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Language of Truth
Final Essay

Motivation via Confusion:

Why oxymorons make effective film and TV show titles

Choosing a name for a film or TV show can be a daunting task. The title will be the identifying feature of a film and the first impression audiences get. It needs to capture some aspect of the story, do justice to the piece of work it represents, and invite curiosity and excitement in the audience. This essay will focus on that last goal and highlight a key tool which has been used to achieve it.

Knowingly or based on intuition, some creators have found a useful tool in naming films and TV shows with the goal of inspiring audience interest: oxymorons. Oxymorons are a subclass of paradoxes limited to one, two, or a very few words. They are inherently contradictory, usually implying two opposite properties simultaneously. As such, they cannot be understood without special analysis or extra information. It is this need for outside information to comprehend them which makes them great titles.

Using examples of popular film and TV show titles which are oxymoronic, this essay will analyze the types, effects, and relations to plot of these oxymorons. It will also explain how the difficulty in understanding oxymorons without outside information makes them effective film titles because it motivates audience to watch the content. We begin by defining oxymora and introducing some tools for oxymoron analysis which have been used by past scholars.

An oxymoron is a part of speech in which opposite or contradictory words or ideas are combined to create a rhetorical effect by paradoxical means (Flayih 30). In other words, an oxymoron is the combination of two opposite/contradictory ideas into the same phrase or even pair of words. Examples include a *false truth*, *sweet sorrow*, or to *silently scream*. In each case, the meaning of the phrase cannot be effortlessly determined. For example, a truth is inherently not false, so what is meant by a false truth? The short answer is that it's up to interpretation by the audience or explanation by the user.

To better understand and analyze oxymorons we can introduce classes into which they can be divided. The first such set of classes distinguishes by the extent to which the two presented ideas are antonyms. We can divide the oxymora into direct and indirect classification. Direct classes are those where the second word is the 'exact' antonym of the first. In false truth, truth is the exact opposite of falsehood, it has a definition as [-false]. Thus, false truth falls into the direct class. Indirect oxymora are those where the second word is a hyponym, or subclass, of the first word's antonym (Falyih 32, Gibbs & Kearney 76). In silently scream, the antonym of silence would be loudness or noise. To scream is a subclass of loudness, since a part of its definition includes [+loudness]. Silently scream is an example of an indirect oxymoron. In Gibbs and Kearney's linguistic research they further divided the class of indirect oxymora into three parts, being strongly, moderately and weakly indirect based on the extent to which the second word was a hyponym of the antonym to the first word (Gibbs & Kearney, 78). Although it is outside the scope of this essay to collect enough data to categorize oxymorons in this way, this subclassification will be referenced based on intuition.

A second means for comparing and analyzing oxymora is by the parts of speech being used. We can distinguish between noun+noun, adjective+noun, adverb+adjective and all the other possible combinations (Falyih 32). These distinctions can be important of understanding how the oxymora might be interpreted by a general audience. In the adjective+noun case, research by Marvin Ching showed that, unlike in non-poetic language where the adjective is interpreted in terms of the noun, in oxymora the noun is usually interpreted in terms of the adjective (Ching 49). He illustrates this with the example of tall man vs tall building. In these phrases tall derives its meaning relative to the noun (man vs building), it does not mean the same thing in both cases. He contrasts this with the oxymoron soundless wailing. His subjects usually defined this phrase as primarily meaning soundless, with the inclusion of wailing adding additional information about the state or behavior. In the oxymoronic case, the noun was interpreted in terms of adjective. Noticing the parts of speech which are forming the oxymoron will thus be useful in analyzing their potential interpretation.

The results of Gibbs and Kearney's (GK) research are tools which will be beneficial in the analysis of oxymora. GK set out to understand how the categories of direct vs indirect, and

the subcategories of strong, moderate and weak homonyms within the indirect class, affected a general audience's opinion on the poetic-ness of an oxymoron, the time it took them to understand an oxymoron, and the extent to which ideas not in the definition of either part of oxymoron are introduced in the interpretation of it. They conducted three experiments, one for each of these questions. In their first experiment they found that in general indirect oxymora were deemed more poetic than their direct counterparts, and that within the subclasses of indirect, those with strong or weak homonyms were more poetic than the moderate ones. Their second experiment revealed that it took audiences significantly longer to 'understand' (find a reasonable meaning for) direct oxymora, thus indicating these were more difficult to parse. Finally, their third experiment revealed that in the interpretation of oxymora, additional ideas and properties were introduced outside the definitions of either part of the oxymoron, and that people's interpretation was often based on their own bias (Gibbs & Kearney 79, 82, 85).

