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# *Opposites Attract - The Oxymoron*

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## Introduction

It is said that ‘opposites attract’, and in the field of Linguistics, nothing can be truer of this than the fact that oxymorons exist. What is an oxymoron? The word oxymoron is ‘a literary device that juxtaposes contradictory terms’ (Ellis, 2022). Put simply, an oxymoron is a combination of words that carry meaning which would otherwise be antonyms or words that mean the opposites of each other. What is even more interesting is that the word oxymoron is in itself an oxymoron. According to Shew (2022), the word oxymoron comes from the Greek words oksús (meaning “keen”) [or oxys (“sharp”) ( Masterclass, 2022)] and mōros (meaning “stupid”), leading to the phrase “sharp stupid”.

There are many possible reasons behind the existence, formation, and use of the oxymoron. The oxymoron, particularly those in the English Language, exist because the language is arbitrary, with an infinite ability to form new words. It is interesting to note that though at a glance, oxymorons may be formed by combining any two parts of speech, they are in actual fact, mostly formed by an adjective + noun combination, or adverb + adjective combination. This is because a noun + noun combination will most certainly equate to a compound noun and not an oxymoron (flower + pot, hand + bag). A list of oxymorons taken from an article by Fazlitdinovna (2021) best illustrates this:

Table 1: List of some oxymorons in English

OXYMRON	COMBINATION
Only choice	Adjective + Noun
Same difference	Adjective + Noun
Friendly fire	Adjective + Noun
Virtual reality	Adjective + Noun
Controlled chaos	Adjective + Noun
Silent scream	Adjective + Noun
Terribly good	Adverb + Adjective
Clearly confused	Adverb + Adjective
Exact estimate	Adjective + Noun
Passive aggressive	Adjective + Adjective
Random order	Adjective + Noun
Live recording	Adjective + Noun
Original copy	Adjective + Noun

## An oxymoron or not? The hyphen mystery

Some oxymorons are sometimes confused with adjectives made up of two nouns – for example, the oxymoron ‘student teacher’ and the adjective ‘student-teacher’. There are several ways to differentiate the two. In the former, the end result is a noun (a person who is still undergoing training as a teacher, or known as ‘trainee teacher’ in the Malaysian context) while in the latter, the combination is hyphenated and functions as an adjective that describes a noun (e.g. - a student-teacher synergy). In general, there isn’t a concrete or hard and fast rule that dictates hyphenated nouns or adjectives as not being oxymorons (as they almost always result in an adjective, and not a noun, which is almost always the case

for an oxymoron). However, a quick search on the internet will show you that these hyphenated combinations of contradictory words such as 'top-down', 'bottom-up' and 'love-hate' are not often found in the list of oxymorons. Perhaps then, for now, it is best to categorize these hyphenated words as 'less popular' oxymorons.

### **The new kid on the block**

Language, being dynamic, has also enabled the formation of oxymorons using colloquial or 'slang' words such as – 'pretty', 'awfully', 'wicked' and 'dead'. These four words almost always take the meaning of an adverb of degree ranging from 'quite' to 'very' and thus can be attached to any adjective signifying the opposite meaning, leading to the existence of oxymorons such as 'pretty ugly', 'awfully fantastic', 'wicked good' and 'dead alive'. Other oxymorons are invented due to the existence of new concepts that were not in existence before. Examples of these are 'virtual reality', in reference to the rapidly growing technological world we are currently experiencing and 'workplace satisfaction' which refers to a relatively modern concept of measuring workplace emotion. This is seen as an oxymoron because, in the past, work was equated with dreary hard labour and satisfaction would be the last thing one derives from carrying it out. Another oxymoron concerning the modern work concept is 'working holiday' where nowadays one actually blends work and vacation time when in the past they were as separate as night and day.

