Language in Performance

Sebastian Patt

Punctuation as a Means of Medium-Dependent Presentation Structure in English

Exploring the Guide Functions of Punctuation

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Punctuation as a Means of Medium-Dependent Presentation Structure in English

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Typographical conventions

abc	Unspecified object language; titles of written documents and names of corpora; foreign-language expressions; emphasis in written presentation
“abc”	Quotations
‘abc’	Representations of meaning; concepts; figurative language use
Abc	Proper names; concepts
ABC	Lexemes
>abc<	Medium-independent word-form(s)
<abc>	Written word-form(s)
abc	Highlighted parts in examples
abc_p def	Highlighted punctuation marks in examples (sec. 7.2)
abc def	Highlighted position of where a punctuation mark could be placed in examples (sec. 7.2)
abc-@	Examples from mere online sources
abc	Nucleus of a tone unit
abc/	Spoken word-form(s) with a rising tone at tone unit boundary
abc\	Spoken word-form(s) with a falling tone at tone unit boundary
abc//	Spoken word-form(s) with an amplified rising tone at tone unit boundary
abc_N	Spoken word-form(s) with narrow fall at tone unit boundary
abc_E	Spoken word-form(s) with emphatic pronunciation
/abc/	Spoken word-form(s) presented in phonetic transcription

In quotations, typographical styles for emphasis and spelling variants are kept in their original form, even if they differ from the conventions used in the present study.

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1 Introduction

Modern English punctuation is often considered not more than a necessary evil, being arbitrary and unmotivated, cf. Chafe (1988a: 8). Giving thought to this popular reputation, *The Penguin Guide to Punctuation* (Trask 1997: 1) concedes that, indeed, many people see punctuation as "[…] an inconsequential bit of decoration, not worth spending your valuable time on." Not surprisingly then, punctuation is claimed to be often learned without teaching or, on the contrary, not learned despite much teaching, cf. Mann (2003: 359f.).

And yet there is an undisputed relevance of punctuation, which arises from the sweeping consideration that – together with capitalisation, for example (a feature which one might add intuitively) – it must be regarded as a basic surface feature of written communication, cf. Cronnell (1980: 3) and Gleason (1970 [1955]: 433); or as Irmscher (1979: 126) puts it, apparently disagreeing with the common belief of arbitrariness:

> Even though many writers do not want to be concerned with punctuation, capitalization, and spelling, they have to be because the reader cannot easily do without them. All of the mechanics are signals of one kind or another. Sending out the wrong signals is misdirecting the reader or, more often, momentarily delaying the decoding process. Readers don't like obstacles.

The particular significance of punctuation as a purpose-related 'signal' is demonstrated forcefully in *The Penguin Guide to Punctuation* (Trask 1997: 3). Here it is shown how multifarious meanings of one ambiguous sequence can be communicated, depending on the position but also on the choice of marks. That is, by applying punctuation marks differently to the sequence in question, namely *we had one problem only Janet knew we faced bankruptcy*, a wide range of dissimilar graphic patterns can be produced in the first place. Of the many possibilities hence imaginable, four punctuated variants are mentioned explicitly in the compendium, each framed by an initial capital letter and a final period. And ultimately each provides the decoder with an altered reading of the same string of words, cf. (1a) to (1d).

(1a) <We had one problem: only Janet knew we faced bankruptcy.>

(1b) <We had one problem only: Janet knew we faced bankruptcy.>

(1c) <We had one problem only, Janet knew: we faced bankruptcy.>

(1d) <We had one problem only Janet knew we faced: bankruptcy.>

Furthermore, and at present not entering into a discussion of the particular textual nuances communicated by the applied marks, there is not only the reported laymen's lack of interest in punctuation. But, as Meyer (1987: 1) notes, a concurrent neglect of a systematic theoretical coverage in academic research of the status, usage and communicative value of punctuation can be observed.

> Modern English punctuation has never received the serious treatment that it certainly deserves. Most discussions are either wholly or partially prescriptive in nature and generally treat the marks of punctuation individually. Rarely is there an attempt to present punctuation as a system rather than as a collection of ad hoc rules and exceptions.

