Common Figures of Speech

The ancient Greeks and Romans divided figures of speech into tropes and schemes. Tropes are figures that change the meaning of a word or words: they involve word choice. Schemes are figures that name various arrangements and patterns within phrases, sentences and longer units of discourse: they involve syntax.

These figures name mental behaviors and reveal both tropes and schemes as stylistic forms that reflect the thought patterns and emotions, and consequently, the character of the speaker.

It is difficult to list figures according to mutually-exclusive categories because they overlap naturally with each other and because every utterance by nature contains multiple figures.

Tropes

—The substitution of one word for another, bringing two ideas into juxtaposition in the mind.

Autonomasia—“Another name.” Substituting a descriptive phrase for someone’s proper name.
   Example: Child of Calamity.

Catachresis—“Misuse, misapplication.” A far-fetched metaphor, sometimes juxtaposing two incompatible measurements.
   Example: The girl that walked into my life that day was long on beauty and short on cash; some people call her Shannon, others call her “The Brain.”

Hyperbole—“Excess, exaggeration.” Exaggerated or extravagant terms used for effect.
   Example: I have spent 100 hours on this handout already.

Metaphor—“Transference.” Changing a word from its literal meaning to one not properly applicable but analogous to it.
   Example: I’m a melon walking on two tendrils.

Metonymy—“Altered name.” Using a proper name for one of its qualities or vice versa.
   Example: “The White House said today...” or “... the Almighty, who shall bless thee with blessings of heaven above...”

Or, substituting cause for effect and vice versa.
   Example: “Give me a hand.”

Onomatopoeia—“Making up a name.” Use or invention of words that sound like their meaning.
   Example: Hullaballoo and hootenanny were made up to describe meaningless political rhetoric in the eighteen hundreds.

Synecdoche—“Understanding one thing with another.” Substituting part for a whole.
   Example: “Give us this day our daily bread.” Or, “All hands on deck.”

Tapinosis—“Reduction; humiliation.” Undignified language that debases a person or thing.
   Example: Substituting “rhymster” for “poet,” or “verses” for “poetry.”

Schemes

—A sentence or utterance that differs from an expected word order (its shape is different).
1) Figures of Repetition

-- Repetition calls attention to important words and ideas.

A) Repetition of sound

**Alliteration**—Recurrence of an initial consonant or vowel sound.
Example: “In order to be happy, Mormons must make marriage matter.” -- Abe Acosta

**Assonance**—"Identity or similarity in sound between internal vowels in neighboring words."
Example: “lake” and “fate” demonstrate assonance.

**Homoioteleuton**—"Like ending." "Use of similar endings to words, phrase, or sentences."
Example: “Eloquent is he who can invent excellently, dispose evidently, figure diversely, remember perfectly.”

B) Repetition of words

**Anaphora**—“Carrying back.” Repetition of the same word at the beginning of successive clauses.
Example: There is “A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time
to dance, a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together.”

**Anadiplosis**—“Repetition, duplication.” Repetition of the last word of one line or clause to
begin the next.
Example: “For your brother and my sister no sooner met but they looked; no sooner
looked but they loved; no sooner loved but they sighed...”

**Conduplicado**—“Doubling, repetition.” Repetition of a word or words in succeeding clauses.
Example: “You are promoting riots, Gracchus, yes, civil and internal riots.”

**Epanadiplosis**—“Doubling.” Repetition of a word at the beginning and the end of a clause.
Example: “I might, unhappy word, O me, I might.”--Sidney

**Epizeuxis**—“Fastening together; repetition.” Repetition of a word without other words between.
Example: Poe’s “The Bells”: “To the swinging and the ringing / of the bells, bells, bells--
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells, / Bells, bells, bells--”

**Polyptoton**—“Same word; various cases.” Words with the same root, but different endings.
Example: Churchill said they “decided to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute.”

C) Repetition of phrases, thoughts

**Synonymia**—Amplification by synonym.
Example: Call it being stood up, left hanging, or getting dogged--they are one.

**Commoratio**—“Lingering.” Emphasizing a point by repeating it several times in different words.
Example: “expelled, thrust out, banished, and cast away from the city.”

2) Figures of Contrast

A) Sounds

**Antimetabole**: Repetition of sounds in inverse order.
Example: “If like a crab you could go backward.”
B) Words

Antithesis—“Opposition.” Conjoining contrasting ideas in a parallel grammatical structure.
   Example: “To blame the praiseworthy and to praise the blameworthy.”

