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Homonyma, Oronyma a Mondegreeny

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Homonyms, Oronyms and Mondegreens

UNDERGRADUATE THESIS

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Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně
s použitím uvedené literatury a zdrojů informací.

V Plzni, 1. června 2017

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vlastnoruční podpis

The topic of my undergraduate thesis is: Homonyms, Oronyms and Mondegreens. The focus will be specifically on Mondegreens.

Homonyms are said to be words (i.e. lexemes) which have the same form, but differ in meaning. (Lyons, 1977) The prefix homo- comes from the Greek word *homós* which meant "one and the same." So all of these words describe some types of sameness. The root -nym simply means "word" or "name". Homographs are words that are spelled alike, but have different meanings and sometimes different pronunciations. The root -graph comes from the Greek word meaning "drawn or written," thus these terms are written the same. For example, stalk is both a plant stem and a verb meaning to pursue stealthily. Homographs also have different etymologies. Not all words that are spelled the same are pronounced identically, so they may be homographs without being homophones, e.g., lead as a metal and as the verb "to show the way." ("Word Fact: What's the Difference", 2014) Words that both sound the same and are spelled the same are both homonyms (same sound) and homographs (same spelling). Example: lie (untruth) and lie (prone); fair (county fair), fair (reasonable). (Moore, 2004) Homophones are words that are pronounced the same but are different in spelling and meaning. In this case the combining from phone comes from the Greek word *phōnḗ* meaning "voice." One commonly confused trio of homophones is to, two, and too. ("Word Fact: What's the Difference", 2014) Heteronyms are a type of homograph that are also spelled the same and have different meanings, but sound different. (Moore, 2004)

An Oronym is a string of words or a phrase that sounds the same as another string of words or phrase, but is spelt differently, e.g. ice cream and I scream. Oronyms usually occur because sometimes in speech it is almost impossible to tell where one word ends and the next begins. This seamlessness of speech can often cause misunderstandings. Furthermore, it originates when a particular word may be divided into two or more meaningful words. (e.g. affection/a faction). Effectiveness of oronyms may depend on what somebody is saying in context with the rest of the conversation. The word "oronym" was coined by Gyles Brandreth in *The Joy of Lex*, 1980. An oronym is also called a continonym or a sliceonym. (Joshi, 2014)

Mondegreens are a sort of aural malapropism. Instead of saying the wrong word, you hear the wrong word. The word Mondegreen is generally used for misheard song lyrics, although technically it can apply to any speech. (Wines, 2007) They can be unintentional or

intentional (songs, TV advertisements etc.). The word itself was coined by an American writer, Sylvia Wright. When she was a child her mother had read aloud to her Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), which included the Scottish ballad 'The Bonny Earl of Murray'. Wright was particularly fond of this ballad, which she thought included the following stanza:

'Ye Highlands and ye Lowlands,
Oh, where hae you been?
They hae slain the Earl Ammuray [*sic*],
And Lady Mondegreen.

In Wright's imagination, Lady Mondegreen was a tragic heroine – murdered alongside her husband by the Gordon henchmen of the Earl of Huntly in the late 1500s. Unsurprisingly, Wright was distressed to discover in later life that Lady Mondegreen had in fact never existed; rather she was the creation of Wright's mishearing of the words 'They hae slain the Earl of Murray, / And laid him on the green.' In 1954 she penned an article, 'The Death of Lady Mondegreen', for *Harper's Magazine* and thus the Mondegreen was given life. (Wines, 2007)

It seems Mondegreens are becoming more and more popular. Within two years, BuzzFeedVideo, a channel on YouTube, has posted nine videos about misheard lyrics and they have reached almost 50 million views in total. This topic has also appeared in other videos of BuzzFeedVideo. Moreover, other channels such as pleated-jeans, WatchMojo etc. are gaining views thanks to this trend. The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon is a TV show on NBC, but it has its own YouTube channel too. A video has been posted on this channel two years ago called Hashtags: #Misheard Lyrics and it has over 8.6 million views. In addition to that, Jimmy Fallon has talked about this topic in several episodes of this show. Furthermore, he is not the only comedian and television host who has mentioned this. When Ellen DeGeneres was performing as a stand-up comedian, she talked about it and she also mentioned this topic in her book:

"Have you ever heard somebody sing some lyrics that you've never sung before, and you realize you've never sung the right words in that song? You hear them and all of a sudden you say to yourself, 'Life in the Fast Lane?' That's what they're saying right there? You think, 'why have I been singing 'wipe in the vaseline?' how many people have heard

me sing 'wipe in the vaseline?' I am an idiot. But it sounds like that, you know?"

