

# A New Study on Parenthesis in the English Language from the Perspective of Modification

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to conduct a new study on parenthesis in the English language through presenting a comprehensive analysis of modifiers and making a comparison of the two different yet similar grammatical units in terms of form, content and function. To have a better knowledge of parenthesis, this paper categorizes parenthesis into Modificative Parenthesis, Connective Parenthesis, and Modal Parenthesis. In the end, this author presents some personal understandings on parenthesis.

## 1. Introduction

In linguistic studies, some discussions of parenthesis have become systematical. However, these theoretical achievements are not necessarily universal. In many languages, including the English language, it is still a difficult thing to draw a clear line between parenthetical units and other grammatical units, say, adverbs and adverbials. This paper aims to conduct a new study on parenthesis in the English language through presenting a comprehensive analysis of modifiers and making a comparison of the two different yet similar grammatical units in terms of form, content and function.

## 2. The Definition of Parenthesis

Leonard Bloomfield, a well-known linguist, considers parenthesis as “a variety of parataxis in which one form interrupts the other.” Another scholar, Ziv, mentions two characteristics of parenthetical units: they do not hold a fixed position in a sentence and they are not dependent on other sentence elements. It can be seen from the two definitions that parenthesis is typical of being independent and its independence has also been indicated in the definition by Tamar Zewi: the widespread terms parenthesis, parenthetical expression or remark, parenthetical unit or entity, and the like, generally refer to any peripheral information, expressed by a single word, phrase, or clause, which in terms of content is external to a sentence. Another characteristic of parenthesis is that it is usually offset with parentheses (i.e., round brackets), commas, or dashes. These punctuation marks serve as concrete signs of parenthesis. As stated above, parenthesis can be understood as “a remark that is added to a sentence, often to provide an explanation or extra information, that is separated from the main part of the sentence by commas, brackets, or dashes”.

## 3. The Definition of Modifier

For a long time, the studies on modifiers in the English language have been limited to attributives that modify a noun phrase in the form of words, phrases or clauses. Although some theoretical discussions can be traced in many famous English grammars, it is still hard to see any logical and complete definitions of parenthesis. In my eyes, modifier (Mer) in the English language is an independent grammatical unit which limits or extends the meaning of another grammatical unit while a modifiee (Mee) is a grammatical unit whose meaning is limited or extended by another grammatical unit. The limitation and extension of modifiers can be demonstrated in the following sentences.

[1] *World* (Mer) population (Mee) has decreased (Mee) *surprisingly* (Mer).

[2] World population had been increasing (Mee) *last century* (Mer).

[3] *As can be seen from the graph* (Mer), world population has decreased surprisingly (Mee).

#### 4. A Comparison of Parenthesis and Modifier

Actually, there are many ambiguities in the definition and classification of parenthesis in traditional grammar. Weizeng Wu regards it as an independent grammatical unit. Daozhen Zhang says it is “between the adverbial and independent grammatical unit”. Yutang Lin divides parenthetical units through modification and emphasis. The reason why people have different understandings on parenthesis is that parenthesis has a large marginality and a big vagueness and, more importantly, is easily confused with modifiers, as is somewhat illustrated in the following sentences.

[4] *Surprisingly*, world population has decreased.

[5] World population, *surprisingly*, has decreased.

[6] World population has decreased *surprisingly*.

[7] World population has decreased, *surprisingly*.

In sentence [4], “surprisingly” is a modifier, traditionally referred to a disjunct, that modifies the main sentence. The sentence can be paraphrased as “It is surprising that world population has decreased”. In sentence [6], “surprisingly” is also a modifier that most probably modifies “has decreased”. In this sentence, “” can be understood as “greatly”, “markedly”, “dramatically”, and so on. But, in sentence [5] and [7], “surprisingly” seems to be more a parenthesis than a modifier possibly because it has more modality in meaning. Therefore, the four sentences can be translated into Chinese as:

[8] 令人惊讶的是,世界人口减少了。

[9] 世界人口,听起来让人吓了一跳,减少了。

[10] 世界人口大幅度减少了。

[11] 世界人口减少了,听起来让人吓了一跳。

To achieve a better knowledge of parenthesis, a comparison of parenthesis and modifier is made in terms of form, content and function.

##### 4.1 Form

Both modifier and parenthesis can be expressed in form as words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. In actual fact, parenthesis might be modifier while a modifier is not necessarily a parenthesis. The position of modifier is comparatively fixed and whatever changes in position might contribute to certain semantic changes. For example, the following sentences are different in meaning, though similar in form, simply because of the positional changes of “only”.

[12] *Only* John saw the rabbit in the forest in spring. (No one else saw the rabbit.)

[13] John *only* saw the rabbit in the forest in spring. (John, possibly, didn't shoot it.)

[14] John saw *only* the rabbit in the forest in spring. (Not other animals.)

[15] John saw the rabbit *only* in the forest in spring. (Not in other places.)

[16] John saw the rabbit in the forest *only* in spring. (Not in other seasons.)

Nevertheless, the meaning of the following sentences does not change at all in spite of the positional changes of the parenthesis “for example”.

[17] *For example*, world population has decreased surprisingly.

[18] World population, *for example*, has decreased surprisingly.

[19] World population has decreased surprisingly, *for example*.

