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A Gricean theory of malaprops

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Abstract

Gricean intentionalists hold that what a speaker says and means by a linguistic utterance is determined by the speaker's communicative intention. On this view, one cannot really say anything without meaning it as well. Conventionalists argue, however, that malapropisms provide powerful counterexamples to this claim. I present two arguments against the conventionalist and sketch a new Gricean theory of speech errors, called the misarticulation theory. On this view malapropisms are understood as a special case of mispronunciation. I argue that the Gricean theory is supported by empirical work in phonetics and phonology and, also, that conventionalism inevitably fails to do this work justice. I conclude, from this, that the conventionalist fails to show that malapropisms constitute a counterexample to a Gricean theory.

1 Introduction

What should Gricean intentionalists say about malapropisms or speech errors more generally? Here, I am concerned with a group of 'Griceans' who share at least one core commitment.

NO SAYING WITHOUT MEANING

If speaker *S* says that *p* by uttering sentence σ in language *L* on some occasion,

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- (i) p must be constitutively determined by S 's speaker meaning on that occasion and, (ii) p must be compatible with the abstract linguistic meaning of σ in L .

NO SAYING is not endorsed by all purported Griceans and is commonly rejected on the basis of speech error data. Philosophers have tried to undermine the principle in all sorts of other ways as well.¹

I believe NO SAYING is true and that showing this is quite important for developing a viable theory of meaning and communication.² Griceans quibble about the proper analysis of *speaker meaning* but that issue can be set aside here. My arguments are compatible with any of the most plausible theories, all of them analyzing speaker meaning in terms of some notion of the speaker's communicative intention. In what follows, however, I am only concerned with one immediate but controversial implication of NO SAYING, namely that speakers must always mean what they say.

I begin by explaining why malapropisms are thought to count against Griceanism as defined by NO SAYING. The most fully worked out argument of this kind is due to Marga Reimer. She argues that her own 'conventionalist' theory of what is said by malapropisms gives the best explanation of the data. Then I present my first objection to conventionalism; the argument from underspecification. In the next section, I present my own theory, or sketch of a theory, called the 'misarticulation' theory of malapropisms, and show how it is supported by work done on speech errors by phoneticians. Finally, this makes it possible to state another objection to the conventionalist thesis; the argument from arbitrariness. The major conclusion is that, contrary to common opinion, the conventionalist cannot use malapropisms to undermine broadly Gricean accounts of what speakers say and mean, based on the NO SAYING WITHOUT MEANING principle.

2 Malapropism: Saying without meaning?

It is difficult to do justice to the variety of slips and verbal blunders falling under the heading of 'malaprop,' so, to fix ideas, I distinguish three kinds. Then I explain how

¹See, e.g., Saul (2002, 2007). Elsewhere, I focus on counterexamples to NO SAYING where the speaker has a conflicting referential intention because of false identity beliefs—due to, e.g., Kaplan (1978), Kripke (1977), Reimer (1992)—but these need to be distinguished from malapropisms (*forthcoming*). See also my article 'Confusion is corruptive belief in false identity' (2016a). On my view, however, both should be categorized as a kind of pragmatic performance error. Of course, this would constitute a substantial revision of the traditional Chomskyan notion of 'performance.'

²See, e.g., Bach (1987); Donnellan (2012); Neale (2005, pp. 181–182); Strawson (1974, p. 52); Unnsteinsson (2014, 2016b).

these examples are thought to give rise to an objection to Griceanism. Consider the following cases.

1. *Incidental malaprop*: When John Kerry was presidential candidate for Democrats in 2004, running against George W. Bush, he slipped while giving a speech and uttered ‘wasabi’ instead of ‘Wahhabi.’ Kerry clearly intended to refer to a Muslim fundamentalist sect called ‘Wahhabi’ but, due to fatigue or whatever, the similar-sounding ‘wasabi’ stumbled through.
2. *Persistent malaprop*: Reimer (2004) describes a colleague who persistently uttered ‘obtuse’ when he clearly meant that something was *abstruse*.
3. *Intentional malaprop*. Davidson (1986) cites an example where the speaker intentionally utters ‘baffle of wits’ instead of ‘battle of wits’ for comic effect.

I define ‘malapropism,’ roughly, as an utterance where some target expression is replaced by a different expression that is similar in pronunciation. Only unintended replacements, as in (1) and (2), count as ‘errors.’ Any of these three examples, however, can then be used to make a plausible argument, along the following lines.

