

Managing Conference Presentation and Discussion Session Breakdown (Repair)

19

Abstract

Everybody makes mistakes in speech, particularly when under pressure and experiencing nerves, exponentially so when trying to maintain an academic posture in front of an audience of peers. Consequently, many presenters suffer some type of breakdown, especially when performing a CP in one's second or third language. But there are ways to deal with these problems gracefully and constructively. In this short chapter, I will outline a few common, helpful strategies for such cases.

19.1 Error Self-repair

One CP speaker I noted made a reference to a previous paper by 'Kawayama,' while the slide indicated 'Yamakawa.' Suddenly becoming aware of the error, the presenter smiled and said, 'Sorry, Yamakawa' and continued without a hitch. The error was noted, admitted, quickly fixed, and it had no lasting impact upon the speaker's performance.

On the other hand, some novice speakers displayed overt embarrassment, such as covering their mouth or face or developing physical twitches. These responses served not only magnify the mistake but also tended to make the audience feel uncomfortable, creating the sense of communal embarrassment that tends to arise from common gaffes.

Displaying too much of a reaction to an error also often led to a series of similar mistakes simply because the speaker has become acutely aware that they have lost concentration and can now only think in terms of 'Error! Error!'

Several speakers I observed tried to cover lexico-grammatical slips by speaking more and increasing their speaking speed, but increased verbosity or speaking pace in fact tended to exaggerate, rather than mask, the problems. Once an error in a CP

is made, it can be very difficult to talk one's way out of it. A quick admission and/or immediate correction is generally the best policy. Adding a quick 'It was nothing' smile to this response was also an effective treatment.

On some occasions, when a minor breakdown occurred, often an error or problem not obvious or having any impact upon the audience, presenters reacted with a startled (or frustrated) 'Ah!' This often had the unintended upshot of drawing the audience's attention to a mistake or problem which might otherwise have gone unnoticed.

In the earlier chapter on discussion sessions, we noted the strategy of *reformulation* and the use of the following phrases:

Let me rephrase that.

Perhaps I didn't express that well/clearly.

For the purpose of repair, we could add the following:

Let me start over.

Sorry. I didn't/haven't express(ed) myself well.

All of the above phrases were helpful strategies when the speaker believed their original explanation or exposition had been insufficient. Moreover, if an interlocutor or audience seems confused by what has been said, these forms can all help to initiate the repair process.

19.2 Renegotiation

When the speaker believes that the breakdown is mutual (as commonly occurs in DSs in particular) it is perfectly acceptable to do what most would do if, for example, their computer suddenly froze—restart it. Presenters can 'shutdown' the dialogue temporarily by using one of the phrases shown below, which can be followed by attempts to 'reboot' the conversation:

We seem to be confusing each other

I think we're getting lost here

Sorry. I think we're misunderstanding each other

Maybe we should start over

Most importantly, I would advise novice presenters not to try to hide from the breakdown or to show overt shame or embarrassment. We must accept that breakdowns are a natural part of human communication, particularly for second-language speakers, and interactants should focus instead upon a mutually negotiated recovery rather than exaggerate the original error.

Readers might, however, wish to consider at what point the breakdown might negatively affect the flow of the narrative and ask what they can do to avoid unnecessary self-inflicted presentation wounds. One negative threshold may be those speaker monologues that involve internal deliberations over presentation details. Speech vacillation over minor details often indicates that the speaker is unprepared, uncertain of their own data, or is not considerate of the audience's presence, and thus may detract from the authority they wish to convey.

On one occasion, I observed a presenter enter into a protracted discussion with a copresenter about the current status of a certain collaboration that had little to do with advancing the narrative and in no way influenced the veracity of the data. It was as if the audience were privy to a private conversation that had interrupted the dialogue between presenter and audience. This type of 'breakdown' can be prevented simply by considering the presence and position of the audience.

19.3 Time or Equipment Issues

Earlier I discussed the problems of poor CP time management, often as a result of overextending the background or outline sections. This led to the presenter rushing through the remaining slides, often glossing over the most important data in the process. On several occasions, the speakers became apologetic (*"Sorry, just a few more slides!"*). Unfortunately, this reveals a lack of preparation and/or poor management on behalf of the presenter. If the presenter's slides are treated as if they are an imposition upon the audience, a violation of the implicit contract between presenter and audience has occurred.

Technical or audience issues are also often the sources of interruption or loss of concentration. As a result, all presenters should carry a plan B. If they fall behind time due to mismanagement, equipment issues, or room/audience management by the chair, they should keep in mind which items or slides can be quickly dispensed with and which remaining items are essential. On one occasion, due to a delayed start of her presentation, a presenter simply forwarded her presentation over three slides while stating, *'I will jump over some of the slides that illustrate (some data/results) in more detail and move on to the discussion.'* This was an effective well-planned move that avoided the presenter resorting to panic.

Although presenters may have a set script that they feel duty bound to follow, if time constraints force their hands, they should be able to provide a concise summary of the contents using only a fraction of the script and focusing upon only the key features—particularly toward the closing of a CP.

Equipment issues can present numerous problems that are not due to time mismanagement but nonetheless lead to narrative breakdown. In my observations, these tended to occur in two cases, (1) at the outset, where faulty equipment means that the presenter cannot get their slides to appear on the projector, and (2) when about to apply a stream/video or to use online functions. It goes without saying that the presenter should do anything within reason to ensure that these functions are

ready and working properly, but local factors outside of their control can waylay these intentions.

Two presenters I observed suffered these problems, and both managed the situation extremely well. One explained the contents of the video as room technicians adjusted the computer settings (*'What I hope to show you here is...'*) without any great loss of time or interruption to the narrative. The other managed an introduction without the use of accompanying slides until the problem was fixed. Preparing an introduction that is not fully dependent upon accompanying slides or being able to narrate the video contents independently of the actual visuals are skills that can come in handy when such problems do occur.

Questions and Exercises for Chapter 19

1. Which language forms would you most likely use to reformulate or self-correct your own speech error? Which forms would you use to renegotiate in a discussion?
2. Have a partner provide a distraction during a CP practice session. Later, note (using a video recording) how you responded to it.
3. Practice performing an introduction to your CP without reference to any slides, and/or explain the contents of any accompanying video to a partner without running the video