9. A Literal Paradox

English is a language so rich in like-meaning words that it is common for us to say the same thing many different ways. We may even go so far as to use apparently opposite constructions synonymously. For example, with Is this true? and Isn’t this true? we use both a positive and a negative question to elicit the same information. And there is the popular exclamation I could care less! which is stigmatized by many critics because it is used not literally as a positive, but as a synonym for its negative, I couldn’t care less! But the most striking, and perhaps one of the more exasperating, confusions of our language occurs when we use a single word to mean both itself and its opposite.

For example, restive, which originally meant ‘standing still,’ from Old French rester, came to mean ‘stubborn’ and now is the equivalent of its apparent opposite, restless. Let normally means ‘to permit, allow,’ but in tennis a let is a serve that has been hindered or obstructed. Ravel means both to tangle and untangle, to knit up and, as we know from Macbeth, who calls on sleep to knit up “the ravelled sleeve of care,” it means to unknit as well. Fast refers to immobility (“The car was stuck fast in the mud”) as well as speed, and dust can mean ‘to sprinkle with dust’ and ‘to remove the dust from.’ Both head and tail can mean, respectively, ‘to add a head to,’ or ‘to behead,’ ‘to remove the tail from,’ or ‘to supply with a tail.’ The preposition with means both ‘accompanying, together’ (grow old along with me) and ‘opposing, against’ (armies fight with one another). Oversight means both looking closely at something (from oversee) and ignoring or forgetting it as well. And there is sanction, which sometimes means ‘to forbid,’ sometimes, ‘to permit or encourage.’

Curiously, there is no exact name for this phenomenon of self-contradiction, though the rhetorical terms ambiguity, amphibology, equivocation, and oxymoron come close. Furthermore, we generally pay little mind to this autoantonymy, assuming perhaps
that such lexical instability must be rare and temporary, the sort of ambiguity that language should not tolerate for very long. In fact, these lexical oxymora crop up regularly, and some have a long and stable history. For example, the double meanings of *dust* have coexisted peacefully since the sixteenth century, and *ravel* and *unravel*, which both enter the language in the 1600s, are with us still today. We have tolerated the paradox of *sanction*, whose double meanings derive from the original legal sense ‘to ordain, decree, ratify,’ almost as long, while we have suffered *cleave*, both ‘split apart’ and ‘cling to,’ for even longer. But some new wrinkles in the universe of opposites are causing trouble. Some usage critics are scandalized that *scan*, which has always meant ‘to examine closely,’ has also been used for at least thirty years to mean ‘skim, examine hastily or superficially,’ a sense accepted without comment by the major dictionaries. In a more interesting, and much more controversial shift of meaning, we find *literally* used both in the old-fashioned way to mean ‘literally,’ and in the newfangled but quite opposite sense to mean ‘figuratively’ (*He was literally climbing the walls*). This the critics of usage univocally condemn.

To dissolve lexical paradoxes, their conflicting senses must interfere sufficiently with one another to create an intolerable situation. Unfortunately, it is often difficult to determine when or why users of English have had enough of double meaning. Take the case of *egregious*. Initially it meant ‘prominent’ in both a good and bad sense (the earliest OED cites are 1534 and 1573, respectively), but the positive sense of the word became obsolete by the nineteenth century, except in humorous contexts. Similarly, the adjective *mere* exhibits two potentially conflicting senses from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries: a positive group of meanings revolving around the notions ‘pure, absolute, entire, and downright’ (*Things rank and gross in nature possess it merely*), all of which have become obsolete, and a negative signification, ‘having no greater extent or importance than the designation implies; that is barely or only what it is said to be’ (*OED*, s. v.), the one sense which survives today. It is more than likely that disambiguation has played some role in the loss of the positive connotations of *egregious* and *mere*, though it is not clear why this occurred after English tolerated their ambiguity for so long.

In some cases, fear of confusion rather than actual ambiguity can bring about a lexical shift. This may have happened with *annul*, which since the early fifteenth century has signified ‘to abolish, cancel.’ A second negative, *disannul*, used as the equivalent of *annul*, first appeared some years after, perhaps because *annul* was not clearly negative enough. The creation of a sharper distinction between negative and positive is certainly behind the coining of *flammable*. *Inflammable* always means ‘capable of burning,’ its sense since it came into the English language in the seventeenth century. By the nineteenth century, however, the notion that someone might carelessly take *inflammable* for *non-flammable*, a sense not actually recorded by dictionaries but whose misreading could prove disastrous, prompted the clarification *flammable* for the unambiguous incendiary sense of the word. *Inflame*, *inflammation*, and *inflammatory*, whose meaning is never in doubt, remain unmodified. *Inflammable* itself continues to be used, though it may occur less frequently than the newer, derived form (Francis and Kučera 1982). A similar process of clarification produces *debone* (1944) alongside the older *bone*, all but one of whose verbal senses clearly refer to the removal rather than the addition of bone
matter (though bone can also mean ‘to furnish with bone,’ a boning knife is always used to remove bone, not to add it).

