

Puns and the subconscious mind

Those formulating puns during conversation take pride in believing it an intentional act. Recently, I recognized one shortly before the listener noticed the double meaning. I concluded that the pun arose from the subconscious mind. One doesn't go through all the words and phrases in one's vocabulary before speaking; one talks extemporaneously. The words and sentences flow out.

The subconscious mind is active constantly – while we are busy doing other things – while at work and, particularly, while we are asleep. The brain stores words and meanings. On uttering sentences, it selects the precise word to suit the specific sentence uttered – an exact word for the occasion – sometimes a pun or a poet's rhyming word. The subconscious mind plays games with all involved, the utterer and the audience, injecting synonyms with double meanings or homonyms with an entirely different meaning that sometimes evokes laughter or contemplation about the intent of the speaker.

On uttering a pun while conversing with my friend, Donald Hair (emeritus professor of English), I commented that I recognized the dual meaning only a short time before he did, stating that it was the way puns evolve. Although nodding in apparent agreement, his facial expression suggested I was descending into the realms of fantasy and alchemy. Two weeks later, he said I had enlightened him, confessing that his experience had since proven the accuracy of the analysis.

The brain is a computer storing acquired information – words, ideas, facts, performance techniques, patterns, music, images. The recognition of one similarity shared by entirely different physical situations is the essence of the mind of a scientist, or of a medical diagnostician analyzing complicated medical disease processes. Noticing similarities between seemingly unrelated situations creates amplified thought waves in our brain circuitry, creating a resonance much as two notes create a musical chord – with endorphin release (a Eureka moment); maintaining an open mind while remaining constantly alert for phenomenal similarities is the essence of science and the stuff of Nobel Prizes.