

A Trial Analysis on Slips of the Tongue

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Abstract: With the reference to the typology of slips of the tongue classified by D.Carroll, this paper displays some slips of the tongue by analyzing and comparing some examples of the speech errors. Most of these examples of slips of the tongue are collected in our daily life in both English and Chinese. So, it allowed us to prove the general existence of the psychological representation of human language and to illustrate the evidence provided by them to help us know better about the psychological process of speech production.

1. Introduction

In the linguistic circle, researchers traditionally pay more attention to language system itself and less to the brain where language is represented and processed since the investigation of language presentation and processing in the brain is much more difficult than the study of language system.

Recent decades, however, have witnessed a number of technological advances that have greatly facilitated the investigation of the human brain and language processing. More and more people are interested in and devoting themselves to the investigation of comparatively new area-psycholinguistics.

Psycholinguistics is the study of language processing. It is concerned with the processes of language comprehension and production. Psycholinguists seek to discover the nature of mental representations with the help of some phenomenon---slips of the tongue. Although slips of the tongue are not conventional, all speakers seem to make them now and then. Since necessity sometimes lies in occasions, this occasional phenomenon still plays an important part in psycholinguistic research. Speech errors are not just eccentricities and are far from random and without explanation. As Fromkin (1971) has said, anomalous utterances are really quite nonanomalous in nature.

Therefore, speech errors have been a primary source of data in speech production, because they allow us some insight into the actual process which takes us from concept to realization of the message. Then, we will begin our survey with the definition or specific domain of speech errors.

2. Slips of the Tongue

Speech error is the subject of this paper. The first thing we need is a provisional definition, just to get us started on what will in fact be an extended definition of our topic. Since language error is defined as an unsuccessful bit of language, speech error could be analogously defined as unsuccessful bit of spoken language, such as utterance, discourse ect. We are now confront with a question that both are unsuccessful, how to distinct errors from mistakes? Intentionality plays a

decisive role in this definition: an error arises only when there was not intention to commit one. One cannot spot so-called ‘deliberate errors’ because they do not exist. When any sort of deviance is intentionally incorporated into an instance of language, we do not say it is erroneous, but deviant. Taylor also suggests that ‘The only way we can reasonably determine whether a mistake is a slip or a genuine error is by reference to the writer’s semantic and structural intentions.’(1986:154)

From the above analysis and research, we may revise the previous definition to an extended one---speech errors or slips of the tongue are unsuccessful bit of language in utterances or discourses without intention. Such errors not only occur in utterances in spoken language and the faculty of pronunciation, but also occur in written form and other biological faculties, such as ear, hand, and eyes. As a result, similarly, there are phenomena of slips of the ear, slips of the pen, slips of the eye. But, in the following analysis, we would like to confine our focus on slips of the tongue.

3. Types of Slips of the Tongue

Many researchers and psycholinguists have studied lots of examples and corpus of speech errors, by means of which emerges the conclusion that though slips of the tongue is an occasional phenomenon, they do not have a random distribution. Although speech errors cover a wide range of semantic content, there appear to be only a small number of basic types. (Fromkin, 1971; Garrett, 1975; Shattuch-Hufnagel, 1979). Then, with the help of the author’s collection of speech errors in daily life, let’s have an eye on the analysis and illustration of different types.

3.1 D. Carroll’s Typology

According to D. Carroll, speech errors can be classified into eight types: shift, exchange, anticipation, perseveration, addition, deletion, substitution and blend.

3.1.1 Shift

Shift refers to one speech segment disappears from its appropriate location and appears somewhere else. In this condition, only one sound is involved and the rest are not influenced. For example (with the words that were apparently intended in parentheses):

- (1) That’s so she will be ready in case she decide to hits it. (decides to hit it)
- (2) easy enoughly (easily enough)

3.1.2 Exchange

Exchange refers to double shifts, in which two linguistic units exchange places. Obviously, being different from shift, exchange involves two sound units. For example:

- (1) 鲤 门 跳 龙 鱼 (鲤 鱼 跳 龙 门)
li men tiao long yu (li yu tiao long men)
- (2) 卖 蜜 蜂 的 (卖 蜂 蜜 的).
mai mi feng de (mai feng mi de)
- (3) *Error speech (speech error)*
- (4) 等 我 跑 过 去 开 门 让 他 敲 (等 我 跑 过 去 敲 门 让 他 开)
deng wo pao guo qu kai men rang ta qiao (deng wo pao guo qu qiao men rang ta kai)
- (5) 殊 曼 (曼 殊)
Shu Man (Man Shu)
- (6) 热 情 shi se (热 情 四 射)
re qing shi se (re qing si she)

3.1.3 Anticipation

Anticipation refers to a later segment takes the place of an earlier one. It differs from shift in that the segment that intrudes an another also remains in its correct location and thus is used twice. For example:

- (1) 谢雨 hong (谢雨欣 能够 红)
Xie Yuhong (Xie Yuxin neng gou hong)
- (2) 把太阳 捞出来...(把被子 捞出来 晒晒 太阳)
ba tai yang lao chu lai..... (ba bei zi lao chu lai shai shai tai yang)
- (3) 做一出;做一些 (做 出 一 些)
zuo yi chu; Zuo yi xie (zuo chu yi xie)
- (4) 规换...(规 范 化 管 理)
gui huan (gui fan hua guan li)