And indeed, apart from its actual usage, punctuation is nearly exclusively dealt with in popular-science usage manuals or reference books. These all take a rather normative stance, seeing it as their indispensable duty to instruct writers in general in the correct application of punctuation marks and to suggest clear-cut rules. Again exemplary looking at *The Penguin Guide to Punctuation* (Trask 1997: ix), the author Robert L. Trask states:

> The book in your hand is a textbook, and it is written for people who find punctuation difficult. If you're not too sure where commas ought to go, if you're puzzled by colons and semicolons, if hyphens and apostrophes are something of a mystery to you, then this book is for you. [...] Each punctuation mark is introduced in turn; its proper use is described with the aid of lots of examples; wherever possible I give you some simple rules for checking your punctuation.

In view of more profound linguistic theory, the treatment of punctuation is mainly confined to appendices or final chapters in grammar books as, for example, in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (*CGEL*) by Quirk et al. (1985) or in *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (*CamGr*) by Huddleston/Pullum (2002). It should be noted in passing that the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (*LGSWE*) by Biber et al. (2007 [1999]) does not devote a section to punctuation at all. Giving particular weight to both spoken and written language, this might take readers by surprise. Extensive coverage can only be found in the form of a few monographs. Most notably, there is Levinson's (1985) theoretical reappraisal of the status of punctuation, which is based on a historical approach, expounding the concurrent development of punctuation and the orthographic sentence; and there is Parkes's (1992) comprehensive (primarily diachronic) synopsis of the history of punctuation in the Western hemisphere. Meyer (1987) offers a corpus analysis of American punctuation usage, advocating

some basic syntactic, prosodic and stylistic principles. Worth mentioning is also Nunberg's (1990) suggestion of a 'text-grammar', whose categories are indicated by punctuation marks that constitute surface-based graphic units of differing length. In the first place, a text-grammar is thus supposed to be describable independent of the structure of a language ('lexical grammar') although it is subject to similar constraints and follows comparable organisational principles, cf. Nunberg (ib.: 17). As to punctuation, some further partly survey-like works exist, but they are all widely divergent in their approaches as well as their research interest, cf. e.g. Sopher (1977), Limaye (1983), Chafe (1988a; b), Dale (1992), Jones (1994; 1995), Dawkins (1995) and Hill/Murray (2000). Convincing, systematic, comprehensive and non-normative attempts to explore the determining parameters of punctuation marks as well as their functionality (roughly, the effects and the information accessible through their usage) are still missing, cf. e.g. Jones (1994: 421).

Yet this neglect of studies in punctuation does not occur without any reason. In many linguistic approaches of the past, written language as such was examined solely as being contrastively opposed to spoken language, cf. Nunberg (1990: passim). In this respect, it was especially the phonocentricity of American structuralism which led to the supposition that – if dealt with at all – written language was mostly legitimated by reference to the spoken medium. The spoken word was given absolute theoretical precedence to any description of writing, and the latter was therefore dismissed as a discrete object of theoretical interest, cf. e.g. de Saussure (1978 [1915]: 45). This distinction in quality is expressed in the following quotation by Gleason (1970 [1955]: 408), proceeding to reserve the more central term 'language' for its spoken variant:

> Many linguists consider all forms of writing entirely outside the domain of linguistics and would restrict the discipline to the consideration of spoken language only. [...] The term **language**, then used in any linguistic context without qualification, should be reserved exclusively for vocal language, that is for communication by means of speech. The qualified term, **written language**, will be used here, in default of any other unambiguous term, for a total system of communication based on writing.

Playing second fiddle also terminologically, everything that was part of the written presentation was regarded as serving the purpose of transcribing speech, i.e. reproducing basic features of spoken language. Consequently, this also applied to punctuation; Marckwardt (1942: 156) writes in his *Introduction to the English Language*:

> Punctuation is in large part a system of conventions the function of which is to assist the written language in indicating those elements of speech which cannot be conveniently set down on paper: chiefly pause, pitch, and stress.

In a similar vein Moffett/Wagner (1976 [1968]: 236) note in a work on language teaching:

> Above all, good punctuation is a set of signals showing the reader how to read the flow of words as the speaker would say them. […] The chief hurdle to punctuating well is not being aware of what one hears.

Bearing in mind the overall weight of structuralism as a scientific paradigm, it might thus seem almost superfluous to mention that if asked about the function of English punctuation, even today one of the most probable answers at least given by non-linguists remains that it indicates breaks or (breathing) pauses in written text – despite the previously reported reputation of arbitrariness. In view of the fact that, undeniably, in many cases the same kinds of syntactic and lexical properties can be observed in both speech and writing, a close interrelation of the two as such cannot be dismissed.

