



2.3 Parallelism in Ugaritic Poetry

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Abstract: Parallelism is a fundamental stylistic device of Ugaritic poetry. This brief study aims to provide an overview of the most basic forms of poetic parallelism, highlighting its implications for the semantics, grammar, phonetics, and visuals of Ugaritic poetic texts.

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Parallelism (often referred to as *parallelismus membrorum*) is a fundamental characteristic of Ugaritic poetry and its main principle of versification. Poetic parallelism relies on the juxtaposition of two linguistic sequences that share semantic, grammatic, phonetic, or graphic properties. As certain features of the first verse unit are repeated in the next, the two units are tied together. The subsequent verse unit emphasizes, complements, contextualizes, specifies, increases, advances, or contrasts the first unit's issue. Poetic parallelism is employed in epics and mythological texts (KTU 1.1–1.24), incantations and *historiolae* (KTU 1.100, 1.114, 1.169), as well as in some prayers and evocations accompanying rituals (KTU 1.23, 1.108, 1.119, 1.161). This brief study aims to provide an overview of parallelism's implications for the semantics, grammar, phonetics, and visuals of Ugaritic poetic texts (parallelism has been treated several times in Ugaritic studies; a brief bibliography is found on the [Ugarit-Portal Göttingen](#); here, you will also find German [translations](#) of selected Ugaritic poetic texts).

Semantic Parallelism: Parallel verse units usually contain semantically related words and phrases (the semantic – more precisely: paradigmatic – relations of juxtaposed lexemes are manifold and cannot all be dealt with here). Parallel expressions may bear the same or a very similar meaning, employing more or less synonymous lexemes like *ʿr* “city” and *pdr* “town, city” in ex. *a*:

a) KTU 1.16 VI 6–7

⁶ *ʿrm . tdu . mt[[x]]*

From the city she scares off Môtu (i.e., death),

⁷ *pdr̄m . tdu . ʿš̄rr*

from the town she scares off the enemy.

However, for many word pairs that are considered synonymous, it is reasonable to assume that the juxtaposed lexemes exhibit minor differences in meaning or bear different connotations (e.g., in the case of Ugaritic / Northwest Semitic words paired with words of foreign origin). Supposedly synonymous terms may harbor different value judgements, originate from different sociolinguistic contexts, and thus evoke different associations for the audience. Therefore, in most cases, we should refer to partial synonymy rather than synonymy. By juxtaposing two partially synonymous terms, the common denotative core of meaning is emphasized, while the peripheral connotations of the two lexemes voice different facets of the superordinate issue.

Apart from partially synonymous terms, hyponyms (sub-terms) and hypernyms (superordinate terms) can be joined in poetic parallelism (cf. Tsumura 1988). In this case, the second term classifies (as a hypernym) or specifies (as a hyponym) the first. A superordinate

term following a more specific one allows for the correct classification of the first statement. In ex. *b*, the phrase *šbrt aryh* “the flock of her kin” indicates that *bnh* “her sons” in the preceding verse unit refers to the entire clan of the goddess ʾAṭiratu (she is considered the creatress of the gods in Ugarit). Moreover, ʾAṭiratu’s name is replaced in the second unit by the more general term *ilt* “goddess,” which can equally be taken as a hyponym-hypernym sequence (the juxtaposition of a figure’s name with an epithet is frequently found in Ugaritic poetry):

b) KTU 1.3 V 36b–37

yšh . aṭrt³⁷ w bnh .

ilʿt .¹ w šbrt . aryʿh

He called ʾAṭiratu and her sons,

the goddess and the flock of her kin.

On the other hand, a hyponym following a hypernym specifies the issue, just as *ymn* “right hand” specifies which *yd* “hand” (left or right) is meant in ex. *c* (Tsumura 1988, 259–260):

c) KTU 1.19 IV 53b–54b

qh̄n . w tšqyn . yn .

t[q]h̄⁵⁴ ks . bdy .

qbʿt . b ymny

Take (it) and give (me) wine to drink,

t[ak]e the cup from my hand,

the goblet from my right hand!

Likewise, holonyms (*whole*) and meronyms (*part*) can be linked in poetic parallelism. In ex. *d*, *yd* “hand” is parallel to *uṣbʿt* “fingers,” which are parts of the *yd* “hand.” The meronym probably provides a synecdoche for the holonym “hand.” At the same time, the image drawn of the goddess meticulously washing every single finger becomes more detailed:

d) KTU 1.3 II 32b–33

ʿtʿrh̄š . ydh . bt³³ʿlʿt . ʿnt .

uṣbʿth . ybmt . limm .