(DeGeneres, 1995)

Another example is Peter Kay on his Tour That Didn't Tour – Tour. He presents his versions of misheard lyrics. Kay's hilarious misheard music lyrics sketch, from his Tour That Didn't Tour - Tour, continues to have us in stitches. Samples include Celine Dion's My Heart Will Go On, the theme tune to the film Titanic, sounding like “The hot-dogs go on” and those famous words from Sister Sledge: "Just let me staple the vicar". Of course, the real Sledge lyrics are "Just let me stay for the record," but Kay's version is rather convincing. Best bit? "You know Duffy, the Welsh songstress? These last three years I thought the poor cow was begging me for bird seed. Apparently it's 'mercy'." (Ward, 2016)

In the beginning of my thesis these terms would be explained similarly as above with their etymology and the occurrence of Mondegreens would have its paragraphs too. Mondegreens appear to be in everyday life; in common speech, in songs, literature – sung versions of poems, in anime, movies, theatres, TV shows, video games, advertisements and much more. My research would be about how often these Mondegreens happen, why and if most people can hear them or not. In addition to that, I would like to contain the factors which influence the creation of Mondegreens. What would follow is the description of these factors in general and then the focus on certain parts in chosen songs and comparing the results. These factors could influence the quality and therefore create a higher chance of a mishearing happening. Furthermore, there would be a described and justified correlation with similar phenomenons such as Buffalax and Soramimi. This implies that most of the theory would be in the first part of the thesis.

The main part would be an online questionnaire which would contain short recordings, possibly songs, and the respondents will answer what lyrics they heard. The respondents would be students of the University of West Bohemia. They would be asked to write down the lyrics as quickly as possible, without thinking about it too much. There would be a time limit for answering the whole questionnaire. The reason is simple, the participants should not be allowed a lot of time for thinking. They could try to misuse that time by trying to search for a general answer on the internet, by getting an insight into this topic or by taking a break from the questionnaire and leaving it unfinished. The recordings would be repeated only a certain number of times (2x or 3x). Based on their answer, a conclusion would be made covering an answer whether this phenomenon is frequent or

not. Moreover, the thesis would have a comparison of results and the answers to questions that will be further discussed in this work.

Also, a certain method would be used to see what the respondents typed in the online questionnaire immediately or afterwards. This function enables more accurate outcome and it is possible to see if the person misheard it on the first try or not. Additionally, if they would like to erase their mistakes, it would show up. It might look like this:

1. Write the lyrics you have heard from this sequence. If you know the song and the lyrics, do not write the lyrics as you remember them, write the first thing you heard, even if it might seem like a nonsense. You can write several versions if you would like, but keep the initial one first. You are encouraged to write during the listening. The track can be repeated only once.



You're gonna miss me when I'm gone, you're gonna miss me by my walk, you're gonna miss me by my taco, you're gonna miss me when I'm gone.
You're gonna miss me when I'm gone, you're gonna miss me by my bulk, you're gonna miss me by my talk, you're gonna miss me when I'm gone.

There are several instances that might happen. The participants either heard the original text or used a "known version" or they created their own words that fit in. Another point is if they wanted to correct their grammatical/stylistic mistakes, so it would make more sense and when they did that. It might be directly after the listening and after reading their answer again or in last remaining minutes, when they are checking their answer. An interesting idea would be to form up a description of the psychological aspects with some contemplations on what their reason was behind their actions.

