

MEYER, Charles F. **Apposition in Contemporary English**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992. Pp. XIII, 152.

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Charles F. Meyer's new book has the *a priori* merit of addressing an area of grammar which has long been neglected without having ever been properly accounted for. As one might expect from a disciple of Sidney Greenbaum, Meyer endows his book with two noticeable features of Greenbaum's celebrated line of work. First, it is *corpus-based*. It covers no less than 360,000 words of both spoken and written English, taken from the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken British English, the Survey of English Usage Corpus of Written British English, and the Brown University Standard Corpus of Present-day American English. Meyer claims to have extracted as many as 2841 instances of apposition from these sources. Second, it is *comprehensive*, in that, by the side of the habitual syntactic description, Meyer adds the most thorough and extensive treatment of both the semantics and the pragmatics of apposition to date.

The book consists of five chapters arranged in a neat, logical disposition. In chapter 1, "Apposition as a Grammatical Relation", Meyer introduces the topic by expressing his dissatisfaction with past treatments of apposition and provides details about his corpora. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 constitute both the bulk and the essence of Meyer's work. In them, the author discusses the syntax, the semantics, and the pragmatics of apposition respectively. All through these three chapters Meyer holds the reader's attention by providing her/him with a profusion of real-life examples and statistical tables. In chapter 5 the author recapitulates the main conclusions reached in his work and ventures a description of apposition based on the predominance of certain syntactic, semantic and pragmatic characteristics.

It is Meyer's semantic and pragmatic account that would appear to be an extremely timely and relevant contribution to the field. Before Meyer, Bitea (1977), Quirk et al. (1985, pp. 1300 ff.), and Koktová (1985) had struck a few insightful but nonetheless minor notes on these two related topics. But Meyer's book provides the reader with rich, meticulously-collected data on a large number of semantic and pragmatic dimensions. Meyer distinguishes four different *semantic relations* existing between the units of apposition: reference (co-reference, part/whole reference and cataphoric reference), synonymy (ab-

solute, speaker, and clausal), attribution (phrasal and clausal/phrasal), and hyponymy (syntagmatic and non-syntagmatic). Furthermore, he establishes *classes of apposition*, which are determined by whether the second unit of the apposition provides information about the first unit which is more specific (identification, appellation, particularization, and exemplification), less specific (characterization), or equally as specific (paraphrase, re-orientation, and self-correction).

To the semantic classes and relations, Meyer adds a complete analysis of the various genres in which appositions figure more or less prominently across his extensive corpus. The pragmatic issues that Meyer discusses offer their best in capturing important aspects of the actual use of appositions in discourse. Thus, for instance, it turns out that since appositions are primarily used to introduce new information about the first unit, they become most necessary in those genres, such as press reportage and learned writing, in which discourse participants have a very low amount of *shared knowledge*. Conversely, they are little necessary in other genres, such as casual conversation, where shared knowledge is much higher, and where their presence is, predictably, comparatively meagre. Meyer also studies *which* kinds of appositions are best suited to *which* specific genres. Thus, for instance, appositions in the semantic classes of appellation and characterization are best suited to the press genre because these types satisfy two essential needs of this genre: namely, to identify and name individuals who are not known to a wide public, and to describe these individuals by adding descriptive information about them. Of course, Meyer's taxonomies and statistics are conveniently backed up in the text by a wealth of real life examples, the mere collection of which turns the Boston-based linguist's contribution to the study of apposition into a fine and impressive piece of scholarship.

However, it is unfortunate that the semantic and pragmatic flesh of Meyer's account should have little syntactic bone to adhere to. In short, Meyer denies a fundamental assumption of modern syntactic theory: namely, that a grammatical relationship, apposition in this case, can be defined in terms of one (and only one) constituent structure. Instead of accepting this clear reality, Meyer utilizes the concept of gradience to claim that "The particular constituent structure that we assign to an apposition will depend on the extent to which the units of the apposition are structurally dependent on each other" (p. 41). In this way, appositions can be either coordinative or subordinative: "Those that are coordinative will be considered central appositions. Those that are subordinative will be considered peripheral appositions and on gradients between central apposition and coordination, peripheral elements (Matthews 1981, 123 ff.), modification, and complementation". The fact is that Meyer's syntactic analysis of apposition is so entirely unhelpful that it casts the deepest

doubts upon the usefulness of his otherwise valuable semantic and pragmatic descriptions.

Meyer's shocking definition of apposition implies a number of unpardonable conclusions. We will mention two. First, it follows from it that only semantic factors can make a distinction between true apposition (which is coordination, according to Meyer) and coordination proper. This means that the difference between, for instance, *Paul, my brother*, and *Paul and my brother* is reduced merely to a matter of meaning. Incidentally, it is paradoxical that this conclusion had already been arrived at by Hockett (1955), a linguist whose goals and assumptions are in marked contrast with Meyer's. Secondly, no less shocking is the fact that Meyer does not bother to clarify where the frontier between apposition and subordination lies. But, since cases of non-central (ie non coordinative) apposition are taken to be instances of subordinative apposition, then we should have been told under what specific conditions subordination proper exists, if indeed at all. In fact, the concept of gradience is invoked by Meyer in a meaningless fashion since he first stipulates that apposition is a grammatical relationship distinct from both coordination and subordination, while at the same time he claims that it is, surprisingly, both coordination and, in varying degrees, subordination as well. Taking Meyer's manner of reasoning at its face value, one would be justified to define, say, a truck, as either a car (centrally) or a motorcycle (peripherally) while still maintaining that both the car and the motorcycle are different from (and therefore opposite to) the truck! It seems clear that Meyer's highly peculiar syntactic analysis is inherently misconceived. This is not because of Meyer's resort to gradience, but rather because of his peculiar way of wielding such a concept.

