

Classical Malapropisms*

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ABSTRACT

Under the name of malapropisms, Fay and Cutler (1977) have examined a variety of speech error. However, malapropisms in the classical sense are not speech errors: they are what the speaker intended to say and would be willing to repeat. This paper analyzes 158 classical malapropisms in English. Though some probably result from imperfect learning, most represent errors of storage in the mental lexicon. Statistical assessment of the examples indicates that they most resemble the 'tip of the tongue' phenomenon, rather than slips of the ear or malapropisms in the Fay/Cutler sense.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Malapropisms and Classical Malapropisms

Under the name **malapropisms**, Fay and Cutler (1977) have examined a type of production error in speech, exemplified by their first example

- (1) if these two vectors are equivalent →
if these two vectors are equivocal.

[The material to the left of the arrow is the **target** utterance, that to the right the **actual** utterance (for which Fay and Cutler use the term *error*.)] These errors involve 'inadvertent use of the wrong word' and are to be contrasted with errors that show 'ignorance of the correct usage' (Fay and Cutler, 1977; 505)--with, indeed, malapropisms in their classical or Mrs. Malaprop sense. **Classical malapropisms**, as I shall call them (Fay and Cutler having preempted the simple term for their production errors), are not, strictly speaking, errors in speaking: My colleague who said

- (2) like social psychology, behest with all these experiments
[beset → behest]

maintained, when questioned, that *behest* was indeed what she intend-

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ed to say, and she did not see what the problem was; and the person who exhibited the substitution

(3) cholesterol → chloester oil

did so throughout a discussion of diet, and repeated *chloester oil* clearly in answer to a direct question about the name of the substance. Perpetrators of Fay/Cutler malapropisms do not *intend* to say what comes out, and will correct themselves if they realize what they have said or if it is pointed out to them.

The Humorous Effect and Social Motivation of Classical Malapropisms

Perhaps it would be a good thing at the outset to dispel two widespread notions about classical malapropisms—one about their effect on the hearer (note the word **ludicrous** in the Concise Oxford Dictionary's definition: 'ludicrous misuse of a word, especially in mistake for one resembling it'), one about the forces that give rise to them (exemplified by the assertion of Evans and Evans (1957; 288) that malapropisms are 'likely to occur in the speech of those who, ambitious to use fine language but not industrious enough to consult a dictionary, soar above their abilities and display, in the malapropism, not only their ignorance but their vanity as well').

As to the first idea—that classical malapropisms are inherently ridiculous or funny—though this is certainly true of the verbal productions of characters like Mistress Quickly, Mrs. Malaprop, and Archie Bunker, there is nothing particularly amusing about many of the malaprops of real life, as in the following:

- (4) There's a connection, no matter how obtuse it is
[obscure → obtuse]
- (5) My friends had to collaborate what I said
[corroborate → collaborate]
- (6) There are several generalities to be made about these examples
[generalizations → generalities]

(unless, of course, you are the sort of person who finds *any* sort of mistake funny). Despite this fact, my sample of classical malapropisms is heavily biased in favor of laughable and even off-color examples, since it is mistakes like

- (7) advice on the planting of enemas [anemones → enemas]

- (8) [to a new cook, showing her the spice cabinet] This is where
I keep my condoms [condiments → condoms]
(9) I hereby jeopardize you to handle my duties
[deputize → jeopardize]
(10) What a handsome soup latrine! [tureen → latrine]

that people notice, remember, repeat to others, and collect in lists of anecdotes about words and their uses. I have no reason to think that funny classical malapropisms are significantly different in character from the unspectacular mistakes, however, so that I have made no attempt to correct for this sampling bias.

