CONCRESCENCE
Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Research
A peer-reviewed open access journal • DOI: https://doi.org/10.68251/cjmr.v3i5.13

ISSN 1595-9287 (Online)
Vol. 3 • No. 5 • 2026
pp. 149–156

RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

DOI: https://doi.org/10.68251/cjmr.v3i5.13

Real-Word Errors in the Newsroom: A Typology of Malapropisms in Nigerian Newspaper English and the Limits of Automated Proofreading

Chibuzor Ozoemena Dalmeida [1], **Adewole A. Alagbe** [2], **Abraham A. David** [3]

[1] *Department of European Languages, Yusuf Maitama Sule Federal University of Education, Kano, Nigeria*
[2] *Department of English, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria*
[3] *Department of Languages and Linguistics, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria*

RECEIVED	REVISED	ACCEPTED	PUBLISHED
09 June 2026	20 September 2026	24 October 2026	30 October 2026

ABSTRACT

Malapropisms, the unintended substitution of one real word for another that resembles it in sound or form, constitute a distinctive and under-examined class of lexical error. The substituted item is a valid dictionary word, so it evades the spell-checking software on which newsrooms increasingly depend, and it can reverse or obscure the meaning of an otherwise competent sentence. This paper offers a conceptual account of malapropisms in Nigerian newspaper English. It defines the phenomenon against the psycholinguistic literature on lexical retrieval, situates it within scholarship on error in the Nigerian press and on Nigerian English as a contact variety, and proposes a two-part typology that separates near-homophonic substitutions from morpho-phonological alignments. Each type is illustrated with instances documented in the published error-analysis literature and in the usage commentary of the Nigerian press itself. The paper then explains why such errors arise and why they survive editing, locating their causes in the production conditions of the deadline-driven, bilingual newsroom and in the structural blind spot of automated proofreading. It argues that malapropisms are patterned performance errors rather than random typographical slips, and that their detection requires human semantic judgement that software cannot supply. The account is illustrative rather than statistical, and it specifies the representative corpus study and reading experiment that would be needed to measure what it describes.

KEYWORDS: Malapropism • Nigerian English • Lexical error • Error analysis • Sub-editing • Newspaper language

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE • APA 7

Dalmeida, C. O., Alagbe, A. A., & David, A. A. (2026). Real-word errors in the newsroom: A typology of malapropisms in Nigerian newspaper English and the limits of automated proofreading. *Concrescence Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Research, 3*(5), 149–156. https://doi.org/10.68251/cjmr.v3i5.13

Copyright: © 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

1. Introduction

Newspapers remain among the most visible institutional users of written English in Nigeria and the forms they publish carry authority well past the moment of reading. Where English functions as an institutional second language and a nativised variety with its own lexical and semantic character (Jowitt, 2019), the press does not merely report in that variety but helps to fix and circulate it. An error printed in a national daily is therefore not a private lapse but a public model, absorbed by readers who treat the newspaper as a standard of educated usage (Ajewole-Orimogunje, 2013; Jowitt, 2019; Kperogi, 2015; Teilanyo, 2020). The accuracy of newspaper lexis is, for this reason, a matter of more than style.

One particularly difficult lexical error in this context is the malapropism. A malapropism occurs when an intended word is replaced by another existing word that resembles it in sound or form. Since the substituted word is correctly spelled and recognised as a legitimate English word, conventional spelling checks may fail to detect the error. The substituted words are legitimate lexical items, but their meanings do not fit the intended context. The combination of formal correctness and semantic inappropriateness therefore makes malapropisms particularly difficult to identify through mechanical proofreading. Although scholars have examined grammatical and lexical errors in Nigerian newspapers, malapropism has received comparatively little focused analysis as a distinct category. This study therefore examines malapropism as a specific form of lexical error in Nigerian newspaper writing. It defines the phenomenon and distinguishes it from related error types, proposes a typology based on the kind of resemblance between the intended and substituted words, and examines the factors that may contribute to its production and survival in published texts. The study argues that malapropisms are not merely random typographical accidents but patterned performance errors, and that their status as correctly spelled real words is precisely what enables them to evade conventional and automated proofreading. The study is conceptual and illustrative, drawing on documented examples from existing scholarship to develop a clearer account of the phenomenon within the Nigerian context.

