METATHESIS in ENGLISH

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Abstract

As we live, we witness and experience change: Our looks, our circumstances, thoughts and feelings are in constant flux. The same applies to words which have lives of their own and during the lifetime of a word, change appears to be the only constant. Words may change syntactically, semantically and phonologically. One type of words' change in language is when a word has two pronunciations resulting from the change of either contiguous or non-contiguous segments. This type of change is known as 'Metathesis'. The term refers to a language sound pattern in which a sequence of sounds appears in one order in one context but in opposite order in a related context. In other words, it is the process whereby under certain conditions, sounds appear to switch positions with one another. Thus, in a string of
sounds where one would expect the linear ordering of two
sounds to be ...xy..., may find instead...yx..

This research is to come to a clearer understanding of the
nature of metathesis. The research deals with Metathesis in
English only and manifests how this phenomenon alters the
shape of words due to different circumstances without changing
the meaning of the words.

1. Theoretical Background

The word "Metathesis" in English refers to the phenomenon
whereby two sounds that appear in a particular order in one
form of a word occur in opposite order in a related form of the
word. The etymology of this word is related to the late Latin
word "metatithenia" meaning to phrase. The word has two parts:
"meta" meaning "beyond over" and "tethenia " meaning "to
replace"( Thompson & Thompson 1969:35).

Metathesis is "a term used in linguistics to refer to the
transposition of elements in a word or sentence" (Hume ,1998:148). Hume believes that when the change occurs to two
adjacent sounds in a word, it frequently involves the letters l or r
and a vowel. Such change is represented throughout the following examples:

Example: (1.1) *revelent* for *relevant*

Example: (1.2) *brid* for *bird*

The change in those two examples of metathesis shows Hume's identification of *l* or *r* positions in the words and indicates that metathesis is very much to take place when a word contains as those two elements. Crystal (2003:291) indicates that metathesis is "A term used in linguistics to be connected with the alteration which can be found in the normal sequence of elements in a sentence-usually of sounds". Hartman and Stork (1976:141) put heavy emphasis on the change at the morphological and phonological levels and refer to Metathesis as "A change either in the arrangement of words in a sentence or in the speech sounds". Norman (1981:33) views metathesis as the transposition of speech sounds and indicates that the change is only in speech sounds. Montler (1986:55) provides similar point of view and identifies metathesis on the phonological level only. For Montler, "Metathesis is a sound change that alters the order of phonemes in a word. In other words, metathesis is the process whereby a sound hops out its proper place and appears in another position in the word."
Metathesis in English, necessarily, involves two sounds (e.g. xy) which occur as xy in one context, and yx in another. As far as the perspective of language change, one order is considered as original (input) while the other is considered as the result of metathesis (output). (Hume, 1998: 186).

Metathesis is not common as other processes that affecting sounds change in language like assimilation and elision, nonetheless, that occurs as a regular phonological process in synchronic systems in a wide range of languages. The process of metathesis shaped many English words historically. For instance, the pronunciation of ask as /æks/ goes back to Old English days, when ascian and axian/acsian were both in use. Another example is wasp was once wæps and hasp, hæps. All these words despite the change of sounds, still well understood (Ibid.).

Thompson & Thompson (1969:40) point out that metathesis is also a common feature of the West Country dialects, and amongst children when they acquire new words, such as pasghetti for spaghetti. Some other frequently heard pronunciations that display metathesis are very common in rhotic dialects such as American English. This is shown in the examples below:
Over time, the metathesized pronunciations became standard, and the spellings were changed to conform to the new pronunciations. Although these pronunciations occur frequently, most dictionaries do not enter them as standard variants (Minkova, 2003:34).

2. Metathesis in Phonological Theory

Though metathesis has been considered, traditionally, a prosodic and superficial effect relegated to performance error, it is ceased to exist as a phonological process connected to the misperception of sounds (Belvins and Garrett, 1998, Hume, 2001). The study of metathesis was done in two trends: linear and non-linear phonology. The linear phonology, on the one hand, presents Chomsky and Halle's (1968) seminal work in generative
phonology in which metathesis is formally described be means of transformational notation:

\[
\begin{array}{c|c}
S & k \\
\hline
1 & 2 \rightarrow 2 & 1 \\
\hline
\text{Input} & \text{output}
\end{array}
\]

In the non-linear phonology, on the other hand, there is no unique formalism for characterizing metathesis as a primitive rule-type. Instead 'metathesis effects' have been derived by a variety of different means such as successive application of rules of sounds deletion and insertion, single feature spreading, Planar segregation and vowel epenthesis.

Therefore, in linear and non-linear phonological theories there is a principled reason to consider metathesis as a legitimate phonological process of segment reversal. Yet, both fail to provide a definite formalism to account for metathesis. Accordingly, a constraint-based theory of phonology known as 'Optimality Theory' was developed providing promising approach to the analysis of metathesis since not only segment reversals possible between an input and output in the theory. Metathesis results from a mismatch in the linear ordering of sounds between input and output, formally encoded as a
violation of the constraints Linearity. So, in unlike rule-based approaches, there is no longer a principled reason to reject the existence of metathesis; indeed, within an OT framework there is just the contrary. Since earlier theoretical frameworks have been testing-ground for a constraint-based approach to phonology. (Hume 2000: 78).