Chiasmus—“Crossing.” An abba pattern of mirror inversion.
   Example: “Anyone who thinks he has a solution does not comprehend the problem and anyone
   who comprehends the problem does not have a solution.”
   Or “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.”

Oxymoron—“Pointedly foolish.” A condensed paradox.
   Example: “This passage is clearly opaque.”

C) Phrases, thoughts

Litotes—“Understatement.” The speaker diminishes a feature of the situation that is obvious to all.
   Example: “A period of silence from you would not be unwelcome.”

Paradox—“Contrary to opinion or expectation.” A seemingly self-contradictory statement.
   Example: Those who lie to themselves are the only real truth seekers.

3) Figures of grammatical connection/disconnection

Asyndeton—“No connectors.” Omission of conjunctions.
   Example: “Man, woman, speech, deed, city, object should be honored.”

Hyperbaton—“Hyperbaton is the transposition, to somewhere other than its usual place, of a word.”

Hypotactic Sentence—“Subjection.” “An arrangement of clauses or phrases in a dependent or
   subordinate relationship.”
   Example: Buzz Fazio was known, among other things, for his incredible enthusiasm in the
   bowling alley, his passion for the oiled hardwood lanes, and his protective obsession
   with his purple bowling ball; which passions often led him to spill out with bliss and
   verve into other lanes, an action which could be very distracting for your first time,
   novice, struggling, bowler, which action, led to the immediate and at times violent,
   removal of poor Buzz from the alley, a sad day for bowlers everywhere, and their pets.

Isocolon—Parallelism—“Of equal members or clauses.” Phrases of approximately equal length and
   corresponding structure.
   Example: The world will little note
            nor long remember
   but it can never forget what we say here
   what they did here.
   --Abraham Lincoln

Paratactic Sentence—“Placed alongside.” Loosely structured sentences tacked on to one another,
   without a connecting word. It creates an impression of carelessness and coordination.
   Example: I came, I saw, I conquered.

Parenthesis—“A statement alongside another.”
   Example: Inserting a word or phrase—a device I am all too fond of—in a sentence.

Periodic Sentence: The main idea of the sentence comes at the end after a series of subordinate clauses.
   Example: “Who it was and why and how he sailed away, with Helen as his love, I shall not say.”
Polysyndeton—“Many connectors.” Use of a conjunction between each clause.

Example: Ladies and gentlemen, to triumph, and to congregate with the great, and to reach toward the stars in the literary heavens, and to eventually reach our goal of helping every student at the university, that is the noble aim of the Reading-Writing Center.

4) Figures of Thought

--The shape of these utterances imitates the shape or form of the thinking mind.

Accumulatio—“Heaping up.” Heaping up praise or blame to emphasize a point.

Example: The defendant “is the betrayer of his own self-respect, and the waylayer of the self-respect of others; covetous, intemperate, arrogant; disloyal to his parents…”

Climax—“Ladder.” Builds on itself.

Example: “I did not say this and then fail to make the motion; I did not make the motion and then fail to act as an ambassador; I did not act as an ambassador and then fail to persuade the Thebans.”

Hesitation: Pretending not to want to make a point.

Example: I’m not certain that I should even include this, for fear that my self-doubt might confuse you.

Irony: Implying a meaning opposite the literal meaning.

Example: I’m sure that your superhuman efforts to avoid falling asleep on the job are worthy of the highest praise and commendation.

Periphrasis—“Circling Speech.” Circumlocution or “beating around the bush.”

Example: Mayor Abscond told the crowd, “Whether or not my party endorses the making of robot noises in higher education is not reliant upon the production level of the sprocket making company in town, rather, my party will abstain from participating in the robot noises themselves, unless called upon to do so by the electorate. In higher education, however, our administration realizes that making robot noises remains an issue which is quite problematic, and which touches the very moral fabric of our community.

Personification: giving human characteristics to a non-human entity or idea.

Example: In the rain, even the JKHB wept as the couple on the quad looked at each other one last time and parted.

or appealing to an authority who is not present.

Example: If Brigham Young were here, he’d agree with me in saying . . .

Use of Questions: The writer asks and answers his own questions.

Example: Who was the only one in the house on the night of the murder? Naturally it was the butler. Who had the only key to the deceased’s room? Again, the butler. Why would the butler kill his master and old friend, you might ask? I respond, why not?


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