Apposition in contemporary English

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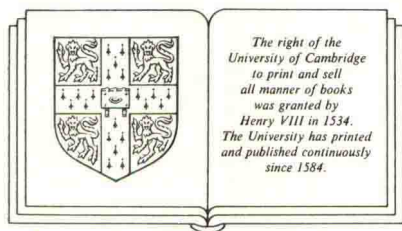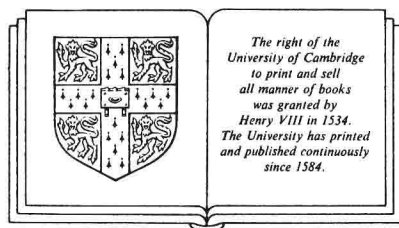# Apposition in contemporary English

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To my parents: Charles and Mary Meyer

Preface

Apposition is a grammatical category discussed in most scholarly grammars, from Jespersen's *A modern English grammar on historical principles* to Quirk *et al.*'s *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. But despite the fact that apposition has been widely discussed, it remains a category that is poorly understood. An investigation of Jespersen, Quirk *et al.*, or any of the other sources that discuss apposition reveals numerous disagreements about how apposition should be defined and a wide variety of different kinds of constructions that are considered appositions. In this book, I attempt to clarify the confusion surrounding the category of apposition by both defining apposition and detailing its usage in computer corpora of spoken and written British and American English.

In Chapter 1, I demonstrate the inadequacies of previous treatments of apposition and argue that apposition is a grammatical relation (like complementation and modification) realized by constructions having particular syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic characteristics. In subsequent chapters, I describe these linguistic characteristics of apposition in detail, using three computer corpora of English as the basis of my study: the Survey of English Usage Corpus of Written British English, the Brown University Standard Corpus of Present-day American English, and the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken British English. In Chapter 2, I detail the syntactic characteristics of apposition, covering such topics as the various forms and functions that units in apposition have and the relationship between apposition and grammatical relations such as modification and complementation. In Chapter 3, I discuss the semantic characteristics of apposition, outlining the semantic relations between units in apposition, the semantic classes into which appositions can be classified, and the kinds of appositions that can be restrictive and nonrestrictive. In Chapter 4, I detail the pragmatic characteristics of apposition, discussing both the thematic structure of appositions and the communicative reasons why some kinds of appositions occur only in certain genres. In the final chapter (Chapter 5), I discuss apposition within the context of the grammar of English. I demonstrate that while units in apposition can have a variety of different syntactic and semantic characteristics, some of these characteristics are

more common that others. In addition, variation in the use of appositions is motivated not by dialectal differences between British and American English but by the varying functional needs of the various genres in which appositions occur.

Contents

Figures

1   Apposition as a grammatical relation

In surveying past treatments of apposition, I demonstrate in this chapter that they provide either an inadequate or incomplete definition of apposition, and argue that apposition is best defined as a grammatical relation realized by constructions having specific syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic characteristics (1.1). To study these linguistic characteristics of apposition, I analyzed the appositions in three computer corpora of spoken and written English (1.2) with the aid of a problem-oriented tagging program (1.3).

1.1   The inadequacy of past studies of apposition

A survey of the literature on apposition supports Quirk *et al.*'s (1985:1302) assertion that "Grammarians vary in the freedom with which they apply the term 'apposition'..."

Some sources take a very conservative approach to defining apposition. Both Fries (1952:187) and Francis (1958:301) restrict the category of apposition to coreferential noun phrases that are juxtaposed:[1]

> (1) *The President of the United States, George Bush*, spoke at a campaign breakfast yesterday.

Others have expanded the category of apposition considerably. Curme (1931) admits as appositions a diverse group of constructions, including predicate appositives (p. 30):

> (2) He came home *sick*. [italics in original][2]

appositive genitives (p. 84):

> (3) the vice *of intemperance*

apposition proper (pp. 88–91), which can be loose (example 4) or close (example 5), categorizations that correspond in this study to, respectively, nonrestrictive and restrictive apposition (see 3.3):

> (4) Mary, *the belle* of the village

> (5) my friend *Jones*

1

and appositive adjectives (p. 93):

> (6) the room *above*

Jespersen (1961), like Curme, quite liberally defines apposition. Among the constructions he considers appositional are certain kinds of clauses in apposition with noun phrases (vol. III, p. 27):

> (7) their idea (notion, impression, view, sentiment, doctrine, etc.) that priests are infallible.

certain kinds of reflexive pronouns in apposition with the pronouns that trigger them (vol. VII, p. 172):

> (8) *You yourself* must set some tasks.

and certain kinds of participles that stand in apposition with the subject of the sentence (vol. V, p. 406):

> (9) *He* sat *smoking*.

