

RHETORIC AND FIGURES OF SPEECH

Too Cunning to Be Understood: Acyrologia

Rhetoric [**ret**-er-ik], n. 1. The art or science of all specialized literary uses of language in prose or verse, including the figures of speech. 2. The study of the effective use of language. 3. The ability to use language effectively.

Through the use of **rhetorical devices** (or **figures of speech**), Shakespeare provides a map to help an actor figure out how to play a character and to communicate the story of the play to the audience. These devices may provide clues to meaning, may indicate how a character's mind works, or may audibly point the audience towards important concepts in a character's speech. Rhetoric is one of many tools an actor can use to discover playable moments in a speech or in dialogue.

Throughout *Much Ado about Nothing*, Dogberry uses what we now call “malapropisms.” These terms, when one word is accidentally substituted for a similar-sounding but different-meaning word, are named for Mrs. Malaprop, a character in Richard Sheridan's 1775 play *The Rivals*. The device was in use long before Sheridan, however; Shakespeare and his contemporaries knew it as **acyrologia**. Characters who use this term frequently tend to be broadly comic, ridiculous in some way. The device may indicate low intelligence (but perhaps with an attempt to display high intelligence and verbal creativity, which fails), but it may also indicate an otherwise sensible character caught in an emotionally heightened moment.

Activity:

- Introduce your students to acyrologia (ah-KIR-o-LOW-gee-a):
 - The use of a word which sounds similar to the proper term but has a vastly different meaning; later known as malapropism.
 - Questions to Ask:
 - What word did the speaker mean to say?
 - Is this a usual speech pattern for the character, or an unusual mistake?
 - How much should an actor play up the joke? How strongly should other characters on stage react to the mistake?
- Give your students **Handout #8**: 3.5 of *Much Ado about Nothing*
- Cast three students: Leonato, Dogberry, and Verges.
 - Your Dogberry will need to be comfortable speaking quite a bit.
- Remind your students of the circumstances surrounding this scene:
 - Leonato is getting ready for his daughter's wedding (which will take place in the next scene) when Dogberry hijacks his attention. What character clues does this circumstance give each actor?
 - Dogberry and Verges, meanwhile, know that Conrade and Borachio have been apprehended, but it is unclear if they know precisely what they have been arrested *for* – that is, for slandering Hero such that Claudio will refuse to marry her and will shame her at the altar. How might that knowledge change Dogberry's energy in the scene? Have your students decide whether or not Dogberry knows the specifics of the situation, or if he does not find them out until the examination in 4.2.

- Play the scene two ways:
 - In the first, Dogberry is absolutely confident of what he's saying. There is no doubt in his mind that he is saying the correct word.
 - In the second, Dogberry is unsure of himself, searching for the right word, and grasping at what he thinks is correct. He may look to other characters for confirmation.
- Discuss:
 - What story does each version of the scene tell?
 - Ask your students if they like Dogberry better in one version than in the other? Do they feel sorry for him in one? Is he funnier in one?
- Now, try the scene again, with a confident Dogberry. This time, have your Verges alter his responses:
 - First, in total awe of Dogberry. This is his mentor, everything he hopes to be in life, and his word is gospel. He imitates Dogberry with total certainty that this is the correct way to behave as an officer of the law.
 - Second, Verges is completely and painfully aware of Dogberry's mistakes but compelled by his inferior position to echo them, leaving him embarrassed and uncomfortable.
- Discuss:
 - How can Verges's reactions change the story?
 - Do his reactions augment or diminish audience sympathy for Dogberry?
 - How do Verges's reactions affect Leonato's comprehension? His patience?

FURTHER EXPLORATION

Examine Dogberry's speeches throughout the play.

- How often does he use acyrologia?
- Do his substitutions ever make a kind of backwards sense?
- Is he more prone to one kind of mistake than another? I.e., does he mistake one part of speech more than another? Or religious terms more than legal terms?

Student Handout #8 - Acyrologia

Much Ado about Nothing – 3.5

Enter LEONATO, with DOGBERRY and VERGES

LEONATO

What would you with me, honest neighbour?

DOGBERRY

Marry, sir, I would have some confidence with you that decerns you nearly.

LEONATO

Brief, I pray you; for you see it is a busy time with me. 5

DOGBERRY

Marry, this it is, sir.

VERGES

Yes, in truth it is, sir.

LEONATO

What is it, my good friends?

DOGBERRY

Goodman Verges, sir, speaks a little off the matter: an old man, sir, and his wits are not so blunt as, God help, I would desire they were; but, in faith, honest as the skin between his brows. 10

VERGES

Yes, I thank God I am as honest as any man living that is an old man and no honester than I.

DOGBERRY

Comparisons are odorous: palabras, neighbour Verges. 15

LEONATO

Neighbours, you are tedious.

