The Impact of Parallelism: A Rationale for Teaching Parallel Structure at All ESL Levels

By Michael G. Marler

Francis Christensen has created almost a cult following with his advocacy of the cumulative sentence. His essay extolling the virtues of right-branch modification has been repeatedly anthologized, and his theoretical analysis has been adopted by one text writer after another.[1] Yet, if we can believe Robert L. Walker (1970), the cumulative sentence is neither "the most common" nor "the most fundamental" of the rhetorical schemes. Those honors, according to Walker, must go to parallelism.

Even if Walker is not right (and my purpose here is neither to support nor challenge his research), the prevalence of parallelism is not hard to understand. It can occur at virtually any point in the English sentence and can be used in a multitude of ways for as many purposes. Unfortunately, most texts, even in ESL, consign parallelism to the realm of style. Yet style is, in fact, the least important of the ways in which it impacts on the sentence. Style counts for little in a sentence which is syntactically or semantically unacceptable or where lack of clarity makes comprehension difficult.

The first part of this article, then, will examine four ways in which parallelism affects writing: syntax, semantics, clarity, and style. The discussion will be from the vantage point of ESL writing, for even though the points made will apply to all writers of English, they will have particular application for second language students who are experiencing syntactic and semantic problems in their writing. The second part of the article will be devoted to areas of ESL pedagogical concern, with constraints and implications.

Parallelism and Syntax

Since parallelism is a structural device, its impact on syntax should not be surprising. Consider the following sentence[2]:

**There was fear, nervous and worried in me trying to figure out what my mother's reaction would be.*

While it is grammatically acceptable (though not idiomatic) to say *There was fear in me* it is not grammatically acceptable to say *There was nervous in me* or *There was worried in me.* Syntactically, we must either convert *nervous* to *nervousness* and *worried* to *worry*:

> *There was fear, nervousness and worry in me. . . .*

or, since this option is not idiomatic, we must transform the *There was. . . .in me* structure to an *I was (predicate adj.)* structure:

> *I was fearful, nervous, and worried. . . .*

While the first part of the sentence is now syntactically and idiomatically acceptable, there are problems remaining in the second part:

> *I was fearful, nervous, and worried trying to figure out what my mother's reaction would be.*

In this form, the deep structure of the second half would read, "I was trying. . . ." But does this express the relationship which could be made clear between the first and second parts of the sentence? The tense is inappropriate and the time relationship is implied rather than stated. By bringing the subject "I" to the surface structure and shifting to the simple past tense—both changes improving parallelism in the surface structure—and by linking the two parts of the sentence with a clear time expression, *as*, the sentence becomes:

> *I was fearful, nervous, and worried, as I tried to figure out what my mother's reaction would be.*

It could, of course, be argued that the parallelism introduced in the second half of the sentence is stylistic, optional, not illustrative of syntactic necessity. My point would be that the parallelism in the first part is clearly a case of syntactic necessity

and that making those changes first can help us see where further parallelism would be helpful. Syntactic necessity here precedes style.

Parallelism and Semantics

In the sentence which follows, there is no problem with syntactic necessity, yet the sentence is clearly in need of correction:

**I think the American people tend to eat too much meat and less vegetables.*

The problem is that the student has selected the wrong linker. In any parallel structure, there are at least three parts: two (or more) statements (I will label them A,B,C, etc.), and one or more linkers (L or L_1 and L_2). The linker indicates the exact relationship between the statements. In the above sentence, the second linker *less* is unacceptable. It does not collocate with the first linker, *too much*. The appropriate collocation is *too much* (L_1) with *not enough* (L_2). And why? Not simply because the two-part L_2 is parallel with the two-part L_1, and not simply because *not enough* has been linked through idiomaticity to *too much*, but because *less* does not semantically communicate as much information as *not enough*.

