Parataxis

ℹ DEFINITION

What is parataxis? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> Parataxis is a [figure of speech](#) in which words, phrases, clauses, or sentences are set next to each other so that each element is equally important. Parataxis usually involves simple sentences or phrases whose relationships to one another—relationships of logic, space, time, or cause-and-effect—are left to the reader to interpret. Julius Caesar's declaration, "I came, I saw, I conquered," is an example of parataxis.

Some additional key details about parataxis:

- Though parataxis often involves the omission of conjunctions ("I came, I saw, I conquered"), it can also use coordinating conjunctions, such as "and" or "but," to join the independent elements together. "I came **and** I saw **and** I conquered" would also be example of parataxis.
- The term "parataxis" was coined in the mid-19th century, and comes from the Greek word for "side by side arrangement." Parataxis is sometimes also called "additive style" because it works by adding each element next to the previous one.
- The independence and equality of the elements in parataxis means that the order of those elements can often be shifted without destroying meaning. Try changing the order of the elements in the following: "The sky was low, and the crowd was silent, and the little girl chewed on a doll, and there was gray smoke." For the most part, its meaning stays the same.

How to Pronounce Parataxis

Here's how to pronounce parataxis: par-uh-**tak**-sis

Parataxis With and Without Conjunctions

Parataxis is often described (particularly on the Internet) as only occurring when conjunctions are omitted, but that is incorrect. Parataxis can occur either with or without conjunctions.

Parataxis without Conjunctions

Also called *asyndetic parataxis*, this form of parataxis involves [asyndeton](#), which is the omission of conjunctions. Here's an example from Ernest Hemingway's [The Sun Also Rises](#):

> "The steer was down now, his neck stretched out, his head twisted, he lay the way he had fallen."

Each clause of this sentence can stand alone, and each one is therefore equal to the others, with no hierarchy among them. The text reads as choppy and abrupt, and the images come at the reader in a rush, compressing the experience and image into something immediate that must be processed all at once, much the way being at an actual bullfight would seem for a person in the stands.

Asyndetic parataxis can also occur across multiple sentences, as in this example from a story by Raymond Carver:

> "I loved you so much once. I did. More than anything in the whole wide world. Imagine that. What a laugh that is now. Can you believe it? We were so intimate once upon a time, I can't believe it now. The memory of being that intimate with somebody. We were so intimate I could puke. I can't imagine ever being that intimate with somebody else. I haven't been."

Here the simple sentences and staccato rhythm come close to real speech, and they also capture the rush of thoughts and emotions this character is feeling.

Parataxis with Conjunctions

Parataxis can also involve conjunctions. When it does, this type of parataxis is called *syndetic parataxis*. The crucial thing to know about syndetic parataxis is that it only ever uses one particular type of conjunction: *coordinating conjunctions*. Here's a quick primer on what coordinating conjunctions are, and how they differ from the other main type of conjunction, *subordinating conjunctions*.

- **Coordinating conjunctions** create *equal* relationships between parts of a sentence, such that the parts of the sentence are related but not dependent on each other. This is the only type of conjunction that can be used in parataxis, which makes sense, as parataxis itself is defined by equality among elements in a sentence. The most common coordinating conjunctions are **for, and, nor, but, or, yet,** and **so** (which conveniently spells out the acronym "Fanboys" to help you remember them). The sentence "I went home and I ate dinner," is one in which the clauses are equal, since each can stand alone.
- **Subordinating conjunctions** create a relationship in which one clause of the sentence depends on the other. For instance, in the sentence "I went home because I had to eat dinner" the meaning of the second, dependent clause ("because I had to eat dinner") only makes sense in the context of the first, independent clause. This type of conjunction *cannot* be used in parataxis, because it doesn't allow for the equality between elements that parataxis requires.

The following excerpt from Rudyard Kipling's short story "The Sing-Song of Old Man Kangaroo" is an example of *syndetic parataxis*:

> "He was grey and he was woolly, and his pride was inordinate: he danced on a sandbank in the Middle of Australia, and he went to the Big God Ngong."

This example has the staccato rhythm typical of parataxis and, while it combines clauses with conjunctions, the sentence makes no effort to define a relationship between those clauses. The kangaroo's pride isn't inordinate *because* he's grey and woolly. Instead, he simply *is* grey and woolly and also has inordinate pride.