The prefix un- presents an opportunity for the creation of apparent rather than actual autoantonyms. Redundant un- gives us unloose and unloosen, which have survived in standard English alongside the synonymous loose and loosen since the 1300s (Unloose the dogs of war). Unthaw, a less authorized form used as a synonym for thaw, not freeze, is still commonly heard. In addition, the OED records unbare, unsolve, unstrip, unempty and unrid, all used in the same sense as the simple positive. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was common to prefix un- to words also suffixed with -less, creating such redundancies as unboundless, uncomfortless, undauntless, uneffectless, unhelpless, unmerciless, unremorseless, unrespectless, unshameless, and unquestionless. Despite the apparent double negative, such words—which are no longer current—were treated not as positives but as negatives, much in the way some people today use the stigmatized irregardless to mean ‘regardless.’

The resolution of many lexical paradoxes involves the loss of an existing word rather than the creation of a new one. Competition existed in the seventeenth century between queen, ‘female monarch,’ a word with positive connotations, and the homonymous but derogatory quean, ‘prostitute’—both ultimately from the same root meaning ‘woman.’ The situation was exacerbated during the rule of Elizabeth I: while the opportunity for punning proved irresistible to the literary wits of the age, it was tempered by the need to stay on the sovereign’s good side, and out of the tower. Some historians of the English language go so far as to argue that the decline in frequency of quean in favor of whore and harlot is directly attributable to the political exigencies of the time.

The negative sense of ravel and the morphologically explicit negative unravel appear at about the same time in the history of English and have continued to coexist without causing significant entanglements of sense, though unravel may now be a slightly more common form. Similarly, with cleave we have a lexical paradox of long standing that has not been resolved. Cleave represents the conflation of two verbs whose form, pronunciation, and spelling were once distinct, and whose meanings, ‘to cut, flay, separate,’ and ‘to stick fast, adhere, or cling to,’ are virtually opposite. Yet the intertwining of these words, which began as early as the fourteenth century, seems never to have presented much of a problem for us. We can attribute this to the fact that neither word is very common (the participles cleft and cloven are more familiar to us, though not necessarily frequent in occurrence), and the latter sense of cleave in particular has an archaic flavor to it that further restricts its use.

The Letter and the Spirit

We come now to a fairly common paradox that continues to exercise language commentators. The use of literally to mean its opposite, figuratively, as illustrated in our epigraph from a New Yorker cartoon of some years back, first appears in the nineteenth century. A look at the complex of letter-related words may throw some light on this spreading English amphibology.

Just as gramma, the Greek word for ‘sign, something written,’ gives us English grammar, Latin littera, ‘alphabetic letter,’ furnishes not only English letter but a set of related words whose meaning turns on letters, including literal, literate, literature and
their derivatives literally, literacy, and literary. Since the development of the alphabet, and even more so since the invention of printing, letters have become the key to learning and serve as metaphors for our knowledge.

As perennial concerns with the level of student reading and writing illustrate, the ability to manipulate letters remains indispensable to survival in our society. Claims that the print culture of the past several centuries is being displaced by our dependence on television are not supported by our continued and frequently irrational faith in the written representation of speech. We still feel uncomfortable with a new word, particularly a new name, until we see it spelled, and while our word is still our bond, most spoken affirmations must be quickly followed up by a written confirmation. Except for some few aspects of legal or religious ceremony, or gambling, a signature rather than a spoken “I will” remains our strongest guarantee. Students, who still ask if spelling counts, seem particularly unwilling to question let alone outright disbelieve what they find between the covers of their textbooks. And legal and evangelical fundamentalists are ever louder and more insistent that interpretation of the civil and moral code be bound by the letter and not the spirit of the written text.

By some quirk of idiom, literal and literally are almost always used not in literal reference to the alphabet, but figuratively to refer to meaning. According to the OED, literal first appears in English in the fourteenth century in a theological context, referring to the interpretation of a text in terms of the ordinary rather than the mystical or allegorical sense of its words. It is not used to refer to the letters of the alphabet until the fifteenth century. By the end of the 1500s, literal had acquired another extended meaning, ‘verbally exact,’ in the context of the translation or reproduction of a text, as well as its most common meaning, ‘the sense expressed by the actual wording of a passage,’ in contrast to figurative or metaphorical meaning. The adverb literally places a similar stress on the common, ordinary, or basic sense of a word or phrase, for example Hume’s He had the singular fate of dying literally of hunger (OED, s. v.).

