

The psychology of spoonerisms

REGARDLESS of our own political persuasion, we probably all felt a little sorry for National Party leader John Key after his gaffe at his party's annual conference. "I want to send the clearest of messages," he said, before continuing: "Under a Labour Government I lead..."

There is not one among us who has not made some kind of "slip of the tongue", from the simplest of confusions of sounds (par cark for car park) through word blends (hand buggage for hand baggage/luggage) to whole word substitutions such as the Key slip.

There is a branch of language study that straddles the fuzzy boundary between psychology and linguistics. It includes researchers from both disciplines, and is rather unsurprisingly called psycholinguistics.

Speech errors provide one rich source of data for such researchers, whose interest is not so much in the why as in the how of speech errors. How is it that such errors arise, and what do the patterns of speech errors tell us about how people put utterances together as they speak?

Sound confusions such as par cark, or well-boiled icicle for well-oiled bicycle, are known both popularly and within psycholinguistics as spoonerisms.

The Rev William Spooner (1844-1930) was warden of New College Oxford and had a reputation for making such slips. Some of the more extreme errors attributed to him are most likely inventions, such as "You have tasted the whole worm" for "You have wasted the whole term", but the label has stuck. It is the pattern of this kind of error that interests researchers — sounds that should appear at a particular point in a word do in fact appear at that point in a word, it's just that they're in the wrong word.

Typically, beginning sounds swap with other beginning sounds (for instance, the "l" and "sh" sounds in "The Lord is a shoving leopard", another example attributed to Spooner). This suggests that as we speak we line sounds up for particular slots in words. In a clever set of experiments, a group of researchers asked participants to read silently a series of word pairs. Participants were told that after some pairs they would be prompted to say that pair aloud. Within the series of pairs participants would see a sequence that had a recurring pattern of beginning sounds, such as ship hull, short



Paul Warren

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

haul, sheet hem, followed by a pair with the opposite pattern, such as hot shirt, which served as the test pair.

The researchers were interested in the factors that would make an error more or less likely when participants were asked to say this test pair aloud. They found that errors resulting in actual words, such as shot hurt from hot shirt, were more likely than errors producing nonsense (such as sheel helf from heel shelf), suggesting that we subconsciously try to ensure that our speech output consists of actual words.

What is more, spoonerisms are far more likely to result from hot shirt than from hit shed, suggesting that we also monitor for appropriate language.

So why did Mr Key not monitor his output closely enough to avoid his gaffe? Psycholinguists point out that other factors affect what we say or write. A powerful influence is how commonly or recently we have met a particular word or sequence of words, and the collocation "Labour Government" has certainly been around for a few years. But this is less appealing to the non-psycholinguist than the explanation of such gaffes as "Freudian slips", the unintended statement of what we really feel or believe.

What do psycholinguists think of Freudian explanations? Well, psycholinguists are mainly interested in the mechanisms of the errors, in how we choose and assemble words, and not so much in what triggers the errors.

But the series of experiments did include one Freudian twist — being greeted by a provocatively dressed young female researcher made male participants much more likely to produce spoonerisms from nonsense sequences such as lood gegas or bine foddys.

■ Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz