

The Puzzles of Punctuations - A Linguistic Study

Dr. D. Nagarathinam & Prof. L. Lakshmanan

=====

Abstract

Punctuation marks are symbols or signs that are used to aid the clarity and comprehension of a written language. Correct punctuation is essential for clear and effective writing. There are fourteen punctuation marks commonly used in English. The important punctuation marks such as the ‘apostrophe’, ‘the ‘comma’, the ‘hyphen’, the ‘semicolon’, ‘the colon’, the ‘dash’ and the ‘abbreviation’ have been dealt with updated information in this paper.

Keywords: Punctuation, the apostrophe, the comma, the dash, the hyphen.

1. Introduction

Punctuation marks are essential to show the reader where sentences start and finish and to make your writing easy to understand. Good punctuation makes a sentence clear and easy to read and understand, because it shows the grammatical structure of the text, its meaning, and often the relationship between words or clauses. Without punctuation it would be very hard to understand what people are writing. The very purpose of punctuation is - to make a sentence meaningful and to give it clarity; for the accurate exchange of written information; and to resolve the ambiguity which thrives on poor punctuation.

2. Two Main Functions of Punctuations

Punctuation serves two main functions:

(1) SEPARATION of:

- (a) *Successive units* (such as sentences by periods, or items in a list by commas)
- (b). Included units (as when parentheses mark off an interpolated phrase or clause)

(2) SPECIFICATION of language functions (as when an apostrophe indicates that an inflection is genitive).

3. Apostrophe

At the outset, let's look at the application of apostrophe.'

The apostrophe is used in writing the genitive singular and plural (thus marking the difference between *dogs*, *dog's*, and *dogs'*) and the informal contractions, especially of the negative particle and of auxiliaries with pronoun subjects : John didn't, She'll, I've.' For e.g.:

- These are my brothers. (= These people are my brothers.)
- These are my brother's. (= These things belong to my brother.)
- These are my brothers'. (= These things belong to my brothers.)

Plurals with apostrophe:

- No ifs or buts, young man
- Mind your p's and q's.
- There are three 5's in 555
- There were \$'s in his eyes.

4. Comma

The comma separates items in lists; coordinate clauses (especially those with a *but*); adverbial clauses and phrases, especially initial ones, from super ordinate clauses; a vocative from the rest of the sentences.

1. The farmer owned sheep, cattle, pigs (,) and poultry.
2. The lecture was good, but there were few listeners.
3. When she saw him, she fell in love at first sight.
4. John, do you know Dalton's address?

A comma cannot separate subject from predicate or verb from object.

5. A man of his courage would always be successful.

6. John thought that the weather would improve.

7.1. My aunt, who lives in Mumbai, is arriving here today.

(It indicates I've only one aunt living in Mumbai.)

7.2. My aunt who lives in Mumbai is arriving today. (Without comma)

(It indicates I've more than one aunt; I'm referring to the aunt who lives in Mumbai rather than one who lives in London.)

8. The conjunctions such as *and*, *but*, *or*, *for*, and *nor*, are used to separate main clauses:

8.1. The building was almost in ruins, *but* the garden is lovely.

8.2. Commas are also used to separate non-essential (or 'parenthetical') elements from the rest of a sentence.

For example: 'Tell him, if you see him, that he's won'.

5. Commas and Clauses

Comma is used between clauses when the clauses are long, contrasted, and complete. The following compound sentences may, but need not, have commas.

9.1. The cottage was old (,) but the garden was new.

The cottage was almost in ruins (,) and the garden was in a mess.

9.2. Beulah boiled the milk and made the tea.

(Here the subject of the second clause, Beulah has been omitted, since it is identical to the subject of the first.)

9.3. Use semicolon if not linked by a conjunction:

The cottage was almost in ruins; the garden looked lovely.

10. The different treatments of *nor*, and *neither*:

10.1. The cottage was not exactly modern, *nor* was the garden.

10.2. The cottage was not exactly modern; *neither* was the garden.

Nor is considered a conjunction, but **neither** is considered a linking adverb.

11. Use a semicolon instead of a comma before a conjunction such as *but*, if you want to emphasize the contrast:

11. The cottage was in ruins; *but* the garden was a sheer delight.

12. I told Sarah and Ruth and Rebecca went straight to the hospital.

In the above example, comma was omitted.

Correction: I told Sarah and Ruth, and Rebecca went straight to the hospital.

If the comma were omitted altogether, you could not determine which meaning was intended.

6. Tags and comments: A different example, now:

13. She is exquisitely beautiful, isn't she?

Isn't she? – Tag question. Before the tag question the comma is almost obligatory? Similarly:

I was just visiting, you see.

You are wrong, you know. (Before short 'comment clauses' the comma is used.)

