

Chiasmus as a Stylistic Device in John Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel

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Abstract

This study deals with chiasmus as one of the common figures of speech. It is a literary device used in rhetoric and in poetry to designate the inversion of an order of words. Chiasmus is a sequence of two grammatical constructions which are parallel in syntax, but with a reversal in the word order of one of them. Chiasmus is a structural device which generates a criss-cross pattern resembling the letter "X" in the English alphabet. Generally, this figure of speech is used for spicing up language and making it more effective and interesting.

The study aims at giving a somehow adequate investigation of chiasmus and the phenomenon it describes. Moreover, it aims at identifying the rhetorical functions of

this selected stylistic device in any text and analyzing various lines from a Neo-Classical poem to show the purposes of using it in this selected literary work.

The first part of this study is devoted to the theoretical framework of chiasmus as a stylistic device. It involves two main sections. Section one presents a full description of chiasmus. Section two shows the rhetorical functions of chiasmus. The second part of this study provides the practical analysis of the device of chiasmus in John Dryden's poem Absalom and Achitophel. Finally, the conclusion sums up the results of the study.

1. What Is Chiasmus?

Chiasmus is a rhetorical figure with two syntactically parallel constructions, one of which has the word order reversed (Clark, 2001: 1; Crystal, 2003: 459). As a stylistic device, chiasmus refers to a literary technique by which balanced statements are produced in reverse parallelism (Ramey, 2007: 4; Ellis – Christensen, 2007: 1).

Accordingly, chiasmus might be called "reverse or crossing parallelism". It involves taking parallelism and deliberately turning it inside out, creating a "criss-cross" pattern (Harris, 2005:1). For example, instead of writing an AB structure (e.g. learned unwillingly) paralleled by another AB structure (forgotten gladly), the AB structure will be followed by BA structure (gladly forgotten). So, instead of writing

1. What is learned unwillingly is forgotten gladly.
one could invert it into chiasmus , as in
2. What is learned unwillingly is gladly forgotten.
Similarly, the parallel sentence
3. I went to school, they went to work.
could be written chiastically as
4. I went to school, to work went they. (ibid.)

In the first chiastic example, the construction varies in the two clauses. In the first clause , the verb (learned) is followed by the adverbial (unwillingly) . The second clause reverses the order of these elements: the verb (forgotten) follows the adverbial (gladly).

In the second chiastic example, the second sentence inverts the word order of the first one. In the first sentence, the subject (I) is followed by the verb (went) which is

followed by the adverbial (to school). In the second sentence, the adverbial (to work) is followed by the verb (went) which is followed by the subject (they).

It is obvious that chiasmus involves fundamentally two elements: inversion and balance (Ramey, 2007:4). The element of inversion, which may exist in the first or second part of the chiastic construction, often results in deviation from the ordinary or normal word order. Moreover, it results in an important quality of chiasmus which is contrast. By its inversion, Chiasmus makes two contrasted structures (Grothe, 2004:9). Here are more examples:

5. They fall successive, and successive rise.
(Alexander Pope, cited in Clarke, 2001:1)
6. Each throat was parched, and glazed each eye.
(S.T.Coleridge, cited in Harris, 2005: 1)
7. He saved others but himself he cannot save.
(Harvey, 1967:163)
8. Scorched were his shins, his legs were bare.
(Jonathan Swift, cited in Clarke, 2001:1)
9. By day the frolic, and the dance by night.
(Samuel Johnson, cited in Cuddon, 1976: 128)

Chiasmus will be described in these examples respectively:

Example (5): In the first sentence, the verb (fall) is followed by the subject complement (successive). The second sentence has the inversion of the elements of the first sentence : the verb (rise) follows the subject complement (successive) .

Example (6): In the first sentence, the subject (each throat) precedes the verbs (was parched).The second sentence inverts the word order of the first one.The verb (glazed) precedes the subject (each eye).

Example (7): In the first sentence, the object (others) follows the verb (saved). The inversion exists in the second sentence in which the object (himself) is used at the beginning of the sentence preceding the subject and the verb (he cannot save).

Example (8): The first sentence reverses the word order of the second one: the subject complement (scorched) is followed by the verb (were) which is followed by the subject (his shins). In the second sentence, the subject (his legs) is followed by the verb (were) which is followed by the subject complement (bare).

