

## Spelling checker problems

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This revision comes from a postgraduate economics essay, by a Korean student:

Original	Revision
... Albania has upended up to the outside world	... Albania has opened up to the outside world

This problem is of a different type to most of those featured in this series of kibbitzers, but illustrates a growing problem associated with the use of wordprocessors, namely unthinking use of spellcheckers. The spellchecking facility of a wordprocessor is not really a spellchecker - what it does is check to see if the word it finds is in its dictionary. If it is not, then it may offer one or more suggestions as to what the word "should" have been. Someone who believes that the computer "knows" what it is doing or "knows English" may be tempted to accept the first suggestion offered. This can lead to disastrous or amusing results.

The spellchecker gives rise to two kinds of problems: **false positives**, where it accepts a wrong spelling because a word with that spelling exists in its dictionary (e.g. **form** instead of **from**), and **false negatives**, where it queries an acceptable spelling because the word is not in its dictionary. In the latter case, the word is often a technical term or a proper name.

One game played from time to time by bored newspaper journalists and their readers is to run proper names through a spellchecker to see what the computer suggests. Thus, the wordprocessor will offer to change **David Blunkett** to **David Blanket**, **Jacques Santer** to **Jacques Santa**, and **Bartle Bogle Hegarty** to **Barrel Boggle Hearty**.