

Discontinuity or Hyperbaton? The Use of Discontinuous Noun Phrases in Latin Prose and Poetry

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For citation: Spevak O. Discontinuity or Hyperbaton? The Use of Discontinuous Noun Phrases in Latin Prose and Poetry. *Philologia Classica* 2025, 20 (2), 272–280.
<https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu20.2025.208> EDN LMOFDG

This article deals with the discontinuity of noun phrases, i. e. the separation of modifiers from their governing nouns by elements (other than enclitics) that syntactically do not belong to the noun phrase. Discontinuity is usually only studied from the point of view of the intervening material and ‘discontinuity’ and ‘hyperbaton’ are used as synonyms. A corpus of classical Latin prose (Cicero, Caesar, Sallust, and Cornelius Nepos) and Augustan poetry (Vergil, Horace, and Ovid) serves to describe the general properties of discontinuous noun phrases, such as frequency, position of components of a discontinuous noun phrase, restriction to only one discontinuous phrase per clause, and type of intervening material. It is argued that discontinuity is a means that serves to mark pragmatic saliency. Discontinuous noun phrases as a whole or their parts (modifier or the noun) fulfil the pragmatic function of Focus or Topic or they carry pragmatic features contrast or emphasis. It is argued that discontinuity is a feature inherent to the Latin language. It is primarily used to highlight pragmatically salient constituents or parts of them. It can also serve stylistic purposes, especially in combination with other stylistic devices. While the use of discontinuity is rather moderate in prose, poetry exploits it much more for the sake of expressiveness.

Keywords: noun phrase, discontinuity, hyperbaton, pragmatics, stylistic device, word order.

I presented this text at the 23rd International Colloquium on Latin Linguistics in Udine (9–13 June 2025), which my dear friend Elena Zheltova was unable to attend. I am pleased to offer it to her in this way.

1. Introduction

As is well-known, Latin allows for the splitting of noun phrases, i. e. modifiers can be separated from their head noun. For example, *magnum* and *incommodum* ‘great harm’ are split by *nostris* ‘to our (men)’ and *attulerat* ‘it caused’ in (1).

(1) (Quae res) ... **magnumque** nostris attulerat **incommodum**.

(This fact) ... and it caused great harm to our men. (Caes. *BCiv.* 3. 63. 5)

This phenomenon is called ‘discontinuity of the noun phrase’ and is considered ‘a common feature of Latin’ (Pinkster, 2021, 1097). However, the separation of noun phrases is often called ‘hyperbaton’, including the *Oxford Latin Syntax*. These terms are

sometimes used interchangeably, as recently by Vendel (2023, 1): ‘I use both these terms, more or less interchangeably, although I take ‘discontinuous noun phrases’ to refer specifically to split noun phrases, and ‘hyperbaton’ to the construction in general.’

Similarly, the term ‘hyperbaton’ is used for discontinuity by Devine and Stephens (2006, 524) and Emde Boas *et al.* (2019, 709), among others, to describe discontinuity in Greek.

The difficulty with equating discontinuity and hyperbaton lies in the definitions. While ‘in grammatical analysis, discontinuity refers to the splitting of a construction by the insertion of another grammatical unit’ (Crystal 2008, 147), hyperbaton is defined as a rhetorical device, i. e. a stylistic figure (see Lausberg 1998, 318–320, and *Brill’s New Pauly Online*, s. v. Figures).¹ Thus, it is important to separate linguistic means as such from stylistic devices that are used to create an expressive or literary style, which has to do with aesthetics.² Equating discontinuity and hyperbaton implies that discontinuity is itself a stylistic device. This view is not correct. In this article, I will show that discontinuity is primarily a property of Latin that serves mainly to mark pragmatically salient constituents. Secondly, it can be used as a stylistic device to increase expressiveness for aesthetic purposes. Additionally, the term ‘hyperbaton’ is sometimes used for *traiectio*, i. e. the displacement or transposition of a word from its usual place to another place. ‘Displacement’ in this sense refers to various forms of the intertwining of constituents belonging to different phrases or clauses (Conway 1900 and Postgate 1916), including the postponement of subordinators, or the insertion of the head noun in a genitival noun phrase that it governs (*magnarum initia rerum* ‘the outbreak of major developments’, Caes. *BCiv.* 3. 22. 4); see, for example, Lilienthal (1859), followed by Hoff (1995). This makes the term ‘hyperbaton’ unsuitable for a linguistic analysis.

