

## A LIGHT-HEARTED LOOK AT GREEK FIGURES OF RHETORIC

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On the night of June 21, 1932, in Madison Square Garden, Joe Jacobs, the manager for boxer Max Schmeling, heard the judges award a decision to Schmeling's opponent, Jack Sharkey. Enraged, Jacobs grabbed the announcer's microphone and shouted to the world, "We was robbed!" Turns out that Jacobs fashioned his patch of rhetorical and oratorical immortality from a Greek figure of speech called *enallage*, an effective mistake in grammar that drives home an argument. To those who complain that "We was robbed!" is a grammatical atrocity I say, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," another enallage and one considerably more effective than "If it isn't broken, don't fix it."

When Abraham Lincoln concluded his remarks at Gettysburg by majestically describing a "government of the people, by the people, for the people," he was enlisting *isocolon*, a parallelism of grammatical forms, in this case prepositional phrases.

When Jonathan Swift sardonically wrote, "Last week I saw a woman flayed, and you will hardly believe how much it altered her appearance," he was taking advantage of the power of *litotes*, a deliberate understatement that helps make a point.

When a teenage bundle of hormones poured into sneakers suggests, "Dad, why don't Mom and you watch the tube tonight so that I can borrow the wheels?" he or she is exploiting *synecdoche*, the figurative substitution of a part for the whole.

These are but four of a veritable bestiary of figures of speech and rhetoric that the ancient Greeks created. Here's a look at ten of the more colorful and ubiquitous specimens:

**Alliteration.** The repetition of initial consonant sounds.

I am an alliteration addict, a slave to the seductions of sequential syllables starting with the same sound.

Leapin' lizards and jumpin' Jehosephat! You can bet your bottom dollar that I am an alliteration addict — a shell-shocked sad sack beating his breast and caught betwixt and between the devil and the deep blue sea, leaping from the frying pan into the fire on the road to rack and ruin. In wending my way through the whys and wherefores of this alluring activity, I shall not shilly shally, dilly dally, hem and haw, beat around the bush, wear out my welcome, pull any punches, leave you in the lurch, make a mountain out of a molehill, or throw the baby out with the bathwater. After all, I'm not a prim-and-proper, dry-as-dust, dull as dishwater, down in the dumps worrywart; a lily-livered, knock-kneed, mild-mannered, mealy-mouthed, daydreaming, tongue-tied, wishy-washy nice Nelly; or a backbiting, too-big-for-his-britches, bird-brained, hard-headed, bottom-of-the-barrel, party-pooing spoilsport.

Pretty please, don't raise the roof, clean my clock, throw a temper tantrum, and take me to task for being a ranting and raving crazy coot with bats in my belfry; a tattle-taling four-flusher who's out to add insult to run you ragged from stem to stern and pillar to post; or a hard-hearted, bamboozling, four-flushing flimflam man who feels free to get your goat and, to add fuel to the fire and insult to injury, make a monkey out of you with farfetched fiddle-faddle that contains neither rhyme nor reason, a bunch of baloney that you need like a hole in the head.

Good grief! Mind your manners, have a heart, and hold your horses. I may be fat and forty and worse for wear, but, to tell the truth, turn the tables, and lay down the law, I prefer to take the proof positive off the back burner, put the fat on the fire, bring home the bacon, and talk turkey; to come clean and bite the bullet — first and foremost and sure as shootin' — by taking a no-nonsense, down-and-dirty, daredevil, death-defying, rip-roaring, rough-and-ready, fast-and-furious, mile-a-minute, wild and wooly, bolt-from-the-blue approach in beating the bushes to pinpoint this hale-and-hearty, short-and-sweet, spic-and-span, safe-and-sound, shipshape, fit-as-a-fiddle, picture-perfect, worthwhile, calm, cool (as a cucumber), and collected, tip-top topic.

I've tried to prime the pump, come hell or high water; to bend over backwards to practice what I preach; to show the method in my madness (and the madness in my method) with wit and wisdom; to give it a go with get up and go; to show the courage of my convictions with vim and vigor and derring-do; to shape up or ship out by going great guns to beat the band; to leave you pleased as punch and jumping for joy head over heels; and to lay it on the line, bag and baggage, part and parcel, and kit and caboodle to convince you that there's more here than meets the eye.