7. Short main clauses and more than two of them you can use commas (or a semicolon or colon):

14. I came, I saw, I conquered.

My duty is my wife, music is my mistress

8. The comma stands for the missing word:

15. Antony loved Cleopatra; Romeo, Juliet

(As Romeo and Juliet are well known the word 'love' is left out)

9. Commas resemble Brackets:

Here commas are used, in pairs (rather like brackets), to separate parenthetical elements in a sentence.

16. a. Tell her, however, that I still love her.

16. b. Tell her, Mary, that I still love her.

16. c. Tell her, above all, that I still love her.

16. d. Tell her, please, that I still love her.

I love her, Julie. Sometimes commas are used to set off single words-

Ah and Juliet here:

Ah, I still love her, Juliet.

When the series consist of only two items connected by a conjunction, commas are not usual.

Hard work and good luck. Hard work and good luck are essential to success.

10. Commas in Numbers: commas are used to separate large whole numbers into units of three, as for thousands and millions:

Example: 123,456; 1,456,245

11. For most simple four-figure numbers, commas are optional.

Example: 3546 or 4,365

19. Commas are not used in four-figure years, page numbers, house numbers, or room numbers:

Example: AD 2001: page 2314 : No. 2342 Town Hall Road

12. Names, Titles, and Addresses: In lists of names arranged by surname, the comma comes after the surname.

Example: Cooper, Gary...

Cooper, James Fenimore...

13. Between a name and a following title or honour^(1,4).

- Arabella Smith,BA,MA, PhD. But it is used to write like this: Arabella Smith, B.A.,M.A., Ph.D.
- Nagarathinam,,M.E., Ph.D.; T. S. Eliot, OM;
- George Bush, The President of United States.
- In dates to separate day, month, and year:
- Sunday, July 9th, 1939.
- The comma is optional nowadays: 9 July(,)1939.
- If only the month and year are specified, the comma is even more likely to be omitted: July (,)1939.
- In letters, after the ‘salutation’ and the ‘complimentary close’:
- Dear sir, Dear Dora, My darling,... With all my love,...yours sincerely,
- In American English, the salutation of a Business letter takes a colon:.....Mr. David:

14. A comma can change meaning drastically:

To the pure by nature, all things are pure.

To the pure, by nature all things are pure.

15. Lists of adjectives: With sequences of such adjectives you can leave out commas:

A round silver casket

When such adjectives occur out of sequence, however, commas are more likely:

a casket, round, silver

A happy Russian child. (No commas) with ungradable adjectives.

16. The Hyphen (-):

There are two principal uses of the hyphen:

- (1) Word divisions at the end of a line. Natural breaks (orthographic, syllabic, morphological) are observed; establish-ment not establishment.

Struc-ture (BrE.) Struc-ture (AmE.)

- (2) The division of words not regarded as wholly established units (anti-war, flower-power)

The hyphen can be used between a word and a prefix, suffix, or combining form - such as pseudo - or counter. It is to prevent ambiguity and awkward combinations of letters:

1. Before Suffix: bull-like, as opposed to workman like.

1-2. After a prefix or other word element. The hyphen is most often used.

- When the main part of a word begins with a capital letter:
Un-American, non-European
- When the main part of a word begins with the letter that ends the prefix or combining form:
Pre-emptive, counter-revolutionary:
- When the prefix is repeated: anti-anti-communism, sub-subcommittee.
- To-morrow (written in the past)→tomorrow
- As a single word with neither spaces nor hyphens:
head waiter tax payer

head-waiter tax-payer
headwaiter taxpayer

17. Compound adjectives:

Coffee-flavored, sugar-coated, well-read

Up-to-date, well-received (when used attributively)

Here is a report that is up to date.

Here is an up-to-date report.

Her novels are always well received.

Her well-received novels include.

18. Some compound adjectives, however, resist the hyphen even in front of the noun:

Freshly frozen fish

A dark green shirt

In vitro fertilization

19. Ambiguity and shared elements:

- An Indian-English teacher/an Indian English teacher
- A Turkish-bath attendant/a Turkish bath attendant

20. Several hyphenated compounds

German-speaking and Spanish-speaking or German and Spanish-speaking: a three-course meal, a four-year study, a three or four-year study.

21. The hyphen can stand for the first part of the compound not just the second:

- A three –wheeled and doored vehicle, many crafts men and-women.

22. Hyphens in numbers: 745(seven hundred and forty-five.)

45,053 (forty-five thousand and fifty-three.)

For fractions: (3/4)three-quarters,(7/16)seven-sixteenths.7/61(seven sixty-firsts),(35/98)thirty-five ninety-eighths.