My article is organized as follows. I will first discuss discontinuity as a property of Latin (section 2). Then I will address the question of the stylistic aspects of discontinuity in prose (section 3) and the use of discontinuity in Augustan poetry (section 4). The findings are summarized in section 5.

2. Discontinuity as a property of Latin

Latin allows for the separation of noun (and other) phrases by the insertion of elements that do not belong to these phrases. The fact that discontinuity occurs in all types of text, including non-literary texts (Spevak 2025) indicates that it is an inherent property of the Latin language.³ In this article, I will use a corpus of classical Latin prose that comprises four of Cicero’s speeches: *Pro Publio Quinctio*, ‘In Defence of Publius Quinctius’, *In Gaium Verrem*, ‘Against Gaius Verres’, book 4. 1–75, *Pro Archia poeta*, ‘On behalf of Archias the Poet’, and *Pro Marco Marcello*, ‘On behalf of Marcus Marcellus’; his rhetorical treatise *Brutus* 1–120, his philosophical treatise *De Divinatione*, ‘On Divination’, 1. 1–100, and his correspondence *Ad Atticum* ‘Letters to Atticus’, book 5. It further contains Caesar’s *De bello Gallico*, ‘The Gallic War’, book 4, and *De bello civili*, ‘The Civil War’, book 3.

¹ Cf. also Marouzeau (1962, 322–335) who calls it ‘disjonction’.

² For literary stylistics, see Marouzeau (1962, xi–xiii). For the history of hyperbaton especially in Russian studies, see Markasova (2024) [Маркасова Е. В. Из истории гипербата в русистике. *Slověne* 2024, 12 (2), 82–112].

³ The discontinuity of noun and prepositional phrases is also a feature of Slavic languages.

1–68, Sallust's *Bellum Iugurthinum*, 'The War with Jugurtha', 1–40, and three of Cornelius Nepos' biographies: *Miltiades*, *Themistocles*, and *Epaminondas*. An examination of discontinuous noun phrases in this corpus shows that discontinuity is used mainly for pragmatic purposes. This is confirmed by the fact that discontinuity is typically used with adjectives expressing size or dimension such as *magnus* 'big', *longus* 'long', *talis* 'such' and *tantus* 'so great', implying a high degree, with interrogative pronouns, possessive pronouns, *nullus* 'no one', *ullus* 'any',⁴ as well as adjectives in the superlative and, to a lesser degree, in the comparative. Discontinuity is optional and it serves to highlight the pragmatic saliency of the noun phrase or part of it. Pragmatically salient elements are constituents that fulfil the function of Focus or Topic or constituents that carry contrast or emphasis. Compare examples (2) and (3) showing minimal pairs of noun phrases functioning as Focus. There is no reason to regard *magnam difficultatem* 'great difficulty' in (3) as a means of stylistic elaboration; the discontinuity is a device of pragmatic highlighting.

- (2) Quae res *magnas difficultates* exercitui Caesaris attulit. Castra enim ...

These developments caused serious difficulties to Caesar's army. For his camp...

(Caes. *BCiv.* 1. 48. 3)

- (3) Pompeianis **magnam** res ad receptum **difficultatem** adferebat. Nam ...

