
UNIT 37 RHETORIC AND GRAMMAR

Structure

37.0 Objectives

37.1 Introduction

37.2 Rhetoric

37.2.1 Figures of speech

37.2.1.1 The simile

37.2.1.2 The metaphor

37.2.1.3 Personification

37.2.1.4 Metonymy and synecdoche

37.2.1.5 Hyperbole

37.2.1.6 Meiosis and Litotes

37.2.1.7 Antonomasia

37.3 Grammar

37.3.1 Grammar allows us to say the unexpected

37.3.2 The Rules of Grammar are Subtle, Complex and Unconscious

37.4 Let Us sum up

37.5 Further reading

37.6 Answers to Check your progress

37.0 OBJECTIVES

- to introduce the features of grammar and rhetoric,
- to review and illustrate some common rhetorical devices, and
- to introduce the notion of an unconscious, internalized grammar.

37.1 INTRODUCTION

We can say that grammar tells us how words are put together in sentences to convey meaning accurately and conventionally. Grammar is associated with correctness in the use of language. Grammar is also a characterization of how language is conventionally used to convey meanings that are agreed upon. Rhetoric, on the other hand, tells us how to use language effectively to achieve our purposes: to persuade someone about our beliefs, to move them to action, to convey emotion effectively, and so on. Rhetoric seeks not just correctness, but clarity, beauty, and force in the use of language. It tells us that there is more than one way to convey an idea, and helps us to choose the best way in which to convey it.

Good speech and good writing display both grammatical and rhetorical properties. We have emphasized throughout this course that speaking well and writing well follow from listening to and reading good models of language. However, there is also a tradition of teaching the rules of grammar and rhetoric. It may help you to know some of these rules, not so much for helping you to immediately to speak or write well, but in order for you to understand and appreciate how a good speech or a good piece of writing is put together. That is, the points in this unit and this

block will teach you the analytical skills that you can use in your reading and listening to see how a certain effect has been achieved. This sensitization to how a sentence or a text is constructed will have an indirect effect on your own use of language, as you will be able to look at your own writing and speaking self-critically, and in this way improve yourself over a period of time.

37.2 RHETORIC

Rhetoric was first taught by the ancient Greeks. It was the art of the orator, of speech that influenced the thoughts and the actions of others. The methods used by the rhetoricians were not always good; they did not hesitate to achieve success at the expense of truth (some would say, in the manner of modern advertising!). Because the art of rhetoric was thus abused, the word “rhetorical” sometimes has negative connotations, suggesting that there is little substance in someone’s speech. It is thus common to call a question a “rhetorical question” when it is not really a question at all, i.e. it does not require an answer (as you saw in the previous unit). For example, you may exclaim in self-pity: “What have I done to deserve all these troubles?” You do not really require an answer, i.e. a lesson in what you did wrong, but you need sympathy!

Because of the abuse of rhetoric, Aristotle wrote a treatise in the 4th century B.C.E. on the art of sound reasoning. Later in this block we shall look at some of the properties of logical thinking and reasoning and how these may be used in argumentation. We shall also list some common fallacies or illogical and illegal forms of argument, and illustrate these as well.

You have already encountered some principles of rhetoric. You are aware, for example, that there are formal, informal and colloquial uses of language, and that to use one style where the other should be used invites ridicule. We have also discussed the correct and meaningful use of words, and discussed avoiding ambiguity in expression, or the clumsy construction of sentences. You may take a minute to look at the relevant parts of the units on globalization and communication skills, or presentation skills, before continuing with this unit. In the unit immediately prior to this one we introduced to you a few literary devices that traditionally are part of the study of rhetoric. Below we review and discuss some of these devices.

37.2.1 Figures of Speech

There are times, especially when we are charged with emotion, when ordinary, everyday speech seems inadequate to express our thoughts and feelings. To make our speech more vivid and compelling, we use figures of speech. But be warned. The figure of speech is a powerful tool, and in untrained hands it is often an arrow that misses its mark and shoots the shooter instead! That is, the careless use of figures of speech may make you an object of ridicule.

37.2.1.1 The Simile

The most common figure of speech is the simile (pronounced /simili/), which introduces a striking comparison. The poet Wordsworth wrote:

I wandered lonely as a cloud.

Lord Byron wrote:

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies ...

More ordinarily, you may have said in annoyance: “You eat like a pig!” Or “He’s as blind as a bat and she’s as proud as a peacock!”

