

RECEPTION OF SPOKEN ENGLISH. MISHEARINGS IN THE LANGUAGE OF BUSINESS AND LAW

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Abstract: *Spoken English may sometimes cause us to face a peculiar problem in respect of the reception and the decoding of auditive signals, which might lead to mishearings. Risen from erroneous perception, from a lack in understanding the communication and an involuntary mental replacement of a certain element or structure by a more familiar one, these mistakes are most frequently encountered in the case of listening to songs, where the melodic line can facilitate the development of confusion by its somewhat altered intonation, which produces the so called mondegreens. Still, instances can be met in all domains of verbal communication, as proven in several examples noticed during classes of English as a foreign language (EFL) taught to non-philological subjects. Production and perceptions of language depend on a series of elements that influence the encoding and the decoding of the message. These filters belong to both psychological and semantic categories which can either interfere with the accuracy of emission and reception. Poor understanding of a notion or concept combined with a more familiar relation with a similarly sounding one will result in unconsciously picking the structure which is better known. This means 'hearing' something else than it had been said, something closer to the receiver's preoccupations and baggage of knowledge than the original structure or word. Some mishearings become particularly relevant as they concern teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Such are those encountered during classes of Business English or in English for Law. Though not very likely to occur too often, given an intuitively felt inaccuracy - as the terms are known by the users to need to be more specialised -, such examples are still not ignorable. Thus, we consider they deserve a higher degree of attention, as they might become quite relevant in the global context of an increasing work force migration and a spread of multinational companies.*

Key words: verbal communication; mondegreens; teaching EFL; mishearings in ESP classes.

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1. Preliminary remarks

Oral communication presents certain peculiarities given the fact that the filters interposed between the speaker and the hearer are more numerous than in written English.

1.1. Faulty perception of spoken language

Spoken language can provide grounds for occurrence of faulty reception. "Mondegreens are a sort of aural malapropism. Instead of saying the wrong word, you hear the wrong word ... Mondegreens are in a sense the opposite of malapropisms; they result from something being misheard rather than missaid ...

The word mondegreen is generally used for misheard song lyrics, although technically it can apply to any speech.” (Austin, 2008)

Research into the matter of perception of spoken English sometimes provides examples of mishearings but does not necessarily name the phenomena as “mondegreens” and does not discuss or analyse the concept, which would not be the point anyway. The matter is rather the diagnosis of the misperceptions and the attempt to better understand the process of misperception in order to be able to preempt it. As demonstrated by Linda Shockey, non-natives are very likely to interpret and decode the sequence of sounds they hear, in a way more familiar to them: “We assume that a lack of familiarity with casual speech is a major factor in their lack of comprehension.” (Shockey, 2003: pp.120-1)

Psychological and environmental factors intermingle in the perception process. This results in a peculiar distortion of the sounds heard or in a particular construction of meaning attributed to some uncertain collection of sounds. An inadequate or poor knowledge and comprehension of the notions heard combined with a personal propensity or a predisposition to react towards fulfilling various expectations on the background of a particular cultural and intellectual baggage on part of the receiver are faced with a sometimes tricky or misleading syntactical structure. This is often new or unfamiliar and maybe delivered at a high speech rate, with a certain accent or a sophisticated intonation, or perhaps lacking an appropriate quality not only if the sound is recorded.

1.2. Definition of the term ‘mondegreen’

So, what is a mondegreen and how did it come into being? “A mondegreen is a word that is construed as it is actually heard, not as the speaker intends it to be heard ...” (Safire, 1994) “Although some linguists have called this stumblepunning ‘unwitting paronomasia,’ the better word is mondegreen. Coiner is the writer Sylvia Wright, who noted in a 1954 Harper’s article that some children happily sang in church of ‘Gladly, the cross-eyed bear,’ when the hymn was ‘Gladly the cross I’d bear.’ She remembered the Scottish ballad ‘The Bonny Earl of Murray’ and how she had recited it as a child: ‘They have slain the Earl Amurray,/And Lady Mondegreen.’” (Safire, 1994) Of course, “It eventually transpired that Lady Mondegreen existed only in the mind of Sylvia Wright, for the actual lyrics said that they ‘slay the Earl of Murray and laid him on the green’.” (Safire, 1994) “And to this day Lady Mondegreen’s name has been used to describe all mishearings of this type!” (Austin, 2008)