The fact that Meyer does not feel at ease when dealing with the syntax of apposition is also evident from the sort of conclusions he reaches when he focuses on various aspects of the spectrum of apposition. Again, only two of his very shocking arguments will be briefly mentioned here. The first has to do with the example in italics below (number 143 in chapter 2 of Meyer's book):

*The absolutely grotesque ritual of high table formal dinner in the evening* started with sherry.

The reasons for the appositive interpretation defended by Meyer are worth quoting:

Because the construction in example 143 behaves syntactically like a postmodifier, it is possible to say that of in this example is not an obligatory marker of apposition ... but rather a prepo-

sition heading a prepositional phrase modifying a noun. *However, the construction in example 143 is semantically appositive ..., making this construction a peripheral apposition.* (p. 51; emphasis added).

As is evident from the citation above, Meyer does not wish to consider even a minimal notion of syntactic independence in the analysis of the constructions of English. Instead, for him, grammatical description appears to be composed of only one level where syntactic, semantic and pragmatic information is all mixed up. Thus, when a given construction fails to satisfy the syntactic conditions for apposition, it can still be an apposition on semantic or pragmatic grounds. But in this way apposition automatically ceases to be a specific syntactic concept and becomes instead a kind of grammatical *jack-of-all-trades*.

At another point during his discussion, Meyer goes as far as to claim that in some appositions only the first unit has a syntactic function, while the second unit has no function at all. He maintains that the example below is a case in point:

The force of the author's analysis (if indeed it has any force) can be felt by the reader, I believe, only after *three questions* have been successfully answered. (1) *What allows us to think that the patient had no third-dimensional representations when his eyes were closed?* (2) *What evidence is there that he was psychically blind?* (3) *How can we be sure that his sense of touch was not profoundly disturbed by his head injury?* (p. 144, fn 11)

Now, it is arguable that the syntactic pattern exemplified by the previous example should be seen as appositive (see Acuña 1993 for a different interpretation). But there can be no doubt that, once it is defined as appositive, then by definition its two members must have not only a function but also *the same* function. After all, is not syntactic equivalence a necessary condition for apposition to be established? Apart from this, and on purely phrase-structure grounds, if the appositive construction as a whole belongs inside the sentence structure, then how is it possible for a constituent in that construction not to have a function inside that same sentence? Clearly, Meyer's syntax flies in the face of the most widely-shared assumptions held by grammarians of all persuasions. Not surprisingly, his *everything goes* approach to the syntax of apposition allows him to admit as appositive a large number of constructions which would normally be given separate analyses. The following examples constitute

only a small sample of the generousness with which Meyer uses the notion of apposition (as before, Meyer's numbers are retained; all the examples are taken from chapter 2):

(12) *ENGLAND international left-winger Eddie Holliday will never touch "bubbly" again.*

(30) *The Association of Head Mistresses warmly welcomed the Newsom report — "a vital and moving human document"—*

(34) *Waterlogging leads to three kinds of changes in the soil: physical, biological and chemical.*

(40) *Well, it's a jolly nice place, the new university,...*

(47) *... He spoke of his desire to promote the abolition of slavery by peaceable means...*

(55) *We might, therefore, ask two things about a new theory of a change of state:*

(a) *Does it give a satisfying physical picture of what is probably happening?*

(b) *Is the numerical agreement with the observed facts in keeping with the number of adjustable parameters, or is the theory unduly "forced" in this respect?.*

(61) *She was getting herself so excited at the thought of my auntie Elsie coming and knitting and knitting and knitting and driving her mad.*

(64) *We were willing to consider analogies but don't forget that the analogies between teaching something relatively simple like late medieval poetry was very different from Anglo-Saxon.*

(83) *People are beginning to rouse themselves, stretch, you know.*

(89) *It could be seen that both artists used a very thick final coat of plaster, one half inch, and that both followed the traditional Italian fresco technique as described by Cennino Cennini in the 14th Century, and current in Italy to this day. That is, they used opaque color throughout, getting solid highlights with active lime white.*

It should be noticed that Meyer takes as appositive, among other constructions, (restrictive) pseudotitles, quotations, displaced adjectival modifiers of nouns, dislocations, (restrictive) noun complements, whole texts, prepositional phrases of all kinds, VPs, and so on. Under this interpretation of apposition, his claim that apposition figures much more prominently than most other grammatical relations in his corpus comes as no surprise. Unfortunately,

it is not immediately clear that one can benefit from this kind of *pan*-appositive approach.

All in all, however, we can only be glad that Meyer has decided to take up the neglected study of so-called appositive structures. Both in its virtues and pitfalls, Meyer's book shows that this is an area of grammar where there is still much to be studied and much to be discussed. We can now hope that future research, whether by Meyer himself or by others, will provide a more firmly-based knowledge of the grammar of apposition.

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