



Um...: Slips, Stumbles, and Verbal Blunders, and What They Mean

Michael Erard

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Um... is about how you really speak, and why it's normal for your casual, everyday speech to be filled with verbal blunders — about one in every ten words. Why do they happen? Why can't we control them? What can you tell about the people who make them?

In this charming, engaging account of language in the wild, linguist and writer Michael Erard also explains why our attention to some verbal blunders rises and falls. Why was the spoonerism named after Reverend Spooner, not some other absent-minded person? Where did the Freudian slip come from? Why do we prize "umlessness" in speaking? And how do we explain the American presidents who are famous for their verbal blundering?

You'll have new ways to listen to yourself and others once you've met the people who work with verbal blunders every day — journalists, transcribers, interpreters, police officers, linguists, psychologists, among others — and when you've learned what verbal blunders tell about who we are and what we want.

A rich investigation of a fascinating subject, full of entertaining examples, *Um...* is essential reading for talkers and listeners of all stripes.

Um...: Slips, Stumbles, and Verbal Blunders, and What They Mean Details

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Pamela says

First book finished this year!

I feel like I know more about slips and disfluencies than I ever expected (and possibly wanted) to know. Among the more fascinating bits, it's interesting to find that slips occur in predictable ways—that is, our slips are "patterned according to the structure of the language." I always thought slips were random and totally the product of the speaker's idiosyncratic mind. But no! No wonder so many linguists study verbal blunders. Secondly, the reason we slip is because our mind arranges words into a sentence before it arranges sounds into a word. I never really thought about my mind assembling sentences as I spoke before, but there you have it. And most entertainingly, you're least likely to use pause-fillers like "um" when you're drunk because you're less self-conscious and less likely to self-edit. Fun facts like these abound, but I still found myself slogging through the book at times—especially in the middle, where linguistic cases and data abound.

Roxana Toloza Chacón says

This is a hard book to rate because I did learn a lot and I can see the huge research endeavor behind it. **HOWEVER**, the way it was written seems to be all over the place and lacks focus. The way it's packed, too, seems to be more about linguistics than history, and I'd say that ratio is actually around 35-75. Bearing that in mind, it's not a bad book to check out if the subject catches your attention.

pomegranate says

Not enough esoteric linguistic facts! I also dislike the cover (yes, I am judgmental and judge books by their covers) and title, since it seems to appeal to idiots.

Bernadette says

I liked it! Here were some of my take-aways/ favorite parts

1. Our verbal blunders don't decrease with fluency, but they increase. Surprising, but makes sense when you consider the web-like associations in our brains. The more connections we have, the faster they happen, the more prone to error we are.
2. even blunders have patterns, like how we tend to swap a noun for a noun, and switch words that have the same number of syllables with the same stress.
3. "Knows better" vs. "doesn't know better" kinds of errors.
4. Terms new to me like egg corn, malapropism, anticipation, idiom blend.
5. People famous for their rhetoric, like Cicero and Thomas Jefferson were actually timid speakers!
6. 'uh' changes in different languages, according to the most neutral vowel is in that language.
7. I liked the part where they explained that blunders happen in the scope of the language spoken. Arabic has

consonants stems with different vowels in between or around them. Blunders might occur when you use the wrong vowel.

From p. 190 "the stem for all things related to writing is k-t-b. To make nouns, verbs, and other verbs and other words, you add other morphemes, which appear as a sequence of vowels that slot between the consonants. Thus, to make the verb "to write" you add the morpheme a-a-a to the morpheme k-t-b. The resulting word is "kataba." Other vowel patterns produce other words. "Book" is kitab. "Library" is maktaba."

8. As listeners, we tend to filter out Uhs and ums. When we see it written though, it makes the speaker seem disflentl truth is, we all blunder! Also, there are news agencies that make transcripts of press conferences. They are told to ignore blunders in the transcript, usually.

Miriam says

Parts were fascinating, but I had a lot of trouble with the numerous slips translated from other languages. It was hard to see what was wrong and why it was important.

