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Parallelism: A Semiotic Feature of Belle Lettres

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Abstract

Parallelism as an expressive feature embellishes graces and endears the well-formedness of sentences elucidating writings and speeches. This paper therefore reintroduces a fundamental feature making utterances rhythmical, rhetorical and elocutionary, qualities severally being misused, overlooked and misinterpreted by many learners, many teachers, and many writers (journalists). It is with regard to the near-neglect of this veritable writing technique that this paper expatiates the concepts of parallelism, the interface between belle lettres (beautiful letters or writings) and belle-lettres (literary writings or studies), and parallelism as a semiotic element of syntactics. It as well juxtaposes well-formed parallel structures and ill-formed ones as exemplary indications of dos and don'ts of making speeches or composing essays. The paper unequivocally underlines the sine qua non of parallelism before effective and enduring speeches and writings can be accomplished.

Introduction

“True ease in writing comes from art, not chance; as these move easiest who have learned to dance” (Pope 1711). Oratory, rhetorics and many essays are learned (art). They, in no way, appear from the blues to make their patterned features part and parcel of anyone (not chance). Just as endearing dancing

gesticulations elicit admiration and ovation, results demonstrating hourly preparation, so do good pieces of writings entertain, inform and educate readers, results arising from the writers spending hours practicing writing, writing, rewriting and making skill second nature to themselves.

Imitating good writers and their writings make one adept and effortless at creating good constructions laced with features endearing themselves to readers as well as enduring the passages of time so long as there are readers emulating these writings. This act of imitation forms the skill of R. L. Stephenson as Oji (2001: 56) recommends: “Whenever I read a book or a passage that particularly pleased me, in which a thing was said, or an effect rendered with propriety, in which there was either conspicuous force or some happy distinction in the style, I must sit down at once and set myself to ape that quality. I was unsuccessful and always unsuccessful; but at least in these bouts, I got some practice in rythme, in harmony, in construction and the coordination of parts”. It is in maintaining acceptable rythme, being in harmony with acceptable language use, keeping with the acceptable construction in the language and observing the acceptable coordination of parts of the linguistic elements that this paper addresses significant feature of good piece of writing that helps one to create pleasing rhythmic effect in ones writing - parallelism.

What is Parallelism?

Linguistic parallelism, according to Yankson (2002: 14), is “the use of pattern repetition in a literary text for a particular stylistic effect”; Marriam-Websters (2004: 898) says that it is “repeated syntactical similarities introduced for the rhetorical effect”; Waldhorn and Zeiger (1980: 83) state that it “signifies the grammatical balance of two or more logically related sentence elements”. These conceptions of parallelism have elements belonging to the same grammatical category and therefore in the same paradigmatic relation: the first conception has “pattern repetition” and “stylistic effect”, the second has “syntactical similarities” and “rhetorical effect”, the third has “grammatical balance” and “logically related sentence element”. These six noun phrases, a pair in each conception, denote synonymous perception of parallelism by these authorities. Parallelism, a feature of speech and writing, requires that the elements – sounds, phrases, words, clauses/sentences - are sequenced appropriately to “give equality and balance to separate points that you make”, Thurman (2002: 161). This assertion affirms Waldhorn and Zeiger (1980:82) who emphasize: “To master parallelism is to control one of the principle techniques of English prose. No

other single device helps more to clarify relationships between kindred ideas". The mastery of parallelism, which creates equality and balance between two clauses, characterizes this statement of John F. Kenney as recorded in Lunsford and Connors (1989):

Mankind must put an end to war, or war will put an end to mankind.

The two clauses conjoined by the coordinating conjunction "or" have the same parallel structures of NP₁+Vb+NP₂+A or NP₁+Vb+NP₂+A.

