
Fehlerlinguistik derives its name from Bierwisch (1970), an important paper which is reprinted in translation in the special issue of Linguistics on slips of the tongue. Bierwisch’s concern — and for that matter, the concern of all the papers in the special issue — is only with tongue-slips, and how they can shed light on questions of linguistic and psychological interest. Cherubim’s volume, however, ranges beyond the definition of ‘Fehlerlinguistik’ suggested by Bierwisch’s use of the word, and thus reminds slip-of-the-tongue researchers that language mistakes provide material for language research in many other ways.

For instance, the study of second language learning has called into existence a whole field of study known as ‘error analysis’. Error analysts invoke the typology, frequency and circumstances of occurrence of mistakes as indices of particular sources of difficulty, or as criteria for pedagogical effectiveness. Similarly, the study of first language acquisition is obviously very concerned with errors — that is, with the stages a child goes through in which its utterances successively approximate to a full adult linguistic competence. Thus the observation that children initially learn correct irregular past tense forms (e.g. went, came), but later pass through a phase in which the correct forms are replaced by errors such as goed and comed, is commonly cited as evidence that the children are at that point learning a past tense formation rule, which for a brief time they overgeneralise to the irregular as well as the regular forms.

Again, the study of language pathology is intensely concerned with the linguistic errors perpetrated by individuals with speech disturbance — as an example, with the inferences to be drawn from the fact that a certain class of patients make a disproportionate number of errors involving the ‘grammatical’ parts of the vocabulary in comparison with the ‘lexical’ portions. And finally, sociolinguistic research concerns itself with the
categorisation of ‘errors’ which consist in dialectal/sociolectal deviation from standard speech patterns.

Not all of these errors are directly comparable, of course. The slip of the tongue is usually detected and corrected by its perpetrator, or sometimes by a hearer; it is, by definition, a deviation from the speaker’s intention. The errors that a language learner makes, on the other hand, are intended utterances, though they are not intended to be errors; in some sense the language learner intends to say something completely correct, insofar as every learner aspires to the eventual attainment of perfect linguistic competence — the error arises because that competence has not yet been attained, and at the moment of utterance the best that can be done is to produce an error. A similar state of affairs obtains with aphasic errors. No speaker would deliberately set out to speak aphasiaically, unless acting or otherwise imitating; the aphasic makes errors because errors are unavoidable. But while aphasic speakers often know that what has come out is far removed from what was intended, correction is usually impossible.

Dialectal deviations from standard forms, however, are cases in which the speaker’s intention is none other than what is produced, and no intention to produce the corresponding ‘accepted’ form, either now or in the future, can be said to exist. For this reason, sociolinguists — among them some of the contributors to Fehlerlinguistik — have devoted a good deal of effort to arguing that dialectal deviation should be excluded from the classification ‘error’ under all circumstances.

All these fields of inquiry into language deviation are represented in Fehlerlinguistik; and more, since several contributions also deal with the question of deliberate error: on the one hand, lexical or syntactic deviation for effect, such as is found in poetry or in advertising language, and on the other hand, the deliberate commission of a slip of the tongue or similar linguistic error as a subtle form of communication (a device well known to Shakespeare, for example). In other words, the collection of papers assembled by Cherubim represents the widest possible interpretation of ‘error linguistics’.

There are 14 papers in all in the volume, and, as is usually the case with book chapters, most of them do not present original research in detail. A paper by Heeschen on aphasia is the solitary exception. Heeschen argues that Broca’s aphasics — ‘agrammatics’ — have not in fact suffered a general loss of syntactic ability, and reports as evidence for this a sentence comprehension experiment in which Broca’s aphasics performed well as long as semantic/pragmatic cues indicated the correct answer, and in which Broca’s aphasics performed better than Wernicke’s aphasics. Exactly this pattern would be expected on the basis of the generally worse
comprehension exhibited by Wernicke's aphasics, and on the basis of the demonstrated ability of Broca's aphasics to substitute for impaired syntactic performance by the effective use of semantic/pragmatic cues in comprehension (Zurif and Blumstein, 1978). The source of Heeschen's difference of opinion with, say, Zurif and his colleagues, turns out on close inspection to be quite trivial: Heeschen apparently considers word order to belong strictly to the realm of syntax, and by demonstrating that Broca's aphasics make use of it, he feels that he has demonstrated that they possess syntactic capacities still. In fact word order, whether or not it should be considered to be strictly a syntactic matter, is not among the linguistic capacities which Broca's aphasics have lost, as attention to the speech of any Broca's aphasic will attest; their syntactic deficit lies in a much more circumscribed area, namely the differential processing of parts of speech.

The 13 other papers are largely theoretical, with varying amounts of illustrative material. Several papers — e.g. those by Ramge, Keller, Löffler and Presch — are rather closely concerned with questions of definition and classification of error types. The book also contains an extensive bibliography, which supplements works referred to in the text with further relevant items. It would have greatly benefited from the addition of an index as well, plus some biographical information on the authors.

Of the individual contributions, the most interesting to my mind are those which discuss the potential function of errors. Sitta, for instance, gives some fascinating examples of the deliberate commission of an error to a specific communicative purpose; Betten, similarly, makes a convincing case that ungrammaticality in spoken language — repetition, for instance — can be NECESSARY to effective communication; Kolde discusses why errors will be sometimes censured, sometimes ignored, sometimes praised as creative. Cherubim, on the other hand, argues cogently that the function of error is NOT to induce language change. Finally, there are also some interesting examples in the paper by Presch, which deals among other things with the references which employers write about their employees; these, he demonstrates, have to be read with an eye not only to what is said, but to what is not said (this is, of course, true not only of references).

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References