✓ Check Your Progress 1

1. Can you complete these common similes in English?

As black as _____ as brave as _____ as dead as _____

as deaf as _____ as cool as _____ as white as _____

37.2.1.2 The Metaphor

The vividness of the comparison can be heightened by leaving out the words that signal the comparison, the words “like” and “as”. We then have a metaphor. For example, “He’s like a tower of strength!” is a simile, but “He’s a tower of strength!” is a metaphor. So also we can say:

There was a torrent of applause after the performance. The artistes were showered with praise.

These sentences invoke metaphors of water – its sound and its force. As you can see, many such metaphors have become part of everyday language.

When using metaphors, we must be careful not to mix them. Look at this example of mixed metaphors, which sounds ridiculous.

The mayor is a pillar of society who has nipped in the bud the plans of the opposition to discredit him.

This mixes two metaphors: a pillar of society (a person who is upright and holds society in place) and nipping in the bud (before it flowers) a plan that is wicked. It is amusing because pillars cannot nip anything in the bud!

The metaphorical use of language is much more common than you may think. For example, we speak in English of “wasting time”, as if time is a physical object like money, food or water, which can be improperly used.

✓ Check Your Progress 2

2. Identify and underline the metaphors in the following sentences:

1. He immersed himself in books.
2. She was the life and soul of the party.
3. This has been a turning point in my life.

37.2.1.3 Personification

When a metaphor represents a lifeless object or an abstract idea as a person, we have a figure of speech called personification.

Stern daughter of the voice of God! O duty!

wrote Wordsworth, personifying duty. Justice is often personified as a blindfolded figure holding in her hands a pair of scales, leading to the expression “Justice is blind”.

✓ **Check your progress 3**

3. Identify and underline the personification in the following statements:

Our university looks ahead confidently into the future.
This is a country on the move.

37.2.1.4 Metonymy and Synecdoche

The figure of speech known as metonymy uses a characteristic or attribute of a person or thing, to refer to that person or thing. For example, the Crown or the Throne refers to a king or queen, or to monarchy. A very common example of metonymy is

The pen is mightier than the sword,

a saying that refers to the influence in society of writers or intellectuals as against soldiers or warriors.

The synecdoche (*sin-ek-doki*) names a part of the person or thing instead of the whole. “He has the ear of the Prime Minister” (= the Prime Minister takes his advice); “Many hands make light work” (=many people working together ...); “they all live under the same roof” (=in the same house). You may have heard the expression “The long arm of the law”, as in “Finally the long arm of the law caught up with the cheats.” Here personification of the law (as perhaps a policeman) is combined with synecdoche (the long arm of the policeman reaches out to catch the criminal by the collar, perhaps).

37.2.1.5 Hyperbole

Have you ever said, “I’m so hungry I could eat a hundred samosas!” or “I’ll kill the person who has taken my best socks!” or “He sleeps 25 hours a day!” You are wildly exaggerating to show your extreme feelings on the subject. This is also a figure of speech, called hyperbole (pronounced to rhyme with ‘melancholy’), a Greek word that means ‘to overshoot’.

In some cultures it is common to use such high praise for people in positions of power that it becomes hyperbolic. A school play once achieved a humorous effect by its sustained use of hyperbole for the character of a Caliph, who was addressed as follows by his fawning courtiers: “O apple of delight! O Peacock of the universe! O Emerald among chickpeas!” In modern English, hyperbole almost always has a comic effect. What is favoured is the opposite of hyperbole, discussed below.

37.2.1.6 Meiosis and Litotes

The opposite of hyperbole is understatement, a kind of speech style associated typically with the British. In colloquial and perhaps old fashioned British English, expressions like ‘not half’ and ‘rather’ in exclamations mean ‘very much indeed.’ More usefully, you may hear it said that someone ‘wasn’t very pleased’ to mean they were very angry; or that something wasn’t very useful (it was totally useless). This is a very useful politeness strategy for conveying displeasure, disapproval and so on, in formal contexts: “His remarks are not always relevant” (=He talks nonsense), “They don’t usually start on time” (=they are always very late), “It may not be safe to eat the salad” (=it’s probably full of dangerous germs; because it’s uncooked). This figure of speech is called meiosis (pronounced *my-oh-sis*).

One particular form of meiosis is the litotes (pronounced *light-o-tease*), in which a double negative is used instead of the positive: “She’s not unwilling to marry him/

to be the Prime Minister" (= she's very eager indeed); "My cooking skills are not bad" (= I'm a good cook). Like meiosis, the litotes is a useful politeness strategy in speaking of one's own skills: "Oh, I'm not a bad driver, I can cope with this traffic", "I can sing a little", sound more modest than boasting about your skills! But used with obvious insincerity, the effect can be quite comic, or even insulting, as when a well known writer says to a beginning writer, "Well, I write a little, and I think your novel sags in the middle".

