

INTRODUCTION

portant of the instinctive forces thus utilized: they are in this way sublimated, that is to say, their energy is turned aside from its sexual goal and diverted towards other ends, no longer sexual and socially more valuable. But the structure thus built up is insecure, for the sexual impulses are with difficulty controlled; in each individual who takes up his part in the work of civilization there is a danger that a rebellion of the sexual impulses may occur, against this diversion of their energy. Society can conceive of no more powerful menace to its culture than would arise from the liberation of the sexual impulses and a return of them to their original goal. Therefore society dislikes this sensitive place in its development being touched upon; that the power of the sexual instinct should be recognized, and the significance of the individual's sexual life revealed, is very far from its interests; with a view to discipline it has rather taken the course of diverting attention away from this whole field. For this reason, the repelations of psycho-analysis are not tolerated by it, and it would greatly prefer to brand them as aesthetically offensive, morally reprehensible, or dangerous. But since such objections are not valid arguments against conclusions which claim to represent the objective results of scientific investigation, the opposition must be translated into intellectual terms before it can be expressed. It is a characteristic of human nature to be inclined to regard anything which is disagreeable as untrue, and then without much difficulty to find arguments against it. So society pronounces the unacceptable to be untrue, disputes the results of psycho-analysis with logical and concrete arguments, arising, however, in affective sources, and clings to them with all the strength of prejudice against every attempt at refutation.

But we, on the other hand, claim to have yielded to no tendency in propounding this objectionable theory. Our intention has been solely to give recognition to the facts as we found them in the course of painstaking researches. And we now claim the right to reject unconditionally any such introduction of practical considerations into the field of scientific investigation, even before we have determined whether the apprehension which attempts to force these considerations upon us is justified or not.

These, now, are some of the difficulties which confront you at the outset when you begin to take an interest in psycho-analysis. It is probably more than enough for a beginning. If you can overcome their discouraging effect, we will proceed further.

Freud, S. (1968)  
 A general introduction to  
 Psychoanalysis, Chapter 2

Note: skim, to

sample Freud's  
 thinking and  
 style.

This chapter is  
 a bridged, ends at  
 pg. 35.

SECOND LECTURE

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ERRORS

WE SHALL now begin, not with postulates, but with an investigation. For this purpose we shall select certain phenomena which are very frequent, very familiar and much overlooked, and which have nothing to do with illness, since they may be observed in every healthy person. I refer to the errors that everyone commits: as when anyone wishes to say a certain thing but uses the wrong word ('slip of the tongue')<sup>1</sup>; or when the same sort of mistake is made in writing ('slip of the pen')<sup>2</sup>, in which case one may or may not notice it; or when anyone reads in print or writing something other than what is actually before him ('misreading')<sup>3</sup>; or when anyone mis-hears<sup>4</sup> what is said to him, naturally when there is no question of any disease of the auditory sense-organ. Another series of such phenomena are those based on forgetting<sup>5</sup> something temporarily, though not permanently; as, for instance, when anyone cannot think of a name which he knows quite well and is always able to recognize whenever he sees it; or when anyone forgets to carry out some intention, which he afterwards remembers, and has therefore forgotten only for a certain time. This element of transitoriness is lacking in a third class, of which mislaying<sup>6</sup> things so that they cannot be found is an example. This is a kind of forgetfulness which we regard differently from the usual kind; one is amazed or annoyed at it, instead of finding it comprehensible. Allied to this are certain mistakes, in which the temporary element is again noticeable, as when one believes something for a time which both before and afterwards one knows to be untrue, and a number of similar manifestations which we know under various names.

Some inner relation between all these kinds of occurrences is indicated in German, by the use of the prefix "ver" which is com-

<sup>1</sup> In German—*Versehen*.

<sup>2</sup> *Verlesen*.

<sup>3</sup> *Verlesen*.

<sup>4</sup> *Verhören*.

