

**COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PERIODIC AND CUMULATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS**

Xamrayeva Zebiniso Xaydarovna
Associate Professor of SamSIFL, PhD.
destiny-xzx@mail.ru

Dinara Turgunbaevna Teshebayeva
Senior Lecturer at the Department of Foreign Languages,
Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (KazNU)

Abstract

Periodic and cumulative constructions represent two fundamental syntactic structures used in written and spoken discourse. While periodic sentences delay the main idea until the end, creating suspense and emphasis, cumulative sentences begin with the main clause and then add descriptive elements. This study researches their structural differences, rhetorical significance, and literary applications. By analyzing examples from classical and modern literature, this paper demonstrates how these constructions shape meaning, enhance expressiveness, and influence reader perception.

Keywords: Periodic sentence, cumulative sentence, syntactic construction, rhetoric, literature, structure, emphasis.

Introduction

Language, as a medium of communication, employs various syntactic structures to convey meaning effectively. Among these, periodic and cumulative constructions play crucial roles in shaping textual coherence and stylistic elegance. Periodic sentences, rooted in classical rhetoric, are carefully structured to withhold the main idea until the end, whereas cumulative sentences, also known as loose sentences, present the main clause at the beginning and build upon it with additional details. This study provides a comparative analysis of these two syntactic constructions, examining their impact on rhetoric, literature, and stylistic clarity.

Defining Periodic and Cumulative Sentences

A **periodic sentence** is a complex syntactic construction where the main clause appears at the end, often preceded by subordinate clauses or phrases that build suspense or logical progression. This structure is prevalent in formal writing and classical rhetoric, as it enhances emphasis and persuasion.

For example, in Thomas Macaulay's *The History of England*:

"If any person has hitherto doubted whether God has made the English of one blood and of one language, let him go into our cities and hear the voices of men whose forefathers fought at Hastings or at Bannockburn, of men whose forefathers followed Cromwell or Montrose, and he will idoubt no more."

[8]

Here, the primary statement (“he will doubt no more”) is held back until the end, reinforcing the argument with a climactic conclusion.

A **cumulative sentence** (or loose sentence) starts with an independent clause and then adds modifying phrases or clauses. This structure mirrors natural speech patterns and allows for a flowing, expansive style that accumulates details.

For instance, in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952):

“He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish.” [5]

This sentence begins with the main idea (“*He was an old man*”) and accumulates additional descriptive elements, contributing to a vivid and immersive narrative.

Comparative analysis of the structure

Periodic sentences begin with subordinate clauses and conclude with the main clause, such as in the sentence, “Although the storm raged on, he remained calm.” This structure creates suspense and ensures the main idea is emphasized at the end. In contrast, cumulative sentences present the main clause first, followed by additional details. For example, “*He remained calm, despite the storm raging on.*” This allows for a more straightforward and fluid expression of ideas.

At the same time, periodic sentences encourage active engagement by delaying the main point, fostering curiosity and anticipation. This makes them particularly effective in persuasive and dramatic writing. Cumulative sentences, on the other hand, provide immediate clarity, expanding the idea progressively for better readability and a more conversational tone.

Additionally, periodic sentences are suitable for persuasive writing, dramatic tension, and complex argumentation, as they guide the reader towards a powerful concluding idea. Conversely, cumulative sentences offer a more natural and conversational style, making them ideal for descriptive and expository writing. By front-loading the main idea, they allow for detailed expansion while maintaining a clear and accessible structure.

Rhetorical and Stylistic Functions

Periodic and cumulative sentences serve different rhetorical purposes, affecting pacing, tone, and emphasis in discourse.

1. Emphasizing Key Ideas

Periodic sentences create a sense of anticipation, making them effective in speeches and formal arguments. As seen in Abraham Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*:

“That government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” [7]

The structure builds towards the final resolution, enhancing its memorability.

In contrast, cumulative sentences provide directness and expand ideas naturally, as in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*:

“They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together.” [4]

Here, Fitzgerald begins with the central assertion (“They were careless people”) and elaborates with layered details.

According to controlling pacing and rhythm to compare in these constructions we can highlight that in periodic constructions it slows down the reading process, adding suspense and complexity, while in cumulative sentences it speeds up the narrative flow, allowing ideas to unfold organically.

For instance, in Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*, periodic constructions create depth:

"When, beneath the almost torrid sky of August, amid the heavy breath of flowers and the dull hum of insects, she paused in the deep shade of the avenue, she felt how wide was the world before her." [6]

Meanwhile, in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, cumulative structures enhance storytelling:

"We went tiptoeing along a path amongst the trees back toward the end of the widow's garden, stooping down so as the branches wouldn't scrape our heads." [9].

Literary Examples and Applications

Both periodic and cumulative constructions have been employed extensively in literary works to achieve different stylistic effects.

Table 1. Literary Examples of periodic and cumulative constructions

Author	Work	Example	Sentence Type
Charles Dickens	<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>	"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..."	Periodic
Jane Austen	<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."	Periodic
William Faulkner	<i>Absalom, Absalom!</i>	"He did not remember when he had not known Ellen, who was still in Virginia then, a delicate and overbred child..."	Cumulative
Virginia Woolf	<i>To the Lighthouse</i>	"He smiled the most exquisite smile, veiled by memory, tinged by dreams."	Cumulative

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of periodic and cumulative constructions reveals their distinct syntactic, rhetorical, and literary functions. Periodic sentences, with their suspenseful buildup, suit formal and persuasive discourse, whereas cumulative sentences provide a natural and flowing expansion of ideas, enhancing readability and description. Through literary examples, it is evident that both structures contribute to the richness and versatility of language, shaping meaning and stylistic effectiveness in diverse contexts.

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