

ON FIGURES OF SPEECH

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It is a toss-up with many persons as to whether History or Mathematics is their most unfavorite subject, and we shall keep this introduction to a minimum for that reason. Luckily, Mathematics does not concern us here, but we feel that a small amount of historical background should be supplied in the interest of clarification. So...

Since four centuries before Christ, Rhetoric has been a most important subject and it is only in comparatively modern times that interest in it has slackened. It was a product of those brilliant, contentious, pedantic Greeks, whose genius initiated so many wonderful things that we take for granted today, and to whom we logophiles owe a great debt.

About 450 BC the Greek city of Syracuse established itself as a democracy. Previous to this time, a number of the citizenry had been sent into exile, and had been dispossessed of their properties by the anti-democratic forces of the so-called 'tyrants'. The mass of litigation entailed in the reestablishment of their rights, when once regained, and the need for trained professional help may well be imagined. Rules laid down at the time by Corox of Syracuse are considered to be the earliest attempts to classify speech, and to lay the groundwork for a discipline necessary in analysing the legal double-talk which was undoubtedly as difficult for the uninitiated then as it is today. This discipline became the art of Rhetoric.

Aristotle, writing one hundred and fifty years later, wrote extensively on Logic, and classified Rhetoric as one of its subdivisions. Figures of Speech he considered useful tools to point up, as it were, ordinary speech. If we define Rhetoric (with Aristotle) as the art of using language to produce a desired impression on the hearer or reader, Figures of Speech may be defined as a set of technical terms for devices adapted for stylistic effect. One must say that Aristotle considered pure Logic as the highest means of attaining the goal of persuasion, but he conceded that Logic was often beyond the ken of the ordinary man, and Rhetoric afforded a meeting-place between the Athenian brain-truster and, well, the Athenian hoi polloi.

He well knew the importance of these 'ornamental devices', the Figures, of which he wrote. Starting with a few, they have grown in number over the two thousand intervening years. They usually have Greek names, but some of the later ones -- logistical terms -- are Latin. Many of them are fearsome: while most of us can look with

equanimity on Simile and Metaphor, and can usually take Onomatopoeia, too, Catachresis and Dysphemism may give pause. In the following zany piece, containing a number of figures of speech, the reader may have fun in seeing how many of them he can spot therein. We use lots of them in our daily speech without realizing the ancient heritage of which they are a part. Most of these words may be found in the Oxford Universal Dictionary (which also gives dates of their first appearances in print) and the American Heritage Dictionary. It is very possible that some readers will discover figures of speech we have missed, or of which we are ignorant. If so, we will be happy to hear of them, and to add them to our list.

Tom and Mary, sharing a small apartment (without benefit of clergy) in a large city of our eastern seaboard, had dreamed for years of a Caribbean holiday, and for years had skimped and saved to that end: but each time that it seemed to be within reach, some unforeseen emergency had arisen, making the trip impossible. But at last -- at long last -- with the apartment rent paid, and Tom's new contact-lenses (which he was not yet quite used to) taken care of by Mauve Cross, they finally felt justified in going to the Bank to withdraw Mary's favorite necklace (a family curio), and their life-savings which they converted into traveller's checks. They then visited a tourist agency and contracted for two two-way tickets to and from the southern island of their dreams (which, incidentally, was still under the Crown).

"It will be a good change from the Borscht Circuit. It usually rains up there, anyway," remarked Tom, meteorologically.

We shall omit the frantic packing, the excitement of the farewell party given them by friends; the dash to the airport from which they were carried away by elation and a large airplane; the sudden escape from the smog, the beautiful, tranquil flight during which they sat hand in hand smiling happily at each other, except for the brief period when food and drinks were served, and him calling her Ducky just like in the old days; nor do we need to elaborate on their arrival at the island, the long trip from the local airport through the boondocks to the hotel; the unpacking, the small, warm room, how pleasant soever (for they had thought air conditioning an unnecessary expense).

Their 'threads' (as Tom put it) hung up, and Mary's hankies and frillies (as she put it) stowed away in the few drawers at their disposal, and their traveller's checks discreetly hidden, the happy couple changed into bathing attire which naively covered the whiteness of their limbs (for bikinis and such mini-costumes were alien to their life-style) -- then they rushed to the beach. It was only a few yards from the hotel. Everything seemed to live up to the superlatives of the travel-brochure which had remarked, 'It's a beautiful world, and this is one of its loveliest countries, where you will find a great capital and beaches beyond compare.'

"Just look at that sunshine!" said Tom brightly.

Ah! The warmth, the clear blue of the sky and the darker blue of the waves with the white lines of surf running along their crests!

"Not bad, eh?" said Tom, rhetorically.

