**Lesson 19 : THE ‘SLIP OF TONGUE’ PHENOMENON :**

When a speaker deviates from the correct pattern of an utterance, we talk of slip of the tongue. Such a phenomenon occurs very often in our day to day conversation. Among the Yoruba, they often talk of ‘asiwi’ (mis-statement) and ‘asiso’, (slips). This happens when they say “put clothes on your body” and “cover your body with cloth” (fi aso sara) and (fun ara laso) respectively. When this is the case, we tend to observe that such deviations are involuntary as speakers make effort to correct them once they are conscious of the speech error.

Wikipedia (2012) reports that the term ‘slips of the tongue’ is derived from a Latin expression ‘lapsus linguae’. They are described as conscious or unconscious deviations from the apparent intended form of an utterance which may be spontaneous or intentional as in puns or word plays. Speech errors are common among children

who have not yet refined their speech. Sometimes, slips frequently continue into adulthood thus leading to embarrassment and often betray regional or ethnic origins.

For example, in northern Nigeria, it is not uncommon to meet speakers who exchange

/f/ for /p/ as in “can I use your fen?” (pen). A typical Igbo speaker who met me when I was just settling down in my new residence at Ayobo-Ipaja, Lagos, talked patronizingly “Oga, come and buy lice” (rice). Likewise, you are likely aware of a popular Fuji musician in Yoruba who alluded to Ibadan people’s speech errors like “kini so? (show), cikin (chicken), etc.

Wang (2012) submits that slips of the tongue occur in the course of information processing in the brain and the production of the utterance. Slips may be conscious when the speaker enters conscious activities the moment the slips occur.

The person will perceive the slips and sometimes makes attempt to correct them.

Speakers who commit unconscious slips are not aware of such errors and often fail to do any

correction. It is the conflict and confusion of concepts during the period of processing

information which underlie speech errors.

Carroll (1994) argued that slips are important source of data in psycholinguistic because they have implications for theories of speech production. It is possible to determine the error pattern which can be explained through cognitive and perceptual mechanism acting on linguistic knowledge. This implies that a current language

experience may be a source of slip as well as language competence acquired in the past.

**How Slips Occur :**

Sigmund Freud in (Fromkin, 1973) attempted a psychological explanation of why some speakers commit slips. He described speech errors as a disturbance which could be “as a result of a complicated psychical influence of elements outside the same word, sentence or sequence of spoken words”.

Some neurolinguists believe that slips occur when there is a disordering of the hierarchical units of the order of vocal movements in pronouncing the word, the order of words in the sentence or the order of sentences in the paragraph.

Wikipedia (2012) explains that all speakers have a spell of speech errors occasionally.

These occur when they are nervous, tired, anxious or intoxicated. During interview sessions, you will observe that even you may not be sure of some utterance which can make you commit slips. I was in a panel one day and one of the candidates gave a different name from the one stated in his curriculum vitae. When queried it was discovered to be his younger brother’s name. Stress session can actually be a cause of slips.

Fromkin (1973) posits that psycholinguistic studies have revealed that slips are non random and predictable. Although it could not be determined when an error will occur or what the particular error will be, one can predict the kinds of error that will occur.

Such predictions are based on our knowledge of the mental grammar utilized by speakers when they produce their utterance. For example, two segments may be transposed as in “Yew Nork” instead of “New York”. In some instances, segmental errors can involve vowels as well as consonants e.g. “bud begs’ in place of ‘bedbugs’

etc.

Speech production comes very rapidly and the mechanism involved is very complicated. Through speech errors we can get an insight into the nature of language processing and production. Slips of the tongue provide linguists with empirical evidence for linguistic theories and give opportunities to learn about language competence and performance models Studies on speech errors explain the sequential order of language production processes. We now have clues on how language interaction modules operate. During speech it is now evident that speakers typically

plan their utterance ahead but slips come in between competence and performance

which is significant psycholinguistically.

Carroll (1986) identifies four features of slips of the tongue:

1. Linguistics elements tend to come from a similar linguistic environment. This means that elements at the initial, middle and final segments interact with one another e.g. “Take my bike.” \*(bake my bike).

2. Distinctive elements and discrete items which interact with one another tend to be phonetically or semantically similar to one another e.g. consonants exchange with consonants, vowels go with vowels e.g. \*“You have hissed my mystery

lecturers.” (You have missed my history lectures).

3. Slips are consistent with phonological rules of the language e.g. \*“I didn’t explain clarefully enough.” (I didn’t explain carefully enough).

4. Stress patterns of slips are consistent. Segments that interact in the utterance received major and minor stress e.g. “burst of beaden’ when the target is ‘beast of burden’. These features underscore the fact that slips of the tongue are

systematic because language production is systematic.

Fernandez and Cairns (2011) assert that words are often organized by their meanings

during language processing so that close associates are stored near one another. Slips

can give us clues into this meaning based organisation. A word retrieval error somehow results in the selection of semantically and structurally similar word.

Instead of “All I want is something for my elbows” you will get (“All I want is

something for my shoulders “Put the oven on at a very low speed” when the speaker intends to say “put the oven on at a very low temperature.”

In each example the speaker has erroneously selected a word that is of the same grammatical class (nouns) and that shares many aspects of meaning with the intended word referred to as the Freudian slips.[[1]](#footnote-2)

1. Iyabode O. Nwabueze et all : **COURSE TITLE: PSYCHOLINGUITICS**, National Open University of Nigeria, FACULTY OF ARTS , 2020,P155- 157 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)