BRAIN TWISTERS: PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF SPOONERISM

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Abstract: The research intends to look at language, specifically at a verbal error known as ‘spoonerism’, and its relation with several psychological variables such as emotional intelligence, creativity, anxiety and personality. Spoonerism is generally understood as a verbal error in which the speaker switches the phonemes of adjacent words. Even though there are several types of Spoonerism and it is a well-researched topic, a psychological understanding of it is seldom explored. Possible correlations are explored to see if there exists any underlying explanation to this verbal error. The research looks at the several forms and types of spoonerism as explained by researchers such as Motely and Baars, Simonini, Robbins, Erard and so on. The research was conducted on 23 PG students of Christ University, Bangalore. The research intends to shed light on this area of psycholinguistics by looking at the possible correlations between Spoonerism and psychological variables such as anxiety, personality, verbal creativity and emotional intelligence using IPAT anxiety test, ABBPS Personality test, Wallach and Kogan creativity test, EIS test by Anukool Kyde, Sanjyot Pethe and Upinder Dhar, and a modified Spoonerism test based on Motely and Baars. The research could further explain how language affects the human psyche and vice versa.

Keywords: spoonerism, psychology, psycholinguistics, Indian context

I. Introduction

Spoonерism is generally understood as a verbal error in which the speaker switches the phonemes of adjacent words. Even though there are several types of Spoonerism and it is a well-researched topic, a psychological understanding of it is seldom explored. Spoonerism is observed to be a common verbal error people make in a daily basis. Although it is a common phenomenon, because of the lack of awareness of the error, people tend to overlook it as a slip of tongue. Based on this verbal error, a Spoonerism test was developed by Motely
and Baars and used to help in identifying several personality problems and intellectual disabilities, such as dyslexia (Tops, Callens, Lammertyn, Van Hees, & Brysbaert, 2012). Research has also looked at Spoonerism as a mere slip of the tongue, but a detailed exploration of the subject shows otherwise. Therefore, the research intends to look at the psychological aspects of Spoonerism and intends to explore the possible correlation, if there exists any.

Reverend William A. Spooner is credited with the origin of this figure of speech even though it existed long before him. For example, in the work “Compleat Gentleman (1622)”, Henry Peacham says “Sir, I must goe dye a beggar” instead of “Sir, I must goe buy a dagger”. Yet, this speech condition is attributed to the many stories revolving around Reverend Spooner. Julian Huxley, who was a tutor at New College, Oxford for six years has several accounts about Reverend Spooner. In one of his accounts, Huxley explains how Reverend Spooner was a man of ‘odd things’ through an example of how he once gave an entire sermon on Aristotle in a village church. Reverend Spooner was actually talking about St. Paul and instead of saying St. Paul, he said ‘Aristotle’ instead. Another story explains how he was looking for a “Dull man at Greenwich”, while he was actually looking for the “Green Man at Dulwich” (Robbins, 1967). Beatrice Lillie recalls (as cited in Robbins, 459) another interesting story:

"I want", he began, "A soda of siphon water to be delivered at my home."

"I beg your pardon, sir, I didn't quite catch .... "

"I said I want a cider of sophon water."

"A cider, sir?"

"No, no. Not a cider. I want a sofa of sidon water, and will you send it round at once, please."

"A sofa? . . . Oh, you mean a sodon of cipher water."
"No. Not a sodon. . . . A cipher of sodon water ... that is, a water of sidon sofa, and I want it delivered white array."

The research could provide insight to the field of psycho-linguistics and can strengthen the relation between the mind and the speech. It could explain why certain people tend to make these mistakes more often than others and it could reveal underlying psychological factors, if any. Further research in the topic would explain if it indeed is a verbal “error” or if it is a marker of something much more.

This brings the research to ask certain specific questions about the nature of this verbal error. (1) How does it occur? (2) What is its relation to Psychology, if there is any? (3) What are its features? (4) Are there any classifications, and if yes, what are they? The research will look at these questions and seek answers based on the existing knowledge available. Questions (3) and (4) will be explored first followed by questions (1) and (2).

