

Some Knotty and Intriguing Oral Mistakes by Cantonese and Other Chinese Speakers of English

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Abstract—In the English speech production of some Chinese speakers of English, gender confusions are likely to occur regarding 3rd person singular nominative, possessive, objective cases and their reflexive pronouns. What's more, some mispronunciations tend to take place somewhat regularly by Cantonese and some non-Cantonese speakers of English. The causes of such spoken gender anomalies and pronunciation errors are tentatively probed into and some suggestions are proposed. Ultimately, some corrective measures are suggested to rectify these oral slips and mispronunciations.

Index Terms—oral slip, gender confusions, 3rd person singulars mispronunciations, language transfer

I. GENDER CONFUSIONS OF 3RD PERSON SINGULARS

In my long-term English teaching career, I have found that some Chinese speakers of English, not rarely in their speeches but seldom or never in their writings, commit such errors as *He's tapping her fingers clumsily on the piano keyboard*. Or, they might say: *The little girl was playing with his own toys*. Moreover, such phrases as "*He hurt herself*." or "*She drew a painting of himself*." also incidentally occur in their speech productions. Quite self-evidently, the errors in the first two sentences arise from the violation of gender correspondences between the nominative and possessive cases of the 3rd person singulars; and the mistakes in the other two sentences result from inconsistencies in gender between the 3rd person singular personal pronouns and the 3rd person singular reflexive pronouns.

In order to further explore and clarify certain underlying causes and performative features concerning this particular phenomenon, I have delivered a small-scale questionnaire among my students who are English majors. As a matter of fact, I designed a simple list of questions and spread the questionnaires to one class of undergraduates and two classes of graduates. In order to be devoid of human factors, the students surveyed are not supposed to sign their names on the questionnaire sheets. The contents of the questionnaire are as follows:

1) Have you ever violated gender correspondence regarding the 3rd person singulars in your speech production?

Examples: She had his breakfast at 7:30 this morning.

She drew a painting of himself.

2) What are your frequencies of such mistakes?

Often_____;

Rarely_____;

Never_____.

3) What are supposed to be your causes of such mistakes?

The statistical figures obtained from the responses to the first two questionnaire items seem to suggest that all the students surveyed, almost without exception, commit mistakes mentioned above, and to a greater or lesser degree. What's interesting about the investigation is when asked about their causes for such errors, none of the students could offer a quite reasonable explanation, simply passing it as an oral slip, or for no reason at all. This coincidence occurred presumably due to lack of in—depth thinking on the part of the students investigated.

In order to acquire some empirical evidences to further discuss the issue, I made a small-scale survey among fifteen boy students and the same number girl students who had been selected randomly in my English classes. To begin with, I divided these thirty subjects into fifteen pairs which comprise two males, two females or a male with a female for each pairing. To be sure, these groupings were also made arbitrarily in the pursuit of experimental objectivity. Then, each pair was supposed to retell a short story that they had read some time before by engaging in a dialogue. The two interlocutors were asked to address the two characters in the story in 3rd person singulars and to use as many 3rd person singular collocations as possible in their conversations.

For the purpose of bringing about a dynamic demonstration of the interlocutor's natural utterances featuring their relative likelihood of the violation of gender agreement between different cases of 3rd person singulars, I deliberately prefabricated a mini-story which runs like this:

Joe Made an Exhibition of Himself

Maria-- a rather capable and hardworking housewife, suddenly fell sick one evening and was physically unfit for any

more manual work. While she was worrying about who to prepare the supper, Joe, her husband, who was idle and lazy and always uncaring to his wife, surprisingly and unexpectedly offered to cook the meal himself. He reassured Maria that he would relieve her of any more work that night and asked her to enjoy the hard won leisure to recover from her sickness sooner. Maria's extreme surprise and joy at her husband's sudden and virtually unbelievable kindness were justifiably beyond description. What's more incredible was that Joe told Maria he would cook the meal according to his own recipe and boasted to her that he would cook an abundant banquet. While busy about his cuisine, Joe was bragging about his much expected delicacies to his half believing half doubting wife. Eventually, you can imagine what's to be expected of this flashy and superficial lazybones? In spite of all his good intentions and endeavours, the raw mediocre "chef" finally made a mockery of himself by adding too much oil and salt into his dishes, thus making his would be feast simply inedible! Apparently, Joe's unworthy vainglory and uselessness greatly annoyed and despaired of poor Maria.