His action gave the Pompeians great difficulty in their retreat, for ... (Caes. *BCiv.* 3. 51. 6)

In classical Latin prose, discontinuity is used for constituents that are pragmatically salient. Pragmatically salient constituents are those that function as Focus and convey new information, such as *magnam difficultatem* 'great difficulty' in (3) above, and constituents that function as Topic, i. e. the entity about which the sentence provides information, such as *huius sententiam* 'his opinion' in (4). Pragmatic saliency also concerns the features of contrast (explicit or implicit confrontation of one element with another) and emphasis (subjective evaluation by the author). The feature of contrast can be carried by a constituent or part of it, for example *firmum* 'strong' is contrasted with *imbecillum* 'weak' in (5) (note the reduction of the head noun in the second segment); the feature of emphasis is seen in (6) with *suum* 'their' (note the repetition of *suus* in the second clause).

- (4) **Huius** (sc. Histiaei) cum **sententiam** plurimi essent secuti, Miltiades non dubitans ...

When the opinion of Histiaeus met with general approval, Miltiades, feeling sure that ... (Nep. *Milt.* 3. 6. 4).

- (5) Equidem ego vobis **regnum** trado **firmum**, si boni eritis, sin mali, *imbecillum*.

Truly, I hand you a strong kingdom if you are virtuous, but if evil, then a weak one (Sall. *Iug.* 10. 6)

- (6) Homerum Colophonii **civem** esse dicunt **suum**, Chii suum vindicant, Salaminii repentunt.

The Colophonians say that Homer was their citizen; the Chians claim him as theirs; the Salaminians appropriate him (Cic. *Arch.* 19).

In my corpus of classical Latin prose, the rate of discontinuity (created by words other than enclitics) accounts for 13.43 % (715 discontinuous noun phrases out of a total of

⁴ This was already observed by Havet (1905).

5,325 noun phrases). This is a number that is consistent with the functions of discontinuity mentioned above.

Before moving on to stylistic aspects of discontinuity in prose, it is important to mention Sallust. He — without doubt intentionally — avoids the discontinuity of noun phrases.⁵ However, he uses it in speeches and, remarkably, also in Marius' speech (Sall. *Iug.* 85).⁶ Marius presents himself as a 'new' man devoted to military service, who cares little for literature and other pastimes, but instead prefers hard work on the battlefield. Therefore, his style is not elaborate: *non sunt composita verba mea* 'my words are not carefully composed', he says (Sall. *Iug.* 85. 31). An example of discontinuity is seen in (7) with *his praeceptis* 'with such principles', functioning as Topic (*his*, used with emphasis, is anaphoric).

(7) **His** ego **praeceptis** milites hortabor.

With such guiding principles as these, I shall encourage my soldiers. (Sall. *Iug.* 85. 35)

The use of discontinuity in Marius' speech argues against the hypothesis that discontinuity is primarily a stylistic device.

3. Stylistic aspects of discontinuity in prose

As Adams (1971, 5) pointed out concerning the discontinuity produced by the verb ('verbal hyperbaton'), Cicero uses more discontinuous noun phrases in his elaborate speeches than in his earlier speeches. This is fully confirmed by my corpus for discontinuity in general: Cicero's first publicly presented speech *Pro Quinctio* (from 81 BC), written in a markedly simpler style, shows a lower rate of discontinuity (9.80%) in comparison with *Pro Archia* (from 62 BC) and *Pro Marcello* (from 46 BC), with 14.18% and 16.67%, respectively, which belong to highly stylized speeches.

When Cicero combines discontinuity with a stylistic device such as parallelism or tricolon, with a rhythmical sentence conclusion — *clausula* — or when he uses a special pattern of discontinuity, we can say that the discontinuity serves as a means of stylistic elaboration. For example in (8),⁷ the discontinuity of *omnes libri* 'all books' is combined with a tricolon — a series of three clauses — and anaphora — repetition of a word at the beginning of each clause.

(8) Sed pleni **omnes** sunt **libri**, plenae sapientum voces, plena exemplorum vetustas.