Accordingly, a safe way to differentiate between a parenthesis and a modifier is to judge to what extent positional changes do with meaning.

##### 4.2 Content

Modification is the most important function and characteristic of modifiers. In a sentence, a modifier is always dependent on other sentence elements. The meaning of a sentence might change with the existence or non-existence of a modifier. However, in many cases, it is vague whether a parenthesis acts on the semantics of other sentence elements. So, in terms of content, parenthesis is less dependent on other sentence elements than modifier.

### 4.3 Function

Both modifier and parenthesis can be a connective device in discourse, helping improve the cohesion in interpersonal communication. Zhuanglin Hu says, “The concept of connection in a text refers specifically to the semantic relationship between adjacent sentences (groups). Through the use of connective devices, people can understand the semantic relationship between sentences, and even logically foresee the semantics of the subsequent sentences through the previous ones. “ Zhu Yongsheng Zhu, et al., adds, “All English connectives, except for “but” and “so”, can be included in the grammatical category of conjunctive adjuncts.” Obviously, it is easy to understand and accept the adverbial modifier as a connective with cohesive function. However, the cohesive function of parenthesis is not universally accepted. On the contrary, people pay more attention to the modal meaning of it. This is one of the reasons for the difficulty in distinguishing parenthesis from modifier. Bingmei Li suggests, “If we analyze parenthesis functionally, we must not only recognize its communicative role, but also affirm its connective role. Therefore, it is understandable to divide parentheses into connective and modal adverbials.”

### 5. A Categorization of Parenthesis

To have a better knowledge of parenthesis, this paper categorizes parenthesis into Modificative Parenthesis, Connective Parenthesis, and Modal Parenthesis.

Table 1 Categorization of Parenthesis

Category	Form	Content	Function	
	marked off by brackets, dashes, or commas	dependent on other sentence elements	Modification	Modality
Modificative Parenthesis	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Connective Parenthesis	Yes	Yes / No	Yes /No	No
Modal Parenthesis	Yes	No	No	Yes

#### 5.1 Modificative Parenthesis

Modificative parenthesis refers to the grammatical units, separated by parenthetical punctuation marks in written language and recognized by intonation groups in spoken language, that are dependent on the semantics of other grammatical units but independent from the grammatical structure. They are mainly modifiers. Examples are:

[20] Mr. Ba Jin, *a famous modern writer in China*, enjoys a great prestige both at home and abroad.

[21] Our population growth is less noticeably - *but far more importantly* - putting a heavy burden on our natural resources.

[22] The People’s Insurance Company of China (*hereafter called “The Company”*) at the request of Shanghai Pine Education & Technology Co., Ltd. (*hereafter called the “Insured”*) undertakes to insure the under-mentioned goods in transportation.

#### 5.2 Connective Parenthesis

Connective parenthesis refers to the grammatical units, separated by parenthetical punctuation marks in written language and recognized by intonation groups in spoken language, that are independent from the grammatical structure but vaguely dependent on the semantics of other grammatical units. They are mainly connective devices. Examples are:

[23] *What’s more*, world population has decreased surprisingly.

[24] World population, *therefore*, has decreased surprisingly.

[25] World population has decreased surprisingly, *however*.

#### 5.3 Modal Parenthesis

Modal parenthesis refers to the grammatical units, separated by parenthetical punctuation marks

in written language and recognized by intonation groups in spoken language, that are independent either on the semantics of other grammatical units or on the grammatical structure. They are mainly grammatical units with modal meaning. Examples are:

[26] World population, *you know*, has decreased surprisingly.

[27] World population, *I think*, has decreased surprisingly.

[28] World population has decreased surprisingly, *say*, by more than 10%.

## 6. Personal Findings on Parenthesis

First, the essence of parenthesis lies not in its parenthetical form but in its modal meaning. The focus of a theoretical and systematic study on parenthesis should be on Modal parenthesis. Anyhow, this may help clarify the relationship between modifiers and connective devices.

Second, parenthesis may not be separated by punctuation marks in written language, but they can be distinguished by different intonations in spoken language. This phenomenon mainly occurs in some super-parenthetical structures, says Yicang Wang. Examples are:

[29] How old *did you say* the boy was?

[30] Who *the hell* do you think they are?

[31] That is the man whose house *they say* was broken into last night.

Third, modifier, connective device and parenthesis are unified in discourse coherence. Delu Zhang notices that, in addition to adhering to the principles of cooperation, politeness and economy, the speaker should try to maintain the continuance and coherence of the discourse, otherwise communication will be interrupted. In some way, the modal meaning of parenthesis meets the very need of situational communication, making the transmission of information more natural and effective.

Fourth, parenthesis is universal in language yet individual in expression. It is a psychological cue with language being its shell. The parenthetical expressions in the following three languages, which indicate a pause in tone, or draw the listener's attention, or adjust the flow of thought, is a kind of psychological expression and a language habit of the speaker.

[32] 那个,学习英语离不开辞典.

[33] Well, dictionary is indispensable for studying English.

[34] あの,英語の勉強するために辞典は必要です.

Fifth, the study of parenthesis may be extended to paralanguage, such as interrupted gestures and verbal expressions in spoken language, which are the speaker's psychological performances and paralanguage habits in the process of communication, bearing obvious modal meaning.

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