23. The semicolon (;):

- The house was dark; the little girl was extremely frightened. (=The house was dark and the girl was extremely frightened)

Here, the two clauses are closely connected in thought or meaning.

- He says so; but how can I trust him? (the choice of semicolon rather than comma here emphasizes the tone of mistrust)

24. Semicolon with adverbs:

He fought hard; however, he lost the game.

25. Semicolon with the options:

He fought hard and he lost.

He fought hard, but he lost.

He fought **hard**; but he lost (very deliberate.)

26. Semicolon helps to linking clauses:

Lakshmanan,BA.,MA.,BEd. Nagarathinam, BSc. (Math), MA. (English), M.E.(Mech.), Ph.D. (Mech.), B.L.; and Bitzu, M.D., Ph.D.

In the wardrobe there were dresses and coats; hats, scarves, and gloves; and several shoes.

27. The colon (:):

‘The colon is a tricky and insufficiently understood form of punctuation. Its correct use is to introduce material that explains, amplifies, or interprets what precedes it:

They did not sleep last night: they must be tired.

They are tired: they did not sleep last night.

They are tired: Let them go and lie down.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:4 April 2016

Dr. D. Nagarathinam & Prof. L. Lakshmanan

The Puzzles of Punctuations - A Linguistic Study

28. Note that what precedes need not be a complete a sentence.

Another Monday morning: It was pouring with rain.

What follows the colon need not be a sentence either, in which case the colon functions rather like such expressions as ‘namely’ or ‘that is’:

‘It is high time we considered Mozart’s predecessor: Haydn.’

Another composer worth listening to is: Haydn. (Omit colon)

29. When the listed items are indented, you can supplement the colon with a dash or a hyphen:

(a) Tetley’s tea-bags

(b) Sparking-plugs

(c) Over-due library books

30. Parallels and contrasts:

Man proposes: God disposes.

To the left, a whirlpool: to the right, a desert.

32. Salutations:

Ladies and gentle men: It gives me a great pleasure...

33. Headings and references:

To: subject: Reference:

34. The Dash (-):

The principal use of the dash (-) is to surround, commas and brackets do any material that is included in a sentence without being structurally essential to it:

I met the principal - he is living in the next street - and we went to the temple together.

35. Summarising, Explaining, Interrupting

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:4 April 2016

Dr. D. Nagarathinam & Prof. L. Lakshmanan

The Puzzles of Punctuations - A Linguistic Study

Talent, hard work, good luck - these are the ingredients of success. Success has three ingredients - Talent, hard work, good luck.

In the second sentence, a colon would nowadays be preferred to the dash:
Success has three ingredients: talent, hard work, good luck.

Related to this use of the dash is its use to 'explain' preceding material.
+-plus
X-times; = - equals
Here, the dash may be read out as means.

36. Dashes are also used to indicate hesitant speech.

I-um-er-well-that is - **I love you.**

37. In the parenthesis:

Compare the use of the commas, brackets, and dashes in the following sentences:
The postman, a good friend of mine, denied the charge.
The postman (a good friend of mine) denied the charge.
The postman - a good friend of mine - denied the charge.

38. Specification:

The functions most commonly specified by punctuation signs are questions, exclamations, genitives, contractions, and abbreviations.
John has gone already?
Isn't she so beautiful!

In these examples the specification signs are not relevant. They are accepted in the spoken English By rising tone and falling tone.

39. Abbreviations:

When writing private letters, you will probably abbreviate words and names in any way you find useful and understandable.

She works for the B.B.C.

She works for the BBC.

Note that if an assertion ends with an abbreviation, and that abbreviation ends with a full stop, no more full stops are needed.

Theni kammavar sangam-->TKS.

40. Conclusion

We have seen the punctuation marks are not just optional frill: they are essential to the accurate exchange of written information. It helps us to solve the ambiguities, and to have clear ideas and thoughts clearer and easier to grasp the meanings of misleading sentences.

Sources Used for This Compilation:

1. Reader's Digest 'How to write and speak Better'-published by The Reader's Digest Association Limited, 2005.
2. A University Grammar of English-Randolph Quirk Sidney Greenbaum, 2000.
3. Advanced Grammar in usage-Martin Hewing; Cambridge University Press, 2008.
4. [Www. en.fel.zcu.cz/.../ Punctuation/Punctuation%20 guidelines.pdf](http://www.en.fel.zcu.cz/.../Punctuation/Punctuation%20guidelines.pdf).

Dr. D. Nagarathinam
Principal
dnagarathinam1960@gmail.com

Prof. L.Lakshmanan
Visiting Professor/English
laxmanmegalai@gmail.com

Theni Kammavar Sangam College of Technology
Veerapandi (Via), Theni- 625 534
Tamilnadu
India