As to the second idea—that classical malapropisms arise from a speaker's attempt to rise above his lexical station—again, this is undoubtedly true of many examples but misleading as a characterization of classical malapropisms in general. For instance, the speaker of (8) tried for **condiments** when **spices** would have been more natural for her and more comprehensible to her addressee; the speaker of (9), a racing steward, frequently indulged in legalisms he was not in full control of (he threatened to revolt [← revoke] racing licenses, as well as jeopardizing his subordinates). Likewise, sports writers and announcers, called upon as they are to fill sizable chunks of space or time with novel commentary on highly structured and repetitive events, often reach too far for the vivid word (hence, arduous [← ardent] racing fans, periphery [← paraphernalia] taken to the game, and a player who ran the gauntlet [← gamut] from goat to glory); and any situation where legal or other technical language is called for may provoke malapropisms (thus, the Columbus police officer who threatened to incarcerate [← incarcerate] one of my colleagues, and the OSU student in an elementary linguistics course who referred to the holocaustic [← holophrastic] stage in language acquisition). Despite these examples, however, nearly a quarter of the classical malapropisms I have collected involve untechnical vocabulary of, what is from the synchronic point of view, Anglo-Saxon nature, as in

- (11) I thought this might shed sunlight on the problem
[some light → sunlight]
(12) It warms the coggles of my heat [cockles → coggles]
(13) A great big old dog—I think it was a collier
[collie → collier]

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(14) We ought to hone in on that problem [home → hone]

(15) on the television scream [screen → scream]

but items of Romance origin are not rare either and they are not obscure:

(16) a giant apartment store [department → apartment]

(17) the Queen's eclectic blue eyes [electric → eclectic]

(18) I'm not precluding the possibility [excluding → precluding]

(19) That might give you a little inclination of the problem [indication → inclination]

The sample

In the exploratory work I am reporting on here, I make use of a collection of 158 classical malapropisms in English collected over a period of about two years, with some difficulty, from a variety of sources (my own observation of speech and writing, reports from others, newspaper or magazine stories on language). I have tried to exclude inadvertent production errors from the sample; a substantial number of my malapropisms recurred over months or years, or were repeated in the face of explicit questioning. Still, these data are surely very 'noisy', in that some examples would have been classified as inadvertent, unintended Fay/Cutler malapropisms rather than as classical malapropisms, if I (or someone) had had the chance to query the original speaker or writer. My statistics must, therefore, be taken as only very rough estimates of the nature of the phenomenon.

In collecting these examples, I have tried to eliminate not only production errors of the Fay/Cutler variety, but also other on-line errors that Fay and Cutler themselves excluded, in particular phonological speech errors *à la* Fromkin (1973)--spoonerisms, anticipations, perseverations, omissions, and blends--and semantic errors. Also, I have not used errors made in the acquisition of English by young children¹ or in the use of English by nonnative speakers. Finally, I have tried to exclude three further types of errors: (1) analogical errors in lexical selection (as when a Burpee seed catalog tells us that a device is 'effective for ridding moles from your garden', or when my daughter says she is 'bored of' things); (2) frozen malapropisms (**infer** for **imply**), which can be acquired directly from adult models, just as are frozen hyper-corrections like **between you and I** and frozen spelling pronunciations

like [oftn] for **often**; and (3) private meanings for individual items, idiosyncratic meanings induced from inadequate contextual information (e.g., **ritzy**, thought by a friend to mean 'poor, tacky', from her parents' deprecating tone in using the word, and **Indo-**, thought by a student to mean 'lower, southern', from its occurrence in **Indochina**). This sifting of examples is no easy matter, and represents a further source of uncertainty in interpreting the statistics in the sections to follow.

SOURCES OF CLASSICAL MALAPROPISMS

Even the few examples I have given already should be enough to suggest that classical malapropisms spring from more than one source, that more than one psychological mechanism is at work in these mistakes. In fact, it is not hard to see at least three different routes that could lead to a classical malapropism. First, Some undoubtedly represent childhood slips of the ear (Garnes and Bond 1975), slips which were never corrected; all of (11)-(15) are good candidates for this subclass, as is

(20) Oh, never mind → oh, lever mind

A second source—not easily separable from the first in every case—is reanalysis of the folk-etymological variety. Probably this is the explanation for (3), and for

