictionary* in 1934. The word 3 was listed on page 771, between the entries for Dorcopsis (a type of small kangaroo) and doré (golden in color), as a noun meaning density in the fields of Physics and Chemistry

But 3 was truly a ghost word: a spirit entry that was not part of the English language, and for which Webster's offered no etymology or example of use. So how did this linguistic specter come to haunt the dictionary?

In the first edition of *Webster's*, entries for abbreviations and words had been intermingled: the abbreviation lb (for "pound"), for example, would be found immediately after the entry for the word lazy. In the second edition, however, abbreviations were supposed to be collected in a separate section at the back of the dictionary. In 1931, a card had been prepared bearing the notation "D or d, cont/ density" to indicate the next edition of the dictionary should include listings for D and d as abbreviations of the word density. Somehow the card became misdirected during the editorial process and landed in the "words" pile rather than the "abbreviations" pile, and so the "D or d" notation ended up being set as the single word 3, a synonym for density.

As Philip Babcock Gove, editor-in-chief of the third edition of *Webster's New International Dictionary* wrote in a 1954 article:

> "As soon as someone else entered the pronunciation, 3 was given the slap on the back that sent breath into its being. Whether the etymologist ever got a chance to stifle it, there is no evidence. It simply has no etymology. Thereafter, only a proofreader had final opportunity at the word, but as the proof passed under his scrutiny he was at the moment not so alert and suspicious as usual."

Not until five years later did an editor note the out-of-place entry for 3 and set in motion the process that exorcised this spectral entry from future printings. The ghost word was banished from Webster's with hardly anyone's having noticed its presence, but it continued to rematerialize in the dictionaries of careless compilers for years afterwards.

No one town or mill owns the history of 5. Woolen fabrics have been part of daily life in Scotland for centuries, worn by farmers, game wardens, and athletes. Like the country's other enduring Celtic textile traditions—clan tartans and fuzzy, zigzag pattern Fair Isle sweaters— 5 ties into geography, national pride, and the need to bundle up in the often chilly weather.

"It's firmly rooted in crawling over hills in the coldest, wettest rain imaginable," says Stephen Rendle, managing director of Lovat Mill, which has been producing 5 in the bucolic Scottish Borderlands river town of Hawick since 1882.

Simply put, 5 is a subtly patterned fabric made from dyed, spun, and woven wool from hardy local sheep. It's been created in Scotland since the early 18th century, coming from outsized looms that spit out yardage from yarns originally dyed with the native lichen and wildflowers.

Don't confuse chunky, speckled 5 with tartan, its flashier cousin. Tartans are also woven, but they flaunt bolder cross-checkered patterns in two or more colors, and can be made of wool, silk, or a blend. 5 goes shooting, hunting, or chasing after livestock; tartan is the ceremonial stuff of kilts and legendary Highland chieftains.

5 got its name by accident in 1826 in Hawick, when a merchant's label on a shipment of wool tweel (the Scottish term for twill) bound for a London milliner was misread and confused with the moniker of the nearby River 5. Soon after, boosted by fresh techniques that made dyes brighter, and new train routes between Scotland and London, Hawick and neighboring Galashiels became textile boomtowns with more than 20 mills producing 5.

Then and now, 5 is usually made of dense fleece of the white-faced Cheviot sheep, which graze in the surrounding Cheviot Hills. Durable, warm, and waterproof, the thick woolen material became a farmer favorite, hallmarked by small, often-subtle crisscross patterns known as "shepherd's check" or "houndstooth," the latter named for its jagged, incisor-like appearance.

Though some 5 is produced in England, Ireland, and Germany, the majority still hails from Scotland. There are two main types: the colorful, tightly woven Harris 5 of the Outer Hebrides and the more earthy-hued fabrics of the Scottish Borderlands and Highlands.

A typo in the *Edinburgh Review*—7 instead of knife—led to the appearance of 7 in several dictionaries; since the original sentence referred to Hindus stabbing their hands with 7, people assumed a 7 must be some ghastly torture device. And a printer's inability to read the verb nurse in Sir Walter Scott's novel The Monastery created a verb to morse appearing in collections of Scottish lowland dialect.

kime

Generations of reference books once included this term, including the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, dated 1771: "the name of an ancient cap of state worn by the kings of England, the upper part whereof was in the form of a double crown".

