

# Mistakes

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## Preface

This booklet was prepared as supplementary material for an introductory linguistics course. It assumes some knowledge of basic concepts in linguistics — the rudiments of phonology, morphology, and syntax — but it is not keyed to follow any particular textbook, and its assumptions are modest. The phenomena it describes are relevant to many different areas in the study of language, so that the text and exercises can be used throughout the course. Text and exercises are intended to be thought-provoking rather than definitive, and an instructor might want to use them (as I have) to spur class discussion on such topics as language variation, attitudes toward regional and social dialects, language acquisition, neurolinguistics, the linguistic analysis of literature, and the psychological reality of linguistic constructs. The exercises are of several types (some are problems with ‘right’ answers, some call for the collection and analysis of data, and some involve more open-ended discussion) and of varying degrees of difficulty; different instructors will want to make different selections from the set.

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# 1

## There Are Mistakes, And Then There Are Mistakes

What happened to make you lose your speech?

Head, fall, Jesus Christ, me no good, str, str. . . .

oh Jesus. . . . stroke.

I see. Could you tell me, Mr. Ford, what you've been doing in the hospital.

Yes, sure. Me go, er uh, P. T. nine o'cot, speech. . .

. . . two times. . . . read. . . . wr. . . . ripe, er, rike,

er write. . . . practice. . . . get-ting better.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Ford is a patient at the Boston V.A. Hospital. As an after-effect of a stroke, his speech is disordered: it is full of hesitations, labored, telegraphic; he stammers over the beginnings of words (*str, str. . . . stroke; wr. . . . ripe*) and replaces some words with phonetically similar ones (*cot* for *clock*, *ripe* and *rike* for *write*); he uses *me* for *I*; his utterances are made up of short phrases, even single words, merely strung together. Anyone would say that his speech was packed with mistakes. Indeed, Mr.

Ford himself — ‘Jesus Christ, me no good. . . . oh Jesus’ — is acutely aware of the problems; like the typical victim of Broca’s aphasia, he UNDERSTANDS speech well and consequently knows just how far off-target his speech is.

--What are you reading now, captain? Dixon asked. *The Bride of Lammermoor*?

--I love old Scott, the flexible lips said. I think he writes something lovely. There is no writer can touch Sir Walter Scott.

He moved a thin shrunken brown hand gently in the air in time to his praise and his thin quick eyelids beat often over his sad eyes.

Sadder to Stephen’s ear was his speech: a genteel accent, low and moist, marred by errors. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Stephen Daedalus is saddened by the captain’s grammar — *something lovely* used as an adverb, a missing relative clause marker. To Stephen, these are ‘errors’, mistakes, pieces of bad grammar, expressions that are plainly wrong. But the captain’s errors are scarcely comparable to the unfortunate Mr. Ford’s; the two are so different, in fact, that we shall want separate terms to refer to them. Let’s look at some of these differences.

To begin with, there is no reason to think that the captain didn’t say just what he meant to say, while it is obvious that Mr. Ford is failing to achieve his aims. Put another way: the captain is wrong from Stephen’s point of view, but not from his own, whereas Mr. Ford is wrong from everyone’s point of view, including his own.

Moreover, when we ask what sorts of ‘rules’ are violated in Mr. Ford’s ‘Head, fall, Jesus Christ, me no good’ and the captain’s ‘I think he writes something lovely’, the answers are significantly different. Mr. Ford’s mistakes here involve entirely LINGUISTIC matters, having to do with ways in which Mr. Ford’s language differs from the language of everyone around him, and from his own language before his stroke: the combination *head, fall* is simply not a way to put words together to form a phrase in ANY variety of English; the use of *me* for the subject of a sentence and the absence of a form of the verb *be* in *me no good*, while both attested in some varieties of English, are quite foreign to the English of the people Mr. Ford grew up with, lived with, and worked with before his stroke. The captain’s adverbial



*something lovely*, in contrast, is something he would have heard from hundreds of British English speakers throughout his life; he could well have learned this usage as a very young child. His ‘mistake’ is not linguistic, but SOCIAL in character: he has used an expression that marks him, to Stephen Daedalus, as belonging to the wrong sort of social group — in this case, to a lower social class than his station in life would predict.

I have pointed out two differences between these ‘mistakes’: one case contains INADVERTENT errors that violate rules of LINGUISTIC structure, the other involves language that is INTENDED to be just as it is, but may incur (from at least some hearers) a negative judgment as to the SOCIAL position of the speaker. For inadvertent violations of linguistic principles, I should like to reserve the term (speech) *errors*. For the remainder there is no standard term, and I have no good candidate.

**1.1** Below are two literary representations of dialogue — the first (involving three speakers) from William Faulkner’s *The Sound and The Fury*, the second from Charles Dickens’ *Pickwick Papers*. List the features of these speeches that might be labeled ‘mistakes’ and critically examine the accuracy of this label.

(a) . . . “What you gwine do ef hit rain?”  
“Git wet, I reckon”, Frony said. “I ain’t never stopped no rain yit.”  
“Mammy always talkin bout hit gwine rain,”  
Luster said.  
“Ef I dont worry bout y’all, I dont know who is”, Dilsey said. “Come on, we already late.”

(b) “Fine, fresh hearty fellows they seem”, said Mr. Pickwick, glancing from the window.  
“Wery fresh,” replied Sam; “me, and the two waiters at the Peacock, has been a pumpin’ over the independent woters as supped there last night.”  
“Pumping over independent voters!” exclaimed Mr Pickwick.

“Yes”, said his attendant, “every man slept vere he fell down; we dragged ‘em out, one by one, this mornin’, and put ‘em under the pump, and they’re in reg’lar fine order, now. Shillin’ a

head the committee paid for that ‘ere job.”

“Can such things be!” exclaimed the astonished Mr Pickwick.

**1.2** Below are three quotations. Comment on features in them that might strike a speaker of American English as mistakes. Evaluate this judgment in the light of the sources.

(a) Other mammals become sexually mature immediately they have stopped growing.<sup>3</sup>

(b) Spink sell modern and antique paper-weights<sup>4</sup>

(c) VILLA ARE SHIT<sup>5</sup>

**1.3** Below are three quotations from sources in Columbus, Ohio. Comment on a shared feature that might strike other speakers of English as a mistake. Again, evaluate this judgment.

(a) Iris Beds Need Drained<sup>6</sup>

(b) Plants Need Housebroken<sup>7</sup>

(c) I want sucked<sup>8</sup>

**1.4** In the passages in 1.1 above, Faulkner and Dickens make some attempt to indicate the regional/social dialects of their characters by means of special spellings (a subject treated at length by Norman Page in *Speech in the English Novel* (Longman, 1973)). Occasionally, writers will use EYE DIALECT, as in *wuz* for *was* or *wimmin* for *women* — spellings which describe pronunciations used by all or nearly all English speakers in colloquial speech, and which therefore serve no other purpose than to indicate to readers that a character is a speaker of nonstandard, lower-class, or ‘hick’ dialect. Identify some eye dialect features from the Faulkner and Dickens quotations above, and then do the same for the following excerpts from Ring Lardner’s short story ‘Gullible’s Travels’, in which eye dialect is extensively used.