In order to obtain highly natural and interference free conversations, the students selected, one pair after another, in time sequence, entered into a quiet cozy lounge and stayed there all alone until they finished their conversation and left and then, the next pair went into and performed the same task. All the work was done in a pressure-free and leisurely milieu without a time limit. Moreover, a hi-fi tape recorder had been concealed beforehand in an inconspicuous corner in the lounge and all the students' dialogues were secretly recorded, totally without their knowledge. Obviously, the reason why all these were done was to reduce the nervousness factors to minimum.

When all had been said and done, an intriguing issue arose: what was supposed to be the subjects' performance concerning the violation of gender correspondences between different cases of 3rd person singulars in their conversations?

The tape recorded the fifteen consecutive conversations authentically. The dialogues, in comparison with one another, are more or less similar, all around the same topic.(i.e. the short story above) each containing much employment of 3rd person singular collocations.

What follows are two typical examples of the students' dialogues.

Sample One

Student A: Hey! Have you heard about Joe recently?

Student B: Oh, no.....anything interesting?

Student A: He just made an exhibition of herself by cooking an extremely poor dish last night.

Student B: Aha....That sounds funny! Anything more interesting?

Student A: As a matter of fact, he'd never done any cooking before and it's her wife who always cooked for him.

Student B: Then how did it come that he cooked for her?

Student A: She fell ill last night, so he volunteered to cook for her.

Student B: Oh, he's so good to her! Then what did he do so as to ruin the whole affair?

Student A: He meant well and offered to use her own special menu.

Student B: Then what happened?

Student A: Well, you know, he's so raw that he put too much salt and oil into his dishes and made them inedible.

Student B: Oh la la..... I see in spite of all his good intentions he made a mockery of herself!

Student A and B: That's a really amusing story! Don't you think so?

Sample Two

Student A: Hi! Ha! Ha! I just can't wait to tell you an extremely funny affair about Joe, you know, that big guy living next to you.

Student B: Yes? Of course I know him. Please don't keep me in suspense! Tell me directly what's the matter with him?

Student A: You know he is idle and lazy all day long and good for nothing. But last night... it's said last night he changed into quite another person. That's it... surprisingly good to her poor wife, Maria.

Student B: Oh, no! It sounds incredible! I'm wondering how can that be possible?!

Student A: It's absolutely true! You know, for the first time in her lifetime he cooked a meal for poor Maria.

Student B: Really? But why?... How comes...?

Student A: Yes, like you, at first I was also puzzled about his sudden change. But what's more dramatic is I don't whether to laugh or cry...

Student B: (more bewildered and wordless)...?

Student A: That is, in spite of all his good intentions and all his boasting about her sumptuous dishes, his rather poor cuisine skill brought an awful end to the whole affair. You can imagine his sorry state saddened her sick wife even more!

Student B: I see, a leopard cannot change its spot, can he?

As you can see, in these two conversations there are quite a few instances of incorrect gender correspondence of 3rd person singulars. As a matter of fact, nearly all of the subjects in the experiment committed oral mistakes here or there concerning the gender agreement. Only one or two samples, according to the transcripts, were mostly error-free or almost sound.

From this sample survey we can see that the failure in keeping gender agreement of 3rd person singulars takes place

haphazardly, with no forewarnings or predictors, just like the passing whims of a capricious person. In other words, this oral anomaly can be justifiably defined and characterized as an oral slip for a considerable number of Chinese speakers of English.

Then what is the case with native speakers? In regard to the two instances mentioned in the first paragraph, native speakers would behave properly and their utterances would instead conform to the gender consistency in the specific positions in these two sentences. However, when the mistakes are unintentionally committed by Chinese speakers of English concerning the examples afore-mentioned, they are supposed to be made spontaneously or randomly, without their second thought, on a par with their other slips of tongue, and are naturally uttered in their flow of speech. The same characteristics are also manifest in native speakers' manner of such utterances. What's more interesting, such oral gender confusions seem only to occur with the 3rd person singulars and seldom or never occur in the categories of the 3rd person plurals or the 1st and the 2nd personal pronouns (singulars or plurals).