However, not clearly differentiating between speech and writing, a view as expressed, amongst others, by Marckwardt and Moffett/Wagner does not provide a convincing theoretical basis at all. That is, in structuralist approaches any similarities have been over-determined, assuming that only an implied congruence of the systems of writing and speech permits an adequate analysis of the former featuring an ingredient like punctuation, cf. Nunberg (1990: 3f., 15). In response to the particular communicative necessities of written text, modern linguistics postulates that speech and writing should rather be considered two diverse linguistic (sub-)systems, cf. e.g. Abercrombie (1965: 36), Hockett (1965 [1958]: 4), Halliday/McIntosh/Strevens (1966 [1964]: 48–55) and Lyons (1969 [1968]: 63). Both are learned in different ways and at different stages in life, and they are used in different communication situations, for diverse purposes and in connection which different audiences, cf. Stubbs (1980: 100–115), Pawley/Syder (1983: 557f.), Nunberg (1990: 3) and Halliday (1992 [1985]: xv, 29f., 39–45). In principle, then, speech and writing should be analysed independently of each other. Additionally, it is especially corpus or statistical linguistics that has helped to discover and substantiate quantitative and qualitative dissimilarities in the usage of constructions and vocabulary between the spoken and the written language. In the works of Biber and Finegan, by way of example, this is yielded through a comparison of speech and writing against the background of broadly defined textual dimensions, established on the basis of co-occurring linguistic features, which take into consideration the communicative tasks of the examined text samples, cf. Biber (1985; 1986a; b; 1988) and Biber/Finegan (1986). Besides, Poole/Field (1976), Chafe (1984 [1982]), Chafe/Danielewicz (1987) as well as Leech/Rayson/Wilson (2001) and also Schäpers (2009) can be named exemplarily as other studies within this field. Of course, all these references represent only a somewhat random, incomplete fraction of the work in corpus linguistics in general and on the spoken-written distinction in particular.

All in all, therefore, and without elaborating further on particular corpus linguistic findings, written language should own certain qualities that are

"[…] unique to that mode" (Nunberg 1990: 3), cf. also Lakoff (1984 [1982]: 239f.). Analogous to a characteristic role fulfilled, for example, by intonation in speech, punctuation is supposed to account for one such special feature in writing. This naturally raises afresh the question of the status and functionality of the non alphabetical signs which accompany "[…] written lexical expressions […]" (Nunberg 1990: 3). The aforesaid interpretation of punctuation being solely supportive to the transcription of spoken language into writing is no longer an entirely satisfying option. Moreover, although showing parallels between punctuation marks and intonational features, pragmatic data illustrate only an approximate fit between the two anyway. A case in point is illustrated by Nunberg (ib.: 13), revealing that punctuation is no convincing written reflex of prosody:

(2a) <Order your furniture on Monday, take it home on Tuesday.>

(2b) <Order your furniture on Monday; take it home on Tuesday.>

Whereas in (2a) a conditional meaning was intended ('if you…, then you can…'), the inserted semicolon in (2b) was to indicate a string of two commands ('do X; do Y'). Hardly any of the participants in extempore experiments managed to link the respective punctuation usage with an unambiguous, clearly relating intonation pattern in spoken language, though. There is no unfailing one-to-one mapping between punctuation marks and intonational qualities, and the written expression system on occasions seems to provide more information than the spoken one. Thus, in line with Quirk et al. (1985: 1611), Bolinger/Sears (1981 [1968]: 276f.) conclude:

> Rhythm and intonation are roughly indicated by punctuation and capitalization, but too much is left out and what is put in suffers from a confusion of two aims: the representations of the breaks that we *hear* and the divisions […] that we *write* – the two usually agree, but not always.

Theoretical inconsistencies, regarding for instance the purpose of punctuation in written texts which are never spoken, help to further increase doubts about a purely "[…] 'transcriptional' view of punctuation […]" (Nunberg 1990: 12). Or, to put it in more general terms, the related question lingers as to why particular features of the spoken expression system should be present in writing anyway, since writing is certainly something that is perceived visually rather than acoustically, cf. Chafe (1988a: 8) and Hoffbauer (2003: 73). It must be noted nonetheless that the need for steady *reference* to spoken language in order to guarantee an adequate application of punctuation as well as to understand its functionality is still vehemently supported in linguistics by researchers like Sopher (1977), Chafe (1988a; b) and partly also de Beaugrande (1984). In this respect, especially Chafe highlights the importance of a 'mental image of sound' in the process of reading and/or

text production. Accordingly, Sopher postulates that punctuation should be applied to 'natural speech rhythm' in order to facilitate encoding and decoding of written text. This basic stance diverges decidedly from the biased view on writing outlined above, and it will be considered further at a later stage in this study, cf. sec. 7.1 below.