"I'll be forever grateful for this!" said Mary. Then, when everything seemed so perfect, she exclaimed, "Oh my! I forgot to take off Mother's necklace!"

"Never mind -- it has a strong clasp: your old lady saw to that before she passed away. Don't worry."

"She'd turn over in her grave if she were alive today, to see how careless I am!"

Then it happened. A wave, a wave that dwarfed all its fellows, a watery giant of a wave that had been spawned 'way out in the gull's territory, roared shoreward. It was unexpected and upsetting. It hissed and thundered into shore, its destination the beach, and in its powerful course, completely overturned Mary, and left Tom, when he struggled out of the swirling surf, quite breathless. It was the Sunday punch of an expert.

"My necklace," wailed Mary. "It's gone! Please, please, look around in the water and see if you can find it!"

"My contact-lenses!" moaned Tom. "They're gone, too! How can I possibly hunt for your necklace?" Sorrowfully, he clasped her to him as they stood together in the surf, which had now calmed down considerably. But Mary's mind was on another, less firm, clasp...

Sadly they struggled up the beach to the hotel. The joy was gone -- the sun shone for others but not for them. The Manager could only notify the life-guard and the beach-patrol to keep their eyes open. He offered little consolation.

Sadly, Tom and Mary rode the elevator to their floor. Slowly they walked the hot corridor to their room. Then... Tom span around on Mary.

"Well, I never!"

"Didn't you lock the door, Tom, when we went out?"

"Of course I did."

"Then why is it open now?"

A horrible premonition struck them both at once, and sent them dashing to the secret place where their money had been hidden. Oh! Oh! Their premonition was only too well-founded! No checks remained in the hiding-place. They were conspicuously absent.

Tom babbled into the telephone, "Give me the Manager!" and when that individual came to the 'phone, "Come quick! We've just been robbed of all our money!"

"We're sorry, Sir," said the Manager, "but unless you deposit your money and valuables in our safe, we cannot be responsible for their loss."

"Are you telling me you can't do anything?"

"We can only report the loss to the Police -- nothing special."

"That's all?"

"I'm afraid the answer must be in the affirmative."

"You...!"

"Don't bad-mouth me!"

As this tale is far from happy as it stands, we shall continue it no further.

In the discussion below, the following abbreviations have been used: AG - Allen and Greenough, New Latin Grammar; F - H. W. Fowler, A Dictionary of Modern English Usage; B - T. Bernstein, The Careful Writer; AH - American Heritage Dictionary; OUD - Oxford Universal Dictionary; WNC - Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary; FW - Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of the English Language.

1. ...without benefit of clergy (euphemism). Defined by AG as the mild expression of a painful or repulsive idea. F says that a euphemism can be more demoralizing than coarseness. B holds that euphemisms are not fig-leaves intended to hide something: they are diaphanous veils intended to soften grossness or starkness. Statements like these make one take stock of his own euphemisms!
2. ...curio (apocope). Loss of a final letter or syllable; 'curio' is a shortening of 'curiosity'.
3. ...Crown (metonymy). Substitution of an attribute or other suggestive word for the name of the thing meant, as 'The White House' for the Administration or the President.
4. ...the Borscht Circuit (periphrasis). A roundabout way of expression; a circumlocution. 'The year's penultimate month' is another example.
5. ...said Tom, meteorologically (Tom Swiftie). The works of Victor Appleton, the creator of Tom Swift, bristle with such phrases. "Six lumps, please," said Tom's girl sweetly is another example.
6. ...carried away by elation and a large airplane (zeugma). The use of a verb or adjective with two different words, to only one of which it strictly applies. 'He lost his hat and his temper' and 'She was washing clothes with happiness and Pears Soap' are other examples.
7. ...calling her Ducky (hypocorism). Use of pet names, nursery words, diminutives, etc.
8. ...boondocks (exoticism). A foreign import, this one from the Philippines. Exoticisms often invade our language and when they are good, and fill a need, they are always welcome. Many words of exotic origin are in daily use and we never give them a thought: 'pyjamas' and 'jungle' are two examples.
9. ...how pleasant soever (tmesis). Slicing a word, or sometimes a phrase, to insert something (B). An inelegant example would be 'He got the formula off a barman in Marrakesh or some bloody where'.
10. ...'threads' (synecdoche). The use of a part for the whole, or the reverse. 'Hands' for 'workmen', 'head' for 'cattle', and 'purple' for 'royal' are other examples.
11. ...hankies and frillies (hypocorism) -- see 7.
12. ...naïvely (diaeresis). Pronouncing two successive vowels as separate sounds and not as a single vowel or diphthong, as in 'Chloë'.
13. ...their limbs (Bowdlerism). Prudish expurgation, so called after Thomas Bowdler (1754 - 1825), who published an expurgated Shakespeare.
14. ...bikinis (exoticism) -- see 8.

