Structural and Semantic Features of Parenthetical Constructions: Evidence from Modern English Literature

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Abstract. The present article studies structural models and semantic content of parenthetical insertions in modern English fiction. The relevance of the research is determined by its focus on the study of the corpus of parenthesis in the modern English language within the framework of the general science issue ‘man and the language’. The study is novel in that it is carried out using evidence from modern English literature (texts written by S. King, J. Barnes, I. McEwan, D. Mitchell, J. Coe). The new language material and the use of methods of component, distributive, transformational and contextual analysis as well as the method of quantitative calculations allowed us to deepen the existing understanding of the structure and semantics of parenthetical constructions in the English language. This article will be of interest to researchers dealing with problems of parenthesis in modern English and to specialists in semantic syntax.

1. Introduction

A parenthetical construction (parenthesis) is distinguished by most researchers as one of the components of the sentence. This unit is characterized by the lack of formal grammatical agreement with the whole sentence, but it is semantically associated with it. Parenthetical constructions violate the continuity of the statement and (partially) its syntactic relations. Their function is not to structurally integrate into the text, but only to semantically relate to a certain predicative unit, to make a passing remark, to assess a specific semantic element of the statement or statement as a whole. Parenthetical constructions are widely used in the language of newspapers, fiction and have already been the subject of special studies [Alexandrova, 2009, Birenbaum, 1977, Kobrina, 1975, Metzler, 1987, Romanenko, 1979, Samoletova, 1980, etc.]. However, there are several points of view on this language unit which in slightly different terms are united on the fundamental question that this category is a phenomenon of communicative and syntactic level of the language. According to M. Khallidey, “syntactic constructions, actualized due to a certain choice, can serve as a means by which a writer conveys his vision of the world, and perhaps even the most effective means” [1]. N. Orekhova noted that the function of parenthetical constructions in comparison with the parts of the sentence is to give additional information (random or very important) about the parts of the sentence or the sentence as a whole [2].

The research on parenthetical insertions is relevant due to the fact that the science of language is reorienting from the internal structure of the language to how language reflects the relationships that exist in reality, including their human, personal factor. Modern linguistics is considered anthropological and the study of language involves taking the human factor into account when the subject of speech and its recipient are included in the description of language mechanisms. In particular, personality aspects—emotivity, imagery, evaluation, intensity, stylistic marking, modality, etc.—are fully represented in the parenthetical construction. These factors are universal in all languages and are regularly inserted into the sentence by means of punctuation marks. However, syntactic
structure of a certain language (the analytical English language) is bound to affect the representation of parenthetical constructions. The relevance of the study is determined by the development of communicative linguistics, text linguistics, semantics, stylistics, the linguo-stylistics, rhetoric, psycholinguistics, cognitive linguistics.

Although parenthesis as a syntactic phenomenon was studied in many ways, in linguistic works devoted to this problem, there is no comprehensive analysis of structural and semantic features and functioning of the parenthetical construction in English literary texts of the early XXI century in order to establish a connection between the structure, semantics and functions of the parenthetical construction which is undoubtedly the novelty of the paper.

The purpose of this article is to trace dynamics of parenthetical construction functioning in modern English taking existing research and texts of modern English fiction into account from three points of view: 1) structural models of parenthetical constructions employed by English writers; 2) their most frequent semantic content; 3) characteristic functions of parenthesis in the literary text.

The contexts containing 1,055 parenthetical constructions extracted by continuous sampling method from the works of modern English writers—S. King, J. Barnes, I. McEwan, D. Mitchell, J. Coe—were the actual base of the study. These authors are not chosen by chance: parenthesis, which helps to structure the information and present it in a logically clear and interesting manner, plays an exceptional role in their works.

2. Structural Models and Semantic Content of Parenthetical Constructions in the English Language

Parenthetical constructions are among those syntactic phenomena which complicate the main statement and are used in its composition as something additional or accompanying it, but not as equal with it, thus, parenthetical constructions cannot exist on their own, without the sentence which they are inserted into. It implies that parenthetical constructions may be associated both with a certain part of the sentence and the sentence as a whole. Parenthetical constructions which refer to the whole sentence are characterized by greater flexibility than those explaining its part.

Most researchers in the field emphasize the potential diversity of the volume and structure of parenthesis. English writers use parenthetical constructions (often author's individual, quite lengthy in volume) in a variety of functions, creating a detailed and deep image of the picture of the world.

The language material analyzed shows that parenthetical constructions are represented by different structural and semantic units and it is possible to distinguish the models preferred by modern authors. Consider the following structural models, their semantic content and the characteristic functions of the parenthesis in modern English prose of the selected writers.