Parallelism: A Semiotic Feature

Merriam-Webster's (2004:1331) says that semiotics is "a general philosophical theory of signs and symbols that deals especially with their function in both artificially constructed and natural language and comprises syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics". According to Crystal 2003:413), semantics studies "the relations between linguistic expressions and the objects in the world which they refer to or describe", syntactics studies "the relation of these expressions to each other", and pragmatics studies "the dependence of the meaning of these expressions on their users (including the social situation in which they are used)". Parallelism is a feature of syntactics which demonstrates pattern repetition or syntactical similarities or grammatical balance and/or equality of linguistic elements in writing or speech. As a feature of syntactics, it is, therefore, a sign, a category of syntax, used to create pleasing rhythmic effect in writing and speech.

Belle Lettres

These are French words. Compounding them by linking the two words with a hyphen makes them conceptualized as literary writings, literary studies or specifically literature. This differentiates them from other writings as scientific, technical or commercial as well as writings embodying the use of special languages for specific purposes. On the other hand, the two words, once un-compounded, mean beautiful letters or writings. Literary writings and beautiful writings coincide with being "types of reading for pleasure" Ellis and Tomliensen (1980: 140) as both have the functional attributes of entertaining, educating and informing readers. According Lunsford and Connors (1989), parallel structure makes writings clear and easy to follow, thus bringing grace and coherence and creating pleasing rhythmic effect in your own writing. The grace, coherence and pleasing rhythms skilled writers put in writings are qualities of parallelism which mark pieces of writings out as beautiful writings (belle letters) or literary writings (belle-letters). Parallelism therefore is an indispensable feature, a semiological

communicative element of syntactics, making speeches and writings endearing, enduring, enlivening and entrapping, attributes charactering beautiful or literary writings (belle-letters).

Parallelism: A Typological Conception

Parallelism as a linguistic feature of syntax makes speeches and writings graceful, elegant, coherent and pleasurable. It appears in sound patternings of people (phonology), in word forms or structures (morphology), in linear arrangement of words (syntactics/syntax), and in conception of objects in words (semantics).

Phonological Level

“At the Phonological level”, according to Yankson (2002:14), pattern congruity may take the forms of chiming (or alliteration); internal or end rhyme; or stress isochronicity in two or more structures”.

Chiming

Chinua Achebe and Elechi Amadi display this phonological feature in their prose books, *Things Fall Apart* and *The Concubine*.

Okonkwo was well known - alliteration (w)

His fame rested on solid personally achievement – alliteration (s)

- Achebe (1958:3)

He tightened his grip on his razor sharp machet – alliteration (h)

Emenike’s knife showed signs of recent sharpening –

Alliteration (sh); (s - hissing or hushing sound)

-Amadi (1982: 1)

Perkins (1978: 96) explains alliteration as “the recurrence of the same consonant sound in words close together”. He exemplifies it by using the expression: “The clanging bell peeled loudly” in which is repeated in four of the five words. The two texts mentioned clearly illustrate alliteration in prose writing or composition. There are recurrences of ‘w’, ‘s’ and ‘h’, ‘sh’ ‘s’ in the texts. This repetition of these sounds makes reading and writing musical and pleasing to the sense.

Rhyme

This is the “repetition of the sound, usually at the end of lines in poetry” (Perkins 1978:103). However, many writers do not limit themselves to end-

rhyme only: there are equally initial and middle rhymes. Egudu (1979:55) explains these rhymes' differentiation in terms of positions in poems.

Rhymes can be differentiated on the basis of other principles.

For example, we can distinguish between three kinds of rhymes depending on the positions in lines of poetry of the rhyming words. One kind is the head rhyme which occurs when two or more lines begin with words that rhyme. Another kind is the internal rhyme which occurs when the rhyming words are found in the middle of lines. The third kind is the end rhyme (the most popular and common of the three) which occurs when the rhyming words are the last in the lines.

The nursery rhyme by Jane Taylor as adapted in *Nursery Thinkers English Course Book I* by Awosike et al (2007: 64) demonstrates the prevalent use of end rhyme.

“Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| 1. Twinkle, twinkle Little Star | a |
| 2. How I wonder what you are | a |
| 3. Up above the sky so high | b |
| 4. like a diamond in the sky | b |

The long vowel /a:/ is repeated at the ends of lines '1' and '2'; the diphthong, also called the gliding vowel, /ai/ is repeated at the ends of lines '3' and '4'. These similarities of the vowels make the lines musical as repetition of same pattern is part and parcel of beautiful or literary writings.