Virgin ʿAnatu washed her hands,

the sister-in-law of the peoples (/ of Liʿmu) her fingers.

In addition, multiple hyponyms (of the same hypernym) can occur side by side. The juxtaposed terms derive from the same field of meaning or have a quality in common that is decisive for the story. Set in parallel, co-hyponyms serve to exemplify an entire field of meaning and thus visualize the scene. In ex. *e*, *hr̄š* “gold” and *ksp* “silver” are parallel, in this passage co-hyponymous for valuable metals. *rqm* “sheets” and *lbnt* “bricks” in turn exemplify different building materials:

e) KTU 1.4 VI 34–35a

³⁴ *sb . ksp . l r¹q¹m .* The silver turned into sheets,
³⁵ *hrs nsb . l lbnt* the gold turned into bricks.

Likewise, epithets and names of figures that are assigned the same or a similar role in the narrative occur in parallel. In ex. f, various enemies of Ba^ʿlu are mentioned in parallel, which ʿAnatu is said to have defeated:

f) KTU 1.3 III 43–46a

⁴³ *mḥšt . mdd ilm . ar¹š¹* I struck down the beloved of ʾIlu, ʾARŠ,
⁴⁴ *šmt . ʿgl . il . ʿtk* I destroyed ʾIlu’s calf, ʿTK,
⁴⁵ *mḥšt . k{.}lbt . ilm . išt* I struck down ʾIlu’s bitch, ʾIŠT,
⁴⁶ *klt . bt . il . ḡbb* I annihilated ʾIlu’s daughter, ḡBB.

Rarely, parallelism serves to elaborate comparisons. The couple is then made up of a reference word that is used in its literal meaning and a metaphorical expression or a comparative phrase figuratively describing the first one (see *b¹l mrym špn* “Ba^ʿlu from the heights of Zaphon” // *k ʿsr udnh* “like a bird from its nest” in ex. g):

g) KTU 1.3 III 47b–IV 2a (I fought for the silver, acquired the gold of him)
ṯrd¹ . b¹l^{IV 1} mrym . špn . who expelled Ba^ʿlu from the heights of Zaphon,
mš¹š¹š . k . ʿš¹r^{1 2} u{.}dnh . who made (him) fly away like a bird from its nest.

In Ugaritic poetry, co-referent parallel expressions (referring to the same issue) are occasionally attached with dissimilar numerals (this phenomenon is to be distinguished from enumerations): two subsequent verse units each contain a numeral (having the same syntactic function), with the number in the second verse unit being higher than the first. The numbers’ arithmetical meaning is secondary; rather, the numbers illustrate the (enormous) extent of a given matter, resulting in an increase (from the lower number to the higher; Segert 1983, 304). In ex. h, the two numbers 77 and 88 are parallel. By juxtaposing the two two-digit palindromic numerals, it is indicated that Ba^ʿlu and his lover (a heifer) slept with each other many, many times. In ex. i, the two numbers 1.000 and 10.000 are connected with the units of measure *šd* and *kmn*. Given this passage (the pair of measurements is frequently found in Ugaritic poetry), it is probably not to be concluded that a *šd* is exactly ten times as large as a *kmn*; rather, it is intended to showcase the enormous size of Ba^ʿlu’s palace:

h) KTU 1.5 V 19b–21

*škb*²⁰ *ʿm*¹*nh* . *šb*^ʿ . *l šb*^ʿ*m* He slept with her 77 times,
²¹ *ʿtš*¹*[ʿ]*¹*ʿy* . *ʿmn* . *l ʿmny* she let him [mo]unt 88 times.

i) KTU 1.4 V 56–57

⁵⁶ *alp* . *šd* . *aḥd bt* The house shall occupy 1.000 *šiddu*,
⁵⁷ *rbt* . *kmn* . *hkl* the palace 10.000 *kumānu*!