2. The usual mondegreen

Researchers in the field of linguistics have become more and more aware of the phenomenon and it quickly acquired the status of phonetic process. As William Safire notices, “In a 1987 essay in Time magazine, Gregory Jaynes found a way of surviving the stress of New York City: He recalled a pastor’s asking him in his youth to rise and sing Hymn No. 508, ‘Lead On, O Kinky Turtle.’ Later, he found it had been intended as ‘Lead On, O King Eternal,’ but ‘in the days since, the phrase lead on, o kinky turtle has assumed a profound significance in the course of my wanderings. I use it in a kind of incantatory fashion, muttering ‘lead on, o kinky turtle’ whenever I feel shorted, stiffed, put upon by outside forces’.” (Safire, 1994)

2.1. Famous examples

The most famous mondegreens (Feldman, 2007), given as examples in almost all contexts where the theme is discussed, seem to be:

- In lyrics:
 - "Excuse me while I kiss this guy", instead of "Excuse me while I kiss the sky" - Jimi Hendrix in Purple Haze,
 - "The girl with colitis goes by", misheard for "The girl with kaleidoscope eyes" - The Beatles in Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds
 - "There's a bathroom on the right", for "There's a bad moon on the rise" - Creedence Clearwater's Bad Moon Rising
- In the medical field: "Varicose veins" heard as "Very close veins"
- In mass-media: "Paper View TV" understood instead of "Pay-per-view TV."

2.2. Common mondegreens

Some other examples of common mondegreens, as remarked by researchers (Cowan and Rakusan, 1998; Edwards, 1995; Kissell, 2008; Nordquist, 2013) or at the Center for the Humane Study of Mondegreens (Carroll, 2003: E-12), can be seen in table 1, a collection showing that researchers into the field particularly relied and focused on lyrics. This comes only natural as it is in songs that mondegreens are more often. (see also Austin, 2008) People are used to communicate plainly, to speak and hear at the normal pace, rate, rhythm, tonality and intonation of the standard discourse. The peculiar melody or the sometimes forced pace of the lyrics may trigger a new combination of syllables or a more familiar structure, for instance.

Table 1: Examples of common mondegreens

<i>Mondegreen</i>	<i>Original</i>	<i>Origin</i>
"Are you going to starve an old friend?"	"Are you going to Scarborough Fair?"	Scarborough Fair, Simon and Garfunkel
"Baking carrot biscuits."	"Taking care of business."	Takin' Care Of Business, Bachman-Turner Overdrive
"Bohemian Rap City"	"Bohemian Rhapsody"	Queen
"Born under a bad sign with a boom boom in your eyes."	"Born under a bad sign with a blue moon in your eyes."	A3, Woke Up This Morning
"Bring me an iron lung."	"Bring me a higher love."	Higher Love, Steve Winwood
"Crimean River."	"Cry Me a River."	Cry Me a River, Julie London
"Dead ants are my friends; they're blowin' in the wind."	"The answer my friend is blowin' in the wind."	Blowin' In The Wind, Bob Dylan
"Donuts make my brown eyes blue."	"Don't it make my brown eyes blue."	Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue, Crystal Gale
"Got a lot of lucky peanuts."	"Got a lot of love between us."	Let's Hang On. Frankie Vallée and the Four Seasons

