

# When using the wrong word is just not quite right

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Most of us would agree with the sentiments expressed in the title of the famous novel by the late UEA Professor, Malcolm Bradbury: *Eating People is Wrong*. It's not a controversial point of view.

But this does remind us that there are different types of wrong. First, there's the Lisbon is the capital of Spain and  $3 \times 3 = 8$  kind of wrong. As the Oxford English Dictionary says, these are wrong in the sense of "not in consonance with facts or truth; incorrect, false, mistaken".

It's inherently true that Lisbon is the capital of Portugal, and that  $3 \times 3 = 9$ .

If these things weren't true, the world as we know it would be a very different place.

Then there's the hitting someone on the



■ Lisbon, capital of Portugal.

head and taking their money kind of wrong. Eating people is presumably this second kind of wrong, though even worse. This is wrong in the OED sense of "deviating from equity, justice, or goodness; not morally right or equitable; unjust, perverse".

Sadly, quite a lot of people also seem to think about our language in terms of right and wrong. If you say "we done it", that's wrong because it should be "did".

But what kind of wrong is this? It's not inherently true that the past tense of do is did. It would make no difference to anything important if all English speakers said "we done it" rather than "we did it" – in fact, most of them do already! And saying "we done it" is hardly deviating from equity, justice or goodness.

So perhaps it's the putting your elbows on the table kind of wrong? This is what the OED describes as "contrary to, or at variance with, what one approves or regards as right".

So basically it's wrong because, according to some people, it's not right. This doesn't really get us very far: who are those people, and what authority do they have to say that putting your elbows on the table, or using a grammatical form which is a natural part of the dialects spoken by millions of people, is wrong?

The fact is that, though "we done it" is not part of the Standard English dialect, it is the natural and correct form in the grammatical systems of the dialects spoken by a majority of native English speakers around the world, including our Norfolk dialect. That's not the same as wrong.