15. ...it's a beautiful world (hysteron proteron). Reversal of natural order of ideas (AG). One need not know hysteron proteron to enjoy the well-known 'For God, for Country, and for Yale!'
16. ...said Tom brightly (Tom Swiftie) -- see 5.
17. ...not bad, eh? (litotes). Affirming of a thing by denying its contrary. Meiosis, an understatement and the opposite of hyperbole, is closely allied to litotes. An example of the former is a father's comment on his son's straight A average through college: That's pretty fair.
18. ...forever grateful (hyperbole). Use of exaggerated terms for the sake of emphasis rather than deception (F).
19. ...your old lady (dysphemism). Use of a disparaging or offensive term to describe something inoffensive, or even grand. Almost the opposite of euphemism. The recent 'gas-guzzler' is an example; 'shack' for 'mansion' has been around for some time.
20. ...she passed away (euphemism) -- see 1.
21. ...she'd turn over in her grave if she were alive today (catachresis). Deliberately paradoxical figure of speech (AH). Another example is 'I never liked you and I always will'.
22. ...a wave like a watery giant (simile). A figurative comparison usually introduced by 'like' or 'as'. One of our best-known figures, so additional examples are unnecessary.
23. ...'way (aphesis). Loss of an initial syllable or letter.
24. ...the gull's territory (kenning). Almost synonymous with periphrasis, and very common in Scandinavian literature. Note 'the sea of the blood' for 'body', and 'wound-engraver' for 'the point of a sword'.
25. ...hissed (onomatopoeia). The fitting of sound to sense. 'Buzz', 'moo', 'choo-choo', etc. No one will have difficulty in finding many more.
26. ...the Sunday punch of an expert (metaphor). A figure in which a comparison or identity is implied (B). An example: 'she is a tigress'.
27. ...but Mary's mind was on another, less firm, clasp (paranomasia). Use of words of like sound (AG); puns, plays on words (F); a fancy word for pun (B).
28. ...Tom span around (pseudo-Dizzy Deanism). This is reminiscent of Dizzy Dean who did great things with the King's English as well as with the baseball bat. The reader will remember 'He slud into second base' and the less well-known 'He retch out and grub her around the waist'. However, 'span', while it may jar on the ear somewhat, is listed as an acceptable archaic form of the past tense of 'spin' (WNC and AH). So, we have labeled it a pseudo-Dizzy Deanism.
29. ...Well, I never! (ellipsis). The full expression might have been 'Well, I never did see such a thing!' Omission of a word or words necessary to complete the sense (AG).
30. ...didn't (syncope). Omission of a letter or syllable from the middle of a word.
31. ...conspicuously absent (oxymoron). Use of contradictory words in the same phrase. Other examples are 'foolishly wise', a translation of sophomore, 'a cheerful pessimist', and many more.

32. ...'phone (aphesis) -- see 23.
33. ...Come quick! (enallage). Substitution of adjective for adverb (FW).
34. ...we're sorry (syncope) -- see 30.
35. ...nothing special (aphesis) -- see 23. 'Especial' was the older form.
36. ...the answer must be in the affirmative (periphrasis) -- see 4.
37. ...You ... ! (aposiopesis). Significant breaking off so that the hearer must supply the unsaid words (F).
38. ...don't bad-mouth me! (neologism). A new word, usage, or expression, especially the use of expressions not yet sanctioned by conventional good usage. It is hard to say, sometimes, where exoticisms, barbarisms and neologisms begin and end -- best, perhaps, to relax in the knowledge that if enough people enjoy the words, they will surely find their ways into the lexicons.

COLLECTIVE NOUNS

One of the logological pleasures is list-making, and a book that addresses this recreation is A Dictionary of Collective Nouns and Group Terms, by Ivan G. Sparkes (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1975). This is a small 191-page book compiled from 14 references, including James Lipton's famous An Exaltation of Larks and the most noted medieval book of venery. The first part is arranged by group name and gives the members of the groups, like POWER - of angels, followers, goods, good things, money, years. Some inclusions seem inappropriate, like PROFUSION (too broad to be associated with any specific nouns) and GERONTOCRACY. The second part is arranged by group member names, like CHILDREN - an aerie, brood, creche, or ingratitude of children; a horde of urchins; a mess of sons, a passel of brats. (As can be seen from this example, modern joke groupings are included with the serious ones; they are generally labelled as such.)

There are signs of sloppiness. For example, GUESS in the group section gives 'guess of diagnosticians', DIAGNOSTICIANS gives 'flutter of diagnosticians', FLUTTER gives 'flutter of cardiologists', and CARDIOLOGISTS gives 'flutter' again to close off the chain. Despite its errors, the book is useful; collectors of collective nouns will find it an indispensable starting point for further work. (PMC)