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M. J. CLARKE

Anthropology, Psychology, Education,
Language, and Philosophy

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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td></td>
<td>page v</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Economic Process in Primitive Societies</td>
<td>RAYMOND FIRTH From <em>Human Types</em></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The Early Education of Manus Children</td>
<td>MARGARET MEAD From <em>Growing up in New Guinea</em></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Moral Standards and Social Organization</td>
<td>RAYMOND FIRTH From <em>Elements of Social Organization</em></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Production in Primitive Societies</td>
<td>RALPH PIDDINGTON From <em>An Introduction to Social Anthropology</em></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The Rules of Good Fieldwork</td>
<td>E. E. EVANS-Pritchard From <em>Social Anthropology</em></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The Science of Custom</td>
<td>RUTH BENEDICT From <em>Patterns of Culture</em></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Survival in the Cage</td>
<td>GERALD LEACH From an article in <em>The Guardian</em></td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Society and Intelligence</td>
<td>W. J. H. SPROTT From <em>Social Psychology</em></td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The Pressure to Conform</td>
<td>MAX HAMMERTON From an article in <em>The Listener</em></td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Learning to Live with the Computer</td>
<td>END MUMFORD From an article in <em>The New Scientist</em></td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Forgetting</td>
<td>IAN HUNTER From <em>Memory: Facts and Fallacies</em></td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Adolescence</td>
<td>J. A. HADFIELD From <em>Childhood and Adolescence</em></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>The Personal Qualities of a Teacher</td>
<td>H. G. DENT From <em>Teaching as a Career</em></td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>ROUSSEAU'S EMILE</td>
<td>S. J. CURTIS and M. E. A. BOULTWOOD From <em>A Short History of Educational Ideas</em></td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contents

15 The Beginnings of Scientific and Technical Education 85
H. C. Barnard From A Short History of English Education

16 Supposed Mental Faculties and their Training 91
C. W. Valentine From Psychology and its Bearing
on Education

17 The Concept of Number 96
Nathan Isaacs From The Growth of Understanding
in the Young Child

18 English in the Primary School 101
Sybil Marshall From An Experiment in Education

19 'Primitiveness' in Language 107
Randolph Quirk From The Use of English

20 English in the Fifteenth Century 113
Margaret Schlauch From The Gift of Tongues

21 An International Language 119
Simeon Potter From Language in the Modern World

22 Language as Symbolism 124
S. Hayakawa From Language in Thought and Action

23 From Word Symbol to Phoneme Symbol 130
C. L. Barber From The Story of Language

24 Definition and Some of its Difficulties 137
R. H. Thoulless From Straight and Crooked Thinking

25 The Subject Matter of Philosophy 142
Sir Isaiah Berlin From an article in The Sunday Times

26 What can we Communicate? 147
A. J. Ayer From The Problem of Knowledge

27 Ethics 153
Bertrand Russell From An Outline of Philosophy

28 Aristotle's Ethics 158
Frederick Copleston From A History of Philosophy

29 The Road to Happiness 165
Bertrand Russell From an article in The Listener

30 Logic 171
A. A. Luce From Teach Yourself Logic

Key to Exercises 177
Index of Points Covered in Exercises 207

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Forgetting

In 1914, Freud published an English edition of his *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. In this book he endeavours to show that many 'lapses of memory' and 'slips of the tongue' are not inexplicable accidents but can be readily understood if fitted into the personality picture of the individual. The reader is recommended to look at this well-written book for himself and discover the wealth of intriguing anecdotal evidence with which Freud supports and develops his thesis.

Freud is at his best when discussing those seemingly accidental mistakes of speech and writing where one word is substituted for another and, especially, where the substitute word means the opposite of the word intended. A physician is writing out a prescription for an impetuous patient who asks him not to give her big bills because she cannot swallow them—and then says that, of course, she meant pills. An arrogant lecturer says that he could count the number of real authorities on his subject on one finger—he means the fingers of one hand. A President of the Austrian House of Deputies is opening a session from which he fears little good will come and announces that, since such and such a number of gentlemen are present, he declares the session as closed; amid laughter, he corrects his mistake and declares the session as opened. All of these examples clearly derive from the person saying what he actually thinks without checking himself to make his insincere but diplomatic statement. No doubt we have all encountered similar examples in our everyday life. Certainly writers of fiction have long been aware of this phenomenon, and have exploited it to good dramatic effect by putting such *lapsus linguae* into the mouths of characters. In Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, for example, Portia has lost her affections to Bassanio but is under a vow not to reveal it. She directs a speech to this welcome suitor in which, throughout, her love for him is thinly disguised and finishes with the words: 'One half of me is yours, the other half yours—Mine own, I would say.' The same expression of our thoughts and wishes is seen in some erroneously carried-out actions. Thus, one physician reports that he is quite often disturbed in the midst of engrossing work at home by having to go to hospital to carry out some routine duty. When this happens he is apt to find himself trying to open the door of his laboratory with the key of his desk at home. The two keys are quite unlike each other and the mistake does not occur under normal circumstances but only under conditions where he would rather be at home. His error seems to express his wish.