In antithetic (or contrastive) parallelism, comparatively rare in Ugaritic poetry, terms or phrases with contrasting meanings are juxtaposed (cf. Watson 1986b; see the complementary contrast between *d ydʿnn* and *d l ydʿnn* in ex. k, or the directional opposition between low and high in KTU 1.23 32a: *hlh [t]špl hlh trm* “Look, one gets down low, // look, the other gets up high”). Antithetical parallelism usually involves two opposing agents: at times, they are associated with two contrasting yet coequal issues (see ex. k). However, antithetical parallelism can also serve to view a superordinate issue from two opposing perspectives, the second statement presupposing the first. In ex. j, the antonymous verbal forms *ḥt* “be smashed” and *li* “be victorious” are opposed. In this case, Šaʿtiqatu’s victory presupposes Môtû’s expulsion (cf. Watson 1986b, 415):

j) KTU 1.16 VI 1–2a

¹ *[m]*¹*t*¹ . *dm* . *ḥt* . [Mô]tu, be smashed!
šʿtqt . *dm*¹ ² *ʿli*¹ Šaʿtiqatu, be victorious!

A rather unique case is found in ex. k. The verb *ydʿnn*, which occurs in the first line as part of the relative clause *d ydʿnn* “the one who knows him,” is repeated in the second verse unit (again as part of a short relative clause). Here, however, the verb is negated: *d l ydʿnn* “the one who does not know him.” The contrast between the god who knows Yarḥu and the god who does not is further illustrated in the main clauses: one hands the moon god food, the other beats him with a stick. The two phrases exemplify two contrasting attitudes, one benevolent, the other harsh (cf. Segert 1983, 300; Watson 1986b, 419):

k) KTU 1.114 6b–8a

il . *d ydʿnn*⁷ *ydb* . *lḥm* . *lh* . The god who knows him (i.e., Yarḥu) passes him food,
*w d l ydʿnn*⁸ *y[[x]]lmn ḥtm* yet the one who does not know him beats him with a stick.

Lastly, it is to be noted that antithetical parallelism can be achieved by juxtaposing two protagonists’ names who are hostile. In ex. j, the names of the opponents Môtû and Šaʿtiqatu

are juxtaposed and combined with antonymous verbs (the antithesis between the two is reinforced by the opposition of male and female gender; Watson 1986b, 415). In KTU 1.6 VI 17a, the names of Môtu and Baʿlu, the two gods facing each other in battle, are opposed. In this case, however, the names are combined with identical verbal forms: *mt ʿz bʿl ʿz* “Môtu was strong, Baʿlu was strong” (Steinberger 2022, 75–76).

Antithesis is formally identical to merism: here, however, the focus is not on the difference, but on the whole area that lies between the two contrasting terms (usually two spatial references). In ex. 1, the terms *šmm* “skies” and *nhlm* “wadi” illustrate the two opposite regions (above and below) from which usually water springs, but where now oil and honey flow. The parallelism expresses the extent of the paradisaical state that prevails from the very top to the very bottom:

1) KTU 1.6 III 12–13

¹² <i>šmm . šmn . tmṯrn</i> ¹	The skies rained oil,
¹³ <i>nhlm . tlk . ʿnbʿtm</i>	the wadis ran with honey.

Syntactic and Morphologic Parallelism: The verse elements that semantically match usually bear the same syntactic function. Thus, parallel verse units often contain equivalent constituents (see, e.g., ex. *n*: each colon comprises subject, accusative object, and verbal predicate). Syntactically parallel elements may correspond morphologically (regarding word class and specifications in conjugation or declension); however, parallel elements do not necessarily have to be morphosyntactically identical. In so-called asymmetrical constructions, juxtaposed verse parts exhibit minor morphosyntactic differences, allowing the poet to pepper parallel verse units with small variations and thus make speech flow more vivid (Gzella 2007). Hence, parallel terms are sometimes given different suffixes, though the meaning seems to remain unchanged. Not least, parallel words that are otherwise largely identical often show minor morphologic transformations (e.g., verbs with energetic suffix are often parallel to verbs without energetic suffix; cf. UG² 500; see also ex. *n*, where the verbal form *nbln* differs from the parallel verb *nbl* only by the suffix *-n*; see also below on repetitive parallelism and the polyptoton).

