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A Stylistic and Interpretive Analysis of English Aphorisms

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***Annotation:** This article intends to investigate the stylistic techniques found in "life and death" aphorisms, as well as to identify their roles and frequency (rates of occurrence). Certainly, these lexical, syntactical, and phonetic acoustic, stylistic techniques are intertwined and mutually complementing, forming a complicated pattern.*

***Key words:** aphorism, stylistic devices, etymology of aphorisms, parallelism, hyperbole, alliteration.*

Introduction. Aphorisms are brief statements intended to convey a point or exemplify a widely held viewpoint. Aphorisms are frequently interpreted as clever pieces of wisdom. They are more than that; they serve as a tool of expressing a philosophy or a mood. An aphorism is either successful or unsuccessful on its own. It is not supported or held up by a system (Gross, 2003:15). Stephen Vincent Benet provides an excellent example: "Life is not lost by dying; life is lost minute by minute, day by day, in all the thousand small uncaring ways."

The stylistic devices that are helpful for developing and analyzing texts are lexical, syntactical, and one phonetic. These will be demonstrated in this article.

English Aphorisms: Definition and Etymology

An aphorism can be a concept, a joke, a short poem, a loose haiku, a picture, a glance, a paradox, or an observation - virtually anything as long as it is brief and simple. It is defined as a brief, concise statement containing a truth of wide significance.

The Webster Dictionary defines aphorism as "a short, pithy sentence; to mark off by boundaries, set aside, cast out, and define; a terse and often ingenious formulation of a truth or sentiment usually in a single sentence; a dage, maxim". An example of an aphorism is, "Men's maxims reveal their characters (Gross, 2003:1). An adage is an older aphorism that has been long used because it contains a truthful observation, such as "don't burn your bridges behind you". The maxim presents helpful instruction. An example of a maxim is, "Aphorisms are portable wisdoms, the quintessential extracts of thought and feeling".

“An aphorism is the concise statement of a moral or philosophical principle. It offers a comment on some recurrent aspect of life, clothed in terms which are meant to be permanently or universally applicable” (Gross,2003: viii). Gross categorized aphorisms as (Mankind, Life, Self-Doubt, Friends and Foes, Happiness and Sorrow, Illusion and Reality, Death, and The Afterlife).

The aphorism has been used from the beginning of human society to represent truth and the author's insights on life. These may be heavenly notions or everyday experiences. The aphorism remains in use if it is true and speaks to the realities of the human experience. The aphorism's lessons encompass codes and conduct, life emotions, and human strengths and limitations. At a glance, the reader will know if it is true and can learn something about life.

The etymological root of the word “aphorism” also comes from the Greek: “apo” means “from” and “boros” means boundary or horizon. So, the original meaning of the term was “something that marks off or set apart”- i.e., a definition. The definition is among the most durable forms of the aphorism, and the English novelist Samuel Butler supplied a wonderful example of it: A definition is the enclosing of a wilderness of idea within a wall of words (Geary,2007:5).

The term “aphorism” was first used in a collection of medical sayings in the “aphorisms of Hippocrates”, which contains the saying “Art is long; life is short” (Jones,1979:99). The one -line aphorism can stand by itself, but is often found in two sentences in order to enhance the saying. These can be joined with other aphorisms in a cluster form to make a larger message, such as a parable. The phrasing should be resilient and of a perceptive nature, with an agreeable rhythm of interesting words.

Modern aphorisms are concerned with the same ideas and questions that have been puzzling humanity from the beginning of time. The desires and longings of the heart, our sense of identity, the nature of good and evil, time, religion, and the aftertime are common themes found in today's' aphorisms. They are used to express the need to find spiritual fulfillment and understanding of the cultural experience of the 20th century (Gross, 2003: v-vi).

Aphorisms and Proverbs. Meider describes the proverb in the following way: "a short, generally known sentence of the folk that contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memoizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation" . In the words of Norrick, the adage is "a traditional, conversational, didactic genre with general meaning, a potential free conversational turn, preferably with figurative meanings". A proverb differs from an aphorism in that it is less educational, but contains entertaining observations, and has no acknowledged source. They are easily remembered and have been utilized verbally and in writing throughout history.

If its language and the subject have become obsolete, people cannot relate, and it is forgotten, becoming a part of folk knowledge and history. New sayings are being created all the time such as “the camera doesn’t lie”, and “Been there, done that”. Through repetition, they may officially be listed as proverbs (Meider, 1985:119).

“While aphorisms offer insights and wisdom, they differ from proverbs in that they are not apocryphal. And while they are universal, they also generally bear the personal mark of the author” (Gross, 2003:ix).