37.2.1.7 Antonomasia

Finally, the use of a famous person's name, or a place name, as a description leads to the figure of speech known as antonomasia. You must have heard the expression "to meet one's Waterloo", as in "After its many takeovers of smaller steel companies, United Steel met its Waterloo in its bid to buy Tensile Strength". This use of language invokes the public's memory or knowledge of the defeat at Waterloo, at the hands of the British Admiral Nelson, of the generally victorious French monarch Napoleon. By comparison, it suggests the might of the United Steel Company and the magnitude of its fall.

Again, the image of David and Goliath from the Bible is often invoked to symbolize the victory of the small or ordinary person against a giant.

The battle of Waterloo has also given the English language the expression "to turn a blind eye to something" or "to turn a Nelson's eye to something", based on the following anecdote. Admiral Nelson was blind in one eye. The French fleet led by Napoleon raised the white flag of surrender when they saw that defeat was imminent. By the rules of battle, the British could not fire on the enemy once this white flag had been raised. But Admiral Nelson turned the blind side of his face towards the white flag, so that he could not see it, and so the British did not halt their attack, disabling the enemy completely.

More happily, we often find the language Telugu described by its users as 'the Italian of the East', to convey that it sounds beautiful; or Kashmir described as the Switzerland of India, and so on. The use of a description or epithet instead of a name is also classified under this figure of speech: for example, Shakespeare is known as 'the Bard of Avon'.

The figures of speech listed above are not the only rhetorical devices that can be seen in powerful speeches or writing. One very common device is parallelism in structures and ideas. We shall illustrate this and other features with rhetorical value in the examples in the next unit.

✓ Check Your Progress 4

Most of us think that figures of speech are found mainly in poetry, or in the speeches of great orators. You will be surprised, then, to see that good journalistic writing is often full of these devices.

4. You may have seen the expression 'a Herculean task' in a newspaper or magazine. What is the figure of speech seen here? Can you explain the expression?

.....

.....

.....

.....

5. Here is a quotation from an article in the newspaper *Mint*, May 8, 2008. The article is "Price economics" by William Pesek. It reports the attempt to form a cartel, like the oil cartel OPEC, among South East Asian countries, to manage rice supplies in a world where the price of grain is shooting up.

This is how the article begins:

"Until last week, the next oil – the critical resource growing ever scarcer and prompting desperate behaviour to ensure supplies – was water. Turns out, it's rice."

What does the writer mean by saying "the next oil is rice?"

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

What does he mean by saying "Until last week, the next oil was water?"

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

The writer himself explains this – find his explanation in the quotation above.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

What is the figure of speech used here?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

37.3 GRAMMAR

We do not learn a language by learning its grammar. We said in Block 1 of this course that we learn language as a child learns language: by receiving and sending messages in it, by using it for communication. There are no shortcuts to this process, which begins with listening or reading, and takes place over a period of time.

But as adults, we have passed beyond the child-like stages of everyday communication, where we use language mainly to talk about the here-and-now to get people to do things, or to act in response to what other people say. We use language to convey complex ideas which cannot be conveyed without language: all the burden of meaning is carried by language. In these cases, if our grammar is unconventional or different from the grammar most other speakers of a language, it can affect communication. We shall illustrate this with some simple examples.

37.3.1 Grammar allows us to say the unexpected

Take three simple words: *man*, *dog*, and *bites*. What is the most likely or probable message that can be conveyed using these words? It is (in “headline English”):

Dog bites man

But you have perhaps heard this journalistic adage: “Dog bites man” is not news; whereas “Man bites dog” is news! The first message is *expected*. The second message is unusual, and so it is news.

But what allows us to use the same words as in the first message, which is expected, to convey the second message, which is unusual? It is the grammar in the word order of English (*Subject-Verb-Object*). (Other languages may use their case systems to convey these meanings.) Suppose we know only the words *man*, *dog*, and *bites*, but we do not know the word order grammar of English. Then we shall see no difference in meaning between “Man bites dog” and “Dog bites man!”

You may think that this grammar is so obvious that it cannot be called grammar at all. But there is a very early stage in the learning of English where a speaker of other Indian languages must understand that the English word order is different from that of our other languages; and that it is less “free”. First, you must understand that our languages normally use a different word order. In Hindi or in Tamil, we would put the words in the order “Man dog bites”, rather than “Man bites dog”. (Try it out in your own language and see in what order you speak these words.)