(a) From the number o’ times I told him that I or the Missus was tired out and goin’ right to bed, he must of thought we’d got jobs as telephone linemen.

We quit attendin’ pitcher shows because the rest o’ the audience wasn’t the kind o’ people

you'd care to mix with. . . . Then we took to readin' the society news at breakfast. It used to be that I didn't waste time on nothin' but the market and sportin' pages, but now I pass 'em up and listen w'ile the Missus rattled off what was doin' on the Lake Shore Drive.

(b) "Is that so!" says the Wife. "I suppose you're perfectly satisfied with your clo'es."

(c) If one fella loses three times in the same month he generally always kills himself.

(d) It was gettin' along to to'rd supper-time, so I excused myself and went back to the apartment.

(e) "Where is it at?" I ast her.

(f) "I wonder what they'll soak us for the trip", I says. "Not mor'n a dime, I don't believe", says the Missus.<sup>9</sup>

- 
1. Howard Gardner, *The Shattered Mind* (Knopf, 1975), p. 61.
  2. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Viking, 1972) p. 228
  3. J.Z. Young, *Programs of the Brain* (Oxford University Press, 1978) p. 28.
  4. Advertisement in *The New Yorker*, September 3, 1979, p. 94, for Spink & Son Ltd., St. James's, London.
  5. Railway graffito in London, fall 1977. The reference to 'Villa' is to the football team Aston Villa.
  6. Columbus (Ohio), *Dispatch*, April 22, 1979, headline.
  7. Columbus (Ohio), *Dispatch*, September 23, 1979, headline.
  8. Graffito, Ohio State University, fall 1975.
  9. Ring Lardner, *Provincial Life*, reprinted in *The Ring Lardner Reader* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963).

## 2

### Errors Have Explanations

It is important to see that even real errors are not utterly random events. The chances that anyone will ever err by saying *hippopotamus* rather than *the* are very slight. Usually, it is possible to see the source(s) of the error, or at least imagine what they might be.

**2.1** How do you think the errors below might have happened? (a) is an error from my own writing; (b) - (d) are speech errors from Victoria Fromkin's *Speech Errors as Linguistic Evidence* (Mouton, 1973); (e) is an exchange reported to me by one of the speakers.

- (a) between
- (b) I didn't know he could did it.
- (c) It's possible that he's not going — it's not possible that he's not going — I mean, it's impossible that he's going.
- (d) a fifty-pound dog of bag food
- (e) Speaker J: Has Robert come back yet?  
Speaker M: He should be.

### 3

## Normal Speech Isn't, Aah, As Smooth As It Sounds

Among the most innocuous of speech errors are the extremely common ones of disfluency — hesitations, interruptions, and the like. We are all so used to ‘editing out’ such phenomena as we listen to ourselves and others that it is quite startling to see a careful transcript of real speech, in which they abound (though without affecting comprehension in the least). Here are a few examples from the speech of school teachers, as cited in Aaron Cicourel, et al., *Language Use and School Performance* (Academic Press, 1974).

[hesitations] He's performed very well amm he's confident he grasps ahh concepts very readily and without any repetition.<sup>1</sup>

[false start] . . . Now Dora, could you stand right here? We want to be sure you have — to get you in focus on the camera.<sup>2</sup>

[false start, hesitations with *amm* and *you know*] . . . Well I felt amm I didn't mean to put him in a loud noisy atmosphere I don't want to en-

courage this in him and yet I felt that he could take it, you know, cuz I think he's used to this kind of surrounding.<sup>3</sup>

[interruption, with material repeated in the continuation] . . . And we're trying to shield — I don't know if this is good — shield the new teacher a little bit so that she'll have a good year and get off to a good start.<sup>4</sup>

[restart, hesitation with *ahh*] He's just he's ahh just talkative but sometimes this makes for a difficult situation if you have too many kids this way.<sup>5</sup>

[restart] Now, I want, Ellen, I want you to pretend that you're the girl and do everything I say the girl does in the sentence I'm gonna read.<sup>6</sup>

**3.1** Collect some examples of disfluencies from the speech you hear; classroom lectures are good sources, as are unrehearsed interviews on radio and television (in both cases, you are not a participant in a conversation and so are free to act as a transcriber). Aim for 10-30 examples. Now notice that in the Cicourel quotations above, mistakes in speaking are often corrected by the speaker. Indeed, in an extensive study of correction, Emanuel Schegloff, Gail Jefferson, and Harvey Sacks ('The Preference for Self-Correction in the Organization of Repair in Conversation', *Language*, 1977) noted that in natural conversation this sort of 'self-repair' is much more common than correction by others. Examine your own collection of examples for cases of self-repair.

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1. Aaron Cicourel, *Language Use and School Performance* (Academic Press, 1974), p. 56.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 66-7.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

## 4

### Errors of Misplacement

Rather more noticeable are errors in which linguistic units are misplaced: one unit substitutes for another, or some unit is inserted, or one is omitted, or two are reversed. The following writing errors of my own illustrate some of the possibilities.

INTENDED	WRITTEN
(a) someone who must be rejected	someone who must re rejected
(b) be out in here	be out out in here
(c) someone who must	some who must
(d) missed targets	missed targest

In error (a) the letter *r* replaces the initial *b* of *be*, presumably in anticipation of the initial *r* of *rejected*. In error (b) the word *out* is repeated. In error (c) the morpheme *one* has been omitted from the word *someone*. In (d) the last two letters of *targets* have been reversed.

Similar errors occur in typing, as in the following examples collected from various sources; all involve individual LETTERS.

INTENDED	TYPED
(a) Zwicky	Zqicky
(b) Zwicky	Zwixky
(c) fiance	finance
(d) between	beteen
(e) Ann Arbor	Ann Arobr
(f) sentence	sentnece
(g) vowel	vowel
(h) reverse	reserve

Examples (a) and (b) are substitutions that depend crucially on the way the typewriter keyboard is laid out: *w* and *q* are typed with adjacent fingers, as are *c* and *x*. In example (c) an *n* is inserted, undoubtedly in anticipation of the later *n* in *fiance*. In example (d) a letter is omitted. Examples (e) and (f) illustrate a very common sort of typo, in which adjacent letters (usually one vowel letter and one consonant letter) are reversed. There are reversals in (g) and (h), too, but at a distance.

#### 4.1 What has happened in the following typing errors?

INTENDED	TYPED
(a) Morris	Morriw
(b) Japanese	Japanele



## 5

### **Zqicky vs. Fwicky In Writing and Speaking**

The inadvertent typing errors *Zqicky* and *Zwixky* are to be contrasted with some other misspellings of my last name, for instance *Fwicky*, *Zuricky*, and *Zwilky*. In these latter examples, my correspondents undoubtedly believed they were reproducing my name correctly — but they failed to do so because they had misread my less than perfectly clear handwritten versions of the name: I cross my Z's, and a crossed Z looks a lot like an *F*; *wi* in script is very close to *ur*; and a cursive *c* resembles an *l*. In any case, there was no slip of the pen or finger in *Fwicky*; from the point of view of production, this is not an ERROR at all (though it is from the point of view of perception).

**5.1** From the point of view of production, are the spellings *Zwickey* and *Zwicki* errors? How do they arise?

**5.2** From the point of view of production, are the spellings *Swicky*, *Zowicky*, *Zawicky*, and *Zewicky* errors? How do they arise?

