

It's All Greek to Me

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The Power of Anaphora and Epistrophe
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Faced with the choice of either receiving goods from Russia or doing without them, Wolodimir Zelensky spoke for the Ukrainian people with a powerful four-line poem:

*Without gas or without you?
Without you.
Without you or without light?
Without you.
Without water or without you?
Without you.
Without food or without you?
Without you.*

In repeating the word 'without', Zelensky was using 'anaphora', a rhetorical device invented by the ancient Greeks and explained by the Cambridge Dictionary as: 'the practice in literature or rhetoric (= speech or writing intended to impress or persuade people) of repeating the same word at the start of several sentences to achieve an effect'.

'Done well,' writes Martin Shovel in *The Guardian*, 'anaphora can stir and intensify an audience's emotions as the repeated elements build towards an unforgettable climax.' Done badly, present-day politicians reduce the rhythmic power of repetition to 'an irritating tic'.

In everyday speech and text, anaphora often sounds **distinctly** tired:

'Run far, run fast.'

'Go big or go home.'

'Be bold. Be brief. Be gone.'

'Get busy living or get busy dying.'

'Open heart, open mind.'

'Monkey see, monkey do.'

'Stay safe. Stay well. Stay happy.'

Now compare to some of the best:

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of **incredulity**, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness'. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859)

'You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, **victory**, however long and hard the road may be.' Winston Churchill to the House of Commons (13 May 1940)

'Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.' John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address (20 January 1961)

'I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up [...] I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia [...] I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi [...] I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they

will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.' Martin Luther King, Jr., Lincoln Memorial Speech, Washington D.C. (28 August 1963)

We should also thank the Greeks for 'epistrophe'. Similar to anaphora, it repeats a word at the end of a phrase, sentence, or clause, rather than at the beginning. A famous example of epistrophe is found in Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: 'and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.'

The power of Zelensky's poem is a unique combination of anaphora and epistrophe:

*Without food or without you?
Without you.*

Use anaphora wisely. It strengthens the speaker, it strengthens the message, it strengthens the memory!

Paul Smith

Vocabulary Trainer

• **distinctly** deutlich

• **incredulity** Staunen/Fassungslosigkeit

• **victory** Sieg