Cambra says

pop linguistics = HELL'S YEAH.

Ensiform says

The history of verbal gaffes and gaffers, from Reverend Spooner to George W. Bush. He discusses Freud, to whom all slips were a sign of hidden neurosis; Rudolf Meringer, who put a linguistic spin on blunders; the history of the sound "um"; the Toastmasters and their strictures on eliminating all verbal fillers; the many modern psycholinguistic studies of verbal slips; Mrs. Malaprop; and many others.

The book's thus rather wide in scope, but its thesis can loosely be summed as: speech errors are a normal and necessary part of speech, as the human mind uses them to keep speech parallel with thought. For example, in anticipating the word "advent" but stuck on the word "invention," one might say, "The invent of computers has..." One of the interesting facts about such blunders that the book points out is the maintaining of emphasis across errors, so in the previous example, "invent" would have a stressed first syllable, like advent. The same goes for parts of speech: nouns are replaced with nouns, and so on. Erard writes in a pleasant, open style that is neither too erudite nor too simple. It's a terrific primer on a deceptively significant subject to those with an interest in language and linguistics.

Rebecca Orton says

I finished the book, "Um. . . : Slips, Stumbles, and Verbal Blunders, and What They Mean" by Michael Erard on October 29th, 2018. I had started it on June 17th, only a few months earlier. I thought the material

covering historical texts was a drag to read through. I was expecting a deeper linguistic analysis but this wasn't the right book to read. I also do not believe that "um" is a speech error. It is a channel feedback mechanism designed to tell the listeners to wait patiently. The book did cover sign languages and I commend the author for doing this. I had read the part in the book where one presenter on verbal blunders "psychically" caused the speakers after her to blunder more than usual. I experienced a similar "psychic" effect today. I finished the book during a lull at a work meeting while I waited for a lady technician at her request to do something on her computer. I was surprised to find that I only had a few pages left to read before it went into the appendices. Later, another technician who was installing a printer for me noted that I had typed "The lazy dog jumped over the quick brown fox" and told me that I had it backwards. It was a slip of the hands! I tried to fix it and he said that it was missing an "s" and I should add the word "sleepy" to it. I said that the problem was the verb; it should be "jumps." He told me that "A quick fox jumps over the lazy brown dog" was used for testing all the letters on the keyboard. I asked him if he liked pangrams and he was noncommittal.

Sylvia McIvers says

Uh, who says um more than once a sentence? Why do we do that?

It used to be that people ignored the 'um'.

Then Freud said its a sign of deep seated anxiety.

Then Reverend Spooner turned the whole business into a joke.

Now linguists and other scientists seem to think that this is the sign that your brain is just taking a moment to line up the words in order, like a toddler trying to fit the red square and the yellow rectangle and the orange triangle into their correct slots. Because your brain is generating ideas and phrases, and changing one word/phrase for another to be more accurate, and oops! They all have to line up to be spoken one word at a time.

Is 'um' a sign of stupidity? Nope. The more words you know, the more 'shapes' you can choose from, and they all have to fit together properly.

My favorite bit: When you get the word category right, and the actual word wrong, you have committed a COHYPONYM.

Did your mother ever call you by another sibling's name?

Do you mix up "Put the food on the ___" table or counter? I always use the wrong one.

Presidential blunders - Surprise! They don't actually blunder more than other people, we just pay closer attention.

Matthew says

Mostly a book on the history of the study of verbal blunders, it didn't really meet my expectations. I expected more elucidation on the meaning - either syntactic, psychological or psycholinguistic - of verbal mistakes. As a prolific gaffe-r myself, I suppose I was looking for insight.

Interesting throughout, the last three or four chapters seemed a bit meandering and unfocused, as though they were tacked on or sent to the publisher on deadline instead of highly polished. Or maybe I was getting cranky because I haven't eaten lunch yet.

David says

An astonishingly dull book, remarkably devoid of intellectual content.