The distinction between linguistic productions which are inadvertent errors and those which are incorrect in some way, but nevertheless accurately reflect the producer's intentions, is an important one. For want of better names, I shall call them ZQICKY slips and FWICKY slips, respectively. And now I turn to examples of each sort from spoken, rather than written or typed, language.

Many errors in the production of speech involve the substitution of one word for another, either because of some semantic relationship between the words, or because of some phonological similarity between them. First, some SEMANTIC ERRORS (again from Fromkin):

INTENDED	SPOKEN
(a) my dissertation is too long	my dissertation is too short — long
(b) there's a small Japanese restaurant	there's a small Chinese — I mean Japanese restaurant
(c) before the place opens	before the place closes
(d) he got hot under the collar	he got hot under the belt
(e) when my gums bled	when my tongues bled
(f) to work with George	to work with Steve — George
(g) bang my finger	bang my thumb

**5.3** What semantic relationships are involved in these errors? What can you say about the SYNTACTIC classification of the words actually uttered, in relation to the intended words?

**5.4** The semantic relationships in errors are to be found elsewhere. In particular, they appear in WORD ASSOCIATION TESTS, in which people are given some 'stimulus word' like *table* and are asked to say the first word that comes to their minds. Some typical responses by adults to *table* are *chair, leg, wood, and furniture*. Using a small number of your (cooperative) friends, collect responses to the following words: *queen, long, open, ten, finger, French, Japanese, old, father, electoral*. Compare your friends' responses to the errors above, and make some sort

of rough classification of them. You may find a number of instances of a type of association not usually found in speech errors, the SYNTAGMATIC association, as when the stimulus *sour* elicits the response *grapes*, or the stimulus *far* elicits the response *few*; in a syntagmatic association, the response is a word that combines to make a phrase WITH (Greek *syn-*) the stimulus word, whereas in a PARADIGMATIC association, the response is a word that is a possible alternative to the stimulus (as it happens, children tend to give syntagmatic responses, adults paradigmatic ones, except to items that occur in fixed expressions; *kith* will elicit *kin*).

Next, let's look at some substitutions based on resemblance in sound rather than on relatedness in meaning — MALAPROPISMS, as they have been called by David Fay and Anne Cutler ('Malapropisms and the Structure of the Mental Lexicon', *Linguistic Inquiry*, 1977):

INTENDED	SPOKEN
(a) denomination	determination
(b) equivalent	equivocal
(c) make	map
(d) work	week
(e) diverged	deserved
(f) Sunday	summer
(g) ferried	ferreted
(h) particles	follicles

5.5 Examine the Fay/Cutler examples above and advance some hypotheses about WHICH aspects of the phonological composition of words are significant in these errors. Also, what can you say about the SYNTACTIC classification of the words actually uttered, in relation to the intended words? And what about the MORPHOLOGICAL composition of words actually uttered, in relation to the structure of the words intended?

Speakers responsible for semantic errors and malapropisms recognize that what was said was incorrect, if someone points out the actual utterances to them. In many of the examples that have been collected, in fact, the speakers heard their errors and corrected them on the spot — as I did in a lecture once when I declared, 'The idea of alphabetic writing spread like wildflower. . . wildflower . . . . uhh wild . . . . FIRE.' Sometimes, of course, it

happens that speakers are so focused on what they INTEND to say that they do not hear what they actually say and refuse to believe anyone else's account of what they actually said.

**5.6** Is my *wildflower* a semantic error or a malapropism? Why?

These semantic errors and malapropisms are all Zqicky slips. Corresponding to the semantic errors above are PRIVATE MEANINGS, which are Fwicky slips. I have one friend who thought for a long time that *Indo-* meant 'southern, lower' (from its occurrence in *Indochina*) and another who believed that *ritz* meant 'in poor taste' (as a result of her parents' deprecating tone in using the word).

**5.7** Explain why these are Fwicky slips.

**5.8** How might someone come to think that *gut* referred to a particularly difficult college course? [Hint: consider the circumstances in which you come to know the meanings of new words.]

Corresponding to the malapropisms above are the sorts of mistakes that Mrs. Malaprop (a character in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's play *The Rivals*, whose name is the source of the term MALAPROPISM) actually came out with — 'She's as headstrong as an allegory [alligator] on the banks of the Nile' and 'a nice derangement [arrangement] of epitaphs [epithets]'. These I have called CLASSICAL MALAPROPISMS ('Classical Malapropisms', *Language Sciences*, 1979), to distinguish them from the Fay/Cutler type above. Like private meanings, they are Fwicky slips. Some real-life examples:

- (a) . . . . like social psychology, behest [beset] with all these experiments
- (b) There's a connection, no matter how obtuse [obscure] it is.
- (c) I hereby jeopardize [deputize] you to handle my duties.
- (d) the holocaustic [holophrastic] stage in language acquisition
- (e) It warms the coggles [cockles] of my heart.
- (f) The policemen threw an accordion [cordon] around the crowd.

It is important that the people who uttered these real-life examples often repeated their peculiar locutions and, when challenged, maintained that the word they used was the word they meant (usually indicating that they didn't see what the fuss was about).

**5.9** H.W. Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Oxford University Press, 1937) gives the following illustrations under the heading MALAPROPS:

- (a) He thought it desirous that the House of Lords should determine the tests to be applied.
- (b) Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has circulated a letter which portends to be a reply to a letter which I had previously addressed to you.
- (c) His capacity for continuous work is incredulous.
- (d) It was a great humility to be kept waiting about, after having been asked to come.

Which words are incorrect, and what should they have been? What do these examples have in common? How are they different from the examples of malapropisms I gave above?

**5.10** *New York* magazine's competition 348 asked for examples of modern malapropisms. Mary Ann Madden, the keeper of these competitions, assembled the results in the issue of May 14, 1979: items (a) - (h) below were repeaters, submitted by a number of contestants; (i) - (l) were First Prize winners. Compare these contrived examples with the malapropisms and classical malapropisms already illustrated.

- (a) Absinthe makes the heart grow fonder.
- (b) Sitting and trading antidotes.
- (c) Bite the pullet.
- (d) Rabid transit.
- (e) Taken for granite.
- (f) For all intensive purposes.
- (g) Harold be thy name.
- (h) How sharper than a servant's tooth
- (i) How Could You Believe Me When I Said I Loved You When You Know I've Been A Lawyer All My Life?

- (j) My poor old mother is 84, and she's been pitching pennies all her life.
- (k) Later on, we'll perspire  
As we dream by the fire.
- (l) He's as graceful as poultry in motion.

**5.11** Just as spellings like *Fwicky* result from earlier misreadings, so some classical malapropisms result from earlier MISHEARINGS, from 'slips of the ear'. Below are fifteen selections from a collection of slips of the ear made by Sara Garnes and Zinny Bond (*Chicago Linguistic Society*, 1975). These hearing errors almost always change words into existing words, and the sentences wholly conform to the syntax of English, though semantically they are often strange. In the examples below, the points you are to examine are in bold type; for each example, discuss the phonetic relationship between the segment that was actually said and the one that was heard.

