

Aposiopesis

Definition of Aposiopesis

Aposiopesis is derived from a Greek word that means “becoming silent.” It is a rhetorical device that can be defined as a [figure of speech](#) in which the [speaker](#) or writer breaks off abruptly, and leaves the statement incomplete. It is as if the speaker is not willing to state what is present in his mind, due to being overcome by passion, excitement, or fear. In a piece of literature, it means to leave a sentence unfinished, so that the reader can determine his own meanings.

Types of Aposiopesis

Aposiopesis examples may be classified according to the following types:

Emotive aposiopesis – This type of aposiopesis is used in conditions of [conflict](#) between emotional outbursts of a speaker, and an environment that does not react. Usually, the writer or speaker pauses in the middle of a sentence.

Calculated aposiopesis – This type of aposiopesis is based on the conflict of missing thought and its opposing force that rejects the substance of that thought. Hence, the idea is removed that is explicitly expressed afterwards.

[Audience](#)-respecting aposiopesis – It is based on the removal of thoughts which are unpleasant to the readers, or offensive to the audience.

Transitio-aposiopesis – It removes the ideas from the end part of a speech in order to immediately get the audience interested in the subsequent section.

Emphatic aposiopesis – It avoids the use of full utterance, to present the idea as greater and really inexpressible.

Some Forms of Aposiopesis

Sometimes a word is used to indicate something completely different from its literal meaning. Such as in this example, “Tis deepest winter

in Lord Timon's purse; that is, one may reach deep enough, and find little" (*Timon of Athens*, by William Shakespeare).

Sometimes a word is used to indicate something whose actual name is not used like, "A chair's arm."

Sometimes a paradoxical statement is used to create illogical strained metaphors. Such as, "Take arms against a sea of troubles."

Abusio is a subtype of Aposiopesis, which results from the combination of two metaphors.

Examples of Aposiopesis in Literature

Example #1: *King Lear* (By William Shakespeare)

King Lear:

"I will have revenges on you both
That all the **world shall** – I will do **such things** –
What they are yet, I know not; but they shall be
The terrors of the earth!"

Shakespeare has used this technique wonderfully to show moods of his characters. Here, it is employed when King Lear gets furious against his wicked daughters. He cannot declare punishment, but he breaks down and burst into tears.

Example #2: *Ulysses* (By James Joyce)

"All quiet on Howth now. The distant hills seem. Where we. The rhododendrons. I am a **fool perhaps**, He gets the plums, and I the plumstones. Where I **come in**."

In this passage, Joyce deliberately paused twice in order to create dramatic effect. The idea is left unfinished. This break also gives an impression of reluctance to continue. The unfinished thoughts are shown in bold.

Example #3: *Henry IV* (By William Shakespeare)

Hotspur:

“O, I could prophesy,
But that the earthy and cold hand of death
Lies on my tongue. No, Percy, thou art dust,
And food for —

Prince Hal:

“For worms, brave Percy: fare thee well, great heart!”

Shakespeare has been famous for using emotional pauses, or moments of sudden silence in soliloquies. The unfinished thought in this extract is shown with a long dash (—). This is a pivotal moment in the play where a [character](#) pauses abruptly.

Example #4: *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (By Mark Twain)

“She looked perplexed for a moment, and then said, not fiercely, but still loud enough for the furniture to hear:

‘Well, I lay if I get **hold of you I’ll —**’

She did not finish, for by this time she was bending down and punching under the bed with the broom, and so she needed breath to punctuate the punches with. She resurrected **nothing but the cat ...**”

There are two examples of aposiopesis in this excerpt. First, the writer pauses at “hold of you I’ll —,” and then at the end of the excerpt, “nothing but the cat.” Both sentences are left incomplete.

Example #5: *Julius Caesar* (By William Shakespeare)

“O judgment! thou art fled to brutish beasts,
And men have lost their reason. Bear with me,
My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,
And I must pause till it **come back to me...**”

Again, Shakespeare uses aposiopesis in the [soliloquy](#) spoken by Antony at Caesar's funeral ceremony. Anthony is making an emotional speech; hence, he is unable to finish his thought. This gives a perfect dramatic impact.

Function of Aposiopesis

The purpose of using aposiopesis is to create dramatic or comic effect. The writers or speakers use it whenever they want to express ideas that are too overwhelming to finish. Several playwrights use this technique to make dialogues seem sincere and realistic. But the most effective use of aposiopesis is seen when readers successfully figure out the missing thoughts that the writer has left unfinished.