

Text Analysis 2

Excerpt from *One for my Baby*, by Tony Parsons

- 1 'You must eat the cold porridge,' he told me once.
- 2 It's a Chinese expression. Cantonese, I guess, because although he carried an old-fashioned blue British passport and was happy to call himself an Englishman, he was born in Hong Kong and sometimes you could tell that all the important things he believed were formed long ago and far away. Like the importance of eating the cold porridge.
- 3 I stopped what I was doing and stared at him. What was he going on about now?
- 4 'Eat the cold porridge'.
- 5 The way he explained it, **eating** the cold porridge means **working** at something for so long that when you get home there is nothing left to eat but cold porridge. And I thought – who did he share a flat with out there? Goldilocks and the Three Bears?
- 6 That's how you get good at something, he told me. That's how you get good at anything. You eat the cold porridge. To become the master of something, you must eat the cold porridge, Grasshopper. Actually he never called me Grasshopper. But I always felt that he might.
- 7 And I tried hard to understand. He was my teacher as well as my friend and I always tried to be a good student. I am **trying** today. But I can't help it – somewhere along the line I took **eating** the cold porridge to mean something else. Something completely different from its Chinese meaning.

Answer the following questions:

1. Explain the word-formation process of *old-fashioned* (paragraph 2).
2. Explain the multi-word verb in the following sentence: *what was he going on about now?* (Paragraph 3).
3. There are several sentences in the text which start with *and* or *but*. Would you consider it grammatically correct? Why do you think the writer uses it? What is the effect?
4. Explain the *-ing* forms in bold.
5. Comment on the cohesion and coherence of the last two paragraphs.

SUGGESTED ANSWERS:

1. Explain the word-formation process of *old-fashioned* (paragraph 1).

Topic 45

Old-fashioned is an example of compounding (adjective compound, to be more exact), whereby the roots *old* and *fashioned* have combined to form a lexical unit which grammatically and semantically functions as one single word.

Besides compounding, there has been a prior process of affixation by means of the suffix *-ed*: *fashion* → *fashioned*. However, it is worth noting that the word *fashioned* does not exist per se, and is only used in this compound.

In terms of spelling, *old-fashioned* is a hyphenated compound, as the two roots are linked by means of a hyphen, contrary to what happens in other compounds which are written either as one word (solid compound – e.g. *handmade*) or as two separate words (open compound, e.g. *bus stop*).

As for meaning, it is clearly an endocentric compound, since its meaning is derived from its components: “something that has fallen out of fashion because it is no longer used, done or liked by people, or because it has been replaced by something more modern”. However, it is a copulative or dvanda compound, since the grammatical head is not clear.

Finally, as regards the syntactic relation between the elements, we are here dealing with a verbless root compound, which means that it cannot be paraphrased given that they are not formed on the basis of a phrase, as would be the case of *breath-taking* (*it takes your breath away*).

2. Explain the multi-word verb in the following sentence: *what was he going on about now?* (Paragraph 3).

Topic 36

Go on about is a multi-word verb, since it consists of more than one word. More concretely, it is an instance of a phrasal-prepositional verb, which, in addition to the lexical verb, also consists of both an adverb and a preposition as particles. These combinations are generally restricted to informal English, and there is normally a one-word paraphrase, which in this case would be: *talk*.

NOTE: Phrasal verbs contain one adverb (e.g. *take off*), whereas prepositional verbs contain a preposition (e.g. *look after*). Therefore phrasal-prepositional verbs may be considered a combination of both.

Phrasal-prepositional verbs fall into two categories depending on whether they can take one prepositional object (transitive, e.g. *I've always looked up to my teachers*) or two (complex transitive – (in)direct object + prepositional object, e.g. *I'll let you in on a secret*). In this concrete case, we would be dealing with the first case: *to go on about something*.

This type of constructions should form part of our students' linguistic repertoire: apart from displaying a more natural use of language, multi-word verbs also allow them to switch

between different levels of formality, given that multi-word verbs constructions are generally informal in nature.

3. There are several sentences in the text which start with *and* or *but*. Would you consider it grammatically correct? Why do you think the writer uses it? What is the effect?

At some point during our learning we were taught that we should never start a sentence with the words “and” or “but”. However, there is actually no grammar rule that states this, and in fact it is relatively easy to find instances of sentences beginning with these coordinating conjunctions, as the text above shows.