3.1.4 Perseveration

Being opposed to anticipation, perseveration occurs when an earlier segment replaces a later one and also the remains are intact. For example:

- (1) 长沙 新一佳, 长沙 榕 城...(长沙 新一佳, 上海 榕 城 商 贸 中 心)
Changsha xin yi jia, Changsha rong cheng....(Changsha xin yi jia, Shanghai rong cheng shang mao zhong xin)
- (2) 设置 (设计)
she zhi (she ji)
- (3) 爱情 偶像 剧‘将 偶...’(爱情 偶像 剧 ‘将 爱 情 进 行 到 底’)
ai qing ou xiang ju <Jiang ou ...> (ai qing ou xiang ju <Jiang ai qing jin xing dao di>)

3.1.5 Addition

Addition means the insertion of linguistic material to the intentional utterance. For example:

- (1) 做 一 出; 做 一 些 (做 出 一 些)
zuo yi chu; Zuo yi xie (Zuo chu yi xie)

3.1.6 Deletion

Conversely, deletion means leaving something out. For example:

- (1) 海 玩...(海 美 玩 具 公 司)
Hai wan... (Hai mei wan ju gong si)
- (2) 手 机 会 醒 吧 (手 机 会 响 吧)
shou ji hui xing ba (shou ji hui xiang ba)

3.1.7 Substitution

Substitution occurs when an intruder replaces one segment. These differ from previously described slips in that the source of the intrusion may not be in the sentence. For example:

- (1) 你 们 趴 到 山 顶 (你 们 爬 到 山 顶)
ni men pa dao shan ding (ni men pa dao shan ding)

- (2) 鸡说鸡有理,婆说婆有理.(公说公有理,婆说婆有理.)
Ji shuo ji you li, po shuo po you li. (Gong shuo gong you li, po shuo po you li.)
- (3) 最近身边有 pāng...(最近身边有帮同事)
zu jin shen bian you pang ... (zui jin shen bian you bang tong shi)
- (4) 规 zu (规则)
gui zu (gui ze)
- (5) 上次打电影 (上次打电话)
shang ci da dian ying (shang ci da dian hua)
- (6) 我姐姐可能刚下课 (我姐姐可能刚下班)
wo jie jie ke neng gang xia ke (wo jie jie ke neng gang xia ban)
- (7) 我在听我姐姐回信 (我在等我姐姐回信)
wo zai ting wo jie jie hui xin (wo zai deng wo jie jie hui xin)
- (8) 手机会醒吧 (手机会响吧)
shou ji hui xing ba (shou ji hui xiang ba)
- (9) 不疼 (不同)
bu teng (bu tong)

3.1.8 Blend

Blend apparently occurs when more than one word is being considered and two intended items ‘fuse’ or ‘blend’ into a single item. For example:

鸡茅... (鸡皮疙瘩/茅塞顿开)
ji mao... (ji pi ge da / mao se dun kai)

3.2 Another Typology

By analyzing the collection of speech errors in both English and Chinese, it can easily get the conclusion that there are two kinds of speech errors, which is sound-based errors and word-based errors.

Up to now, it has been widely acknowledged that there are seven levels of language. These levels are inter-connected, inter-penetrated and depend on one another, and they represent multiple and simultaneous linguistic operations in the planning and production of an utterance. Of course, sound-based errors are those errors that occur in the level of spoken language, while word-based errors occur in the level of the words we use or the vocabulary of a language. From the previous classification analysis, we can see that sound-based errors can be divided into the above eight groups. Analogously, word-based ones will naturally fall into the identical classification. For example:

Substitution: 我在步行街上买的 (我在堕落街上买的)
wo zai bu xing jie shang mai de (wo zai duo luo jie shang mai de)

上次打电影 (上次打电话)
shang ci da dian ying (shang ci da dian hua)

Exchange: 卖蜜蜂的 (卖蜂蜜的).
mai mi feng de (mai feng mi de)

Anticipation: 把太阳捞出来...(把被子捞出来晒晒太阳)
ba tai yang lao chu lai.... (ba bei zi lao chu lai shai shai tai yang)

From these data, we may conclude that most of speech errors in English are sound-based errors; on the contrary, most of speech errors in Chinese are word-based errors. This feature is related to

the nature of the language rather than by accident.

4. Features of Slips of the Tongue

By analyzing the above speech errors, further observation can be included, that such errors have some observable features. I'd like to show them in this part.

4.1 Similar Units Interact At All Levels Better Than Dissimilars

First, we can see clearly that similar units interact at segment level. Very so often, people make speech errors only because he utters a wrong segment, which makes the whole word different from the intensional one. We can obtain evidence from many examples, such as in 'bate of dirth (date of birth)'; 'sedden duth (sudden death)'. In the first example, both the two segments are voiced stops, and in the latter one both are front vowels.