3. Metathesis and Speech Errors

The distinct nature of metathesis resulted in what was commonly known as the "metathesis myth" in which metathesis was considered as sporadic and irregular, restricted to performance errors, child language, or sound change (Hume 2001:32). This view was evident in Spencer's work who states that “Metathesis frequently occurs in all languages as a type of speech error and is a common feature of child phonology.” (1996: 68). Crystal (1997:240) presents his idea on Metathesis and again carrying in mind the same idea of its appearance frequently in the performance of errors, in such tongue-slips or in the phenomenon of ‘spoonerisms’. Powell (1985: 106) also believes that “Metathesis has generally been treated as a minor sound change. Sporadic and irregular, examples of metathesis are often treated as if labeling it were explaining it.”.
Kenneth (1993:411) identifies verbal pratfalls which form the types of Metathesis. These include the performance errors slips of the tongue and spoonerisms. Some of the most famous kinds may be deliberate wit rather than inadvertent slips.

4. Slips of the Tongue

Normal speech contains a fairly large number of slips of the tongue, which mostly pass unnoticed. These slips of the tongue are defined as "An unintended mistake made in speaking," (Trask, 1995:38). This means, that all human beings may produce errors when they speak. The errors can be divided into: selection errors and assemblage errors. The selection error involves the following categories:

a) Meaning

Example (4.1)  *crossword* **instead of** ‘jigsaw’.

b) Sound

Example (4.2)  *cylinders* **for** ‘syllables’.

c) Syllables

Example (4.3)  *badger* **for** ‘beaver’.

d) Blends of two similar words.
Example (4.4) *torrible* for ‘terrible’ and ‘horrible’.

(Ibid.)

The most well known type of these categories is the errors in sound that are usually called 'malapropisms'. This type of errors suggests meaning and sound to be partially linked in the mind, and also that the linking up involves the activation of a number of words which are similar to the target. The words are stored unevenly and some parts are more prominent than others. This is related to what is known as the bathtub effect, by analogy with someone lying in the tub with only his/her head and feet visible. The same inequality of representation is evident with tip-of-the-tongue effects, it is often possible to remember the beginning and end sounds of words that a person cannot completely call to mind but other parts of the word may be difficult to remember therefore the change takes place (Montely, 1995:50).

Malapropisms is characterized by a high rate of syllable number retention and when malapropisms maintain the number of syllables, they also retain the metrical structure (Aitchison, 1994:44).
The Assemblage Errors are especially characterized by the following types:

a) Anticipations: with a word or sound coming in too soon:

Example (4.5)  

\[ \text{crounty cricket for \textit{county cricket}.} \]

b) Perseverations: with a word or sound repeated:

Example (4.6)  

\[ \text{beef needle soup for \textit{beef noodle soup}.} \]

c) Transpositions: with words or sounds transposed:

Example (4.7)  

\[ \text{to gap the bridge for \textit{to bridge the gap};} \]

( Trask 1995:75)

The best-known of these categories is the sound transpositions called spoonerisms. These errors indicate that chunks of speech are pre-prepared for utterance, possibly in a tone group (a group of words spoken within the same intonation pattern), and that the activated words are organized in accordance with a rhythmic principle.( Ladefoged 2001:63).
5. Spoonerisms

Spoonерism is a phrase in which the initial consonants of two words have been swapped over, creating an amusing new expression. The name was taken from the Revd W. A. Spooner (1844–1930), Warden of New College, Oxford. His reputed utterances, like the accusation that a student had ‘hissed my mystery lectures’, appear to have been inadvertent slips, but Spoonerisms differs in that it may also be used for deliberately humorous effect. So, it is a reversal of sounds in two words, with humorous effect. This point that creates the difference between slips of the tongue and spoonerism (Mcarthur, 1998).

Kenneth (1993:411) defines spoonerisms as "the amusing result of the transpositions of sounds in a pair of words or phrases".

Some of the most famous quotations attributed to Spooner are as shown below:

Example (6.1) The Lord is a shoving leopard instead of The Lord is a loving shepherd

Example(6.2) May I show you to another seat? is said, May I sew you to another sheet?
A spoonerism is a play on words in which corresponding consonants, vowels, or morphemes are switched. They are considered a form of pun when used purposely as a play on words (Ibid.).

7. Conclusions

The order of sounds can be changed in a process called metathesis. *Tax* and *Task* are variant developments of a single form, with the [ks] represented by x metathesized in the second word to [sk]. This term itself was identified from different points of views. Traditionally, metathesis has been treated as a minor sound change. In other words it has been considered as sporadic and irregular. Phonologically, some theorists reversed the traditional trend and gave metathesis a more fundamental role to be a phonological process.

Accordingly, The characterization of metathesis was identified in a linear and non-linear phonology. Concerning the linear phonology, metathesis is formally described by means of transformational notations in which any operation of sound change can be described as this (sk– ks). The non-linear phonology, stated that there is no unique formalism for identifying metathesis as a primitive rule-type. Thus, metathesis
was seen much more as a sporadic, marginal process rather than a phonological process.

The development of a constraint-based theory known as the 'Optimality theory' provided a better approach to the theoretical analysis of metathesis to be a phonological process in which it results in part from a mismatch in the linear ordering of sounds between input and output and encoded as violation of the constraint Linearity.

Yet, Metathesis does not exist as a regular phonological process but rather it is commonly thought to be restricted to performance errors. And hence, is closely associated with slips of the tongue and spoonerism. For the slips of the tongue, on one hand, there are two types of errors: the selection errors and the assemblage errors. Spoonerism, on the other hand, is another type of metathesis which includes the change of sounds, syllables or words. Spoonerisms are intended for funny effects and this is the point that differentiates it from slips of the tongue.

REFERENCES


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