Parataxis, Asyndeton, and Polysyndeton

Parataxis often overlaps with the figures of speech asyndeton and polysyndeton, which both refer to the way that coordinating conjunctions are used. While neither asyndeton nor polysyndeton is expressly focused on creating balance in the words, phrases, or clauses of a sentence (like parataxis is), in practice these devices often overlap with *asyndetic parataxis* and *syndetic parataxis*.

- **Asyndeton** is the omission of coordinating conjunctions where you would normally expect them. "I came, I saw, I conquered" is an example of both asyndeton and *asyndetic parataxis*.
- **Polysyndeton** refers to an overabundance of coordinating conjunctions. "He ate beans and he ate rice and he ate burgers and he ate corndogs and he ate fish and he ate cake," is an example of both polysyndeton and *syndetic parataxis*.

Parataxis vs. Hypotaxis

The opposite of parataxis is hypotaxis. Hypotaxis is when the elements of a sentence are not all equal, and clauses are subordinated to and dependent on one another. Put another way, hypotaxis uses subordinating conjunctions to indicate the relationships of logic, space, time, or cause-and-effect within and between related sentences or clauses.

In the following example from *Notes of a Native Son*, James Baldwin uses hypotaxis to rank, order, and build his observations:

> "In later years, particularly when it began to be clear that this 'education' of mine was going to lead me to perdition, he...warned me that my white friends in high school were not really my friends and that I would see, when I was older, how white people would do anything to keep a Negro down. Some of them could be nice, he admitted, but none of them were to be trusted and most of them were not even nice. The best thing was to have as little to do with them as possible. I did not feel this way and I was certain, in my innocence, that I never would."

It's impossible to break apart the clauses in Baldwin's sentences and have the text still make sense. He is taking the reader on a very specific journey, and the order of his understanding—and, subsequently, a reader's understanding—is crucial.

✳ EXAMPLES

Parataxis is found in prose and in poetry. Because it produces text that is pithy, rhythmic, and imaginative in its associations and juxtapositions, parataxis is also common in advertising slogans.

Parataxis in Prose

Parataxis appears often in prose literature, and it was particularly common among some modernist writers after World War I. Ernest Hemingway's famous style, for instance, involves a great deal of parataxis.

Parataxis in Ernest Hemingway's Stories

This excerpt from one of Hemingway's short stories is an excellent example of parataxis, in which each sentence is simply placed, one next to the other, without any explanation or attempt at connecting the ideas in each sentence.

> There were no rooms at the inn. We drove farther until we found a hotel. It was raining heavily and we got soaked on the way to the door. Our socks stank of mildew. We ate dinner there and talked little.

Parataxis allows Hemingway to describe only the surface of events, while inviting readers to interpret or fill in the unstated deeper feelings and desires of his characters. Hemingway draws the reader into a deeper world through parataxis.

Parataxis in Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies*

Samuel Beckett is known for his clipped and abrupt language that often forces the reader to interpret its meaning. In other words, he's a frequent user of parataxis:

> "Live and invent. I have tried. I must have tried. Invent. It is not the word. Neither is it live. No matter. I have tried."

Beckett's example shows how parataxis can make a reader feel as if he or she is experiencing the narrative *in process*. Because parataxis is naturally additive, it feels as if we are in the mind of this character, experiencing one thought, then another, and another, as the character tries to find the correct words and make sense of his life.

Parataxis in Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*

The following excerpt from Cormac McCarthy's novel is an example of both parataxis and polysyndeton:

"He ate the last of the eggs and wiped the plate with the tortilla and ate the tortilla and drank the last of the coffee and wiped his mouth and looked up and thanked her."

What McCarthy communicates here, and what would be difficult to communicate without parataxis and polysyndeton, is how complex and tender a seemingly simple human action can be. Nothing more is happening than a man finishing breakfast. However, McCarthy breaks down this action into all of its components, which, in turn, puts focus on each act of the meal—both that the woman performed in making it and that the man undertook in eating it. Because of parataxis, the meal becomes something the reader can't just take for granted, but rather something that must be considered in full.

Parataxis in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*

In this example from Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, there is parataxis *between* each of the sentences, and *within* the final sentence.

"Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarecely better—splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foothold at street corners..."

Each of the sentences is on equal footing, all happening at the same time, one piling up on another, with no order or hierarchy provided by the text. As a result, the passage captures the chaos and bustle of the street, the people, the dogs, and the horses. Through parataxis, the reader is made to experience this riotous scene just as a person on the street would.

Parataxis in Poetry

Parataxis takes on a slightly different meaning when it's used in poetry; in the context of poetry, parataxis refers to two starkly dissimilar objects or ideas being placed beside each other. So this definition maintains the sense of independent entities being placed side-by-side, but it adds the condition that these entities must be different. The juxtaposition between these entities then causes readers to make their own associations and interpretations.

Parataxis in Ezra Pound's "Canto LXXXI"

Ezra Pound forces the reader to make surprising associations by using parataxis:

sky's clear
night's sea
green of the mountain pool

By this juxtaposition, or poetic parataxis, the reader must themselves imagine and interpret what connects each line.

Parataxis in Chika Sagawa's "Rusty Knife"

The first two lines in Chika Sagawa's poem ask the reader to find commonality between two disparate images:

Hazy blue dusk scales the window.
A lamp dangles like the neck of a woman.

Parataxis in Advertising Slogans

Advertising slogans often employ parataxis. The rhythm of parataxis makes the phrase memorable, which advertisers want for their slogans.

- The taste of real coffee. Rich. Smooth. Mellow.
- Maybe she's born with it. Maybe it's Maybelline.
- Melts in your mouth. Not in your hands.
- The few. The proud. The Marines.

In addition, because parataxis doesn't offer an interpretation itself, it invites the audience to "fill in the gaps" where language does not exist. Simply by reading a slogan that uses parataxis, the audience becomes an active participant in the slogan's meaning; it's the readers own interpretation, for example, that explains what makes Marines proud and unique.

🛠 WHY WRITERS USE IT

There are may reasons why writers might use parataxis. A few common reasons include:

- **To add mystery to a text.** Parataxis, which does not provide signals as to how different elements relate to one another, asks the reader to interpret why these elements were included in the way that they were. Put another way: parataxis can make the reader more active and less passive.

- **For simple, straightforward writing.** Writing that relies on parataxis tends to be described with terms like "unvarnished" or "straightforward," so parataxis is often a feature of minimal writing styles or dialogue from characters who speak simply.

- **To trim the fat.** Parataxis can help writers avoid wordy or redundant descriptions and exposition, which can add excitement and make a narrative move faster.

- **To create a choppy, staccato rhythm.** Parataxis often involves sentences or clauses that are short and simple, and for that reason it breaks the writing into choppy, rhythmic segments.

- **To thrust a reader directly into an experience.** The piling up of details that is characteristic of parataxis can be overwhelming. This forces a reader to try to sort through the onslaught of description, just as someone actually experiencing a chaotic or overwhelming situation would have to sort through what they were seeing or feeling.

- **To emphasize each of the details or components of a larger process or list.** Parataxis—particularly syndetic parataxis—can create a pause before each element of a list, which forces the reader to linger. Conversely, sometimes parataxis can be meant **to exhaust the reader by emphasizing the length of a list**, rather than each individual element.

- **To invite readers to make their own meaning.** Because parataxis does not clearly or overtly show how things are connected, it naturally leaves interpretation up to the reader. This can be particularly effective when a flat, declarative description leaves a reader to interpret the feelings or motivations that are left unsaid.

- **To create a sense of objectivity.** Stripped-down or straightforward writing, which often uses parataxis, can make a reader trust the author, because they feel as if they are getting a clear picture of what happened without being told how they should feel about it.

🌐 OTHER RESOURCES

Check out these resources on other sites for even more information about parataxis.

- The Wikipedia Page on Parataxis: Brief in its description, but it does offer a couple of good examples.

- The Dictionary Definition of Parataxis: A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of parataxis.

- A blog post that focuses on the grammatical details behind parataxis (and its opposite, hypotaxis). The post is somewhat technical, but also clear and comprehensive.

- **Parataxis on YouTube**

  ◦ President Barack Obama's 2009 Inaugural Address relies heavily on parataxis.

  ◦ An 8-minute video lesson that explains the difference between parataxis and hypotaxis.

HOW TO CITE

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