The semantic value of linkers can be seen even more clearly in this next example:

That room was not air-conditioned* ***than* *this one.*
L

The linker *than* relates semantically to a "more or less" situation whereas the sentence context provides a "similar or dissimilar" situation. The need here is for the linker *like:*

That room was not air-conditioned ***like*** *this one.*
L

Parallelism and Clarity

Lack of clarity is inevitable whenever syntactic or semantic necessity are violated. However, it is possible for a sentence to be syntactically and semantically acceptable yet lack desired clarity due to faulty parallelism. Consider the following sentence:

I was thinking only* ***of* *myself and not* ***for*** *anyone else.*

Thinking *of* someone else and *for* someone else are two different mental processes. But who is to say what the student meant? Of course, the context may provide the answer, in which case we move on or mentally correct the text and credit the student with a semantic error. But what if the text is vague? We then go to the syntax for help. Given the first part of the sentence,

I was thinking ***only*** *of myself*
L_1 A

and the second linker

and not
L_2

we expect the parallelism to be completed:

I was thinking only ***of*** *myself and not* ***of*** *anyone else.*

The problem is that there is no syntactic (or semantic) necessity here, only expectation, and expectations are often violated for good reasons. In this case and others like it, if the discourse context is vague, an ambiguous parallelism can only result in frustration for the reader.

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The impact of parallelism on clarity can also be seen in this next sentence:

A child may be* ***low in his academic*
A

work for several days ***and*** ***some***
L

days his work is considered high.
B

What, exactly (and parallelism encourages, demands exactness), is the relationship between *several days* in statement A and *some days* in statement B? Do the *some days* fall before or after the *several days* or both? Why are different category words used, *several* being more specific and countable, *some* being more general and noncountable? If this lack of clarity had been

worked out, the stylistic weakness of placing statement A in the active and statement B in the passive might also have been avoided:

On some days a child's academic performance may be low, yet on other days it may be high.

or

For several days a child's academic performance may be low, and then for several more days it may be high.

Technically, of course, the inconsistencies in the original sentence are not violations of syntax or semantics. The sentence is grammatical, and the student could argue that each word expressed the intended meaning. My point would be that a reformulation based on parallelism would produce a sentence with greater clarity as well as one with acceptable syntax and semantic values. Of course, such a reformulation would require the student to choose between countability and non-countability. But then, if this would truly compromise what the student is wishing to say, the original is inappropriate as well because it suggests parallelism, even though it doesn't effectively work it out. And this is a point in itself: Parallelism at its best is not something that gets imposed on written expression. Often the idea to be expressed reaches out for parallelism as the only appropriate structure that will communicate the desired meaning.

Parallelism and Style

This brings the discussion to the point where too many texts begin--with parallelism used not to improve the grammaticality, the meaning, or the clarity of a piece of writing, but its style. Unfortunately, since these other matters may be more critical in enhancing or inhibiting communication, the teacher may be tempted, with elementary and intermediate students, to forget how easily parallelism can be taught and how much it can affect the quality of even a simple sentence. For example:

Hotels in Hawaii are **larger **and** **fancy.***
A L B

If the student were a beginner who had wandered into the use of a comparative structure which was too difficult to handle properly, the sentence could be written:

*Hotels in Hawaii are **large** **and** **fancy.***
A L B

On the other hand, if the student were an intermediate or advanced student, he could be shown how to complete the comparative form successfully and be encouraged to try additional parallelisms:

Hotels in Hawaii are larger** **and** **fan-
A C L_2 D
cier** **than hotels in Samoa.
L_1 B

Homes in Hawaii are bigger and more expensive than homes in Samoa.

Roads in Laie are wider and better maintained than roads in Apia.

In either case, whether the parallelism is simplified for the beginner or extended for the more advanced student, it will have done much to improve the expressiveness of the writer and the pleasure of the reader.

To this point, I have focused on four primary ways in which parallelism impacts on writing. In particular, I have tried to demonstrate that parallelism should not just be a structural device we resort to in an effort to help students polish their writing once they have reached an advanced level and mastered the more basic skills. I have tried to show that parallelism itself is basic.

My next concern is with pedagogy, for if parallelism is basic, it ought to be taught throughout the ESL curriculum. However, if it is to be taught effectively, teachers will need to be aware of and pay due respect to certain pedagogical implications or constraints arising out of the very nature of parallelism and the nature of second language learning.[3]

Skills Level

The first of these implications or constraints relates to the difficulty of managing two mental activities at one time: the manipulation of content and the manipulation of structure. ESL students at all levels have difficulty doing both of these at one time. One principle to keep in mind is that the level of complexity in the parallelism taught should match the level of the student's competence. As Carolyn Kessler (1972) points out, "structures involving rank shifts, certain types of embeddings, and

complex sets of nonmorphemic rules would then be placed among those introduced late in a course of instruction."