If possible, other occurrences of Mondegreens would be contained as well. The work with them would be the same way as described above - comparing the factors (e.g. whether the respondents hear Mondegreens in the spoken versions of poems or not) and all results and coming to a conclusion.

A different questionnaire could be created in Czech with Czech recordings and Czech Mondegreens and then the outcome would be processed. By doing that, one could know whether this phenomenon happens more often in Czech language or in English language and find out why it is so.

The selection of the recordings would be the first step. Phrases of one or multiple words, which have a tendency to be Mondegreens, would be chosen. By selecting tracks from different music interpreters, genres (e.g. rock, pop, country etc.), year of publishing and so on, the variation could serve an important role in this research. It would create more opportunities to compare the relevant factors. These factors could include whether or not the singers were male or female, how old they were, what their nationality was, what their accent was or if they had a medical condition which could alter their voice in any way. Some other factors which are worth considering could be loudness, pitch, whether or not the words were slightly mispronounced, articulation, voiced and voiceless sounds, whether or not the singer's voice was drowned out by another instrument or aspect (like background noise, other voices, fast pace etc.) and more.

A website would be created afterwards where I would be able to log in and place these tracks in it. The order of them would also be a factor to focus on. The easier tasks would be in the beginning, the more advanced in the middle or towards the end. Web application would be written in HTML5 with jQuery. It would run on my own server with CentOS 7 under Apache HTTP web server software. User data would be saved in MariaDB database.

Students would see a different website than me, they would see list of audio tracks with text fields to input their text. After playing each track they would type what they heard into input text fields beside each audio track. The website would have a safety measure which would prevent undesirable actions, such as the same person repeating the already completed questionnaire or changing its results.

The respondents would be contacted probably via mass email from the head of the department who is capable of contacting every student of the University of West Bohemia. If it would not be possible this way, I would try to contact someone with this privilege or I would send a request to every faculty to distribute this separately. The students would be acquainted with this project, they would know the purpose of their participation and they would be assured of their anonymity and informed about the outcome.

Several main problems might occur in this research. One would be working mainly with the unintentional Mondegreens that already happened to someone, so there may be a chance of someone knowing this phenomenon or the certain song. By using less known songs and other occurrences, by making the questionnaire with care, so bias would not appear, and by not giving the questionnaire to someone who knows about this already (classmates), this issue could be eliminated and hopefully will be.

Another issue might be that the number of completed questionnaires will be too low. This would be difficult to resolve. Even though the students would be encouraged to fulfil them, they may not do it. All pros and cons needs to be considered and one way to ward off this potential crisis would be by handing out the printed questionnaires and playing out these recordings in classrooms, but that also has many disadvantages.

A problem with copyright might arise. After studying the rules and regulations concerning copyright, actions towards not breaking them will be made. If it is sufficient, a disclaimer will be added at the end of the questionnaire and in the mass email which would include a statement that the used sections of songs are for research purposes of this undergraduate thesis only. In addition to that, a numbered list of the songs with their copyright owner could be located either on the second web page, the one with the questionnaire, before the disclaimer, or it would be on the next web page. Three web pages will exist in total. The first one will have queries about the participants, for instance age, gender, faculty and level of English. The last web page will have signs of gratitude for completing the questionnaire, additional information probably about the topic and my email address, if anyone would like to contact me with some questions. There might be a question concerning whether or not they knew about this phenomenon when they were accomplishing the tasks.

1. Slips of an Ear

The following text is a direct citation from Nordquist, R. *Slip of the ear* (2016):

A slip of the ear is an error of misperception in listening: mistaking a word or phrase for a similar-sounding word or phrase in speech or conversation. Also called mishearing. Slips of the ear provide researchers with insights into the ways in which words are recognized in connected speech.

Examples and Observations

- "She looked away from him, her face working.
- "'Can't you understand what a shock I have had? I thought you were the perfect knight.'
- "'Yes, isn't it?'
- "'Isn't what?'
- "'I thought you said it was a perfect night.'
- "'I said I thought *you* were the perfect knight.'
- "'Oh, ah!'"

