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Slips of the tongue in the London-Lund corpus of spontaneous conversation*

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Abstract

This paper presents a list of slips of the tongue which occur in a corpus of English conversation transcribed from tape recordings. The kinds of error included in the list are briefly discussed, as are the criteria for detecting errors. The work forms a basis for an estimate of the frequency of such errors in ordinary speech.

The London-Lund corpus is a collection of spontaneous conversations between educated adult native speakers of British English. Some of the speakers knew they were being recorded, others did not. The corpus comprises 34 texts, each of which contains 5,000 words spoken by people who were being recorded without their knowledge, together with a variable amount of material by speakers who did know of the recording (always considerably less than 5,000 words). The 34 texts have been selected from a larger set collected in the Survey of English Usage, which has been based at University College, London, since 1960, under the directorship of Randolph Quirk. In that survey, primary attention has focused on the speech of those who were unaware of the recording. However, for the purposes of the present paper, no distinction has been made between speakers of the two kinds, because none of them realised that their speech was going to be analysed for errors. Reference to the list of errors and the transcriptions of the texts can readily resolve the question of whether the person who produced a particular error did or did not know that a tape was being made.

The transcription of the corpus is widely available in two forms, as a book (Svartvik and Quirk, 1980), and as a machine-readable tape.¹ For the most part, an orthographic representation has been used, with additional symbols and conventions to represent prosodic and para-linguistic features. Phonetic transcription has been used where non-words were spoken.

This paper presents a list of the speech errors which can be detected with reasonable certainty in the corpus. In most studies of speech errors speakers have been consulted about what they intended to say. Such consultations have obviously been impossible in the present study. However, the study does have the major advantage of allowing a reasonable estimate to be made of the frequency of speech errors in spontaneous speech. Previous collections of speech errors have not been systematic; the errors have been collected as and when they have been noticed. In any case, asking people what they intended to say inevitably disrupts the flow of conversation. For these reasons other collections of errors (e.g. Meringer and Mayer, 1895/1978; Fromkin, 1973) do not allow estimates of frequency to be made.

Only unintentional slips of the tongue have been included in the list of errors. A number of other phenomena have been specifically excluded. False starts are numerous throughout the corpus, but these are interpreted as deliberate changes of plan, which reflect quite different psychological processes from slips of the tongue. Similarly, hesitations and repetitions are phenomena of a completely different kind from exchanges, blends and the other kinds of error listed here. Infelicities of expression are also excluded, for the same reason (see Brown, 1980). One class of omission from our list does call for some comment — that of prosodic errors. These have been left out largely because intuitions about such errors are not very clear, unless they are actually corrected by the speaker (Cutler, 1980). Furthermore, they are very difficult to find in the printed version of the corpus without a great deal of work. The original audio tapes, which would have made the search much easier, have not been made available (Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 26).

There can be no pretence that all slips of the tongue in the corpus have been listed. Thus the estimate of the frequency of speech errors in conversation is a conservative one. A number of factors have prevented a complete listing from being made.

1. At some points the transcribers were uncertain about the wording. In the book, these pieces of text are enclosed in double angle brackets, << >>. Sometimes a slip of the tongue appears inside such brackets. For example, in S.1.6 TU1106² there is an apparent error, where the speaker says <<*inonical*>> *canonic*. However, as the *inonical* is uncertain, no error has been recorded. Similarly, possible errors in the rest of the text were not recorded if they depended on these uncertain pieces of text. In S.1.7 TU493/4 one speaker comments *it's* <<*starting*>> *to rain*, and another responds *has it*, apparently producing a tag error. However, if the uncertain *starting* had been *started*, or had been so unclear that the second speaker could have taken it to be *started*, then no unintentional slip of the tongue has occurred.

2. Many sections of text had plausible interpretations both as false starts and as slips of the tongue. For example, in S.1.7 TU1293 the speaker says *for a [k] second*. The [k] could be an anticipation of the third phoneme in *second*, but it could also be a false start, *a couple of seconds*. Without the speakers' comments on what was intended it was not possible to classify such sequences unambiguously as errors. They were, therefore, not included in the list.

3. Because proper names have been changed in the corpus — only their prosodic features have been retained in their fictitious counterparts — certain anticipations and perseverations in the vicinity of such names may have been missed.