For the first two types there is some proposition *p* such that the speaker actually said and asserted *that p*, without meaning *that p*. In the first example, Kerry said something about *wasabi* without meaning anything about *wasabi*. In the second the colleague said someone’s writing was *obtuse* without meaning that anyone’s writing was *obtuse*. The third type of case is somewhat more complicated, but here is how the argument could go. In intentionally uttering a sentence containing the expression ‘baffle’ the speaker said something involving a *baffle* without meaning anything about a *baffle*, because there is no such thing. The speaker may have meant, however, something involving a *bafling battle*.

All three examples thus appear to support the idea that, in cases of malapropism, speakers can say something without actually meaning it. For now, I focus only on the first two types, leaving intentional malaprops until the very end. In fact, on Reimer’s (*ibid.*, 325) conventionalist account, only the first two types will provide counterexamples to NO SAYING, as she believes that the speaker does say and mean the same thing in the third kind of case.

This leaves us with a question: Why should we accept the description of the first two cases as involving saying without meaning? Citing the ‘obtuse’-example, Reimer (*ibid.*, 322) writes that “[t]he speaker of a malaprop, upon being informed of the fact that his use was non-standard, would likely agree that what he actually said was different from what he intended to say.” A few sentences later, she gives a fairly direct answer to my question.

[I]f we are going to develop a philosophically sound notion of saying, it would presumably be best to build it upon a pre-theoretical notion that is sensitive to a distinction that has clear explanatory value: the distinction between saying and (speaker) meaning. This is a distinction that allows us to explain (*inter alia*) the coherence of claiming that one doesn't always mean what one says.

According to Reimer, then, we should posit a distinction between saying and meaning to explain why it is coherent for speakers to describe malapropisms in terms of the distinction.³ But how is what is said determined, then, if not by way of communicative intentions? On Reimer's view, it is determined by *linguistic convention*; in making the malaprop the speaker simply *says* and *asserts* what the words 'conventionally mean' in the language in question. Without assuming a full-blown theory of conventionality, Reimer takes this to imply, at a minimum, that by engaging in the rule governed activity of speaking English, the speaker tacitly agrees to have their utterances interpreted in accordance with the conventions of the language. As they say, speaking a language is like playing a game. It follows, then, that Reimer's colleague asserted that someone's writing was obtuse while meaning that it was abstruse.

More specifically, Reimer—and those who share her general outlook⁴—speaks of 'contextually relativized conventional meaning' in order to "accommodate indexicality and ambiguity" (*ibid.*, 333n2). Assuming that this is clear enough let us state the Reimerian thesis as follows:

Conventionalist theory of malapropisms

When speaker *S* utters malaprop-sentence μ , the content of what *S* says is determined by the contextually relativized conventional meaning of μ , which is, say, the proposition *that p*.

Additionally, *S* may mean and implicate all sorts of things other than what *S* strictly says by uttering μ . Further, at least when dealing with *unintended* malaprops, *that p* is *no part* of what *S* means or intends. A malaprop-sentence is any sentence containing an expression that 'replaced'—in a sense to be made precise below—another similar-sounding expression in the speaker's utterance.

³Michael Devitt (2013: 88) also describes speech errors, spoonerisms in particular, as cases of unintentionally saying one thing and meaning another.

⁴Searle (1969: ch. 2) is a classic statement of this type of conventionalism.

3 The argument from underspecification

Now I will argue that the conventionalist fails to correctly describe the cases at hand because the conventionally encoded meaning of a linguistic expression—even if relativized to context—always underspecifies what is said by the speaker in uttering that expression on a given occasion. This idea is not new and was spelled out in some detail by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in *Relevance* (1986/1995) and other work.⁵ Gricean theorists propose to bridge this gap with communicative intentions, so that successful communication is always explained by means of the hearer's capacities for intention-recognition and mindreading.⁶

In light of this tradition in philosophy of language, let's take a closer look at so-called 'incidental' malaprops. Assume Kerry uttered,

- (1) Wasabi is a dangerous sect,

but his plan was to utter,

- (2) Wahhabi is a dangerous sect.

Now, what exactly, according to the conventionalist, did Kerry *say* by uttering (1)? What is the contextually relativized conventional meaning of (1)? The simple disquotational answer would be that Kerry said (3).