But all books are full (*sc.* of such precepts), and all the sayings of philosophers, and all antiquity is full of examples. (Cic. *Arch.* 14)

A special discontinuity pattern combined with a *clausula* is seen in (9); *denique omnium* 'in short, of all', which concludes the sentence, creates the sequence trochee — cretic (– ~ – ~ –) which *rerum omnium* 'of all things' would not create. Additionally, in this complex noun phrase with two splits, the modifier *omnium* is separated from its head *rerum* and is postposed; this seldom occurs in prose, where the components of genitival noun phrases (head noun and its modifier) are usually kept together.

⁵ In Sallust's *Iug.* 1–40, the discontinuity rate is 4.45%, which is significantly below average. The use of discontinuity in Sallust's speeches has been noted by Szantyr (1972, 689). For Sallust's anti-ciceronian style, see Syme (1964, 257).

⁶ It contains 1,161 words and 93 noun phrases of which four are discontinuous.

⁷ With a minor manuscript variant *sunt omnes*.

- (9) Pro hisce rebus **vacatio** data est ab isto **sumptus, laboris, militiae, rerum** denique **omnium**.

In return for these services, he exempted them from money payments, forced labour, military service, in short, from everything. (Cic. *Verr.* 4. 23)

In such examples, the discontinuity not only marks pragmatically salient constituents but it also creates an elegant and elaborate construction, and therefore, it can be considered a means of stylistic elaboration.

4. The use of discontinuity in Augustan poetry

Augustan poetry shows a highly elaborate style. My corpus of poetry comprises two books of Vergil's *Aeneis* 'Aeneid', book 1 and book 4, Horace's *Sermones* 'Satires', book 1, and *Carmina* 'Odes', book 1, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, book 7, and *Fasti* 'Calendar', book 6. The rate of discontinuity in this corpus is 51 % (1,882 discontinuous noun phrases out of a total of 3,696 noun phrases), i. e. four times higher than in prose. Poets use discontinuity with adjectives expressing a dimension such as *magnus* 'big' or *altus* 'high, deep' and with adjectives with an intensive meaning such as *talis* 'such' or *tantus* 'so great', as prose writers do — an example is seen in (10) — but they also use it with various other adjectives.

- (10) **Talibus** adgreditur Venerem Saturnia **dictis**: / 'Egregiam vero laudem ...

The daughter of Saturn accosts Venus with these words: "Splendid indeed is the praise ... ' (Verg. *Aen.* 4. 90)

Although the discontinuity in poetry is pragmatically motivated in the vast majority of cases (71 %), as in (10) where the discontinuous phrase *talibus dictis* 'with these words' is the Focus of its clause, 20 % of the instances of discontinuity lack a pragmatic motivation. For example in (11) the coordinated objects *pauperum tabernas regumque turris* 'the poor man's cottage and the rich man's castle' are pragmatically more salient than the discontinuous instrument adjunct *aequo pede* 'with impartial foot' (note the alliteration). Another example is seen in (12) with the adjective *medius* 'in the middle', which is the second most frequent adjective used in discontinuous noun phrases.⁸ Here, *mater* 'mother', accompanied by the secondary predicate *gerens* 'bearing', i. e. some form of continuation, is the Focus of the clause rather than the discontinuous space adjunct *media silva* 'in the middle of the forest'.

- (11) Pallida Mors **aequo** pulsat **pede** *pauperum tabernas / regumque turris*.

Pale Death knocks with impartial foot on the poor man's cottage and the rich man's castle. (Hor. *Carm.* 1. 4. 13)

- (12) Cui (*sc.* Aeneae) *mater* **media** sese tulit obvia **silva**, / virginis os habitumque *gerens* et virginis arma ...

Across his path, in the midst of the forest came his mother, with a maiden's face and mien, and a maiden's arms ... (Verg. *Aen.* 1. 314)

⁸ It occurs 17 times, after *magnus* 'big', which is used 22 times.