Literal can also be associated with the misinterpretation of language. A literal person, or a literal-minded one, is someone who takes seriously or at face value what is meant either figuratively or in jest. As the epigraph for this chapter shows, this sort of literality is frequently the source of humor. But that epigraph also illustrates a use which the OED labels as a mistake, despite the number of examples cited in its most recent supplement: the use of literally as an intensifier to mean ‘figuratively,’ as in the words addressed to poor Hawkins.

This figurative use of literally has become a bugbear for language critics. While they tolerate the two-faced ravel and cleft, they draw the line at figurative literally because it is a word directly tied to the interpretation of words. Opponents of the change in literally would restrict the word to its literal sense, forgetting for the moment that what they take to be the letter is itself a figure. In their usage handbook, Marius and Wiener (1985, 592) call the new literally misleading or ridiculous. Crews and Schor (1985, 358) maintain, “If you write I literally died laughing, you must be writing from beyond the grave.” Donald Hall (1985, 434) sees in it a misguided attempt to vivify dead metaphors. And Harry Shaw (1981, 305) charges that we overuse both the figurative and the literal meanings of literally. Webster’s New World Dictionary (1959) acknowledges the new literally, tagging it as colloquial and commenting, “regarded by many as an erroneous usage.” The American Heritage Dictionary (1982) finds the error common (the latest
edition of the dictionary does acknowledge that it is “used as an intensive before a
figurative expression,” though a usage note is far from approving, and Claire Cook (1985,
185) warns against it from a practical point of view: “Abuses of the word can seem
ludicrous, and those who recognize them enjoy pointing them out.” Most recently,
commentators have been condemning the OED’s recognition of a hyperbolic sense for
literally.

Word for Word

The fact that authorities grudgingly acknowledge the increasing paradoxical use of
literally, even though they disapprove of it, provides further evidence that a semantic
turnaround has taken place. It is not unusual for words to undergo such antonymic
transformation. History once meant ‘factual account,’ but eventually acquired the
opposite meaning, ‘fictional account,’ as well, no doubt because many factual accounts
prove unreliable. Today history generally indicates nonfiction, while the clipped form of
the word, story, developed a stress on fictionality (similarly, French histoire and conte—
the latter from Latin computus, ‘exact account’—can mean both ‘true account’ and ‘lie’).
In addition to the examples cited earlier, the change is common for a whole set of
expressions which once meant ‘right away.’ Anon, by and by, in a moment, presently, and
soon once meant ‘instantly,’ but now they refer to an unspecified time in the near future.
Even directly, immediately, and right away have come in certain disappointing instances
to mean ‘in a little while.’ In some cases, opposite meanings coexist so subtly that we do
not notice them. Incidentally refers to matters indirectly connected with what has gone
before, though incident originally means ‘naturally appertaining to,’ a sense quite
opposite. And even à propos means both ‘having direct reference to the matter at hand’
and, when used in the absolute, ‘incidentally, by the way.’

In other cases, the oppositions are both blatant and tolerated. Both bad and good
can be used in slang to indicate their opposites. Terrible does not retain much connection
with terror, though it still means something negative, but terribly, as in terribly
entertaining, has become a positive intensifier. Many such intensifiers are words stripped
of their original meaning, and three of these, really, truly, and very (the last from Latin
verus, ‘true’), are words which, like literally, once signified truth and exactness but are
now frequently used instead to indicate an extreme state, often a figurative one at that.

The fate of literally will ultimately depend not so much on the classification of
one of its uses as an error, but on the actual ambiguity generated by the literal paradox.
Our opening illustration from the New Yorker notwithstanding, the use of literally to
mean ‘figuratively’ does not seem to interfere significantly with comprehension. For one
thing, the literal sense of the word is largely restricted to formal, written contexts, while
the loose sense tends to occur in less formal speech and writing. It may be that not
enough people use literally in conflicting senses to cause a problem. On the other hand,
the frequent complaints that the figurative meaning of literally is common may indicate
the form has already stood the test of time.

Unlike cleave, quean, ravel, and inflammable, literally has become a fairly
common word. If communicative interference does result from competing meanings of
literally, we can be fairly confident that some lexical or semantic change will occur to
dissolve the paradox and restore comprehension. Whatever form it takes, this change will
certainly be boosted by the complaints that have been lodged against the construction. But complaints alone are not going to be enough, for revamping the ways we use *literally*, like most of the reforms that have been advocated for English at one time or another, will take quite a bit more than simply pointing out the illogicality of the construction in question.

Opponents of the new *literally* may draw some consolation from the fact that it and other intensifiers such as *really* and *truly* eventually lose their intensity and become candidates for replacement. So it may be that while we are stuck with the literal paradox for now, speakers and writers of English will insist on using *literally* in its new sense only until something better comes along.