SAID	HEARD
(a) por <b>p</b> oise lady	corp <b>u</b> s lady
(b) bridge <b>c</b> able	bridge <b>t</b> able
(c) <b>r</b> ecite	rec <b>y</b> cle
(d) <b>w</b> rapping service	wre <b>c</b> king service
(e) I'm getting <b>m</b> arried	... <b>b</b> uried
(f) say goodbye to the Fry's	... to the <b>f</b> lies
(g) A <b>v</b> iable solution	a <b>b</b> uyable solution
(h) a section for the <b>d</b> eaf	... for the <b>d</b> eath
(i) Maple Leaf <b>w</b> ieners	make-believe wi <b>e</b> ners
(j) Bloomfield's person- ality got <b>w</b> arped here	... got Whor <b>f</b> ed here
(k) <b>w</b> rapping service	wre <b>c</b> king service
(l) <b>D</b> eath in Venice	de <b>a</b> f in Venice
(m) horse <b>s</b> how	horse <b>s</b> hoe
(n) <b>C</b> upid	<b>C</b> uban
(o) <b>C</b> upid	<b>C</b> uban

**5.12** When you hear a classical malapropism, you may find it very hard to retrieve the word that YOU would use. If you feel unsure in this way, you are in the TIP-OF-THE-TONGUE state, fishing for the right word among a collection of alternatives. You might want to investigate this state and compare your results with the classical malapropisms and slip-of-the-ear cases above. To do

this, choose some low-frequency words like *apse*, *nepotism*, *cloaca*, *ambergris*, and *sampan* (examples used by Roger Brown and David McNeill in their 1966 study of the tip-of-the-tongue (TOT) phenomenon, in the *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*): read the definitions to some subjects and ask them to supply the corresponding English words — and all the words they think of along the way. Brown and McNeill reported that the TOT state was unmistakable: the subject ‘would appear to be in mild torment, something like the brink of a sneeze, and if he found the word his relief was considerable’. What phonetic relationships do you find between the targets and the words your subjects supplied in their search for the right words?

I have now discussed four types of slips in which one word is substituted for another: two based on meaning, two based on sound; and two Zqicky types, two Fwicky types. The table below summarizes the terms I have used in classifying these types of slips:

	<b>MEANING-BASED</b>	<b>SOUND-BASED</b>
<b>ZQICKY</b>	semantic errors	malapropisms
<b>FWICKY</b>	private meanings	classical malapropisms

## 6

### Errors At Many Levels

Though I dwelt in the last section on the one case of WORD SUBSTITUTION errors, there are many other types of real errors in speech. Here are some assorted examples of bloopers (again from Fromkin):

INTENDED	SPOKEN
(a) the trouble with markedness theory	the markedness theory with trouble
(b) she's twelve going on thirteen	she's twelve going on thirty
(c) clear blue sky	glear plue sky
(d) it's the optimal number	it's the moptimal number
(e) Bach distinguishes three different types	Bach distinguishes three different bipes
(f) group three	griep three
(g) Bank of America	Mank of Aberica
(h) a language learner needs	a language needer learns
(i) five uninterrupted days	five interrupted days



**INTENDED**

- (j) whisper
- (k) sit all day

**SPOKEN**

- whipser
- zit all day

As with the writing/typing errors we examined earlier, these speech errors may involve linguistic units of many different sizes and types — at least, phrases, words, morphemes, syllables, phonemes, and features of phonemes. And, as before, in some errors one unit replaces another; in others a unit is inserted; in others a unit is omitted; and in still others two units are reversed.

**6.1** Classify each of the examples above with respect to the nature of the units involved (phrases, words, and so on); and with respect to the character of the error (replacement, insertion, omission, reversal). In some replacements and insertions, the new material duplicates something elsewhere: either the new material **ANTICIPATES** something that will follow or **PERSEVERES** from something earlier. Indicate which of the examples is an anticipation or a perseveration.

**6.2** Below are examples (from Fromkin) of a new type of error. What is the mechanism involved?

- (a) momentaneous
- (b) I can't even get the jargon corright
- (c) importance of adjoicent rules
- (d) car dealsman
- (e) the competition is a little stougher
- (f) horrible

**6.3** Below are some syntactic examples, collected from various sources. In what way can these errors be seen as similar to the errors in the previous question? How might these errors have arisen?

- (a) We have found no other device more effective for ridding moles from your garden.
- (b) I'm bored of these assignments.
- (c) They will have to let the reactor to cool down.
- (d) . . . . in this ever-changing world in which we live in . . . .
- (e) Fusional language — is a language that puts

together all the free morphemes and bound morphemes together.

- (f) They have more grammar rules, spelling, and a more broader vocabulary than a pidgin.
- (g) That is the problem which I don't know how to solve it.
- (h) It [prescriptive grammar] is what some people (the ones who write the books) think everyone who speaks English should follow their rules.

## 7

### Ignorance

The examples we have just been looking at are production errors (Zqicky slips) and mistakes arising from some misapprehension of the details of the linguistic system (Fwicky slips). Three further sources of mistakes are IGNORANCE of these details, INTERFERENCE from another system, and DISTURBANCE of normal linguistic functioning. I will take these up in succeeding sections, and then move on to still more sources of error.

Ordinary spelling mistakes occur in part because writers have learned incorrectly how the spelling system applies to particular cases; this is what is going on when someone CONSISTENTLY misspells a word — *seperate* for *separate*, and *descendent* for *descendant*, for instance. But spelling mistakes also occur because writers are trying to extend the system they know to new cases in ignorance of the actual spellings, as happens when people try to cope with unfamiliar proper names or technical terms, consequently spelling *Geiss* or *Gais* for *Geis*, and *alvelar* for *alveolar*. What is important in both cases is that, in general, misspellings reflect some knowledge of the PRINCIPLES connecting written symbols with pronunciation, as well as knowledge of the correct spellings for many specific words.

**7.1** Examine the misspellings below (collected from various sources) and suggest how they might have arisen.

- (a) She delivers her lines well and lipsinks to song rather well.
- (b) You wont be sorry!
- (c) This allows knew ideas to be introduced. . . .
- (d) I think the material could of been presented in a more interesting way.
- (e) If your good looking and white. . . .
- (f) Denistry
- (g) . . . . and have no real interest in persuing further education
- (h) tuna cassarole
- (i) Schembechler intently dislikes playing freshmen. . . .
- (j) He made the material alot more interesting than it was
- (k) it was big but I could hadle bigger
- (l) First in touchdowns scored by a quarterback

The purest cases of ignorance mistakes are those that arise when someone has heard a particular word, phrase, construction, or discourse type but hasn't been supplied with enough information to determine its meaning or the sorts of contexts in which it is appropriate — circumstances that give rise to private meanings, like those mentioned in section five above. Young children acquiring their first language make many mistakes based on ignorance, as of course do people learning an additional language — but they are not the only ones. The college freshman who returns home for Thanksgiving dinner after a couple of months of dormitory life and asks a family member to 'pass the fuckin' butter' exhibits an ignorance of the contexts in which this recently learned style of speech is appropriate. The child who challenges you with the question, 'How do you get off an elephant?' and then responds to your baffled 'I don't know' with a triumphant 'You don't get off an elephant, you get off a duck!' has not yet learned that there is a class of jokes (namely, puns) for which the exact wording of the joke is crucial (in case you haven't heard this antique pun, the correct version begins, 'How do you get down off an elephant?').