II. Literature Review

What are the features and classifications of Spoonerism? R H Robbins explains how Spoonerism can be broadly categorized into two: True Spoonerism and Pseudo-Spoonerism. True Spoonerism, says Robbins, will have these three features: 1) the switching of (usually, initial) letters, syllables or words. 2) the consequent formation of meaningful words and 3) the presence of humour. For example, in the sentence “So you will be abily easle (a) to chase the train (b) of thought.”, (a) is an example of pseudo-spoonerism because the words “ably” and “easle” are not actual, meaningful words. Whereas (b) is an example of true Spoonerism as “chase” and “train” are actual, meaningful words. Robbins also talks about two types of Spoonerism. Type 1 Spoonerism is when there is a transposition of words, while Type 2 Spoonerism is when there is a transposition of letters. Example for type 1 would be “Courage to blow the bears of life” and “Must you stay? Can’t you go?”. Example for type 2 would be “Two essentials for a train journey, a rag and a bug” and “A famous general is described as bottle-scarred, then as battlescarred”.
Whereas Hill (1973 209-10) (as cited in Sobkowiak, 2015, 280) while differentiating between a Spoonerism and a Pun, talks about 3 different criteria. 1) Firstly, he states that “every genuine spoonerism produces at least one English word”. 2) Secondly, “sounds are transposed from no more than two words or constructions”. 3) Lastly, “the span between the transposed sounds is suspiciously long” (Sobkowiak, 2015). Simonini, in his essay, calls these errors as “speech lapses (Simonini, 1956)”. He provides a more complicated classification of these phonemic lapses. According to him, the phonemic lapses would fall under five categories in which the research will look only at the first two. The categories are: 1) several types of anticipation and 2) several types of lag. Simonini explains Anticipation by saying how phonemic lapses occur because of the anticipation of the elements yet to come in a sentence. He further divides anticipation into three: anticipation with exchange – exchange of sounds (example: Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States, Hoobert [Herbert] Heever [Hoover]), anticipation with substitution – anticipated phonemes displace other phonemes without undergoing loss (example: Everybody today would like to take a crap [crack] at the Japs) and anticipation with addition – addition of single syllable or phoneme without undergoing loss (Meet Joe E. Brown, currently starving [starring] in Harvey) (Simonini, 1956). Lag is explained as the process by which certain sounds in a sentence get unintentionally repeated. Lag with substitution is when a group of sounds already uttered displaces other set of sounds (example: The governor this week is hunting beer [bear] in the Colorado mountains). Lag with addition is when a sound or group of sounds are unintentionally repeated and added to the utterance (example: The Russian freighter that crapsized [capsized] in Portland's harbor).

A part from Simonini’s article would explain the first question of “How does it occur?”. Simmonini says, Speech lapses are most likely to occur where conditions of excitement, haste, external distraction, mental confusion, or fatigue are present… Pressure of time, program interruptions, and technical difficulties also affect a speaker's power of concentration and his accuracy of pronunciation. (Simonini, 1956, 253)

The lack of literature in the area of psycho-linguistics related to Spoonerism causes a gap in the understanding of whether psychology really does play any role in this verbal error or not. Michael Erard talks...
about something similar to this. He explains how in the 1960s, Noam Chomsky’s grammatical theorization changed the way speech errors were looked at. Linguists such as Victoria Fromkin talked about how “abstract mental units of sounds and words were also concrete symbols in speaker’s minds” (Erard, 2007, 1674). Even though this was the case, Erard concludes his argument by saying how speech errors occur as a result of the attempt to pronounce two sounds at the same time. Erard essentially says how speech errors occur as a result of “collision of motor commands rather than as substitutions of mental symbols” (Erard, 2007, 1676) (Erard, 20017).

III. Research Design

The research intends to use the survey method to collect data required for the research. In order to check if there exists correlation between Spoonerism and the Psychology of a person, the research intends to use several psychological tests such as IPAT Anxiety test, EIS Emotional Intelligence test, Verbal Creativity test, ABBPS Personality test and a modified Spoonerism test based on the test created by Baars and Motley (Baars & Motley, 1976). The assumption of correlations are made on the basis of the literature which speaks about how anxiety, excitement, haste, external distraction and mental confusion affects Spoonerism (Simonini, 1956).

The survey was administered on a sample of 23 PG students of Christ University, Bangalore. The sample consists of 4 males and 19 females in the age group of 20 to 32.

The first test to be administered was the IPAT Anxiety test. It has 40 questions and the participants were given sufficient time to complete the test. According to the responses, the raw score is calculated, which is converted into the sten score. The sten score between 1-3 represents unusually relaxed, 4-7 represents average anxiety, 8 represents serious anxiety and 9-10 represents high level anxiety. The anxiety test showed the anxiety of the participants while the test was administered.