(P. G. Wodehouse, *The Girl on the Boat*, 1922)

"[A] graphic designer asked me why my software product flowed 'down.' It didn't, but it was an interesting idea, one that led to a major innovation. Later, I found out that I'd misunderstood him. He had asked me if a link opened down, not if the product had flowed down. The mix-up, I believe, was really my subconscious feeding me a new idea, a Freudian slip of the ear."

(David Kord Murray, *Borrowing Brilliance: The Six Steps to Business Innovation by Building on the Ideas of Others*. Gotham Books, 2009)

"People tend to mishear consonants more frequently than vowels, and the misheard sound or syllable is usually unstressed and comes in the middle of a word. For this reason it's easy for people to mishear 'It's about time Robert May was here' as 'It's about time to drop my brassiere.'"

(Michael Erard, *Um . . . : Slips, Stumbles, and Verbal Blunders, and What They Mean*. Pantheon, 2007)

1.1. Slips of the Ear and Word Boundaries

- "Slips of the Ear are useful in providing insights into how listeners determine where word boundaries lie in connected speech. When listeners misplace boundaries, they tend to insert them between a weak syllable and a strong--suggesting that segmentation is influenced by the predominant *SW (strong-weak) pattern* which characterises English rhythm."

(John Field, *Psycholinguistics: The Key Concepts*. Routledge, 2004)

- "Because casual speech is a continuous stream, listeners have to segment the stream in some way in order to find phonological sequences to compare with words in their mental lexicon. Slips of the ear involving word boundaries suggest that listeners employ stressed syllables as aids in segmentation.

"In the simplest case of word boundary errors, all properties of the target utterance correspond with the perceived utterance except for the presence of word boundaries. A classic error of this type is:

acute back pain - a cute back pain

The listener perceived the phonological material accurately but misanalyzed the speaker's utterance, interpreting the initial unstressed syllable as an article. Listeners may fail to detect word boundaries, insert spurious word boundaries, or shift the location of the word boundary."

(Z.S. Bond, "Slips of the Ear." *The Handbook of Speech Perception*, ed. by David Pisoni and Robert Remez. Wiley-Blackwell, 2005)

1.2. Stress and Slips of the Ear

"Stress within a word is relatively unimportant in many languages, but in English the initial syllable of most content words (e.g., nouns, verbs) is typically stressed. When listeners heard strings of words without the stress on the first syllable, they often misheard them (Cutler & Butterfield, 1992). For example, many listeners who heard 'conduct ascents uphill' presented very faintly misheard it, because they mistakenly assumed the words started with a stressed rather than an unstressed syllable."

(Michael Eysenck and Mark T. Keane, *Cognitive Psychology: A Student's Handbook*, 5th ed. Taylor & Francis, 2005)

Chocolate Orange and the Novel *A Clockwork Orange*

"Terry's began manufacturing its Chocolate Orange in 1931. . . . The words 'chocolate orange' were thus a part of everyday speech in 1940s London, and might have been overheard anywhere. 'Chocolate' and 'clockwork' are not homophones, but they are close, and might sound alike in a noisy pub. Perhaps [Anthony] Burgess misheard. Perhaps he even realized that he had misheard but liked what he had misheard."

(Gary Dexter, *Why Not Catch-21?: The Stories Behind the Titles*. Frances Lincoln Ltd., 2007)

Slips of the Ear by Second-Language Learners

"An examination of written transcriptions of audio-recorded speech that were prepared by advanced second language learners at UCLA indicates that verbs are commonly misheard (e.g. *thought* for *fraught*). Personal names are often not recognized as such (e.g. *down the reed* instead of *Donna Reed*), and idioms are often misheard (e.g. *more stuff and barrel* for *lock, stock, and barrel*; both proper names and idioms in fact are prime candidates for mishearing even among native speakers (Celce-Murcia, 1980)."

(Marianne Celce-Murcia and Elite Olshtain, *Discourse and Context in Language Teaching: A Guide for Language Teachers*. Cambridge University Press, 2001)

- This is the end of direct citation from Nordquist, R. *Slip of the ear* (2016).

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