DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 116 501 FL 007 396

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TITLE Speech Errors, Error Correction, and the Construction of Discourse.
PUB DATE Oct 75
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at Colloquium on New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English (4th, Washington, D.C., October 24-25, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Discourse Analysis; English; *Error Patterns; Interaction Process Analysis; Language Research; *Language Usage; Language Variation; Linguistic Performance; Models; Phonology; *Semantics; Structural Analysis; Syntax
IDENTIFIERS *Error Analysis

ABSTRACT

Speech errors have been used in the construction of production models of the phonological and semantic components of language, and for a model of interactional processes. Errors also provide insight into how speakers plan discourse and syntactic structure,. Different types of discourse exhibit different types of error. The present data are taken from interviews concerned with domestic tasks, such as routines for preparing family dinners and dinner parties, getting the family off to work, the organization of a baby-sitting pool, and the layouts of apartments. There are almost no phonological errors, and few syntactic errors. The most common type of corrections are of semantic errors or errors of discourse ordering. Four major types of semantic errors are discussed: (1) semantic error involving the correction of potential ambiguity, if both interpretations would be plausible in the context; (2) the correction of the level of lexical specificity; (3) the correction of memory or fact; (4) the correction of the ordering of the discourse components, which provides crucial insights into the process of planning discourses. Cases not marked as errors by speakers, but which current syntactic models do not consider well-formed sentences are also discussed. (Author/CLK)

Speech Errors, Error Correction, and the Construction of Discourse

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This paper examines a body of speech errors, particularly those speech errors which the speakers correct, in order to discover some of the ways in which speakers monitor their own speech, and to draw some inferences from them about the processes used by speakers in constructing discourses.

Previous work on speech errors has focussed mainly on phonological and morphological errors, using them as a tool to confirm or discover the existence of the basic units and processes of production. (Fromkin 1973) One reason for the concentration on phonology has been the method of data collection. In general, errors have been collected on the fly, by writing them down as they are heard. One result of this method is that not much of the context can be reproduced, the matrix sentence at best. This makes it impossible to study certain types of errors of discourse planning and semantic alternation. It also appears to be the case that the topic of discussion and the stylistic level of the discourse influence the type of errors that speakers are likely to make. (Labov 1975) Fromkin does not indicate the source of her examples, but many of

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1. I would like to thank the following people for helpful discussions and clarifications at various stages in the writing of this paper: Diane Bradley, Joseph Goguen, George Lakoff, Geoffrey Nunberg, Chiahua Pan, and Benji Wald. I am extremely grateful to the women who consented to act as subjects of the interview. The errors in this paper are theirs; the faults in it are my own.

them appear to come from academic discussions of linguistics.

The present study uses a different method of data collection. The errors in question are drawn from a series of interviews with middle-class New York City housewives, on the general topic of the speaker's attitude towards her neighborhood. The particular discourse types elicited are descriptions of the preparation of family dinners and dinner parties, the routine for getting the family awake and out of the house in the morning, apartment and house layout descriptions, narratives involving multiple protagonists, and explanations of the functioning of a baby-sitting co-op. (This body of data was not elicited in order to study errors and error correction; it is part of an on-going study of the structure of temporally or propositionally complex discourse types.) Because of the nature of the corpus, which provides the entire discourse context of the errors made, we have a perfect opportunity to look not only at the errors speakers make, but also at the kinds of errors that they correct and the ways that they correct them.

When we start to look at errors on the semantic and discourse levels, we are faced with the question of what is meant by the notion "error." In phonology, there is little question. We almost always know what the target structure is, and have no difficulty in determining whether an acceptable token of the intended form has been produced. On other level, this is not as clear. Even in syntax, as we shall see, there can sometimes be some question as to whether the string produced represents the speaker's intention or not. In the

area of discourse formation, this determination is impossible to make. At least at present, we do not have a well-articulated theory of discourse structure which will allow us to recognize a deviant example of an explanation or a narrative. In a few cases, for example, jokes, we can tell the difference between a joke which is merely badly told or not funny, and a joke which is missing some information. ("I forgot to tell you, it was a Jewish Martian.") But usually we can not specify the speaker's intention precisely enough to recognize a deviation from it. Therefore we must rely on the speaker's own recognition that what he has produced does not adequately express his intention. This means that in studying discourse, we can only count as errors those structures which the speaker spontaneously corrects.

