This paper attempts to investigate communication slips from socio-cultural perspectives. Communication slips (slips of the tongue, pen, hand and mind) have been studied mostly in search of support for linguistic and psychological theories. These slips, however, also have their practical implications apart from their theoretical contributions. This is in part because the speaker’s socio-cultural background and the communication environment inevitably affect the way people talk and behave. The complicated social relations and diverse cultural values, and even one’s political viewpoints can all be reflected in slips. Therefore, slips of various types can be analyzed from both linguistic and psychological aspects, as well as from the socio-cultural perspectives.

All speakers wish to perfect their communication skills in order to carry out error-free communication activities. Communication in real life, however, is usually much less than perfect. Slips of different types (e.g., slips of the tongue, pen, hand and mind) have been found to occur in verbal and nonverbal communication activities, and errors in speech have been a research topic of many linguists (e.g., Fromkin, 1973, 1980). For example, errors like cup of coffee → cuff of coffee and less young → yes lung are believed to show that speech segments of different sizes in an utterance are organized and processed in a linear order, such that segmental errors obey structural laws (Fromkin, 1971). Other errors like pleased to meet you → pleased to beat you in a job interview competition are thought to be caused by the speaker’s psychological state (Motley, 1985). Speech errors have been classified into different categories in different studies (Motley, 1985). But most of these studies have been along the lines of linguistic and psychological theories. This is because linguists are interested in the information that speech errors provide about linguistic units and linguistic rules (Garrett, 1992).

While psychologists believe that speech errors often involve the speaker’s general psychological and cognitive state. However, language is more than a physical or psychological phenomenon. Speech errors occur not just for linguistic or psychological reasons. Many socio-cultural factors also influence the speaker’s speech planning and communication performance. Non-verbal errors can reflect a person’s absentmindedness, carelessness or a mistake in decision making caused by a past habit or recent experience (Yang, 2002). Such errors in practical life can cause serious problems. Errors in speech can also have serious social consequences. A speaker’s social status, cultural background, and even political viewpoints can be reflected in his speech performance. Speech errors that have sociopolitical overtones may create disturbances among listeners who hold different cultural values and share different political points of view. Slips that reflect the complicated social relationships in one culture may not exist in another, making such errors typically language/culture-specific. Induced errors or intended errors in speech can therefore be used in performances intended to entertain audiences. In this sense, tongue slips can contribute to not
only linguistic studies, but to our understanding of their social and cultural implications as well.

Studying the socio-cultural communication errors in a given language provides insight into the relationship between a speech error and the speaker’s social, cultural or political environment. After illustrating what slips lead to in our everyday lives, this paper compares speech errors in Chinese and English to show how language and cultural differences determine the types of errors that do (or do not) occur, and how induced/intended errors work to create artistic effect in cultural performances.

**Slips of the Mind and Tongue in Practical Life**

The study of communication slips has lent support to our understanding of linguistic theories, but it also has practical implications. People make slips in speech and other cognitive and physical activities. Such inadvertent errors have been related as causal factors in various accidents with serious consequences. For example, Reason (1982) analyzed several catastrophic accidents in which fatalities were apparently caused by slips of the mind. A London bus driver crashed a double-decker bus into a low overpass, killing six passengers, simply because he was in the habit of driving the same route in a single-decker bus. A senior pilot on the island of Tenerife failed to obtain clearance from the control tower before taking off and his Boeing 747 collided with a landing plane, killing 577 passengers and crew. The reason for this accident is believed to be that the pilot had just finished a different assignment involving hundreds of hours of training pilots in a cockpit simulator, in which runway clearance was not required. These fatal errors reflect how a highly habitual and automatic action can substitute for the correct one.

Like inadvertent errors of the non-verbal kind, speech errors can also have social consequences. On August 31, 1995, ABC aired its regular TV program, America’s Funniest Home Videos. One of the video segments showed a graduation ceremony where the speaker, a professor at the school stunned the audience by congratulating the students on the achievement of their “tremendous amount of scholarship and tremendous amount of sex.” A slip like this may be accepted with understanding laughter from the audience (the speaker in fact won a prize by sending the videotaped tongue slip to the TV company), but other slips may face severe criticism.