<sup>5</sup> *Verlesen*.

mon to all the words designating them.<sup>1</sup> These words almost all refer to acts of an unimportant kind, generally temporary and without much significance in life. It is only rarely that anything of the kind, such as the loss of some object, attains any practical importance. For this reason little attention is paid to such happenings and they arouse little feeling.

I am now going to ask you to consider these phenomena. But you will object, with annoyance: "There are so many tremendous puzzles both in the wide world and in the narrower life of the soul, so many mysteries in the field of mental disorder which demand and deserve explanation, that it really seems frivolous to waste labour and interest on these trifles. If you could explain to us how it is possible for anyone with sound sight and hearing, in broad daylight, to see and hear things which do not exist, or how anyone can suddenly believe that his nearest and dearest are persecuting him, or can justify with the most ingenious arguments a delusion which would seem nonsensical to any child, then we might be willing to take psycho-analysis seriously. But if psycho-analysis cannot occupy us with anything more interesting than the question why a speaker uses a wrong word or why a *Hausfrau* mislays her keys and similar trivialities, then we shall find something better to do with our time and our interest."

My reply is: Patientel Your criticism is not on the right track. It is true that psycho-analysis cannot boast that it has never occupied itself with trifles. On the contrary, the material of its observations is usually those commonplace occurrences which have been cast aside as all too insignificant by other sciences, the refuse, so to speak, of the phenomenal world. But in your criticism are you not confounding the magnitude of a problem with the conspicuous nature of its manifestations? Is it not possible, under certain conditions and at certain times, for very important things to betray themselves in very slight indications? I could easily cite many instances of this. What slight signs, for instance, convey to the young men in my audience that they have gained a lady's favour? Do they expect an explicit declaration, a passionate embrace, or are they not content with a glance which is almost imperceptible to others, a fleeting gesture, a handshake prolonged by a second? Or suppose you are a detective engaged in the investigation of a murder, do you actually expect to

<sup>1</sup> [The equivalent English prefix is "mis-," but is not so widely employed.—Tr.]

find that the murderer will leave his photograph with name and address on the scene of the crime? Are you not perforce content with slighter and less certain traces of the person you seek? So let us not under-value small signs: perhaps from them it may be possible to come upon the tracks of greater things. Besides, I think as you do that the larger problems of the world and of science have the first claim on our interest. But on the whole it avails little to form a definite resolution to devote oneself to the investigation of this or that great problem. One is then often at a loss how to set about the next step. In scientific work it is more profitable to take up whatever lies before one whenever a path towards its exploration presents itself. And then, if one carries it through thoroughly, without prejudice or pre-conceptions, one may, with good fortune and by virtue of the interrelationship linking each thing to every other (hence, also, the small to the great), find, even in the course of such humble labour, a road to the study of the great problems.

It is from this point of view that I hope to enlist your interest in considering the apparently trivial errors made by normal people. I propose now that we question someone who has no knowledge of psycho-analysis as to how he explains these occurrences.

His first answer is sure to be: "Oh, they are not worth any explanation; they are little accidents." What does the man mean by this? Does he mean to maintain that there are any occurrences so small that they fail to come within the causal sequence of things, that they might as well be other than they are? Anyone thus breaking away from the determination of natural phenomena, at any single point, has thrown over the whole scientific outlook on the world (*Weltanschauung*). One may point out to him how much more consistent is the religious outlook on the world, which emphatically assures us that "not one sparrow shall fall to the ground" except God wills it. I think our friend would not be willing to follow his first answer to its logical conclusion; he would give way and say that if he were to study these things he would soon find some explanation of them. It must be a matter of slight functional disturbances, of inaccuracies of mental performance, the conditions of which could be discovered. A man who otherwise speaks correctly may make a slip of the tongue, (1) when he is tired or unwell, (2) when he is excited, or (3) when his attention is concentrated on something else. It is easy to confirm this. Slips of the tongue do indeed occur most frequently when one is tired,