Let us look first at corrected errors in the formulation of discourse. I am assuming a model in which the speaker must perform all of the following operations: selection of the overall information to be conveyed, arrangement of it, assignment of sentence boundaries, and selection of syntax and lexicalizations for each sentence. This model has already been shown for apartment descriptions (Linde 1974a, 1974b, Linde and Labov,1975) and is part of the current project on temporal and explanatory structure. It is quite similar to the production models suggested by Fromkin and by Fry (1969).

The first possible source of difficulty is the problem of the formulation of the overall structure of the discourse. There may be difficulties in deciding where to begin or end, or

in managing the hierarchic arrangement of the sub-parts of the discourse. (1) is an example of difficulty in beginning the discourse.[2]

1. But it had a ..., you walked in the front door, there was a long hall. (PS 7 apt)

The speaker attempts to move from the opening evaluation of the apartment to the layout description proper without mentioning the entrance. This violates one of the major rules for the description of layouts, which must begin with some mention of entrance as an orienting point for the specification of all directions. (Linde 1974a, pp 64-67)

(2) is an example of difficulty in ending a discourse.

2. So it was, the kitchen was pretty impossible, but we did pretty well there. (PS 7 apt)

(2) is taken from an apartment layout description. The speaker apparently begins to offer a closing evaluation of the entire apartment, and then changes the plan inorder to include an evaluation of one of the rooms. Such an evaluation of a single room always precedes an overall evaluation.

Another problem involved in discourse planning is the task of marking and keeping track of the division between sub-units of discourse. For at least some discourse types, such as apartment layout descriptions and task instructions, sub-units appear to be hierarchically organized. (Linde 1974a, Deutsch 1974) (3) and (4) are two cases which show the problem of

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2. Examples with parenthesized index numbers are taken from my tapes; others are either invented or written down after hearing.

of organizing the hierarchy of sub-units.

3. So the last half of the afternoon of the party, I generally do the major part of the main course and whatever vegetables that we have, and I have, one thing I guess I should mention, a wonderful babysitter, an older woman who lives around the corner, who sits for me at least one day a week and often two or three afternoons a week. So if I ever get pinched, which has happened, I just take the baby over there and leave her until I get things cooked and then go back and get her. (PS 7 cd)

In (3), the speaker interjects the marker one thing I guess I should mention at a point which is not a major constituent break, because the information about the existence and schedule of the baby-sitter forms another sub-unit, not to be conjoined in the same sentence with part of the scheduling of the dinner party preparation. (Note that the marker was separated from the rest of the sentence by parenthetical intonation.)

4. If you went left, you walked into the laundry room. But it was, um, the whole house was practically the size of the bottom floor of this house. (PS 2 house)

In (4), the speaker is trying to pronominalize house, the superordinate category of the discourse hierarchy, which was last mentioned seven sentences back. However, the result would have been ambiguous, since it can be used to pronominalize both within the discourse sub-unit and beyond it back to the major category of the hierarchy. (It-pronominalization thus appears to differ from that-pronominalization, which refers back only to major categories. (Deutsch,1974, Linde to appear.)

Another type of difficulty in discourse formation concerns the task of ordering the informational units. The speaker begins a sentence, drops it in the middle, adds one

or more other sentences, and then returns to the dropped sentence and gives a complete version. (5) is the conclusion of a long narrative given as an answer to the question "How did you find this apartment?"

5. So we walked back in and we said "We'll take it." So that's how we landed in..., Ironically one of the people we asked was the husband of the lessee, who said later he thought people who were so naive as to ask that, he should have said, "By all means don't take it, that's outrageous." But anyway we took it, they became very good friends of ours in the end. And that's how we landed in New York. (PS 7 narr)

The information bracketed by the picked-up false start is not essential to the plot of the story; it serves to reinforce the evaluation that this story reports an amazing series of coincidences. (This analysis relies on Labov's notion of narrative clause and evaluation. Labov 1973) (6) is a similar case of a picked-up false start bracketing background material whose function is to increase the strength of the evaluation of the narrative. It is taken from the story of a girl trapped at City College during the Great Blackout of 1965.