A second principle to keep in mind is that when teaching beginners, it will be best to provide either the content or the structure rather than requiring them to manipulate both at once. Of course, if exercises are kept appropriate to the student's skills level, the student can be eased into doing both at the teacher's discretion. However, the need for caution arises from the nature of avoidance strategies students adopt when a task becomes too difficult. Outside the classroom the student may simply choose to avoid parallelism altogether, opting for easier, though less effective ways to express himself. Parallelism may remain a classroom activity done under duress rather than one willingly practiced until acquisition occurs.

Another aspect of avoidance relates to the process of simplification. According to Jain (1969) and Bertkua (1974)[4], simplification is "the process of shortening, generalizing, or in some way simplifying English sentence structure." It is according to these authors, the "single most important process underlying the strategy of an adult speaking a second language" (Bertkua 1974: 284). While both their studies deal with spoken language, it is not difficult to see the implications for written language and in particular for parallelism. Sentences, they tell us, are simplified in one of two ways: The learner (1) "substitutes a simpler and/or shorter construction at the sentence or clause level, or (2) overgeneralizes verb morphology and eliminates functor words at the word level" (Bertkua 1974:248). Either of these simplification processes could be fatal to parallelism.

Functional Value

Another pedagogical implication is that selecting the appropriate level of complexity in parallelism will not be enough to guarantee its use and acquisition. Students will not choose to use parallelism (outside the classroom in creative, independent production) unless they are aware of and appreciate its functional, communicative value. For this reason, I suggest that the semantic value of the linkers should be clearly taught and related to the communicative needs. Here, for example, are five typical parallel structures:

(1) A is greater than or less than B
(2) A is added to or removed from B
(3) A is similar to or dissimilar to B
(4) A is in harmony or disharmony with B
(5) A is equal or not equal to B

Only when students realize that these structures will often correspond with thoughts and feelings they may wish to express will they internalize them.

This point of view is supported in part by an observation on reading phenomena by Ulijn. His research, he says, indicates that the mind prefers conceptual analysis to syntactic and resorts to syntactic only when the conceptual or semantic information is inadequate (Ulijn 1978:11-12). If this is also true in writing, students will be much more concerned with the selection of vocabulary than with the syntactical arrangement of the vocabulary. The challenge, then, will be to show that the syntactical arrangement itself can have a conceptual or semantic function.

Before leaving the concept of functional value, I would like to make one other observation. Most of the texts I have seen treat parallelism only in terms of style and then as if the goal were to produce grand orators or rhetoricians. For example, they select excerpts from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, Churchill's World War II broadcasts, and John F. Kennedy's Presidential Inaugural Address. It is doubtful, however, that these types of examples reflect the communicative, functional needs of most ESL writers. Most ESL students will have little need for the highly styled prose of battle speeches or inaugural addresses. Their needs are more personal, more practical, and less dramatic. It is doubtful they will be motivated by such "foreign" samples of a foreign language. Instead, I suggest the ESL teacher begin immediately to collect his own samples from his own students' papers. If parallelism is, in fact, "the most common" and "the most fundamental rhetorical scheme" in the language, as Walker claims, adequate samples will not be hard to find, and they will truly be functional.

Correcting Parallelism in Written Work

My last point in this part of the article may seem contradictory to what I have been trying to maintain throughout the article. I have been trying to secure for parallelism what I see as its rightful place in the ESL curriculum—a place of importance alongside vocabulary enrichment and basic grammar (however they are taught). Nevertheless, when it comes to the correction of written work, it seems that at least for purposes of grading—which inevitably leads to penalizing for errors—the focus should be clearly on grammar and mechanics. If students violate syntactic or semantic necessity while trying to employ parallelism, or if their faulty parallel structures inhibit clear expression, the errors should be noted and appropriate parallelisms suggested, but such errors should not be penalized. An overly strict approach to grading will almost certainly encourage avoidance and inhibit fluency.