When compared to proverbs, aphorisms are more informative and can be prosaic or poetic. Aphorisms may also come with repeated words and phrases or two parts with similar syntactic structure. It can be seen that proverbs are used more in our daily life than aphorisms.

In the history of literature, the style of aphorism went through numerous stages and historic events. Numerous references are used not only to give evidence to author’s education, but they are also a

rhetoric figure. By means of allusions, references and popular quotes, aphorists convey wide range of meanings, ideas and thoughts in a simple and concise manner (Szczesniak, 2008:60).

The complex perception and comprehension of aphorism is complicated by the fact that the genre appears as an individual structure without any wider context. Since aphorism functions in two semantic planes, it is ambiguous (Ibid.). These semantic planes are literary and metaphoric. The former constitutes the body of aphorism, whereas the latter is a carrier of “deep thoughts”: the wisdom of aphorism, which contributes to the highly artistic literary form of this genre.

Aphorism often uses impersonal form, phrases referring to general public or group nouns (people, some.):

“and *“It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious” (Oscar Wilde)*

The aphoristic style is characterized by irony and a sense of humor, as well as the presence of several rhetorical devices, such as; paradoxes, antitheses, workday, ellipsis – which help aphorisms have a compact language form (Ibid:68).

To address the matrix of oppositions, the aphorism employs rhetorical word patterns such as antithesis, parallelism, proportion, oxymoron, chiasmus, metaphor, and paradox in a succinct, expressive manner. The aphorism conveyed an insight or perception through language. Aphorisms may not always have an obvious meaning; in fact, they are often opaque at first glance. It often works dialectically through paradox, pun, mixed metaphor, or similarly unexpected word and semantic juxtaposition, requiring the reader to reconsider, to complete the dialectical process of an active quest for unexpected meaning. (Gross, 2003:v)

Analysis

Parallelism. Trask defines parallelism as “the use of the same construction in consecutive sentences for rhetorical effect”. Parallelism is the use of the same pattern of phrases, clauses, sentences to express two or more ideas of the same level of importance. Thus, similarity of form points up similarity of content (Kane, 1988:145) According to Beau Grande and Dressler (1981:49), parallelism is “the repetition of a structure but filling it with new elements”. To explain this, they provide the following example:

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns.

In this case, a series of comparable events are conveyed using the same structure: verb - possessive pronoun - direct object. “Parallelism refers to repeated syntactical resemblance. Several elements of a sentence or sentences are stated similarly to demonstrate that the ideas included in the sections or sentences are equally important.” Parallelism also adds rhythm and balance to the context and, most importantly, clarity to the sentence (Harris, 2010) According to Galperin (1981: 189), “the necessity condition in parallel construction is identical, or similar, syntactical structure in two or more sentences or parts of a sentence in close succession”.

In this respect, Hodges and Whitten (1982: 223) believe that “a sentence is balanced when grammatically equal structures are used ... to express contrasted or similar ideas” and this equates parallelism with balance.

This device is shown in the following aphorisms:

***A single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is statistic.* Churchill** There are identical expressions

here, such as (a single death/a million deaths). The goal of such parallelism is to influence the two opposing viewpoints: a single death is parallel to a million deaths.

Life is a tragedy for those who feel, and a comedy for those who think. Dr. Squid According to this aphorism, there is a parallel construction on the clausal level as (a tragedy for...and a comedy for...) which highlights two opposing notions in order to equate the significance of the section.

It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done;

it is a far, far better rest that I go to, than I have ever known. Charles Dickens This parallel composition requires similar syntactical structure in two statements that are closely related. In this aphorism, parallelism supports repetition, making the entire sentence epigrammatic.

Everyone is born sincere and die deceiver. Lucde de Clapiers Here, parallelism consists of notion contrasts that equate the part's value on a phrasal level to (born / die; truthful / deceitful). The contrast is also used to compare one object to another.

Hyperbole is a figure of speech and literary device that creates heightened effect through deliberate exaggeration. Hyperbole is a powerful literary device that involves **exaggeration** to create vivid imagery, emphasize a point, or evoke strong emotions. It often appears in aphorisms and other forms of concise wisdom. In formal writing the hyperbole must be clearly intended as exaggeration, and should be carefully restricted (Harris, 2010) Hyperbole can make a single point very enthusiastically explained as: Or you can exaggerate one thing to show how really different it is from something supposedly similar to which it is being compared (Ibid.): *This stuff is used motor oil compared to the coffee you make, my love.* According to Norrick "Hyperbole has traditionally been considered a rhetorical figure along with, if not quite of the same importance of synecdoche, metaphor and metonymy". He (Ibid.) adds that hyperbole counts as amplification. Amplification says more than necessary as in the following example: *Faint heart never won fair lady. In this example the concept of hyperbole is due to the existence of* Hyperbole can be expressed by all notional parts of speech. The most typical cases of expression are: by pronouns (every, all, everybody); by numerical nouns (a thousand); by adverbs of time (never, ever). Baldick states that hyperbole is an exaggeration for the sake of emphasis in a figure of speech not meant literally as in the following example: *I have been waiting here for ages.* This device is shown in the following aphorisms:

A single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is statistic. Churchill

The hyperbolic device in this aphorism is: (a single / a million) which is a deliberate exaggeration of a numerical nouns to indicate emphasis.