- (3) *that wasabi is a dangerous sect.*

But this is far from clear. 'Wasabi' is clearly polysemous or ambiguous.⁷ It can refer to (i) a condiment popular on sushi, or (ii) a plant of the *Brassicaceae* family, from which the condiment is produced. The conventionalist has three options, it seems: either Kerry said something about (i), or (ii), or (iii) the meaning is somehow indeterminate between the two. But all three options are problematic.

⁵Cf. Wilson & Sperber (2012). I argue for this view of underspecification in my (2014), but related ideas are to be found in, e.g., Bach (1994a, 1994b); Bezuidenhout (2002); Carston (2002); Neale (2016); Perry (1986, 2012); Recanati (2010); Reimer (2002); Searle (1978); Travis (1989, 1997); Weiskopf (2007); Wettstein (1984).

⁶To be clear, the notion of what is said at play in NO SAYING is a notion that incorporates illocutionary force. This is as it should be, as competent hearers must recognize this part of the speaker's intention if communication is to succeed. Different theorists have of course proposed different ways of cutting the saying-pie. For example, Bach (1994a) defines a notion of a proposition type relativized to narrow context, which explicitly excludes creatures of illocution. This stipulated notion is not at issue in this paper.

⁷The difference between polysemy and ambiguity seems to be mostly a matter of degree. See Sennet (2011) for discussion.

Assume first, and quite plausibly, that in the past Kerry has usually uttered ‘wasabi’ to mean (i) and is only vaguely aware that ‘wasabi’ is also the name of the plant. Let’s now go through the options one by one. First, is it possible that Kerry said something about the condiment by uttering (1)? It’s glaringly obvious that *relativizing to context* doesn’t support this answer. *Ex hypothesi*, there is nothing at all in the immediate context to determine (i) as opposed to (ii). The utterance is made in the context of a speech that has nothing to do with any plant or condiment.

What if the contextual salience of (i) is increased by supposing, e.g., that Kerry actually said *that he didn’t like the taste of wasabi* right before he uttered (1), making the same error? (Inventing a plausible context is surely possible here.) This would still not suffice to determine which meaning is at issue. Polysemous expressions can quite easily be intended in different ways in one and the same context. So the following conversation—where the speakers refer successively to the condiment and the plant—shouldn’t raise any eyebrows.

- (4) Wasabi is so expensive.
- (5) Yeah, wasabi is very hard to cultivate.

Someone might stop me here and say, “You’re already assuming that *wasabi-as-condiment* is much more salient in Kerry’s mind and in the context of utterance. So, arguably, only this meaning would play a role in any *causal explanation* of Kerry’s malaprop. If so, wouldn’t this suffice to determine the contextually relativized conventional meaning of ‘wasabi’ in (1)?” Sounds plausible to me, but note, however, that taking this line is not open to the conventionalist.⁸ Conventionalism, at least as understood by Reimer, is predicated on minimizing the role of what the speaker ‘has in mind’ in determining contents. Remember that, on Reimer’s account, and language users tacitly agree to have their words interpreted in accordance with prevailing conventions, relative to context. And letting the speaker’s intention override convention here doesn’t leave much over for convention, explanatorily speaking (more on this in §5 below).

The same set of considerations counts against option (ii) and more strongly so, as it’s the less salient of the two meanings. What about (iii)? Is the conventional meaning of the malaprop indeterminate between, at least, (i) and (ii)? Whatever we say about the case at hand, this cannot be the conventionalist’s answer in general. Consider a slightly starker example, involving homonymy or ambiguity, where the speaker planned to utter ‘Take those dead bats to the tank’ but, in the psycholinguistics jargon, performs the speech error of ‘perseveration’ and utters (6) instead.

- (6) Take those dead bats to the bank.

⁸To be clear, although this is plausible, it is not what I propose below on behalf of the intentionalist.

Perseveration is when an earlier segment of speech replaces a later item, so, here, /b/ replaces /t/ (cf. Carroll 2007: ch. 8; Fromkin 1973; Levelt 1993: ch. 9).⁹ Now, if conventional meaning always underspecifies the meaning intended by the speaker, the sound sequence /bank/ is quite clearly ambiguous and can be intended, by normal speakers on different occasions, as referring to a financial institution or a riverbank. As before, the context is assumed to have nothing to do with either conventional meaning, so it can't help the conventionalist. But if option (iii) is endorsed, the theory predicts that what is said by the speaker who slips and utters (6) is indeterminate between the two meanings. This consequence, when generalized, should be unacceptable to the conventionalist. Why? Because, for a lot of cases, the theory would be left with no single, sensible answer to the question: What is said by the speaker of the malaprop-sentence?