Here is what you might learn from this book.

SPOILER ALERT!! SPOILER ALERT!! (tee-hee)

Chapter 1: Most 'spoonerisms' are probably apocryphal.

Chapter 2: There is less to Freudian slips than meets the eye.

Chapters 3-5: Mistakes and hesitation are an intrinsic part of verbal communication. Everybody makes mistakes, and while the particular pattern of doing so is specific to an individual, ascribing some deeper significance to verbal 'disfluencies' is generally misguided. In other words, the answer to the question implicit in the last part of the book's title is "precious little".

The origin of verbal mistakes lies in the fact that speaking is essentially complicated. People who are tired, or distracted, are prone to more frequent errors; similarly, variation in frequency of errors with age follows a predictable, unsurprising pattern.

Chapter 6: The Toastmasters hold speakers to a higher, error-free, standard than is actually consistent with normal human speech.

Chapters 7 and 9: People are often amused by other folks' hilarious bloopers, particularly when committed by celebrities and captured on camera.

Chapter 8: (probably the only chapter with the germ of an interesting idea) the frequency of occurrence of particular mistakes does shed some useful light on how the brain acquires language.

Chapter 10: President Bush makes a boatload of verbal blunders.

Amazingly, the author manages to stretch this thin gruel over a total of 270 pages.

If most of the revelations above strike you as either blindingly obvious or completely banal, then you will understand why I give this book only a single star.

Elizabeth says

As someone who is a lover of language and the varied psychosomatic nuances behind it, I was expecting to fly through this one. I was slightly disappointed. It was mainly a review of all the research that has been done verbal disfluencies, and the general consensus among all the experts far and wide is (drum roll please)...that no one really knows what's going on behind our ums, slips of the tongue, and other varied blunders we make on a daily basis. Erard did at least debunk the idea of the Freudian slip, and brought to light a few interesting points, but the book's main point was that the only way to stop making verbal blunders is to stop talking. It didn't really answer the question of "What they mean". It's worth reading if you come at it with the right approach - that it is a social and political look, and not a scientific exploration, at what we say and how we say it.

Lena says

Who knew that a book about speech errors could be so entertaining? But there are many laughs to be had from the often hilarious mistakes that linguist Michael Erard uses to illustrate his theories. I am still giggling over the poor newscaster who said “Also keeping an eye on the Woodstock Rock Festival was New York’s governor, Rockin Nelsenfeller.” Ahem. But this book is far more than a collection of spoonerisms, malapropisms and eggcorns. Erhard makes some fascinating arguments that speech errors reveal valuable information about how we learn and use language.

Early on, the author makes a point of calling into question assumptions about that most famous of speech errors, the Freudian slip. In one chapter, he tells the story of the throw-down between Freud and Viennese professor Rudolph Meringer, whose speech error research Freud borrowed when presenting his own psychological slip theory. Freud may have won that battle publicly, but Meringer made a compelling argument that such errors are shaped far more by the mechanics of speech than they are by unconscious repressions.

Of particular interest to me personally were Erard’s discussions about pause fillers such as “uh” and “um,” which I was disturbed to hear myself using with abandon during my first radio interview. I feel better now knowing that these kinds of pause fillers actually serve an important speech function for both speaker and listener. Erard’s chapters on Toastmasters and the history of speaking fashions did reinforce my desire to train myself out of the habit when I’m on the air, though, but I now have slightly more realistic expectations about how thoroughly I’ll be able to do that.

Nat says

This is a survey of different attitudes towards a variety of verbal blunders. Verbal blunders include hesitations, like "um" and "uh", starting sentences over (reconstructions), slips of the tongue (Freudian and otherwise), malapropisms ("a nice derangement of epitaphs"), and a variety of other ways of misspeaking. It begins with an account of Freud's approach to slips, and the reaction among his contemporaries. The best historical anecdote in the book is the account of gentlemen of Freud's era appropriating his interest in the psychological significance of verbal slips and tics and deliberately "psyching" everyone they met (doing off the cuff analyses of the significance of a hesitation or the fact that someone does something odd with their hands).