### **Categories and types of oxymorons**

The categorization of oxymorons comes in many forms. Some English websites categorize them according to single word or double word oxymorons. Single word oxymorons are words such as 'spendthrift', 'bridegroom' and 'bittersweet' (LearnEnglish, 2023). Double word oxymorons are much more common such as those in the list in Table 1. Other oxymorons are 'big baby', 'open secret', 'sad smile' and 'much less'. There are also three word oxymorons such as 'a bit much', 'all alone together', 'more or less' and 'less is more'.

### **Functions of oxymorons**

After all this discussion on oxymorons, one cannot ignore the main question, which is, what exactly is the function of an oxymoron? In general, the functions of oxymorons can be categorized as words to emphasize (a) literary and grammatical elements (b) movement in terms of fluidity and situation size and (c) humour and/or sarcasm.

#### **(a) Literary and grammatical elements**

Oxymorons are essentially literary devices that add that 'punch' in a piece of writing. They are often used by fiction writers to emphasize a point or make their work gets to be more interesting to the reader. They aid in making deep emotions felt and captured within a single word- for example, we have the extremely famous line from The Bard: 'Parting is such sweet sorrow that I shall say goodnight till it be morrow'- (William Shakespeare from Romeo and Juliet). Here, the oxymoron explains that when one leaves a loved one, it is both painful to be apart, but the memories make it sweet.

Oxymorons are also very simply a grammatical unit that helps emphasize something. For example, the oxymoron 'terribly good' is simply a combination of an adverb modifying an adjective, to illustrate just how good that something is. Here, the word 'really' or 'truly' is substituted with the adverb 'terribly'.

### (a) Movement in terms of fluidity and situation size

Some writers deliberately create oxymorons to give more depth to their writing, and to better describe and further illustrate movement by omitting the conjunction 'and' – for example; 'up down', 'left right' and 'in out' (e.g. - He watched the hammer move in the up down direction relentlessly; each move pushing the nail even deeper into the wood). There are also others that give a clearer picture of the direction or speed of movement such as 'climb down' and 'run slowly', or the position one is in – 'sit up'. Other oxymorons give readers a sense of the size of a situation as in 'small crowd' and 'short queue'. Yet some others come in the form of phrasal verbs- 'stand down' – (E.g. - He had to stand down from his position as president as he was largely unpopular).

### (b) Humour and/or sarcasm

Oxymorons present themselves best in the form of humour and/or sarcasm. Some humorous and sarcastic oxymorons include 'genuine fake' (a fake item cannot be genuine unless it is so craftily counterfeited or copied to perfection that it becomes the *crème de la crème* of the fakes – a 'genuine fake') and 'honest politician' or 'business ethics' -these two oxymorons are seen as sarcastic as the concepts behind the two words in each pair do not always seem to go hand in hand.

### Oxymorons in Bahasa Malaysia

It may interest you to know that oxymorons also exist in Bahasa Malaysia. Some examples of them are 'lebih kurang' (more or less), 'banyak sikit' ( a bit more), 'tipu betul' ( a true lie/scam), 'suka benci' (like to/ constantly hate) and 'suka marah' (like to/ constantly reprimand) – (e.g.- "Tak baik suka benci dan suka marah orang" – It is not good to constantly hate and reprimand people) suka duka, pahit manis, (the ups and downs) and 'penipuan sebenar' (ultimate deceit). In addition, just as in the case of the slang words 'pretty', 'awfully' and 'wicked', the new slang words to signify 'very' in Bahasa Malaysia are 'teruk', 'parah' and 'gila', which when translated, literally means 'terrible', 'severe' and 'crazy'. Therefore, we now have the Bahasa Malaysia version of the oxymoron 'terribly good/ kind' to be 'baik teruk', 'baik parah' and 'baik gila' (oftentimes spelt 'giler').

### Conclusion

Language is a fascinating, living phenomenon, and oxymorons make it even more enchanting by allowing interesting alternatives when expressing meaning. We hope you have found this article on oxymorons 'awfully good' and extremely helpful in using the English language in more creative ways.

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