

Sophomore Seminar: Slips of the Tongue. Spring 2008.

You mean to say “Your shoe is untied,” but instead you say “Your foot is untied,” or “Your too is untied” (with the t of “untied” anticipated earlier in the sentence). You aren’t going to come out with “Your is shoe untied,” or “Your oosh is untied,” or “Your pigeon is untied.” Why some errors and not others? We will start by examining collections of real-life slips of the tongue and other errors of daily life (mishearings and typos, for example), to see what happens and what does not. We will use slips of various kinds as windows into how language is structured and processed; we can see how the system works by looking at how it goes wrong. Then we will broaden our scope by looking at selected data from language disorders (aphasias, in particular) and from imperfect learning (children learning their first language, second-language learners, all of us learning to spell in English). Here the goal is to get beyond saying that people cannot do something and instead to describe what they do and hypothesize why. Finally, we will look at things many people think are the truest examples of errors or mistakes in language: deviations from formal versions of standard dialects. Again, we will focus on what people do, rather than what they do not, but here we will also consider important social factors.