So also, we say “the sky in” and not “in the sky” (for example). We use “postpositions” where English uses “prepositions.” Now you can perhaps understand why some learners of English made the following mistake. They looked at a headline,

Can you name every plant in your garden?

and began to translate it: “In every plant, ...!” (They put the word *in* with the words before it rather than the words after it.) But for most learners of English, this beginner’s stage is very short; they soon learn the word order of English.

Now let’s complicate things a little. Look at the sentence (again in “headline English”): “Dog is bitten by man”. Who has bitten whom? To understand this, you must know your grammar! To see why this is so, compare the two headlines below:

Dog is bitten by man

Dog has bitten man

Three words are common to both the headlines:

Dog ... bitten ... man

If you fill in the first blank with *is* and the second blank with *by*, you get the ‘unexpected’ or ‘news’ headline where the man bites the dog. This sentence is in the ‘passive voice’. Whereas if you fill in the first blank with *has* and don’t fill

anything into the second blank, you get the expected headline that is not 'news'. This sentence is in the 'active voice'.

✓ **Check Your Progress 5**

1. Using the three words *man*, *dog* and *bites*, write an 'unexpected' and an 'expected' headline.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

2. Using the words *dog*, *bitten*, *man*, make an 'active, expected' headline and a 'passive, unexpected' headline.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

37.3.2 The Rules of Grammar are Subtle, Complex and Unconscious

Linguists have studied children learning English as their first language, and also older children learning English at school as a second language. They find that when children are still learning English, there is a stage at which they can understand passive sentences whose meaning is 'sensible', for example, headlines such as

Man trampled by elephant
Child bitten by dog
Goat eaten by tiger

But they cannot use grammar accurately to say who has chased or hit whom in sentences such as the following:

Boy chased by girl
Truck hit by car

This is because in the real world boys can chase girls and girls can chase boys; and you need to "know" English grammar to know that the headlines above are in the 'short passive' form. (Of course, you may not know this consciously.)

So how do you 'learn' this grammar? Linguists say that you 'acquire' it. You need not have been taught the passive construction at school; most three year olds can understand simple passives, before they start attending school. So there are points of grammar that you 'pick up' when you learn English naturally. This is why (to repeat our point) we say that you cannot learn a language by learning its grammar.

Why is this so? Well, there are at least two reasons. For one thing, some of the rules of grammar we seem to know are so subtle and complex that we are still discovering them. We take them for granted; we cannot explain them. The situation is a little like in the sixteenth century, before gravity was "discovered"; everyone took it for granted that things fall to the earth if they are not supported, but no one knew why this was so, and no one asked why this was so! Similarly, let us look

at a small point of English grammar that you probably know, without being taught it, and not knowing why this rule exists.

There is a 'stylistic inversion' rule in English that lets us put an adverb right in the beginning of the sentence, in order to emphasize it. Look at these pairs of sentences.

The carriage rolled down.	→	Down rolled the carriage!
The boys ran away.	→	Away ran the boys!
The flame went out.	→	Out went the flame!

Notice that when the adverb comes to the first position in the sentence, it 'pulls' the verb with it, so that the 'subjects' – the carriage, the boys, the flame – now follow the verb. They come right at the end of the sentences in the right hand column.

Now let us use a pronoun instead of these 'subject words'. What happens to the word order?

It rolled down.	→	Down it rolled!
They ran away.	→	Away they ran!
It went out.	→	Out it went!

When the subject is a pronoun, it stays in second place – the verb does not invert with it! That is, the sentences in the right hand column do not now end with a subject pronoun.

Why is this so? There is no very clear answer, except that small, short words like pronouns behave differently from other nouns. Perhaps the language avoids ending the sentence with a pronoun: it avoids the sentence **Down rolled it!*

There are other constructions in English where pronouns are not allowed to end the sentence. For example, you can say '**put off the light**', as well as '**put the light off**'. But you must say '**put it off**', you cannot say **put off it*', with the pronoun at the end. Again, you can say, '**Here is the news!**' but you cannot say **Here is it!* You must say '**Here it is!**' This is another instance of a pronoun not being allowed to end a sentence in English.

Who made these rules? We don't think anyone made them consciously. Linguists believe that languages behave the way they do because of certain mental principles, just as the universe behave the way it does because of certain physical principles. In any case, you may not find the 'rules of grammar' described above written down in any grammar book. But if you know your English, you probably agree that that is how things are.

The second reason why such rules have to be 'acquired' in use rather than 'learnt' as grammar is that these rules are too complex to be of use to us when we are actually speaking, if we have to use them consciously. Let's give you an analogy. When we speak, we use stored breath; we cannot breathe in. Now imagine if you had to consciously decide when to breathe in and when to speak! It would occupy so much of your attention, you would forget what you wanted to say. Instead, you unconsciously regulate your breathing when you speak.

