

Yawning gap between passion and a desire for sleep

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You think you are being witty and interesting but the person you are trying to chat up just cannot stop yawning. Do not despair — it doesn't necessarily mean they are bored. In fact, they might be very attracted to you.

According to researchers who met in Paris yesterday for the first International Conference on Yawning, far from being just a sign of tiredness, a yawn could indicate a whole range of other states and emotions — interest, stress, even a desire for sex.

However, the neurologists, pharmacologists, ethnologists, psychologists and other specialists who gathered at the prestigious Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital cautioned against being carried away by their theories.

Most admitted they did not understand why there was a relationship between sex and yawning, nor how to tell the difference between a yawn signifying erotic arousal and one that indicated a need to sleep.

Although the yawn is common — we do it an average of 240,000 times in our lives — it remains a mystery.

"In the 20th century, it disappeared as a topic of academic interest," said

Olivier Walusinski, the French specialist who organised the conference. "In France, for instance, there was only one thesis on it in the whole century." No one knows exactly why we do it, or indeed why dogs, monkeys and all other vertebrates — with the inexplic-

able exception of the giraffe — do it either. Indeed, just about the only thing we do know for sure is that the popular theory about yawning — that it oxygenates the brain — is wrong.

"We can send a man to the Moon but we cannot explain this most trivial of acts," said Wolter Seuntjens, a Dutch academic who is a pioneer in chasmology, as he calls the science of yawn studies.

He was among the first to postulate the theory of the erotic yawn after noting that sexologists were often consulted by people whose partners yawned during foreplay or intercourse. "This

can often cause problems for a couple," he said. But the yawn can indicate a desire to bond, he insisted.

There are abundant literary references, he added, citing D.H. Lawrence's description of Lady Chatterley "stretching with the curious yawn of desire". One explanation may lie in its contagious nature. If the person beside you yawns, in all likelihood so will you.

Bertrand Deputte, Professor of Ethnology at Alfort Veterinary School near Paris, studied 5,000 yawns by macaques and mangabey monkeys. Alpha males — more sexually active, aggressive and perhaps more stressed —



yawned more than subordinate males. Dr Walusinski said other emotions such as anxiety can produce a yawn. "You find that people yawn before making their first parachute jump," he said. "My theory is that yawning has a counterbalancing effect. When you are stressed it relaxes you, and when you are tired it stimulates you."

