

## **Lecture Mondegreens**

Those readers who were students long ago, and who now work outside higher education, may be surprised at how lectures have changed. Years ago, the only way to hear a lecture was to turn up at the advertised time and place, sit on a usually uncomfortable seat, and experience the event live. This is still what lecturers prefer students to do but, mainly because of the Equality Act, there are other ways in which lectures can be accessed.

The first step was automatic lecture recording, set up along with the timetable, which deposited a recording of the lecture on a server accessible from the home web page of the course. Students unable to attend, or who need assistive technology, could now view the lecture at any time they pleased. At its best, this really did help students with special needs. At its worst, it drove weaker students to ignore lectures for most of the year and to binge-watch them just before exams, something made obvious by the deluge of questions lecturers receive then, questions that make it all too obvious that this is the first time students had engaged with the material. Even then, they would often watch the videos on fast-forward; a colleague of mine was told by a student that she did not recognize her at first, because her voice sounds so much higher on fast-played videos.

The next step, mainly for deaf people, was the provision of transcripts. These were and are generated automatically from the videos by text-to-speech programs. In theory, lecturers could rely on the system to do a good job and not interact with it. In practice, this is far from true and wise lecturers check the transcripts generated by machine, and edit them before their release to remove unfortunate mishearings. They are a little like Mondegreens (misheard song lyrics: see links). Here is a set I spotted from just one of my lectures:

- *The whole of the nervous system comes from Amsterdam* [ectoderm]
- ureteric bud -> *your erotic belt*
- pinocytosis -> *penis psychosis* (every time)
- hormone -> *whore moan* (every time)
- filter -> *philtre* (every time, despite this being such a common word).
- Phylotypic -> *finite epic*

They don't all act in the direction of clean-to-ruder. Ones that have gone the other way, rendering reproductive anatomy into more everyday words, also from my medical lectures, have been

- vulva -> *Volvo* (often enough I wondered if they sponsored the programmers!)
- clitoris -> *liquorice*
- foreskin -> *force kin*
- uterus -> *yew terrors*

Much more concerning is the machine transcription system's bizarre habit of landing on words that one would expect it to avoid at all costs. Three times, I have had to correct a very unfortunate mishearing of the common English word "bigger", and I have had to correct a surprising rendition of the common contraction "can't", and also "count". One wonders about what kind of corpus of literature the software writers used to train their system! And why they did not add 'traps' to ensure that certain words are never rendered automatically? It is of course *possible* that those words will be used in lectures, in rare and very specific contexts (e.g. as direct quotes in social history or English literature), but it would be much safer to require the occasional academic who includes them to have to edit them into a transcript, than to require all of us to edit them out.

I realize I get off lightly – my colleagues with Scottish accents, who are of course numerous in the University of Edinburgh, can find that the system has rendered their elegant prose into pure gibberish.

Each new version does get better, and I look forward to the promise of being freed from a long editing job coming true. In the meantime, Mondegreens will remain part of a lecturer's life.

Jamie Davies, Edinburgh, October 2023

**Links:**

Mondegreens – derivation of that term - <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/mondegreen.html>