



A Lesson on English

Oxymorons, Paradoxes, Paradigms and Parables

by Sara Tusek

THANK THE GREEKS

The four words in the title above are in the English language thanks to the ancient Greeks. Classical Grecian culture built a highly-respected science and art of effective communication called rhetoric. After many centuries, speechmakers (including such greats as Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.) still study the techniques of rhetoric for advice and inspiration on how to use language persuasively. This lesson will focus on four rhetorical devices: oxymorons, paradoxes, paradigms and parables.

WHAT IS AN OXYMORON?

There's something irresistible about an oxymoron. In a word or two, you put together two seemingly contradictory ideas and come up with something new.

For example, in a restaurant you might see "Jumbo Shrimp" on the menu. This is a classic oxymoron, as "jumbo" means big and "shrimp" is a slang word for undersized. The food is big and little at the same time!

Or take the food flavor descriptions "bittersweet" and "sweet-and-sour." Most American find bitter to be a very negative word, as in "it's a bitter pill to swallow," whereas sweet is a blissfully positive word:

"she's so sweet!" "Sweet-and sour" is a Chinese kind of seasoning that combines vinegar and sugar, two condiments that seem not to go together to an American.

Other oxymorons are "Navy jet pilot" (this seems contradictory, as a navy is made up of boats, not jets, manned by sailors, not pilots), "pretty ugly" (a slang term to describe something that's only moderately unattractive) and "a little pregnant" (you're either pregnant or not!).

WHY WE LOVE OXYMORONS

Oxymorons are arresting, novel and often funny. They get our attention by contradicting the nice, neat categories we have in our minds for language. They are a form of humor, as humor is based on the upsetting of previously-held ideas or perceptions.

We are first surprised by a fresh oxymoron, then intrigued and even amused. However, having gained our attention, the work of the oxymoron is not complete.

A good, well-conceived oxymoron not only startles us but gives us a brand-new idea. The oxymoron turns language "on its head" by using it in such a way that we are forced to reevaluate our prior paradigms (a Greek word for model or organizational structure).



"A Lesson on English" is a series of short lessons created for people who want to become fluent in conversational English. The lessons are practical and useful for students learning English in a traditional classroom setting or on their own.

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WHAT IS A PARADOX?

One way to think of a paradox is that it's a stretched-out oxymoron. That is, the paradox is a short phrase (group of words) that is seemingly self-contradictory, while the oxymoron is just one or two words long.

Since the paradox is longer, it can be even more thought-provoking than the oxymoron. The paradox can tap into deeper cultural ideas and social constructs than the oxymoron, as there is sufficient "mind-space" in the paradox to delve into what we take for granted as members of a particular culture.

JESUS, THE MASTER OF PARADOX

Jesus Christ was the master of paradox. The New Testament of the Bible records many of Jesus' conversations and sermons; nearly all of them include paradoxes.

For example, in the Book of Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount is recorded. In this address, Jesus is explaining the difference between the kingdom of God (His kingdom) and earthly kingdoms. In kingdoms that men devise on earth, the winners are strong and gain everything; the losers are weak and have nothing at all. In the kingdom of God, however, the winners become losers ("the first shall be last") and the losers become winners ("the last shall be first."). That's a paradox.

And there's more: He who saves his life, according to Jesus, will lose it; he who loses his life for God's sake will gain it. He who would be master of all must be servant of all, as Jesus Himself came to earth as a servant.

Jesus was God and man at the same time. That's a major paradox, one which has puzzled humans for over 2,000 years. He was dead and then alive again—the ultimate paradox. Jesus turned the entire cultural concepts of strong and weak,

gain and loss, and life and death upside-down. He was a living, breathing paradox. By His words and actions, he overturned cultural, religious and social beliefs and habits. His paradoxical sayings caught the attention of His followers and eventually changed their paradigms (if they were willing to change).

WHAT IS A PARABLE?

A parable is a brief, colorful story that illustrates a principle, often a spiritual principle.

Jesus was also the master of the parable. Most of his discourses to his close followers (his disciples) are parables. Many of these are so well-known that most Americans, even non-churchgoers, will recognize them: the parable of the prodigal son, or the one lost sheep in a flock of 100 sheep.

One famous parable is found in the Book of Mark: a woman has ten coins and loses one. She lights her lamp, sweeps the house and searches carefully till she finds it. In the same way, Jesus says, there is rejoicing in Heaven in the presence of angels over one sinner who repents.

In the Book of John, Jesus tells His disciples that he has food to eat that they know nothing about. They are puzzled; he then continues the parable, saying that His food is doing the will of His Father Who sent Him by finishing what His Father has started. Jesus is talking about his coming death and resurrection, but

the disciples can't understand His parable. When they complained about not understanding His stories, Jesus told them that those with ears to hear, can hear Him. Another parable!

OXYMORON, PARADOX, PARADIGM, PARABLE

Greek rhetorical devices still have the power to persuade by making us question our ideas. Sometimes with humor, sometimes with an intellectual challenge, these Greek concepts add to the richness of English.