We normally speak at the rate of 3-7 words **a second**. Imagine if you had to consult rules of grammar while you were speaking at this rate! We speak continuously; there is no time to pause and look at our grammar as we speak. We must "know grammar" unconsciously, the way we "know" how to balance ourselves on two feet, or (for some of us) how to balance ourselves on two wheels. We must "acquire the skill" by practicing and falling down!

37.4 LET US SUM UP

1. Grammar tells us how words are put together in sentences to convey meaning accurately and conventionally. Grammar is associated with correctness in the use of language. Grammar is also a characterization of how language is conventionally used to convey meanings that are agreed upon.
2. Rhetoric tells us how to use language effectively to achieve our purposes: to persuade someone about our beliefs, to move them to action, or to convey emotion effectively. Rhetoric seeks not just correctness, but clarity, beauty, and force in the use of language. Where there is more than one way to convey an idea, rhetoric helps us to choose the best way in which to convey it.
3. Good speech and good writing displays both grammatical and rhetorical properties.
4. Rhetoric was first taught by the ancient Greeks. The speech of the orator influenced the thoughts and the actions of others.
5. We already know some principles of rhetoric: for example, that there are formal, informal and colloquial uses of language. To use one style where the other should be used invites ridicule. The correct and meaningful use of words, and avoiding ambiguity in expression, or the clumsy construction of sentences, are also exercises in rhetoric.
6. A few literary devices called figures of speech are traditionally part of the study of rhetoric. But the careless use of figures of speech may make you an object of ridicule.
7. The most common figure of speech is the simile, which introduces a striking comparison.
8. The vividness of the comparison can be heightened by leaving out the words that signal the comparison, the words “like” and “as”. We then have a metaphor.
9. When a metaphor represents a lifeless object or an abstract idea as a person, we have a figure of speech called personification.
10. The figure of speech known as metonymy uses a characteristic or attribute of a person or thing, to refer to that person or thing.
11. The synecdoche names a part of the person or thing instead of the whole.
12. Wildly exaggerating to show your extreme feelings on a subject is also a figure of speech, called hyperbole.
13. The opposite of hyperbole is understatement, a figure of speech called meiosis.
14. One particular form of meiosis is the litotes, in which a double negative is used instead of the positive.
15. Finally, the use of a famous person’s or place’s name as a description leads to the figure of speech known as antonomasia.
16. When we use language to convey complex ideas, all the burden of meaning is carried by language. In these cases, if our grammar is unconventional or different from the grammar most other speakers of a language, it can affect communication.
17. Suppose we know only the words *man*, *dog*, and *bites*, and we do not know the word order grammar of English. Then we shall see no difference between “Man bites dog” and “Dog bites man!”

18. In Hindi or in Tamil, we would put the words in the order “Man dog bites”, rather than “Man bites dog”. So also, we say “the sky in” and not “in the sky”. We use “postpositions” where English uses “prepositions”.
19. When children are still learning English, they can understand passive sentences whose meaning is ‘sensible’. But they cannot use understand passive sentences whose meaning does not give them a clue that the sentence is passive and not active.

37.5 FURTHER READING

Metaphors to live by (by George Lakoff) can be found in a good library.

Current English: A Guide for the User of English in India by K.S. Yadurajan. Oxford India Paperback edition. 2001, 2003.

37.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. coal; a lion; a doornail/a dodo; a doorpost; (a) cucumber; snow

Check Your Progress 2

2. immersed himself (as if books are an ocean)
 the life and soul of the party (as if a party is a living being)
 a turning point (as if life is a journey)

Check Your Progress 3

3. Our university; This country.

Check Your Progress 4

4. This is antonomasia. The reference is to Greek mythology, and the twelve tasks of Hercules. Since these were very difficult or impossible tasks, the difficulty of the task is described by invoking the name of Hercules.
5. “The next oil is rice” means rice is going to be the next product that is difficult to get, and is getting more expensive. “Until last week, the next oil was water” means that as recently as only a week ago, it was thought that water was getting scarce, and water would be the thing that would be difficult to get in future, becoming as precious as oil. The author explains what the word “oil” stands for in the parentheses “- the critical resource growing ever scarcer and prompting desperate behaviour to ensure supplies.”

As for what the figure of speech is, we can say that oil serves as a metaphor for “a critical resource growing ever scarcer and prompting desperate behaviour to ensure supplies.” Perhaps we can also say this is an instance of antonomasia. The name of a common, well known product is being used as a description.

Check Your Progress 6

6. Man bites dog. Dog bites man.
 Dog has bitten man. Dog is bitten by man.