2.1. Parenthesis is a Word Form

This model is represented mostly by nouns. Less common are adjectives, adverbs, verbs and pronouns. The word as a parenthesis makes it possible to foreground certain information to a greater extent since it is associated with a slight informative content of the highlighted element and, as a consequence, great attention to a particular detail. Parenthetical words perform the functions of evaluation, brief comment or clarification from the author or character’s position, the function of specification and explanatory comment. To punctuate parenthesis of this type, double dash (more often) and round brackets (less frequently) are used. Consider the following examples.

2.1.1. Parenthesis is a Noun

e.g. <...>that the Mad Bird Woman was the key to it; and that if we wanted to solve it, we were going to have to find out more, somehow, about the person—or the thing—whose silhouette we had glimpsed that afternoon through the window of Number 11, Needless Alley [3].
In this paragraph, the parenthetical construction plays the specific role in reader’s perception of the text. The parenthesis clarifies the previous noun “the person” and stresses the author’s uncertainty in this situation.

2.1.2. Parenthesis is a Pronoun

E.g. Lady Grayer has invited me—us—to a musical gathering [4].
That’s him! I mean—that’s her—it—whatever it was <…> [3].

In these two examples, the parenthetical constructions specify the pronouns to give more information about the stated events.

2.1.3. Parenthesis is an Adverb

E.g. He was ambulatory—barely—but my grandfather was blind and bedridden and horribly corpulent, a victim of hypertension [5].

In this given paragraph, the parenthetical construction expresses the author’s uncertainty about a real physical state of the main character. The author is not sure that the grandfather is really ill.

2.1.4. Parenthesis is a Verb

E.g. He reversed out of the pantry, pausing to turn off the light, reminding himself that he must (rinse) put everything back in order as he made his retreat [5].

In this example, the parenthetical construction expressed by a verb serves to specify the main character’s duty about the house and to pay reader’s attention to this fact.

2.2. Parenthesis is a Phrase

Parenthetical constructions represented by a phrase, as a rule, are characterized by a small volume (from 2 to 5 word forms). The parenthesis of this type can relate both to a certain part of the sentence and to the sentence as a whole. The analysis of the position the parenthesis occupies in the sentence shows that the position of parenthetical phrases in the sentence is free, not fixed, which distinguishes them from other parts of the sentence; the position of parenthetical phrases does not depend on the nature of their connection with the including sentence. In general, parenthetical phrases are used in about a third of cases. Despite the slight informative content, parenthetical phrases can convey important conceptual or hidden information since they substantially interrupt the narrative which makes it possible to foreground certain information. Within the sentence, parenthetical phrases perform the function of appeal to the addressee of the speech, reference to the author or source of information, specification and explanatory comment. Modern English literary texts are characterized by the use of double dash to mark parenthetical phrases.

E.g. She rose to her feet—quite a slow, effortful process—and shuffled into the kitchen [3].

The parenthetical phrase performs the function of explanatory comment to show the reader the character’s unwillingness to do something in this situation.

2.3. Parenthesis is a Sentence

Parenthetical sentences proved to be quite frequent in modern English literature. This is due to the high informative capacity of the propositional structure and minor parts of the statement, modal words and other units. From the point of view of its structure, this model has several modifications and may be a sign of the idiostyle of certain authors. Parenthetical sentences perform the function of specification and explanatory comment. Within this model, the same punctuation marks are observed: double dash and round brackets. Consider the following examples.

2.3.1. Parenthesis is a Simple Sentence

E.g. He and my mother have arranged by telephone (I hear both sides) to meet in the evening [6].

The use of the parenthesis in the sentence fulfills the explanatory function and helps to introduce the second part of the sentence, which contains details about the idea formulated in the first part of the utterance, which is very significant to the whole novel, defining the notion of the main character.
2.3.2. Parenthesis is a Subordinate Clause  

E.g. But from now on, without agreeing that every feature of the situation corresponded with every detail in the film (besides which I was, in any case, still very hazy on most of those details), I was more persuaded than ever that we had stumbled into the very epicentre of a mystery [3].  

In this paragraph, parenthetical sentence performs the function of specification and explanatory comment to attract the readers to the character’s speculations about the given situation.

2.3.3. Parenthesis is a Part of a Compound Sentence  

E.g. Klieg doesn’t even look at them—he pays people to look at them and to think about what’s on them, and for every screen you see here (and for thousands more that are too dull to make good decorations), there are at least a couple of employees who know much more about it than Klieg ever will [7].  

