

## OXYMORON AS A LITERARY FIGURE OF SPEECH

Soroka I.A.

Law Institute “KNEU named after Vadym Hetman

Kyiv, Ukraine

This work presents different types of oxymora, a stylistic figure of speech, and analyses their usage in literature and everyday speech.

Oxymoron makes the English language more expressive, emotive and beautiful.

Macmillan English dictionary (2002) defines oxymoron as an expression that contains words with opposite meanings, for example “a bitter sweet experience” (i.e. an experience that is both unpleasant and pleasant) [2]. An oxymoron (Greek plural oxymora) is a figure of speech that combines two normally contradictory terms. They appear in a range of contexts, from inadvertent errors such as *extremely average* and deliberate puns like *same different*, to literary oxymora that have been carefully crafted to reveal a paradox.

The term oxymoron originates from the Greek *oxy* ("sharp" or "pointed") and *moros* ("dull"). Thus the word **oxymoron** is an oxymoron itself. In general, oxymora can be divided into the expressions deliberately crafted to be contradictory and the phrases that incidentally contain a contradiction (often as a result of a punning use of one or both words).

The most common form of oxymoron involves an **adjective + noun** combination: such as “An optimistic tragedy”, the title of a play by Vsevolod Vishnevsky, “A living corpse” by Leo Tolstoy, the title of a story “A poor millionaire” by O.Wilde. Less often **noun + verb** combinations can be found. For example: "The silence whistles" from Nathan Alterman's “Summer Night” and the name of the novel by L. Andreev “When we dead awake”.

Writers use an oxymoron in order to attract attention to a contradiction. For example Wilfred Owen [3], in his poem “The send-off” refers to soldiers leaving for the front line, who "lined the train with faces grimly gay." In this case the

oxymoron *grimly gay* highlights the contradiction between how the soldiers feel and how they act: acting *gay*, they actually feel *grim*.

Some oxymora become clichés: *deafening silence, sweet sorrow*. Oxymora are sometimes unintentionally created by errors in conversation, *e.g. original copy*.

In some cases an inadvertent oxymoron is adopted as the name for a concept, in this case it stops being recognised as an oxymoron (*e.g. virtual reality*).

Unlike literary, a great many oxymora are not intended to construct a paradox; they are simply puns. Examples include *controlled chaos, open secret and organized mess*.

There are also many examples where terms that are superficially contradictory are juxtaposed in such a way that there is no contradiction. Examples include *pretty ugly* (in which context pretty means rather, not attractive) and *hot ice* (hot and ice mean "stolen" and "diamonds" in criminal argot). It is disputable whether these collocations may be called oxymora.

Some oxymora are not obvious, some may require understanding of verbal or regional interpretations, and some may even indicate certain prejudices (*military intelligence, honest lawyer, resident alien, legally drunk, peace force, rap music, religious tolerance, plastic glasses, homeopathic medicine*).

Words will often be put together and used as oxymora for editorial comments, whether for political or ideological purposes. For example, if you say the phrase "honest politician" is an oxymoron, then you are implying that politicians are inherently dishonest.

Comedians scatter oxymorons throughout monologues with great success:

"I have never let my schooling interfere with my education," wrote a humorist Mark Twain. "She used to diet on any kind of food she could lay her hands on," observed a comic Arthur Baer. "You'd be surprised how much it costs to look this cheap," joked a country singer Dolly Parton.

Richard Lederer [1] identifies natural and crafted types of oxymora. Most speakers of English who know the definition of an oxymoron would have little

trouble identifying the pairs *inside out*, *student teacher*, *working vacation* and *small fortune* as oxymora. R. Lederer calls this major category of oxymoronology "natural" because the perception of these duos as oxymora is relatively direct and effortless and does not depend on plays on words or personal values. Among the examples are: *mobile home*, *fresh frozen*, *loyal opposition*, *old boy*.

When we say *same difference*, *global village*, *accidentally on purpose* we are likely to be more aware of the collision of opposites than when we say *old news* or *death benefit*.

Oxymora make effective headlines in newspapers, names of films, literary works and appealing phrases on hoardings. Figures of speech such as oxymoron add beauty, colours, emphasis, exaggeration, exclamation, irony, and luxuriance to the English language.

### References

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