or has a headache, or feels an attack of migraine coming on. Forgetting proper names very often occurs in these circumstances; many people are habitually warned of the onset of an attack of migraine by the inability to recall proper names. In excitement, too, one mixes up words or even things, one performs actions erroneously<sup>1</sup>; and the forgetting of intentions, as well as a number of other undesignated acts, comes to the fore when one is distracted, in other words, when the attention is concentrated on other things. A familiar instance of such distraction is the professor in *Fliegende Blätter* who forgets his umbrella and takes the wrong hat, because he is thinking of the problems which are to be the subject of his next book. We all know from our own experience how one can forget to carry out intentions or promises when something has happened in the interval that absorbs one very deeply.

This seems so entirely comprehensible and also irrefutable. It is perhaps not very interesting or not so much so as we expected. Let us look at this explanation of errors more closely. The various conditions which have been cited as necessary for the occurrence of these phenomena are not all similar in kind. Illness and disorders of the circulation afford a physiological basis for an affection of the normal functions; excitement, tiredness, and distraction are conditions of a different kind which could be described as psychophysiological. These last could easily be converted into a theory. Fatigue, as well as distraction, and perhaps also general excitement, cause a dissipation of the attention from which it may follow that the act in question has insufficient attention devoted to it. It can then very easily be disturbed and inexactly performed. Slight illness or a change in the distribution of blood in the central organ of the nervous system can have the same effect, by these conditions affecting the determining factor, the distribution of attention, in a similar way. In all cases it would be a question of the effects of a disturbance of the attention from organic or psychical causes.

But all this doesn't seem to promise much of interest for a psycho-analytic investigation. We might feel tempted to give up the topic. To be sure, a closer inspection of the facts shows that they are not all in accord with the 'attention' theory of errors of this sort, or at least that not everything can be directly deduced from it. We find that such errors and such forgetfulness also take place when people are not fatigued or excited, but are in every way

<sup>1</sup> In German—*Vergessen*.

in their normal condition; unless, just because of the errors, we were subsequently to attribute to them a condition of excitement which they themselves did not acknowledge. Nor can the matter be quite so simple as that the successful performance of an act will be ensured by an intensification of attention, or endangered by a diminution of it. For a great number of actions may be carried out in a purely automatic way with very little attention and yet quite successfully. In walking, a man may perhaps scarcely know where he is going but keep to the right road and stop at his destination without having gone astray. At least, this is what usually happens. A practised pianist strikes the right notes without thinking of them. He may of course also make an occasional mistake, but if automatic playing increased the danger of errors the virtuoso, whose constant practice has made his playing entirely automatic, would be the most exposed to this danger. Yet we see, on the contrary, that many acts are most successfully carried out when they are not the objects of particularly concentrated attention, and that mistakes may occur just on occasions when one is most eager to be accurate, that is, when a distraction of the necessary attention is most certainly not present. One could then say that this is the effect of the 'excitement', but we do not understand why the excitement does not rather intensify the concentration on the end so much desired. So that if in an important speech anyone says the opposite of what he intends, it can hardly be explained according to the psychophysiological or the attention theory.

There are also many other minor features in connection with these errors which we do not understand and which are not rendered more comprehensible by these explanations. For instance, when one has temporarily forgotten a name one is annoyed, one is determined to recall it and cannot desist from the attempt. Why is it that despite this annoyance the person so often cannot succeed, as he wishes, in directing his attention to the word which, as he says, is "on the tip of his tongue," and which he instantly recognizes when it is supplied to him? Or, to take another example, there are cases in which the errors multiply, link themselves together or act as substitutes for one another. The first time, one forgets an appointment; the next time, after having made a special resolution not to forget it, one discovers that one has made a mistake in the day or hour. Or one tries by devious ways to remember a forgotten word, and in the course of so doing loses track of a second name which would have been of use in finding the first. If one then pursues the