Instead of simply listing constructions in apposition, other sources take a more principled approach. Burton-Roberts (1975:410) admits as appositions only those constructions that can be linked by a marker of apposition, constructions ranging from noun phrases (such as the apposition in example 1) to sentences (example 10) and adverbials (example 11):

> (10) You won't be totally alone, that's to say, there'll be others to help you.

> (11) They met *here*, [that's to say] *in London*.

Matthews (1981:223) claims that apposition is an "undifferentiated" grammatical relation, specifically a type of "juxtaposition," a grammatical relation that stands in opposition to other grammatical relations: modification, complementation, parataxis, coordination, and peripheral elements. Because apposition is an undifferentiated relation, Matthews (1981:224) observes, it is often difficult to distinguish apposition from other relations, and he provides numerous examples (pp. 224–36) of constructions on gradients between apposition and other relations, such as modification and parataxis.

Quirk *et al.* (1985:1302) note various characteristics of units in apposition:

(i)   Each of the appositives can be separately omitted without affecting acceptability of the sentence.
(ii) Each fulfils the same syntactic function in the resultant sentences.
(iii) It can be assumed that there is no difference between the original sentence and either of the resultant sentences in extralinguistic reference.

Appositions satisfying all criteria are termed instances of FULL APPOSITION (Quirk *et al.* 1985:1302):

> (12a) *A neighbour, Fred Brick*, is on the telephone.
> (12b) *A neighbour* is on the telephone.
> (12c) *Fred Brick* is on the telephone. [italics in original]

Appositions not fulfilling all criteria are termed instances of PARTIAL APPOSITION (Quirk *et al.* 1985:1303):

> (13a) *An unusual* present was given to him for his birthday, *a book on ethics.*
> (13b) *An unusual present* was given to him for his birthday.
> (13c) *Was given to him for his birthday, *a book on ethics.*

In addition to noting syntactic characteristics of apposition, Quirk *et al.* (1985:1308–16) classify appositions into various semantic classes. For instance, appositions in which the second unit provides an example of the first unit are placed into a semantic class called "exemplification" (pp. 1315–16):

> (14) They visited *several cities*, for example *Rome and Athens.*

Other types of appositions are classified into other semantic classes, such as appellation, identification, and particularization.

Although all of the above approaches to defining apposition provide insights into the category of apposition, taken individually, they provide either an inadequate or an incomplete description of apposition. If, as Fries (1952) and Francis (1958) advocate, only coreferential noun phrases are considered appositions, then the class of apposition is severely limited, and a key similarity between certain kinds of nominal and non-nominal appositions is obscured: the ability of both kinds of appositions to admit a marker of apposition. In example 15, the marker of apposition *i.e.* separates two adjectives; in example 16, the marker *that is* separates two subordinate clauses.

> (15) The woman was *happy* (i.e. *ecstatic*) that she was appointed chief executive of the company.

> (16) *If students study hard*, that is, *if they do all of their homework and attend their classes regularly*, they will graduate from college with the credentials necessary to obtain a good job.

To claim, then, that the constructions in examples 15 and 16 are not appositions simply because they are not noun phrases is arbitrary and also ignores the obvious linguistic similarity between nominal and non-nominal appositions that contain identical markers of apposition.

Admitting a wide variety of constructions as appositions, on the other hand, expands the class of apposition to the point that virtually any

construction satisfying the literal definition of apposition (i.e. "placed alongside of") is considered appositional. For instance, there is little evidence that constructions in Curme's (1931:93) category of appositive adjectives (e.g. *the room above*) behave like other appositions: such constructions do not admit a marker of apposition (e.g. **the room, that is, above*) and they are not related by any of the semantic relations, such as coreferentiality, that exist between units in apposition.[3] Consequently, considering such constructions appositional makes the category of apposition meaningless.

Although positing principles to account for appositions avoids the problem of Curme's and Jespersen's approaches to apposition, the principle posited by Burton-Roberts (1975) is problematic in certain instances. If appositions are restricted to only those units that are able to be separated by a marker of apposition, then constructions such as the one in example 17a will not be admitted as appositions, since they do not allow a marker of apposition (example 17b):

> (17a) *Mrs. Thatcher, one of the more important political figures in England since World War II*, may again run for Prime Minister.
>
> (17b) *Mrs. Thatcher, that is to say, one of the more important political figures in England since World War II, may again run for Prime Minister.

While Burton-Roberts considers such constructions reduced relative clauses, they behave more like appositions (Meyer 1987a:106–8). Like many other appositions, the units in constructions such as 17a can be reversed (example 18), and a copular relationship exists between them (example 19):

> (18) One of the more important political figures in England since World War II, Mrs. Thatcher, may again run for Prime Minister.
>
> (19) Mrs. Thatcher is one of the more important political figures in England since World War II.