6. So I had around five girls together and we decided to take a cab to my house and we were all going to sleep over my house and we finally, with all of the guys out in uh the helmets, the civil defense directing traffic, it was really frightening it was so dark and everything, but we had a great time. It was a night-to-remember kind of thing. And we all finally made it to my house and we stayed up half the night just talking about it. (PS 9 narr)

Cases like this suggest the hypothesis that when the speaker makes the first organization of information, that is, the retrieval of the incident from memory, the information selected is a skeleton form of the final narrative, the sequence

of incidents alone. There are 12 such examples of picked-up false starts; nine in narratives and three in discourse types whose structure is not as well documented. In seven of the nine narrative cases, the false starts bracket secondary material -- evaluative material or additional background information -- rather than actual narrative clauses which advance the story line. This hypothesis of skeleton storage of narratives would explain how it is that we are able to tell the "same" story with different evaluations for different purposes. (Sacks implies a similar view of the nature of storage. Sacks 1970, Lecture 5)

There is, however, one extremely interesting case in which the material bracketed by the false start is vital to the story. (7) is taken from a story given in response to a question about the adequacy of neighborhood medical facilities. The speaker feels that the hospital in general is poor, but that the emergency service is good, as shown by the care given to her daughter when she had a blackout.

7. But she had a very high fever at the time and she blacked out. <u>But they</u>, she um had gotten something caught in her throat so it was a whole crazy incident and she really wasn't breathing, <u>and they had a respirator and what have you</u>. (PS 4 narr)

The most salient fact of the story is that the girl was not breathing and so almost died. This must be part of the most minimal storage of the incident; it can not be omitted. How then can we account for the false start of (7)? It is possible that in constructing a discourse, the speaker plans the later part of the discourse as he is uttering the early sentence of it. An example like (7) gives some evidence

that speakers may occasionally jump ahead to utter the portion of discourse which is at that moment being planned. (Fry suggests a similar model for phonological and lexical errors. Fry 1969)[3]

The next cases involve problems with individual pieces of information. There may be difficulty in retrieving a particular fact, or in lexicalizing it, or an incorrect fact may be supplied and then corrected. Speakers will often provide an indication in the discourse that they are having trouble remembering a fact or lexicalizing it. These indications are inserted at points in the sentence which are not major constituent breaks, suggesting that these are genuine traces of disruptions, rather than stylistic devices. (8), (9), and (10) are examples.

8. They think she had a, what they call a febrile convulsion, although she didn't convulse, she blacked out. (PS 4 narr)

9. The big one? I was, where was I? Park West Village. (PS 8 blackout)

10. The last one I gave I had brisket.
(CL) And ...?
Brisket and baked potatoes, sour cream and what was the vegetable, how can I think? oh, Brussels sprouts. (PS 4 cd)

Following Lakoff, we may call these amalgams, sentences containing lexical material which must be copied in from the derivations of other sentences. (Lakoff 1974) Lakoff gives

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3. The last case of a picked-up false start in a narrative is an intermediate case. The bracketed material consists of background material plus a repetition of a narrative clause.

examples like (11), (12), and (13).

11. John invited you'll never guess how many people to you can imagine what kind of a party.

12. John is going to, is it Chicago? on Saturday.

13. The Knicks are going to win because who on the Celts can possibly handle Frazier?

Lakoff's examples differ somewhat from the cases in my data, though. In his examples, the amalgamated material appears to have a primarily stylistic function, while in my examples, the amalgamations seem to be the result of difficulties in formulating the sentence.

The next cases are what we may call errors of fact. Unlike the amalgam cases, in these cases a fact has been retrieved, lexicalized either fully or partially, and then corrected.

14. And so it was a nice day, no, no, I don't think it was a nice day, not like today, it was a crummy day, so they couldn't even go out very much. (PS 6 cd)

15. Then I brown some butter and some garlic, oh no, you just put butter and you brown the meat. (PS 2 cd)

16. But, um, so by eight o'c-, by eight thirty we're all set to go. (PS 6 mr)

Note that these cases appear to exhibit problems in the retrieval of a fact rather than a word. Compare them with (17), taken from a description of the family's routine in the morning.

17. And Catherine goes to bed, goes to school on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. (PS 6 mr)

(17) clearly represents difficulty in the choice of a word, not of a fact.

There are also cases in which the speaker substitutes an alternate lexicalization even though the original appears to fit the discourse. In some cases like (18), (19) and (20), the speaker appears to be monitoring for level of specificity.

18. I think really the hosp-, the old part of the hospital is really terrible. (PS 4 narr)

19. First a lot has to do with our own op-, with my own opportunities. (PS 6 expl)

20. And we just not- (/nowt/), we saw that big light get softer and softer and softer, and it went out. (PS 5 blackout)

There are also cases in which the substituted word appears to be on the same level of specificity, and it is impossible to tell in any principled way why the original was rejected.