second name, a third gets lost, and so on. It is notorious that the same thing happens with misprints, which are of course errors on the part of the compositor. A stubborn error of this sort is said once to have crept into a Social-Democratic newspaper, where, in the account of a festivity, the following words were printed: "Amongst those present was His Highness, the Clown Prince." The next day a correction was attempted. The paper apologized and said: "The sentence should of course have read, 'the Crow-Prince.'" Again, in a war-correspondent's account of meeting a famous general whose infirmities were pretty well known, a reference to the general was printed as "this battle-scared veteran." Next day an apology appeared which read "the words of course should have been 'the bottle-scared veteran!'"<sup>1</sup> We like to attribute these occurrences to a devil in the type-setting machine or to some malevolent goblin—figurative expressions which at least imply something more than a psychological theory of the misprint.

I do not know if you are aware of the fact that slips of the tongue can be provoked, called forth by suggestion, as it were. An anecdote will serve to illustrate this. Once when a novice on the stage was entrusted with the important part in *The Maid of Orleans* of announcing to the King: "The Constable sends back his sword," the principal player, during the rehearsal, played the joke of several times repeating to the timid beginner, instead of the text, the following: "The *Komfortabel* sends back his steed."<sup>2</sup> At the performance the unfortunate actor actually made his debut with this perverse announcement, though he had been amply warned against so doing, or perhaps just because he had been.

All these little characteristics of errors are not much illuminated by the theory of diverted attention. But that does not necessarily prove the theory wrong. There may be something missing, a link, by the addition of which the theory might be made completely satisfactory. But many of the errors themselves can be considered from another aspect.

Let us select slips of the tongue, as the type of error best suited to our purpose. We might equally well choose slips of the pen or of reading. Now we must first remind ourselves that, so far, we have

only enquired when and under what conditions the wrong word is said, and have received an answer on that point only. Interest may be directed elsewhere, though, and the question raised why just this particular slip is made and no other: one can consider the nature of the mistake. You will see that so long as this question remains unanswered, and the effect of the mistake is not explained, the phenomenon remains a pure accident on the psychological side, even if a physiological explanation has been found for it. When it happens that I make a mistake in a word I could obviously do this in an infinite number of ways, in place of the right word substitute any one of a thousand others, or make innumerable distortions of the right word. Now, is there anything which forces upon me in a specific instance just this one special slip, out of all those which are possible, or does that remain accidental and arbitrary, and can nothing rational be found in answer to this question?

Two authors, Meringer and Mayer (a philologist and a psychologist) did indeed in 1895 make an attempt to approach the problem of slips of the tongue from this side. They collected examples and first treated them from a purely descriptive standpoint. This of course does not yet furnish any explanation, but it may lead the way to one. They differentiated the distortions which the intended phrase suffered through the slip into: interchanges (in the positions of words, syllables or letters), anticipations, perseverations, compoundings (contaminations), and substitutions. I will give you examples of these authors' main categories. As an instance of an interchange (in the position of words) someone might say "The Milo of Venus" instead of "The Venus of Milo." The well-known slip of the hotel-boy who, knocking at the bishop's door, nervously replied to the question "Who is it?" "The Lord, my boy!" is another example of such an interchange in the position of words.<sup>1</sup> In the typical Spoonerism the position of certain letters is interchanged, as when the preacher said: "How often do we feel a half-warmed fish within us!"<sup>1</sup> It is a case of anticipation if any one says: "The thought lies heartily . . ." instead of: "The thought lies heavily on my heart." A perseveration is illustrated by the well-known ill-fated toast, "Gentlemen, I call upon (*auf*) you to (*auf*) *hiccough* (= *anzustossen*) to the health of our Chief."

And when a member of the House of Commons referred to

<sup>1</sup> [English example.—Tr.]

<sup>2</sup> [*Komfortabel* is a slang Viennese expression for a one-horse cab. An English example of this is as follows: In a play during a scene of a funeral procession the actor was made to say, "Stand back, my Lord, and let the *parson cough*!" instead of "the coffin pass."—Tr.]