DOGBERRY

It pleases your worship to say so, but we are the poor duke's officers; but truly, for mine own part, if I were as tedious as a king, I could find it in my heart to bestow it all of your worship. 20

LEONATO

All thy tediousness on me, ah?

DOGBERRY

Yea, an 'twere a thousand pound more than 'tis; for I hear as good exclamation on your worship as of any man in the city; and though I be but a poor man, I am glad to hear it. 25

VERGES

And so am I.

LEONATO

I would fain know what you have to say. [...]

DOGBERRY

One word, sir: our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended two aspicious persons, and we would have them this morning examined before your worship. 30

LEONATO

Take their examination yourself and bring it me: I am now in great haste, as it may appear unto you.

DOGBERRY

It shall be suffigance.

LEONATO

Drink some wine ere you go: fare you well. 35

Exeunt LEONATO

DOGBERRY

Go, good partner, go, get you to Francis Seacole; bid him bring his pen and inkhorn to the gaol: we are now to examination these men.

VERGES

And we must do it wisely. 40

DOGBERRY

We will spare for no wit, I warrant you; here's that shall drive some of them to a non-come: only get the learned writer to set down our excommunication and meet me at the gaol.

Exeunt

Teacher's Guide – Too Cunning to be Understood: Acyrologia

Much Ado about Nothing, 3.5

Enter LEONATO, with DOGBERRY and VERGES

LEONATO

What would you with me, honest neighbour?

DOGBERRY

Marry, sir, I would have some confidence with you that **decerns** you nearly.



Dogberry means "concerns".

LEONATO

Brief, I pray you; for you see it is a busy time with me.

DOGBERRY

Marry, this it is, sir.



Why doesn't Dogberry actually tell Leonato anything here? Does Verges excitedly interrupt him? Does he attempt to hand Leonato a paper with the information written down? Is he still gathering his thoughts? Explore different interpretations.

VERGES

Yes, in truth it is, sir.

LEONATO

What is it, my good friends?



Dogberry probably means "sharp".

DOGBERRY

Goodman Verges, sir, speaks a little off the matter: ~~an old man, sir,~~ and his wits are not so **blunt** as, God help, I would desire they were; but, in faith, honest as the skin between his brows.



Does Verges identify a meaning other than "honest" for that word? Is he insulted? Humble? Proud?

VERGES

Yes, I thank God I am as honest as any man living that is an old man and no honester than I.



Probably for "odious"; Nick Bottom makes almost the same error in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

DOGBERRY

Comparisons are **odorous: palabras**, neighbour Verges.



Dogberry shortens a Spanish phrase, "pocas palabras", "few words". Why is he shushing Verges?

LEONATO

Neighbours, you are tedious.

DOGBERRY

It **pleases** your worship to say so, but we are the poor duke's officers; but truly, for mine own part, if I were as **tedious** as a king, I could find it in my heart to bestow it all of your worship.



Clearly, Dogberry mistakes the meaning of "tedious". But for what? Ask your students to examine context clues to determine what they think Dogberry assumes the compliment was.

LEONATO

All thy tediousness on me, ah?



Is Leonato amused or annoyed?

DOGBERRY

Yea, an 'twere a thousand pound more than 'tis; for I hear as good **exclamation** on your worship as of any



Dogberry probably means "acclamation".

man in the city; and though I be but a poor man, I am glad to hear it.

VERGES
And so am I.

LEONATO
I would fain know what you have to say. [...]

DOGBERRY
One word, sir: our watch, sir, have indeed **comprehended** two **aspicious** persons, and we would have them this morning examined before your worship.

 Mistakes for “apprehended” and “suspicious”, respectively.

LEONATO
Take their examination yourself and bring it me: I am now in great haste, as it may appear unto you.

DOGBERRY
It shall be **suffigance**.

 For “sufficient”.

LEONATO
Drink some wine ere you go: fare you well.

Exeunt LEONATO

DOGBERRY
Go, good partner, go, get you to Francis Seacole; bid him bring his pen and inkhorn to the gaol: we are now to **examination** these men.

 Here, Dogberry uses not the wrong word, but the wrong part of speech, in a device called *anthimeria*. Anthimeria is usually an indication of high intelligence. Does it seem like Dogberry makes this substitution consciously or accidentally?

VERGES
And we must do it wisely.

DOGBERRY
We will spare for no wit, I warrant you; here's that shall drive some of them to a **non-com**: only get the learned writer to set down our **excommunication** and meet me at the gaol. *Exeunt*

 Possible for “non-plus”, as in, to make them nonplussed. It may also be for “*non compos mentis*”, “of unsound mind”, a Latin term which was in use in English by 1607 and could have appeared in speech earlier.

 For “examination”.