The second test to be administered was the ABBPS personality test. The test has two parts; first part consisting of 17 questions, and the second part consisting of 16 questions. The test measures the categories of
tenseness, impatience, restlessness, achievement, domineering, workaholic, complacent, easygoing, non-assertive, relaxed and patience. The test provides insight on the personality type – either type A or type B of the participants.

The third test administered was a creativity test devised by Wallach and Kogan. The test has two components: verbal creativity and non-verbal creativity. For this research, only the verbal creativity test was administered. The test is divided into 3 parts: instances, alternative uses and similarities. The first part has 4 questions, the second part has 6 questions and the third part has 6 questions as well. The participants are given 30 seconds to give as many responses as they can for each question.

The fourth test administered was EIS, an emotional intelligence test developed by Anukool Kyde, Sanjyot Pethe and Upinder Dhar. The test measures self-awareness, empathy self-Motivation, emotional Stability, managing relations, integrity, self-development, value orientation, commitment, altruistic behavior. The participants were given enough time to record the responses.

The final test to be administered was a spoonerism test modified from the test devised by Motely and Baars. The test consists of 20 sets of word groupings, which are divided into 2 – the first 10 sets designed for spoonerism with meaningful word pairs and the next 10 sets designed for spoonerism with meaningless word pairs. Each grouping has 5 word pairs in it; the first two word pairs are neutral pairs, the next two pairs are suggestive pairs, and the last pair is the word pair where spoonerism is expected to occur. The first 4 pairs are shown in 1 second intervals, and the participant is asked to say out loud the 5th word pair. Spoonerism is expected to occur, and the responses are noted down.

III. Results and Discussion

Among the 23 participants, 10 participants, TT, RTR, MAF, MJP, AP, SP, GA, KK, SU and ST were seen to have made spoonerisms of various types and 20 instances of spoonerism, out of all 460 responses.
Participant AP’s and TT’s was the only cases where there was a complete switching of the initial sounds. Instead of the word ‘[m]an [b]un’, AP responded by saying ‘[b]an [m]un’. Instead of saying the word ‘[j]olly [f]am’, TT responded by saying ‘[f]olly [j]am’. In AP’s case, the resulting word pair was partially meaningful, whereas in TT’s case, the resulting word pair was perfect spoonerism where both the words were meaningful. This falls under R.H Robbins’ classification of spoonerism.

Participant KK, instead of saying the word ‘fan [b]oy’, said ‘[b]an boy’. Here, the sound [b] from the second word ‘boy’ displaced the [f] sound from the word ‘fan’. Similarly, the participant SP said ‘jolly [j]am’ instead of saying ‘jolly [f]am’. Here, the [f] sound was displaced by the preceding [j] sound. SP also made another error where instead of saying ‘[t]in [d]oor’, the participant said ‘[d]in [d]oor’. Here, the [t] sound was displaced by the [d] sound. All of these becomes instances of partial spoonerism.

Participant MJP was seen to make an error, which falls under the category of Simonini’s ‘anticipation with substitution’. Instead of saying ‘nosey c[oo]ks’, MJP responded by saying ‘n[oo]sey craks’. The [o] sound of the word ‘nosey’ was substituted by the [oo] sound from ‘cooks’. Even though there is substitution with anticipation, it does not exactly fall under Simmonini’s category because of the participant’s response, ‘craks’. The occurrence of this error could not be explained by the researcher.

Participant TT was seen to make another error in which the word which preceded the target word in the test influenced the speech. ‘Long [h]at’ was the target word, and the participant responded by saying ‘long [p]at’. This word pair in isolation, does not make sense. The [p] sound occurs nowhere in the words ‘long hat’. This could be explained by looking at the word pair that preceded ‘long hat’. The [p] sound in the preceding word pair ‘horse la[p]’ could have repeated during the response of the participant.

Similarly, participant MAF, instead of saying ‘long hat’, responded by saying ‘long ha[r]t’. The [r] sound could have been derived from the previous word ‘ho[r]se lap’. Participant SU responded to the word pair ‘flow stick’, by saying ‘flow s[h]tick’. This could have been because of the preceding word pair, ‘so[c]ial fa[sh]ion’. Participant ST responded to ‘nosey cooks’ by saying ‘no[i]sy cooks’, probably because of the preceding word
pairs ‘to[y] dog’ and ‘blue sk[y]’. GA responded to ‘sick pen’ by saying ‘s[t]ick pen’, probably because of the preceding word pair ‘migh[t]y hack’. MAF’s responses to ‘bad goof’ and ‘sick pen’ where ‘bad gof’ and ‘slick pen’. This could have happened because of the word pairs which preceded them; ‘new res[o]lve’, ‘gallant bl[o]ck’ and ‘pi[l]low sack’ respectively. Participant RTB was also seen to make this error. Instead of saying’ [b]ig ja[w]’ RTB responded by saying ‘big ja[b]’. These could be examples of Simonini’s classification of lag with substitution (sounds already uttered displaces other set of sounds).