<i>Mondegreen</i>	<i>Original</i>	<i>Origin</i>
"Hope the city voted for you."	"Hopelessly devoted to you."	Hopelessly Devoted to You, Grease
"I blow bubbles when you are not here."	"My world crumbles when you are not here."	I Try, Macy Gray
"I got no towel, I hung it up again."	"I get knocked down, but I get up again."	Tubthumping, Chumbawumba
"I never had me a better time in a textile mill, oh my,"	"I never had me a better time and I guess I never will"	Crocodile Rock, Elton John
"I'll be your xylophone waiting for you."	"I'll be beside the phone waiting for you."	Build Me Up Buttercup, The Foundations
"I'll never leave your pizza burning"	„I'll never be your beast of burden"	Beast of Burden, The Rolling Stones
"I'm a pool hall ace."	"My poor heart aches."	Every Step You Take, The Police
"Just brush my teeth before you leave me, baby."	"Just touch my cheek before you leave me, baby."	Angel of the Morning, Juice Newton
"Mama don't take my clothes 'n' throw 'em away."	"Mama don't take my Kodachrome away."	Kodachrome, Paul Simon
"Midnight after you're wasted."	"Midnight at the oasis."	Midnight at the Oasis, Maria Muldaur
"... no ducks or hazards in the classroom."	"... no dark sarcasm in the classroom"	Another Brick in the Wall, Pink Floyd
"She's got a chicken to ride."	"She's got a ticket to ride."	Ticket to Ride, The Beatles
"Sweet dreams are made of cheese"	"Sweet dreams are made of these"	Sweet dreams are made of these, Eurhythmics
"Sleep in heavenly peas."	"Sleep in heavenly peace."	Silent Night, Christmas carol
"The ants are my friends"	"The answer, my friend, is..."	Blowing in the Wind, Bob Dylan
"What a nice surprise when you're out of ice."	"What a nice surprise bring your alibis."	Hotel California, Eagles
"You and me and Leslie."	"You and me endlessly..."	Groovin', The Rascals
"You make the best homemade stew around."	"You make the best of what's still around."	When The World Is Running Down, The Police

Source: author's design on information from references cited in the paragraph above

3. Mishearings in ESP classes

Next, some similar situations; met as a lecturer at the University of Oradea, teaching English at the Faculty of Economics and the Faculty of Law, will be presented. Funny surprises discovered in papers written on various listening materials, called forth a

deeper research into the matter and more careful examination of the notes students took. Further observations and some experiments both in dictation and listening comprehension revealed the presence – if not really regular, than at least often enough to be pertinently considered a relevant phenomenon – of mistakenly perceived phrases.

3.1. “Pearls” in Business English classes

Several examples of such ‘pearls’, as we are accustomed to name the “logic-linguistic confusions”, can be seen in table 2.

Table 2: Selection of mishearings met during Business English classes

<i>Original fragment</i>	<i>Misheard structure</i>
Under these terms, they hived off the retail operation	And he disturbs the height of the retail operation
Payment’s now past due	Payments go part stewed
Bargaining comprises of all these	Burden income prizes and all fees
Bidding means putting forward a proposal	Building is good in form of the proposal
Avoid default under the promissory note	If all the fault and all the promise are remote
The bill came to five grands	Then Bill Gates won high rates
Out of pocket expenses were paid back	Out of packages pence for a paid bag
He paid in cash and checked his change	He paid in cash on chequed exchange
There is high level maintenance on the free market	This hardly ever meant announcing a flee market
The bottles were hand wrapped	The bottles were hard trapped
Passengers who booked cabins	Passing chairs to look at this
On board you’ll be entitled to free meals	Abroad he’ll be in the title of two-three mails
They ‘ll have the surcharge refunded	They have this new judgment founded
They retained the distinctive long-necked glass	They retained the instinct of a non-backed class

Source: author’s design on own data

We can note that while some misinterpretations are totally outside the field of business, rather illogical and quite hilarious, most examples preserve or try to retain a certain mark of the domain, yet. Still comical, as they attempt to fit in the context but hardly manage to, we can assume that the minds of the subjects must have struggled to somehow keep the register, to stay in some way inside the fields of business.