Double discontinuity or two discontinuous noun phrases in one clause, traditionally referred to as ‘double hyperbaton’ (cf. Pinkster 2021, 964), partly belongs to the category of pragmatically unmotivated discontinuity. In some cases, both discontinuous noun phrases can be pragmatically salient as *Albus Notus* ‘bright South Wind’ functioning as Topic and *obscurum caelo* ‘from the dark sky’ functioning as Focus (note the contrast between *albus* and *obscurum* as well as enjambment) in (13).

- (13) **Albus** ut *obscurum* deterget nubila *caelo* / saepe **Notus** ..., sic tu sapiens finire memento / tristitiam.

As the bright South Wind often wipes the clouds from the dark sky ..., so you should make sure to drown life’s sadness.’ (Hor. *Carm.* 1. 7. 15)

However, in the majority of cases, only one of the discontinuous noun phrases, usually the first one, is pragmatically salient. An example is seen in (14); *his dictis* ‘by these words’, the Focus of its clause, announces Venus’ words addressed to her son Cupido, already mentioned earlier (l. 658). *Amorem* ‘Love’, with its characterizing epithet *aligerum* ‘winged’ is not salient. The discontinuity of noun phrases which are pragmatically not salient is explained by the fact that the second discontinuous noun phrase serves as the intervening material for the first one or that for one element of the second phrase, a position other than the ‘usual’ one is preferred for stylistic elaboration (for example, alliteration) or metrical convenience.

- (14) Ergo **his** *aligerum* **dictis** adfatur *Amorem*: ...

Therefore to winged Love she speaks these words: ... (Verg. *Aen.* 1. 663)

In poetry, discontinuity is often combined with stylistic devices such as alliteration, periphrasis, Homeric comparison, chiasmus, enjambment, climax, anaphora, or paronymy. Example (15) shows periphrasis (circumlocution) or description of something at length instead of naming it directly, namely ‘daybreak’. This compound sentence contains three discontinuous phrases. The noun phrase *postera Aurora* ‘following Aurora’ extends into another clause coordinated by *-que* ‘and’. The discontinuity is accompanied by alliteration (*postera Phoebea*) and assonance (*umentem umbram*, repetition of the vowel *u*).

- (15) **Postera** *Phoebea* lustrabat *lampade* terras / *umentemque* **Aurora** polo dimoverat *umbram* ...

The morrow’s dawn was lighting the earth with the lamp of Phoebus, and had scattered from the sky the dewy shades ...’ (Verg. *Aen.* 4. 6)

Discontinuity as a means for marking pragmatically salient constituents can be used to increase expressiveness. This is exploited in particular in ‘dramatic scenes’.⁹ For example, when Ovid describes the fire of the temple of Vesta (*Fast.* 6. 437–442), he uses discontinuity in each line, combined with alliteration, antithesis, and polyptoton. Then he employs an unusual way of separating noun phrases by elements belonging to another clause: separating *magna voce* ‘in a loud voice’ by *succurrite* ‘hasten to the aid’. This instance of discontinuity, in which a noun phrase is separated by an element belonging to

⁹ In stylistically oriented studies, a ‘mimetic’ function of hyperbaton is often postulated, see, among others, Dainotti (2015, 239–263).

another clause, serves to increase the dramatic effect of the situation being described, as shown in (16).¹⁰

- (16) Provolat in medium, et **magna** ‘*Succurrite*’ **voce**, / ‘non est auxilium flere,’ Metellus ait.
Metellus rushed into their midst and in a loud voice cried: “Hasten to the aid! There is no help in weeping.” (Ov. *Fast.* 6. 443)

5. Summary

Discontinuity is essentially a means to mark pragmatically salient constituents or parts of them. In prose, it typically occurs with adjectives of size and dimension and adjectives that have an intensive meaning (‘so’), e. g. *tantus* ‘so great’ but it is also found with other modifiers. In prose, the discontinuity of noun phrases is pragmatically motivated. Discontinuous noun phrases fulfil the pragmatic function of Focus or Topic or they carry contrast or emphasis. In comparison with poetry, discontinuous noun phrases in prose allow:

- only one instance of discontinuity per clause (finite or non-finite clause);
- separation by constituents (or elements such as connectors) belonging to the same clause.