Now the issue arises as to whether there would be some difference in occurrence and frequency in relation to this kind of oral slips committed in a relatively stressful situation?

Accordingly, the above experiment was done again, this time with some important changes in experimental conditions. The fifteen pairs of subjects, one pair after another, were asked to conduct their dialogues on a platform with some audience sitting below observing their performances. And the short story was only allowed to be read immediately before their conversation impromptu. Moreover, a five-minute time limit was set on each dialogue improvised on the spot. Besides, all the subjects had been told beforehand that their conversations would be recorded for later review. Evidently, all these were done in order to magnify the nervousness factors in the experiment and to see if they would exert any negative influence on the subjects' performance.

Quite surprisingly, the review of the experimental results seem to indicate that, in spite of all the artificial interferences applied, the occurrence and the frequency of oral slips of the kind committed did not increase significantly; that's to say, the index focused upon in the two experiments remained more or less the same. So from this we can assert that, broadly speaking, stress constitutes no key factor in affecting gender confusion regarding 3rd person singulars.

II. CAUSES UNDERLYING GENDER CONFUSION

What should be emphasized here is that such oral slips are only made by some Chinese speakers of English sometimes instead of by everyone every time. The occurrence is haphazard and at random. Moreover, such lapses are often committed by some Chinese speakers while seldom or never by native speakers. What causes lie behind this intriguing oral linguistic phenomenon? So far as the 3rd person singulars are concerned, their either masculinity or femininity in their nominative, possessive and objective cases and reflexive pronouns are signified in the following two grammatical collocations: 1) he-his-him-himself 2) she-her-her-herself

In order to demonstrate their respective collocation inevitability in some specific situations, we cite again the above-mentioned two sentences, that is, *He's tapping his fingers clumsily on the piano keyboard.* And, *The little girl was playing with her own toys.* For native speakers, these collocations and other collocations of the kind have become something formulaic and naturalistic in their speech production. In other words, these oral expressions are more ordinary and familiar for them to produce than for Chinese speakers of English. This reasoning can be supported by the following two expositions on SLA (Second Language Acquisition).

Argument One

For a great deal of the time anyway, language production consists of piecing together the ready-made units appropriate for a particular situation and ...omprehension relies on knowing which of these patterns to predict in these situations. Our teaching therefore would centre on these patterns and the ways they can be pieced together, along with the ways they vary and the situations in which they occur. (Nattinger,1980:)

Argument Two

For native speakers, speech production does not all have to be traced back to the elemental phonetic features, since a considerable amount of language chunks or grammatical or lexical collocations are straightforwardly stored in the mental lexicon.(Kormos,2006)

Thus we can assume that native speakers execute native selection and exhibit native fluency when they make correct collocations in their oral speech. Whereas for some Chinese speakers, their knowledge and awareness of the English 3rd person singulars are mechanical, superficial, fragmentary and incoherent, as something imposed upon them artificially, so they are without a native-like control of the English 3rd person singulars, which gives rise to their confusion in gender collocations.

Besides the reasons mentioned above, there seems to be some subliminal constraint or regulating mechanism implicit in the mind of the native speakers of English to keep them from such oral lapses. What's more, native speakers might be mentally, cognitively and linguistically conditioned so as to be immune from such "viruses" as early as from their childhood, or even from their birth. If the above assumptions could be proved valid, we could conclude that such oral expressions as uttered in the right way in terms of gender have become something subconscious, automatic, natural, instinctive, instantaneous and error-free on the part of the native speakers.

So far as the Chinese language is concerned, its pronunciation system is called "pinyin (拼音)".According to this

system, Chinese people vocalize the Chinese 3rd person singular pairs, i.e. 他 (“ta”; masculine, equivalent of “he” or “him”) and 她 (“ta”; feminine, equivalent of “she” or “hers”) the same or in some gender-free way.