This bears elaboration, since conventionalists could simply be happy with the prediction. It may even seem plausible to suppose that, in mistakenly uttering (6), the speaker in fact said something which is indeterminate between the two alleged senses of 'bank.' Or, if there are two homonyms at play here, it is indeterminate which *word* the speaker uttered. But this will not do. Reimer explicitly seeks a notion of saying where what is said is determined by an interpretation which accords with prevailing linguistic convention. And it is clear that, in ordinary contexts, an utterance of 'bank' ought to be interpreted as indicating one and only one of the two senses. Overriding this apparent convention requires something very specific, even metalinguistic; something along the lines of: "There are river banks and financial banks. I'm going to the bank. I don't care which type of bank it is." In uttering the second sentence, the speaker may have pulled off the feat of to *saying* something which is indeterminate between the two senses of 'bank.'

Arguably, however, slips like (6) involve contexts that are not quite ordinary, either. The conventionalist may wish to assert that, in such cases, what the speaker says is determined only by linguistically encoded conventional meaning, no matter how indeterminate. The problem, however, is that this cuts the saying-pie in two very different halves, breaking its unity. Remember that I am assuming that conventional linguistic meaning underspecifies what is said. On this view, the conventional meaning of a sentence is a constraint on what a speaker can say and mean on a given occasion of utterance. And, arguably, the constraint is not fully propositional, but what the speaker says and means, on this picture, is a proposition with a truth condition. But then, if the conventionalist analysis of (1) and (6) is accepted, the malaprop-part of the pie will not

⁹Because of the idiomatic expression 'can take it to the bank'—meaning, roughly, that someone can depend on the truth of what one says—the slip in (6) might also be explained as a case of 'substitution,' where part of the sentence uttered is infiltrated by some unrelated expression.

actually contain any of the things speakers ordinarily say, i.e. truth-apt propositional contents. This undermines the conventionalist description of malapropisms and, thus, the accompanying argument against Gricean intentionalism. Seen in the right light, conventionalism fails to show that Kerry *said* anything about *wasabi*; he only uttered a sentence which, under other circumstances, could have been used to say something about *wasabi*. To be sure, the conventionalist can respond by arguing that the thesis of underspecification is false. Although I believe this is a dead end, that debate is beyond the scope of the paper.

The bottom line, then, can be stated as follows. If we want the notion of saying to apply to cases of malapropism at all, we ought to prefer theories according to which speakers, in misspeaking, can determinately say something.¹⁰ The theory I sketch in the next section is one such theory and, so, would seem preferable to a view where what is said must be unusually indeterminate. The problem, of course, is that the conventionalists lack a trick that the intentionalists have up their sleeve. As mentioned above, on the intentionalist view, sentence-meanings place constraints on the formation of communicative intentions. But what is said by the speaker on an occasion is constituted only by the communicative intention, although the intention needs to be compatible with the meaning of the expression the speaker *planned* to utter. With this background one can always fall back on saying, even when the speaker is being indeterminate or engaging in *double entendre* of some sort, that the speaker's intention constitutively determines which meaning is at issue. On the conventionalist picture, the 'language' must always determine this for us—in a sense which seems difficult to make precise. True, this means the intentionalist is saddled with the counterintuitive thesis that there is no saying without meaning. If the arguments in this paper are on the right track, however, this is much less of a problem than many theorists have tended to suppose.

4 The misarticulation theory of malapropisms

Now I present what the Gricean theorist, in a more positive way, should say about malapropism. The idea is basically to use the model of *mispronunciation* on all varieties of speech error. This results in a parsimonious and elegant theory that is compatible

¹⁰It is worth noting that both the conventionalist and the intentionalist could adopt the view that nothing is actually said in cases of malapropism; there is only what the speaker meant. I discuss this option briefly from the intentionalist standpoint below. But the issue is partly terminological, i.e., the debate would tend to shift to a notion like the 'primary' or 'semantic' meaning of the utterance. Anyway, the reader is welcome to conditionalize the whole argument of this paper: *if* malapropism involves saying, this is how the notion ought to be explicated.

with the full range of ‘speech errors’ revealed both by experimental work and empirical observation.

Misarticulation theory of malapropisms

When speaker *S* utters malaprop-sentence μ , the content of what *S* says is determined by *S*’s communicative intention in uttering μ , for example *that p*. This is so even if μ happens to be standardly uttered, in *S*’s language, to say something other than *p*.