No one knows whether death, which people fear to be the greatest evil, may not be the greatest good. Plato

This aphorism incorporates hyperbole, as shown by the phrase "greatest good." Here, the writer exaggerates one aspect to demonstrate how significantly different it is from something ostensibly comparable to which it is being contrasted.

1. The supreme happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved; loved for ourselves, or rather in spite of ourselves. Victor Hugo
2. I am old enough to know better but I'm still too young to care. Ogden Nash
3. All animals except man know that the ultimate of life is to enjoy it. Samuel Butler
4. In the aphorisms stated above, hyperbolic devices express effect and emphasis as in: "supreme

happiness”, “too young”, “all animals”, “too much”, “all serving” and “only hope”.

Life is just one damned thing after another. Elbert Hubbard

There is hyperbole in this aphorism (one) which is used as a deliberate exaggeration of a certain quality of an object.

Being widely employed in aphorisms **alliteration** indicates rhythms. It is the repetition of the initial sound of two or more words as in (big bat in the belfry). In alliterative verse, sound –unity is provided in every line by alliteration Trask states that alliteration is the “repeated use of the same initial consonant sound in a string of words in a connected text: *The burghers of Brighton briskly bundled the belligerent boatmen back to Brest*. Alliteration is used in proverbs, football chants, set expressions, and aphorisms to make memorizing easier. Cuddon (1999:23) says that the repetition of initial consonants sounds of words that are found close together in a line is alliteration. A good example is: *Five miles meandering with a mazy motion*. The aim of alliteration is to achieve specific kinds of effect or rhythm in sentences. This device is illustrated in the following aphorisms:

Don’t die until you are dead. Elbert Hubbard

There is alliteration in this aphorism (consonance). The re-repeated sound is often met at the beginning of words: don’t / die / dead. This device is employed in this aphorism to indicate rhythm.

All I desire for my own burial is not to be buried alive. The Earl of Chesterfield

Alliteration here is shown in: burial / be/ buried to provide rhythm.

Meiosis is another stylistic device frequently used in aphorisms. This figure of quantity is opposite in meaning to hyperbole. Meiosis is a deliberate diminution of a certain quality of an object or phenomenon. Meiosis makes speech expressive (Harris, 2010) Good examples are:

It was a cat- size pony.

There was a drop of water left in the bucket.

This device is shown in the following selected aphorisms:

I don’t think anyone should write their autobiography until after they are dead. Samuel Goldwyn

In the above aphorism, there is meiosis, which is a remarks about making utterances expressive because people are unable to write their autobiographies, which may be done after someone's death.

In three words I can sum up everything I’ve learned about life. It goes on. Robert Frost

The use of meiosis in this aphorism implies that something is less significant than it actually is: in three words. The goal here is that in three words, he/she can explain what he/she has learnt about life. This aphorism solely has an expressive meaning.

Stylistic analysis of aphorisms is reciprocally related to **Irony**. Abrams states that irony is a statement in which the meaning that a speaker implies differs sharply from the meaning that is ostensibly **expressed**. Irony is a lexical stylistic device based on the simultaneous realization of two logical meanings – dictionary and contextual, but the two meanings stand in opposition to each other (Galperin, 1981:133). This device is shown in the following aphorisms:

All animals except man know that the ultimate of life is to enjoy it. Samuel Butler There is irony in this aphorism. Mockery is concealed to convey a negative feeling (pity). Here there is an attitude opposite to that which is actually stated.

Attention to health is life's greatest hindrance. *Plato* The irony is used here to convey a negative meaning as irritation. Attention to health is the greatest impediment of life.

Conclusions. Based on the results stated earlier, the following conclusions have been drawn:

English aphorisms about "life and death" are complicated structures that suggest parallel structures and balanced sentences. Parallel structures are arrangements of words, clauses, phrases, and sentences that ensure that parts of equal importance are developed and phrased similarly. To be balanced, clauses or phrases must be similar in structure and meaning. This represents the reality that without parallelism, writing can become overly complicated and awkward. The selected aphorisms of life and death contain repetition, which means that words and ideas are utilized more than once to create emphasis.

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