Slips of the tongue or pen in Chinese have also been found to attract unwanted attention. During the Cultural Revolution in China (1966-1976), a Chinese calligrapher was allegedly punished for his “counter-revolutionary” behavior, simply because he slipped while brush-painting a very popular political slogan wishing Chairman Mao a long life. He accidentally replaced wan shou wu jian (万寿无疆, a long life without limit) with the “counter-revolutionary” wu shou wu jiang (无寿无疆, no life without limit). In March 2000, a top Chinese legislator made a slip in his much noticed on-line work report. Turning the intended min fa dian (民法典 a civil code), into the erroneous min dian fa (民典法, a non-existent word). The media quickly responded by questioning the speaker’s working attitude and health, and by extension, his academic and administrative abilities as a senior legislator.

Both verbal and non-verbal communication acts can be influenced by the anticipation and preservation of related experiences or linguistic items. Non-verbal behaviors are governed by
the same mental controlling system that processes speech behavior. Any malfunctioning of this processing mechanism can lead to either slips of the mind (as in an accident) or slips of the tongue/pen. From today’s psycholinguistic point of view, these errors can be explained without involving any political reasoning. For example, when the Chinese calligrapher was writing the character 万 (wàn), he was already anticipating the future character 无 (wú), resulting in the error. The verbal slip of the Chinese legislator is also caused this way. The context of his speech prior to the slip point contains a number of lexical items involving the word suffix 法 (fǎ, law), such as 公司法 (gōngsī fǎ, corporation law), 保险法 (bǎoxiǎn fǎ, insurance law), 商标法 (shāngbiāo fǎ, trademark law), 专利法 (zhuānlì fǎ, patent law), 婚姻法 (huānyīn fǎ, marriage law). Experiments in other languages (e.g., Japanese) have shown that such a frequency effect does indeed increase the chance of making errors of the slip-of-the-pen kind (Nihei, 1988; see also Kess & Miyamoto, 1994 for references).

Nevertheless, speech errors by different speakers may reveal the storage of a speaker’s working lexicon. A slip like that made by the legislator is much less likely to occur in the speech of someone who never deals with law terms. This reminds us of the fact that some very common error types found in Chinese may never occur in English and vice versa.

**Slips and Language/Culture Differences**

Errors in English and Chinese may be classified into similar categories. Language-specific and culture-specific characteristics, however, determine the differences between the two languages in terms of the likelihood of certain types of errors occurring rather than others. For example, word orders in Chinese topic-comment structures may follow more patterns than the largely SVO word order in English. Errors that involve consonant cluster and derivational segments are common in English, but are not in a language like Mandarin Chinese which allows no consonant cluster within a syllable. On the other hand, errors related to tones and logo-phonological features are typical among Chinese speakers, but are obviously not as likely in English. Structural differences may show that errors are more likely to be found in certain areas. For example, while it is unlikely or impossible that a Chinese speaker can make errors with structural elements such as the personal pronouns (e.g., he for she or it, me for I), it is quite possible for an English speaker to make such errors. The following are a few examples from Fromkin (1973):

1. Laurie’s boyfriend has longer hair than she does.
2. I told him (Peter) you were not coming.
3. The city has a personality of its own.
4. I gave it to him.

It is obvious that the underlined items in the above sentences are pronouns in different cause and gender, and they interfere with each other in the course of lexical retrieval. However, such errors are not likely to occur in Chinese, since all the third-person singular pronouns in any gender and case are associated with one and the same monosyllabic
representation *ta*. Disregarding its written format, the pronoun *ta* in Chinese in most cases can be the English equivalent of he, she, him, her, or it, depending on the speech context. Although there are different lexical representations for a third-person singular pronoun in Chinese depending on gender and case differences (e.g., male/female and subject/object), the phonological representation of these items is the same. A Chinese speaker can select a reference in the lexicon without making an error so long as the lexical item is third person singular. This suggests that an English speaker has to process at least five times as many items as a Chinese speaker in choosing the right pronoun from the same category. It is evident that such factors within the structural build-up of a language can determine the likelihood of error occurrence in that language.

Similar differences between languages in the probability of making errors can also be determined by socio-cultural factors related to the language items involved. English speakers may make errors that are not likely to occur in Chinese, but they are very unlikely to make errors of the following kind (errors which are typical for Chinese) which involve the complicated system of Chinese kinship terms:

5. *ta quan kao ta de gonggong* → *ta de yuefu*
   她全她的公公。
   “She totally depends on her father-in-law.”