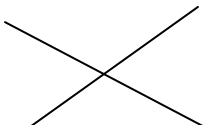
Example (9): This example is different from the preceding ones.Its two constructions lack their verbs. They have only subjects and adverbials .The reversal exists in the first construction: the adverbial (by day) precedes, and then follows, the subject (the frolic). In the second one, the subject (the dance) precedes the adverbial (by night).

Chiasmus is one of the great mainstays of rhetoric. It is that rhetorical device which makes poetry and writing lively and eloquent. Moreover, it helps the writer to have the attention of his readers or listeners (Browning, 2007: 1).

One of the most fascinating features of chiasmus is the "marking with an X" notion which is derived from its etymology. Ramey (2007:3) and Grothe (2004:1) mention that the word "chiasmus" is derived from " Khiasmos" which is a Greek verb meaning " mark with two lines crossing like an X".The following examples can be "marked with an X":

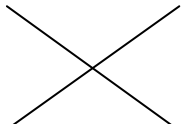
10. Watch all their ways, and all their actions guide.
(Alexander Pope, cited in Browning, 2007: 5)

and

Watch all their ways,

all their actions guide.

11. Works without show, and without pomp presides.
(Alexander Pope, cited in Abrams, 1971:150)

and

Works without show,

without pomp presides.

2. Rhetorical Functions of Chiasmus

As a stylistic device, chiasmus can be used to achieve certain rhetorical functions which refer to the writers' intent to use it in their works. These functions are as follows :

2.1 Effectiveness

Like all figures of speech, the main function of chiasmus is effectiveness (Harris, 2005:4; Ellis–Christensen, 2007:1). The following example in which the subordinate clause (if clause) is moved around is made effective by chiasmus:

12. If you ask and enquire of them, they do not withdraw themselves; they do not chide if you make mistakes.

(Richard de Burry, cited in Harris, 2005:4)

The effectiveness of chiasmus is more obvious in the case of short structures in which one wants balance, but which cannot be paralleled effectively because they are too short. They become effective when they are made chiasmic (ibid.), as in the following poetic line written by Samuel Johnson:

13. Untouched his cottage, and his slumbers sound.

This poetic line has two short constructions. They lack their verbs . Both of them are parallel in syntax . However, they display chiasmus .The inversion exists in the first construction in which the subject complement (untouched) first precedes , then follows , the subject (his cottage) . In the second one, the subject (his slumbers) precedes the subject complement (sound) (Harris, 2005:4).

2.2 Emphasis

Generally speaking, the strong emphasis which is achieved by chiasmus is done for "effectiveness". By its inversion, chiasmus serves to put the most important element in the most emphatic position (Ellis-Christensen, 2007: 5; Harris, 2005:3; Grambs, 1984: 65), as in the following examples:

14. I like the idea; its execution I don't.

Unlike the first sentence in which the object (the idea) follows the (subject and) verb, the second sentence has the object (its execution) followed by the subject and verb. This inversion is made to give an important position to the object "its execution". It is given special importance .The speaker wants to emphasize that he doesn't like the execution of the idea.

15. Tell me not of your many perfections; of your great modesty tell me not either.

Here, the reversal is made in the second sentence. The noun phrase " your great modesty " in the prepositional phrase " of your great modesty " (which is a direct object of the verb "tell") is used at the beginning of the sentence before the verb "tell" and the indirect object "me". Here, the speaker intends to emphasize the fact that he doesn't want to be told about the great modesty of the hearer.

3.Application

Chiasmus is a figure which is especially common in Neo- Classical poetry (Dispatcher, 2007:1; Grothe, 2004:6). The researcher has found that this is true after investigating chiasmus in this poetry .The main Neo – Classical poets were: John Dryden (1631- 1700), Jonathan Swift (1667- 1745), Joseph Addison (1672- 1719), Alexander Pope (1688- 1744), and Samuel Johnson (1709- 1784). The period of Neo – Classical poetry is usually taken to be from Dryden's maturity to Johnson's death . The Neo – Classical poets attempt to model their works on Roman and Greek originals – on what is known of them (Cuddon, 1976:419- 420).

The application in this study consists of one poem which has been selected from Neo – Classical poetry. It is John Dryden's poem Absalom and Achitophel . This poem contains various and obvious examples of chiasmus.They are different in structure. The text of this poem is too long to be included as a whole in this research, so the researcher is going to write only the chiasmic samples for the purpose of the analysis.The text of this poem is taken from The Oxford Anthology of English literature (1973) by Kermode and Hollander (eds.).