In conclusion, there are many benefits which can come from teaching parallelism which I have not discussed. For one reason or another, they have seemed outside the focus of this article. They include such opportunities as a functional way to teach a "feel" for the English sentence (and with it more accurate, more appropriate punctuation), a natural approach to vocabulary discrimination and enhancement, along with improved control over word family groups, and a meaningful way to help students improve cohesiveness in their writing. In a discipline presenting so many difficulties to even the willing, anxious learner, can teachers afford to neglect a skill which can carry with it so many benefits?

Notes

[1] Francis Christensen's essay, "A General Rhetoric of the Sentence," can be found complete in the Revised Edition of *The Norton Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co. Inc., 1969); a current incorporation of Christensen's cumulative sentence rhetoric can be found in a 1982 text by Patrick Hartwell and Robert H. Bentley, *Open Language: A New College Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 230-231.

[2] The sentences used as examples in both the text and appendix have been taken from papers of ESL students in freshman composition courses at BYU–HC. Errors not related to parallelism have been corrected in the student sample to prevent their acting as distractors.

[3] The language learning concepts presented in this part of the paper have already been established by recent linguistic research. My purpose is not so much to help establish the concepts as it is to present them with a special focus on parallelism, to help assure that when parallelism is taught, potential problems are avoided.

[4] In her article, "An Analysis of English Learner Speech," Jana Svoboda Bertkua presents her own research and comments on Jain's paper.

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APPENDIX: Additional Sentence Examples

A. Syntactic Necessity:

1. *. . . .they can be classified briefly into three groups. They are* ***screamer,*** *si-*
A B
lenter, *and* ***talker.***
B L C

1. *. . . .they can be classified briefly into three groups. They are* ***the screamers,***
A
the talkers, *and* ***the silent ones.***
B L C

2. *I'm* ***not only*** *selling tickets* ***but***
L_1 A L_2
also ***answer*** *all my customers' ques-*
L_2 B
tions.

2. *I'm* ***not only*** *selling tickets* ***but also***
L_1 A L_2
answering *all my customers' questions.*
B

3. *In our Tongan customs, it is rare to find a girl* ***going out*** *and* ***dates*** *alone.*
A L B

3. *In our Tongan customs, it is rare to find a girl* ***going out*** *and* ***dating*** *alone.*
A L B

4. *The current was so strong it could* ***carry*** *a canoe* ***and*** *crushed to pieces*
A L B
at the bottom of the ocean.

4. *The current was so strong it could have* ***carried a canoe*** *to the bottom of the*
A
ocean ***and*** ***crushed it*** *to pieces at the*
L B
bottom of the ocean.

B. Semantic Necessity:

5. ***Whatever she says*** ***or*** ***how she acts,***
A L B
she never loses her charm.

5. ***Whatever she says*** ***or*** ***however she***
A L B
acts, *she never loses her charm.*

6. ***In conjunction with*** ***a mental growth,***
L A
your physical appearance *changes too.*
B

6. ***In conjunction with*** ***your mental***
L A
growth, ***your physical appearance***
A B
changes too.

C. Syntactic-Semantic Necessity:

7. *Money is* ***a problem to everyone,***
A
but *it is* ***more effective in my family.***
L B

7. *Money is* ***a problem to everyone,*** ***but***
A L
it is especially ***a problem in my family.***
B

8. ***He*** *is stronger and more mature* ***than***
A L
his age.

8. ***He*** *is stronger and more mature* ***than***
A L
others *his age.*
B

9. The way we were seated in the class-
A
room was much different from the
L B
way we have here in this classroom.
B

9. The way we were seated in the class-
A
room there was much different from
A L
the way we are seated here.
B

D. Clarity:

10. Young and mature differ from each
A
other, so with freshman and graduate.
L B

10. The differences in youth and maturi-
A
ty are reflected in freshmen and
L B
graduates.
B

E. Style:

11. Many elementary teachers as well
A L
as the secondary school teachers
L B
teach only to satisfy their needs
L_1 C
rather than satisfying students'
L_2 D
needs.
D

11. Many elementary and secondary
A L B
school teachers teach only to satisfy
L_1 C
their own needs rather than to
C L_2 D
satisfy the needs of their students.
D