(21) bubonic plague → Blue Bonnet plague

(22) Seneca Hotel → Cynical Hotel

(23) Hanover [telephone exchange] → Hangover

If the first two types involve imperfect learning, the third source seems to imply faults in the storage and retrieval system of the mental lexicon. Most of my examples have been of this sort, as are

(24) planned obsolescence → planned adolescence

(25) a reasonable facsimile → a reasonable facility

(26) Wouldn't you get any alibi? [alimony → alibi]

(27) Then he [a doctor] gave me some kind of anecdote
[antidote → anecdote]

(28) Her purse just capitulated into the cloud
[catapulted → capitulated]

(29) circadian rhythm → Circassian rhythm

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- (30) Are you correlating those papers? [collating → correlating]
- (31) The policeman threw an accordion around the crowd
[cordon → accordion]
- (32) It all becomes a mute question [moot → mute]
- (33) He's going to Physics to retire ... Physics, Arizona
[Phoenix → physics]
- (34) People don't understand one another's feelings, but me,
I'm psychotic [psychic → psychotic]

My speculation about these mistakes is that they arise at some time when a speaker is trying to fish out one word from the mental lexicon but gets another one, without realizing that the actual utterance is not the target utterance. Upon hearing the actual utterance (that is, by feedback in the speech situation), the speaker accepts the actual utterance in place of the target, so that the actual utterance *becomes* the stored item. For the original error in retrieval to occur, the storage of the target must have been insecure, defective, or incomplete. Thereafter, the speaker's memory for the item is secure, but erroneous from the point of view of other speakers of the language. This account of what happens in the third type of classical malapropism--which is, I grant, quite speculative--is then very much like what happens in the 'tip of the tongue' phenomenon (Brown and McNeill 1966), where a speaker is trying to retrieve an insecurely stored item. I will return to this parallel below.

It would certainly be advantageous to be able to separate these three types of classical malapropisms and to concentrate on the third type. Unfortunately, I have no defensible method for dividing the examples into groups and have lumped them together for purposes of analysis.

NATURE OF THE MISTAKES

My sample includes 158 classical malapropisms,² a corpus roughly comparable in size to Fay and Cutler's 183 production errors. Some comparisons between these types of errors are summarized in Table 1; Table 2 includes figures from the original tip-of-the-tongue experiments.

Table 1

Comparison of Different Types of Malapropisms

	Fay/Cutler Malapropisms	Classical Malapropisms
Number of Examples	183	158
Error is Existing Word	100%	87%
Grammatical Category Agrees	99%	91%
Stressed V Agrees	54%	70%
Consonantal Onset Agrees	50%	77%

Table 2

Analysis of Different Types of Malapropisms

	Fay/Cutler Malapropisms	Classical Malapropisms	Tip-of-the-tongue Approximations
Number of Syllables Agrees	87%	71%	57% ¹ 48% ²
Stress Pattern Agrees	98%	93%	78%

NOTES: 1. Explicit guesses. 2. Words of similar sounds.

Note first that Table 1 shows that the Fay/Cutler malapropisms are all real words, whereas only 87% of my classical malapropisms are. In (35) are listed the 20 actual utterances in my sample that are not existing words of English.

- (35) assimulated [← assimilated], vanishment [← banishment],
 bastie [← bastard], choiroptractor [← chiropractor], coggles
 [← cockles], consolated [← consolidated], chloester oil
 [← cholesterol], defferentiate [← differentiate], flagrance
 [← fragrance], holocaustic [← holophrastic], uncongenital

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[← uncongenial], incancerate [← incarcerate], laxadaisical [← lackadaisical], leadway [← leeway], leave-way [← leeway], rickity-split [← lickity-split], octangular [← octagonal], phrasenology [← phraseology], preempty [← preempt], jambles [← shambles]

Next, the Fay/Cutler errors match their targets in grammatical category 99% of the time. In my sample the figure is lower (91%), but not extraordinarily so. In (36) are listed the 12 actual utterances in my sample that (in my judgment) are not of the same category as their targets.