Stress Isochronicity

Stress is “energy of articulation” Jones (1981: xxi) or is “described as the relative strength of a syllable”, Roach (2004:2). Articulation describes the force of air injected by the lungs (technically called airstream mechanism) for the pronunciation of a syllable. Stress in English obeys the phonological theory of isochronicity. Isochronicity or isochrony states that “the stressed syllable fall at approximately regular intervals throughout an utterance.... If there are several unstressed syllables... they will be articulated rapidly to get them into the time span available”, crystal (2003:245). Isochrony reflects in lines the four basic meters (the groupings of stressed and unstressed syllables) of English poetry, according Egudu 1979:136.). The first kind of metre or group of syllable is that in which an unstressed syllable is followed

by a stressed one. This is called iambus; the second, called trochee, is where a stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed one; the third is when two unstressed syllables are followed by a stressed one (this is called anapaest); the fourth is when a stressed syllable is followed by two unstressed one (this is dactyl).

In the Jane Taylor poem above, the main metre used reflecting isochronous rhythm is trochee: “Twinkle” and “little” are two syllable words: the first syllables of words – “twin-” and “lit-” are stressed, while the final syllables of “-kle” and “tle” are unstressed. Similarly, in line 2, ‘How’ is stressed, ‘I’ is unstressed; ‘won-’ is stressed, ‘-der’ is unstressed; ‘what’ is stressed, ‘you’ unstressed; in line 3, ‘up’ stressed, ‘a’ unstressed, ‘bove’ stressed ‘the’ unstressed, ‘world’ stressed, ‘so’ unstressed; in line 4, ‘like’ stressed, ‘a’ unstressed; ‘dia’ stressed, ‘mond’ unstressed. Also, underlined iambic rhythm is reflected on Caesar’s famous statement: I came, I saw, I conquered. The repeated ‘I’ is unstressed, while the past verbs are stressed.

These pattern repetitions of isochronous elements elicit beauty, pleasure and melody of literary writings.

Structural Level

Structural and morphological levels are considered as one since the changes in the forms of words to express tense, plurality, comparison and possession reflect syntactic behaviours. Fabb, as Eruchalu (2007: 6) records, considers structural parallelism as holding “between two sections of text when they are the same at some level of structure (for example, when they have the same phrase structure). Elaborating linguistic parallelism, Yankson (2004: 14) clarifies thus:

...structures are syntactic equivalents when they have similar patterns: NP₁ + VP + NP₂ (or SVO). Structures may also be marked as equivalents when they are initiated by the same lexical item, for instance, by a Wh-Question form, or by a comparative marker like “As”, or by an adverbial “perhaps”. We can also say that two or more structures are equivalent by virtue of the fact that they express the same proposition.

For instance, Caesar’s statement, I came, I saw, I conquered, comprises three equal clauses that have the same structural patterns of SV + SV + SV. Similarly, John F. Kennedy’s: Mankind must put an end to war or war will put an end to mankind has similar structural patterns of SVOA + SVOA.

Underscoring sameness of proposition is the first line of Chukwu's (2008: 65) poem entitled "My Diploma Is My Woe": I chose a pathway; a sublime One. Rewriting the second part of this line gives the same statement as well as the same structural pattern: I chose a pathway: (I chose) a sublime one (pathway). The common structure becomes SVO + SVO.

Semantic Level

"Semantic parallelism holds between two sections of text when they can be interpreted to be the same in some components", Fabb according to Eruchalu (2007: 6). Yankson (2002: 4) corroborates Fabb. He says that "at the semantic level lexical items that occur in the same paradigm (or belong to the same grammatical category) may be related either synonymously or antonymously". The synonyms among words share the same semantic feature. For instance, in the expression: The sun, the moon and the stars smile daily at the world, 'the sun', 'the moon', 'the stars' relate synonymously under the same semantic feature +heavenly bodies, as well as sharing the same structural patterns, noun phrases (NPs). Also, in the expression:

As we are fending for ourselves, we should be saving for
a rainy day as well as caring for the needy,

The words 'fending', 'saving' and 'caring' are
synonymous as they share the same semantic feature
+welfare.