When Freud begins to discuss 'lapses of memory' in terms of repression, he seems to move on less firm ground. He does not, of course, claim that all lapses are due to repression. His concern is to show that at least some are and, to this end, he gives examples in which a name or a word is unexpectedly forgotten and proceeds to demonstrate that the forgotten item is associated either directly or indirectly with unpleasant circumstances. Here we may cite two of his most convincing examples. The first concerns a man (X) who repeatedly forgot the name of an old acquaintance and business associate (Y). When he required to correspond with Y, he had to ask other people for his name. It transpired that Y had recently married a young woman X himself had hoped to marry. Thus X had good reason to dislike his happy rival and want to forget all about him. The second example concerns a man who set out to recite a poem, got so far, and then could recall no more although he knew the poem well. The line on which he blocked was descriptive of a pine-tree which is covered 'with the white sheet'. Why should this phrase have been forgotten? Asked to relate what came to his mind when he thought of this phrase, it was found that it immediately reminded him of the white sheet which covers a dead body, and of the recent death of his brother from a heart condition which was common in his family and from which he feared he too might die. The phrase referring to the white sheet appears to have been forgotten because it was associated with circumstances which the man did not wish to recall. In Freud's other examples, the link between the forgotten item and some unpleasant circumstance is not so easily demonstrated.

(From *Memory: Facts and Fallacies*, by IAN HUNTER.)
Notes

LINE

6 wealth: great quantity
The word wealth is normally only used in this sense in the fixed phrase: The (or a) wealth of. For example: There is a wealth of evidence.

8 his thesis: the idea or theory which he is expounding in his book

13 impecunious: without much money

15 arrogant: full of pride in oneself
he could count: See note to 4/36, p. 22.

18 little: See note to 5/22, p. 27.

20 amid laughter: in the midst of laughter, with laughter all round
Amid is used in formal, written style, but not normally in conversation.

22 from the person saying: Notice that the noun preceding the gerund is not in the genitive.

25 have long been aware: The use of long in this way with positive statements (as opposed to negative statements and questions) occurs in formal, written style, but in conversation for a long time is normally used.

27 lapsus linguae: a slip of the tongue (Latin)

29 has lost her affections to: has fallen in love with

32 Mine own: In modern English my would be used.

33 I would say: I mean

34 erroneously: incorrectly

35 in the midst of: in the middle of
(Restricted to formal, written style).

engrossing work: work that occupies all one’s time or attention

44 to move on less firm ground: to have less justification for what he says

45 transpired: turned out

50 he blocked: his memory failed

59 Why should this phrase have been forgotten?: The use of should conveys the idea: Why did it happen that this phrase was forgotten?

60 Asked to relate: Notice that this is an example of a misrelated participle—a construction regarded by grammarians as incorrect, but one which may nevertheless be found occasionally even in the writings of scholars. Students should avoid using it themselves.

Exercises

1 Explain what general points the author is illustrating when he quotes the following specific examples:
a The patient whose doctor was writing out a prescription for her. (para. 2)
b The President of the Austrian House of Deputies. (para. 2)
c Portia in Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice. (para. 2)
d The doctor who tried to open the door of his laboratory with the key of his desk. (para. 2)
e The man who could not remember the name of an old acquaintance. (para. 3)
f The man who could not remember a line of a poem. (para. 3)

2 Complete the following sentences with suitable prepositions or adverbial particles.
a In this book Freud endeavours to show that many lapses of memory can be readily understood if they are fitted — the personality picture of the individual. The reader is recommended to look — this well-written book — himself and discover the wealth of evidence — which Freud supports his thesis.
b Freud is — his best when discussing the kind of mistakes where one word is substituted — another, and the substitute word means the opposite — the word intended.
c A doctor is writing — a prescription for a patient, who asks her not to give her big bills, and then says that she means pills. This clearly derives — the person saying what she thinks — checking herself. Writers of fiction have long been aware — this phenomenon, and have exploited it — good dramatic effect.
d The same expression of our thoughts and wishes is seen in some erroneously carried — actions. People make mistakes that they would not make — normal circumstances.
e Freud also discusses lapses of memory — terms — repression. He gives the example of a man who set — to recite a poem, but could not remember it. The poem reminded him — the death of his brother — a heart condition, — which he feared he too might die.

3 Fill in the gaps in the following sentences with little, a little, few, or a few, as required.
a He was reluctant to attend the meeting, as he feared that — good would come of it.
b The problem is so difficult that — people have managed to find a satisfactory solution.
c The problem is very difficult, but — people have managed to find a solution.
d There was — opposition to this proposal, but it was not very serious and was soon overcome.

e In general, firms are concerned mainly with the technical problems of introducing computers, and give — thought to the psychological implications.

4 Which of the words in the list given below could be substituted for the word underlined in the following sentence without changing anything else in the structure of the sentence? What changes would be required by the others? (See note Ex. 3, Passage 1, p. 4)
The reader is recommended to look at this book for himself.
asked, suggested, required, expected, hoped.

5 Give words that are opposite in meaning to those underlined and would fit into the context.
a An accidental mistake
b An impecunious patient
c An arrogant person
d He is aware of the problem.
e To reveal the truth

6 Each of the following sentences needs a word to complete the sense. The word needed in each case is related to the word given in brackets at the end of the sentence. Complete the sentences accordingly.
a His action is completely — ; there seems to be no reason for it (explain).
b He shows that there are clear reasons for these — accidental mistakes. (seem)
c They thought they would arrive during the morning, but they were — delayed. (expect)
d The directors were surprised when they encountered — instead of co-operation from their staff. (hostile)
e They have not been sufficiently aware of the need to consider the social — of this change. (imply)
f They adopt a policy of —, and do not tell their employees anything about their plans. (secret)
g This is a very — book, and I am enjoying reading it. (interest)
h Children will not learn if they are not —. (interest)
i He sleeps very badly; he has had several — nights lately. (sleep)
j He — forgot his friend’s address, and had to ask other people for it when he wanted to write to the friend in question. (repeat)

7 Summarize in your own words the author’s opinion of Freud’s explanations of lapses of memory and slips of the tongue.