On the Consciousness of Slips of the Tongue

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I. Introduction

People’s daily speech can be divided into conscious speech acts and unconscious speech acts. For example, the ordinary speech falls into the former while the balderdash and other senseless talks belong to the latter. In this paper, slips of the tongue are singled out for discussion. So far there is no certain idea whether a tongue slip is a conscious speech act or an unconscious speech act.

2. Mechanism of slips of the tongue

Although slips of the tongue are speech errors on the surface, in effect they are unsymmetrical phenomenon taking place in the course of information processing in the brain and the production of utterance.

As known to all, language cognition finds its ultimate root in brain, which is characterized by two modes of processing: serial processing and parallel processing. We hold that language processing is not an absolute sequential process, but a parallel process in the neural network.

The enhanced activity in the SMA prior to sound errors, found in the experiment by Jürn Möller et. al. (2007), confirms their hypothesis: conflicts may arise at a processing level related to the phonetic encoding or articulatory planning of speech output.

3. The consciousness of slips of the tongue

Whether particular slips of the tongue involve consciousness is determined by whether the speaker enters conscious activities the moment the slips of the tongue occur. In other words, the slips of the tongue are apt to be perceived by the speaker the moment he/she makes them are conscious ones while those which are not perceived by the speaker are unconscious ones.

We estimate that the majority of slips of the tongue are conscious. This type of speech errors are in fact verbal reflections of latent conscious conflicts. Sometimes speakers are also found to commit some unconscious slips of the tongue. In this case they are insensible of the errors and thus fail to correct them.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, we propose that the conflict and confusion of concepts while the brain processing information underlies slips of the tongue. It is the contradiction between parallel thinking processing and sequential linguistic expression that results in the occasional slips of the tongue. The slips of the tongue that enter the individual’s consciousness are referred to as conscious tongue slips, while those fail to enter the individual’s consciousness are referred to as unconscious tongue slips.