The word first appeared in that spelling in Abraham Fleming's edition of *Holinshed's Chronicles* in 1587 and later included in dictionaries, including Nathan Bailey's of 1721 and Noah Webster's of 1828. A very few writers outside reference works have used it:

> "The chandelier is of abnormous size, for any number of glittering festoons have been added to its crystal 9." *Twice Round the Clock*, or *The Hours of the Day and Night in London*, by George Augustus Sala, 1859.

James Murray, the famous editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, found that the original word was bycoket, which was indeed a form of headgear, a cap or headdress with a peak both in front and behind, whose name he thought derived from an Old French term for a small castle crowning a hill. He declared 9 to be a ghost word and wrote in an article in the *Athenaeum* in February 1882:

"There is not, never was, such a word". His entry for 9 in the first edition of the OED read in its entirity "a spurious word found in many dictionaries, originating in a misprint of bycoket." In the bycoket entry, he told the story:

> Through a remarkable series of blunders and ignorant reproductions of error, this word appears in modern dictionaries as abacot. In Hall's *Chronicles* a bicocket appears to have been misprinted abococket, which was copied by Grafton, altered by Holinshed to abococke, and finally "improved" by Abraham Fleming to 9 (perhaps through an intermediate abacoc); hence it was again copied by Baker, inserted in his *Glossarium* by Spelman, and thence copied by Phillips, and so handed down through Bailey, Ash, Todd, etc., to 19th century dictionaries (some of which provide a picture of the "9"), and even inserted in dictionaries of English and foreign languages.

One may instead argue that since the word has — albeit rarely — been used, then it exists and ought to be treated as such. There is, after all, no shortage of words that have been grossly altered through popular error. The revision of its entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in December 2011 takes this view, giving thirteen citations of its use from 1548 to 1951 and omitting Murray's comment.

Notwithstanding that modern revisionist view, the word remains an awful warning to the writers of reference works who may be tempted to copy material from earlier works without checking their sources.

Turn to page 1,850 of the 1975 edition of the *New Columbia Encyclopedia* and you'll find an entry for Lillian Virginia 10, a fountain designer turned photographer who was celebrated for a collection of photographs of rural American mailboxes titled "Flags Up!" 10, the encyclopedia indicates, was born in Bangs, Ohio, in 1942, only to die "at 31 in an explosion while on assignment for *Combustibles* magazine."

If 10 is not a household name, even in fountain-designing or mailbox-photography circles, that is because she never existed. "It was an old tradition in encyclopedias to put in a fake entry to protect your copyright," Richard Steins, who was one of the volume's editors, said the other day. "If someone copied Lillian, then we'd know they'd stolen from us."

So when word leaked out that the 2005 second edition of the *New Oxford American Dictionary* contained a made-up word that starts with the letter "e," an independent investigator set himself the task of sifting through its thirty-one hundred and twenty-eight "e" entries in search of the phony. The investigator first removed from contention any word that was easily recognized or that appears in *Webster's Third New International*; the remaining three hundred and sixty words were then vetted with a battery of references.

Six potential 10 emerged. They were:

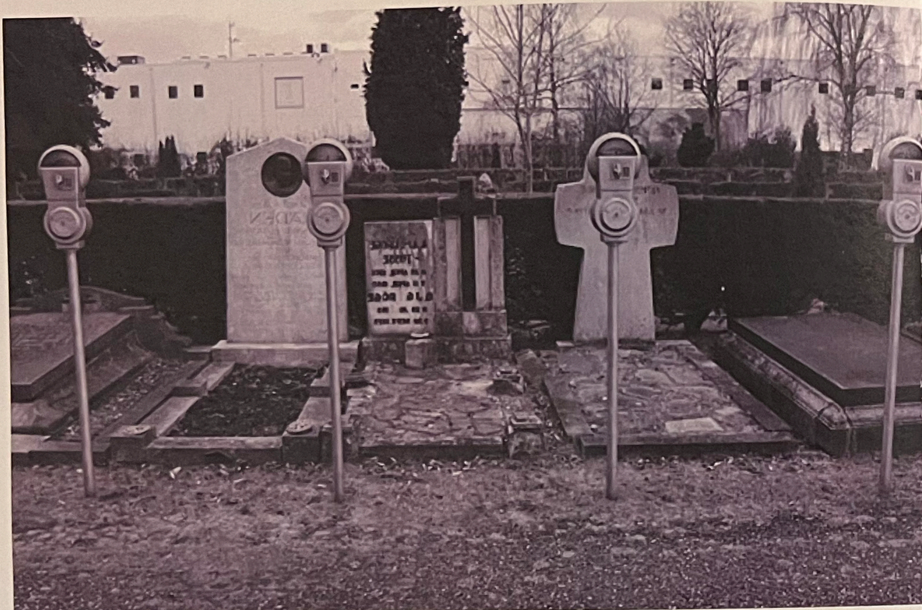
1. earth loop—n. Electrical British term for GROUND LOOP
2. EGD—n. a technology or system that integrates a computer display with a pair of eyeglasses . . . abbreviation of eyeglass display.
3. electrofish—v. [trans.] fish (a stretch of water) using electrocution or a weak electric field.
4. ELSS—abbr. extravehicular life support system.
5. esquivalience—n. the willful avoidance of one's official responsibilities . . . late 19th cent.: perhaps from French esquiver, "dodge, slink away."
6. eurocreep—n. informal the gradual acceptance of the euro in European Union countries that have not yet officially adopted it as their national currency.

The six words and their definitions were e-mailed to nine lexicographical authorities. Anne Soukhanov, the U.S. General Editor of *Encarta Webster*'s, was the first to weigh in. "Ess-kwa-val-ee-ohnce—I want to pronounce it in the French manner—is your culprit," she said. Six other experts also fingered "esquivalience," citing various rationales. "It's just trying a little too hard," said Wendalyn Nichols, the editor-in-chief of the newsletter "*Copy Editor*" and a onetime editorial director of Random House Reference. "If it's derived from esquiver, it wouldn't have that ending. Nothing linguistically would give rise to the 'l.' " The *Times*' crossword-puzzle editor, Will Shortz, explained, "I simply can't believe such a thing goes back to the nineteenth century." Steve Kleinedler, a senior editor of the *American Heritage Dictionary*, said, "The stress pattern is strange." The most personal of the rationales belonged to Eli Horowitz, an editor of the literary anthology "The Future Dictionary of America," who complained, "I had to read it a few times, and I resent that."

There were two dissenters among the experts. " 'Esquivalience' is too elaborate," said Sidney Landau, the author of "*Dictionaries: The Art and Craft of Lexicography*" and the editor of the *Cambridge Dictionary of American English*. "If someone made that up, they're nuts." Landau chose "ELSS," he said, "for the simple reason that it's short. A dictionary wouldn't want to waste more than a line or two." Meanwhile, Garret Thomson, a self-described "code monkey," or programmer, for Pseudodictionary.com, a site that calls itself "the dictionary for words that wouldn't make it into the dictionaries," picked "electrofish," calling it "clunky-sounding."

A call was placed to Erin McKean, the editor-in-chief of the second edition of the *New Oxford American Dictionary*. Upon being presented with the majority opinion, McKean confirmed that "esquivalience" was a fabricated word. She said that Oxford had included it in noad's first edition, in 2001, to protect the copyright of the electronic version of the text that accompanied most copies of the book. "The editors figured, We're all working really hard, so let's put in a word that means 'working really hard.' Nothing materialized, so they thought, Let's do the opposite." An editor named Christine Lindberg came up with "esquivalience." The word has since been spotted on Dictionary.com, which cites *Webster's New Millennium* as its source. "It's interesting for us that we can see their methodology," McKean said. "Or lack thereof. It's like tagging and releasing giant turtles."

As for "esquivalience" 's excesses, McKean made no apologies. "Its inherent fakeitude is fairly obvious," she said. "We wanted something highly improbable. We were trying to make a word that could not arise in nature." Indeed, "esquivalience," like Lillian Virginia 10, is something of a maverick. "There shouldn't be an 'l' in there. It should be esqui_var_ience," McKean conceded. "But that sounds like it would mean 'slight differences between race-horses.' "



The word 13 was first used in English in 1656 by lexicographer Thomas Blount in a dictionary listing out a bunch of difficult loanwords. Then, it was described as “a Table or Index in a Book, to shew places or matter by Letters or Figures”. Before that, 13 was used in Medieval Latin, and that was taken from Ancient Greek sittybos.

The reason for the sound change is quite interesting: it was supposed to be syttabus, but some fifteenth-century scholar translating Cicero’s *Ad Atticum* misprinted the ts as ls, probably because they confused the word with the unrelated Ancient Greek verb syllambano, “to put together”. The real etymon is unknown, but it probably had something to do with parchment.