**7.2** What aspect of English are the children described in the

passage below, from pages 38 and 39 of Charles Fillmore's *Santa Cruz Lectures on Deixis* (Indiana University Linguistics Club, 1975), ignorant of?

Herb Clark has brought to my attention some experiments that were conducted with preschool children communicating with each other across a barrier. They could hear each other, but they could not see each other. Each child had in front of him an array of blocks, and the experiment was to see how well children of different ages could communicate with each other by linguistic means alone. One child was told how to assemble the blocks to make a particular figure, and his job was to teach the child on the other side of the barrier how to do the same thing. It was not uncommon, Clark tells me, for the one child to say, "Put this block on top of that one", for the other then to say, "You mean this one?", and for the first to reply, "Yes". This is characteristic of what Piaget refers to as the egocentric speech of children under the age of about seven.

**7.3** William Labov ('Denotation Structure' in *Papers from the Parasession on the Lexicon*, Chicago Linguistic Society, 1978) has described in some detail the meanings associated with his daughter Jessie's first words. *Mama* was used at first to refer to Jessie's mother, father, any one of her three (teenaged) sisters, and her (teenaged) brother, but not to herself or to anyone outside her immediate family. A few months later, Jessie began to use *dada*. By then, *mama* was used only for her mother, but *dada* was at first used for both her father and brother. A month later, *mama* and *dada* were each being used to refer to a single person. How do you think Jessie might have arrived at her earlier incorrect usages?

**7.4** Labov reports that Jessie's very first word, *cat*, was used for a large number of round-headed creatures, including the Labov family cat (its first referent), female lions (but not male ones), squirrels (but not rabbits), some puppies (but not most adult dogs), barn owls, and ostriches. Comment on this particular bit of toddler semantics.

## 8

### Competing Systems

Children acquiring a first language and adults learning an additional one say a great many things that are mistakes from the point of view of a fully monolingual adult, but which can scarcely be attributed to simple ignorance of a linguistic system. Instead, they usually appear to be behaving according to a system, though one that is different from the system they are learning. The child who rejects suggestions by prefixing *no* to a verb construction — *no going home* 'I'm not going home', *no put it back* 'I won't put it back' — is not producing sentences like an adult, but she is producing them according to a pattern. She has, as it were, hypothesized her own set of principles for English.

**8.1** Around the age of 3, all children acquiring English (no matter what they said when they were younger) come up with verb forms like those in (a) below and noun forms like those in (b) below.

- (a) He comed/goed/sleeped/sitted/standed.
- (b) Two mouses/sheeps/mans/foots/gooses.

Explain these deviant forms.

Comment on the role of correction in language acquisition, as illustrated in this exchange between a four-year old and linguist Jean Berko Gleason<sup>1</sup>:

Child: My teacher holded the baby rabbits and we patted them.

Linguist: Did you say your teacher held the baby rabbits?

Child: Yes.

Linguist: What did you say she did?

Child: She holded the baby rabbits and we patted them.

Linguist: Did you say she held them tightly?

Child: No, she holded them loosely.

**8.2** Almost all children acquiring English invent the reflexive pronouns *hissself* and *theirselves* and, for a time, use these instead of *himself* and *themselves*. Why should this be?

**8.3** Many English-speaking children have deviant plural forms like *peoples*, *childrens*, and *feets* in the examples below, but do NOT say things like *boyses* or *handses*. Why should they make one type of mistake and not the other?

- (a) Once upon a time there was some peoples that had a dog and a child.
- (b) That's the mother and they are some little childrens playing with her.
- (c) The boy is on his feets.<sup>2</sup>

**8.4** Around the age of 4 my daughter Elizabeth used the following past participle forms (in constructions like *I've already . . .* and *It's been. . .*):

- (a) jumped, asked, hoped, fized, skipped, died, . . . .
- (b) sat, slept, came, went, stood, made, . . . .
- (c) broken, spoken, bitten, gotten
- (d) tooken, roden, wroten, sawn, aten

Explain the deviant forms in (d).

**8.5** The following errors exemplify a type that is widespread in English-speaking children, even in the early years of grade school. What aspect of English structure are the speakers of (a) - (d) ignorant of?

- (a) I see a clothes.
- (b) He gave her a popcorn and the little baby ate some.
- (c) There's a dirt.
- (d) They're fruits in the basket.<sup>3</sup>

**8.6** Below is a list of pronunciations of English words by Joan Velten at the age of 22 months (as reported by her father Harry in 'The Growth of Phonemic and Lexical Patterns in Infant Language', *Language*, 1943). (There are only two vowels in the pronunciations: *a* as in *father* and *u* as in *chute*.) Consider the CONSONANTS in these examples; for the purposes of this problem, suppose that Joan's pronunciations are versions of adult English pronunciation.

- (a) What alterations does Joan make in her pronunciations of consonants at the beginning of words? At the ends of words?
- (b) What alterations does Joan make in her pronunciations of consonant clusters?

JOAN	ADULTS
1. ap	up
2. at	out
3. bat	pat, spot, bought, bite
4. bu	boy, pea, blow, blue
5. but	bead, bed, boat, put, boot
6. dap	top
7. dut	toad
8. nap	knob
9. nuf	sniff
10. baf	puff

A learner of a new language is also making hypotheses about the structure of the language, and in this case the learner's hypotheses are guided in part by the structure of previously



learned languages. The result is characteristic patterns of interference from one system to another: ‘foreigner talk’ and a ‘foreign accent’.

**8.7** Read through the following dialogue<sup>4</sup> and note some of the pieces of second-language interference in the old man’s speech. Make some informed guesses about the syntax of his first language. (You are perfectly safe here; we know nothing more about him than you see here, since this is his only appearance in the novel.)

‘Excuse me, . . . is Mrs Spindrift in, please?’

‘Here is staying nobody of such name. There was staying, but not now no longer.’

‘Would you mind telling me when she left?’

‘Yesterday, day before, who knows? Here today, gone tomorrow is rule of hotels. Excuse, fish is burning.’

‘But did she leave no message, no address?’

There was a scream from the kitchen. ‘I tell you’, said the old man, ‘fish is burning. I go now, I know no more.’

**8.8** The following errors (arranged into groups) were reported by Andrew Cohen from the speech of children in Redwood City, California, who spoke both English and Spanish. They are NOT errors monolingual English-speaking children usually make, and they do NOT involve features characteristic of the English dialects of the area. Suggest, for each group, an explanation in terms of interference. (You do not need to know any Spanish to make these hypotheses.)

- (a) 1. Think the baby’s eating an apple.  
2. Then puts this in the pants.<sup>5</sup>
- (b) 1. The hands are back on that girl.  
2. Then puts this in the pants.<sup>6</sup>
- (c) 1. They eat altogether the dinner.  
2. This boy had once a cat.<sup>7</sup>
- (d) 1. Another one is sitting in the wall.  
2. They want to stand on the yard.<sup>8</sup>
- (e) 1. I don’t know what’s her name.

2. She says that a little boy pushed her down and then after that she told the teacher who was the boy.<sup>9</sup>

If you speak Spanish, you might want to explain the errors in (f) below, which are in a sense the reverse of the errors in (b) above.