Dryden wrote Absalom and Achitophel during the political situation of England in 1681. It is a great political narrative poem supporting King Charles II. Below is a summary of the historical and political background of the poem as given by Jack (1952: 53) and Kermode and Hollander (1973:1602–1603).This summary is necessary for the understanding of the characters that the poem describes.

In 1681 a crisis happened in the conflict between the Whigs who wished to exclude the King's brother, James, the Catholic Duke of York, from succession to the throne, and those who stood with the King himself in favour of ' true succession'. The first Earl of Shaftesbury, the leader of the Whig party, proposed to replace the Duke of York by the King's illegitimate son, James, the Duke of Monmouth.

Wishing to arouse fear of Catholic power, the Whigs found explosive material in the disclosures by Titus Oates, an ex – seminarian, that a Popish Plot existed to murder Charles, to establish power by violent means and to burn London .Oates's deposition was highly suspicious, and it showed a convenient power of expansion. However, enough shreds of evidence could be gathered to give Oates's testimony plausibility and to promote the Whig demands that the King legitimize his natural son, the Duke of Monmouth, and make him his successor.Nevertheless, the King withstood the Whig demands and achieved financial independence of a parliament

that tried to force his hand by withholding funds. He dissolved parliament in March 1681 .Shaftesbury, charged with high treason, was arrested. While he was waiting for a trial, Dryden was asked to write Absalom and Achitophel to influence Shaftesbury's trial, and criticize those who stood against the King.

This poem is an allegory that uses the characters and incidents of the biblical story of the rebellion led against David, King of Israel, by his natural son Absalom and his wicked counselor, Achitophel. Each character in the modern story is given a name found in the

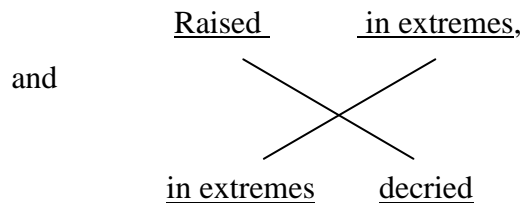
biblical story. For example, Charles is 'King David', Monmouth is 'Absalom' and Shaftesbury is 'Achitophel' (Hopkins, 1986: 64).

Text 1:

*From hence began that Plot, the nation's curse;
Bad in itself, but represented worse;
Raised in extremes, and in extremes decried;* (108-10)

In these lines, Dryden shows the effect of the alleged Popish Plot on people. He clarifies the fact that this plot, originated in 1681 by Titus Oates, is a curse for the state and the nation. It is a bad plot which frightens people and creates perplexity among them. This plot was exaggerated. Some people strongly believe it while others condemn it (Jones, 2005:3).

Chiasmus exists in the verse " Raised in extremes and in extremes decried ". In the first construction, the verb (raised) precedes the adverbial (in extremes). In the second construction, the verb (decried) follows the adverbial (in extremes). The rhetorical function of chiasmus in this line is effectiveness. Dryden uses chiasmus in this short line to make it interesting. The chiasmic form of this verse is better than its parallel one, i.e. " raised in extremes and decried in extremes". This line is chiasmic because it "can be marked with an X", which is the feature of chiasmus (See p.3).

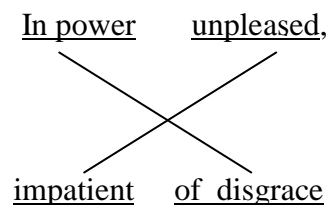


Text 2:

In power unpleased, impatient of disgrace. (155)

In this line, Dryden describes the character of Achitophel, who is meant for the first Earl of Shaftesbury, the leader of the Whig party. Here, Dryden sheds light on his follies. When he is in position of authority, he does not feel pleased and satisfied. Achitophel is very ambitious. He is greedy for more power. Moreover, he lost the respect and approval of people because of his bad behaviours towards the King and the state. In states of shame, he is impatient. He exceeds the limits of endurance.