Structural Reflections of Parallelism

Parallelism, Lunsford and Connors (1989) emphasize, "characterizes the most elegant passages of our language". Structural reflections of parallel structures, both correctly and incorrectly written, are consecutively presented. Instances are abstracted from newspapers, magazines, and textbooks.

Correct Parallel Structures

The structures exemplifying expressions belong to the same grammatical unit, i.e. they are either of the same word-class, the same phrase or the same clause.

Word-Class Parallel Nouns

- Socrates had ability, knowledge, honesty and courage.
- from Waldhorn & Zeiger (1980:83)

Three subjects guaranteed to cause a fight are politics, religion, and money. – from Lunsford and Connors (1989)

- None of the tribunals' judgments assumed the queerness, weirdness and notoriety of the Abia State Election Tribunal.

- From Daily Sun 14 April 2008, Monday

Parallel Verbs

- The quarterhorse skipped, pranced, and absolutely sashayed on the track.

- From Martins (1989).

- Socrates analysed, discussed, questioned, and generalized.

- From Waldhorn & Zeiger (1980: 83)

Parallel Adjectives

“A great nose indicates a great man - Genial, courteous, intellectual, virile, courageous”

Rostand in Waldhorn & Zeiger (1980: 83)

- Socrates was intelligent, able, honest, and courageous.

- from Waldhorn & Zeiger (1980: 83)

- Some rational members of the PDP saw the judgment as perverse, reprehensible, and odious.

- from Daily Sun 14 April 2008, Monday

- The tribunal admitted in evidence videotape whose source was spurious, suspicious and doubtful.

- From Daily Sun 14 April 2008, Monday

Parallel Participles

- As more and more antismoking laws are enacted, we see legions of potential nonsmokers munching Nicorette, gnawing peppermints, chewing pencils, knitting sweaters, or practicing self-hypnotism.

-From Martins (1989)

- Socrates faced his trial fearlessly, insisting on the truth as he saw it, and rejecting expedient compromises. (1980:83)

- From Waldhorn & Zeiger (1980: 83)

Parallel Phrases

Adjectives

- We must care for the elderly, the unemployed, the homeless, the sick and the poor, the weak and the vulnerable.
- Many people prefer the term the physically challenged to the disabled or the handicapped. - From Leech & Svartvik (2002: 237)

Prepositional Phrases

- A cloud of critics, of compilers, of commentators, darkened the face of learning, and the decline of genius was soon followed by the corruption of taste.
- Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* as quoted in Lunsford and Connors (1989).
- Socrates confronted his accusers with complete assurance and with unabashed candour.
- Waldhorn & Zeiger (1980:83)

Infinitive Phrases

- I would suggest that what is important is to maintain the way he started and to move forward in that direction,...
- From Daily Sun 14 April 2008, Monday
- Socrates loved to trap his friends into seemingly innocent statements and then to expose their errors in logic.
- From Waldhorn & Zeiger (1980:83)
- Court is good because it fine-tunes our democracy, it finetunes some of the basic ideas and it especially underlines the crucial role of law. Three clauses introduced by 'It'.
- Daily Sun 14 April 2008, Monday

Parallel Clauses

Parallel clauses (structures) must have the same parallel grammatical structures.

- History became popular, and historians became alarmed.
SVC or SVC - Will Aurant in Martins (1989)

- Mankind must put an end to war, or war will put an end to mankind.
SVOA or SVOA - J.F Kennedy in Martins (2989)
- Socrates believed that the ideal state should be governed by intellectual aristocrats and that democracy was a dangerous creed.
- From Waldhorn & Zeiger (1980:83)

Conjunctions and Parallelism

Coordinating conjunctions connect elements or units of equal grammatical structure. In making use of “and”, ‘but’, ‘or’ in linking words it should be noted that expressions of the same structure should precede and follow them. Similarly, for correlative conjunctions - either or, neither-nor, both-and, not only-but also “use the same structure after both parts” Lunsford and Connors (1989). Examples: coordinating conjunctions.