[English examples.—Tr.]

another as the "honourable member for Central Hell," instead of "Hull," it was a case of perseveration; as also when a soldier said to a friend "I wish there were a thousand of our men *mortified* on that hill, Bill," instead of "fortified." In one case the *ell* sound has perseverated from the previous words "member for Central," and in the other the *m* sound in "men" has perseverated to form "mortified."<sup>1</sup> These three types of slip are not very common. You will find those cases much more frequent in which the slip happens by a compounding or contraction, as for example when a gentleman asks a lady if he may *in-sort* her on her way (*begleit-digen*); this contraction is made up of *begleiten* = to escort, and *beleidigen* = to insult. (And by the way, a young man addressing a lady in this way will not have much success with her.) A substitution takes place when a poor woman says she has an "incurable *infernal* disease,"<sup>1</sup> or in Mrs. Malaprop's mind when she says, for instance, "few gentlemen know how to value the *ineffectual* qualities in a woman."<sup>1</sup>

The explanation which the two authors attempt to formulate as the basis of their collection of examples is peculiarly inadequate. They hold that the sounds and syllables of a word have different values and that the innervation of the sounds of higher value can interfere with those of lower value. They obviously base this conclusion on the cases of anticipation and perseveration which are not at all frequent; in other forms of slips of the tongue the question of such sound priorities, even if they exist, does not enter at all; for the most frequent type of slip is that in which instead of a certain word one says another which resembles it, and this resemblance is considered by many people sufficient explanation of it. For instance, a professor may say in his opening lecture, "I am not inclined (*geneigt* instead of *geeignet* = fitted) to estimate the merits of my predecessor." Or another professor says, "In the case of the female genital, in spite of the *tempting* . . . I mean, the *attempted* . . ." (*Versuchungen* instead of *Versuche*).

The commonest and also the most noticeable form of slip of the tongue, however, is that of saying the exact opposite of what one meant to say. These cases are quite outside the effect of any relations between sounds or confusion due to similarity, and in default one may therefore turn to the fact that opposites have a strong conceptual connection with one another and are psychologi-

<sup>1</sup> [English examples.—Tr.]

cally very closely associated. There are well-known examples of this sort. For instance, the President of our Parliament once opened the session with the words "Gentlemen, I declare a quorum present and herewith declare the session *closed*."

Any other common association may work in a way as insidious as the association of opposites and may on occasion lead to results as inopportune. So there is a story to the effect that, at a festivity in honour of the marriage of a child of H. Helmholz with a child of the well-known inventor and captain of industry, W. Siemens, the famous physiologist Dubois-Reymond was asked to speak. He concluded his doubtless brilliant speech with the toast "Success to the new partnership, Siemens and *Halske!*" which was of course the name of the old firm. The association of the two names must have been as familiar to a resident in Berlin as "Cross & Blackwell" to a Londoner.

So the effect of word-associations must be taken into account, as well as that of sound-values and similarities between words. But even that is not enough. In one type of case, before we can arrive at an adequate explanation of the slip we must consider some phrase which had been said, or perhaps only thought, previously. Again, that is, a case of perseveration, as Meringer insists, but arising in a more distant source.—I must confess that altogether I have the impression that we are further than ever from comprehension of slips of the tongue.

However, I hope I am not mistaken in thinking that in the course of our examination of the above examples an impression has formed itself in us which may be of a kind to repay further attention. We were considering the general conditions under which slips of the tongue occur and then the influences which determine the kind of distortion effected in the slip, but so far we have not examined at all the result of the slip itself, as an object of interest without regard to its origin. If we bring ourselves to do this we shall in the end have to assert courageously that in some of the examples the slip itself makes sense. Now what does it mean when we say "it makes sense"? Well, it means that the result of the slip may perhaps have a right to be regarded in itself as a valid mental process following out its own purpose, and as an expression having content and meaning. Hitherto we have only spoken of errors, but now it appears as if the error could sometimes be quite a proper act, except that it has intruded itself in the place of one more expected or intended.

