

The Freudian slip revisited

WE should begin by reminding ourselves of what Freud actually said about slips and lapses. He was rarely one to mince his words. 'A suppression of a previous intention to say something is the indispensable condition for the occurrence of a slip of the tongue' (Freud, 1922, p.52). A slip is the product both of a local opportunity from the particular circumstances and of a struggle between two mental forces: some underlying need or wish and the desire to keep it hidden. Freud applied similar arguments to slips of action and memory lapses. Indeed, it was his inability to recall the last name of a minor poet that set him on the track in the first place. And therein lies his genius: his ability to see the value of what he termed 'the refuse of the phenomenal world'.

Freud was well aware of alternative explanations. He called them 'psycho-physiological factors', a label that embraced fatigue, excitement, strong associations, distraction, preoccupation and the like. He was even willing to concede in a half-hearted way that a few errors could occur for these reasons alone: '...we do not maintain that every single mistake has a meaning, although I think that is very probable' (Freud, 1922, p.22). To Freud, notions such as absent-mindedness, excitement or distraction offered little or nothing in the way of real explanation:

They are mere phrases... They facilitate the slip by pointing out a path for it to



JAMES REASON on unconscious urges and cognitive cock-ups.

take. But if there is a path before me does it necessarily follow that I must go along it? I also require a motive determining my choice, some force to propel me forward. (Freud, 1922, p.36)

It is in regard to the nature of this motive force — unconscious urges or mere habits — that many contemporary psychologists would part company with Freud. We can best illustrate these differences of opinion by getting down to cases.

A classic example

One whole chapter of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Freud, 1914) was devoted to a single slip. Freud regarded this analysis as one of the most convincing demonstrations of his thesis. It also reveals him as the travelling companion from hell.

On a holiday trip Freud met a young man who was bemoaning the lot of Jews in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The young man quoted — or attempted to quote — a line from Virgil in which the spurned Dido seeks long-term vengeance on Aeneas. What the young man actually said was: 'Exoriare ex nostris ossibus ultor' (Let an avenger arise from my bones). He was immediately aware that he had got the quote wrong and foolishly asked the all-too-willing Freud to explain why it had happened.

Freud began by giving the correct quotation: 'Exoriare aliquis nostris ex ossibus ultor' (Let someone arise as an avenger from my bones). He then asked the young man to free associate on the missing word *aliquis* (someone). His responses went as follows: dividing the word into *a* and *liquis*; relics; liquefying; fluid; saints' relics; Saint Simon, Saint Benedict, Saint Augustine and Saint Januarius (the last two being calendar saints); Saint

Januarius's miracle of blood (a phial of his blood is supposed to liquefy once a year). Finally, he got to the crunch — the fact that he was very worried because his girlfriend back in Vienna had missed her last period.

One can imagine the smug expression on the maestro's face at this moment. The important clues, according to Freud, were the allusions to calendar saints and the idea that blood flows on a certain day. Even the choice of quotation had a meaning. Dido was crying out for her descendants to avenge her race — a clue to the young man's equally fervent desire that no descendants should be in the offing.

Should we give Freud the expected round of applause? Probably not, since the textual critic Sebastiano Timpanaro (1976) devoted an entire book to providing an alternative explanation, albeit a far more mundane one. Timpanaro pointed out that the boy's misquotation contained two separate errors: it omitted the pronoun *aliquis*; and the words *nostris* and *ex* had been reversed. He then argued very convincingly that, to a young man of his classical education, both the presence of the word *aliquis* in the sentence (which is redundant anyway) and the correct order of *nostris* and *ex* are highly unusual forms (nowhere else does Virgil use this particular ordering).

The sentence is thus susceptible to the process of banalisation: the replacement of archaic or unusual expressions with forms that are in more common use. In other words, the errors were due to strong habit substitution, or what Bartlett (1932) called conventionalisation.

Slips undone

Let's take another of Freud's own examples and see if the same rather unexciting counterarguments could also apply. His

friend Dr Stekel told him of an embarrassing incident that had occurred when he was bidding a female patient goodbye after a house call. Stekel extended his hand to the lady and then discovered, to his horror, that it was undoing the bow that held together her loosely fastened dressing gown. Stekel commented: 'I was conscious of no dishonourable intent, yet I executed this awkward movement with the agility of a juggler.' (Freud, 1914, pp.136–137.)

