

"IS ANAL RETENTIVE HYPHENATED?": SELF-REFERENTIAL HUMOR

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You know about self-referential statements. The classic examples are the Greek logical paradoxes. The Epimenides Paradox, in one variant, asserts: "This sentence is false." For millennia, philosophers have struggled to determine what such bafflers mean, if indeed they have any meaning at all.

But our focus today is on the more entertaining topic of *humorous* self-referentiality: quips, clever observations and jokes that sometimes contain an element of wisdom or profundity as a bonus to the laughter they provoke.

As an introduction to these ingenious creations, consider a quintessential self-referential epigram: "Nostalgia isn't what it used to be." This provocative remark amusingly illustrates itself, while communicating a germ of truth. (Usually attributed to Peter De Vries, it gained wider exposure when Simone Signoret adopted it as the title of her 1976 memoir.)

A sign familiar in workplaces commands, "Eschew Obfuscation." Parents scold children with the injunction, "I've told you a million times not to exaggerate!" And a universally applicable maxim assures us that "All generalizations are wrong—including this one."

But reflexive humor is a funny thing. It's hard to define—except perhaps by reference to itself.

It's not sufficient to be merely paradoxical or incongruous or oxymoronic. The key ingredient of linguistic self-referentiality must exist. The meaning that results is either self-contradictory or self-confirming—which, interestingly enough, are direct opposites. And, of course, the comment must be witty or otherwise risible.

In August of this year, Sidney Morgenbesser died. A philosopher and professor at New York's Columbia University, he was renowned for his intellectual playfulness, and was a skilled practitioner of self-referential repartee. From *The New York Times* obituary (August 4, 2004):

In the 1970's, a student of Maoist inclination asked him if he disagreed with Chairman Mao's saying that a proposition can be true [and] false at the same time. Dr. Morgenbesser replied, "I do and I don't."

In the 1950's, the British philosopher J. L. Austin came to Columbia to present a paper about the close analysis of language. He pointed out that although two negatives make a positive, nowhere is it the case that two positives make a negative. "Yeah, yeah," Dr. Morgenbesser said.

The latter joke is often recast with a clueless instructor uttering the assertion and a student in the back of the lecture hall riposting, "Yeah, right!"

Lists of arch, sarcastic and quasi-paradoxical one-liners in the style of George Carlin and Steven Wright circulate frequently on the Internet. Similar jokes are ubiquitous on T-shirts and bumper stickers. Not all such jests are self-referential, but the following qualify:

- "What if there were no hypothetical questions?"
- "I'm not sure of the definition of *déjà vu*, but I have a feeling I've seen it before."
- "Is there another word for synonym?"

The genre readily lends itself to dialogue form:

- "You have poor listening skills." "What?"
- "Is our biggest challenge ignorance or apathy?" "I don't know and I don't care!"
- "At least we can agree to disagree." "No we can't."
- "Where are the self-help books?" "If I told you, it would defeat the purpose."

"Indecision may or may not be my problem," says Jimmy Buffett. Whether it is or isn't, variations of this quip considerably predate his 1995 song.

My British friend Chris Tame confesses, "I'd like to become a conformist, but what would my friends think of me?"

In a skit on his radio show, Garrison Keillor chats with a dumb-blonde type who is having difficulty understanding a passage she is reading. Gal: "Hmm ... *ambivalence*. Do you know what that word means?" Keillor: "More or less."

Also in the reflexive humor category are the tongue-in-cheek "rules" of English grammar and usage that have been distributed for ages, first on paper and then via the Internet and e-mail. These contradictory commandments teach valuable lessons: "Avoid clichés like the plague." "Verbs has to agree with their subjects." "Don't use a foreign expression if you can find an English *quid pro quo*." In a 1979 column on ludicrous language laws, William Safire solicited additional contributions from readers. He compiled 50 of them, along with his commentary, in a 1990 book called *Fumblerrules*.

As for me, I recently told my literary agent that I'm writing a book on the theory of nominalism. His response: "So-called."

To return to where we began: A persuasive case can be made that the ancient self-referential paradoxes are illegitimate and absurd. But—to paraphrase Fermat—the space limitations of this article preclude my supplying the proof here.

The point is that such logical impossibilities and absurdities are often funny. The phenomenon starts early: when children reach a certain level of development, they laugh at elephant jokes and other forms of nonsense, demonstrating a newly acquired comprehension of reality and objectivity. All things considered, then, it's not surprising that self-referentiality is a fertile source of humor.

Let us conclude on an upbeat note. "There's good news and bad news. The good news is that there's no bad news."