21. Well, we uh arrived in, first of all moved to New York with a moving van. (PS 7 narr)

22. We have the ground floor bedrooms and a bath-, one bathroom. (PS 5 house)

23. And we went over to a friend's apartment, who was having, who had invited us over for apple pie or something.

24. She had a bl-, she blacked out. (PS 4 narr)

There are seven such cases. With the exception of (24), all the substituted items are chosen from the same form class as the original. These cases are too varied to permit explanation of why the first choice was rejected, since they would have made sense in their original form. However, these cases, like the previous ones, do show clearly that speakers are continuously monitoring word choice.

There is also an extremely interesting group of cases in which speakers make corrections to avoid potential ambiguities.

None of them involve ambiguities of constituent structure, scope, opacity, or any of the types of ambiguity prominent in current syntactic argument. There is, in fact, only one example out of thirteen which could be considered in any way an ambiguity of structure. This is (25), which is the conclusion of a description of an entire family's routine in the morning.

25. So it means getting up around, for me it means getting up around seven thirty. The kids can sleep a little bit longer. (PS 8 mr)

All the other cases involve purely semantic ambiguities.

26. One the, on our upper floor, we have three bedrooms. (PS 4 house)

Thespeaker is describing her apartment, which occupies the first two stories of a four-story building, the upper two floors of which she rents out.

27. I work three da-, I go into my office three days a week. (PS 6 fd)

The speaker of (27) is a woman who has a husband and three children, is a full-time university teacher, and is finishing a dissertation. Understandably, a major theme in her accounts of her routines is that she is always working. In (27), she corrects the potential ambiguity of work, which could refer either to her teaching job, or to all her labor.

28. And I put in the ro-, the turkey or whatever, and then I go back to bed. (PS 1 cd)

Roast could be used as a cover term for turkey, which has been mentioned before in the discourse. Usually, though, roast refers to roast beef; certainly it sets up at least a potential misunderstanding.

29. I was approached by somebody who happened to recognize me from the building, because when you're working, your husband and you are both working and you come home at night, you don't meet the other people in your building until after you either have a dog or you have a baby. (PS 9 expl)

(29) shows a correction of the number ambiguity of you. (In addition, notice the full form of You either have a dog or you have a baby. Conjoining the two NPs would have set up a ludicrous ambiguity with the word have.)

30. And uh I was approached by somebody in the grocery store when I wheeling the baby around, my first s-, child around. (PS 9 expl)

The speaker here is referring to her oldest child, a son. The more specific formulation, my first son, sets up a possible contrast with my first daughter, a contrast which is not the case since the speaker has two sons.

The most salient characteristic of these corrected ambiguities is that both meanings would be plausible in the context. Ambiguities like (31), in which one interpretation is quite unlikely, are not corrected.

31. Then the first room to the left is a large child's bedroom. (I-18)

The claim is not that all plausibile ambiguities are corrected, but rather that the speakers are monitoring their speech in such a way that they can catch potential disruptions as subtle as the ones cited here.[4]

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4. Jefferson cites cases of equal complexity, in which the speaker begins to use a term and then substitutes for it a more elevated version, for example cop to officer. She analyzes this as a way for the speaker to indicate both his usual form and the fact that he is altering his usual form in deference to the nature of the interaction. (Jefferson 1974)

Let us turn now from errors of discourse formation to errors in phonology and syntax. There are surprisingly few phonological errors in this data -- in fact, only one case that might be analyzed as an error of anticipation.

32. Um, we have a three story brown hou-, brownstone. (PS 3 house)

It is puzzling that there are so few phonological errors, although given the methods of data collection of previous work, we do not know what the expected frequency should be. It is possible that some phonological errors were not transcribed, due to problems of recording fidelity. (The interviews were recorded on the Sony TC-55 cassette recorder, almost always in the presence of young and noisy children.) It also appears to be the case that the social setting and the particular discourse type influence the type of errors which are most likely. (Labov 1975) Certainly we have all observed that complex syntactic errors are common in academic discourse, in which the speaker attempts to represent complex ideas, perhaps for the first time, while under social pressure to make a good impression, and perhaps while in competition to hold the floor.

In considering the syntactic errors in this data, we must distinguish between errors recognized by the speakers, and errors recognized by the analyst by reference to some syntactic model. There is one case of a syntactic error corrected by the speaker.

33. ... whereas the benches for the mothers is, are quite far away. (PS 4 expl)

There is no doubt about this case; any speaker and any syntactic theory would label it an error.

There are also cases whose status is not as clear. The speakers provide no correction, but at least some linguists consider these sentences to be not fully grammatical.