In certain cases the sense belonging to the slip itself appears obvious and unmistakable. When the President in his opening speech closes the session of Parliament, a knowledge of the circumstances under which the slip was made inclines us to see a meaning in it. He expects no good result from the session and would be glad to be able to disperse forthwith; there is no difficulty in discovering the meaning, or interpreting the sense, of this slip. Or when a lady, appearing to compliment another, says "I am sure you must have *thrown* this delightful hat together" instead of "*sewn* it together" (*aufgeputzt* instead of *aufgeputzt*), no scientific theories in the world can prevent us from seeing in her slip the thought that the hat is an amateur production. Or when a lady who is well known for her determined character says: "My husband asked his doctor what sort of diet ought to be provided for him. But the doctor said he needed no special diet, he could eat and drink whatever I choose," the slip appears clearly as the unmistakable expression of a consistent scheme.

Now supposing it should turn out that not only a few cases of slips of the tongue and errors in general, but the great majority of them, have a meaning; then the meaning of the error, to which we have hitherto paid no attention, would become the point of greatest interest to us and would justifiably drive all other points of view into the background. All physiological and psycho-physiological conditions could then be ignored and attention could be devoted to the purely psychological investigation of the *senses*, that is, the meaning, the intention, in the errors. With this in view, therefore, we shall soon consider further material.

Before undertaking this, however, I should like to invite you to follow up another clue with me. It often happens that a poet makes use of a slip of the tongue or some other error as a means of artistic expression. This fact in itself proves that he thinks the error, for instance, a slip of the tongue, has a meaning; for he constructs it intentionally. It could hardly happen that a poet accidentally made a slip of the pen and then allowed his slip of the pen to stand as a slip of the tongue of the character. He wishes to reveal something by means of the slip and we may well enquire what that may be—whether perhaps he wishes to indicate that the person in question is distracted or over-tired, or is expecting a headache. Of course we should not exaggerate the importance of it if poets do make use of slips to express their meaning. Slips might be in reality without meaning, accidents in the mental world, or

only occasionally, have a meaning, and poets would still be entitled to refine them by infusing sense into them for their own purposes. However, it would not be surprising if more were to be learned from poets about slips of the tongue than from philologists and psychiatrists.

There is an example of a slip of this kind in Schiller's *Wallenstein* (Piccolomini, Act I, Scene 5). In the foregoing scene, young Max Piccolomini had taken up Duke Wallenstein's cause ardently, and had been passionately describing the blessings of peace, which he had become aware of in the course of a journey accompanying Wallenstein's beautiful daughter to the camp. As he leaves the stage, his father (Octavio) and the courier Questenberg are plunged in consternation. The fifth scene continues:—

QUESTENBERG. Alas! and stands it so?

Friend, do we let him go

In this delusion? let him go from us?

Not call him back at once, not

Open his eyes here and now?

OCTAVIO (*recovering himself out of deep thought*).

He has now opened mine

And I see more than pleases me.

QUESTENBERG. What is it?

OCTAVIO. A curse upon this journey!

QUESTENBERG. But why so? What is it?

OCTAVIO. Come, come, friend! I must up

And follow the ill-omened clue at once!

And see with mine own eyes—come with me now!

QUESTENBERG. What now? Where go you then?

OCTAVIO (*hastily*). To her, herself!

QUESTENBERG. To . . .

OCTAVIO (*corrects himself*). To the Duke! Come, let us go

Octavio meant to say: "To him, to the Duke," but his tongue slips and he betrays (to us, at least) by the words "*to her*" that he has clearly recognized the influence at work behind the famous young warrior's rhapsodies in favour of peace.

A still more impressive example was found by O. Rank in Shakespeare. It occurs in the *Merchant of Venice*, in the famous scene in which the fortunate suitor makes his choice among the three caskets; and I can perhaps not do better than read to you now Rank's short account of it.

"A slip of the tongue which occurs in Shakespeare's *Merchant*