

Lecture 10: Figures of Speech II: Tropes

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is George Orwell's *The Orwell Reader: Fiction, Essays, and Reportage*.

In the previous lecture, we examined schemes, figures of speech in which normal word order is varied in order to generate rhetorical effects. Tropes are figures of speech in which the speaker or writer varies the meanings that words generally have. There are a great many tropes, and many of them are not worth going into in detail, either because they are so obscure or, more commonly, because they have become such regular parts of communication that most people use them without thinking. In that case, the name is useful but you have probably already understood the trope and know what its effects are. But in this lecture, we will present some of the most important and useful tropes that are found everywhere from advertising to student requests for paper extensions to elevated political discourse.

Oxymoron. This trope (which most people mispronounce “oxy-moron,” but which is technically pronounced “ox-ZYM-or-on) is the deliberate bringing together of two opposites.

Oxymorons are used most frequently in poetry and advertising: My favorite oxymoron is “jumbo shrimp,” but there are many others. Oxymoron works because language allows for contradictions while the real world does not. The trope rarely convinces someone of anything new, but it is a pleasing rhetorical ornament when it is not overused.

Euphemism. Oxymoron can get tiresome, but it is not as loathsome as euphemism, using a happy-sounding word for something less pleasant.

“Putting the dog to sleep” or buying a “previously loved” car or any of the other tedious dishonesties that people and organizations use (“down-sizing,” “re-organization”) are examples of euphemism. It may seem at first glance that euphemism is just a nice way of getting through the day, but in fact it, more than any other trope, leads to intellectual dishonesty. George Orwell's 1946 essay “Politics and the English Language” has a scathing and accurate condemnation of euphemism.

Antiphrasis. This is another exceptionally common trope. Antiphrasis is defined as using a word or phrase to mean exactly the opposite of its denotative meaning.

“Oh, that's great!” said sarcastically is an exceptionally common antiphrasis. At times it is possible to let the irony and sarcasm content of a rhetorical statement creep up too much (especially because sarcasm does not play well to an audience that is not already mostly on the speaker's side), but in

general, antiphrasis can be a useful antidote for euphemism and the fog of poor thinking that accompanies that trope.

Paranomasia. When we use a word that sounds a lot like another word to make an often humorous point, we are using the trope of paranomasia.

Maureen Dowd, the *New York Times* Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist, uses paranomasia all the time (probably too much), as do headline writers. Sometimes Dowd gets it right though; her best pun was her calling Bill Clinton's relations with Monica Lewinsky, "maladroit du seigneur," which uses paranomasia (on the "droit du seigneur," the mythical right of the Lord of the Manor to have sex with a young woman before her husband) and the word "maladroit," meaning inept.

It is hard to go through a newspaper without finding headlines that use paranomasia. Immediately before writing this, I flipped through the *Wall Street Journal* (which actually uses fewer of these than most papers) and found: "Russia Puts Motorola on Hold" (about a business deal), "Not So Friendly Relations" (about the family that owns the Friendly's restaurant chain), and "See You Later Alligator" (about reptile problems in Florida). Headline writing is very difficult, but obvious and boring paranomasia—which usually involves linking an actual event to a clichéd phrase—weakens stories rather than strengthens them. Paranomasia is better at mocking an opponent or making a joke to relax your audience than it is at generating direct agreement.

Hyperbole.

At the civil rights rally at which he gave his *I Have a Dream* speech, Martin Luther King said:

"I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation."

This is at least arguably true, and thus not hyperbole, but King could not know this at the time, and of course there might be future demonstrations that are even greater. But King's use of hyperbole, deliberate overstatement, in the *I Have a Dream* speech, worked. Likewise, when Bill Clinton said that the economy under George H.W. Bush was "the worst economy in fifty years," no reasonable economist actually could substantiate that idea, but the rhetorical tactic was successful. Notice also the danger of hyperbole: when John Kerry tried to use the same Clinton line, it was not successful. Hyperbole wears out very quickly, and, as anyone who reads weblogs knows, it is a trope that is so seductive that it leads writers astray from making an argument. Thus it is often convincing only to those who already agree with a speaker or writer.

Litotes. The antidote to hyperbole, litotes is a deliberate understatement for the purpose of provoking humor or creating the impression of modesty.