6. *ni gege bi ni da ji sui ?* → *ni didi bi ni da ji sui ?*
   你哥哥比你大几岁？
   你弟弟比你大几岁？
   “How much older than you is your (older) brother?”
   “How much older than you is your (younger) brother?”

7. *ta de saozi hen piaoliang* → *xiaogu hen piaoliang*
   她的嫂子很漂亮。
   小姑很漂亮。
   “Her sister–in–law is pretty.”

8. *kuai jiao shushu* → *dada*
   快叫叔叔
   大大
   “Quick, say hello to your uncle.”

The above examples illustrate some confusion in the use of kinship terms in Chinese, which is sufficiently complicated that speakers sometimes retrieve the wrong item from a web of kinship terms. Although both the terms *gonggong* 公公 and *yuefu* 岳父 in 5 are equivalent to the English term “father–in–law”, they in fact give different connotations in the Chinese kinship term system. *Gonggong* refers to the father of the husband, while *yuefu* refers to the father of the wife. A married woman can call her father–in–law *gonggong*, but not *yuefu*, while a married man can call his father–in–law *yuefu* but not *gonggong*. The speaker in example 5 violated this pragmatic rule in her speech, hence the error.

The misused terms in example 6 are *gege* 哥哥 “elder brother” and *didi* 弟弟 “younger brother,” both of which are the equivalent of the English term “brother.” In English, one’s “brother” can be either younger or older than the referent, but a Chinese speaker uses different terms accordingly. In Chinese, the relationship between *saozi* 嫂子 and *xiaogu* 小姑 in example 7 is that of a “sister–in–law.” *Saozi* refers to the wife of one’s elder brother while
xiaogu refers to a younger sister of one’s husband. These two terms are represented by one and the same term ‘sister-in-law’ in English. The word dada 大大 in example 8 refers to an elder brother of one’s father, and shushu 叔叔 one’s father’s younger brother. Since “uncle” is the term to cover both, English speakers do not run into troubles leading to errors of this kind. Speech errors like these arise from socio-cultural characteristics that influence speech production. From a sociolinguistic point of view, the basic unit of a community in every society is the family. Kinship terms are a major part of address terms. In English, kinship terms are relatively simple. For example, five English terms (brother, sister, cousin, brother-in-law and sister-in-law) can cover all one’s family members and relatives of the same generation. In Chinese, however, a speaker must make clear how he or she is related to the addressee.

The English term “cousin” covers a large range of kinship relations. In Chinese, cousins are not only distinguished with respect to gender and age differences (e.g. biaoge 表哥 “an older male cousin,” biaomei 表妹 “a younger female cousin”), but also distinguished by the “closeness” of the relationship. Traditional Chinese families are centered round the father (e.g., children carry the name of the father). Cousins on the father’s side are considered closer to the family than those on the mother’s side. Such differences are clearly marked in forms of address. For example, the English term cousin can have different equivalents in Chinese. The morphological prefixes tang 堂 “in-house” and biao 表 “superficial” in kinship terms indicate whether a cousin has a closer relation to the family (a child of the father’s brother but not sister ), or has a distant relationship (a child of the father’s sister or a child of the mother’s brother/sister). Such differences in kinship terms leave more choices for a Chinese speaker than for an English speaker, hence, more chances for errors involving such address terms. This is because a speaker has to select the most appropriate term from a list of related kinship terms. The speaker of example 9 below has to make clear the relationship between the two referents in his speech and therefore has to correct any error in speech that might confuse the listener.

9. *tamen shi biao — tang xiongdi*

“tamen shi biao — tang xiongdi”

“They are maternal — paternal cousins.”

The speaker in 9 has to stop short after uttering biao, realizing that the relationship between the cousins is paternally related (which is closer than biao), and hence changed to tang. This complex kinship system reflects the strict Confucianist principle of group membership, making a clear demarcation between insiders and outsiders even within an extended family. The tang/biao differentiation also applies to relatives of different generations, making the already complicated kinship system even more complex. This system greatly increases the number of competitive choices for an error to occur than in English.

