“REDUN-DANCES”: HUMOROUS REDUNDANCIES

DON HAUPTMAN
New York, New York
donhauptman@nyc.rr.com

For many years, I have archly interpolated into written and spoken communications what I call “redun-dances”: redundancies used deliberately for humorous effect.

I slip in remarks such as “It’s strange yet bizarre” or “I’m amazed and astounded” or “He’s as famous as he is well known.”

Initially, I believed I had invented the device. Then I recalled that when I was in college in the 1960s, a joke circulated about an anti-drug film supposedly entitled Marijuana: Threat or Menace? (No such cinematic spoof existed then or now, but the satirical title remains popular online.)

The folks at Hooters apparently share this puckish perspective, given their ubiquitous slogan: “Delightfully tacky, yet unrefined.”

But if I didn’t originate the device, I may be the first to name it, analyze it, and assemble a corpus of examples. My “vast yet extensive” research online and in my library of language and wordplay books failed to turn up any previous accounts of the phenomenon.

Before we go any further, a few definitions are in order. A redundancy is any type of unnecessary repetition. A tautology is pretty much the same thing, though it conveys a stronger sense that the repetition is needless and unacceptable. A pleonasm is still another synonym, meaning “more words than are required to express an idea.” (Some dictionaries draw finer distinctions, but don’t you get the impression that the three terms are sort of … redundant?)

Of course, redundancies that might provoke laughter can be found in abundance. But in these cases, the humor is unintentional.

The authority on accidental and erroneous redundancies is Richard Kallan, who collected more than a thousand specimens into a clever little book called Armed Gunmen, True Facts, and Other Ridiculous Nonsense (Pantheon, 2005).

Here are a few of his examples: “actual truth,” “advance warning,” “close proximity,” “convicted felon,” “deceptive lie,” “exactly identical,” “merge together,” “negative stigma,” “new innovation,” “past history,” “written document.”

I’ve encountered “internal thoughts,” “positive improvements,” “regress back,” “small handful,” “universal lingua franca,” and many others.

Some redundancies become idioms. Such phrases are used so frequently that we can easily forget that they’re tautological. Common examples include “bits and pieces,” “dead and gone,” “pick and choose,” “rant and rave,” “scream and yell.”

And let’s not forget the classic malapropism attributed—some say misattributed—to Yogi Berra: “It’s déjà vu all over again.”
But, one might ask, what's wrong with redundancies—"really and truly"? Here are some good reasons to eschew them.

First, effective writing is concise. The most famous commandment in *The Elements of Style*, the standard usage guide, is "Omit needless words." Many tautologies are awkward, clichéd, and ludicrous. They make the writer look incompetent or illiterate. Finally, redundancies can be irritating. A friend complains that she cringes at her husband's frequent use of "tiny little."

But humor is a different kettle of fish. So let's return to the topic at hand: *intentional* redundancies, or redun-dances. Here are more of my own coinages, with which I routinely amuse and annoy people:

- "That suggestion is as obvious as it is self-evident."
- "I'm as mortified as I am embarrassed."
- "The news is as incredible as it is unbelievable!"
- "Let's get this job done with speed and rapidity."
- "Wow! It's as expensive as it is costly."
- "I'm not only tired but also exhausted."
- "Sadly yet unhappily. . . ."
- "Was it chance—or coincidence? You be the judge."

You can surely devise your own redun-dances, if you're so inclined. But here's a story that suggests a caveat.

A while ago, I wrote an article for a trade publication. To grab the reader's attention, I began with the words "It's strange yet bizarre. . . ." I asked a colleague to review a draft of the piece. "You've made a mistake in the lead," he admonished. "They mean the same thing." Clearly, then, not everyone will get the joke.

Finally, a related device is the seemingly contradictory, paradoxical, or oxymoronic statement that's also intended facetiously, e.g., "The explanation is as simple as it is complex." Of course, both assertions could well be true, albeit in different respects, and the comment pithily conveys a certain profundity. But this may be a subject for another article.

The moral: As a general rule, avoid redundancies—unless you're using them deliberately for amusement, or for some other purpose. As the preceding "brief synopsis" demonstrates, this literary device should be handled with "meticulous care."

Acknowledgments: For many excellent ideas and suggestions, my thanks to Richard Kallan, Elizabeth Saenger, and Robert Schleifer.