The contemporary view of blunders is that they're valuable evidence for linguistics and cognitive science. By studying the breakdown of cognitive operations, we can better understand their normal functioning. The author notes that Arnold Zwicky (a famous linguist and contributor to Language Log) teaches a class based on verbal mistakes, which sounds like a fantastic idea.

JoAnna Spring says

You speak between 7,500 and 22,500 words per day and 1800 of them involve a verbal blunder. You have a slip of the tongue every 7 minutes. You "um" a lot. You make some sort of error on average once every 10 words. It's going to get worse as you get older.

This is likely why you spend all your time trolling around the internet, rather than engaged in those old fashioned talking conversations with people in the same room.

Take heart, fair introvert! *Um: Slips, Stumbles and Verbal Blunders and What They Mean* exists to let you know that no one is immune speech errors. Not even American Presidents...but more on that later.

Speech errors fall into two main categories: a slip of the tongue - saying the wrong word or wrong sound (like "black bloxes") - or a speech disfluency such as the pause filler (uh, um, er). These errors likely happen when your brain shifts from planning what you're going to say, to executing the actual talking or shifting back again. It has been happening forever and it will continue to happen forever.

The author, Michael Erard, wants readers to know that errors should not always be considered disruptions to communication. Often, they are essential to communication. An "uh" lets your engrossed listeners know you've got more to say, but you need a second to pull it together. It may take you a moment to grab a word that is on the Tip of your Tongue (TOT - that is an Official Acronym), but that is because you know 30,000 of them, which is pretty damn awesome. And where would Freud be without the slips?

There are fun little facts throughout the book, such as the idea that hand gesturing reduces speech errors, that "uh" is one of the easiest sounds to make in English (and likely why we use it as a pause filler), that you make more speech errors when you are nervous or lying, and that when a cop pulls you over and asks you about the weather, he is probably measuring the number of errors you make when speaking about easy things so when he hauls you downtown to start the tough interrogation, he can tell when you're hiding something. So, it may be to your advantage to stutter a lot right off the bat.

Erard states early in the book he became interested in the subject of blunders because of the media coverage of President Bush II and the image of the President's...mental capacity as a result. While some info is interesting (Bush wasn't noted as a verbal blunderer until after Dan Quayle left the race in September, 1999), Erard's defense of Bush gets downright preachy at times and I'm left wondering if I just read a 300 page scolding. Did he write the whole book in an effort to make over-educated elitist Liberals feel bad for calling Bush a dummy?

Take this passage, which is related to the idea that people judge speech errors in two categories: the speaker "knows better" and just flubbed, or "doesn't know better" and their mistake was a result of being an idiot. The author believes Bush's blunders were/are considered "doesn't know better" in order to further the idea that he isn't very bright.

On one hand, criticizing how smart or competent or moral a person is because he or she doesn't speak like you do (or as you expect them to) smears a larger set of people than you'd think, including nonnative speakers of English, stutterers, people with diseases that impact their motor control, and the elderly. Liberals shouldn't talk about speaking this way - it contradicts how they work to include everybody and make sure that everyone has equal opportunity.

That's a nice shout out at the end, but really? We should be easy on Bush because there are people in this

country who have Parkinson's or don't speak English as a first language? That makes absolutely no sense. At all.

For all the fun little facts and...deep philosophical questions about Bush's mental capacity, there is also a lot of boring, wasted space throughout the book. In some sections it seems the author includes excess information (like, every "Spoonerism" ever uttered) just to prove he did his homework. It takes a lot more work than it should to find the interesting stuff and I'm not convinced the book follows any logical order.

I suppose if you are looking for an excuse not to attend a social event and talk like an idiot, there are worse things to read. But, in defiance of the author's ranting, I'll recommend Slate's *The Complete Bushisms* instead.