It is important to note that, on any Gricean theory, the formation of communicative intentions is severely constrained by the speaker’s other mental states, specifically, speakers cannot intend to do what they believe is impossible (see, e.g., Donnellan 1968). I should also add that, so far, this is only a theory of unintentional malaprops, that is to say, cases where uttering μ constitutes an *error* from the point of view of the speaker, since some other expression was the intended target. So, on this theory, even if it is normal, in *S*’s language, to utter μ with some different communicative intention, which ‘fits’ the conventional meaning of μ better, it doesn’t follow that that’s what μ says on a given occasion. Further, when *S* misspeaks there is always some expression σ in *S*’s language such that *S* misarticulated σ as μ and the proposition expressed by *S* in uttering μ need only be compatible with the abstract linguistic meaning of σ , on the occasion of utterance. Indeed, σ is the target of the speaker’s intention and, on this view, the communicative intention need only be compatible with the target expression, not the erroneous expression. One clear advantage of this theory is that it captures the full range of speech errors, also those made by, for example, people learning a second language. Native speakers of Icelandic, when learning English, tend to confuse /v/ and /w/ in speech articulation. So my wife sometimes says she is in ‘Vest Willage’ rather than West Village. Hearers have no problem compensating and can easily understand what is being said.

More generally, empirical work on speech perception reveals what linguists call the ‘lack of invariance problem,’ namely that there is no one-to-one correspondence between acoustic signals and perceptual categorization into phonetic segments. In speech perception, very different acoustic patterns appear, to the hearer, as just a single sound. The reason for this is the phenomenon of *coarticulation*. Phonetic segments are coarticulated in that the acoustics of a single segment of speech is influenced by the preceding or following sounds in the utterance. Take, for example, the production of the /t/ segments in ‘toe’ and ‘tea.’ Here, the lips are positioned differently in anticipation of the articulation of the vowel sounds that follow, resulting in slightly different acoustic signals. This gave rise to the counterintuitive idea that we actually recognize phonetic segments by perceiving their mode of *articulation* by the speaker,

rather than their acoustics, since this appears to provide a more robust categorization (see Hickok 2014, ch. 5, for critical discussion). At the very least, however, lack of invariance shows that speech perception involves all sorts of automatic mechanisms compensating for context-induced variation in acoustic cues. Various differences in the signal simply go unnoticed by speakers and hearers. Arguably, philosophers have tended to overlook speech errors where such compensation is automatically or unconsciously performed by the hearer and, thus, their perspective has been skewed towards cases where speakers appear to say something other than they intended because of the error.

Furthermore, experimental work on misspeaking shows a tendency for speech errors to produce words rather than non-word strings. This is called the lexical bias effect. So, for example, if a speaker is already familiar with the name ‘Aubrey,’ speech errors involving the similar sounding ‘Audrey’ should tend towards replacing /d/ with /b/, rather than, say, /t/ or /k/. Speech errors are anchored in the language actually spoken, making it less likely that the non-name ‘Aukrey’ is produced when the target is ‘Audrey’ (see Levelt 1993: §9.5.2, for discussion).^{11,12} Examples like this will be important for what follows. And my claim, here, is that malapropism should be seen in light of phonetic and articulatory variance across individuals more generally.

So, to keep to the same example, the native speaker of Icelandic might utter, when arriving at a dinner party,

(7) I brought the vine,

and thereby mean that she brought the *wine*.¹³ But the suggestion on the table is that, for the purposes of semantics, this utterance of (7) should not, merely because ‘vine’ happens to be a word in English, be considered any different from misarticulations

¹¹Lexical bias normally interacts with other effects, for example the phonemic similarity effect, according to which phonemes that have similar articulatory profiles are more likely to interact in speech. Thus, since /d/ and /t/ are both dental stop consonants, but /k/ is velar (articulated with the back of the tongue at the soft palate and not at the upper teeth), ‘Autrey’ is probably more likely to occur than ‘Aukrey.’ Interestingly, the phonemic similarity effect is absent in ‘inner speech,’ but lexical bias is present (Oppenheim & Dell 2008).

¹²When she was two, my daughter could only pronounce the name ‘Oliver’ as ‘olive oil’—the English is very similar to the Icelandic—which, I presume, was partly explained by lexical bias since she learned the latter first. I could give a very long list of such examples.