More importantly, however, if such constructions are not juxtaposed (example 20a), a relative clause paraphrase is not possible (example 20b). The ungrammaticality of sentence 20b suggests that the second unit in this sentence is not a reduced relative but rather the second unit of an apposition.

> (20a) *The man* is difficult to work with, *an unsurly individual who scowls at just about everyone he encounters.*
>
> (20b) *The man is difficult to work with, who is an unsurly individual who scowls at just about everyone he encounters.

While Matthews (1981) notes important differences between apposition and relations such as complementation and coordination, strictly speaking, apposition is not a type of juxtaposition, since it is possible for many units in apposition not to be juxtaposed:

(21) *Three people* attended the meeting: *Dr. Smith, Professor Jones, and Mr. King.*

In addition, because apposition is a grammatical category that is realized by so many different kinds of constructions, it makes more sense to say that apposition is a relation itself rather than an instance of another type of relation, juxtaposition. Further evidence for this analysis is the fact that Matthews' relation of juxtaposition is a rather ad hoc relation, consisting of categories, such as apposition and correlative constructions (e.g. *the more, the merrier*), that do not fit easily into the other relations that Matthews posits.

Quirk *et al.* (1985) provide a conceptually sound analysis of some important syntactic and semantic characteristics of apposition. However, their analysis is incomplete because it does not provide a comprehensive discussion of the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic characteristics of units in apposition. And it is providing this kind of comprehensive linguistic description of apposition that is the goal of this study. Apposition, it will be demonstrated, is best viewed as a grammatical relation that stands in opposition to relations such as complementation or modification. The relation of apposition is realized by constructions having specific syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic characteristics that both define the relation of apposition and distinguish it from other grammatical relations. Figure 1.1. lists the grammatical relations to which apposition is opposed and the linguistic characteristics that define the relation of apposition.[4]

According to the view of apposition depicted in Figure 1.1, the highlighted units in example 22 qualify as an apposition because they possess specific syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic characteristics.

(22) *The president of the company, Mary Smith,* resigned yesterday.

Syntactically, the units exhibit characteristics of apposition because they are noun phrases, a syntactic form that typical appositions have (2.1.1), and because they are functioning as subject of the sentence, a common syntactic function for short appositions (2.2). In addition, the units have a linear (2.3) and hierarchical (2.4) structure characteristic of many appositions: the units are juxtaposed and constitute a single apposition consisting of units that stand in a binary relation to one another.

Semantically, the units exhibit characteristics of apposition as well: the units are coreferential, one type of semantic relation that exists between units in apposition (3.1.1.1); they are in the semantic class of appellation, a class in which the second unit names the first unit (3.2.1.2); and they are
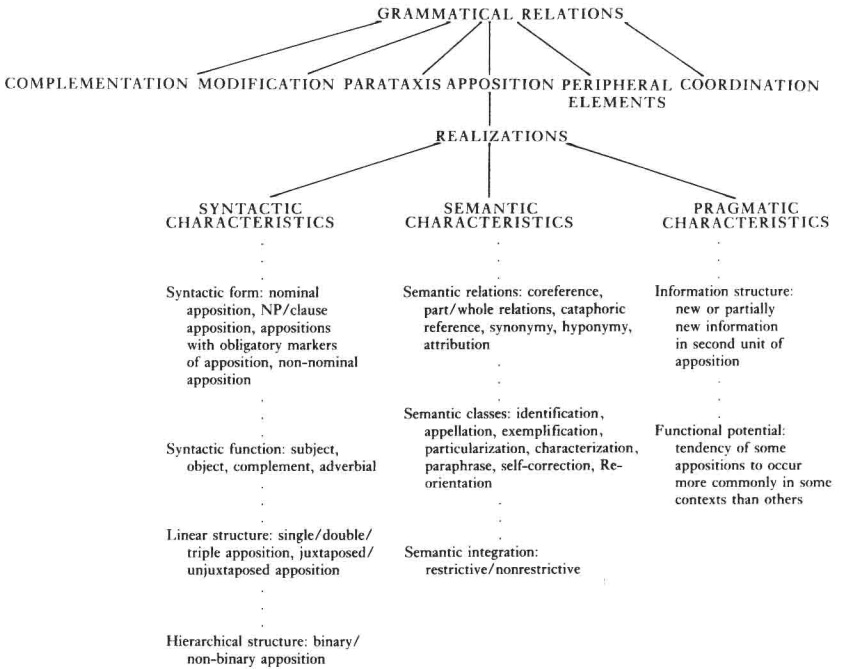
Fig. 1.1   The linguistic characteristics of units in apposition

nonrestrictive and therefore not semantically integrated, because the second unit does not restrict the reference of the first unit (3.3).

