



Malapropism: A Psycholinguistic Study

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Abstract

Human speech may not always be righteous; sometimes it may include errors that are described as slips of the tongue. These slips can be trace to the quickness of speech or to the fact that the speaker is fatigued. Among these errors is a type called malapropism on which this paper is designed to focus. Malapropism is a process in which certain word is replaced by another word which is neither a synonymy nor a related word. It is hypothesized that such replacement is based on phonological similarity. To say it differently, the speaker uses certain word which has similar or near pronunciation to the intended one. The current paper aims to investigate or to explain the psychological justifications for committing such errors. The problem of the study is that although slips of the tongue are sufficiently studied, yet there are few studies that focus on malapropism from a psychological perspective.

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المخلص

قد لا يكون الكلام البشري سليماً دائماً؛ فقد يتضمن أحياناً أخطاء توصف بأنها زلات لسان. وقد ترجع هذه الزلات إلى سرعة الكلام أو إلى كون المتحدث مرهقاً. ومن بين هذه الأخطاء نوع يسمى سوء استخدام الألفاظ والذي تم تصميم هذه الورقة للتركيز عليه. سوء استخدام الألفاظ هو عملية استبدال كلمة معينة بكلمة أخرى ليست مرادفة ولا كلمة ذات صلة، ومن المفترض أن هذا الاستبدال يعتمد على التشابه الصوتي. وبعبارة أخرى، يستخدم المتحدث كلمة معينة لها نطق مماثل أو قريب من النطق المقصود. وتهدف الورقة الحالية إلى التحقيق في أو تفسير المبررات النفسية لارتكاب مثل هذه الأخطاء. وتكمن مشكلة الدراسة في أنه على الرغم من دراسة زلات اللسان بشكل كافٍ، إلا أن هناك دراسات قليلة تركز على سوء استخدام الألفاظ من منظور نفسي.

1. Introduction

Slips of the tongue are almost inevitable. It is said that for every 1,000 words spoken, one or two errors are committed by the speaker. Every seven minutes of continuous talk, a slip is bound to occur if we account that the average pace of speech is 150 words a minute. In addition, we commit between 7 and 22 verbal slips each day (Pincott: 2019).

These errors are sometimes intentionally used for a purpose or another; however, the most evident one is for humor purposes. In literature, for example, these errors have been exploited by different writers, like Shakespeare, Schiller, George Meredith etc.

Doubtlessly, these phenomena are not left without being studied, and among those who studied them is Sigmund Freud who suggests that “[such] disturbances of speech may be the result of complicated physical influences, of elements outside the same word, sentence or sequence of spoken words” (Freud, 1914: 254).

2. Slips of the Tongue

The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus defines slips of the tongue as “something that you say by accident when you intended to say something else”. In the same way, Crystal (2010: 272) views slips of the tongue as “involuntary departure from the speaker’s intended production of a sequence of language units”. He further adds “sounds, syllables, morphemes, words, and sometimes larger unites of grammar can be affected”.

These phenomena can be found in both phonetic and psycholinguistic studies and are found to be not random, i.e., they can be explained by reference to some basic constraints. These constraints are: first; mostly, both words involved in the slip of the tongue (the word that contain the slip and the one that is affected by it) belong to the same syntactic constituent or intonation/rhythm unit. Secondly, the word that is affected by the slip is the most strongly stressed within the tone unit and thirdly, most slips of the tongue involve the symmetrical substitution within a syllable of one sound by another (Ibid).

3. Classification of the Slips of the Tongue

Slips of the tongue can be classified according to different clues. Among these clues is the modality in which it appears, i. e. whether it appears in a single modality or in a bimodal performance, that is in cases arise when some type of perception must be coordinated with some type of production: reading and writing, as in copying; reading and speaking, as in reading out loud; listening and speaking, as in shadowing or (at some remove in time) verbatim recall; and listening and writing, as in transcribing.