An instance which does not fall under the above mentioned categories of spoonerism was observed in the case of the participant MAF. MAF response to ‘man bun’ was ‘m[au]n b[au]n’. One of the ways in which this could be explained is by looking at the sounds [a] and [u]. In the participant’s response, these sounds seem to have joined to create a single unit of sound, [au].

Whereas, participant KV was found to have given responses which cannot be explained with the basis of spoonerism. KV’s responses were ‘dead live’ instead of ‘dead lock’, ‘jolly pan’ instead of ‘jolly fam’ and ‘big log’ instead of ‘big jaw’.

In order to check if there exists any significant correlation between spoonerism and the psychological aspects of emotional intelligence, verbal creativity, anxiety and personalit, t tests were performed.

**Table 1**

*Table showing the results of the correlation between, emotional intelligence, creativity, anxiety and spoonerism using independent T-test.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Spoonerism</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig (2 tailed)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>-2.02</td>
<td>0.055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
The table shows the results of the independent T-tests on creativity, emotional intelligence and anxiety with respect to spoonerism.

From the table, it can be understood that people who made spoonerism had a mean score of 2.52 (M = 2.52) in the creativity test, whereas people who did not make spoonerism had a higher mean score of 3.22 (M = 3.22). The standard deviations were 0.77 and 0.86 respectively. The test revealed that creativity and spoonerism had no significant relationship (t = -2.02), since 0.055 > 0.05. The significance score shows that the data available isn’t enough to reach a proper conclusion regarding this aspect. The question of correlation might be able to be answered if the sample size is larger.

People who made spoonerism had a mean score of 120.90 (M = 120.90) in the emotional intelligence test, whereas people who did not make spoonerism had a higher mean score of 133.23 (M = 133.23). The standard deviations were 15.29 and 13.65 respectively. The test revealed that emotional intelligence and spoonerism had no significant relationship (t = -2.03), since 0.054 > 0.05. Just like the significance score of creativity, the availability of more data might be able to provide more insight regarding the correlation between emotional intelligence and spoonerism.

People who made spoonerism had a mean score of 8.80 (M = 8.80) in the Anxiety test, whereas people who did not make spoonerism had a lower mean score of 7.15 (M = 7.15). The standard deviations were 1.39 and...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Intelligence</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>120.90</td>
<td>133.23</td>
<td>15.29</td>
<td>13.65</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>8.80</td>
<td>7.15</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows the results of the independent T-tests on creativity, emotional intelligence and anxiety with respect to spoonerism.
1.81 respectively. The test revealed that anxiety and spoonerism had a significant relationship (t=-2.36), since 0.027<0.05.

Table 2

Table showing the results of the correlation of Personality type and Spoonerism

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Spoonerism</th>
<th>N</th>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalty type</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personality type</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Personality type</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is evident from the table that there exist no significant relation between personality type and spoonerism, as 0.11>0.05.

IV. Conclusion

The study looks at spoonerism and its possible correlations. The psychological variables it looked at, are emotional intelligence, creativity, anxiety and personality. It was evident from the study, that the study could not establish any significant correlation between emotional intelligence, creativity and personality with respect to spoonerism. At the same time, the study showed that there was a positive correlation between anxiety and spoonerism. But it is important to note that correlation does not necessarily mean causality.
V. Limitations

The study was conducted on a small sample of 23. For more specific and accurate answers, a larger sample size is required. Furthermore, the sample was unevenly distributed in regards to gender. Also, the sample consists only of MA students of Literature. It is not possible to come to a general conclusion about spoonerism with such a data. The spoonerism test was administered as a group, instead of administering it on the participants, one by one. This caused the responses to go unsupervised and thus, easier to be manipulated. As most of the subjects were conscious of what they were writing down, several extraneous variables could have affected their responses. The anxiety test only measures the anxiety of the participant at that given point of time. So with the data available, it is not possible to come to a conclusion regarding the exact correlation between anxiety and spoonerism. It could be concluded that the levels of anxiety affects spoonerism, but it cannot be confirmed that anxiety need to be present for spoonerism to occur. Extraneous variables such as stress, fear of being judged and other personal feelings/emotions might have also affected the results.