Another influential factor that makes it less likely for English speakers to make errors of this type is that English speakers tend to address relatives or acquaintances by name. When the relationship between the speaker and a referent becomes too complicated, the name of the referent is used in place of a particular kinship term or a title. It is not uncommon to hear an English speaker call his or her seniors, or even parents, by name. This addressing pattern
saves a lexical search for the appropriate term, reducing the chance of making an error in the
course of retrieving and producing the right lexical item. In Chinese, however, it is considered
inappropriate or impolite to address one’s senior by name. In conventional practice,
interlocutors must be addressed with a kinship term (e.g. erge 二哥 “second elder brother,”
san yi 三姨 “third aunt on the mother’s side”), a title (e.g. changzhang 厂长 “factory chief,”
zhuren 主任 “director”), or surname plus a title (e.g. Zhang yisheng 张医生 “Doctor Zhang,”
Li jiaolian 李教练 “Coach Li”). A speaker has to consider social appropriateness during
speech production and make adjustment according to the relationship between the speaker and
the addressee. The following examples illustrate such adjustment in speech production.

10. Ma daifu — Ma zhuren
马大夫 — 马主任
“Doctor Ma — Director Ma”

In example 10, the word daifu 大夫 “doctor” is a term used to show the profession of the
addressee, but not an administrative rank as the word zhuren主任 “director” does. In a
society where ranking is important in showing a person’s social position, it is often
considered more appropriate to address someone by rank rather than by profession. The
speaker obviously has in mind this concept of class distinction, hence the correction in his
speech.

The speech errors discussed above suggest that the socio-cultural characteristics of a
language indeed influence speech production in a specific language environment. They also
show that different speakers have different working lexicons and different plans before the
articulation of a sentence, and may switch from one to another which is socio-culturally more
appropriate during the sentence production. In such cases, speakers are not correcting
themselves in terms of the lexical items they choose, but the socio-cultural properties of these
items. Therefore, English and Chinese differ not only in terms of the linguistic aspects of each
language; the socio-cultural aspects of language also play an important role in determining the
likelihood of error occurrence in different domains.

Speech Errors as a Source of Humor

Because of the dramatic difference between what is intended and what is actually
produced, slips can sometimes be humorous. In a slip, the target can be transformed
phonologically, syntactically, or semantically, and the result can often be an unexpected
utterance that is dramatically changed into something that is entirely out of the context. Such
erroneous utterances can often produce laughter. Some well-known spoonerisms below
(Fromkin, 1980) have been used to show how humorous tongue slips could be.

11. Our dear old Queen → Our queer old Dean
12. You have wasted two terms. → You have tasted two worms.

Intended slips are designed to bring about special effects. But such “designs” mostly
imitate primed errors in real speech. Baars (1992) has observed that conscious priming
increases the frequency of experimentally evoked slips in speech. For example, if one asks someone to repeat the word *poke* about half a dozen times and then asks, “What do you call the white of an egg?” most people will answer “*Yolk.*” Although they know the difference between egg white and yolk they have been primed by the word *poke* to retrieve a similar-sounding item from the lexicon. Reason (1992) has described similar instances of word games such as the following:

13. Q: What do we call the tree that grows from acorns?  
   A: Oak.  
Q: What do we call a funny story?  
   A: Joke.  
Q: What sound does a frog make?  
   A: Croak.  
Q: What is Pepsi’s major competitor?  
   A: Coke.  
Q: What is another word for cape?  
   A: Cloak.  
Q: What do you call the white of an egg?  
   A: Yolk.

The frequency of primes, as well as the presence of common phonological elements, clearly plays an important part in determining the likelihood of the “*yolk*” response. Intentional speech errors have long been used in Chinese literary works. One can find numerous examples of the intended use of puns, spoonerisms, and omission or addition of words, syllables or phonemes in order to change the semantics of an utterance for entertaining or artistic effect. For example, a modest elderly Chinese movie actor was recently telling his audience over CCTV that his wife once wrote him a letter to congratulate him on becoming a *ying tan xin xiu* 影坛新锈, which is supposed to mean “new star in the movie industry.” But the intended “slip of the pen” on the character *xiu* 锈 has a metal radical, which sarcastically changed the meaning into “new rust in the movie industry.”