In reality, it is ok to start a sentence with these words, provided, that is, that we do it appropriately. Employing “and” or “but” at the beginning of a sentence creates a casual tone, which certain situations indeed call for. Therefore, we need to ensure that the tone is appropriate for the situation, and that what follows the coordinating conjunction is an independent clause, capable of standing alone as a sentence.

In the particular case of this text, the speaker is clearly speaking informally, and certainly replacing “and” or “but” with a conjunctive adverb (e.g. *moreover*, *furthermore*; *however*, *nevertheless*) would have the very unfortunate effect of sounding too formal (and even stuffy).

4. Explain the *-ing* forms in bold.

Check: *the difference between the gerund and the present participle* – <https://www.grammaring.com/the-difference-between-the-gerund-and-the-present-participle>

Topic 35

Eating the cold porridge means [...]: this is an instance of a gerund, which always functions as a noun. In this case, the *-ing* form is used because the clause is functioning as the subject of the sentence (unlike Spanish, where the infinitive would be employed). This is one of the uses of the *-ing* form in English, although the *-to* infinitive may sometimes be found, e.g. *to tell the truth is always right*. However, in cases with the *to*-infinitive it is more common to start with introductory *it* and place the *to*-infinitive clause at the end of the sentence (*it is always right to tell the truth*).

Eating the cold porridge means working at something [...]: this is another case of a gerund, which functions as a noun. Syntactically speaking, the clause *working at something* is the direct object of the verb *mean*. It is worth noting that the verb *mean* may be followed by both an *-ing* or a *to*-infinitive form, with a change of meaning. In this case, the *-ing* form is used because the meaning of “mean” is “to involve, imply”. When it means “to have the intention to”, it is followed by the *to*-infinitive form (e.g. *I've been meaning to write to you*).

I am trying today: in this case *trying* is a present participle, employed as part of the continuous construction *am trying* (present continuous tense). Continuous tenses in English are always construed by means of the verb *to be*, which functions as auxiliary, and the *-ing* form of the main verb, *try* in this case.

I took eating the cold porridge to mean something else: here we have another instance of a gerund, functioning as a noun. The whole phrase “eating the cold porridge” is the direct object of the verb *took*, and *eating* is the predicator of its clause.

5. Comment on the cohesion devices of the last two paragraphs.

Topic 8

At first sight, both paragraphs seem very simple in terms of cohesion, since the majority of sentences are simple sentences, connected by commas or full stops. There are some instances of coordinating conjunctions (*but*, *and*), but very often they are employed at the beginning of the sentence (thus functioning as an adverb conjunct), in order to convey a casual, informal tone. When functioning as conjunctions, they convey a certain idea of speed in the text, written as if it was being spoken: “he was my teacher as well as my friend and I always tried to be a good student”.

However, if we dig deeper into the text, we shall find several examples of cohesive elements:

- **Lexical cohesion**

As regards lexical cohesion, there are several instances of reiteration and, more concretely, repetition: “that’s how you get good at something”; that’s how you get good at anything” // “You eat the cold porridge”; “you must eat the cold porridge”. The word “grasshopper” is also repeated twice. This conveys the meaning of going around the same idea, and also writing following the stream of thought.

- **Ellipsis**

“I always felt that he might [call me Grasshopper]”. This would be a case of anaphoric, textual ellipsis, since the ellipted element may be recovered from the previous text. It is also a case of clausal ellipsis, since what has been ellipted is a whole clause.

“I am trying [to be a good student] today”. This would also be another example of anaphoric, textual, clausal ellipsis.

- **Reference**

“But I can’t help it”: In this example, the pronoun *it* is used as a pro-form (personal reference), which means that it cannot be interpreted on its own, but rather whose understanding depends on the semantic connection with its referent. In this example, the referent is not entirely clear: one might understand that it refers to the fact of not being a good student, although not necessarily. If that was indeed the case, we would be speaking of endophoric reference (the referent has been given at an earlier point in the text - anaphoric). Otherwise, it would be a case of exophoric reference, since reference is made to assumed thoughts outside the text.

In essence, there are several cohesion devices employed, although the prevailing impression on the reader is that of a quick and fresh text which parallels speech, especially due to the use of simple sentences and the lack of conjunctions.