- (f) 1. Esto perro está poniendo su mano.
2. El tiene su mano arriba.<sup>10</sup>

**8.9** Below are some words that have been borrowed from English into Hawaiian.

(a) From this evidence, what hypothesis would you make about the ways consonants and vowels can be combined to make words in Hawaiian? Support your hypothesis with relevant examples.

(b) In the examples below, how are the English consonants altered to fit the Hawaiian consonant system? Try to make GENERAL statements about these alterations.

(c) If a Hawaiian speaker tries to reproduce the English word *these*, what consonants will he probably use?

ENGLISH (in ordinary spelling)	HAWAIIAN (in tran- scription)	ENGLISH (in ordinary spelling)	HAWAIIAN (in tran- scription)
1. Abraham	ʔapalahama	10. Jean	kini
2. Adam	ʔakamu	11. Korea	ko:lea
3. beef	pipi	12. Mary	mele
4. blue	polu:	13. pencil	penikala
5. Clark	kalaka	14. Robert	lopaka
6. dollar	ka:la:	15. room	lumi
7. drive	kalaiwa	16. Ruth	laka
8. Filipino	pilipino	17. Smith	kamika
9. hymn	hi:meni	18. taboo	kapu

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1. Courtney Cazden, *Child Language and Education* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), pp. 91-92.
  2. Andrew Cohen, *A Sociolinguistic Approach to Bilingual Education* (Newbury House, 1975), p. 172.
  3. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
  4. Anthony Burgess, *The Doctor Is Sick* (W.W. Norton, 1960), pp. 88-9.
  5. Cohen, *Op. cit.*, p. 177.
  6. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
  7. *Ibid.*, p. 199.
  8. *Ibid.*, pp. 200-1.
  9. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
  10. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

## Disturbances In Production

Many things can get in the way of normal speech production. Food in the mouth, for instance. Muscle spasms. A gag. Clenched teeth. Various deformities or injuries — cleft palate, toothlessness, a missing tongue, laryngectomy. All of these conditions involve the peripheral mechanisms of speech production. Other disturbances are more central.

Some are still mysterious. The causes of stuttering, dyslexia, and autism are poorly understood, but it seems clear that the problem is not actually with the organs of articulation. Rather, the problem lies somehow in the organization and functioning of the brain. There are other, better understood, conditions in which this is certainly the case: prolonged sleeplessness and the ingestion of certain drugs (for example, grain alcohol) will alter the chemical balance of the brain in such a way as to result in more or less serious disturbances in functioning, including language functions. One experimental study of the effect of alcohol on speech (Leland Lester and Royal Skousen, 'The Phonology of Drunkenness,' *Papers from the Parasession on Natural Phonology*, Chicago Linguistic Society, 1974) documented several phonological effects of drunkenness — in

particular, the devoicing of word-final consonants, so that the final *z* sound of *tease* is replaced by *s*; the final *d* sound of *bed* by *t*, the final *g* sound of *dog* by *k*, and the final *v* sound of *locomotive* by *f*; and the replacement of the *s* sound in words like *yes*, *spin*, and *first* by *ʃ*, the final sound of *dish*.

Much more extensive linguistic disturbances occur in the various aphasias and in certain forms of ‘mental illness’, in particular the collection of behaviors referred to as schizophrenia. We have already seen the halting, disjointed speech of the Broca-type aphasic. Now consider the extremely fluent productions of a victim of Wernicke’s aphasia.

“Oh sure, go ahead, any old think you want. If I could I would. Oh I’m taking the word the wrong way to say, all of the barbers around here whenever they stop you it’s going around and around, if you know what I mean, that is tying and tying for repucer, repuceration, well, we were trying the best that we could while another time it was with the beds over there the same thing. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

The problems with this speech are manifold. There are phonological errors and there are syntactic errors. But the most striking things about this discourse are the ways in which it fails to cohere and the ways in which it is hard to locate in some context. (In contrast to Mr. Ford, the Broca’s aphasic we began with in section one, this patient is scarcely aware that there is any problem with his speech.)

**9.1** Comment informatively on some of the errors in the discourse above.

One standard indicator of schizophrenia is the so-called ‘flight of ideas’, in which one idea leads to another, that to still another, and on and on, with no coherence — and with a very private and closed frame of reference. The passage below<sup>2</sup> is a literary representation of schizophrenic speech.

The Emanence. Yes. The light. That’s it, yes, of course. God the Father, Amen, Amen, Amen. And we were, yes, that’s who we were and that’s why I am here, but I lost my way in those fields.

The Thames you say, That's a tidal river. Not like that other. The river comes in and out, in and out, a tide, one and two and me makes three. Three. A tidal river is like a breath, breathing, feeding the land with fish and. . . Who? Who?

**9.2** Identify some of the linguistically anomalous features of this speech. And describe some of the links that connect one part with the next.

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1. Howard Gardner, *The Shattered Mind* (Knopf, 1975), p. 68.
  2. Doris Lessing, *Briefing For A Descent Into Hell* (Knopf, 1971), pp. 160-1.

## 10

### Mistakes Induced By Correction

I turn now to a surprising class of linguistic mistakes: things no one would have done wrong if they hadn't been instructed, corrected, or otherwise made aware of 'mistakes' in their speech.

One variety of these mistakes has become known under the heading of HYPERCORRECTION. This is what is going on when people who have been counseled to say *I* instead of *me* in *Charlie and me like fishing* overshoot in their adjustments and use *I* when *me* would be correct, as in *She gave it to Charlie and I*; or when people who have learned that *running* and *washing* are more 'proper' than *runnin'* and *washin'* restore the final sound of *running* to words that never had it, producing *kitching* and *chicking coop*. What is common in these cases is that in an attempt, conscious or unconscious, to replace instances of 'incorrect' X by 'correct' Y, some perfectly correct cases of X are replaced by Y.

**10.1** Some lower-middle-class New Yorkers have been heard saying things like *Oh my Gard!* How could this happen?

**10.2** Why would someone come to say *Whom do you think*

won the race? ?

**10.3** Examine the spelling mistakes below. Say what they have in common, and suggest how they might have arisen.

- (a) The 100% real coffee that let's you be your best.
- (b) Clam's Casino
- (c) Follow the above procedure's to avoid damaging the cable. . . .
- (d) Iranian's are demanding that the U.S. get out of their country.
- (e) Mrs. Haas want's cheerleaders.

Sometimes mistakes result directly from rules that people have been taught. Some writing teachers, for example, have told their students that commas are written in places where you pause in speaking a sentence — a rule which is not entirely useless but is significantly inadequate, and which leads people to put a comma between the subject and the predicate of a sentence, this being the spot in the sentence where a pause is entirely natural. Some examples<sup>1</sup>:

- (a) First of all the system, don't really care about the students. . . .
- (b) The infants sence of sight and hearing, are at their best early in life.
- (c) Older people, look down upon young people.
- (d) An intrusun on the part of the father, may changes the course of his life.