The search for the errors proceeded as follows. The texts were printed out from the computer tape. Each text was read by one of the authors, who, using very liberal criteria, marked every potential error. Then three or four of the authors met together to discuss each of these errors to decide if there was a plausible alternative explanation of the item, for example as a false start. Those items which were judged to be genuine slips of the tongue were provisionally classified. Any remaining conflicts about the errors were resolved in further discussions when the final list was drawn up.

The errors have been assigned to four main categories, depending upon the kind of linguistic unit involved.

1. Segment errors are those involving phonemes or phonological features.

2. Syllable errors have been grouped with morphological errors involving grammatical morphemes, such as tense and number.

3. Word errors may involve the substitution of either a semantically or a phonologically similar word. The latter kind of error is a malapropism. Among function words the chief errors are substitution of one pronoun for another, or one preposition for another.

4. Errors involving larger units were mainly blends of phrases. Tag errors — choice of the wrong tag in a tag question — have also been included in this category.

In the absence of speakers' comments, the simplest interpretation of each error has been chosen. For example, a fairly large number of errors have been classified as anticipations of initial phonemes. However, the occurrence of the initial phoneme of a later word could be the result of a number of different kinds of error. The speaker may, for example, have anticipated the whole word, or have been about to produce a spoonerism. Once a mistake has been detected, the following material can be suppressed, producing what looks like a simple segment anticipation.

Within each group the errors are further subcategorised, where possible, on the basis of the following seven-way classification: anticipation, perseveration, omission, addition, exchange, substitution, blend. Some

standard terms from the speech error literature have been retained for specific kinds of error, for example, *malapropism* and *haplology*. Table 1 gives the number of errors of each type in the corpus. Table 2 lists the errors.

Table 1. *Number of errors of each kind in the corpus*

	Segment	Syllable	Word	Phrase	Other	Total
Substitution	25 ¹	18 ²	50	6 ⁶		99
Anticipation	22		5			27
Exchange	1		1			2
Omission	1	6	7			14
Addition	2	2	4			8
Perseveration	4					4
Blend			15 ⁴	12		27
Other		2 ³	4 ⁵	1	3	10
Total	55	25	86	20	5	191

Notes

1. Includes two vowel reduction errors.
2. Includes 14 errors in number and tense.
3. One error involving both syllable omission and tense and one shift.
4. Includes nine haplogies.
5. Two Tip of the Tongue states and two function word shifts.
6. Includes five tag errors.

Table 2. *List of speech errors in the London-Lund corpus*

Text	Tone unit	Item ¹	Putative target	Gloss
(1) Segment errors				
S.1.1	113	[ʌðəw] from that ²	apart from that	anticipation
	679	the [əuw] the only other	only	substitution
S.1.2	202	I am not personally [prəfeə ə]	prepared	substitution
	336	the rest of us [bə ə:] have been	have been	anticipation
S.1.3	530	and [j] when you finished	when you	anticipation
S.1.4	103	instead of [p] cluttering up their own place	cluttering up	anticipation
	255	the whole [s] range from which selections	range from	anticipation
	385	what I've done is simply choo[s]	choose	substitution
S.1.5	1097	go [ʃ] into sheer admin	into sheer	anticipation

Table 2. *Continued*

Text	Tone unit	Item ¹	Putative target	Gloss
S.1.6	1080	his [reta] letters were	letters	substitution
S.1.7	908	the one that [raŋ] rung	rung	substitution
	1165	for [rə] to get it ready for Christmas	to get it	anticipation?
S.1.11	916	you can't really tell from this [f] thing	thing	substitution
	1012	[θraʊ] three one three	three	substitution
S.1.13	1011	[klai] close the loopholes	close	substitution
S.1.14	197	in [traʊ] County Tyrone	Tyrone	anticipation
	239	[pʌ:sk prə ði:] protected the castle	protected the castle	anticipation
	320	to [brai] the Irish Press	buy	addition
	342	Miles of the [kən] column	column	substitution
	369	a [bʌ] double bed	double bed	anticipation
	432	I [ʃæt] there	sat	substitution
	525	he [sli:pʃ] next to the door	sleeps	substitution
	561	our [pi] our purpose in Northern Ireland	purpose	substitution
	774	sailed up the [ʃæni] Shannon	Shannon	substitution
S.2.1	1335	it was [fən] fantastic	fantastic	vowel reduction
S.2.2	293	it is [invai] I'm I'm obliged	invaluable	substitution
	877	the only [b] way he's got of getting it back	way	anticipation
S.2.3	397	in [st] in in armies and in every General Staff	in armies and	anticipation
S.2.4	553	practical [kr] all practical classes	classes	perseveration
	774	some [səʊ] sort of coherent body	sort of	anticipation
S.2.5	696	being recorded [sʌre] surreptitiously	surreptitiously	vowel reduction
S.2.6	768	let him [me] be measured	be measured	anticipation
S.2.7	338	they were [se] terribly underpaid	terribly	substitution
S.2.8	298	so much more [in insen in] intense	intense	substitution
	304	everything is [mitʃ] more complex	much	perseveration
	322	I think that the [britʃ]	British	omission
	639	I would think [pæk] Pakistan	Pakistan	substitution
S.2.9	956	almost as [noʔ] much unknown	much unknown	anticipation
	1027	something the [k] patient complains of	patient	anticipation