With the means to divide oxymora into two different sets of classes and some understanding of the way these classes effect an audience's interpretation; we can analyze how oxymora appear in film and TV show titles.

We begin with the action comedy bearing an oxymoronic title: *True Lies*. True Lies has an adjective+noun formulation. It is clearly an oxymoron; lies includes in its definition a requirement of [-truth] and therefore contradicts the adjective truth. The antonym of truth is falsehood, having a value [-truth] so, to determine whether true lies is a direct or indirect oxymoron, we must decide if lies is a synonym or hyponym for falsehood. There are many different speech acts which can be classified as lies, distinguished by the intent of speaker, the extent to which they knew their statement to be false, and whether the listener was meant to detect the lie. All these speech acts have in common a connotation of [-truth], however, the meanings can vary significantly from there. For this reason, this paper will classify lies as a very strong hyponym for falsehood, rather than a synonym, and thus true lies as a strong but indirect oxymoron.

Having classified true lies we can use the analytical tools developed above to better understand how it would be interpreted. Using Ching's findings, we can assume that the noun will be interpreted in terms of the adjective. True lies will be understood as having the properties

of truth with some aspects of a lie. For example, true lies might refer to a truth which was told with the intent to deceive or a lie which turns out to be true. This interpretation is sound; both these possibilities are significant plot elements of the movie. GK's analysis tells us that true lies, being a strongly indirect oxymoron, will be generally interpreted as more poetic and will be more quickly understood than something like true falsities (direct oxymoron) or true wrongs (moderately indirect). GK's findings are corroborated by noticing how neither of these phrases sound interesting or poetic compared to true lies. To continue to develop the understanding of how oxymora are used in film titles we can examine several other examples.

We can consider a second oxymoronic title involving lies with the HBO TV series *Big Little Lies*. Big little is a direct, adjective+adjective oxymoron. Big has a definition of [-little] so, the two adjectives are in perfect contradiction. GK's results tell us a general audience will find this more difficult to interpret than true lies. This essay finds that to be true. To understand its interpretation, we must examine the events of the show, while, with true lies, we could reason some possible explanations without assistance. Spoilers ahead. The finale to the first season of *Big Little Lies* involves one character attacking several others simultaneously, the others fail to defend themselves until one of them pushes the attacker down a flight of stairs to their death. All the remaining attack-ees form a pact and agree to lie by saying the attacker tripped and fell. These lies might be considered *little* in that they are not very elaborate or extended, however their importance in legal and personal matters for the characters is *big*. Big little lies can only be understood when the two adjectives describe different aspects of the lies, however, the title "lies which are little in complexity but big in importance" doesn't have the same charm.

Another famous film with an oxymoronic title is *Back to the Future*. Back to the future is an example of an objective oxymoron, one where the usual definition of the words leads to an oxymoron, but the phrase can be interpreted non-paradoxically. Objectively, back has a definition of [-forward] while the future includes in its meaning as sense of [+forward] therefore their combination is oxymoronic. This is an example of an indirect oxymoron since future is a homonym of forward, or, conversely, back is a homonym of past. If we ignore the objective definitions, we can use alternate meanings to eliminate the oxymoron. Back can be interpreted as a shortened version of go back which is a synonym of return, as in 'return to a place one was

before'. Return to the future is not inherently oxymoronic. If we consider the perspective of someone having traveled back in time and trying to return to their original temporal location, they might describe their goal as trying to return to the future of their current temporal location. In fact, the objective oxymoron of back to the future could even be broken with the addition of 'go'. Go back to the future eliminates the interpretation of back required for the objective oxymoron. Of course, this meaning is exactly what was intended, as this interpretation of back to the future, which breaks the oxymoron, is the plot of the movie!

