

Punctuation

Punctuation refers to various systems of dots (Lat *punctus*) and other marks that accompany letters and other glyphs as part of a writing system. Although there is a certain overlap among the various kinds of markings, punctuation proper should be distinguished from **diacritic marks**, which are intended as modifications of individual letters (e.g. *ö ő á í è ç š σ ū ñ ñ*) and are often simply considered to be part of the letter they appear on, like the dot on the Latin lower case *i*, as well as from **logographs**, which are simply one-glyph representations of lexical items (e.g. @ # \$ % &). Several other common glyphs like the slash indicating alternation (*and/or*), or asterisk ‘*’ indicating some special qualification like a footnote or ungrammaticality, are intermediate between these categories, but are not considered true punctuation. This article will consider only punctuation marks that appear separately from other written glyphs and have no lexical reference.

The modern suite of punctuation marks includes the period ‘.’, comma ‘,’, colon ‘:’, semicolon ‘;’, left and right parentheses ‘()’ (and other brackets, square ‘[]’ and curly ‘{ }’), interrogation and exclamation marks ‘?!’ (bracketed with their inverses ‘¿¡’ in Spanish), dashes of several lengths ‘- – —’, single and double quotation marks ‘“»”’, and the apostrophe, or raised comma ‘’” (not to be confused with the prime mark ‘’’, which is a diacritic).

This suite, with minor variations, is in use today in practically all alphabetic writing systems in the world, and many non-alphabetic ones, with a set of uses that is remarkably similar across languages. In this regard punctuation may be considered a supra-linguistic representational system, like the Arabic numerals. Unlike Arabic numerals, however, punctuation is of recent adoption (Shakespeare’s punctuation, for instance, is quite different from Modern English); it is subject to great individual variation (like handwriting, or spelling before the introduction of printing); and there is no consensus as to how it should be used (though there is no shortage of prescriptivist fulmination, all incomplete and contradictory in one way or another; e.g. Truss 2004). Thus it must also be considered a representational system that is still in the process of being standardized, and may not in fact ever achieve standardization.

Punctuation has several uses, one of which is to mark the boundaries of certain structural constituents of written language, identifying them as units and separating them from other textual units. The simplest example of this is the **space** character that appears between words in English and most other alphabetic writing systems. This is a fairly recent innovation in writing; classical Latin and Greek writing, for instance, did not leave spaces between words, and modern Thai still does not. Another example is the use of a period to mark the end of a grammatical sentence. (The convention of starting the first word of a sentence with a capital letter may be considered part of punctuation, spelling, diacritic marking, or even grammar, depending on how one defines each term; in any event letter case distinctions are also of recent origin in European writing, dating, like spelling standardization, from the widespread establishment of printing.)

Another use of punctuation is to indicate textual relations between higher-level constituents like phrases and clauses that are not obvious from the syntax. An example of this kind of usage is the semicolon in English. The semicolon is a full stop in terms both of intonation (it is aurally indistinguishable from a period) and grammar (it follows a complete sentence). But, as Thomas 1979 puts it, “The semicolon tells you that there is still some question about the preceding full sentence; something needs to be added”. Another example is the colon, which must be followed by some unit that constitutes an ‘extension’ of the constituent preceding the colon: a list of examples, a clause defining it, or simply its name.

Still another use – indeed, the original use – of punctuation is to provide some indication of the intonational and rhythmic intentions of the writer, as the written words indicate the lexical and grammatical intentions. For instance, the comma in English is often claimed to represent an intonation sequence of *mid-low-high-mid*, like the one used in counting: *Fifty-one, fifty-two, fifty-three, fifty-four, ...* They serve, to those who follow this theory, to represent the ‘authorial voice’, and guide conventions for reading aloud. This of course applies to English only, and should not be considered to apply to other languages, like German, where the rules for punctuation are specifically governed by syntactic considerations.

Since much if not most reading (and writing) takes place without any aural stimulus at all, there is considerable doubt as to the empirical (not to speak of the epistemological) nature of this representation. The most authoritative modern studies (Nunberg 1990 and Nunberg, Briscoe, and Huddleston 2001) take the position that ‘it is not clear what explanatory purpose would be served by saying that punctuation “transcribes” [such inner voices], particularly when, as with colons or parentheses, they have no actual correlates in ordinary speech.’ (Nunberg 1990:15).

However, the vast individual differences in punctuation of English suggest that writers use a multitude of contradictory rules in their punctuation; and that there is no reason to expect this situation to change soon.

References

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