Chinese *xiangsheng* 相声 “cross-talk” is a traditional performance that takes the form of a dialogue between two performers. Intentional speech errors are commonly found in such performances to elicit laughter from the audience. One of the methods commonly used by these performers is for Speaker A to set a “trap” for Speaker B by priming B with a string of phonologically or semantically similar words or phrases. Speaker B accepts the pattern, which is then suddenly turned to a different direction. In this “misleading” dialogue, Speaker B appears to be following the pattern, but is unable to cope with the unexpected irregularity, resulting in the “slip” to achieve the humorous effect, just as what some psycholinguists have done to elicit speech errors in lab experiments. To achieve such humorous effect, the speaker must understand how the intended error is naturally embedded into the normal speech utterance and the regularities listeners listen for in comprehending it, so that the speaker can manipulate the listener. The following intentional errors from Shao (1993) show how intended errors are for such purposes.
14. A: ni dou xihuan shenme xiangmu?  
你都喜欢什么项目?
B: juzhong, shejian tiaosan, tiaogao, tiaoyuan, tiaohe...  
举重，射箭，跳伞，跳高
跳远，跳河

15. A: zhemeshuo ni ye shi guan?  
这么说你也驶过船?
B: shi guo 驶过。
A: ni ye yao guo lu?  
你也摇过橹?
B: yao guo 摇过。

In 14, Speaker B is “trapping” the audience with a list of sports events that are also phonologically similar, priming the listener with the X-jumping’s pattern. However, Speaker B ends up making a “slip” that is semantically opposite to the concept of sports (since tiaohe 跳河 “river jumping” in Chinese normally refers to committing suicide by drowning). In 15, Speaker A first asked a number of questions that B could most possibly answer with a “yes.” To explain this in a structural way, A primed B with the interrogative sentence structure of ni X guo Y (?) “Have you ever X-ed a Y?” (where X is a verb with the perfective aspect marker guo 过, and Y is a noun representing an object affected by the action of the verb X). When Speaker B “falls” into the pattern by simply answering X-guo’ (Yes, I have X-ed a Y)’ to all of Speaker A’s questions, Speaker A asked an off-the-pattern question that is most likely to be answered with a “no” (since not everyone has the experience of fan guo chuan “to have overturned a boat” as the Chinese culture considers it a very bad luck). Such an unexpected pattern change caused Speaker B to say “yes” instead of “no” in the answer, as he has been deeply primed by the previous pattern.

Intended speech errors are designed and produced to amuse the audience. Although they are not real errors in the sense that they are produced as intended, a careful study of these errors shows that errors may be primed phonologically, semantically and structurally. Speech errors in an entertaining performance are very similar to experimentally elicited errors in that they all involve a carefully set speech environment in which the speaker is conditioned in different ways. It is evident that designed errors can trigger laughter and bring entertaining effect, following the same processing patterns as normal errors do. But speakers of intended errors must also follow linguistic rules to achieve the desired effect of their intentional slips. Therefore, a good understanding of the language internal rules and their social and cultural
implications, as well as language processing mechanisms in general, is essential for creating ideal speech effects.

Conclusion

Slips in verbal communication have been mainly discussed within the frame of reference provided by linguistic and psychological theories. But the analysis of the socio-cultural aspects of such slips and their practical implications have been rarely addressed in the literature. Speech errors occur in the course of verbal communication, and such communication is inevitably conducted within a given socio-cultural environment. Studying the socio-cultural factors that cause speech errors in a given language provides insight into the relationship between a speaker and his or her working lexicon determined by his/her socio-cultural background. If research on slips is limited only to purely linguistic and psychological activities without considering the socio-cultural context of a given language, many types of errors that naturally occur in normal speech cannot be accounted for. The socio-cultural environments of different languages can determine how a speaker’s lexical storage is structured and the probabilities of error occurrence in normal speech. Errors of certain types are obviously very common in one language, but are absolutely impossible in another, simply because of socio-cultural differences.

Like non-linguistic slips of the mind, verbal slips can be the result of habitual cognitive activities. Speech errors may bring serious social consequences that involve some politically sensitive issues in special settings. Analyses on the speech context and linguistic regularities may help explain the cause of certain slips, but others could be purely politically or culturally motivated, and some intended errors may have an entertaining effect on occasions such as performances. These intentional errors, when analyzed psycho-linguistically, show that phonological and semantic priming forms the basis of jokes with tongue slips. Jokes with planned “slips” are common in Chinese cross-talk performances but they were rarely discussed in the context of psycholinguistic theories. Western psycholinguists (e.g., Reason, 1982, 1992) have experimentally found that a priming effect on speakers occurs under different priming conditions, but Chinese performers have long been using this priming effect to manipulate humorous “errors” in entertaining their audience. This is why studies on communication slips would be wise to also take into consideration socio-cultural values and their practical implications, as well as the ways in which these expectations are consciously manipulated.

References


