



# When Saying the Wrong Thing Doesn't Really Matter

COMMUNICATION CORNER No. 38

*by Philip Yaffe*

## Editor's Introduction

Each "[Communication Corner](#)" essay is self-contained; however, they build on each other. For best results, before reading this essay and doing the exercise, go to the first essay "[How an Ugly Duckling Became a Swan](#)," then read each succeeding essay.

*Getting one's tongue tangled is an ever-present fear for most public speakers. But it shouldn't be. Occasionally saying the wrong thing seldom does any serious damage, or any damage at all, to the effectiveness of a presentation. Here's why.*

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Recently I have been noticing a strange phenomenon. Actually, probably not strange; it had almost certainly been going on for a long time and I had just never noticed it.

I am talking about how people in the public eye (and ear) sometimes tangle their words and actually say something that may be exactly the opposite of what they want to say. However, in every case I have noticed, they plow right on as if nothing had happened.

Why? Because for them (and for most of their audience), nothing had happened. In most cases, listeners know what they meant to say, even if that isn't what they actually did say.

It is crucially important to understand this about public speaking. Slips of the tongue are normal and quickly forgiven by the audience, if they even notice them. Even when they do, most people most of the time will recognize a slip of the tongue for what it is and realize that what you meant to say is not what you did say. So they excuse it and you simply move on as if it hadn't happened.

In a recent example, near the end of 2020 a high-level public health official was discussing the progress being made toward developing a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine. He said, "It is imperative that the *virus* be released to the public as soon as possible." Yes, he actually did say "virus" rather than "vaccine." I don't think he noticed it, nor did hardly anyone else. However, it wouldn't have mattered because everyone listening to him would have known that he certainly didn't mean virus but vaccine. Thus, no harm done. So the speaker simply moved on.

In another example, I noticed someone talking about the cost of an important piece of medical equipment. He put the price at \$280 when he meant to say \$280,000. And again, it wouldn't have mattered whether or not anyone noticed the stumble because they would have recognized he meant the higher (much higher) figure. And so it goes.

Public speakers reading a speech that has been carefully prepared in advance hardly ever make such mistakes. However, if you are speaking extemporaneously such as during a conversation, a meeting, or an interview, flubs are inevitable. Fretting over this inevitability can seriously damage

your ability to express yourself. So don't become rattled. If it is really important to correct the error (assuming you even notice it), then do so. Otherwise, simply move on.

For fun, here are a few notable examples of such innocuous flubs by some very notable people.

Once Ronald Reagan, 40th President of the United States, was trying to recall an apposite quotation of John Adams, 2nd President of the United States. Adams had said, "Facts are stubborn things." Reagan flubbed and said, "Facts are *stupid* things."

Mayor Richard Daley was the reigning political leader of the city of Chicago during the turbulent 1960s. The Democratic National Convention was held in Chicago in August 1968. However, with the nation divided by the Vietnam War, the city had become fertile ground for protests. When confrontations between police and protesters turned violent, Mayor Daley made an unfortunate (and certainly unintended) comment: "The police are not here to create disorder; they're here to *preserve* disorder."

Even President Barack Obama, who is the epitome of a calm, cool, collected speaker, has made a few notable flubs. For example:

- "The Middle East is obviously an issue that has plagued the region for centuries."
- "The reforms we seek would bring greater competition, choice, savings, and *inefficiencies* to our health care system."
- "Meanwhile, we continue to ramp up our training and support of local forces that are fighting ISIL on the ground. As I've said before, this aspect of our strategy was moving too slowly . . . So, with the additional steps I ordered last month, we're speeding up training of *ISIL* forces."
- "Let me introduce to you the next President—the next *Vice President* of the United States of America, Joe Biden."

And indeed, what about Joe Biden?

Throughout his long career, President Biden has carried the unenviable label of "gaffe machine," i.e., he makes oral errors. But two things need to be said about this. First, his gaffes are probably fewer and farther between than he is given credit for. Second, he recognizes them and apologizes for them when they are brought to his attention.

Donald Trump, his direct nemesis during the 2020 election campaign, also makes enormous gaffes, but is less likely to recognize them or apologize for them when they are brought to his attention.

For example, President Trump once said that his father had emigrated to the United States from a lovely little town in Germany. What he should have said was that his grandfather had emigrated to the United States from a lovely little town in Germany; his father was born and raised in New

York. Nevertheless, Trump made the comment on at least four different occasions and (as far as I know) never corrected it.

In August 2020, President Trump informed the world that the Spanish flu pandemic started in 1917 (it was actually 1918) and probably contributed to ending the Second World War (1939–1945) rather than the First World War (1914–1919). He also once said the Continental Army “took over the airports” from the British during the American Revolution (War for Independence). This epoch-making conflict took place from 1775–1783, well over a century before the airplane was invented by the Wright Brothers in 1903.

Philosopher and politician Benjamin Franklin once opined, "A slip of the foot you may soon recover, but a slip of the tongue you may never get over." I think this was perhaps an overstatement.

Incidentally, Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) was never president of the United States as many people (including a lot of Americans) believe. He was one of the so-called "Founding Fathers" of the United States and served as ambassador to France for the fledgling American republic. But he never inhabited the White House, for two very good reasons.

- He never ran for president.
- The White House did not start construction until 1792, two years after his death. It was completed in 1800.

### **About the Author**

Philip Yaffe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1942 and grew up in Los Angeles, where he graduated from the University of California with a degree in mathematics and physics. In his senior year, he was also editor-in-chief of the *Daily Bruin*, UCLA's daily student newspaper. He has more than 40 years of experience in journalism and international marketing communication. At various points in his career, he has been a teacher of journalism, a reporter/feature writer with *The Wall Street Journal*, an account executive with a major international press relations agency, European marketing communication director with two major international companies, and a founding partner of a specialized marketing communication agency in Brussels, Belgium, where he has lived since 1974. He is the author of more than 30 books, which can be found easily in Amazon Kindle.

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