In this example, the parenthesis not only fulfills the function of explanatory comment, but also gives the author’s negative evaluation of people who never do their work well.

2.3.4. Parenthesis is a Compound or Complex Sentence  

E.g. Now, the withdrawn cork, the chink of glasses—I hope they’re clean—and Claude is pouring [6].  

The parenthesis in this block of the text bears a lot of meanings. Firstly, it performs the function of specification. Moreover, the author gives his negative evaluation of the main character’s cleanliness. He deliberately used the phrase “I hope they’re clean” to pay the reader’s attention to it.  

Next time—well, I mean, if you ever want to help me out with my overcatering again—I’ll do you my vodka sorbet [4].  

This parenthetical sentence besides performing the function of explanatory comment serves to express the character’s wish to see the girl again.

2.4. Parenthesis is a Part of a Parenthesis  

Interestingly enough, parenthetical construction can be inserted into another parenthetical construction. The sentences with similar insertions are constructions with two levels of inclusion. Including and included parenthetical constructions can be expressed by different structures—from a minimal nominative unit to a complex syntactic entity. As a rule, including parenthetical constructions are expressed by more complex structures than the included ones and perform the function of explanatory comment. It should be noted that, within sentences with parenthesis of this structural type, the included parenthetical construction is usually marked by round brackets, the double dash is used to punctuate the including parenthesis. The following examples illustrate the model.  

E.g. For a day or two—perhaps even three—the person who breathed the poison fumes (or even worse, swallowed the grains of sand) would feel fine—perhaps better than ever before in his life [5].  

The following example shows the explanatory function of the parenthetical constructions, which at the same time contribute to the logical organization of the sentence.  

Structural and semantic models and functional features of the parenthetical construction in the language material under study presented in descending order of their frequency are given in the following table.  

We can observe from the table that any unit of the language, which is able to convey certain content and function in the text, can be used as parenthesis. Parenthesis is put, as a rule, in the middle of the sentence. The most common form of its representation is a simple sentence. This is because it does not make the structure of the whole sentence heavy, does not complicate the perception of the statement.
Table 1. Structural Models of Parenthetical Constructions and Their Functional Characteristics in
English Fiction of XXI Century.

| Parenthetical Construction | Usage Frequency | Position, Punctuation marks | Function | Writers |
|---------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|----------|---------|
| Simple sentence           | 41%             | In the middle of the sentence Double dash / round brackets | Specification and explanatory comment | S. King, J. Coe, D. Mitchell |
| Phrase                    | 28%             | In the middle of the sentence Double dash / round brackets | Appeal to the addressee of speech, reference to the author or source of information, specification and explanatory comment | J. Barnes, S. King, I. McEwan, D. Mitchell |
| Word form                 | 16%             | In the middle of the sentence Double dash (more often) / round brackets (less frequently) | Estimation, brief comment from the author or character’s point of view, specification and explanatory comment | S. King, J. Coe, D. Mitchell, I. McEwan |
| Compound sentence         | 7%              | In the middle of the sentence Double dash / round brackets | Specification and explanatory comment | S. King, J. Barnes, J. Coe, D. Mitchell |
| Complex sentence          | 6%              | In the middle of the sentence Double dash / round brackets | Specification and explanatory comment | J. Coe, D. Mitchell, I. McEwan |
| Part of a parenthesis      | 2%              | In the middle of the sentence Double dash / round brackets | Explanatory comment | S. King, J. Barnes, J. Coe |

3. Conclusion

Thus, the language material analyzed revealed that parenthesis is a complex phenomenon in the modern English language. It is represented by different structural and semantic units: a word form, a phrase, a simple sentence, a compound sentence, a complex sentence.

We can draw a conclusion about the emerging trend in the structure of parenthesis. The authors of the period under study use the following parenthetical constructions: simple sentences, phrases and word forms. These data are based on statistical calculations and analysis of the language material.

In addition, it is possible to point out the trend in the functional and semantic use of parenthesis in modern English fiction. The parenthetical constructions, which prevail in the works of modern English
writers, express specification of the character, their state or situation and convey additional explanatory information.

We can also conclude that more than 80% of all parenthetical constructions employed by the authors perform the functions of clarifying specification and explanatory comment which are represented by all the structural types. Furthermore, parenthetical constructions are subjective expressive and evaluative in their nature. They express an assessment of the degree of confidence, doubt, irony, indignation, etc. Parenthesis as a subject of research is advanced and still open for discussion. In the future, it is possible to study this topic using the works of modern Russian, German writers.

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