34. I see mainly her age group, which they're not ready for that kind of thing yet. (PS 2)

35. We have a front room, a big front room which, I don't know, we use it for just when we have a lot of people. (PS 4 house)

36. We built another area down lower where we had put a big bedroom for the kids which I was going to put a divider up when they got bigger. (PS 2 house)

37. ... simply because Saturday is a day which we like to do things as a family and I like to see my husband. (PS 7 cd)

Speakers who do not have this pattern react with almost violent disbelief and repudiation when questioned about the acceptability of these sentences. In an interview situation, of course, it is impossible to stop to question the speaker about his judgment of the grammaticality of the preceding sentence. However, consider the dazzling sentence 38.

38. He married a woman to get out of the army, which already I don't like him.

This was produced by a native speaker of English, a graduate of Barnard College, who works as an editor of scientific texts. The sentence came as part of a story about the deplorable character of an acquaintance. When I brought the sentence to her attention, she remarked that she would not allow it in a manuscript, but that it was fine in speech.

We must conclude that these sentences are grammatical,

particularly since there is no evidence whatever of the speakers correcting them. They are examples of a pattern in which the relative pronoun which has been reanalyzed as a general subordinating conjunction meaning "and in relation to the preceding assertion."[5]

A similar case is (39), which should also be analyzed as a colloquial pattern of pronominalization, rather than as an error:

39. I like to make that a lot. Or beef stroganoff, or so mething that I can hopefully do most of it ahead. (PS 2 cd)

A structure whose status is somewhat more questionable is dislocation. In the data of the present study, there are only examples of left dislocation. Clear cases are (40), (41) (42), and (43).

40. The playground, they're trying to make it better as I'm sure you've heard. (PS 4 expl)

41. But all the people that we know, not only are they doing things but also very involved with their kids. (PS 6 expl)

42. And the chicken, you know, the Chinese style, it's so easy cause it's just vegetables, just cut up that, you know, that it really has to be prepared just seconds before the guests are here. (PS 9 cd)

43. Now having a pediatrician for a babysitter, it's phenomenal. (PS 9 expl)

Judgments vary on whether these sentences are grammatical.

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5. This form is not confined to New York City. It is certainly found in Philadelphia, where it is characteristic of working class style. (William Labov, personal communication) Further research is required to discover the extent of the pattern.

Certainly, there is some question about (44), in which pronominalization has not occurred.

44. And the kids, it was really too small for the kids. (PS 2 house)

It has been argued that left dislocated sentences represent an on-line correction of a mistakenly chosen subject, and hence should be considered a performance pattern only. We can best understand the function of these sentences by comparing them to sentences with topicalized NPs.

45. And mashed potatoes everyone knows how to make. (PS 1 cd)

46. And salad I usually make at the time of the meal. (PS 1 cd)

47. The horsdoeuvres I often do a day ahead and the main dish I generally try to do the afternoon of the party. (PS 7 cd)

48. And now he goes off to school by himself. And Danielle I take to school. (PS 5 mr)

49. And just the people that we know, who by, just by proximity are our neighbors, we're very very excited by. (PS 6 expl)

These cases are undoubtedly grammatical. In these discourses, topicalization is used to indicate contrastive emphasis. This is directly obvious in (47) and (48). In the other examples, the topicalized NP contrasts with another item of the same class mentioned earlier in the discourse. This differs from the discourse function of sentences with left-dislocated NPs. These sentences are used to introduce, or often re-introduce a topic into the discourse, but not as a contrast to a preceding topic of the same sort. Since the speakers do not treat these left-dislocated sentences are errors, and since they use them for a specifiable discourse function, we must consider these

structures fully grammatical.

A less clear case is the sentence type in which there is a preposed NP related to the rest of the sentence semantically but not syntactically.

50. Um, the actual layout, well you had to walk through the living room to get to our bedroom. (PS 4 apt)

It is hard to tell whether to analyze this an an error or not. It might be considered a false start, but it is considerably more integrated into the discourse than are the false starts involving problems in discourse planning. These sentences are probably related, both structurally and in use, to the as for sentences mentioned by Ross, which are mysterious but grammatical. (Ross 1970)

51. As for the students, adolescents almost never have any sense.

There remain a number of types of errors which can not be classified at all, at least, not presently. This is unfortunate, but the aim of this study is not to account for all of the errors of a corpus, but rather, to see what can be learned from errors about the psychological realities of production. Even at this early stage of research, we can conclude that speakers' errors show that they maintain a complex and elaborate monitoring system for semantic and discourse disruptions.

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