Last but not least, before I call it quits, head for the hills, burn my bridges behind me, and bid you a fond farewell, I hope you've wholeheartedly enjoyed this treasure trove of tried and true, bright eyed and bushy tailed, bread and butter, bigger and better, larger than life, cream of the crop, clear-cut (not haphazard, halfhearted, or mickey mouse) alliterative expressions (the more the merrier), all of them as good as gold, worth a pretty penny, a chunk of change, and big bucks, hardly a dime a dozen. Dollars to doughnuts, that's what happens when you go from rags to riches and put your money where your mouth is.

**Chiasmus.** "Success is getting what you want; happiness is wanting what you get." That's not only a profound statement and a commonsense truth. It's also an example of chiasmus — a reversal in the order of words in two otherwise parallel phrases in order to produce a rhetorical or humorous effect. The *chi* in *chiasmus* stands for the letter *X* in the Greek alphabet, and the word comes from the Greek *khiasmos*, meaning "crossing; to mark with a *X*." In most chiastic statements, if you stack the first clause on the second and then draw straight lines from the key words in the first to the second, you will draw an *X*. Try it with a chiastic quotation like "When the going gets tough, the tough get going."

Chiasmi (the formal plural form) show up in some of the most clever, thought-provoking, and memorable pronouncements in history:

- One should eat to live, not live to eat. —*Cicero*
- If guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns. —*unofficial slogan of the NRA*
- Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country. —*John F. Kennedy*

Quotations like these have been used for centuries by the world's greatest thinkers, leaders, and entertainers — from Aristotle (“We should behave to our friends as we would wish our friends to behave to us”) to Shakespeare (“Fair is foul, and foul is fair”) to Mae West (“It's not the men in my life that count; it's the life in my men”). From ancient Sanskrit to this very moment, chiasmi have been employed to inspire, insult, seduce, teach, and provoke.

And above all, please remember: It's better to leave the house and kiss your wife good-bye than to leave your wife and kiss the house good-bye.

**Hysteron proteron.** A Greek figure of rhetoric that means “the latter earlier,” or more familiarly, the cart before the horse. In hysteron proteron the logical order or sequence of objects or events is reversed. If you bear this concept in mind, you'll find examples all around you:

- You don't go *back and forth* between places. You must go forth before you can go back.
- You don't put on your *shoes and socks* each morning. That is an exceedingly difficult maneuver. You put on your socks first, then your shoes.
- You aren't *head over heels* in love. You're head over heels in love because when you flip, literally or metaphorically, your heels are over your head.
- It's not that you can't *have your cake and eat it, too*. If you think about it, it should be that you can't eat your cake and have it, too.
- It isn't a *hit-and-run* play. If you know your baseball, you know that the sequence constitutes a run-and-hit play.
- And, closely related to hysteron proteron, it shouldn't be *ass backward*, which is the proper arrangement of one's anatomy, to describe things all turned around. For that state of disarray the expression should be *ass forward*.

**Irony.** A rhetorical and literary device that involves an incongruity between two elements. You can't have too many ironies in the fire:

*Verbal irony* is an incongruity between what is said and what is meant. Bayed about by his enemies, Marc Antony praises those who have assassinated Julius Caesar as “honorable

men. So are they all, all honorable men.” Gradually, and too late for Caesar’s killers to intercede, the Roman rabble come to see that Antony really means that Brutus and his co-conspirators are the opposite of honorable men.

*Situational irony* exploits a discrepancy between what we expect and what happens in a work of art. It is ironic that the oiler, the strongest of the men in Stephen Crane’s short story “The Open Boat,” is the one who drowns while the others, weaker and sicker, survive. It is ironic that Edwin Arlington Robinson’s rich and shining Richard Cory “one calm summer night, / went home and put a bullet through his head.”

The heartrending, gut-wrenching gulf between what we know and what a literary character knows is *dramatic irony* — watching that character advance toward and walk off a cliff and not being able to cry out and help. We know well before Oedipus discovers it that he has married Jocasta, the girl just like the girl who married dear old dad. We know well before Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet and Hamlet about the sleeping potion and poison sword that will extinguish their young lives. But we are powerless to help them.

Now that you know that irony is a discrepancy that illuminates the human condition, please don’t use *ironic* to mean a simple coincidence. It is ironic that a nation of our wealth should also incarcerate the highest percentage of prisoners in the world. That on the street the other day I happened to bump into a superannuated classmate from my old elementary school is in no way ironic; it’s just coincidental.