The repetition and transformation of the first verse unit’s word order in the second and third unit gives rise to different structural varieties of parallelism. Exemplarily, we shall look at the verse composed of two or three cola (cf. Steinberger 2022, 61–63, for an overview of verse

units in Ugaritic poetry). In parallelism's most basic form, the structure of the first colon is maintained in the following colon (the sentence elements are repeated in the same order; see ex. *a, f, j*). In chiasmic constructions, the elements of the first colon are repeated in reverse order in the second (see ex. *m*, featuring anadiplosis; note that modifiers and particles here merge with a main constituent, forming one unit that is transposed as a whole; cf. Watson 1983, 259–260):

m) KTU 1.17 V 10b–11

{ <i>hlk . ktr</i> } ¹¹ { <i>ky'n .</i> }	He indeed saw the coming of Kôṭaru,
{ <i>wy'n .</i> } { <i>tdrq¹ . ḥss</i> }	yes, he saw the approaching of Ḥasīsu.

In verses with every colon containing more than two (mostly three) constituents, usually two of them join to form a compound colon clause (consisting either of the verbal predicate and a nominal constituent or of two nominal constituents). The compound clause and the remaining single constituent are taken up independently in the subsequent colon. The elements of the compound clause can be rearranged (they are chiasmic to the elements of the corresponding compound clause), while the compound clause, seen as a whole, is in the same position in each colon. Likewise, the constituent independent of the compound clause is in the same place in each colon (see ex. *n, e, l*; cf. Watson 1983, 261–263):

n) KTU 1.3 V 33b–34b

¹ <i>kl¹nyy .</i> { <i>qšh</i> ³⁴ <i>nbln .</i> }	We all want to bring his jug,
<i>kl¹ny¹y .</i> { <i>nbl . ksh</i> }	we all want to bring his cup!

Occasionally, the constituent that is independent of the compound clause is placed at the beginning of the one colon and at the end of the other colon (it is arranged in chiasmic order). The elements of the compound clause, however, are rendered in the same order. In ex. *o*, the verb *yqh* follows the interrogative pronoun *mh* in both cola; the direct object (*mt uḥryt* // *mt atryt*) is once at the beginning of the colon and once at the end (cf. Watson 1983, 260):

o) KTU 1.17 VI 35b–36a

<i>mt¹ . uḥryt .</i> { <i>mh . yqh</i> }	Death at the end – what can take it away?
³⁶ { ¹ <i>m¹h . yqh .</i> } <i>mt . atryt</i>	What can take away death in the final stage?

These are but the most basic connections between cola, each containing the same constituents. It is to be noted, however, that often elements of the first colon are omitted in the

second or third colon, while in other cases elements are added in the second or third colon, yielding, e.g., terrace verses (cf. Watson 1986a, 208–210), staircase verses (cf. Watson 1986a, 150–156) or elliptical verses (cf. Miller 1999).

Visual Parallelism: In addition to grammar and semantics, parallelism occasionally affects the layout and the phonetics of poetic texts, reinforcing and extending the connection between juxtaposed elements. In visual (or graphic) parallelism, the same or similar signs are arranged one above the other in two or more successive lines, yielding a recurring pattern of text that is visually perceptible (cf. Yogev / Yona 2018). Unlike other forms of poetic parallelism, visual parallelism only appeals to the writer and reader of a text, but not to the listener.

On the Ugaritic tablets, the beginnings of successive lines are at times shaped visually parallel. In KTU 1.15 III 7–12, e.g., the sequence {tld . pgt} (“she shall bear the girl”) is repeated at the beginning of six successive lines (although the phrase is not fully preserved in each line; see the WSRP photos [UC15303965](#) and [UC15304134](#)): the corresponding signs are arranged one above the other. Further examples of line-initial visual parallelism are found in KTU 1.4 (cf. Yogev / Yona 2018): {klnyn} in IV 45–46 (repeated twice); {mtb} in IV 52–57 (repeated five times); {hš} in V 51–54 (repeated four times); {špq . il} in VI 47–54 (repeated eight times); {‘m . gr} in VIII 2–3 (repeated twice, with ‘m again repeated at the beginning of l. 4).

Phonetic Parallelism and Rhyme: At times, the phonetic shape of poetic texts is influenced by parallelism (Pardee 1988, 51–57 / 182–185). Phonemes from the first verse unit are taken up in the next, yielding different forms of rhyme (note that the study of Ugaritic rhyme is complicated by the fact that the Ugaritic writing system is primarily consonantal). Either whole syllables correspond, or only the vowel or the consonant sequence (assonance vs. consonance).

