Malapropism

Malapropism Definition

Malapropism finds its origins in the French phrase *mal a propos*, which means "inappropriate." It is the use of an incorrect word in place of a similar-sounding word, which results in a nonsensical and humorous expression.

The word malapropism comes from "Mrs. Malaprop," a character in Sheridan's comedy *The Rivals*, who has a habit of replacing words with incorrect and absurd utterances, producing a humorous effect. A miss-speech is considered malapropism when it sounds similar to the word it replaces, but has an entirely different meaning. For instance, replacing *acute* with *obtuse* is not a malapropism because the words have contrasting meanings, but do not sound similar.

Using *obtuse* for *abstruse*, on the other hand, is a malapropism, as there is a difference in meanings, and both words sound similar. These characteristics makes malapropism different from other errors in speech, such as *eggcorns* and *spoonerisms*.

Common Malapropism Examples

Malapropism is a common phenomenon in our daily life. We find some hilarious Malapropism examples being quoted in the media.

Example #1

The magazine *New Scientist* reports one of its employees calling his colleague "a *suppository* (i.e. repository) of knowledge." The magazine further reports the worker apologized for his "*Miss Marple-ism* (i.e. *Malapropism*)."

Example #2

Richard J. Daley, the former mayor of Chicago, is said to have called a "*tandem* bicycle" a "*tantrum* bicycle," and to also have incorrectly used the phrase "Alcoholics *Unanimous*," rather than "Alcoholics *Anonymous*."

Example #3

Bertie Ahern, the former *Irish Taoiseach*, is said to have given a warning to his country against "upsetting the *apple tart* (i.e., apple *cart*) of his country's economic success".

More Common Malapropism Examples

> Cheer up. I *predicate* (predict) a final victory.
> His capacity for hard liquor is *incredulous* (incredible).
> This does not *portend* (pretend) to be a great work of art.
> *Fortuitously* (fortunately) for her, she won the sweepstakes.

Examples of Malapropism in Literature

In literature, malapropism is employed to create humorous effect.

Example #1: *The Rivals* (By Richard Brinsley Sheridan)

In his novel, *The Rivals*, Richard Sheridan introduces a character, Mrs. Malaprop, who habitually uses words that mean quite the opposite to the words she intends to use, but which have similar sounds to the words she replaces. It becomes a great source of humorous effect in the play. For example, in Act III, Scene 3, she tells Captain Absolute:

> "Sure, if I *reprehend* anything in this world it is the use of my *oracular* tongue, and a nice *derangement* of *epitaphs*!"

In the above passage, she comically replaces *apprehend* with *reprehend*, *vernacular* with *oracular*, *arrangement* with *derangement*, and *epithets*

Some other funny examples of malapropism in the same play include "... *illiterate* (obliterate) him quite from your memory," and "... she's as headstrong as an *allegory* (alligator)."

Example #2: *Much Ado About Nothing* (By William Shakespeare)

William Shakespeare uses malapropism in his plays as well. Look at the following example of malapropism uttered by Constable Dogberry in Act III, Scene 5 of *Much Ado About Nothing*:

> "Our watch, sir, have indeed *comprehended* two *auspicious* persons."

Notice the use of *comprehended* for *apprehended*, and *auspicious* for *suspicious*.

Similarly, an instance of malapropism can be observed in Act I, Scene 3 of *Twelfth Night*. Sir Toby Belch says:

> "By this hand, they are scoundrels and *subtractors* that say so of him. Who are they?"

The malapropism here is "subtractors," which should have been "detractors." Yet another example comes from the same character in Act I, Scene 5 of the same play:

> OLIVIA: "Cousin, cousin, how have you come so early by this *lethargy*?"
>
> SIR TOBY BELCH: "Lechery! I defy lechery."

Here, the use of *lechery*" instead of *lethargy* is a malapropism.

Example #3: *Huckleberry Finn* (By Mark Twain)

In Chapter 33 of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Aunt Sally can be spotted using a malapropism. She says:

"I was most *putrified* with astonishment,"

Here, the use of the word *putrified* is a malapropism, as it seems she was thinking of *petrified*.

Function of Malapropism

Although it is considered an error in speech, malapropism is a great source of humor in both everyday life and literature. In daily life, malapropisms are often unintentional, but writers introduce malapropism in their literary works intentionally to produce comic effect. It ensures the attention of the readers, as it inserts an extra element of interest in a literary piece. This is the reason why the characters using hilarious malapropisms are often well-known.