**Metaphor.** This seminal word and concept goes back to the Greek *meta*, “over, across” + *pherein*, “to carry.” A metaphor, then, is a figure of speech that merges two seemingly different objects or ideas and carries us from one realm of existence to another.

You might have been taught that “*a* is like/as *b*” is a simile (“I’m as jumpy as a puppet on a string”) and “*a* is *b*” is a metaphor (“life is a cabaret, old chum”). But almost all metaphors present only the *b*, and the reader or listener infers the *a*. Thus, for example, when you make “a spur-of-the-moment decision,” the moment is, figuratively, a rider who leaps upon you, the horse, and digs his or her spurs into your flanks.

We usually think of metaphors as figurative devices that only poets create, but, in fact, all of us make metaphors during almost every moment of our waking lives. As T. E. Hulme observed, “Prose is a museum, where all the old weapons of poetry are kept.” That’s why I never metaphor I didn’t like.

Much as I hate to stick my neck out on a limb, I’m as happy as a pig in a poke to share with you a selection of my favorite mixed metaphors — miscegenated figurative comparisons guaranteed to kindle a flood of laughter in you. It’s time to fish or get off the pot and to take the bull by the tail and look it in the eye:

- A virgin forest is a place where the hand of man has never set foot.

- The bankers' pockets are bulging with the sweat of the honest working man.
- During the Napoleonic era, the crowned heads of Europe were trembling in their shoes.
- I came out of that deal smelling like a bandit.
- I have a mind like a steel sieve.
- They're biting the hand of the goose that laid the golden egg. —*Samuel Goldwyn*
- She was a diva of such immense talent that, after she performed, there was seldom a dry seat in the house.

Metaphors be with you!

**Metonymy.** When we use the *crown* to refer to a monarchy, the *brass* to refer to the military, the *White House* to refer to the U.S. executive branch, and *suits* to refer to business people and other professionals, we are in each case employing a *metonymy*, a label that stands for something else with which it is closely associated.

When we call an athlete a *jock*, we are shortening the athletic supporter known as the jockstrap and metonymously making it stand for the person's identity. The connection has become so figurative that women, who never wear that equipment, are also called jocks.

**Oxymoron.** An oxymoron is not a big, dumb cow. Rather, an oxymoron is a figure of speech in which two incongruous, contradictory terms are yoked together in a small space. Self-referentially, the word *oxymoron* is itself oxymoronic because it is formed from two Greek roots of opposite meaning — *oxys*, “sharp, keen,” and *moros*, “foolish,” the same root that gives us the word *moron*.

Close kin to *oxymoron* is *sophomore*, a juxtaposition of the Greek *sophos*, “clever, wise,” as in *sophisticated*, “wise in the ways of the world,” and the abovementioned *moros*, “foolish.” Many a sophomore is indeed a wise fool.

Other single-word oxymorons include *firewater*, *spendthrift*, *wholesome*, *superette* (“large small”), *Connecticut* (“Connect. I cut.”), and the surname *Noyes* (“No yes”).

Literary oxymorons, created *accidentally on purpose*, include Geoffrey Chaucer's *hateful good*, Edmund Spenser's *proud humility*, John Milton's *darkness visible*, Alexander Pope's “damn with *faint praise*,” Lord Byron's *melancholy merriment*, James Thomson's *expressive silence*, Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *falsely true*, Ernest Hemingway's *scalding coolness*, and, the most quoted of all, William Shakespeare's “parting is such *sweet sorrow*.”

Among the best two-word oxymora are *military intelligence*, *political science*, *sight unseen*, *negative growth*, *flat busted*, and *jumbo shrimp*. Expand that last one to *fresh frozen jumbo shrimp*, and you have a double oxymoron.

Good grief! Oxymorons are everywhere! I can only hope that this small dissertation on the oxymoron will not go over like a *lead balloon*.

**Paradox.** My son Howard and daughter Annie are professional poker players who live and move and have their beings in that windowless, clockless pleasure dome known as Las Vegas. It's an easy life — earning thousands of dollars in a single night just sitting around playing card games. But it's a hard-knock life, too, what with the long, sedentary hours; the addictive behavior and secondhand smoke that suffuse the poker rooms; and the times when Lady Luck goes out whoring and your pocketbook and ego get mugged.

