

Hello. I'm Daniel Brint. Welcome to the Upper Street TODAY language talk, a weekly podcast about English language, expressions, idioms and any other topics of interest inspired by TODAY's subject.

This Wednesday January 10th is bitter-sweet chocolate day, enthusiasts are encouraged to find original ways of enjoying their preference – sprinkle it on coffee, make chocolate chip biscuits, for example. Share recipes online. For many of us, the idea of celebrating chocolate so soon after the holiday season might not be very appealing however, either because we are tired of it, or making an effort to avoid sweet temptation. Ah but here, sweet is combined with bitter, so at least different taste buds are involved.

Of course, a wonderful thing about taste is the capacity to blend different flavours so that they can be experienced simultaneously. And the stronger the contrast, the more potential there is for delight and surprise. Sweet and sour is another example. (1.06)

Such delectable combinations require words capable of expressing their special qualities. This can result in having adjectives or nouns containing opposite ideas - and there is a term for these kinds of words - which is oxymoron. These words, or sometimes expressions if we broaden the definition a bit, bring together incongruous or contradictory concepts ideas or experiences. You've probably heard expression like you have to be cruel to be kind, or Our expressions bittersweet and sweet-and-sour other easy to understand because they precisely refer to sensations. Other types of oxymora can be more abstract and even comic -some of my favourites are military intelligence, airline food and Microsoft Works.(1)

Oxymora (I'm going to use the old-fashioned plural form but you can also say oxymorons) can be formed a wide variety of ways – with adjectives, nouns and verbs, sometimes compounded, often as two words, or hyphenated. Unlike a paradox, oxymora highlight contradiction and incongruence, while a paradox will often express a general truth that transcends lexical difference, 'less is more,' for example, in the context of savouring food or choosing decoration makes absolute sense. There isn't time here to go into the complex discussions around oxymora, irony, and even euphemism but these are things I plan to return to in future episodes.

Oxymora provoke or surprise us at some level of awareness. Consider another food – the thing rather than the taste in this case – jumbo shrimp. Each word on its own refers to an extreme size but in different directions. The fact that silence can seem more significant than speech gives us the term 'a deafening silence', as when an audience is so shocked by a comment that nobody can think of anything to say. Some oxymora have become so normal that we hardly pay attention to their oppositions – 'you clearly misunderstood my remarks.' barely registers as a contradiction. (1.20)

Then there are the odd cases of accidental oxymora – a spendthrift – someone who is irresponsible with money – links 'spend', and the word 'thrift' that means economy or

saving, hence the 'thrift stores' in the US, places with the lowest prices. But thrift originally meant 'wealth', so 'spendthrift' didn't become an oxymoron until long after it was coined.

Well, I hope you have enjoyed this episode of the Upper Street Today podcast. To use an oxymoron, I think it's an awfully good topic but please let me know what you think by leaving a comment.

Thank you.