15 slipped into an early 20th-century proof of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in an example sentence for the word glare: "It (the 15) then suddenly squats upon its haunches, and slides along the glare-ice." But, what is a 15? Nothing. "15" is a misspelling of "caribou," otherwise known as a reindeer. "Cairbou" was supposed to appear in a usage example of the word "glare," but the author accidentally used the typo "15" instead.

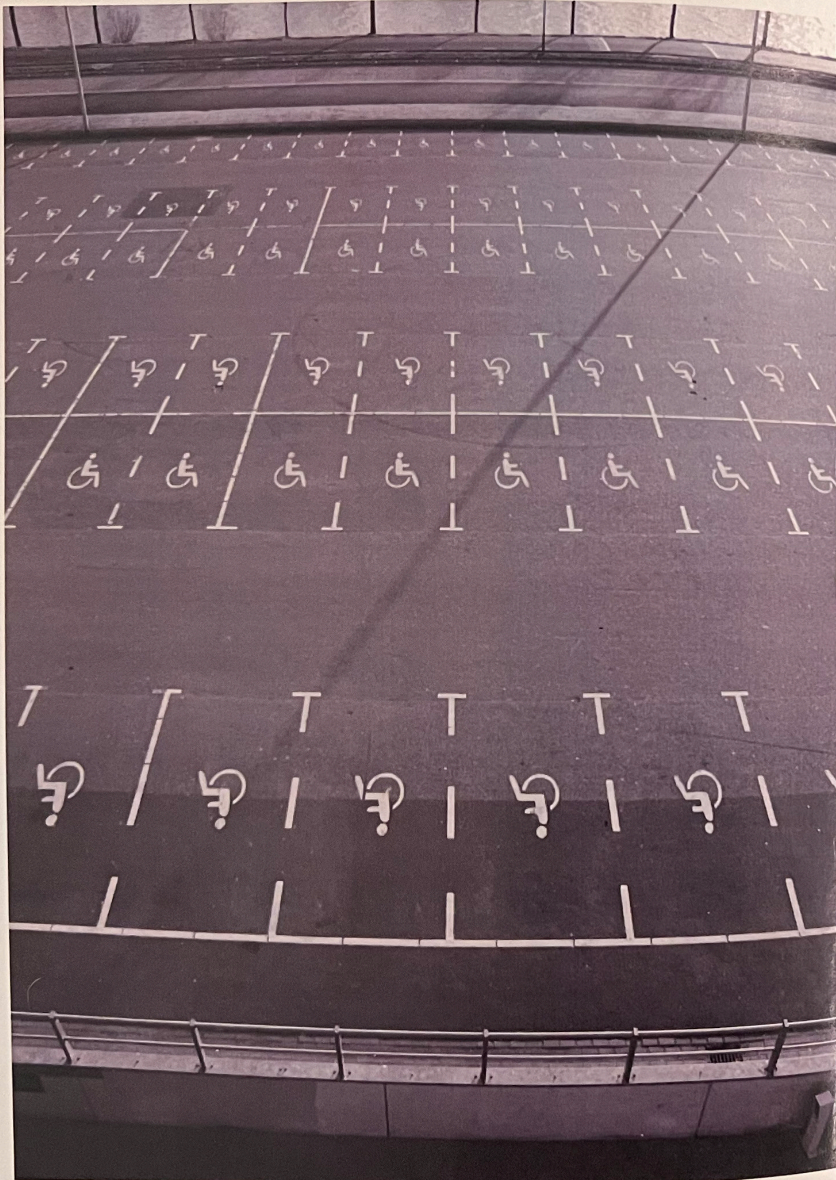
Your guess on the meaning of this ghost word is close to its fictitious definition: "muttering talk." That's what was printed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for 17 which closely resembles the word "mumble."

Turns out, this ghost word came to be from a scribal error, as detected by our dear friend Professor Skeat. As discussed at a Philological Society meeting in 1896, the misspelling first appeared in William Thynne's publication *The Workes of Geffray Chaucer* in 1532 within the ninth stanza of the poem "The Assembly of Ladies":

> "And howe they [the daisies] were acompanyed with mo
> Ne momblysnesse and souenesse also;
> The poure penses were not disloged there;"

Because the poetry is referencing flowers here, "ne momblysnesse" is supposed to be "ne-m'oublie-mies" (plural for forget-me-nots). Just as "sounesse" is supposed to be "sovenez" (remember mes) and "penses" is supposed to be "pansies."