2. Defining Malapropism

A malapropism is the substitution of an intended word with another existing word that resembles the intended word in sound or form (Fay & Cutler, 1977; Aor & Pilah, 2021). Unlike a misspelling, which produces a non-word, a malapropism involves the use of a real word in an inappropriate context. Its defining feature is therefore not simply that the wrong word has been used, but that the substituted word bears a phonological or formal resemblance to the intended one. This distinguishes malapropism from purely semantic errors in which the substituted words have related meanings but no significant similarity in form. Psycholinguistic research suggests that such errors are not random but reflect the organisation and retrieval of words in the mental lexicon. Fay and Cutler (1977), for instance, found that malapropisms commonly involve words that share grammatical and phonological characteristics, supporting the view that lexical items are partly organised according to their sound patterns. Subsequent research has further linked the occurrence of such errors to factors such as word frequency and phonological neighbourhoods (Vitevitch, 1997).

The category requires some further distinctions. A purely semantic substitution, where the intended and substituted words are unrelated in sound or form, is not normally classified as a malapropism. Homophone errors also require caution because, although they involve real words with identical pronunciation, they differ from the near-phonological substitution characteristic of the classic malapropism. More importantly, in the context of Nigerian English, a distinction must be made between genuine lexical errors and legitimate features of a nativised variety of English. Not every departure from British or American usage constitutes an error; some forms reflect established patterns of Nigerian English (Jowitt, 2019; Kperogi, 2015). Thus, a malapropism should be identified only where there is sufficient evidence that a speaker or writer intended one word but used another existing word because of their similarity in sound or form.

3. Literature Review

The literature relevant to this study can be grouped into three main areas that have largely developed independently. The first is the psycholinguistic tradition, which examines how words are represented, stored, and retrieved. The second comprises studies of Nigerian language errors, which focus on the forms of errors found in speech and writing. The third concerns Nigerian English as a contact variety, examining the social and linguistic factors that shape its use. Each body of scholarship provides useful insights into malapropism, but none fully explains the phenomenon within the Nigerian context. Bringing these perspectives together therefore provides a more comprehensive basis for understanding malapropism and for identifying the specific gap that this study seeks to address.

The psycholinguistic stream supplies the mechanism. Fromkin (1971) demonstrated that slips of the tongue are not random noise but orderly phenomena that reveal the units and stages of language production, and her work established the study of error as a legitimate route into the architecture of processing. Fay and Cutler (1977) applied that principle directly to malapropisms, observing that an error word and its target tend to share grammatical class, number of syllables, and stress pattern. They argued from this regularity that the mental lexicon is organised in part by sound, so that a failure of retrieval lands on a phonological neighbour of the intended word rather than on any random item. Vitevitch (1997) sharpened the account by examining the phonological neighbourhoods of a corpus of malapropisms, reporting that the density of a word's neighbourhood and its frequency jointly condition how often it is misretrieved, and that error words are often more frequent than the targets they displace. The construct has retained its currency in recent work, with Kristianti (2024) analysing written malapropism among learners in English language teaching and Yamanaka (2024) testing whether a generative language model can interpret malapropism correctly against a corpus of fifteen hundred examples. This stream explains why the error, when it occurs, takes the form it does, but it says little about the institutional settings in which malapropisms reach a public.