¹³Karen Green (2001: 242) also gives a good example of a persistent malapropism that fits this theory well. In a school project, her young son wrote, “Hitler was the leader of the nasty party.” In this case the speaker misarticulates ‘Nazi’ as ‘nasty.’ Admittedly, the case is more complex, since he may also have had the (true) belief *that Hitler was the leader of the nasty party*. But if this is a malaprop at all, and not just a plain expression of this true belief, we must also assume that /nasty/ is his erroneous way of articulating ‘Nazi.’

resulting in non-word strings. The misarticulation theory claims that the speaker of (7) happened, on this occasion, to pronounce ‘wine’ as ‘vine.’ Here, and, it would seem, for the vast majority of misspeakings, this description is perfectly fine. But it should be expanded to capture the less intuitive cases as well, paying handsome dividends in terms of simplifying the overall theory.

Admittedly, cases of this sort are intuitively understood in terms of simple differences in idiolect. Any ‘public language’ is just what a bunch of idiolects share and these vary in all sorts of ways. This does not, however, speak against the present point. In so far as a speaker who utters (7) had /wine/ as their *target* sound sequence on a given occasion, they perform a speech error. So, on this picture, some mistakes made by non-native speakers can be classified as malapropisms. Of course there will be cases where we can only describe speakers as having an idiolectical /vine/ sequence as target. But think of cases where the speaker is being ‘corrected’ by native speakers and doesn’t get it right until after a few attempts: here there is clearly a target-error pair. There is a continuum of cases going from idiolectical variation, through persistent malaprops, until we get to the one-off, incidental cases.

Slips of the tongue where one proper name replaces another are perhaps the least intuitive cases for the misarticulation theory. For it predicts that a speaker might pronounce, e.g., ‘Frank’ as ‘Joanne,’ which seems absurd. But let’s start with a real-life example and take it from there. When Osama Bin Laden was killed numerous media outlets reported something like (8).

(8) Obama was killed.

It was clear that they were making a mistake. But even if many couldn’t resist giving the Freudian explanation that (8) manifested the speaker’s repressed desire, phonetic considerations are much more powerful.¹⁴ In this case the target expression, ‘Osama,’ shares a lot of features with the error expression, including stress-pattern and syllable number. Importantly, this is true of the majority of actual target-error pairs. The names also share many general semantic features, e.g. they are both names of powerful men who are often in the news. Further, there may even be a phonetic anticipation effect hiding here since ‘Osama’ can easily activate the expression ‘Bin Laden’ and this could make the activated /b/ segment replace the earlier /s/ segment.¹⁵ So, the speaker of

¹⁴I do not mean to suggest that phonology and psychoanalysis are engaged in the same explanatory projects here. However, a good phonological explanation will often make a psychoanalytic one superfluous. And this is exactly what Rudolf Meringer, who was the first to investigate slips seriously from a phonological point of view, argued as against Freud in the early 20th century (Erard 2008 ch. 2).

¹⁵‘Anticipation’ is the opposite of perseveration, where a later segment replaces an earlier one, e.g. ‘bake my bike’ replaces ‘take my bike’ (Carroll 2007: 195). Michael Erard (2008: 264–267) discusses the Obama/Osama example in a book popularizing phonetic explanations of malapropisms.

(8) simply pronounced ‘Osama’ as ‘Obama.’ Certainly there will be slips where the phonetic explanation is not as obvious, but according to the empirical literature these are much less common and, arguably, they should not dictate theoretical choices. Our theory should generalize from the most common type of case, i.e. ones where the explanation is phonetic, and treat the strained cases as anomalies. This clearly applies to examples like the one where a speaker intends to utter ‘Frank’ but utters ‘Joanne’ instead.

A reviewer for this journal aptly points out that I have ignored Grice’s own analysis of some types of non-literal speech. And this deserves a brief comment. Grice proposed that, to take his own example, when a speaker utters ‘He is a fine friend’ and means it ironically, they only *pretend* or *make as if to say* that someone is a fine friend. In fact the speaker says nothing but, by way of an act of pretence, they *mean* that someone is a terrible friend (or something along those lines). I would tend to endorse this proposal for certain kinds of figurative speech—including irony. However, the model does not fit malapropisms. Pretending to say that *p* in order to convey that *q* requires a complex set of intentions which is entirely absent in malapropism. As the case is described here, the reporter who utters (8) has no intention to pretend to say *that Obama was killed*, they just utter (8) inadvertently while intending to utter something that sounds very similar. Thus, I don’t want to argue that Grice’s notion of making as if to say is illuminating for analyzing speech errors.¹⁶

5 Argument from arbitrariness

Accepting level-headed, phonetic explanations gives the upper hand to the misarticulation theory since the semantics of malaprop-expressions usually figure only minimally in the best explanations of their occurrence. If the speaker had uttered ‘Ofama’ instead of ‘Obama’ no one—and that includes the conventionalist—would have thought that they had unintentionally said anything about anyone. But since the speaker *could have* uttered (8) in the same context intending to refer to Obama we tend to think of the case differently. Wrongly so.