This line is chiasmic. In the first construction, the adverbial (in power) precedes the subject complement (unpleased). In the second construction, the subject complement (impatient) precedes the adverbial (of disgrace). Because of its shortness, it cannot be paralleled effectively, i.e. "(he is) unpleased in power, (and he is) impatient of disgrace. So, Dryden uses chiasmus in this line to make it effective and attractive to the listener and reader. This line can form an "X":

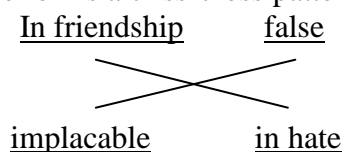


Text 3:

In friendship false, implacable in hate. (173)

Dryden, in this line, mentions another negative characteristic of Achitophel. As for his friendship, it is based on a false ground. He is not a real friend. He is not sincere in his friendship. Moreover, his hatred is extreme. It cannot be changed. Achitophel is always unwilling to stop opposing the King. He is an implacable enemy.

This line contains chiasmus. In the first structure, the adverbial (in friendship) comes before the subject complement (false). The second structure reverses the order of these elements: the subject complement (implacable) comes before the adverbial (in hate). Here, Dryden uses chiasmus for the purpose of effectiveness. The chiastic form of this line affects the listener or reader more than its parallel form, i.e. (He is) false in friendship (and he is) implacable in hate. This chiastic line forms a criss-cross pattern:

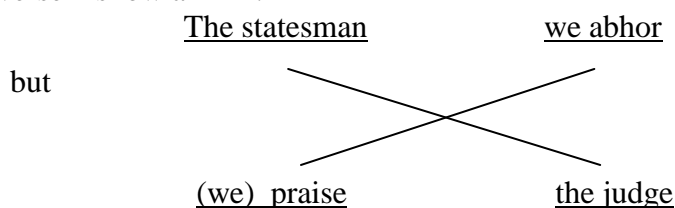


Text 4:

The statesman we abhor, but praise the judge. (187)

This verse reveals the fact that Achitophel is hated as a political leader because of his intrigues and follies, but he is loved and admired when he is a fair-minded judge (Sen, 1997:70).

This verse exhibits chiasmus. The first sentence reverses the word order of the second one. In the first sentence, the object (the statesman) exists at the beginning of it. This object precedes the subject and verb (we abhor). In the second sentence, the object (the judge) follows the (subject we and) the verb (praise). In this verse, Dryden employs chiasmus to achieve effectiveness and emphasis. As for the function of emphasis, the reversal found in the first sentence gives the object (the statesman) an important and emphatic position. Dryden emphasizes the fact that people hate Achitophel when he is a politician. The elements of this chiastic verse show an "X":



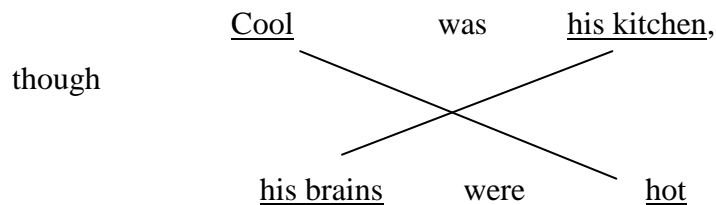
Text 5:

Cool was his kitchen, though his brains were hot. (621)

In this poetic line, Dryden describes the character of Shimei representing Slingsby Bethel who is one of the two Whig sheriffs of London, and a republican bitterly opposed to the King. Dryden is against Shimei who hates the King and joins the people who curse and stand against him. Shimei pretends to be pious to cheat people. He never takes any action against the enemies of the King and the state. This line clarifies the point that Shimei's kitchen could not utilize the fire of his deep hatred (against the King) which burns his brains. Shimei eats little food. Moreover, he makes his servant starve (Kermode and Hollander, 1973:1618; Jones, 2005:9).

Dryden makes this line chiasmatic. The first sentence reverses the word order of the second one. In the first sentence, the subject complement (cool) is followed by the verb (was) which is followed by the subject (his kitchen). In the second sentence, the subject (his brains) is followed by the verb (were) which is followed by the subject complement (hot).