Pragmatically, the units exhibit characteristics of apposition because the second unit contains new information not previously introduced into the discourse (4.1). And because the second unit contains new information that names the first unit, the apposition has a functional potential best suited to the press genre, a genre in which it is communicatively necessary to name individuals and provide information about them (4.4.2.3).

The linguistic characteristics of the apposition in example 22 represent some of the many characteristics that appositions can have. A complete description of these characteristics is given in Chapters 2–4, which discuss, respectively, the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic characteristics of units in apposition. In addition, Section 2.5 discusses constructions whose linguistic characteristics place them on gradients between apposition and other relations, such as complementation.

Defining apposition in the manner proposed in this study avoids the inadequacies of past treatments of apposition. Viewing apposition as a grammatical relation having various realizations does not arbitrarily restrict the class of apposition to only certain kinds of constructions. At the same time, the class of apposition is expanded in a principled manner so that only

Fig. 1.2 Corpora

A Brown Corpus (60 samples: 120,000 words)
  1 Press (20:40,000)
  2 Learned (20:40,000)
    (a) Humanistic (10:20,000)
    (b) Scientific (10:20,000)
  3 Fiction (20:40,000)
B London-Lund Corpus (LLC) (24 samples: 120,000 words)
  1 Spontaneous conversation (24:120,000)
    (a) Disparates (8:40,000)
    (b) Equals (8:40,000)
    (c) Intimates/equals (8:40,000)
    (d) Intimates (8:40,000)
C Survey of English Usage Corpus (SEU) (24 samples: 120,000 words)
  1 Press (8:40,000)
  2 Learned (8:40,000)
    (a) Humanistic (4:20,000)
    (b) Scientific (4:20,000)
  3 Fiction (8:40,000)

certain kinds of constructions are considered appositional. Finally, the linguistic characteristics posited to define apposition cover not just some characteristics of apposition but all of them.

1.2 The computer corpora used to investigate apposition

To detail the various linguistic characteristics of apposition and also to study its usage, three computer corpora of English served as the basis of this study: the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken British English (cf. Svartvik and Quirk 1980; and Svartvik 1990), the Survey of English Usage Corpus of Written British English (see Greenbaum 1985), and the Brown University Standard Corpus of Present-day American English (see Kučera and Francis 1967). Approximately 120,000 words of text in each of these three corpora was investigated, making the total corpus on which this study is based approximately 360,000 words in length. The corpora, as Figure 1.2 indicates, enabled the study of four types of variation. The Brown and Survey of English Usage corpora were used to compare British and American English. Within these corpora, equal proportions of journalistic, learned, and fictional writing were selected to study variation by written

Fig. 1.3 Sample tagging routine

Example sentence
  The word capitalism can no doubt be defined in the terms of
  reasonably strict economic analysis, yet it gains its colour very
  largely from what people believe capitalist society has been like.
  (SEU w.9.3.5–3)

Tags
  (A) Corpus: SEU (Tag 3)
  (B) Genre: learned (humanistic) (3)
  (C) Sample: w.9.3 (91)
  (D) Reference: specific (2)
  (E) Syntactic form: citation (14)
  (F) Syntactic function: subject (non-existential) (1)
  (G) Multiple apposition: single apposition (1)
  (H) Juxtaposed/unjuxtaposed apposition: juxtaposed (1)
  (I) Binary/non-binary apposition: distinction not relevant (3)
  (J) Optional markers of apposition: no marker (6)
  (K) Semantic relation: strict coreference (1)
  (L) Semantic class: identification (3)
  (M) Restrictive/nonrestrictive apposition: restrictive (1)

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genre. The London-Lund Corpus was compared with the Brown and
Survey of English Usage corpora to study variation in speech and writing
and, additionally, variation by speech genre. To investigate this last type of
variation, the spontaneous conversation of four different kinds of individuals
was investigated: disparates, equals, intimates, and intimates and equals.
All of the frequency counts reported in this book are based on the
appositions occurring in these three corpora of written and spoken British
and American English.

1.3 The computational analysis of appositions in the corpora

To study appositions in the corpora, a problem-oriented tagging routine
was developed.[5] Each apposition was identified and manually assigned
thirteen different tags. The tags recorded such information as the corpus,
genre, and sample in which the apposition occurred. In addition, the tags
specified linguistic information about the apposition, for instance the
syntactic form and function of the apposition, the semantic relationship
existing between the units, and so forth. A complete listing of tags is given
in Appendix 1. A sample tagging routine for an example apposition is
detailed in Figure 1.3.
    Lotus 1–2–3™, a popular spreadsheet, was used to computerize the tags