How to Misspell 'Paris'

One feature of language is that we are able to make mistakes. We can misspeak, misspell, or missign. There are malapropisms, typos, and spoonerisms. Our metaphysics of words needs to be flexible enough to accommodate these phenomena. In this paper, I focus on one sort of mistake that we make - misspelling. After sketching Wetzel's (2000; 2009) argument that a nominalist account of words cannot accommodate the phenomena of misspelling words, I outline a new version of nominalism that can. I use this to argue that nominalism can provide a better explanation for the variety of linguistic mistakes we observe compared to type-realism.

The phenomena of misspelling words is often part of the motivation given for accepting type-realism - the view that particular words are tokens of (abstract) types. Types must exist (in part) because we recognise misspelt instances as (deviant) tokens of a type.[1] Positing types is able to explain how 'Prais' is a misspelt instance of the *type* 'Paris', and how 'colour' and 'color' are instances of the same word, despite their difference in spelling.

Wetzel (2000: 364; 2009) goes further, arguing that the phenomena of misspelling *cannot* be explained by nominalists who reject the need to posit (abstract) types positing only instances (or particulars) instead.[2] The problem is that the nominalist must hold that (1) be rephrased as (2):

1) 'Paris' consists of five letters.
2) Every 'Paris'-inscription consists of five letter-inscriptions.

If (2) is a paraphrase of (1), then (1) should entail (2). But, Wetzel argues, for nominalists the term 'Paris' in (1) can only be understood as picking out a set that contains instances composed of the same arrangement of letters (or sounds), meaning that (1) does not entail (2) as, intuitively, 'Pariess' is an instance of 'Paris'.

In response, I will first argue that there is no need for a nominalist to be committed to those restrictions, especially once we reject the antecedent commitment to behaviourism held by nominalists such as Bloomfield, Quine, and Goodman. Instead, drawing on bundle theories in the metaphysics of objects (see Paul 2017), I argue that word-instances should be analysed as being collections of various sorts of properties. That is, a token of the word 'table' can be analysed as being a collection of phonetic, orthographic, semantic, syntactic, pragmatic, inferential, and other sorts of properties that we might want to attribute to words.[3] Under this new proposal, contra older forms of nominalism, patterns of resemblance can hold with respect to any of the properties that partly compose the particular words, not just their phonetic and orthographic properties.

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[1] This is also why types are not individuated by their spellings. How we should individuate word-types instead is still unclear; see Miller 2019.

[2] I use 'particular' and 'instance' interchangeably here.

[3] This is an indicative, non-exhaustive, list. I remain neutral here on what properties word-instances have.

Once we consider this (more accommodating) form of nominalism, the response to Wetzel's objection turns on what we take 'Paris' in (1) to refer to. As the nominalist wishes to avoid positing types, 'Paris' must refer to a (mere) set of instances.[4] The question is *which* set it refers to. I argue that for the nominalist there are many possible candidates, each reflecting the different ways in which members of a set resemble each other. For example, 'Paris' may refer to the set whose members possess the orthographic property of 'being spelt 'P-a-r-i-s''. If we take 'Paris' in (1) to refer to that set, then (1) *does* entail (2), and the particular 'Pariess' would not be a member of the set referred to in (1).

However, 'Paris' may instead refer to the set whose members resemble each other relative to their phonetic properties. In that case (1) does not entail (2) as it may not be the case that all members of that set have orthographic properties, given that it is plausible that spoken particulars do not have orthographic properties. Alternatively still, 'Paris' could refer to the set whose members resemble semantically. It such a case, then both (1) and (2) are false as the semantically individuated set contains particulars, such as 'Pariess', which does not consist of five letters.

Whether some particular counts as a misspelling depends on the particular set we are referring to, and the conventions within a community governing words and their explanatory use. 'Pariess' is commonly taken to be a misspelling as speakers within the community (typically) agree that the relevant set relative to our (normal) communicative or explanatory aims contains only members spelt 'P-a-r-i-s'; but, 'color' is often *not* taken to be a misspelling as the relevant set is semantically individuated.[5]

This shows that nominalism can account for how we can misspell a word. We do so by producing a particular that is not a member of the set whose members exactly resemble orthographically (in the relevant way). However, it also illuminates other sorts of mistakes we make by not producing a particular that is a member of a set individuated semantically, or phonetically, or inferentially, etc., relative to the conventions and explanatory use of language in that context and community. The type-realist struggles to explain this variety of ways mistakes occur as no clear individuation of types is possible, and thus we have no criterion against which to see if two tokens are tokens of the same type.

In contrast, as sets are not genuine entities, the nominalist can construct as many sets as needed, each relative to some use of language, or some explanatory purpose, and the different sorts of mistakes we make are explainable through the different ways to individuate sets relative to properties of its members. There is no need for abstract types; all that is needed is sets of particulars, and the ability of speakers to recognise which set is relevant relative to a particular situation.[6]

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[4] I assume, in line with nominalism in other domains, that sets are not ontologically committing.

[5] Some sets will not be individuated relative to a single property. Sets can be composed of members that share similar semantic *and* phonetic properties, or similar orthographic *and* grammatical properties, or any combination of properties that partly compose particular words.

[6] It remains unclear how well we can do this. Prima facie, we are able, but failures to individuate sets in the same way as other speakers could account for various phenomena such as verbal disputes, talking past each other, and when the speaker's intentions do not align with broader conventions.