VI. Future study

In-depth studies can be conducted on the field with larger samples and variables. The study could also provide more information regarding the less explored areas of psycholinguistics. These studies could also be used in the educational sector to see how the psychology of the learners affect the linguistic abilities and academic performances. These could also provide to be useful regarding aptitude tests and interviews.

References


Tenseness  Impatience  Restlessness  Achievement  Domineering  Workaholic  Total score  Complacent  Easygoing  Non-Assertive  Relaxed  Patience  Total score
4.93  14  7  6  13  8  2  50  14  17  8  9  10  58  A/B
2.87  6  3  10  6  4  6  35  13  13  7  8  13  54  A/B
2.18  11  7  10  12  9  5  54  16  16  9  13  6  60  B
3.81  15  4  7  9  7  6  48  13  17  9  7  11  57  A/B
4.06  10  5  11  7  7  6  46  12  14  6  14  12  58  A/B
3.81  16  7  10  10  11  4  58  13  16  8  9  10  56  A/B
3.06  17  6  9  5  11  9  57  15  15  7  11  8  56  A/B
2.87  17  5  11  7  10  5  55  9  13  7  11  7  47  A/B
3.25  13  5  9  7  4  4  42  13  20  6  7  10  56  B
2.62  17  5  12  8  9  5  56  17  18  7  14  12  68  B
3.18  13  7  9  6  6  2  43  10  17  7  7  11  52  A/B
2.93  17  7  11  8  7  7  57  12  20  7  16  5  60  B
3.56  8  6  7  10  9  6  46  9  19  9  6  4  47  A/B
2.37  15  5  13  7  5  4  49  15  14  8  11  8  56  A/B
1.37  16  10  15  11  9  12  73  11  14  7  8  8  48  A
1.81  11  4  11  7  5  6  44  12  17  10  13  3  55  A/B
2  12  6  10  7  6  2  43  10  19  8  8  5  50  A/B
2.62  14  6  10  7  4  5  46  10  14  6  9  9  48  A/B
2.87  10  5  5  9  6  3  38  10  19  9  13  6  57  B
1.93  11  5  6  8  7  7  44  12  11  8  8  8  47  B
1.87  16  7  10  10  12  9  64  14  10  6  10  6  46  A
4.37  15  2  6  6  7  6  42  16  16  7  12  7  58  A/B
3.81  13  7  12  10  7  11  60  9  18  7  16  4  54  A/B

**Interpretation**

**Type A Scores**
ABBPS - Personality Test

**Type B Scores**
Creativity Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>IPAT- Anxiety Test</th>
<th>Sten Score</th>
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<td>1</td>
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Appendix
Spoonerism Test

Toy Dog
Blue sky
Could Knock
Cold Nuns
Nosey Cooks
Flat Tire
Soft Hand
Mall Trip
Male Tame
Take Map
Poor boy
Sock post
Love Damp
Leg Denim
Dead Level
Car trash
Kill Bill
Damn Luke

Dope Lost
Lock door
Hitch Ban
Pony Man
Fox Meow
Fable Moose
Make Food
Killer bee
Fat Poppy
Flex Jib
Ford Jar
Jolly Fam
Tiller Junk
Hilltop Frittatta
Desk Place
Dinner Pork
Pimple Dose

Cry cake
Box papa
Cat Fox
Card Fax
Fable Cab
Job Drama
Fast Nana
Parrot Ramp
Postit Rock
Rocket Pod

Emotional Intelligence Test

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<th>Emotional Stability</th>
<th>Managing Relations</th>
<th>Integrity</th>
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New resolve
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Gabble Book
**Bad goof**
Noon Glue
Pain Grow
Home Laugh
Horse Lap
**Long Hat**
Car park
Yellow Clean
Jew Barrow
Jill Box
**Big Jaw**
Santa Claus
Satan Pole
Bugle Fandom
Born Foster
Fan Boy
Trick Quiver
War Totem
Ball Mock
Bad Moon
**Man Bun**
Glass Lock
Net Barbie
Cattle Bag
Cot Bash
**Bottle cap**
ID Tag
Mighty Hack
Pillow Sack
Pink Send
**Sick pen**
Jello Shot
Reek Carpet
Mango Wane
Mild Wallow
**White Mark**
Plow Farm
Glow Gigs
Social Fashion
Stove Finger
**Flow Stick**
Seek Truce
Draw wax
Dangle Tax
Did Toll
**Tin door**