Such being the case, we may assume that, for the Chinese ESL learners, the seemingly gender-free utterance of the Chinese 3rd person singulars might have prepossessed them subtly and suggestively. Sometimes, they tend to err during the speech production of English 3rd person singular gender collocations, partly due to the adverse influence of the Chinese genderless oral representations of the Chinese 3rd person singulars; i.e. negative impact on their thinking or speaking habits regarding this very issue. (some predisposition towards such errors)

Now it can be concluded that, regarding the oral gender correspondence of the English 3rd person singulars, confusions are likely to occur to Chinese speakers of English. Both the occurrence and the frequency of these oral slips, or a specific category of Chinese speakers of English involved in such cases, are not determinable or consistent, with no foreseeable track to be followed. Instead, these oral errors take place incoherently and arbitrarily, with no regularity or consistency discerned. However, for native speakers of English, in their utterance, gender collocations of the 3rd person singulars would naturally take care of themselves.

III. MISCELLANEOUS ERRORS IN PRONUNCIATION

Besides the gender confusion phenomena in the oral speeches of Chinese speakers of English, pronunciation errors committed by Cantonese and non-Cantonese Chinese speakers of English also arise quite frequently.

Negatively influenced by the Cantonese dialect, there exist in Cantonese English many pronunciation mistakes. The mispronunciations are represented by vowel errors and consonant errors.

1. Vowel mispronunciations

Vowels are sounds in which there is no obstruction to the flow of air as it passes from the larynx to the lips (Hu Zhuangling, 2002). English and Cantonese belong to two different language systems, therefore there are some dissimilarities in their vowel sounds.

(1) English vowels, especially short vowels, possess some distinguishing features from the simple vowels in Cantonese, e.g. length, tense and lax, etc. So it is not hard to understand that most Cantonese speakers of English tend to mispronounce a series of English short vowels, e.g. the mispronunciation of [hit] as [hi:t] and [ful] as [fu:l], which naturally cause confusion in oral communication.

(2) There are two short vowels which are unique in English, i.e. [æ] and [ʌ]. [æ] is a front vowel, when pronounced, the lips are slightly spread (O’CONNOR J D, 1967). But Cantonese speakers of English often wrongly utter [æ] as [e]. e.g. bag [bæg] as beg[beg]. The main cause for this error is that the mouth is opened too slightly and the tongue is raised too high. As for the utterance of the short vowel [ʌ], Cantonese speakers of English tend to replace it with the utterance of the long vowel [ɑ:], resulting from opening the mouth too wide, the back of the tongue being raised too high and the tongue muscle being slightly over-strung.

2. Consonantal mispronunciations

Consonants are sounds in which there is obstruction to the flow of air as it passes from the larynx to the lips, no matter whether the vocal cords vibrate or not. English consonants are where Cantonese speakers of English make the most mistakes.

(1) The addition of vowel sounds

English words consist of syllables and each syllable comprises rhyme and onset, and each rhyme includes peak and coda. If the first syllable of the word in question begins with a vowel, we say that this initial syllable has a zero onset. An onset can at most hold a three-consonant cluster, whereas a coda may accommodate at most four consonants (Peter Roach, 2000).

Some Cantonese students are liable to add a vowel sound into a consonant cluster at the position of onset and coda. For example, the mispronunciation of “please” as similarly as “police”, inserting a vowel sound [ə] into the consonant cluster /pl/. Likewise, as for the word “script”, Cantonese students tend to pronounce it as [skəripət].

(2) Level-tongue phenomenon

Level-tongue phenomenon is the most common mispronunciation instance for Cantonese speakers of English. The post-alveolar sounds [r], [ʃ], [ʒ], [tʃ] and [dʒ] are comparatively easily confusable for them. Since [r] is non-existent in Cantonese, Cantonese students, more often than not, confuse [r] with [l]. Likewise, they tend to mistake [s] and [z] for fricatives [ʃ] and [ʒ] and affricates [ts] and [dʒ] for [tʃ] and [dʒ]. e.g. “China [tʃʌinə]” is pronounced as [tsainə], and “shrine [ʃrain]” is pronounced as [srain].

Above-mentioned are common errors in oral English made by Cantonese. In addition, these errors are seen most often in the midst of overseas Chinese throughout the world, among whom quite a number of them are of Cantonese stock. That is just why I’ve accorded particular importance to and devoted a special case study of how Cantonese speakers of English make so many mistakes orally.

The following are typical errors committed by both Cantonese and non-Cantonese Chinese speakers of English.

(1) Plosive consonants are added with the vowel [ə] when pronounced.

e.g. This is a desk [ə]. I’m a student [ə].