The second body of work is the analysis of error in the Nigerian press and in Nigerian learner and user writing, to which Nigerian scholars have contributed steadily (Adejare, 2024; Ahembe & Joshua, 2025; Madu, 2019; Mgbemena, 2015). Madu (2019) analysed grammatical and lexical errors in three national dailies and recorded real-word substitutions such as "likely" for "lightly" and "other" for "order," attributing them to the phonological closeness of the words involved. Ahembe and Joshua (2025) examined the essays of secondary-school writers in Adamawa State and treated malapropism explicitly as a form of wrong-word error, placing it within a wider inventory of lexical slips. Adejare (2024) studied homophonic errors in the electronic messaging of Nigerian speakers of English as a second language and extracted thirty instances of sound-driven real-word interchange, a phenomenon that borders closely on the malapropism. The newspapers themselves have sustained a tradition of usage criticism that records such errors with full attribution, and the column kept by Wabara (2018) offers documented cases such as "vigilante" for "vigilance" in one national title and "onset" for "outset" in another. Taken together, these works establish beyond dispute that real-word substitution occurs in Nigerian writing and in the Nigerian press, and that practitioners notice it, yet they treat the malapropism as one item among many rather than as a category deserving its own analysis.

The third stream concerns Nigerian English as a contact variety and the usage phenomena peculiar to it. Jowitt (2019) provides the standard descriptive treatment, mapping the lexical and semantic features of the variety and cautioning against the reflex of reading every difference as deficiency. Kperogi (2015) documents a wide range of recurrent real-word confusions in Nigerian usage, among them "comity" for "community" and "literal" for "literary," and he locates them within the specific conditions of English operating as an institutional second language. Ajewole-Orimogunje (2013) presses the cautionary point further, treating many Nigerianisms as legitimate semantic variation rather than error, a reminder that the analyst must separate genuine innovation from genuine slip. Teilanyo (2020) addresses interlingual malapropism directly, showing how contact between English and Nigerian languages produces sound-based substitutions that a monolingual account would miss, and Aor and Pilah (2021), in a study of

metathesis in English and Tiv, classify malapropism among the performance errors that such contact generates. This stream explains the ecology in which the newsroom malapropism arises, yet it stops short of following the error into the editing process where it either dies or survives.

Read across the three streams, a clear gap emerges. The psycholinguistic work explains the slip but ignores journalism; the Nigerian error analysis records instances but does not isolate the malapropism; and the contact-variety literature explains local conditions but does not pursue the error to the sub-editor's desk. No existing study, so far as I have found, brings a psycholinguistic definition, attributable Nigerian evidence, and the realities of newsroom production to bear on the malapropism as a single, bounded category. That convergence is what this paper attempts, and the typology and the account of editing that follow are offered as its contribution.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Error Analysis, particularly the framework developed by Corder (1967), which treats language errors not simply as defects but as evidence of the processes underlying language production. Corder identifies four main stages in error analysis: identification, description, explanation, and evaluation. These stages provide the analytical sequence adopted in this study. Although Corder originally developed the framework for studying language learners, its distinction between competence and performance makes it applicable to the analysis of errors produced by professional language users. Corder (1967) distinguishes between competence errors, which arise from gaps in a learner's knowledge of the language, and performance errors, which are temporary lapses in language production, retrieval, or self-monitoring. Since journalists are experienced users of English, the malapropisms examined in this study are treated primarily as performance errors rather than evidence of inadequate linguistic competence. They may result from failures in lexical retrieval or from insufficient monitoring during the production of news texts. The psycholinguistic account of lexical organisation further complements Error Analysis by explaining why such slips often result in the selection of a word that resembles the intended word in sound or form (Fay & Cutler, 1977). The framework therefore enables this study to identify, describe, and explain malapropisms in journalistic writing and to consider their potential effect on readers, without claiming to measure readability as a distinct variable.

