

The Rhetoric of Chiasmus #2

Food

Of all human activities, eating is right up there with the most pervasive and important – think of the many cooking shows on TV, cook books for sale etc. So next time you're eating, try chewing on this...

Previously, I introduced the concept of chiasmus, and left you with the suggestion that many people have the ability to develop their own, original chiasmic sayings.

This was brilliantly brought home to me when I was talking about chiasmus with my daughter, Elena, back in 2003. Elena was nine at that time and even then, she displayed a good grasp of language and an affinity for playing with words. After I had finished explaining the concept of chiasmus – by using the Cicero quote “I eat to live, not live to eat.” – a while later on that same day, she came back to me with this: “**I just die to live, not live just to die.**” The subtlety of that construction is quite profound; but from a nine-year old? What can I say? I wish I'd thought of it.

However, as you know now, chiasmus is used extensively in writing, and by many famous people. One such person was John F. Kennedy. On his inauguration day, in January 1961, he is remembered for this often quoted statement: “**Ask not what your country can do for you; rather, ask what you can do for your country.**” It's a great couple of lines, but I have it on good authority that Kennedy actually adapted another quote that was made much earlier in history, probably as early as 1894. However, his rendition will be remembered as the best example.

Now, chiasmus works best when two elements are present, the first of which is having the words form **a perfect crisscross** – or as near perfect as possible, given the context. Harking back to that Cicero quote again, imagine it split into two lines after the comma (you could even write it down to see), you'll see how the two instances of the words “eat” and “live” form a perfect crisscross, thus:

**I eat to live,
not
live to eat.**

The second element is the use of **homonyms** – words that have more than one meaning, but which have the same form. Occasionally, I also use **homophones** – words that sound the same but have different form, as with ‘bare’ and ‘bear’. In the above example using homonyms, both words are used to convey a subtle

difference in meaning and, in doing so, Cicero was perhaps trying show a better way of looking at what one aspect of life is all about.

There are, in fact, many thousands of such words, so the opportunities for chiasmus are almost unlimited, I think.

How do I know there are thousands? Because, since 2000, I've maintained my dictionary of homonyms and homophones at my website, <http://rogersreference.com>. The current edition has 9370 such words. Eventually, I feel sure I'll have a dictionary with over 10,000 words.

Chiasmus, however, need not be just educational, didactic or even philosophical. It is, as I've said before, the repository of some of the funniest lines in literature, film and TV. The bible, for example, has many examples of chiasmus; Shakespeare was arguably one of the greatest exponents. So for now, let me leave you with another of my own attempts at gentle humour, using homophones:

Imagine, if you will, the next time you're eating out with friends. Perhaps the following thought could capture the zeitgeist:

**Good food is as much a conversation piece
as good conversation is food for peace.**

Copyright © Roger J. Burke, 2010. All rights reserved.