Initial rhymes build on the phonetic similarity between the first parts of two or more subsequent verse units (cf. Watson 1999, 184). In ex. *p*, the words *tant* and *thmt* (which are neither semantically nor grammatically parallel) are linked by an initial rhyme. Except for the vowel of the penultimate syllable and the case ending, *tant* and *thmt* share similar syllables: /ta/ is followed by a laryngeal (/ʔ/ and /h/), the vowel /a/ and a nasal (/n/ and /m/); in both words, /t/ is the last consonant (note, however, that the vocalization of *tant* is debatable; cf. Bordreuil / Pardee 2009, 168; UG² 270):

p) KTU 1.3 III 22b–25

<i>rgm</i> ²³ ṣ̣ . w . lḥšt . abn .	<i>rigmu</i> ṣ̣iṣṣi wa LḤŠ-(a)tu ṣ̣abni
²⁴ tant . šmm . ṣ̣m . arṣ	<i>taṣ̣anîtu</i> šamîma ṣ̣imma ṣ̣arṣi
²⁵ thmt . ṣ̣mn . kbkbm	<i>tahāmāti</i> ṣ̣imma(n)na kabkabîma

The word of tree and whisper of stone,
the whispering of the skies with the earth,
of the floods with the stars!

Furthermore, end rhymes are attested in Ugaritic poetry, frequently involving homeoptota. (Often, it is not clear whether rhymes occur only by chance or whether they were deliberately used to connect subsequent verse units. The question arises not least in the case of rhymes between recurring grammatical elements, including homeoptota, e.g., when parallel words share the same prefixes or suffixes, or they are connected with identical particles. These forms of rhyme could also be seen as a by-product of grammatical parallelism.) In ex. *p*, the lexemes *abn* and *arṣ* both start with /ʔa/ and end with the genitive ending /-i/. In ex. *q*, the verbal forms at the end of the two cola show the same vowel sequence (they are both analysed as L-stems; UG² 577 / 650) and have the same pronominal suffix (-k). Furthermore, the second syllable of both words starts with a guttural (/ḥ/ and /ʕ/):

q) KTU 1.4 IV 38b–39

<i>hm</i> . yd . il m ^l lk ¹ ³⁹ yḥssk .	<i>himma</i> yadu ṣ̣ili malki ³⁹ yuḥâsisuki
<i>ahbt</i> . ṭr . t ^l rr ¹ k	<i>ṣ̣ahbatu</i> ṭôri tuṣ̣ârîruki

Or does the love of ṣ̣Ilū excite you,
does the passion of the bull arouse you?

Repetitive Parallelism: In Ugaritic studies, repetition is commonly considered a form of parallelism (cf. Pardee 1988, 169–170). Here, the juxtaposed terms derive from the very same lexeme. The word forms may be identical, corresponding morphosyntactically; at times, however, the lexeme is modified morphosyntactically in the second unit (which is the case with polyptota). Needless to say, the repetitive elements overlap phonetically and, if the verse units are arranged one above the other on the tablet, yield visual parallelism. The verbatim repetition of entire cola within a verse is rare (at times, individual elements of parallel verse units correspond verbatim, while the others diverge; see ex. *a*; note, however, that whole narrative sections may be repeated verbatim, which is to be considered repetitive parallelism at its largest

scale). In ex. *r*, the parallel cola are identical except for *bn* standing in parallel to *bnm*, the same lexeme with an additional particle *-m*:

r) KTU 1.15 III 20–21

²⁰ *w tqrb . wʿldʿ bn ʿlʿh* So, her time came to bear him a son,

²¹ *w tqrb . wʿld . bʿnʿm ʿlʿh* so, her time came to bear him a son.

Outlook: Poetic parallelism influences the vocabulary, grammar and structure of Ugaritic poetic texts and occasionally affects their phonetic form and their graphic layout. Parallelism links verse units of different lengths. The various scales at which parallelism comes into play have not been addressed in this study. The references discussed above are verses composed of two or three cola. However, parallel links are found on a smaller scale as well, i.e., between phrases within single cola (cf. Watson 1984). On the other hand, poetic parallelism is at work in strophes connecting several verses (cf. Steinberger 2022). Furthermore, parallelism affects the overall structure of poetic texts given that whole narrative sections can be built in parallel (often repetitive-parallel). Thus, a close study of parallelism reveals both the micro- and the macro-structure of Ugaritic poetic texts.

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