5. A Typology of Journalistic Malapropisms

Malapropisms can be classified according to the type of resemblance between the intended word and the substituted word. The two types proposed in this study reflect different relationships within the mental lexicon. This distinction is important for both analysis and editorial practice because the two forms of malapropism involve different kinds of lexical similarity and may therefore require different approaches to identification and correction. The first type is the near-homophonic substitution, in which the intended word and the error are close in sound yet unrelated in origin and share no root. A clear newspaper example is the use of *likely* for *lightly* in the sentence, "I am not prepared to take it likely with anybody that damages any pipeline," documented by Madu (2019). The two words are unrelated morphologically, making the substitution primarily phonological. Similarly, Kperogi (2015) documents the recurrent use of *comity* for *community* in the expression "comity of nations." Although both are legitimate English words, the substitution results from formal similarity rather than semantic equivalence. Madu (2019) also records *other* for *order* in "in other to stem this unpatriotic act." Although the phonological similarity is less exact, the example can still be understood as a sound-based substitution between two existing words.

The second type is morpho-phonological alignment, in which the intended and substituted words share a root, affix, or other morphological material, making their resemblance both structural and phonological. Wabara (2018), for example, records the confusion between *vigilante* and *vigilance*, which share the root *vigil* but differ in their morphological endings. The pair *onset* and *outset*, also reported by Wabara (2018), similarly contains the shared element *set*. Kperogi (2015) documents the confusion between *literal* and *literary*, which likewise reflects similarity in both form and sound. Other commonly

cited examples, such as *prescribe* and *proscribe* or *statute* and *stature*, illustrate the same general principle, although they are used here as standard examples rather than as cases drawn from a particular newspaper corpus.

To maintain a clear distinction between the two categories, this study adopts a simple classification rule: where the intended and substituted words share a root or identifiable derivational structure, the error is classified as morpho-phonological alignment; where their relationship is based solely on phonological similarity, it is classified as near-homophonic substitution**.** Morphological relatedness therefore takes precedence where both types of similarity are present. Thus, *prescribe* and *proscribe* are treated as morpho-phonological alignment because they share the root *scribe*, whereas *likely* and *lightly* are classified as near-homophonic because their relationship is phonological rather than morphological. The near-homophonic category is consequently restricted to substitutions in which sound provides the principal basis of resemblance.

The Nigerian linguistic context introduces a further consideration because contact between English and indigenous languages may influence lexical selection. Teilanyo (2020) identifies interlingual malapropism as a possible consequence of language contact, whereby features of a speaker's first language may influence the retrieval of an English word. Such cases do not require a separate category within the present typology because the resulting substitution can still be classified according to its relationship with the intended word: either near-homophonic or morpho-phonological. Language contact therefore provides an additional explanation for how particular substitutions may arise rather than constituting a third type of malapropism. Nevertheless, the available evidence should be treated cautiously. The number of clearly documented newspaper examples remains limited, and the existing literature does not provide sufficient evidence to establish that either type is more prevalent than the other.

6. Why Malapropisms Occur and Why They Survive

Understanding malapropism requires attention not only to how the error is produced but also to why it may escape detection and appear in published texts. These are distinct stages in the life of the error: the first concerns lexical production, while the second concerns monitoring and editorial detection. A malapropism may therefore arise from an ordinary lapse in lexical retrieval and nevertheless survive because the substituted word is itself legitimate, correctly spelled, and grammatically appropriate. Examining both stages is particularly important in journalistic writing, where speed, limited production time, and editorial pressures can increase the possibility that such errors will pass into print.

Two questions therefore need to be distinguished: how the error is produced and why it survives into print. The error may occur when lexical retrieval shifts towards a phonological neighbour under conditions of cognitive or production pressure. Fay and Cutler (1977) and Vitevitch (1997) explain that words are organised partly through relationships of phonological similarity, creating networks of neighbouring lexical items. During fluent production, the intended word is normally selected from among these alternatives, but fatigue, haste, or divided attention may allow a neighbouring word to be retrieved instead. The resulting error is therefore not a random selection but a substitution involving a word that bears some formal resemblance to the intended item. The newsroom may intensify these conditions because deadlines reduce the time available for careful word selection, copy is often produced rapidly, and journalistic work in Nigeria takes place within a multilingual environment in which language contact may influence lexical retrieval (Teilanyo, 2020). This does not necessarily indicate inadequate linguistic competence; rather, it reflects the possibility of performance errors in the production of language.