Chiasmus makes this line effective. Moreover, chiasmus, in this line, achieves the function of emphasis which is illustrated by the inversion found in the first sentence. This inversion gives the subject complement (cool) an emphatic position. Here, Dryden attracts attention to this element emphasizing the point that Shimei does not use his kitchen. His servants rarely cook food. He is a miser. If one draws the words of this line as a chart, the words form an "X":

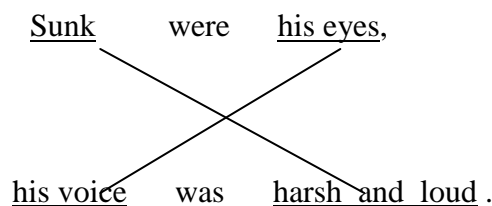


Text 6:

Sunk were his eyes, his voice was harsh and loud. (646)

In this line, Dryden describes the character of Corah. Corah stands for Titus Oates, the chief witness of the Popish Plot. Here, Dryden describes Corah's shape. For instance, his eyes are hollow and falling inwards, which suggests that he is an ugly old man. Moreover, this implies that he has a deep personality. He has wit and wisdom. However, he uses them illegally. He achieves his ambitions by cunning. In addition, his voice is loud and unpleasant to listen to (Zwicker, 1972:5).

This line displays chiasmus. The inversion of chiasmus is made in the first sentence which reverses the order of the elements of the second one. In the first sentence, the subject complement (sunk) comes before the verb (were) which comes before the subject (his eyes). In the second sentence, the subject (his voice) comes before the verb (was) which comes before the subject complement (harsh and loud). Dryden uses chiasmus in this line to achieve effectiveness and emphasis. The reverse order made in the first sentence gives the subject complement (sunk) the most important and emphatic position. Through this, Dryden intends to emphasize the point that Corah is an ugly man with a profound character. Moreover, Dryden wants to emphasize that Corah has wit and wisdom which are used illegally. This line can show an "X":



Text 7:

Exalts his enemies, his friends destroys. (711)

This line is from the speech that Absalom delivers to people. Absalom stands for Monmouth, who is Charles' rebellious son. In this speech, Absalom tells people what they want to hear and pretends to be on their side. In this line, he talks about his father King David who stands for King Charles. According to Absalom, his father has a paradoxical character.

why chiasmic quotes are said to be "marked with an X". Chiasmus has important rhetorical functions. One can practice using it for emphasis or greater effectiveness.

Chiasmus is found more in poetry than in prose. It is particularly favoured by the Neo-Classical poets. However, it is less common than other figures of speech, for example, antithesis. Dryden's poem *Absalom and Achitophel* has been selected as a sample from Neo-Classical poetry. It is one of Dryden's great political satires. In this poem, Dryden criticizes certain characters that stood against King Charles II. He mentions their follies. Moreover, he praises other characters that support the King. Dryden employs chiasmus in certain lines of this poem to affect the reader and emphasize certain important facts which are related to the good or bad characteristics of the characters of the poem. Dryden's use of chiasmus was necessary to achieve the satire in this poem.

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الخلاصة

تعنى هذه الدراسة بالمقابلة العكسية بوصفها احدى الصور البلاغية الشائعة الاستعمال. فهي وسيلة أدبية تستخدم في البلاغة و الشعر. المقابلة العكسية هي تتابع بنائين نحويين متطابقين من حيث بناء الجملة و لكن يوجد قلب لترتيب كلمات الجملة في أحدهما. المقابلة العكسية هي وسيلة تركيبية تنتج تركيباً متقاطعاً يشبه الحرف "X" في الأبجدية الانكليزية. عموماً، تستخدم المقابلة العكسية لإضافة عنصراً التأثير و المتعة للغة.

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إعطاء توضيح وافٍ للمقابلة العكسية و الظاهرة التي تصفها. كما أنها تهدف إلى تمييز الوظائف البلاغية لهذه الأداة الأسلوبية المختارة في أي نص و تحليل أبيات شعرية متنوعة من قصيدة واحدة من الشعر الكلاسيكي الجديد لتكون عينة للدراسة لتوضيح الغرض من استعمال المقابلة العكسية في هذا العمل الأدبي المختار.

كُرس الجزء الاول من هذه الدراسة للاطار النظري لموضوع المقابلة العكسية. يتالف هذا الجزء من قسمين رئيسيين. يقدم القسم الاول وصفاً وافياً للمقابلة العكسية. يبين القسم الثاني الوظائف البلاغية للمقابلة العكسية. اما الجزء الثاني من هذه الدراسة فيقدم التحليل العملي لوسيلة المقابلة العكسية في قصيدة ابلوم و اکتوفيل (Absalom and Achitophel) للشاعر جون درايدن. واخيراً، تعرض الدراسة النتائج التي توصلت اليها.

