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## MISUSE OF WORDS

EUGENE J. ALEXANDER, M.D.\*

Psychiatrists are alert for slips of the tongue because these may be indications of repression or suppression of ideas with dynamic significance. But even individuals of good education and intelligence may use words incorrectly, just as they may misspell words, or add a column of figures incorrectly, without it being evidence of the unconscious at work. Here are some examples I have collected recently, with suggested reasons for the errors.

Meeting the word in written form, he takes it into his vocabulary with an incorrect mental spelling, leading to incorrect pronunciation:

a. "I had a proached egg for breakfast."

b. "I was noncahalant about it." (as if the word were non-ca-hal'ant)

c. "The reason I am shriking my work is because I feel so bad." She meant "shirking," of course. The error may also have come about from confusion with the word "striking" as applied to labor's absences from work. I am quite sure she did not know the meaning and connotation of the noun "shrike," for practically no one did until the play by that name was produced recently.

d. ". . . a griping tale on television." The context indicated he meant a "gripping" tale. I am sure he was acquainted with the word "gripe," both in its medical sense of intestinal cramps, and in its slang sense of annoying. He was not being careless, for he used the word twice. The dictionary gives him some support in his usage of the word, but to his listeners the colloquial meaning came first to mind, and he sounded as if he were trying to make a joke—which he wasn't.

e. "I have a bussing in my ear." I doubt if he knew of the meaning "a kiss" for the word "buss."

Meeting the word in written form, he takes it into his vocabulary with an incorrect meaning, gained from its context.

a. The word "exotic" has been used so much with a connotation of exciting, alluring, and mysterious that its dictionary meaning ("foreign") comes as a surprise to most persons who think they know the word. That, of course, is how language changes; if general usage differs from dictionary definition, it is the dictionary, not usage, which must change.

Hearing the word, he takes it into his vocabulary with an incorrect meaning, because the word happens to sound like one he already knows. This type of error in the use of symbols is often met in psychiatric practice: the patient behaves as if things which have a superficial similarity are the same thing.

a. "My interests are vicarious." (meaning, various)

b. "I have exalted all the funds I have." (meaning, exhausted)

c. "I was reticent to see a psychiatrist." I have heard several different persons, including a radio announcer, misuse this word, as if it meant "reluctant" or "hesitant." I think its similarity in sound and slight similarity in meaning (i.e., reticent means a specific reluctance or hesitancy to speak) accounts for its misuse.

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d. "He bolstered out of the house." This was used in a context meaning that he left angrily and noisily, as if she had combined the two words "bolted," and "blustered."

e. Errors of the type I am now describing may make excellent humor. "The Pocket Book of Boners," one of the funniest books I have ever read, contains many like these: "When the villain tried to seduce her, she reclined to obey him." "It was raining cats and dogs, and there were poodles on the ground."

Hearing the word, he continues to leave the word out of his vocabulary, but gives its meaning to a word he already knows which has a similar sound but a different meaning:

a. "I contributed my indigestion to the shrimps I ate." (meaning, attributed)

It also appears that some words get misused because the error trips more easily and rhythmically off the tongue than does the correct phrase:

a. "I ate my dinner with great agusto." One must admit this has more rhythm than "great gusto."

b. "I should have stood in bed." This use of "stood" for "stayed" was mimicked so much, as a joke, after the famous first time it was uttered, that it is becoming a part of common usage now, of which the dictionaries will eventually have to take note. My patient, who intended to convey to me the idea that he was staying on his diet, would not, in the present tense, have said, "I *stand* by my diet," for there was no defense of or "standing up for" the diet implied. However, in the past tense, he has forgotten how to say, "I *stayed* on my diet," and it would sound funny to him to say, "I *stood* on my diet." Therefore, the phrase as he actually spoke it was, "Still I *stood* by my diet."

I have called attention to these common errors in the use of language symbols primarily to emphasize that not all errors humans make are dynamically determined. Some, of course, are. But inattention (proached for poached), connotation (exotic for exciting), and the rule "similar things are the same thing" (vicarious for various) accounts for some errors. Perhaps the point is not proved. One could say, for example, that proached has more specific dynamic meaning than mere inattention. Perhaps the man always wanted to be a preacher, and so every time he sees "p" followed by "ch" the unconscious makes an effort to turn it into "preach," and almost succeeded with his eggs for breakfast. Now, every time he eats them—if they are proached, but not if they were poached—he can satisfy symbolically a tiny bit of his wish to be a preacher. Such neat analyses make us very proud of ourselves as psychiatrists, but also very close to being dealers in idle speculation instead of physicians. No, the mental process is simpler than that. Some people just are not as precise as others in their use of words. Some persons have an interest in words; others, poor souls, do not. I read all the signs along the road; my wife sees all the flowers. Why am I so blind as to think a petunia and a nasturtium look alike, and she so blind that she reads, "I am not rich," as, "I am now rich?" Analyze the reasons for our different interests to your heart's content and I'll not argue with you; but when I call a chrysanthemum a gardenia, just call it ignorance, and not evidence of a repressed destructive wish toward mums, mummy, mammy, mommy, and mother.