

The Pragmatics Encyclopedia

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Parentheticals

Parentheticals are expressions of varying length, complexity, function and syntactic category, which are interpolated into the current string of the utterance. Expressions that have been argued to be parenthetical in nature include sentence adverbials and adverbial clauses, one-word expressions (e.g. English *like, say, what*), comment clauses (e.g. English *I think, I suppose, you know*, German *glaube ich*, French *je pense*), reporting verbs (e.g. English *he said, said she*), vocatives, nominal appositions, non-restrictive relative clauses (NRRC), question tags, and various types of full or elliptical clauses (*cf.* Dehé and Kavalova 2007 and Kaltenböck 2007 for overviews).

In **syntax**, a contradiction exists between far-reaching structural independence of the parenthetical from its host utterance on the one hand and linear order and certain existing hierarchical relations on the other hand. Accordingly, parentheticals have either been argued to be external to the syntactic structure of their host sentence (e.g. Haegeman 1988; Peterson 1999; Espinal 1991; Burton-Roberts 1999b), or loosely related to it, for example, in terms of adjunction (Ross 1973; Emonds 1973, 1976, 1979; McCawley 1982; Corver and Thiersch 2002; Potts 2002; D'Avis 2005; Vries 2005, 2007) or insertion (Ackema and Neeleman 2004). Those approaches that assume structural independence account for linearization and apparent surfacing relationships along the lines of semantic association (e.g. Peterson 1999), **utterance interpretation** (e.g. Haegeman 1988), or serialization in the phonetic component (e.g. Haider 2005).

In prosodic research, parentheticals have been argued to be in their own intonational domain and marked by a change in pitch level, loudness and tempo. Prosodic cues indicating phrase-level boundaries before and after the parenthetical include pauses (e.g. Altmann 1981; Astruc 2005; Bolinger 1989; Payà 2003a; Taglicht 1998), falling-rising pitch at the end of the immediately preceding domain (e.g. Local 1992) and the blocking of sandhi rules (e.g. Frota 2000). We also know that the intonational features of parentheticals depend on various factors, among them length, relative weight and syntactic make-up and position (e.g. Bolinger 1989). Certain types of relatively short parentheticals, such as comment clauses, reporting verbs, question tags and vocatives, may be prosodically integrated into an adjacent domain (e.g. Crystal 1969; Taglicht 1998; Wichmann 2001; Gussenhoven 2004; Peters 2006; Dehé 2007). While shorter parentheticals are more likely to be prosodically integrated than longer ones (e.g. Peters 2006), empirical research has shown that the placement of an intonational boundary before NRRCs or other types of sentential parentheticals is far from obligatory, and that it depends on position, prosodic make-up and discourse factors (Watson and Gibson 2004; Dehé, to appear).

In **pragmatics**, parentheticals have been approached from various perspectives. In an early study by Urmson (1952), certain types of parentheticals, comment clauses in particular, are seen as expressions which do not have any descriptive function and do not contribute to the truth-conditionality of the host utterance, but which attach an illocutionary commitment to it (*cf.* also Hand 1993). The hearer is guided

towards a proper assessment of the statement. Similarly, comment clauses, interrogative parentheticals (e.g. English *do you think, do you know*) and tag questions have been analyzed as mitigators in more recent **speech act** theoretic approaches, i.e. as insertions used to modify, correct, reinforce or soften a speech act performed by the host utterance (e.g. Mittwoch 1979; Fraser 1980; Schneider 2007a, 2007b). They function as a **hedge** on the illocutionary force of the frame utterance (Hand 1993). Apart from this mitigating function, the insertion of a parenthetical may also lead to the addition of another speech act to the one performed by the host.

Looking at *as*-parentheticals, nominal appositives, NRRCs and certain types of adverbs in particular, Potts (2002, 2005) proposes that parentheticals should be analyzed as contributing conventional **implicatures** (Grice 1975). They are thus 'logically and compositionally independent of the at issue-entailments' (Potts 2005: 89). Cf. Blakemore (2007) for a critical discussion of this approach.

In terms of **relevance theory** (Sperber and Wilson 1995), parentheticals are generally inserted in pursuit of optimal relevance (Blakemore 2005a, 2006, 2007). On the one hand, their use leads to an increase of the costs of the utterance in at least two ways: the inserted additional material (word or phrase) increases the hearer's linguistic processing efforts, and its marked prosodic behaviour may increase the hearer's phonological processing efforts. On the other hand, the additional linguistic material may diminish the effort of memory and **inference** in that it helps the hearer to achieve early and correct **disambiguation** and **reference** assignment, and thus assists the hearer in deriving the intended cognitive effects. Similarly, the departure from normal **prosody** may guide the hearer towards the intended interpretation (Wilson and Wharton 2006). Overall, the insertion of a parenthetical increases the cognitive effects of an utterance and helps to achieve optimal relevance. As Blakemore (2006) argues, some parenthetical expressions may yield cognitive effects of their own, while others only contribute to the relevance and overall interpretation of the host. Specific types of parentheticals that have been analysed in the framework of relevance theory include *and*-parenthetical clauses (Blakemore

2005a; Kavalova 2007), sentential adverbs (Ifantidou-Trouki 1993) and parenthetical *what* (Dehé and Kavalova 2006).

In the framework of **conversation analysis** (Schegloff 2007), parentheticals have been seen as located at the interface of turn-taking and **sequence organization** (Mazeland 2007). Parentheticals, analyzed as separate turn constructional units (TCUs), may be inserted within an ongoing TCU or, in a multi-unit-turn, between TCUs. Their insertion initiates a subsidiary activity, that is, parentheticals are used to specify, exemplify, explicate, clarify, characterize, elaborate on or delimit a referent or reference introduced prior to the parenthetical in the TCU interrupted by it (Mazeland 2007). They are designed to get a response, i.e. as a sequence (Schegloff 2007). The characteristic prosodic features of parentheticals are seen as a key device to signal their status as separate TCUs.

In a theory of **information structure**, parentheticals have been argued to function as 'partitions' (Taglicht 1984; Ziv 2002). Specifically, comment clauses, vocatives and certain types of adverbs are used to set off the marked theme (or 'link' in Vallduví's 1992 sense) from what follows in the main utterance, and to link it to information in the preceding utterance. Dehé and Kavalova (2006) argue that the one-word parenthetical *what* helps the hearer to recognize the **focus** of the sentence.

Certain parentheticals such as comment clauses have been argued to be subject to a process of **grammaticalization**, developing from pronoun-verb combinations to epistemic adverbs or **discourse markers** (Thompson and Mulac 1991; Aijmer 1997; Dehé and Wichmann, to appear).

Overall, parentheticals are a multifaceted phenomenon and further research needs to be done to fully account for it.

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See also: Discourse markers

Suggestions for further reading

- Blakemore, D. (2006) 'Divisions of labour: the analysis of parentheticals', *Lingua*, 116: 1670-87.
Dehé, N. and Kavalova, Y. (eds) (2007) *Parentheticals*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.