Definition of Parallelism

Parallelism is the use of components in a sentence that are grammatically the same; or similar in their construction, sound, meaning or meter. Parallelism examples are found in literary works as well as in ordinary conversations.

This method adds balance and rhythm to sentences giving ideas a smoother flow and thus can be persuasive because of the repetition it employs. For example, “Alice ran into the room, into the garden, and into our hearts.” We see the repetition of a phrase that not only gives the sentence a balance but rhythm and flow as well. This repetition can also occur in similar structured clauses e.g. “Whenever you need me, wherever you need me, I will be there for you.”

Function of Parallelism

The use of parallel structures in speech or writing allows speakers and writers to maintain a consistency within their work and create a balanced flow of ideas. Moreover, it can be employed as a tool for persuasion as well because of the repetition it uses.

Common Examples of Parallelism

- Like father, like son.
- The escaped prisoner was wanted dead or alive.
- Easy come, easy go.
- Whether in class, at work or at home, Shasta was always busy.
- Flying is fast, comfortable, and safe.
Examples of Parallelism in Literature

In literature, parallelism is used in different ways to impress upon the readers in order to convey messages or moral lessons.

Example #1

Antithesis is a kind of parallelism in which two opposite ideas are put together in parallel structures. Alexander Pope in his “An Essay on Criticism” uses antithetic parallel structure:

“To err is human; to forgive divine.”

Example #2

We see the repetition of parallel structures in the following lines from “A Tale of Two Cities” by Charles Dickens:

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

By repeating “It was…” in the passage, the readers are prompted to focus on the traits of the “age” they will read about in the succeeding passages.

Example #3

We see William Blake employ Parallelism in his poem The Tyger. The use of parallel structures, starting with “what”, creates a beautiful rhythm in the above lines:

“What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?”

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