Slips can also be classified according to the presence of some linguistic form in a context where it would not be expected or the absence of these forms where it would be expected. Other clues are of greater importance and they include: first, the linguistic basis of an error that is the basis on which the slips arise; does it arise on the basis of phonological relationships, orthographic relationships, semantic relationships, or something else? And within these broad categories, which specific relationships figure in this error? Fay and (Fay & Cutler 1977: 519) present an example where easily is presented instead of early. Both words are adverbs (syntactic relationship), morphologically speaking, they are different as the former is bimorphic whereas the latter is a monomorphic, phonologically, they are different although they share the same final /i/, and orthographically, they share a final ly corresponding and an initial ea.

Another important thing that distinguishes slips of the tongue is that of perception, i.e., the relationship between what should have been produced and what actually was produced. For further information about the classification of the slips of the tongue Zwicky (1979: 123) present the following figure:

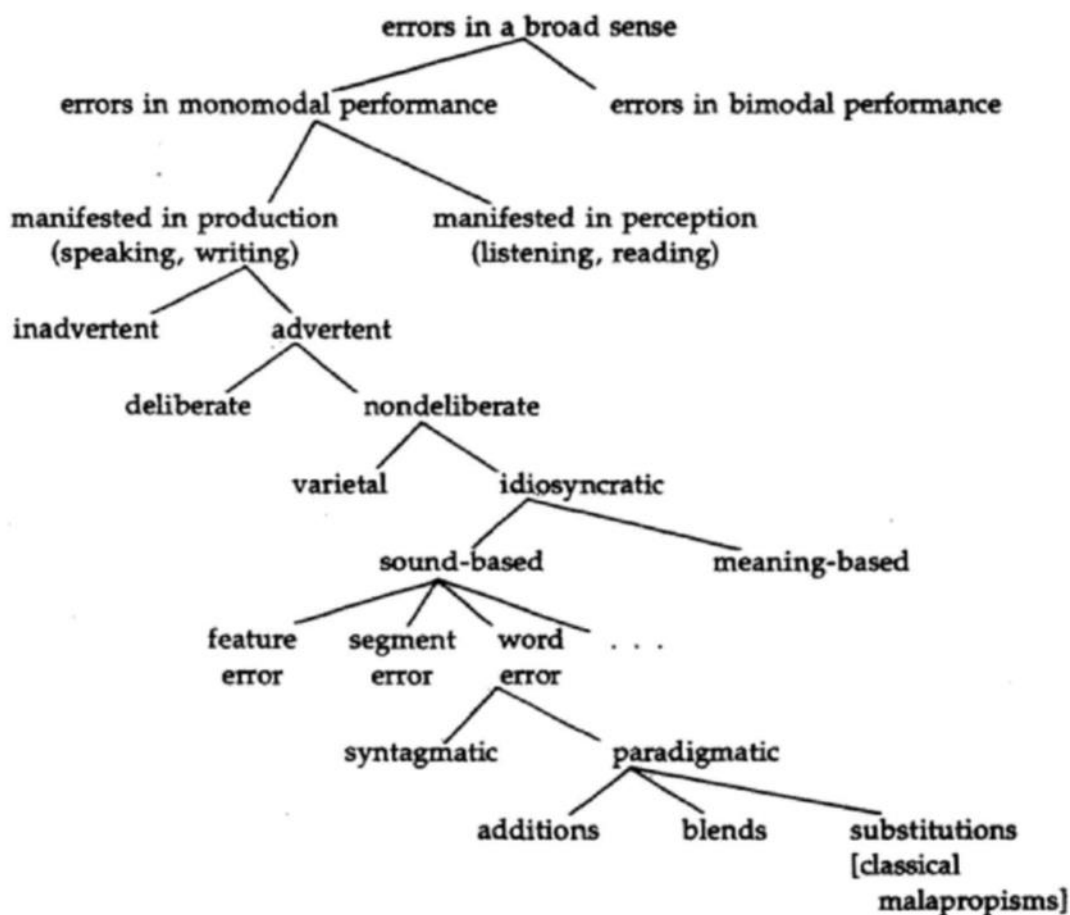


Figure 8.1. Partial classification of errors, focused on the classical malapropism.