Table 2. *Continued*

Text	Tone unit	Item ¹	Putative target	Gloss
S.2.10	523 735	was [t] smoking too heavily the new [bel], were supposed to see the new Mel Brooks film	smoking too Mel Brooks	anticipation anticipation
S.2.11	13 36 126 1102 1393 1423	thunderous [ə:prɔ:z] country [preznts] it was [tesprətli] hot people [klæm] climb those mountains the [rʌʃə] Russian ... course one six [rʌn] one rouble sixty-two kopeks	applause peasants desperately climb Russian rouble	substitution addition substitution substitution perseveration substitution
S.2.12	367 808	[ɔribə] originally done by Euripedes the Telegraph and [ræ] [ri?] ringed it	originally ringed	anticipation perseveration
S.2.13	565	that's the only [wə] reason	reason	substitution
S.3.1	959	[werai] whereas somebody coming	whereas	substitution
S.3.4	73 480	some of the [ʃ] rooms are wrongly shaped there has been some [s] paint spent	rooms paint	anticipation anticipation
S.3.5	147 1101	it's rather an artificial [du:neimā] I don't know the [wai] play well enough	denouement play well	exchange anticipation

(2) Syllable/morpheme errors

S.1.1	502	these are oral contraception	contraceptives	word formation
S.1.6	83	his mother ... who [sei] they've now got a flat	said OR says	number OR tense
S.1.8	891	to get a selective, a bunch	selection	word formation
S.1.14	104 104	money which have been given ... their hard earned pay which have been very good pay	has has	number agreement tense
	124	have I ever [tel] talked to you about	told	tense
	580	I've just gave given you	given	tense
S.2.1	839	my trouble in [plain in tr] in applying	applying	prefix omission
S.2.7	401	we kept keep getting large sums	keep	tense
S.2.8	64	the Sheikhs would all [dru:] withdraw	withdraw	omission/tense

Table 2. *Continued*

Text	Tone unit	Item ¹	Putative target	Gloss
	220	that was all [ren] Redmond was asking for	Redmond	omission
	286	they are of historical interested	interest	added inflection
S.2.9	482	they were [ʌl] able	able	omission
	988	what was ever giving rise	whatever was	shift
S.2.11	1262	that wasn't [vəsətali] it was just filling in	versatility	omission
S.2.13	1204	he think thinks that Ella's worried	thinks	number agreement
S.2.14	437	[dei] disabled people	disabled	omission
S.3.1	53	I went away to did it	to do it	tense
	1274/5	Sons and Lovers ... I like them more	it	number agreement
S.3.2	44	would be better off-wise than what he would have been in Cordoba	better off than	addition
S.3.3	710	guarantee us a [gri:]	degree	omission
	756	reading of the texts are	is	number agreement
S.3.4	74/6	if you were to have four or three students there you can't really talk to them	were to have ... couldn't OR had ... can't	wrong combination of tenses
	228	on [kemist] chemical side	chemical	word formation
	232	I don't really hold out much hopes	much hope	number agreement
	439	I'm totally unorientated	disorientated	prefix substitution
S.3.6	457	a series which ... are ... aimed at	is	number agreement
	665	in answers in answer to	answer	number agreement
(3) Word errors				
S.1.2	496	you know [win] we're not	we're not	haplology
	636	Mallet [nets] never lets	never lets	haplology
S.1.5	495	we, they, when they mark	they	pronoun substitution
S.1.6	605	nearly all reserved and we finally found a couple of seats marked quite clearly non-[r] no smoking	no smoking	semantic substitution
	785	an Indian [pærədium] parodied him	parodied him	haplology
S.1.7	658	the vision of speaking computers on science fiction	in	preposition substitution
	1261	can you [kəvæ] what's the word connect	connect	Tip of the Tongue