Remember also our conclusion from the Wahhabi/wasabi example. If the conventional meaning of ‘Obama’ underspecifies its intended reference on a given occasion of utterance, which must be right I think, there is nothing to fix or determine *which* Obama is referred to in (8). According to the Gricean, only referential intentions can

¹⁶Note, however, that this kind of proposal would be untouched by the argument from underspecification. When speakers make as if to say something by uttering a sentence containing an ambiguous term like ‘bank,’ they would, normally, either make as if to say something about a financial institution or about a river bank.

perform this task but, *ex hypothesi*, the speaker had no intention to refer to anyone called Obama in uttering (8). Thus the conventionalist must collapse the referential content of ‘Obama’ in (8) with its descriptive content, which is, presumably, something like *the person called ‘Obama.’* Admittedly, in this particular case, one referent is extremely salient, but still, there is nothing in the conventionalist story to determine whether (8) is about the 44th US President or, say, Barack Obama Sr., his father.

To be clear, however, the issue is not decided conclusively by discovering the right causally explanatory theory of malaprops. Conventionalism is strictly speaking compatible with any such theory since it’s only a claim about the *meaning* or *content* of malaprops in context. But empirical findings yield grounds on which to build the decisive argument, which is an argument from *arbitrariness*: the conventionalist theory makes an entirely arbitrary distinction between word and non-word producing errors. The first kind, it is thought, *says something* but the latter *says nothing* since the resulting string has no conventional meaning at all. Clearly, this content error/empty error distinction crosscuts any distinction made by a plausible explanatory theory. On anyone’s account there will be some content errors that are explained in exactly the same way as any kind of empty error, namely by way of phonetic/phonological effects. Content errors are common because of the lexical bias effect. But this effect is mostly due to formal similarities in target-error pairs, such as morphological and syntactic distribution, stress-patterns, and the like. If the conventional meaning of the error expression does not play a role in explaining its occurrence, it is hard to see why it ought to be postulated as the content expressed by the speaker in uttering the malaprop-sentence on a given occasion. As before, this undermines the conventionalist’s description of malapropisms in §2 above and makes it doubtful that we have a real counterexample to a broadly Gricean theory.¹⁷

Still, it might be claimed—this was indeed suggested to me by Michael Devitt (pers. comm.)—that in those cases where semantic features play a substantial role in the correct causal explanation of a malaprop the corresponding meaning could be attributed to the speaker.¹⁸ I think this is fine as far as it goes, but it doesn’t go very far. First,

¹⁷Note, also, that the two views under discussion in this paper are not intended to be exhaustive of theoretical space. So, I don’t try to conclusively establish the truth of the misarticulation theory here. One could, for example, prefer Gauker’s (2003, 2008) non-intentional theory or King’s (2014, 2013) ‘coordination account’ of the matter. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal who emphasized this point.)

¹⁸See also Devitt (1981: 139–140), where he writes: “[...] more than one ability, and hence more than one network, may have an immediate role in the production of a designational term. When this happens, we have slips of mind or tongue, cases of “crossed wires.” A classical example of such an occurrence was supplied, appropriately enough, by Canon Spooner. He once delivered a sermon that included many uses of ‘Aristotle.’ He was leaving the pulpit when suddenly he stopped, returned, and announced to the congregation, “When in my sermon I said ‘Aristotle’ I meant St. Paul.” We are inclined

as already noted, Reimer's conventionalism doesn't allow for this type of response. Secondly, and more to the present point, what causes the utterance of an expression cannot in general be identified with what is meant or said by that expression. Obviously phonetic features are not assigned as the contents of what a speaker says because they causally explain the fact that the utterance was produced on a particular occasion. Only the communicative intention of the speaker can constitutively fix or determine what is said and meant on a given occasion of utterance.