4. Types of the Slips of the Tongue

Types of slips are divided into seven depending on their linguistic manifestations (Dell and Reich, 1980:20). They explain them with examples that, giving the letter T for the target or the intended utterance and S for the possible slip). These are:

i. Anticipations. A unit in the stream of speech appears too soon, possibly replacing the unit that should have appeared.

(1) T: *Bad sack.*

S: *Sad sack.*

ii. Perseverations. A unit that has already occurred in the stream of speech recurs later, possibly replacing the unit that should have occurred.

(2) T: *Bad sack.*

S: *Bad back.*

iii. Transpositions. Two units in the stream of speech are produced, each where the other one should have been.

(3) T: *Bad sack.*

S: *Sad back.*

iv. Substitutions. Some unit replaces another unit, but the origin of the unit that actually appears is unknown.

(4) T: *Bad sack.*

S: *Bad lack.*

v. Blends. When two words are both possible at a particular position in the stream of speech, occasionally a blend of the two words will appear instead of either.

(5) T1: *Don't yell so loud. T1: Don't shout so loud.*

S: *Don't shell so loud.*

vi. Counter- blends. This relatively rare phenomenon was noted by Hockett (1967). After a person produces a blend, he or she may, on a second attempt to produce the intended utterance, produce a second blend that uses the elements left over from the first blend.

(6) T1: *Can we afford it? T2: Can we avoid it?*

S: *Can we avoid it? I mean, Can we afford it?*

vii. Haplologies. Also noted by Hockett (1967), this phenomenon involves skipping part of the target utterance.

(7) T: *Listened to Dorothy's story with attention.*

S: *Listened to Dory with attention.*

Malapropism

The term is derived from Sheridan's play "The Rivals". Mrs. Malapropos is a name of one of the character of this play who pretends to be cultured despite her ignorance and this leads her to produce a number of slips of the tongue. Sheridan uses depicts this character in this way for ridiculous purposes but this term is used in psycholinguistics to account for all the slips of this type that are produced intentionally or unintentionally. For example;

(8) Mrs. Malaprop said, "Illiterate him quite from your memory" (*obliterate*)

(9) "She's as headstrong as an allegory" (*alligator*)

(10) You could have knocked me over with a fender. (*feather*)

Concerning the definition of this term, Crystal (2010: 452) defines malapropism as "an inappropriate word, used because of its similarity in sound to the intended word (a paradigm of virtue)". Similarly, it is defined as "a humorous misuse or distortion of a word or a phrase,

especially, the use of a word sounding somewhat like the one intended but ludicrously wrong in context” (Mish, 2001:702).

Unnsteinsson (2017:3) identifies three types of malapropisms. These are:

1. Incidental malaprop: In reference to a Muslim fundamentalist sect called ‘Wahhabi’, John Kerry (the presidential candidate for Democrats, running against George W. Bush) slipped while giving a speech and uttered ‘wasabi’ that is in 2004.
2. Persistent malaprop: That is when somebody keeps using certain slip. Reimer (2004) describes a colleague who persistently uttered ‘obtuse’ when he clearly meant that something was abstruse.
3. Intentional malaprop. Davidson (1986) cites an example where the speaker intentionally utters ‘bae of wits’ instead of ‘battle of wits’ for comic effect, or all the examples mentioned by Sheridan and other authors who intentionally used this phenomenon.

5. Psycholinguistics Explanation of Malapropism

In his model, Levelt (1989) proposes that Speech production comprises conceptualization, formulation, and encoding. Conceptualization means the determination of what to say, so a message is formed and then this message will be translated into a linguistic form which in turn has two aspects: syntactic planning and lexicalization (the process whereby word concepts are turned into sounds). The last level is encoding which involves detailed phonetic and articulatory planning.