Table 2. *Continued*

Text	Tone unit	Item ¹	Putative target	Gloss
S.1.8	1040	after he'd had him	she	pronoun substitution
S.1.9	376	they have transcripts	transcriptions	malapropism
	804	transcriptions should I say so long as I'm in my own little nit	niche	malapropism
	1327	following his [bai] father as he read the bible	father as he	anticipation
S.1.10	389	which is the American the Australian expression	Australian	semantic substitution
	681	the eye is as important as ... the ear is as important as the eye	ear	anticipation
S.1.11	831	we send it even up	even send it up	shift
	1048	days which I can probably commute	on which	preposition omission
S.1.12	123	we've seen I've seen ... you've seen	you	pronoun substitution
	651	so he [tʃauks] it	chooses/takes	blend
	697	a good deal too South	too far South	omission
S.1.13	148	I was very drifting	??	substitution
	398	really they I do	I	pronoun substitution
S.1.14	1195	when [ʃə] he does ring up	he	pronoun substitution
	164	he was offered an engineering degree engineering job	job	substitution
S.2.1	246	if she'd been if he'd been	he'd	pronoun substitution
	165	the [læ] the left-hand side	left hand	haplology
	196	I'd right been right down	I'd been right	omission
	672	you [gɔ] he got	he	pronoun substitution
S.2.2	890	they hadn't got [faɪə] (= fire) they hadn't got flour	flour	malapropism
	1002	to my best of my knowledge	the best of my	anticipation
S.2.1	664	this is not a bibliographical [dæsti] description	description	malapropism??
S.2.2	297	we are efficient and trustworthy on, trustworthy I meant to say not efficient	trustworthy	semantic substitution
	615	it makes them more difficult it makes it more difficult for them to raise money	it	pronoun anticipation

Table 2. *Continued*

Text	Tone unit	Item ¹	Putative target	Gloss
S.2.3	82	it's a bit of [əmə] an amalgam	an amalgam	haplology
	301	made it all look what which it was ... horribly complicated	what it was	addition
	545	this is the [f] one of the few things	one of the few	anticipation
S.2.4	72	I was larking about with this thing next year	last?	semantic substitution
S.2.5	213	it's [præ] probably true	probably true	blend??
S.2.6	842	started out as a [mə] Renaissance specialist	Renaissance	semantic substitution
	1241	we ought really to try to get rid of some of those people sharply don't you?	I think we ought OR don't you think?	omission
S.2.7	112	one was in French about by Chabrol	by	preposition substitution
	1300	that they [swiful] swizzle things around in	swish/swizzle	blend
S.2.8	83	it could well equally	equally well	shift
	289	the [kæʔ] the [ʔ] Protestants	Protestants	semantic substitution
S.2.9	626	general science [ə:] general medicine	medicine	semantic substitution
	826	just as much a surgeon's knife does	much as a	omission
S.2.10	310	single [ein] lens reflex	single lens	haplology??
	487	she'd burnt a couple burst a couple	burst	malapropism
	489	How to Bluff [we] Your Way	Your Way	anticipation
	858	people who [bain] I've been	I've been	haplology with perseveration of omitted material
S.2.11	18	applause that you'd expect from the leading soprano	for	preposition substitution
	1086	you might be wasting away of resources	wasting away resources	addition
S.2.12	889	burst into hilarics	hilarity/hysterics	blend
S.2.13	975	that he she's only ever seen ... once	she	pronoun substitution
	979	seventeen year old [glez] lesbian	girl/lesbian	blend
	991	she was trying to [skræ] strangle	strangle/scratch	blend
	1076	it [dʒə] they just	they	pronoun substitution

