

Flights of rhetoric

Martin Eayrs

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Mainstream language is full of rhetorical devices such as **enallage** (deliberate grammatical mistakes), **metaplasmus** (deliberate misspelling), etc., which are not always appreciated by modern readers, and indeed not always perceived as deliberate. This is a rather puzzling aspect of language usage, and one that must be particularly annoying for foreign learners, but frequently occurs amongst native speakers, usually in order to achieve some stylistic effect.

One well-known example of this is the immortal injured cry of Joe Jacobs, a boxing promoter, who grabbed the microphone when his protégé was declared the loser, and shouted 'We was robbed'. These three words have passed into the linguistic hall of fame. If, however, he had said the (grammatically correct) words 'we *were* robbed', nobody would have remembered him or, probably, even have paid him any attention.

The use of 'was' here is an example of the rhetorical device **enallage**, a fancy name but it just means an effective and deliberate grammatical mistake. Clearly there is an element of inventiveness here, and the ability to coin such lasting phrases is perhaps denied to all but few. Compare for example (from the now defunct *Punch* magazine), 'You pays your money, and you takes your choice', another now timeless phrase.

Both the above examples are now routinely used by native speakers quite unselfconsciously, in many cases probably without knowing why or where they come from. However, we can find examples in classic literature as well. Shakespeare is particularly fond of this device:

But see where Somerset and Clarence comes (3 H VI 4.2.3)

Is there not wars ? Is there not employment ? (2 H IV 1.2.85)

To show an unfelt sorrow is an office which the false man does easy (Mac 2.3.143)

where the 'correct' forms should of course be 'come' instead of 'comes', 'are' instead of 'is' and 'easily' instead of 'easy'. Shakespeare is of course not the only writer who does this - two random examples are to be found in Defoe and Lewis Carroll, who wrote 'I takes my man Friday with me' and 'Curiouser and curiouser' in *Robinson Crusoe* and *Alice in Wonderland* respectively.

One kind of **enallage** is the **anthismeria**, and again Shakespeare makes considerable use of this rhetorical device. The anthismeria consists of substituting one part of speech for another. For example, in Shakespeare's *King Lear* we read 'The thunder would not peace at my bidding'. The word 'peace' here, normally used as a noun, is employed as a verb for dramatic effect.

We see this again and again in Shakespeare. In *Measure for Measure*, ('Lord Angelo dukes it well[]), and in *Romeo and Juliet* ('Thank me no thankings, nor proud me no prouds'), we see substitutions for the verb; it is not common to think of verbs 'to duke' or 'to proud'. Sometimes we can substitute for a noun as well. Hamlet talks of dying '... in his own too-much', and in *Troilus and Cressida* we read of 'the mutable, rank-scented many'. Rabelais tells us that 'Every why hath a wherefore', Eliot talks of 'the vacant [going] into the vacant', e.e. cummings produces expressions like 'he sang his didn't he danced his did' and when we get to James Joyce, well, his language, to quote the man himself, resides 'somewhere, parently, in the ginnandgo gap between antediluvius and annadominant'.

What Joyce does is to deliberately misspell and reform words, depending on the reader to make the implied mental associations. Lewis Carroll explained this technique when commenting on his masterpiece of the absurd, 'Jabberwocky'. He defined the word 'slithy', invented by him, as a 'portmanteau word', composed of the inherent parts of the two words 'sly' and 'lithe'. And when Disraeli talks of 'anecdotalage', or I with my limited command of Spanish invent a Spanish verb **mochilar* to describe my ramblings in the south, we are guided by the same mental principles; the words are understood immediately, whether they 'exist' or not.

Modification of existing words can be of various kinds; I put the technical terms in brackets in case any reader may be interested in the names of these figures of rhetoric. Firstly we can add something to a 'standard' spelling. This addition can be at the beginning (**prosthesis**), e. g. 'enshrined', 'beweep'; in the middle (**epenthesis**), e.g. 'bretheren' and 'visitating' instead of the shorter 'brethren' and 'visiting'; or at the end, (**proparalepsis**), e.g. 'climature' and 'vasty' instead of 'climate' and 'vast'.

Sometimes elements are taken away from 'correct' words. Again this can be from the beginning (**apharareisis**), the middle, (**syncope**) or the end (**apocope**). Examples of each: 'plain' instead of 'complain', 'e'en' instead of 'even' and 'ope' for open, all found commonly in Elizabethan writers. Notice that it is a consonant which is omitted in examples of **syncope**. If a vowel is omitted, as commonly happens in the contracted forms which are so characteristic of spoken English, this is called **synaloepha**, a device much favoured by scansion-conscious poets who would vary between words like 'take't' or 'take it' according to the number of syllables required.

This kind of playing with the language is beyond most learners of the language, but provides enormous amusement to many native-speakers.

Those who have studied the classics at school or university derive a certain pleasure from incorporating archaic vocabulary, spelling and structures in their communication with their peers, and will often mix registers shamelessly, so that a sentence can have elements both of Middle English and rap slang: the total effect is inevitably fresh and stimulating.