**What is it that makes a word tricky?** Is it the fact that it’s funny and hard to pronounce, like *discombobulate*? Or is it the fact that it has many meanings, like the verb *to set*? Irregular verbs are, by their nature, tricky little words and they have to be learned by heart. Compound words can be tricky as well. For an English language learner, a person who’s yet to discover all the rules and rhythms of the language, some of the trickiest words to learn are tricky simply because they are confusing.

**Lie, Lay, Lain**

*To lie* is as tricky as verbs can get. It’s an intransitive verb, so it cannot have a direct object, and it means “to recline.” *Lie* is tricky because its past participle, *lay*, looks the same as the transitive verb *to lay*. *To lay* has a similar meaning (“to put down”), but because it is a transitive verb, it requires an object. So, you can say:

Last night, I lay (past tense of *to lie*) in bed knowing the morning would come all too soon.

And you can say:

She lays (present tense of *to lay*) a dress on her bed.

But you can’t say:

As I lay here in bed, I think about how tomorrow will be a very long day.

**Beside/Besides**

*Beside* and *besides* are two commonly confused prepositions. *Beside* is used to determine a spatial relationship between two objects:

He sat beside the piano while she played.

*Besides* can be used as a preposition and as a linking adverb. If used as a preposition, it means “in addition to”:

She wants to learn how to play other instruments besides the piano.

If used as a linking adverb, *besides* means “also:”

It was too late to get back on the road, and, besides, we are feeling too tired.

**Discrete and Discreet**

Here’s a tricky pair of words for you. *Discrete* and *discreet* are homonyms, words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings.  
*Discrete* means separate or distinct:

The space was divided into discrete areas for working, eating, exercising, and sleeping.  
*Discreet* has a sneakier meaning, having to do with privacy and not attracting too much attention:

John gave Pete a discreet nudge under the table.

**There, They’re, and Their**

It wouldn’t be fair to speak about homonyms and not mention the most famous trio among the commonly confused and misspelled homonyms in the English language—*there, they’re,* and *their*. *There* is an adverb, *they’re* is a contraction of *they are*, and *their* is a pronoun. When used correctly, they look like this:

They’re going to their house—the one over there.

**Whom**

“For Whom the Bell Tolls” is probably the most recognizable usage of the pronoun *whom*. Given that it’s the title of a famous novel, and that it’s been used as a title for a well-known song, one would think that it would suffice to remind us when to use *who* and when to use *whom*. But it gets tricky for English language learners. Even those who speak English as their first language sometimes don’t get it right.  
*Who* is a subject pronoun, and it is used in a sentence like this:

He who enters this website shall find all the secrets of English grammar.

*Whom* is an object pronoun, and it is used in a sentence like this:

The person to whom the correct usage of commas comes easily shall find happiness in life.

**Everyone**

*Everyone* is not a particularly tricky pronoun to use. When you want to say something about a whole group of people, you use it like this:

Everyone remembers where they were when humans first landed on the moon.  
The tricky part comes when *everyone* is separated into *every one* because then it changes its meaning from “the whole group” to “every discrete member of the group.” It can seem a subtle difference, and that’s what makes it tricky. Here’s how *every one* looks in a sentence:

Gifts were given to each and every one of the linguists who attended the convention.

**Affect (and Effect)**

There’s no shortage of commonly mistaken homonyms—*affect* and *effect* are another pair. And both of them are tricky in their own right because both can be used as a noun or a verb, although *affect* is more commonly used as a verb and effect is more commonly used as a noun.  
To affect means to influence, and it allows you to say something like:

We were not affected by the recent changes.

Effect, on the other hand, means something that comes about as a consequence of something, so:

The misuse of the word “literally” has a disconcerting effect on her.

When used as a noun, *affect* refers to the outward appearance of someone experiencing an emotion:

His cheerful affect didn’t fool anyone. We all knew that deep down he was crushed.

When used as a verb, *effect* often appears with the word *change* and means “to cause”:

Activists work to effect change in their communities.

**Definitely/Definitively**

*Definitely* and *definitively* are not tricky to learn and use, but they are misused to such an extent that it can cause a problem for an English language learner, especially one who likes to read stuff on the web.  
Both *definitely* and *definitively* are adverbs. *Definitely* means “certainly,” “clearly,” or “without any doubt”:

You will definitely find this article useful and recommend it to your friends.

*Definitively* also means “clearly,” but it has an air of conclusiveness:

Next week, the school will decide definitively whether we have to attend summer classes or not.

**Your’s**

Noticed something strange? We hope you did, because *your’s*, simply put, does not exist. You might see it from time to time, but it’s nothing more than someone’s spelling mistake.  
But *yours* does exist, and it’s a possessive pronoun we use when we want to replace *your* and a noun. So we can say:

My kung fu is stronger than your kung fu.

And we can also say: My kung fu is stronger than yours.

**Than/Then**

We’re finishing with yet another pair of commonly confused homonyms: *than* and *then*. *Than* is a conjunction we use when we want to compare two or more things:

Days are warmer than nights.

*Then* is an adverb. Depending on its use, it means “at the time” or “afterward”:

We were working at the mines then. But we learned how to sail, and then we left the mines and Snow White for good.