The use of discontinuity in prose is rather moderate (an average of 13 % of all noun phrases). Discontinuity can serve the purpose of stylistic elaboration in prose, especially when combined with other stylistic figures.

Poetry, in contrast, seeks much more expressiveness. The rate of discontinuity reaches 51 %. Apart from the ‘normal’ use of discontinuity with adjectives of size or dimension and adjectives with an intensive meaning in noun phrases which are pragmatically salient, poets employ discontinuity for purposes of stylistic elaboration. Such stylistically marked uses of discontinuity can be recognized by:

- the combination with other stylistic figures;
- the use of two (rarely three) discontinuous noun phrases per clause;
- intrusion of one or more constituents belonging to another clause.

6. Conclusions

Discontinuity is a means that serves to mark pragmatic saliency. This explains why it typically occurs with adjectives of size or dimension (*magnus* ‘big’), adjectives such as *tantus* ‘so great’, and pronouns such as *nullus* ‘no one’ (without being restricted to them). At the same time, it is an optional means; the author has the choice of using a continuous or a discontinuous noun phrase.

There are some important differences between the use of discontinuity in prose and in poetry; among them, one can mention, in particular (i) the frequency — discontinuity in poetry is four times more frequent than in prose, and (ii) the rule of one discontinuous noun phrase per clause, which is often not observed in poetry (double discontinuity).

The brief examination of discontinuity of noun phrases in prose and poetry, presented here leads to a distinction between a property inherent in language, *discontinuity*, and its exploitation for stylistic purposes, especially in poetry, in which case it can be called *hyperbaton*.

¹⁰ My poetry corpus contains six instances of separation by a constituent belonging to another clause.

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Дисконтинуальность или гипербат? Использование прерванных именных фраз в латинской прозе и поэзии

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Для цитирования: Spevak O. Discontinuity or Hyperbaton? The Use of Discontinuous Noun Phrases in Latin Prose and Poetry. *Philologia Classica* 2025, 20 (2), 272–280.
<https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu20.2025.208> EDN LMOFDG

В статье рассматривается разрыв именных групп, то есть отделение модификаторов от управляющих существительных различными элементами (кроме энклитик), которые в синтаксическом плане не относятся к именной группе. Разрыв именных групп обычно изучается только с точки зрения вложенного материала, а термины «разрыв (дисконтинуальность)» и «гипербат» используются как синонимы. Корпус классической латинской прозы (Цицерон, Цезарь, Саллюстий и Корнелий Непот) и поэзии эпохи Августа (Вергилий, Гораций и Овидий) служит для описания общих свойств разрывных именных групп, таких как частотность, расположение компонентов разрывной именной группы, ограничение до одной разрывной группы в предложении и тип вложенного материала. В данной статье утверждается, что разрыв именных групп — это средство,

служащее для маркирования прагматической значимости. Разрывные именные группы в целом или их части (определение или существительное) выполняют прагматическую функцию фокуса или темы, либо несут в себе прагматические признаки контраста или эмпазы. Утверждается, что разрыв именных групп — это особенность, присущая латинскому языку. Она используется в основном для выделения прагматически значимых составляющих или их частей. Она также может служить стилистическим целям, особенно в сочетании с другими стилистическими приемами. Хотя использование разрывов в прозе довольно умеренно, в поэзии они используются гораздо чаще для достижения выразительности.

Ключевые слова: именная фраза, разрыв, гипербатон, прагматика, стилистический прием, порядок слов.

Received: 24.10.2025

Accepted: 17.12.2025