Thirdly, and finally, even if the causal-conventionalist thesis were accepted it would leave out a host of cases where speakers indeed uttered a malaprop which happened to be syntactically well-formed, but where the correct explanation is entirely or partly phonetic/phonological. Thus the objection from arbitrary distinctions crops up again: Why suppose that some syntactically well-formed errors are assigned contents and others are not? On the misarticulation theory, the only relevant possible world in which Kerry says (3) by uttering (1) is one where he—perhaps for one strange moment in a speech—actually believes *that wasabi is a dangerous sect*. In such a case, of course, the intentionalist assigns this very content to the speaker on the occasion of utterance. But any real-world explanation of a malaprop will be a messy affair of intermingled syntactic and phonetic features, where it would be entirely arbitrary to assign (3) to some (1)-malaprop-utterances on some occasions and not to others. Better to say Kerry mispronounced 'Wahhabi' as 'wasabi' and be done with it.

So far, nothing has been said about *intentional malaprops* like the one mentioned by Davidson (1986: 89) where the speaker utters 'baffle of wits' instead of 'battle of wits.' This is as it should be, because it is much harder to construct a plausible counterexample to intentionalism using only intentional malapropisms. And they are malaprops in name only for the speaker doesn't make any mistake at all; they use an expression the utterance of which *would* constitute a mistake in some different context, e.g., a context where the speaker falsely believes that 'battle' should be pronounced /baffle/. But intentional malapropisms are interesting in their own right and serve well, at this juncture, to clarify the less obvious differences between conventionalism and the misarticulation theory. On Reimer's account (9) gets assigned its contextually relativized conventional meaning, namely *that a baffle of wits ensued*.

(9) A baffle of wits ensued.

So 'baffle' means *baffle* and 'wits' *wits*. Certainly, Reimer adds, the speaker also communicates, by association, that what happened was a *battle of wits* and that it was in some way cause for *bafflement*.

to say that Spooner had St. Paul in mind but ended up referring to Aristotle." Indeed we are so inclined. But the inclination ought to be resisted in this case. On my view Spooner, for some reason, and over some specific stretch of time, mispronounced 'St. Paul' as 'Aristotle.'

The point to make here is that the intentionalist is free to concur, and postulate that the speaker's communicative intention in uttering (9) may very well be *that a baffle of wits ensued*. It's just that this happens also to be its conventional meaning, according to Reimer. And this is, on both accounts, what is said by the speaker. The subtle disagreement would occur only at the level of content determination. The conventionalist assigns this meaning *because* it is the conventional meaning. The intentionalist does so because it is the meaning intended by the speaker. This kind of case is so very special, it seems to me, that it cannot be used to adjudicate between the two theories.

6 Conclusion

Famously, J. L. Austin (1957: 133n1) made a distinction between doing something by mistake and doing something by accident. I don't think his own formulation was a very helpful one, nor do I think he gave a good argument for accepting it—but those were, of course, the heady days of ordinary language. At any rate, he may have had something like the following in mind. When you mistake one thing for another thing you might do something wrong *by mistake*. So when you believe falsely that donkey *A* is donkey *B* you might shoot *A* while you were actually supposed to shoot *B*. However, when you take aim at one thing but miss it and shoot another thing you do something wrong *by accident*.

In this sense, malapropisms happen by accident. Speakers have a specific target in mind but the articulatory mechanism fails them, either persistently or just incidentally. If the argument in this paper is correct, such accidents are far more common than people tend to think. Furthermore, Gricean intention-based theories of communicative content can account for them without abandoning the idea that what is said is constitutively determined by speaker meaning. It seems plausible to say that malapropisms provide cases where speakers say something they didn't intend or mean to say. But this is an explanation from folk psychology that can easily be restated in terms acceptable to Griceanism, without loss of explanatory power. When speakers perform a speech error and produce a syntactically well formed sentence different from the one they intended, they don't thereby *say* what that sentence is normally taken to say. They simply produce a sentence that could have been uttered—if they had had the requisite communicative intentions—to say what it is normally taken to say.

In terms of the bigger picture, the case for the misarticulation theory of malapropisms shows the acceptability of idealizing away from pragmatic performance errors when theorizing about foundational notions in semantics, such as *saying*, *meaning*, *implicating*. I would suggest, further, that this can also be done for the Austinian category of utterances made 'by mistake.' Just as Reimer used malaprops to argue against No

SAYING, many philosophers have used Frege puzzles—and other kinds of confused identities—for exactly the same purpose. If I'm right, even such cases should be described as a special kind of pragmatic error, making the semantic conclusions theorists are aiming for much less immediate than is usually thought. But that's a story for another occasion.

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