The resemblance that facilitates a malapropism may operate through both acoustic and visual channels. Dictation and transcription, for example, place greater emphasis on the acoustic relationship between words, while rapid reading and on-screen editing may increase the possibility of overlooking words that are visually similar. Kristianti (2024) associates written malapropisms with limitations in monitoring rather than with the absence of the intended word from the writer's linguistic repertoire. These channels may also operate together, particularly where two words are similar in both sound and written

form. Such cases are especially relevant to the morpho-phonological category identified in this study because the substitution may be reinforced by several forms of lexical similarity.

The survival of the error into print is partly explained by the limitations of conventional proofreading and automated checking. Human proofreading can detect a malapropism because the reader can evaluate the meaning of a word in relation to its sentence and context. A spell-checker, by contrast, generally verifies whether a word is correctly formed and recognised in its dictionary rather than whether it is semantically appropriate in a particular sentence. Consequently, a correctly spelled word may pass automated checking even when it conveys a meaning contrary to what the writer intended. Research on the processing of malapropisms by generative artificial intelligence similarly suggests that recovering the intended meaning from such substitutions remains difficult (Yamanaka, 2024). The problem is therefore not simply one of spelling accuracy but of contextual and semantic appropriateness. Effective detection consequently requires human attention to meaning in addition to technological checking. Thus, once a malapropism survives into print, its consequences may extend beyond the rarity of the error itself. Because the substituted word is a legitimate lexical item and the surrounding sentence may remain grammatically well formed, readers may receive no obvious indication that an error has occurred. Where the substituted word changes the intended meaning substantially, readers may misunderstand the information or be required to reconstruct the writer's intended meaning. In journalistic contexts, this can be particularly significant because readers generally approach published news as authoritative information. A lexical substitution that reverses or substantially alters meaning may therefore affect not only comprehension but also the perceived credibility of the publication.

7. The Implications of Malapropisms for Editorial Practice

Treating malapropisms as performance errors that can evade automated detection suggests that effective editorial responses must combine technological tools with human semantic judgement. The first implication is that human sub-editing remains necessary for this class of error. Spell-checking software can identify misspellings, but it cannot reliably determine whether a correctly spelled word is appropriate to the intended meaning of a sentence. Editorial proofreading should therefore include a deliberate reading for sense and context, rather than concentrating exclusively on grammar, spelling and punctuation. The usage discussions that identify malapropisms after publication demonstrate the value of such semantic attention (Wabara, 2018).

A second implication is that editorial attention may be allocated according to risk. Since malapropisms are more likely to arise under conditions of speed, pressure, and limited monitoring, newsrooms with restricted sub-editing resources can give particular attention to copy produced under such conditions. A third practical measure is the development of a house list of recurring real-word confusions in Nigerian English. Such a resource could draw on documented examples, including those discussed by Kperogi (2015), while also incorporating errors identified through the publication's own correction records. A fourth implication concerns training. Regular editorial training on common phonological, morphological, and lexical confusions can improve writers' awareness and strengthen their own monitoring before manuscripts reach the editorial stage.

These measures are not necessarily new in themselves. Their significance lies in their alignment with the nature of malapropism. Because the error involves a real and often correctly spelled word being used in the wrong semantic context, effective prevention must go beyond mechanical proofreading. The most appropriate defence is therefore a combination of careful lexical selection, human semantic judgement, targeted editorial review, and appropriate use of technological tools.

8. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the malapropism deserves to be treated as a category in its own right within the study of Nigerian newspaper English. It is defined by the union of real-word status with formal resemblance, which marks it off from misspelling, from semantic confusion, and from the legitimate

variation of a nativised variety. It sorts into near-homophonic substitutions, where the link between error and target is purely acoustic, and morpho-phonological alignments, where the two words share structure, and documented instances from the Nigerian press illustrate both. The error is produced when lexical retrieval slides to a phonological neighbour under the load conditions of the deadline-driven, multilingual newsroom, and it survives because the automated tools that catch misspellings are blind to a correctly spelled wrong word. Its effect, once it survives, is out of proportion to its frequency, since it can invert meaning while leaving the surface of the sentence intact.