The order followed in this model can tell how slips occur. One explanation for the occurrence of these slips is that the two elements of the slip (the intended and the actual outcome) must be simultaneously active at the same level of processing. Practical evidence for this is that lexical words exchange with lexical words, but content words only exchange with other content words, and function words with other function words; content words do not exchange with function words, or vice versa. In the same way, Steinberg (1998: 305) presents Fodor’s (1975) view of the occurrence of the slips of the tongue. For him, the speaker has a plan of what he wants to say but it is the articulatory mechanism which does not cooperate with the cognitive mechanism. The following real example will explicate the above claim: During his 1992 campaign, George Bush starts his speech with:

(11) I do not want run the risk of ruining what is a lovely recession (reception).

The aforementioned example reveals that Bush was thinking of the ‘recession’ which is a trump card especially in election campaigns while he conceptualizes his message to utter ‘reception’. This example can also be a perfect example that support Freudian explanation of the speaker’s repressed desire which he declares in this way: "slips arise from the concurrent action -or perhaps rather, the mutual opposing action of two different intentions" (Freud

1963:44). He summons that slips are symptoms of unconscious forces or mental conflict within an individual.

In the same way, the above example confirms the claims that phonetic considerations are much more powerful. Producing this specific word 'recession' can be traced to different reasons:

1. Both words (recession and reception) share the same stress-pattern, syllable number, the syllabic consonant as well as sharing the initial and final syllables.
2. Both belong to the same word category (nouns).
3. Their semantic relation is antonyms.

According to its definition, malapropism involves whole word substitution and this kind of substitution involves either semantic substitution, such as (fingers ->toes, husband -> wife) or form-based substitutions, such as (equivalent -> equivocal, historical -> hysterical) (Fay and Cutler, 1977). This means, as Fay and Cutler (Ibid) claim, that the processes of word production and comprehension use the same lexicon, but in opposite directions (producing toes where fingers is intended).

Naiyf (2018:149- 50) limits the causes or cases that to malapropism; replacement, insertion and addition. Replacement means replacing phonemes instead of each other due to the fact that they are of the same place and manner of articulation or due to the similarity between the preceding and the following suffix.

(12) *The bowels (for vowels) are pronounced distinctly.*

The two replaced phonemes /p/ and /v/ are pronounced by the participation of the lips; the former is bilabial while the latter is labiodental. This means that both phonemes are produced by the lips, so their replacement is natural especially in rapid speech.

Another case of replacement is that of minimal pairs, as in;

(13) *Children have equal excess (for access) to school.*

The second case which causes malapropism is insertion, where the speaker insert a phoneme to the word and this results in a word resemble the one intended, as in;

(14) *The kinds of Greek columns are Corinthian, Doric, and Ironic (for Ionic).*

The /r/ is inserted to produce *Ironic* instead of *Ionic* this case is similar to the case of /r/ intrusion but it is not the only sound that could be inserted.

The third case where malapropism occurs is addition this is referred to as word net semantic links, as in the following examples

(15) *The four seasons (for seasoning) are salts, pepper, mustard, and vinegar.*

One final case that evokes malapropism is when both replacement and insertion work together to form a word, as in;

(16) *The habitants of Moscow are called Mosquitoes (for Moscow).*

The similarity occurs between the word ‘Muscovites’ (the intended word) and ‘Mosquitoes’ (the produced word) is the main cause of this slip. The former word refers to those who live in Moscow.

Conclusions

Slip of the tongue is a phenomenon which all of us might experience especially in time when we are fatigued, irritated or distorted. Of course, slips of the tongue are of different kinds but the one under focus is that of malapropism which is either intentionally or unintentionally done. Intentional malapropism is exploited in literary works for humor purposes whereas unintentionally malapropism is that which is committed by ordinary speakers in ordinary situations due to the abovementioned reasons.

The psychological interpretation of producing this type of slips is that there are two words activated simultaneously at the same time while the speaker is thinking of producing a message; the two words here are the one intended and the one produced. Besides, phonological interpretation has a say in interpreting how these slips might work. The main framework within which the words in malapropism are exchanged is the phonological similarities, i.e. the resemblance or closeness in pronunciation of both words whether in sounds or number of syllables. In addition to the phonological similarity, it is noticed that there is a shared syntactic category between both exchanged words.

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