To Freud, of course, the interpretation was obvious: Stekel harboured unprofessional desires for the woman, a secret betrayed by his unwitting hand movements. But there is also a more boring explanation: Stekel, momentarily distracted or preoccupied (perhaps even by lust), had fallen into the habit-plus-affordance trap. Nineteenth century medicine was a very hands-on affair. In the course of his house calls, Stekel would have been accustomed to undoing the bows of bed jackets and similar garments to palpate a patient's chest or abdomen. A strong habit was thus established and bows naturally afford untying. All that was required to trigger the gaffe was some wayward attention just prior to the intended hand-shaking sequence.

Duller alternatives

With these two examples, we have assembled most of the ingredients for an alternative view. There are at least two necessary conditions for provoking an absent-minded error. Firstly, some cognitive underspecification that can take a variety of forms — inattention, incomplete sense data, or insufficient knowledge; secondly, the existence of some locally appropriate response pattern that is strongly primed by its prior usage, recent activation or emotional charge, and by the situational calling conditions. There is also the prediction that an error sequence is likely to be more familiar, more frequent and more typical in context than the intended correct sequence. We can test out these ideas on an instance of what, on the face of it, was a classical Freudian slip.

Some years ago, I was invited to attend the opening of a new building designed to house clinical psychologists. The person who made the opening speech was a local politician. After extolling the virtues of clinical psychology at some length, she ended by saying: 'I declare this Department of Cynical — er, I mean Clinical — Psychology open.'

Initially I warmed to her, thinking — as no doubt would Freud — that that was

what she really meant. But there were duller alternatives. First, 'cynical' and 'clinical' have very similar structures and would therefore fit equally well into the articulatory programme. Second, 'cynical' anticipates the initial phonology of 'psychology' — the first syllables have a very similar sound. How often have we heard newsreaders make similar anticipatory errors? Third, being a politician, it is likely that the word 'cynical' had far more currency in her everyday lexicon than did 'clinical'.

The claim here is not that Freudian slips do not occur. They almost certainly do. The argument is about their relative frequency. Modern psychologists (see Norman, 1981; Reason, 1979, 1990) would contend that most everyday slips and lapses have more banal origins — along the lines indicated above. But there is a simple test that can be applied. For a slip to be convincingly Freudian, it should take a less familiar form than the intended word or action.

A cursory search of Freud's own examples yielded one strong possibility — that of the Viennese lady who, when calling her children in from the garden, said 'Juden' (Jews) instead of 'Jungen' (boys). It is likely that, for any mother, the latter word would be used more frequently than the former, even if she were Jewish herself.

Mostly right

Enough of this carping. It is time to acknowledge Freud's greatness as a psychologist. Like William James, he had a rare gift for describing and analysing the phenomenology of mental life. For example, he was perhaps the first person to recognise the significance of 'recurrent blockers' in tip-of-the-tongue states:

In the course of our efforts to recover the name that has dropped out, other ones — substitute names — enter our consciousness; we recognise them at once as incorrect, but they keep returning and force themselves on us with great persistence... My hypothesis is that this displacement [of the target name] is not left to arbitrary psychological choice, but follows paths that can be predicted and which conform to laws. (Freud, 1960, p.38)

That these paths probably have more to do with structural similarity, shared context and strong association than with unconscious impulses does not diminish the value of this insight (Reason & Lucas, 1984).

Perhaps Freud's greatest contribution

was in recognising such apparent trivia as 'windows on the mind'. He put it well:

In scientific work it is more profitable to take up whatever lies before one whenever a path towards its exploration presents itself. And then...one may find, even in the course of such humble labour, a road to the study of the great problems. (Freud, 1922, p.21)

And so he did.

So, was Freud right about Freudian slips? Rightness, particularly in our business, is not an all-or-nothing thing. He was probably not right in asserting that all (or nearly all) slips are in some way intended. But if we ask whether Freud was correct in his view that slips represent minor eruptions of unconscious processing, then the answer would be an emphatic 'yes'. But we would not necessarily take the strict psychoanalytic interpretation of 'unconscious'; rather it would be one that relates to processes that are not directly accessible to consciousness. The large part of mental life — schematic or automatic processing — falls into this category.

Slips, we now believe, provide important glimpses into the minutiae of skilled or habitual performance. But they can also reveal suppressed feelings. Freud was perfectly correct in refusing to divorce cognition from emotion.

On balance, then, he was mostly right — though he would hate the 'mostly'.

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