Litotes goes all the way back to ancient Greece, but my favorite old example is in *Beowulf* where, after killing a significant number of sea monsters who had tried to eat him, Beowulf says of the creatures, "they had no joy in that feast." Litotes can be tricky, because you have to rely on the audience getting the joke and not think you are just being boring. Also, litotes have a tendency to work their way into the language through euphemism. Our idiom that someone is "drunk" actually began as a litotes. Someone would be reeling

and vomiting on himself and someone else must have deadpanned, “Well, it looks like he has drunk” (one drink), and that description eventually evolved to our current meaning.

Apophysis and Paralipsis.

“Speaking of drunk, I won’t say how often my opponent is drunk, because I think this campaign should be above such low charges. And I’ll skip over my opponent’s thievery and graft because that’s not relevant to our argument.”

These are examples of two closely related tropes. We use apophysis when we say that we will not say something (and in so doing, say it). Paralipsis draws attention to something by noting that we will skip over it. Both tropes require a fair bit of subtlety for them to be successful, because their use is often obviously an attack upon the opponent. When Bob Dole would elliptically talk about “character” without directly attacking Bill Clinton, it was an attempt to get the effect of apophysis without being called on it. It was not successful for Senator Dole.

Prolepsis (also Procatalepsis). Possibly Dole’s criticisms were rhetorically unsuccessful because in some ways Clinton had used prolepsis to deal with them. Prolepsis (a more technically correct but unwieldy term is procatalepsis) is the trope of answering criticism before it has been made.

This is a smart strategy and tends to work very well. If you have pre-answered an objection, even if the answer isn’t particularly good and the objection is strong, you seem to have already thought about your opponent’s arguments and refuted them. Prolepsis can sometimes work against a speaker, however, if the use of the trope raises an objection that your opponent had not considered or if it draws your audience’s attention to a flaw in your argument that they otherwise would not have noticed.

Rhetorical Question. This is possibly the most common of all tropes, but it is far less useful than many speakers realize. Rhetorical questions are so overused that they no longer (if they ever did) inspire the sorts of agreement that is their intention.

A rhetorical question in writing is almost always an instance of the author trying to hide his or her inability to prove a point. One very effective debating trick is to *answer* the rhetorical question, taking the answer in a direction different from that which the asker of the question intended.

Hypophora. To prevent people from coming up with the “wrong” answer to a rhetorical question, speakers and writers sometimes use “hypophora,” a trope in which you answer your own rhetorical question before someone else can give an answer you are not looking for.

The danger here is that you may bore your audience; if you give the question and the answer, you could have just made a statement to begin with:

“Is there any reason at all to buy Professor Drout’s *A History of the English Language* course?” “Yes! You’ll learn a lot about English!” could obviously be simplified into “You should buy Professor Drout’s *A History of the English Language* course because you’ll learn a lot about English” (really, you will).

Pleonasm. The trope of pleonasm is related to the problem of raising a rhetorical question and then answering it.

Pleonasm is defined as unnecessary repetition (and there you see the logical fallacy of *petitio principii*; all the work in that definition is being done by the word “unnecessary.” Of course *unnecessary* repetition is bad; now can you tell me what repetition is unnecessary, please).

The *petitio* is in the definition because one person’s pleonasm may be another’s effective ornamentation. For example, the “let freedom ring” anaphora that King uses in the *I Have a Dream* speech certainly is not bad or ineffective pleonasm.

There are many more figures, and it can be very enlightening to mark up a political speech with different colored highlighters to indicate the schemes and tropes. There are probably more common schemes than there are tropes in contemporary political discourse, but both are everywhere, from advertising slogans to students making excuses, and from the courtroom to the kindergarten playground. Figures are the ornaments on the rhetorical structure, but if the house falls down, no one notices the ornaments, which is why we spent so much time on the foundations, structure, frameworks, and the bricks involved in the construction. Now that we have discussed the ornaments, we will go back inside and look at the specific materials (if I can stretch this metaphor even further) and small-scale techniques that are used in putting the whole building together, the metaphorical equivalent of the boards, sheetrock, nails, screws, and electrical wiring of the house. We are going to examine grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary to see how these essential elements are used throughout any rhetorical edifice. This passage, by the way, was an example of *allegory* or *extended metaphor*, in which a complex and detailed comparison is used to clarify a particular situation. I hope it convinced you.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why is paranomasia so common in newspaper headlines?
2. What rhetorical technique did Bill Clinton employ to combat Bob Dole's apophasis?

Suggested Reading

Orwell, George. *The Orwell Reader: Fiction, Essays, and Reportage*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1984.

Other Books of Interest

Mackin, John H. *Classical Rhetoric for Modern Discourse*. New York: Free Press, 1969.