The account offered here is conceptual and illustrative, and its limits should be stated plainly. It does not measure how often malapropisms occur in the Nigerian press, how the two types distribute across beats and titles, or how far they impede comprehension, and those are empirical questions that the illustrative material drawn on here was never designed to answer. A representative corpus, with articles sampled without regard to whether they already contain errors, coded by more than one analyst and with every instance verifiably sourced, would establish prevalence and distribution. A controlled reading task would establish the effect on comprehension that this paper has been careful only to describe. The contribution I claim is prior to those studies and necessary for them: a clear definition of the category, a workable typology, and an account of why the error is made and why it survives, against which the measurement can later be built.

ORCID iD

Chibuzor Ozoemena Dalmeida https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7953-1721

Adewole A. Alagbe https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6109-7518

Abraham A. David https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5447-4396

Declarations

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

References

Adejare, B. O. (2024). Homophonic errors in Nigerian ESL speakers' WhatsApp text messages. *Beyond Babel, 8*(2), 4-16. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14599617

Ahembe, T. I., & Joshua, J. (2025). Error analysis in essay writings of selected secondary schools in Mubi. *IAA Journal of Communication, 11*(1), 69-77. https://doi.org/10.59298/IAAJC/2025/1116977 Ajewole-Orimogunje, C.-O. (2013). Lexico-grammatical features of Nigerian English. *International Journal of English Language Education, 1*(1), 261-271. https://doi.org/10.5296/ijele.v1i1.3316

Aor, T., & Pilah, G. A. (2021). Nature of English and Tiv metatheses. *Indian Journal of Language and Linguistics, 2*(2), 27-37. https://doi.org/10.34256/ijll2124

Corder, S. P. (1967). The significance of learners' errors. *IRAL: International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching, 5*(4), 161-170. https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.1967.5.1-4.161

Fay, D., & Cutler, A. (1977). Malapropisms and the structure of the mental lexicon. *Linguistic Inquiry, 8*(3), 505-520.

Fromkin, V. A. (1971). The non-anomalous nature of anomalous utterances. *Language, 47*(1), 27-52. https://doi.org/10.2307/412187

Jowitt, D. (2019). *Nigerian English*. De Gruyter Mouton.

Kperogi, F. A. (2015). *Glocal English: The changing face and forms of Nigerian English in a global world*. Peter Lang.

Kristianti, T. (2024). The implications of written malapropism in ELT. *Polyglot: Jurnal Ilmiah, 20*(1), 151-169. https://doi.org/10.19166/pji.v20i1.7400

Madu, B. N. (2019). Analysis of grammatical errors in three selected Nigerian newspapers. *ANSU Journal of Language and Literary Studies (AJLLS), 1*(5), 10-34. https://journals.ezenwaohaetorc.org/index.php/AJLLS/article/view/830

Mgbemena, J. A. (2015). Language variations or language change? Lexical innovation processes in Nigerian English. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature, 3*(8), 37-50.

Teilanyo, D. I. (2020). Interlingual malapropism in a bilingual context: Insights from Icheoku and Masquerade. *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics, 65*, 32-39.

Vitevitch, M. S. (1997). The neighborhood characteristics of malapropisms. *Language and Speech, 40*(3), 211-228.

Wabara, E. (2018, May 12). "Unemployment problem" wrong. *ThisDay (Saturday Expression)*. https://www.thisdaylive.com/2018/05/12/unemployment-problem-wrong/

Yamanaka, T. (2024). Can ChatGPT understand malapropism correctly? Challenges to Davidson's passing theory in generative AI. *English Language Teaching, 17*(9), 48-57. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v17n9p48