Table 2. *Continued*

Text	Tone unit	Item ¹	Putative target	Gloss
S.2.14	60	I regret for having to inform	regret having	addition
	133	one of them has dropped off	out	preposition substitution
	291	if they we do	we	pronoun substitution
	327	[vi:enr] Vienna is a congress Stadt	Vienna	haplology
	667	to think the ways of doing the best	think of	preposition omission
	820	a mass of great [ə] sort of grey hair	grey	malapropism
	951	it's difficult to get a word edgewise out of him	word out of him	addition
	1047	being embroiled into	in	preposition substitution
S.3.1	155	you sort of turned us in	down	preposition substitution
	844	sixteen fifty sixteen sixty	fifteen fifty sixteen fifty	semantic substitution
	844	on the throne during those [pir ə] during those years	year	semantic substitution
S.3.2	662	list of advertisements and Peter Genial's the only one	applicants	malapropism
	814ff	Pershing Healing Stirling Shearing	Spearing	Tip of the Tongue
	943	this little RPM this little forty-five disc	forty-five disc	semantic substitution
	1023	it's easier for us it's easier for them	them	pronoun substitution
S.3.3	156	round a table on you	on a table round you	preposition exchange
	314	how many of those books ... is there only one copy in the library	copy of	preposition omission
	1132	reception ... in which six finalists turned up	to OR at	preposition substitution
S.3.4	360	on the rooms	in	preposition substitution
	503	we're very proud and glad of [ə:] about that	glad about	preposition substitution
	595	for last for this year	this year	semantic substitution
	616	that class that seminar	seminar	semantic substitution

Table 2. *Continued*

Text	Tone unit	Item ¹	Putative target	Gloss
	708	buy any more sites in the college for the college	for	preposition substitution
	957	papers who [əʔ] students who took papers	students	substitution/anticipation
S.3.5	73	struck me as a [pɔui] as as a play	play	semantic substitution
	708	fruit pickers ... fruit growers I mean	growers	semantic substitution
	782	correct attitude of court [pr]	to court procedure	preposition substitution
S.3.6	33	you know much more about this ... than I am	do	substitution
	101	a notch was made for Raleigh	niche	malapropism
	637	we've [ə:] you've thought about	you've	pronoun substitution
	728	being conscience being conscious of	conscious	semantic substitution (or word formation?)

(4) Errors involving larger units

S.1.4	197	there was no point in in in doing it was it	was there	tag error
S.1.5	203	he'll be here himself soon after ... nine isn't he	won't he	tag error
S.1.8	168	you want something round you when you think it when you look at it	look at it/think about it	blend
S.1.9	121	this'll obviously is the bad thing about living in London	this'll obviously be/this obviously is	blend
S.1.10	40	listed up you see and went out in some ghastly regiment of foot	enlisted/joined up	blend
	553	you've got quite respectable glasses bifocals isn't it	aren't they	tag error
S.1.13	431	you might set alight to yourself	set light to yourself/set yourself alight	blend
S.1.14	77	middle mid Wales	mid/the middle of	blend
	210/1	I don't know what took over [ə] overtook me	came over/took hold of	blend
S.2.2	204	these are miscellaneous family and other personal letters is it	aren't they	tag error
S.2.3	258	this was [impɔs] was be impossible	would be/was	blend

Table 2. *Continued*

Text	Tone unit	Item ¹	Putative ² target	Gloss
S.2.5	418	I always [k] under[s] can't understand	can't (always) understand	syntax
S.2.13	421	a book match with your photograph on the front	book of matches/match book (box)	blend
S.2.14	255	a very great many people	very many/a very great number	blend
S.3.2	921	in any case of the Spearing thing	in the case of/in any case with	blend
S.3.3	560	in the long term point of view in the college	from the long term point of view/in the long term	blend
	1242	to be able to talk to [ʔə] people in your own age	of your own age/in your own age group	blend
S.3.6	313	this is after all in one period aren't they	isn't it	tag error
	1041	do sit down in sit in on each other's lectures	sit in on	semantic substitution

(5) *Unclassified*

S.1.7	800	when it still wasn't [frns ə:] satisfactory		
S.1.8	111	If you're going to confer a picture into your room		
	628/9	we were being asked to put up our numbers and that we would get a pro-rata staff increase		

Notes

1. In some cases the interpretation of the errors depends on more global context than can be given here. Readers are referred to the transcriptions in cases of apparently dubious interpretation.
2. Many features of the transcription have not been preserved in this table.

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Notes

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1. Available from Norwegian Computing Centre for the Humanities, Box 53, University of Bergen, N-5014, Bergen, Norway.
 2. S.1.6 refers to the number of the text in Svartvik and Quirk (1980), TU1106 refers to the 1106th tone unit within that text.

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