- The group performed whenever anyone would listen AND wherever anyone would pay. (Equal clauses connected)
- From Lunsford and Connors (1989)
- Medical surveys suggest that Americans are dieting more BUT are still consuming too much fat. (Equal clauses connected)
- From (Ibid above).

Correlative Conjunctions

- Mike is NOT ONLY very kind BUT ALSO very good looking.
Equal adj. phrases connected
- From Thurman (2002:164)
- “Native Son” depicts a world where blacks have NEITHER decent housing NOR secure family lives.
Equal NPs connected
- From Lunsford and Connors (1989).

Non-Parallel or Incorrect Structures

Thurman (2002:161) counsels that “understanding parallelism isn’t as difficult as it may seem”. She further advises that “in using parallelism, you simply write all the similar parts of a sentence in the same way. If you’ve used two nouns, you don’t suddenly switch to a gerund. If you’ve used verbs

that have a certain tense, you don't suddenly change tenses. If you begin in one voice, you don't suddenly switch to another voice". Thurman's pieces of advice however do not lost in many writers and/or speakers as wrong applications of parallelism still characterize many expressions daily or occasionally written and spoken.

Daily Newspapers/Magazines

- Probing corruption should be done quietly, privately and in the most discreet manner.
- Wrong structures: adv + adv + PP

- *Daily Sun* 14 April 2008, Monday

To get a correct parallel structures, the PP introduced by "in" should be replaced with another adverb, discreetly", so the structure becomes"... quietly (adv), privately (adv) and discretely (adv.)

- ... one thing I want to assure Bayesians is that I will not fail to serve you conscientiously, transparently and with the highest sense of responsibility...
- wrong structures – adv + adv + pp

The adverb, responsibly, should take the place of the prepositional phrase introduced by 'with' to give parallel structures: "...conscientiously (adv), transparently (adv) and responsibly (adv)".

- Iyabo has petitioned...over her harassment, persecution and the flagrant disregard of the due process by EFCC officials

Wrong structures – Noun + Noun + NP

- Daily independent 22 April 2008

"Humiliation and intimidation" replacing the noun phrase introduced by "the" gives us equal or similar structures: harassment (N), persecution (N) and humiliation (N) or intimidation (N).

- We view this story as malicious, callous and aimed at deliberately tarnishing the image and reputation of the entire management of the Mint.

Wrong structure – adj + adj + clause

- Daily independent 22 April 2008

To make the structures parallel, the clause introduced from “aimed” should be replaced with the adjective “injurious”. So, the correct structures become:... malicious (adj), callous (adj) and injurious (adj).

- Transport Minister noted that the ports are expected to generate revenue, create employment and wealth and because about 90% of the countries cargo import and export also pass through the sea ports, efficiency at the port is crucial.

Wrong structure – infinitive + infinitive +noun.

- Newswatch 25 February 2008

To recast this, it is necessary to place initially what should be done first before what should result or arise from it:...expected to be efficient, generate revenue and create employment... because... through the sea port. In so doing, the parallel structures become: to be...(infinitive), (to) generate...(infinitive) and (to) create... (infinitive).

- The nonagenarian was known for his witty remarks, anecdotes and a rich social class.

Wrong structure-NP+N+NP

Newswatch 25 February 2008

Recasting correctly, we have epigrams (N), anecdotes (N), and companies (N), or we provide a premodifier for the noun, anecdotes, to make it a phrase:...witty remarks (NP), mirthful anecdotes (NP) and a rich social life(NP).

Another instance of incorrect and correct parallel structures from Thurman (2202:163)

Mixture of Active and Passive Structures

- I was worried that Bill would drive too fast (active voice) that the road would be too slippery (active voice) and that the car would be stopped by the police (passive voice).