Then, speech errors may also occur at word level. That is to say, usually words that fall into the same syntactic category interact with each other rather than that fall into different syntactic categories. In substitution, nouns will be substituted by another noun rather than a verb or a preposition; verb must be substituted by another verb in stead of an adjective. In 'He rode his bike to school tomorrow. (yesterday)'; 'You go wash (brush)your hair.'; 'Ask (Tell) me whether...', all the wrong words really uttered are of the same syntactic function of their original intended ones.

Generally speaking, elements that interact with one another tend to be similar to one another. In syllable-sized units, syllabic slots exchange with the same slots in other syllables: initial segments exchange with initial segments, vowel nuclei with other vowels, and final segments with final segments. (Fromkin, 1971) across word boundaries, stressed syllables are exchanged with other stressed syllables rather than weak syllables. Additionally, what is striking is that, at higher levels, elements of the same grammatical class are very so often involved in exchanges. That is to say nouns are exchanged for nouns and not verbs or adjectives.

4.2 Errors Are Consistent with Basic Rules of the Language

It is interesting that no matter in what kind of language speech errors are made, the novel linguistic items slips produced are generally consistent with the phonological rules and syntactic rules, or in other words, grammar of the language. This point can be appreciated studying blend errors. All the new words produced by blend are possible words. Let's look at the following examples: (a) gone *mild* (*mad/wild*); (b) That's *terrible!* (*terrible/horrible*); (c) *enlicit* your support (*enlist/elicit*). The pronunciation of the words 'mild', 'terrible', 'enlicit' are all ok. They violate no phonological or phonetical principles. In the aspect of pronunciation, they all can be new words. At the same time, these errors are consistent with syntactic rules also. We can see this from the phenomenon that words interacted with each other are of the same syntactic category. Error must occur in its right position in utterance. That is to say the wrongly uttered noun must appear behind a verb but not in front of it, for example '卖蜜蜂的 (卖蜂蜜的). *mai mi feng de* (*mai feng mi de*)'; and the wrong adjective must appear before the noun it modifies, for example '在 半点的报时之后 (在整点的报时之后) *zai ban dian de bao shi zhi hou* (*zai zheng dian de bao shi zhi hou*)'.

Owing to this feature, though sometimes the utterances are not identical with what we intended to produce, listeners could still infer the intentioned utterances and understand properly. Also, it reveals the reason why people can usually tolerate other's occasional slips of the tongue and not correct these slips whenever they encounter. Sometimes, these slips do not influence the communication and comprehension, so people will, to some extent, accept the existence of such errors.

5. Illustrations Provided by Slips of the Tongue

We have mentioned at the beginning of this paper that research into slips of the tongue plays a very important part in psycholinguistics, for the nature and range of errors in speech production provides some idea of the units we use in producing language, as well how and to where they can be moved around. Since errors result from misapplication of linguistic rules, they also serve as a testing ground for whether the theoretical concepts linguists proposed are matched in the way units are altered, exchanged, or lost. Generally speaking, research on speech errors allows us to probe into the production of language, which involves how a speaker translates information and intentions into the language formats available in a language, like English or Chinese. Of course, such slips will show some illustrations, with the help of which we can reach our goal.

5.1 Illustration of Language Processes

The famous model of language processes is Fromkin's Model of Speech Production (Fromkin, 1971). According to him, there are six stages of speech production: identification of meaning; selection of a syntactic structure; generation of intonation contour; insertion of content words; formation of affixes and function words; specification of phonetic segments. The illustrated examples of speech errors provide evidence for the view that these stages exist as independent planning units in speech production, since the vast majority of speech errors contain mistakes at only one level of these stages. Also, speech errors illustrate that language procession goes on in separate stages. These phases take effect step by step in order rather than randomly ordered.

5.2 Illustration of How the Mental Lexicon is Organized

Very so often, blends illustrate how the mental lexicon is organized on the basis of characteristics like part of speech class and phonological as well as semantic features. Blends are speech errors in which two suitable words fall together. The words undergoing blend usually belong to the same part of speech class, and usually share semantic features. There are many examples shown in the previous part.

Besides blends, substitution can also do favor in this aspect. Semantic field closely relates the words substituted; a common error is the exchange of antonyms, as in 'It is rather cold---I mean, hot today.' In pulling out the right choice from our mental dictionary, we first get the right domains, but come out the wrong word, as in 'This piece is too long, I mean, too short.'

In the end, it comes to the conclusion that words in our mental dictionary are not random distributed, but regularly organized. Our mental lexicon are classified and placed in system of domains and semantically organized rather than phonologically organized.

6. Conclusion

Besides the above points analyzed in this paper, there still are other topics about speech errors, such as reasons both phonological and linguistic of this phenomenon. But because of lacking of theoretical supports and the author's lacking of psychological background, we would not extend or elaborate this topic here.

Slips of the tongue are common phenomena in everyday life, though we do not produce them intentionally. So, we could not ignore its existence. Research on this psychological representation of human language could help us know better about the psychological process of speech production. Since the limitation of data collected, this paper can only be a trial analysis of speech errors. Some more aspects related to this topic are still open to further researches and observations.

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