**10.4** Essentially the same thing has happened in all of the cases below. What is it? Why do you think it happened?

- (a) *Marm* (as in *schoolmarm*) and *parsnip*, once pronounced with long a as in *father*, are now pronounced with ar as in *farther*.
- (b) *Theatre*, *Catholic*, and *throne*, all once pronounced with t, are now pronounced with θ (the initial sound of *think*).
- (c) *Nephew*, once pronounced with v, is now



- pronounced with *f*.
- (d) *Often*, once pronounced with no *t*, is now frequently heard with one.
  - (e) Some people pronounce *boatswain* to rhyme with *goat's mane*, rather than as *bos'n*.
  - (f) Some people pronounce *waistcoat* to rhyme with *haste note*, rather than as *weskit*.

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1. Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (Oxford University Press, 1977), Chapter 2.

## Inconsistency

Confronted with the mistakes, errors, disturbances, and so on that we have been examining, many people are inclined to say that the speakers and writers responsible for them 'don't know the rules' or 'haven't learned how' or simply 'can't' do whatever it is. This negative view of the situation tells us very little about what is going on; in fact, it diverts our attention from what the speakers and writers ARE doing. My strategy has been to focus on what they do — which always turns out to have some system and some rationale — and not to dwell on what they can't do.

Still there are situations where it is very tempting to say that someone just gets mixed up. The poem below — 'Lord Byron's Life', by Julia Moore (1847-1920), the 'Sweet Singer of Michigan' — is one such situation. It is a real compendium of types of mistakes, including even a comma separating subject from predicate (in the second verse). But Moore was not just sprinkling words and punctuation marks on paper. Her lapses are for the most part matters of inconsistency in a system that is easy to discern: the rhyme scheme is sometimes abandoned, as is the metrical pattern, and an elevated, poetic diction occasionally gives way to nonstandard features, so that no consistent style is

maintained. Nevertheless, there is a rhyme scheme and a metrical pattern, and the style is basically that of 'fancy poetry'.

**11.1** Identify some of the lapses in the rhyme scheme and the metrical pattern of this poem. Point out some lexical, morphological, and syntactic features that belong to the 'fancy poetry' register and others that are nonstandard.

“Lord Byron” was an Englishman  
A poet I believe,  
His first works in old England  
Was poorly received  
Perhaps it was “Lord Byron’s” fault  
And perhaps it was not.  
His life was full of misfortunes,  
Ah, strange was his lot.  
The character of “Lord Byron”  
Was of low degree,  
Caused by his reckless conduct,  
and bad company.  
He sprung from an ancient house,  
Noble, but poor, indeed.  
His career on earth, was marred  
By his own misdeeds.  
Generous and tender-hearted,  
Affectionate by extreme,  
In temper he was wayward,  
A poor “Lord” without means;  
Ah, he was a handsome fellow  
With great poetic skill,  
His great intellectual powers  
He could use at his will.  
He was a sad child of nature,  
Of fortune and of fame;  
Also sad child to society,  
For nothing did he gain  
But slander and ridicule,  
Throughout his native land.  
Thus the “poet of the passions”,  
Lived, unappreciated, man.  
Yet, at the age of 24  
“Lord Byron” then had gained

The highest, highest pinnacle  
Of literary fame.  
Ah, he had such violent passions  
They was beyond his control,  
Yet the public with its justice  
Sometimes would him extol.  
Sometimes again "Lord Byron"  
Was censured by the press,  
Such obloquy, he could not endure,  
So he done what was the best.  
He left his native country,  
This great unhappy man;  
The only wish he had, "'tis said,"  
He might die, sword in hand.  
He had joined the Grecian Army,  
This man of delicate frame;  
And there he died in a distant land,  
And left on earth his fame.  
"Lord Byron's" age was 36 years,  
Then closed the sad career,  
Of the most celebrated "Englishman"  
Of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

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1. D.B. Wyndam Lewis and Charles Lee, *The Stuffed Owl* (Coward-McCann, 1930).

## 12

### Errors of Omission

Suppose you come across someone who learned English as a second language and who behaves in every way you can see like a native speaker of the language — but she never uses the tag question construction exemplified by the final phrases of *It's going to rain, isn't it?* and *There won't be anyone at home, will there?* Instead she appends a questioning element like *right?*, *hunh?*, *isn't that right?*, or *don't you think?* Does she speak English? Certainly in one sense she does. But in another sense she falls a bit short of having the linguistic system shared by everyone around her.

Children acquiring English as their first language all eventually seem to add the tag question construction to their repertoires, even though it has a rather complex form and would be dispensable for the purposes of ordinary communication. Adults learning English as a second language may well choose to dispense with this troublesome construction and AVOID it entirely. Indeed, adult learners may dispense with whole chunks of structure, avoiding constructions they find difficult (say, the passive construction, if their first language has no comparable syntactic pattern), words with sounds they find hard to pronounce, and topics for which they lack vocabulary.

**12.1** Teachers of English as a Second Language often report that their students whose first language is Romance (for instance, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, or Romanian) avoid the English word *actual*, using *real* or some other near-synonym in its place. Look up French *actuel*, Italian *attuale*, Spanish *actual*, Portuguese *atual*, or Romanian *actual* in an appropriate dictionary and explain why speakers of these languages might avoid English *actual*.

**12.2** Gaberell Drachman ('Some Strategies in the Acquisition of Phonology', in *Issues in Phonological Theory*, ed. by M.J. Kenstowicz and C.W. Kisseberth, Mouton, 1973) reviews very detailed accounts of the acquisition of English by three children and notes the RARITY of a number of words in the productions of these children until around age 2, although the children surely understood most of these words when they were uttered by adults: *foot, finger, fix, feed, fall, knife, off, roof, laugh, thumb, thing, three, throw, thank, tooth, bath, cloth, mouth, with*. One child, Neilson Smith's son Amahl, had *thumb* (pronounced [wʌm]) appear first at 26 months; according to Smith, 'Hitherto he had always refused to say 'thumb', insisting it was a finger [wɪŋgə]'. Suggest a reason for the rarity of the words above during the early stages of language acquisition and for Amahl Smith's treatment of *thumb* during these stages.

**12.3** The following passage is typical of the writing of beginning writers.

The paragraph says that children like to see other birds sing and they want to know the names of the different kind of birds and then they don't hear or see the birds and the father comes to the son and says that one of the bird is a sparrow and the other one is a jay but the boy wants to know which is the jay and which is the sparrow.<sup>1</sup>

Insofar as you understand this passage, how would you rewrite it? Why do you think the original writer used the form s/he did?

**12.4** English has a number of clearly different constructions with Verb-*to*-Verb in them, among them the three types illustrated in (a) - (c) below.

- (a) The penguin is eager/anxious to swim the Torres Straits.
- (b) The penguin is certain/sure/likely to attack gulls.
- (c) The penguin is easy/difficult to locate.

Robert Bley-Vroman ('Contrastive Analysis, Generative Grammar, and Interlanguage Studies', *Texas Linguistic Forum*, 13, 1979) observes that his Romanian students of English reproduce the (a) construction correctly, use sentences like *It is certain that the penguin will attack the gulls* instead of the (b) construction, and persistently and resolutely say things like *\*The penguin is easy to be located* for the (c) construction. What do these facts suggest about the syntax of Romanian?

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1. Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 31.