Structure – active voice +active voice+passive voice

In the two active clauses, the subjects - “Bill” and “the road” directly precede the verbs- would drive and would be while in the passive one, the subject, police, is not placed before the verb; rather it appears as a passive

agent controlled by the preposition 'by'. Recasting it, gives the active form of the passive clause and so, makes the clauses parallel:

I was worried that Bill would drive....

That the road would be..., and that the police would stop the car.

A second instance from Lunsford and Connors (1989)

- The duties of the job included baby-sitting (participle), house-cleaning (participle) and the preparation of meals

(noun phrase).

Recasting the noun phrase provides a participle thus making the participle structures similar. So, the participle - preparing for -replaces the noun phrase - the preparation for.

Relevance of Parallelism to Speech and Writing

Rhetorical Device

Rhetorics is persuasive use of language to inform, educate, entertain. Pattern repetitions of similar categories make expressions exciting, graceful, endearing and inviting.

Rhythmic Device

Rhythm explains the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. This makes expressions musical or rhythmical as stressed syllables precede unstressed ones or vice-versa in utterances. In the speech or writing of a skillful person, the ears or brains of listeners or readers always perceive temporary pauses as a group of stressed and unstressed syllable end, and as new ones begin.

Coherence

A paragraph is a group of sentences. These sentences give detail about one idea. Parallelism effects coherence of sentences and paragraphs since conjoining structures of equal ideas about a subject enables readers and listeners to grasp the progress of thought of writers and speakers.

Readability

A bad workman always quarrels with his tools, so does a bad writer. A bad user of a language jumbles ideas and, in so doing, puts audience out, for the piece being experienced is disinteresting, uncoordinated and meaningless. On the contrary, parallelism on the minds of good users is elegantly weaved into

composition. This facilitates clear reading and easy following of the piece as grace of passage and coherence of text are palpably foregrounded.

Awkwardness

Parallelism disinfests compositions of awkwardness. Awkwardness or non-parallel expression shows weakness of a passage and presents one as not being fully in control of language. But, there are virility of expression, unity of ideas, and assurance of success for a writer, by his language use, because “the more nearly parallel the two [or more] structures are, the stronger the connection of ideas will be” Lunsford and Connors (1989).

Elegant Variation

Compound or double sentences and those sentences with multiple clauses exemplify expressions composed with parallel grammatical structures. Varying these sentence structures with simple ones makes a piece interesting and enticing. Good writers/speakers, as Waldhorn and Zeiger (1980:83) explain, vary their use of language from parallel word structures to parallel phrase structures and to parallel clause structures which invariably maintains the same ideas. The master-story teller, Chinua Achebe, makes use of parallel clause structures which precede a simple clause structure in beginning the chapter two of his popular *Things Fall Apart* (1986:7)

Okonkwo had just blown out the palm-oil lamp and stretched himself on his bamboo bed boomed the hollow metal.

The parallel clauses capture two actions:...had just blown and [...had just]stretched, and the simple structure introduced by the action word boomed frustrates what Okonkwo intends to do. This admixture is imitated by those who want to improve their writing capability.

Elocutionary Device

Elocution, according to Hornby (2001:376), is “the ability to speak clearly and correctly, especially in public and pronouncing the words in a way that is considered to be socially acceptable”. Speaking clearly and correctly is engendered when parallel units are sequentially placed side by side. This makes a speaker, a writer or a reader apply the phonological pause (rhythm) noticeable by an audience or by the mind as the proper information patterns and stresses on appropriate syllables are superimposed on the units on which these supra- segmental features are inherent in. In other words, proper pronunciation of words coupled with the right placement of the prosodic features on the appropriate sense-groups of expressions is the hallmark of clarity and acceptability of speech.

Conclusion

This paper is suggestive of making “people realize that errors are errors, on whose lips or from whose pen they occur not withstanding” Oji (1994:96). Understanding elements of good writing, imitating good writers and/or writings, and making your writings reflect features of good writing will make one become permanent in turning out good pieces of writings orally or verbally. Parallelism as a rhetorical device, rhythmic device, elocutionary device and what have you should be the “primus inter pares” of all the devices employed to lace beautiful writings (belle lettres) and literary writings (belle-littres).

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