- (36) baseball [← base-born], behest [← beset], bewitched [← betwixt], Blue Bonnet [← bubonic], intensive [← intents and], juggler [← jugular], menthol [← mental], mine [← might (modal)], lever [← never], pianoforte [← piano (ad-verb)], radial [← radius], sunlight [← some light].

Agreement in number of syllables, as Table 2 shows, between target and actual utterance was very high (87%) for the Fay/Cutler errors, clearly lower (71%) for my classical malapropisms. Of those polysyllables with the same number of syllables in the target and actual utterance (112 in my sample), the stress patterns matched in 98% of the Fay/Cutler cases, in 93% of mine.

On the other hand, Table 1 also indicates that agreement in the stressed vowel was not very great (54%, by my calculation from the data in their appendix) in the Fay/Cutler data, but much more substantial (70%) in mine. Agreement on the word-initial consonant cluster or consonant (excluding vowel-initial words) was also low (50%) for Fay and Cutler, but again more substantial (77%) for me.

These measures of agreement in classical malapropisms resemble in at least one way the results of Brown and McNeill's tip-of-the-tongue experiments: there is significant but not near-perfect agreement with respect to number of syllables. Brown and McNeill's (2966) subjects were right 57% of the time in guessing explicitly how many syllables the target word had, and when they supplied words in an attempt to reach the target, their answers that resembled the target in sound rather than meaning agreed with the target 48% of the time. These figures are to be compared with 71% matching in classical malapro-

pisms and 87% in Fay and Cutler's data. Unfortunately, the tip-of-the-tongue data cannot be directly compared with malapropisms with respect to the stressed vowel and the consonantal onset of the word; Brown and McNeill did not calculate the former figures at all, and for the beginnings and ends of words they calculated agreement of **letters** in those positions (getting figures between 45% and 50% for their 'similar-sound' words, figures which probably represent substantially higher matching of phonemes).

Setting aside examples attributable to imperfect learning (internalized slips of the ear and internalized reanalyses), we should expect considerable agreement between tip-of-the-tongue approximations to target words and classical malapropisms. In a sense, a classical malapropism is a tip-of-the-tongue approximation that never was adjusted to fit the target word--an internalized near-hit in the retrieval process. Indeed, the words involved in classical malapropisms are (again, if cases of imperfect learning are set aside) very much like things one might have on the tip of one's tongue--**prothetic, subjunctive, voracious, cordon, engrossed, flog, grandiose**-- and they only occasionally come from the everyday vocabulary. In contrast, Fay and Cutler's malapropisms include a great many based on very frequent and ordinary words--targets like **spell, week, map, trip, single, open, bothered, downstairs, room, radio, fine, and good**.

Because of their character as internalized tip-of-the-tongue approximations, classical malapropisms, though enjoyable, provide only a very distant view of the organization of the mental lexicon, while production errors of the Fay/Cutler type give a much better picture. On the other hand, classical malapropisms involve processes of perception and memory as well as processes of production, hence could conceivably shed light on more aspects of cognition than the Fay/Cutler errors can.

NOTES

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1. Jean Aitchison (1977) has examined differences between child malapropisms and adult malapropisms. However, much of her data was obtained from responses to advertisements in the English *Sunday Times*, and it is not clear which of her examples are production errors and which classical malapropisms (moreover, as she notes, some may represent reading errors and some ordinary child phonology). Moreover, the child sources of her malapropisms ranged in age from 2 to 13 years, though the older children should probably be grouped with the adults for the purposes of analysis (at least, the question of age divisions should be more carefully examined). For these reasons, I will not summarize her data here or compare it with mine.
2. This sample contains two repeated malapropisms (**refrain** for **restrain**, and **anecdote** for **antidote**), which have been counted separately. A larger sample would undoubtedly include more repetitions; **take the wrong tact** (← **tack**) and **floundering** for **foundering**, for instance, are probably fairly frequent classical malapropisms.

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