As English is a language much used in the filed of business, tourism, international trades, transportation, international affairs, marketing and other domains of communication – speaking, hearing and understanding – in this ‘lingua franca’ of the world economy, and, given the fact that mistakes can easily occur with non-natives - yet not only with non-natives-, this aspect of the process of mishearing might prove quite relevant.

A business meeting, a presentation, a telephone conversation or a negotiation might lead to odd results if participants ‘hear’ something different from what was said or

unintentionally 'interpret' the sounds heard, construing a new phrase, like in the old game of 'the wireless phone'. Not very common – as the very nature of the specific terminology used does neither logically nor normally allow even margins, let alone large ranges, of potential interpretation –, but, nevertheless, possible, such mishearings demand a certain attention and could benefit from a deeper investigation.

3.2. Occurrence in classes of English for Law

Fixed expressions and strict terminology of proceedings are very unlikely to create confusion in the minds of those who have been trained and work in the field of law since they are familiar with the lexical particularities and the specific notions and concepts of their profession. All the same, the non native students preparing for the field of law in a non-English language might have problems with the terminology of English juridical language which they approach during the university years. They only deal with it during their first two study years and are not too probable to use it in an English speaking court environment, for instance. That is because the law system differs and specialised studies would be required for someone to be allowed to work in the English law system. Still, some mishearings might appear in their activity when researching and tackling documentation, when going to conferences or talking to a non-native English speaker about professional matters.

Some examples of misperceptions of law terminology encountered during classes of English with law students can be seen in table 3. Unlike with students in economics, as seen in table 2, we shall note that the register is now in most cases changed to a standard one. There are now rather scarcely preserved instances of juridical discourse as this is, indeed, more difficult to construe.

Table 3: Mishearings met during English for Law classes

<i>Original text</i>	<i>Misheard structure</i>
Improper appropriation of funds in one's keeping	In a proper preparation he founds the housekeeping
Misdemeanour is not punishable by imprisonment	Mister Minnor is now punishing one of the prisoner
Plea bargaining is resorted to so as to speed up trial	Plea bargaining is resulted if she asked to speak of trial
They sent a subpoena to summon the witnesses to court	They sent us some peanut and to some of the witnesses a card
The libel refers to written defamation	The liable returns a written information
Confess against the promise the sentence will be lighter	Confess that great supporters of sentence will delight her
The court extended the protection	The court is bent in the profession
Measures that grant suspects the benefit of due process of law	Assures the grand suspects the bona fide to process the law
The Chancellor of the Exchequer controls the public finances	The chance of those that win a cheque can close the public finances

Source: author's design on own data

Even if rarely likely to occur, mistakes in the perception of terminology of law might have rather unpleasant outcomes. We can imagine, for instance, the consequences

that can be brought about, in bureaucracy and formalities, by an official document of the court that is issued containing such mistakes as a misplaced punctuation, a defective linkage of syllables or even missing words, due to a mishearing and a wrong transcription of the procedures.

4. Conclusions

A particular failure in perceiving speech, often seen as a funny perception mistake, mondegreens are mostly encountered when it comes to lyrics as it is in songs and poems that sounds might be distorted by a certain imposed rhythm. Yet, misperceived terms may arise in other fields, too. From dry, silly or really dull, to mildly amusing, odd, or plainly ludicrous, the erroneous hearing of certain words or phrases may spring from any listener faced with whatever speaker – more or less experienced, native or not. It is doubtless that all domains of life and activity may register instances of the aforementioned mishearings, and with learners of English it comes all just natural.

Having a rather limited occurrence, these special ‘mondegreens’ or mishearings in professional activities – if these ‘mistakes in hearing’ can be applied as such to the said domains – are not, in our opinion, of a very extensive occurrence. Thus they cannot be considered to produce relevant negative effects. Still, the presence of these sorts of misperceptions noticed during the English classes with non-philological students, i.e. students not trained philologically, should at least stir attention and drag awareness to the fact that unintended puns can emerge, or, rather, be received and interpreted wrongly, even in the most formal fields of human activity.

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