How best to catch and crystallize this collide-o-scopic life my children lead, this life of gorgeous poker rooms and hearts of darkness, of Euclidean clarity and survival of the meanest? Bob "Silver Eagle" Thompson, once tournament director of the World Series of Poker at Binion's Horseshoe casino, said it best: "Poker is a tough way to make an easy living."

That's a paradox, a statement that seems absurd or self-contradictory but that turns out to be true. The word *paradox* combines *para*, "against," and *doxos*, "opinion, belief." In its Greek form the word meant "not what you'd expect to be true."

Paradox is a particularly powerful device to ensnare truth because it concisely tells us something that we did not know we knew. It engages our hearts and minds because, beyond its figurative employment, paradox has always been at the center of the human condition. "Man's real life," wrote Carl Jung, "consists of a complex of inexorable opposites — day and night, birth and death, happiness and misery, good and evil. If it were not so, existence would come to an end."

Paradox was a fact of life long before it became a literary and rhetorical device. Who among us has not experienced something ugly in everything beautiful, something true in everything false, something female in something male, or, as King Claudius says in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "mirth in funeral" and "dirge in marriage"? Who among us is not captured by and captured in Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Man"?:

Placed on the isthmus of a middle state,  
A being darkly wise and rudely great:  
With too much knowledge on the Sceptic side,  
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,  
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest,  
In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast.  
In doubt his mind or body to prefer,  
Born but to die, and reasoning but to err;

.....  
Sole judge of Truth, in endless Error hurled:  
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!

As I — glory, jest, and riddle — finish writing this entry, I suffer a little death. Something has ended, winked out, never to be begun, shaped, or completed again. But, at the same time, as I approach the end, I think of the poet John Donne, who, four centuries ago, chanted the paradoxology of our lives: “Death, thou shalt die.”

Immortal I know that you, in another place and another time, are passing your eyes over these words and sharing my thoughts and emotions long after I have struck the symbols on my keyboard, perhaps even after I have slipped this mortal coil.

**Paraprosdokia.** Derived from two Greek roots that mean “an unexpected outcome,” this figure of speech is characterized by a surprising left-hand turn at the end of a statement that produces a humorous or dramatic effect, as in “I’ve had a perfectly wonderful evening, but this wasn’t it.” —*Groucho Marx*; “When I die, I want to die like my grandfather did — peacefully in his sleep, not screaming like all the passengers in the car he was driving.” —*Bob Monkhouse*

**Simile.** A comparison between two essentially different objects or ideas expressly indicated by words such as *like* or *as*, as in “O my love is like a red, red rose that’s newly sprung in June. O my love is like the melody that’s sweetly played in tune.” —*Robert Burns*; “Life is like a box of chocolates. . . .” —*Winston Groom*; and “Life is like a dog sled race. If you’re not the lead dog, the scenery never changes.”

One Judge Martin J. Sheehan of Kenton Circuit Court, Kentucky, rejoiced similitudinously in the settlement of a case that had been scheduled to go to trial earlier:

And such news of an amicable settlement having made this court happier than a tick on a fat dog because it is otherwise busier than a one-legged cat in a sand box and, quite frankly, would have rather jumped naked off of a twelve-foot step ladder and into a five-gallon bucket of porcupines than have presided over a two-week trial of the herein dispute, a trial which, no doubt, would have made the jury more confused than a hungry baby in a topless bar and made the parties and their attorneys madder than mosquitoes in a mannequin factory.

It is therefore ordered and adjudicated by the court that the jury trial scheduled herein for July 13, 2011, is hereby canceled.

**Zeugma**, from a Greek word meaning “yoke,” features the omission of a verb or surprising use of the same verb, creating a striking yoking of two nouns:

Or stain her Honor, or her new Brocade . . .

Or lose her Heart, or necklace at a Ball.  
—Alexander Pope

For a more modern example, in “You can call me Ray, and you can call me Jay, but please don’t call me late for dinner,” the verb *call* takes on a new meaning the third time it appears. For another example, when I am speaking on behalf a large-hearted organization, I sometimes declare zeugmatically, “ABC Charity validates your parking and your humanity.”

## AN ANCIENT FRENCH PUZZLE

By Anon

