

Pointedly Foolish
by Jeffery Greb

An oxymoron is a figure of speech wherein two contradictory terms are combined. From the Greek for *pointedly foolish*, an oxymoron can be used to produce a variety of effects, mostly for humor, when employed purposefully by a skilled writer. In everyday speech, however, oxymorons are typically applied with little or no thought as repeated phrases bordering on cliché that frequently express the opposite of the intended message, although the speaker is generally unaware of this. Their ubiquity perhaps lies in the fact that they sometimes express complex ideas succinctly where proper expression of the ideas would require excessive wordiness.

One type of literary oxymoron is the Petrarchan conceit. Named for early Italian Renaissance poet Francesco Petrarca (the English called him “Petrarch”), these conceits combine hyperbolic opposites to describe an idealized love in lyric poetry (sonnets, specifically). The form really caught on throughout Europe in the 16th century, long after Petrarch’s death in 1371. By Shakespeare’s day, though, they were considered old fashioned, and he purposefully mocks their use in *Romeo and Juliet* (1595). When we first meet Romeo in Act I, scene 1, he pines for Rosaline. One of the ways Shakespeare conveys to the audience that this is not true love of the sort Romeo will have later with Juliet is by Romeo’s use of Petrarchan conceits indiscriminately. In his first speech of more than two lines, Romeo uses “brawling love,” “loving hate,” “heavy lightness,” “feather of lead,” “cold fire,” “sick health,” and more. These formal oxymorons convey Romeo’s lack of seriousness regarding love at this point in the play. (He also complains Rosaline won’t “ope her lap” and asks Benvolio the *non sequitur* of where they should eat. Methinks love is not what the boy is after.)

Interestingly, today the subject of air travel has become rife with oxymorons. For example, consider the phrase *near miss*. Usually heard when a newscaster attempts to explain

that two aircraft narrowly avoided airborne collision, it of course means the direct opposite. A *near miss* is a *hit*, but the audience has heard the phrase spoken in this context so many times, the contradiction does not even register. Another favorite is *crash landing*. When an airplane crashes, it has reunited with the earth in a manner inconsistent with the method with which it was designed. The speaker is attempting to convey that the crash was controlled and that casualties were limited or avoided outright. But a plane must either land or crash; it cannot do both. Similarly, a plane designed to exclusively land on a concrete runway cannot have a *water landing*. When flight attendants expound a plane's safety features at the start of a flight and direct the passengers to find flotation devices under their seats to be used "in the unlikely event of a water landing," passengers should hope that it's indeed unlikely. If their 737 "lands" in water, it has, in fact, crashed.

While these oxymorons regarding air travel are deliberately misleading, they are not nefarious. They allow the industry to convey important information while minimizing the impulse among some people to unduly overestimate the dangers of flying. The same cannot be said for oxymorons in retail, however. Their sole purpose is to separate consumers from their money. For example, take the phrase *new and improved*. A product that never existed before cannot be improved upon, but both sound positive and boost sales. *Less is more*, *clean dirt*, *frozen hot chocolate*, and *genuine fake* have all been used in advertisements. Some other oxymorons, like *customer service*, *sustainable growth*, *job security*, *jobless recovery*, and *budget deficit*, only become oxymoronic as a type of political statement within a specific context.

A particular peeve of mine is when the checker at the supermarket tells me, "You saved x number of dollars." Every single time I'm told this I have the impulse to explain that I saved nothing; in fact, I actually spent money, the opposite of saving it. What they're really saying is

that I spent less than an imaginary amount they *weren't* charging for some of the items, which is also untrue. If they *were* charging the higher imaginary amount, I would have truly saved because I wouldn't have shopped in the store. (Sometimes I cannot resist the urge, and I explain all this to the confusion of the checker, who looks at me with glazed tired eyes that say, "Give me a break, asshole – I have to say this. It's my job. What's your excuse?")

As stated above, most of the time oxymorons in everyday speech function primarily as a kind of short-hand for more convoluted statements. Who would take the time when discovered doing something inappropriate to say to an accomplice, "Behave in a manner consistent with that of a person who is unaware of anything untoward occurring" when *act naturally* will suffice? The oxymorons *virtual reality*, *random order*, *growing smaller*, *passive aggressive*, and *least favorite* all fit this category. Others, like *clearly confused* and *pretty ugly*, are oxymoronic because one of the words has a meaning in another context that is opposite to the other word. (In the first phrase, *clearly* means *obviously*, not *easily understood*; *pretty* means *very*, not *attractive*.) Oxymorons can be fun to play with, however: As we sit *alone together* in *deafening silence* at the *farewell reception* while dining on *jumbo shrimp*, it is a *bittersweet open secret* among the *small crowd* that most of us find poor writing *weirdly normal*.

Finally, I come to an oxymoron that would be hilarious if not also heinous. Heinous because of the ugly idea it espouses that human value is somehow directly correlated to skin pigment. Hilarious because those who espouse the philosophy almost invariably and without exception exude through their discourse and their very mien the sense that they have spent their entire lives swimming at the shallow end of the gene pool. I am, of course, referring to the oxymoron *white supremacist*. (You could also effectively make the case that this phrase is not oxymoronic, it is simply moronic, and you'd get no argument from me.)