We can contrast the objective oxymoron about time travel in back to the future with the 'proper' time-travel oxymoron in *X-Men: Days of Future Past*. Future Past is a direct, noun-noun oxymoron. Unlike back, past has the exact definition of [-future] and thus future past is a complete contradiction. Like before, to understand what is meant by this title we must understand the plot of the movie. In *Days of Future Past* the main character is sent backwards in time to change the past and avoid a present where all life on earth is destroyed. Brace for some mental gymnastics. We must interpret future as 'what will be', then the oxymoron future past becomes 'what will be (the) past'. From there we consider that the movie mostly takes place during our main character's days in *the past he is manipulating*. Then we can deduce future past= 'what will be the past'= the new past which is being created. So, *Days of Future Past* describes 'days spent in what will become our new past'. Interestingly, the oxymoron is never broken throughout this deduction. Instead, we come to understand its intended interpretation by accepting the paradoxical nature of time travel itself. The oxymoron in *Days of Future Past* corresponds to a legitimately paradoxical aspect of the plot. As reflected by this exercise, GK's research found that direct oxymora take the most time to interpret. It also found the example like *Days of Future Past* would be deemed less poetic than something like its counterpart back to the future, however, this essay argues that this title, and all oxymoronic titles, are chosen for their paradoxicality, possibly at the expense of poetically.

We have seen in this analysis that several of the oxymora, particularly the direct ones, have required examining the plot of the film itself to effectively interpret their meaning. In the examples of *Big Little Lies*, *Back to the Future*, and *Days of Future Past* an understanding of the plot enabled the reduction of their paradoxical/oxymoronic titles into comprehensible

descriptions of plot elements. This is precisely the point of these oxymoronic titles. The goal of a film title is to invite intrigue and interest in the film. A good title should spark curiosity and wonder, encouraging the reader into watching the movie. The paradoxical nature of an oxymoron is perfect for that purpose. “Human beings have the tendency to reject semantic vacancy in communication. Whenever they come across an utterance that seems illogical, they resort to...trying to figure out the deeper meaning” (Faliyh 33). This behavior in which humans search for answers when presented with an illogical statement motivates them to try and understand the meaning of a presented oxymoron. By making the title of a film or TV show oxymoronic, the obvious solution for a curious observer who can’t understand the title is to watch the movie, hoping its plot might provide clarity or explanation for the oxymoron.

Consider this (noncomprehensive but random) list of oxymoronic film a TV show titles: *The Walking Dead, Night of the Living Dead, Eyes Wide Shut, Slumdog Millionaire, Big Little Lies, Urban Cowboy, A Hard Day’s Night, Back to the Future, Days of Future Past*. Chances are, several of these titles seem familiar even if you’ve never seen them. There are two possible explanations for this. The first is that they have all been successful, with many of them receiving incredible levels of renown and even ‘cult classic’ status. The second is that their oxymoronic titles lend them extra notoriety. The titles represent a puzzle which still needs to be solved. Even if the reason for their extra recognition is their success, the argument could be made they were successful *because* they had oxymoronic titles which motivated audiences to see them. Consider the comparison of the titles ‘return to the future’ and ‘back to the future’. The second, featuring the objective oxymoron, is far more interesting. Perhaps the added mystery of the oxymoronic title *Back to the Future* garnered this film, and the others on that list, the success they have enjoyed.

Using the means of categorization we’ve been applying through the essay, we find, out of nine titles in the list, five are indirect oxymora and four are direct. GK showed that indirect oxymora are interpreted as more poetic by a general audience while direct oxymora take longer to understand. Based on this this assumption, we might postulate that the property of taking longer to understand, which could be extended to imply being more complicated, is being balanced among film titles at with their perceived poetry. Those responsible for naming films are

choosing names which will best motivate the audiences to want to understand the title while also sounding poetic. True Lies, then, might be considered an ideal film title, since it's nature as an oxymoron right on the line between direct and indirect lends it both a poetic sound and an added difficulty in determining its exact meaning.

No one tool is the silver bullet of naming things, however, a compelling case can be presented for using oxymora when trying to create a name which will motivate audiences to consume content. Using the methods of analysis introduced in the beginning, this essay has analyzed the properties of some oxymorons which have been used in film and TV titles. It also used the results of past linguistic experiments to understand how audience might interpret these oxymora. Finally, it sought to highlight how the mysterious and inexplicable nature of oxymora can be used to motivate audiences to watch movies and TV shows with oxymoronic names. In a potentially paradoxical result, we have found that a title which is confusing and cannot be easily understood may motivate audiences better than one which is clear.

Citations

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