(2) Ignore the incomplete explosion of plosives when followed by other plosives, fricatives, nasal consonants or

affricates.

e.g. Top Ten a good student
 Good night. a hard lesson
 Good morning. Goodbye.

Note: The underlined letters above should be pronounced with incomplete explosion.

(3) Plosives when preceded by [s] should be pronounced with less explosion. Please note the underlined letters:

e.g. sky stop sport style

(4) There are no such sounds as [ʃ] and [θ] in Chinese mandarin, causing a lot of Chinese speakers of English to pronounce:

e.g. “she[ʃi:]” is often mispronounced as he[hi:]. “Thank you [’θæŋkju:]” is mispronounced as [’sæŋkju:]

(5) Diphthongs are pronounced as single vowel (Zhang Jinsheng, 2001).

e.g. Okay[əu’kei] as [ək]

I[ai] as [e] Time [taim] as [tem]

(6) In some southern Chinese dialects, there does not exist the sound [k], so people there tend to substitute [h] for [k]. Therefore, “He gave her a kiss.” is changed into “He gave her a hiss.”

(7) The nasal sound [m] does not last long enough when some Chinese pronounce words ended with [m]. They just shut up their mouths, but there’s no [m] sound coming out.

e.g. team dream swim

(8) People from some locations in Southern China cannot pronounce the sound [r], they simply pronounce it as [l]. e.g. “three [eri:]” is pronounced as [oli:].

(9) What is also worth mentioning is that some people, especially southerners of China such as Cantonese, Hunanese, etc. frequently confuse the nasal sound [n] with the lateral [l], because there is a fuzzy boundary between [n] and [l] in Cantonese and Hunanese. e.g. “Hunan [’hu’næn]” is pronounced as [’hu’læn]. “nation” is pronounced as [’leiʃən].

IV. PROBING INTO THE CAUSE OF MISPRONUNCIATIONS

There began in as early as 1940’s and 1950’s in the American linguistic circle the discussions about “language transfer”. Charles Fries and Robert Lado are the pioneers in this domain. “Transfer” is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired. (ODLIN T., 2001)

The impact of one’s mother tongue on the second language is immense and widespread. Language learners tend to transfer the traits of their mother language onto the second language. If the traits of the two languages are similar, then positive transfer or facility can be accessed; on the contrary, if the structures of the two languages are disproportionate, then negative transfer or interference will emerge, causing the language practitioners commit mistakes (ibid).

The methodology drawn upon to analyze the errors committed in the Second Language Acquisition should, first of all, be “contrastive analysis”. It was first put forward by Charles Fries and ever since gained widespread access in foreign language teaching. The connotation of contrastive analysis is to make a comparison between one’s mother language and target language, conducting a detailed analysis of each other’s structures and characteristics. Self-evidently, during the acquisition of English phonetics, Cantonese and non-Cantonese Chinese speakers of English, under the negative influence of Chinese pronunciation and dialect, would unconsciously use their mother tongue’s way of utterance to replace similar English pronunciations, (Li Xinkui, 1988) i.e. a paradigm of negative language transfer.

V. THE WAYS TO COUNTERACT GENDER CONFUSION AND PRONUNCIATION ERRORS WITH EFFICACY IN A CLASSROOM SETTING

In regard to the mispronunciations committed by Cantonese students, language teachers should direct and motivate their students according to the following guidelines.

1. Engage students in a great deal of listening and imitation pronunciation activities.
2. In answer to some particular knotty pronunciations, explain some pronouncing theories to their students.
3. Regarding the pronunciation knots listed above, language teachers may adopt consolidated and concentrated training strategies and construct specific pronunciation schemes. (KELLY G., 2001)
4. Given the addition-of-vowels phenomenon, the following exercises are recommended.
 - (1) Constant practice of onset consonant clusters
 break please screen spring
 [br-] [pl-] [skr-] [spr-]
 - (2) Pronunciation exercises of coda consonant clusters
 Sixth slept claspt desks
 [siksə] [slept] [klæsp] [desks]
5. Relinquish traditional monotonous instruction formulas, and try to diversify and implement imaginative teaching methodology.
6. As for the gender confusion of the 3rd person singulars, in light of the discussions above, rote learning or repetitive

oral exercises can be applied in order to proactively reduce or preempt such oral errors. Just as the English proverb goes, “Practice makes perfect.”

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