## 13

### Deliberate Violations

A language runs according to a great many rules: its sounds are distributed according to general principles (so that *fung* is a possible English word, but *ngiff* is not); its words are composed in regular ways (so that in English the three parts of *unlocks* may combine in this order, but not in any of the five other possible orders of *lockuns*, *unslock*, and so on); its sentences are composed by rule as well (so that 'A penguin won't bite.' is a possible English sentence, but 'Bite won't penguin a.' is not); and further rules govern what it is appropriate to say (or even which language to use) in particular circumstances (so that 'This is Arnold Zwicky.' is appropriate American English for a telephone introduction, but 'I am Arnold Zwicky.' is not). Other rules govern spelling and writing. Further rules are imposed in certain special types of language use, as in joke-telling or poetry. We have seen how violations of these rules may arise in many different ways. In none of our examples, however, has a rule been violated by someone who knew that there was a rule, knew that s/he was violating that rule, and intended to violate it. But such DELIBERATE violations of the rules of language are actually quite common. People joke by lapsing into broken English, putting on accents,



acting crazy, and talking inappropriately. People insult or demean others by using inappropriate language. People disguise what they are saying by talking in Pig Latin or some other 'secret language'. People break the rules of ordinary language to achieve aesthetic effects.

**13.1** Four quotations from Marx Brothers movies are given below. In these exchanges, Groucho Marx (intentionally) violates a rule. What sort of rule? What effect would Groucho's responses have on you, if you were one of the people he's talking to in these exchanges?

- (a) [on a ship] Chico: I come up to see the Captain's bridge.  
Groucho: The Captain's bridge? I'm sorry. He always keeps it in a glass of water when he's eating. [Monkey Business]
- (b) Captain: One of them goes around with a black moustache.  
Groucho: So do I. If I had my choice I'd go around with a little blonde. [Monkey Business]
- (c) Zeppo: Now I like education as well as the next fellow —  
Groucho: Well, move over and I'll talk to the next fellow. [Horsefeathers]
- (d) [in a boat] Connie: What a day! Spring in the air!  
Groucho: Who me? I should spring in the air and fall in the lake? [Horsefeathers]

**13.2** Examine the short dialogue below, the beginning of an encounter between a Southern white policeman and a black psychiatrist. Analyze the policeman's stratagem in this dialogue.

'What's your name, boy?' the policeman asked. . . .  
'Dr. Poussaint. I'm a physician. . . .'  
'What's your first name, boy? . . . .'  
'Alvin.'

**13.3** Below are some forms from a secret language used by two young brothers in Boston; the data are based on the discus-

sion by Joseph Applegate in 'Phonological Rules of a Subdialect of English' (*Word*, 1961).

- (a) Describe the alterations in ordinary English pronunciations that these children used to create their special language; these can be stated as two very general rules.
- (b) How would you account for the pronunciations in (9) - (11)?
- (c) How would these boys have said *this* and *giggle*?

Ordinary English (in standard spelling)	Child Form (in transcription)
1. tag	tæg
2. pet	pɛt
3. beat	bi t
4. kick	kɪ <sup>?</sup>
5. cake	ke <sup>?</sup>
6. soon	tun
7. think	tɪŋk
8. has	hæd
9. tooth	tut
10. toot	tu <sup>?</sup>
11. suit	tut
12. dog	dæg
13. dogs	dægd
14. pig	pɪg
15. pigs	pɪgd
16. Daddy	dæ <sup>?</sup> i
17. Bobby	ba <sup>?</sup> i
18. paper	pe <sup>?</sup> ər
19. does	dʌd
20. did	dɪ <sup>?</sup>
21. die	day
22. died	day <sup>?</sup>

**13.4** The humorous effect of the following passage by S.J. Perelman is achieved in part by a kind of deviation. Explain.

If you had chanced to stray into the Western & Occidental Hotel in Penang, Malaysia, during the ensuing fortnight (and if you did, you ought

to have your head examined), you might have observed a curious derelict brooding over a lemon squash in the lobby. The four-day growth of beard, the feverish deep-sunk eyes, the nicotine-stained fingers, and the grimy singlet all told their pitiful but familiar tale of the beachcomber, yet another white man doomed to disintegration under the remorseless tropical sun. Could this brutish mass of protoplasm, one asked himself, really be a thinking, sentient human organism? Could this seedy castaway, mottled with heat rash and bereft of illusions, be the same buoyant pilgrim who had left New York just five months before, his head stuffed with romantic visions and his satchels with nylon hose? Could this bit of flotsam cast up on a lee shore, spurned by civilization and totally dormant above the neckband, conceivably be the author of these present lines? Brother, I hope to kiss a pig he could.<sup>2</sup>

**13.5** Below is an untitled poem by e. e. cummings, usually referred to as 'anyone lived in a pretty how town'. Discuss the deviant syntax of this poem. What effects do you think cummings achieves with these particular deviations from ordinary English syntax?

anyone lived in a pretty how town  
(with up so floating many bells down)  
spring summer autumn winter  
he sang his didn't he danced his did.  
women and men (both little and small)  
cared for anyone not at all  
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same  
sun moon stars rain  
children guessed (but only a few  
and down they forgot as up they grew  
autumn winter spring summer)  
that noone loved him more by more  
when by now and tree by leaf  
she laughed his joy she cried his grief  
bird by snow and stir by still  
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones  
 laughed their cryings and did their dance  
 (sleep wake hope and then) they  
 said their nevers they slept their dream  
 stars rain sun moon  
 (and only the snow can begin to explain  
 how children are apt to forget to remember  
 with up so floating many bells down)  
 one day anyone died i guess  
 (and noone stooped to kiss his face)  
 busy folk buried them side by side  
 little by little and was by was  
 all by all and deep by deep  
 and more by more they dream their sleep  
 noone and anyone earth by april  
 wish by spirit and if by yes.  
 women and men (both dong and ding)  
 summer autumn winter spring  
 reaped their sowing and went their came  
 sun moon stars rain<sup>3</sup>

**13.6** Below is a section of a poem by Jack Spicer (one of the few poets ever to have written about linguistics). In contrast to the cummings poem, this one has scarcely anything deviant about its syntax. Yet it is certainly not ordinary language, and it is not easy to read. What sorts of linguistic principles is Spicer violating and what effects does he manage through these violations?

Malice aforethought. Every sound  
 You can make making music.  
 Tough lips.  
 This is no nightengale. No-  
 Body's waxen image burned. Only  
 Believe me. Linguistics is divided like  
 Graves' mythology of mythology, a  
 triple goddess — morphology, phonology,  
 and syntax.  
 Tough lips that cannot quite make the  
 sounds of love  
 The language  
 Has so misshapen them.

Malicious afterthought. None of you bastards  
Knows how Charlie Parker died. And  
dances now in some brief kingdom  
(Oz) two phonemes  
That were never paired before in the language.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Alvin Poussaint, 'A Negro Psychiatrist Explains The Negro Psyche', *New York Times Magazine*, August 20, 1967.
  2. S. J. Perelman, 'The Back of Beyond', from *Westward Ha!* reprinted in *The Most of Perelman*, (Simon and Schuster, 1957).
  3. e. e. cummings, *Complete Poems 1913-1962*, (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 515.
  4. Jack Spicer, *Language* (White Rabbit Press, 1965), p. 62.