Can speech errors become part of a language?

Languages are continuously changing. We can observe it in all languages attested for a relatively long time, if we compare two different stages of these languages. We can compare, for instance, Modern English to Middle or Old English; any Romance language such as Portuguese, Catalan, French, Sardinian, Spanish or Romanian to Latin; or Hindi to Prakrit or Vedic Sanskrit and see how centuries of speaker interactions affect the structure of a given language. We can even somehow feel the changes of the language in real-time, if we compare the language of older generations to that of younger ones or if we pay attention to the differences between the actual spoken language and that "higher" standard usually described in teaching materials and grammars. And these differences, this often mistakenly called "linguistic decay" is not there just now, but has been a feature of all languages since the inception of language itself.

Language change takes many forms; changes can be observed in all possible aspects of a language. We can observe changes in the phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, orthography, and so on. But, in the case of phonetics, variation is an unavoidable requirement of speech itself. If we look closely, we can observe that speech acts actually show variation all the time. Even if we try hard to do so, human beings are not able to produce exactly the same sound twice. Any two instances of the same word will always have subtle differences in segment length, vowel formant frequency or pitch, for instance. Thus, humans necessarily show variation in all productions of an utterance. And this variation results in variation at the individual level, community level, dialect level, and so on, which ultimately results in many forms of sound change.

This talk presented the possibility of speech errors such as *spoonerisms* being integrated into the language as sporadic instances of sound change. The adoption of errors as linguistic innovations would be a nice example of a change that does not involve any kind of willingness by neither the speaker nor the hearer: I hypothesize that innocent slips of the tongue can result in linguistic innovations under very specific circumstances.

Spoonerisms are speech errors in which one or more consonants or vowels switch position with the corresponding consonants or vowels in a nearby word within a phrase. These slips of the tongue were named in honour of minister William Archibald Spooner, who was famous by unwillingly using them as a humorous device in his speeches. Such spoonerisms include: "It is kisstomary to cuss the bride" (instead of "customary to kiss the bride"), "I am tired of addressing beery wenches" (instead of "weary benches") or "You have hissed all my mystery

lectures" (instead of "missed all my history lectures").

The sound change compared to these speech errors is known as *metathesis*. In this process, a *segment* or phonological unit changes its position in the speech chain. More precisely, the cases under study involve a not very well-known kind of metathesis which is referred to as *reciprocal metathesis*, given that it is two non-consecutive segments that exchange their position with one another without affecting the rest of the phonological sequence. We find examples of this process in languages as different as

Greek (μαλλόρρυπος /maˈloripos/ > μαρόλυπος /maˈrolipos/ 'dirty hair', σμύραινα /ˈsmirena/ > σμύναιρα /ˈsminera/ 'lamprey');

Polish (pɛrmanɛntnɨ > pɛrnamɛntnɨ 'permanent', pɔrtsɛlana > pɔrtsɨnɛla 'china, porcelain');

Spanish (murciégalo > murciélago 'bat', humareda > humadera 'cloud of smoke');

Basque (ergel > elger 'dumb', lizun > luzin 'mould, lascivious');

Amharic (käbäro ~ käräbo 'drum', qəbanug ~ qənabug 'oil from the nug-seed');

Quechua (yuraq ~ ruyaq 'white', lamran ~ ranram 'alder tree'); or

Turkana (ŋakɛmɛra ~ ŋakɛrɛma 'mole', ŋikwaŋɔrɔmɔka ~ ŋikwaŋɔmɔrɔka 'kind of tree').

In order to get a broad understanding of this sound change, a survey of reciprocal metatheses from a wide range of languages from all over the world was first developed, followed by a sample of speech errors in English. Then, I compared the psycholinguistic restrictions (or, more precisely, probabilistic tendencies) which seem to apply to each of these processes. After comparing the properties of the cases of reciprocal metathesis under study to the known characteristics of speech errors such as spoonerisms, some similarities as well as some crucial differences arise.

There are many similarities between spoonerisms and reciprocal metatheses. First, both processes affect sounds that are found in the same syllabic position: the interchanged segments are almost invariably located either both in syllable-initial (*onset*) or syllable-final (*coda*) position in the case of consonants, and vowels only interact with other vowels (in the middle

error

of the syllable or *nucleus*). Second, the two interchanged segments tend to be phonetically similar, in the sense that some *phonological feature* or property is shared by both sounds, in both spoonerisms and reciprocal metatheses. Third, the affected sequence of segments tends to be articulatorily complex in both cases. Fourth, the result of both processes is always phonologically well-formed: although it might not exist, the resulting word looks like any other word of the language.

On the other hand, there are a number of differences between speech errors and reciprocal metathesis. In speech errors, the reversed segments tend to be in two different words, while in the cases of reciprocal metathesis they must necessarily be in the same word. This is probably the clearest requirement for integrating a previously non-existent word into the language only errors produced within the boundaries of the word may be subject to being incorporated into the lexicon of the speaker. A second crucial difference is a lexical bias on the output word: While both processes tend to target low-frequency words (i.e., the less familiar the word, the more likely for errors to be made), the resulting word tends to be a familiar word in the case of spoonerisms but a new word in the case of reciprocal metathesis. A last difference is that groups of segments are often exchanged in the case of speech errors (overinflated state → overinstated flate), but analogous changes are unattested within reciprocal metathesis.

I propose that the similar tendencies found in spoonerisms and reciprocal metathesis reflect a common psychological origin of the two processes, while the few differences between them are related to the human capacity to recover lexical items from our memory: if the erroneous word deviates too much from the

target word, or if the erroneous word already exists in the language, the error will be quickly corrected by the speaker and/or the hearer of the conversation. If the resulting erroneous word is not too different from the target and it is not part of the language, it might, in rare occasions, be remembered, be further reproduced and be ultimately integrated into the language as a new variant. This set of differences can be argued to be the main conditions that facilitate the incorporation of non-etymological lexical items into our vocabulary.

Zusammenfassung:
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Veranstalter:
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