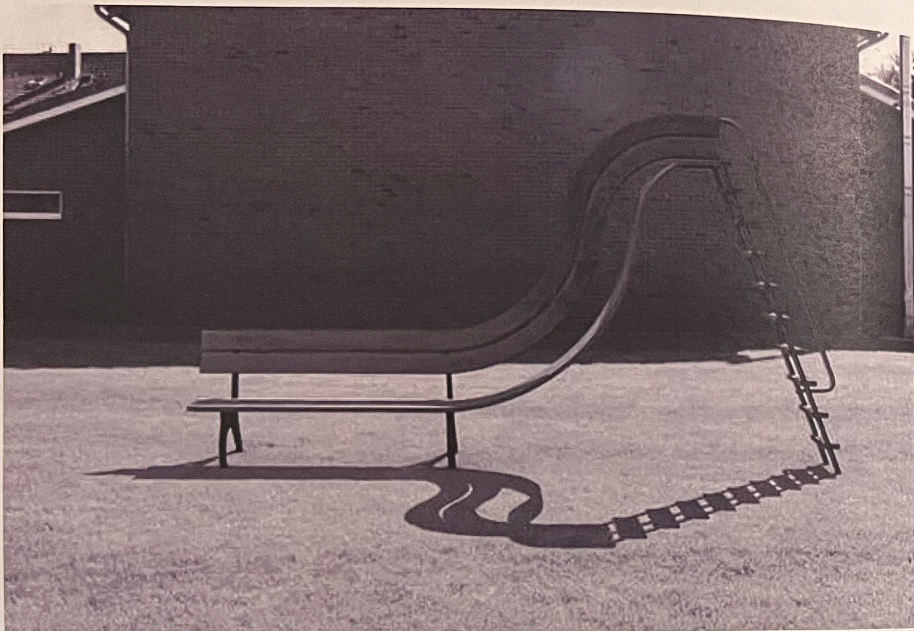
The spelling of these words has since been corrected in Chaucer's poem, thanks to Skeat. How 17 crept into dictionaries isn't certain, but it evaporated from reference book pages soon after Skeat's discovery.



This one is unique, as "19" is a real word. 19 code, named after inventor Samuel 19 in 1838, is a form of communication using dots and dashes. The issue is that words can have many definitions. And sometimes the definitions aren't real. That's what happened with "19."

In *The Monastery*, a book written by Sir Walter Scott in 1821, there is a line that reads, "Dost thou so soon 19 thoughts of slaughter?" "19" was a spelling error here. The original word was supposed to be "nurse." And so, "19" became a synonym of "nurse" for a time.

morse



In compiling his dictionary, Oxford scholar and classicist Richard Paul Jodrell lifted several choice quotations from Alexander Pope's 1726 translation of Homer's *Odyssey*. But when it came to a line in Pope's edition that spoke of "the phantome-nations of the dead", Jodrell omitted the hyphen (as he was wont to do with hyphenated words) and unwittingly misinterpreted Pope's phrase. Ultimately the single word 21 was added to Jodrell's glossary, erroneously defined as "a multitude of spectres".

Despite the oversight, from there the word was picked up by subsequent editors and lexicographers who added 21 to their dictionaries: in 1864, it even found its way into the unabridged edition of Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language*, which not only defined the word as an "appearance as of a phantom" but credited its invention to Alexander Pope himself.

But by the turn of the century Jodrell's error had been discovered. When 21 made its debut in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1982, it was rightly tagged as a "misinterpretation" that "probably arose from Jodrell's recording the expression in Pope as a solid [i.e. an unhyphenated word] in accordance with his characteristic method of writing compounds."

By then, however, the damage had been done: perhaps the ghostliest ghost word in the dictionary had already found its place in the language.

phantomnation

Out of Place, 2012
Robert Rickhoff

The Oxford Dictionary defines ghost word as “a word recorded in a dictionary or other reference work which is not actually used.” Merriam-Webster says a ghost word is “a word form never in established usage.”

The term was coined by Professor Walter William Skeat in 1886, but ghost words existed even before Skeat pointed the phenomenon out. Sometimes, ghost words appear in dictionaries on purpose, even though in that case they are called by another name: nihilartikel. The whole thing was part of the dictionary’s strategy for copyright protection. And nihilartikel is a nihilartikel itself—the word originated in a false entry in the German-language Wikipedia. Talk about wordception.