In linguistics, the general unease in only equating punctuation with pauses, juncture, stress and intonation is already, if rather unexpectedly, shared by some structuralists, cf. e.g. Roberts (1956), Francis (1958) and Fries (1973 [1952]). Although the correlation to speech, i.e. 'language itself' in their diction, always represents the most central argument in their reasoning, the above-mentioned authors all qualify this view later on: the merely approximate relationship of especially punctuation and intonation is recognised, and 'regularisation processes' are suggested as a possible reason, cf. e.g. Roberts (1956: 237). By this, a structural function of punctuation, supplementing "[…] the features of form and arrangement […]" (Fries 1973 [1952]: 282), is endorsed, too, cf. also Francis (1958: 469f.).

This insight, together with the understanding that written language should be treated as a linguistic system in its own right, clears the way for the other main hypothesis concerning the functionality of punctuation; namely, there is a constant debate across all schools in linguistics over whether (or to which extent) punctuation is in fact determined by the grammar of a language; or whether, in turn, punctuation determines the grammar of a language. Taking a decided position, several linguists, such as Gleason (1970 [1955]: 433), posit the congruence between punctuation and syntactic configuration, noting that "[p]unctuation marks syntax" and that "[i]t is predicated upon a certain type of syntactic structure." Whitehall (1967 [1958]: 119), surely a structuralist, believes: "Its most important function is "to make grammar graphic."" Yet in general, it is again not very difficult to cite counter-examples that challenge an assumed merely syntactic functionality of punctuation, cf. (3a) from Levinson (1985: 137):

(3a) <One of the 'clouds' dropped lower. And landed.>

In (3a) part of the verb phrase is presented as detached from the main clause and as an isolated punctuation unit has received sentence status, typographically indicated by the capitalised *And* as well as the period following *landed*. First of all now, if, as Whitehall (1967 [1958]: 9, 30f., 124f.) postulates, the period as a 'sentence separator' carried the potential to assign a written 'word-group' the function of "[…] an independent grammatical unit […]" (ib.: 9), the sequence *And landed* as presented in (3a) would form such a unit. That is, echoing Whitehall, the period would *symbolise* a distinctive stress-juncture pattern, typically indicative of declarative subject-predicate statements and supposedly decisive of the question of self-containment. Hence,

the *And landed* in (3a) would be quite distinct in syntactic status from the *and landed* presented in (3b).

(3b) <One of the 'clouds' dropped lower and landed.>

In the latter case, mainly determined by its written form, the string in question (*and landed*) would consequentially have to be labelled as syntactically dependent, constituting a structurally complementing element in an extended written arrangement. Following from its (non-)application, punctuation would thus have to be perceived as carrying the potential of altering or determining the syntactic structure of the written stretches in (3a) and (3b), yielding two different configurational patterns. Such an interpretation seems dubious to say the least: it appears to be based on unclear theoretical foundations underlying some linguistic approaches, in which grammar, punctuation and intonation are diffusely merged. Intuitively speaking, it is not punctuation from which syntactic structure follows, but at times the latter is made visible by punctuation. This potential of punctuation marks, namely to encode different syntactic patterns at the written level, has already been illustrated in (1a) to (1d) above. Still, such a function does not hold for (3a) and (3b) either. From a syntactic point of view, the status of the string *And landed* in (3a) is not different from the one in (3b), irrespective of its punctuational presentation. The information provided in writing is not relevant for differentiating between dissimilar syntactic arrangements. Since, secondly, the presentational configuration in (3a) does not represent the handbook-approved default punctuation one would probably expect with coordinated non-complex verb forms anyway, there should be more to the applied punctuation than simply marking an unquestionably existing structural boundary.

Moreover, the insufficiency of an approach heavily biased in favour of syntax can also be illustrated by adding that punctuation in written stretches of English is often voluntarily reduced to or even restricted to the sentence-initial capital and the sentence-final period. Referring to constraints, it seems safe to argue that the potential of punctuation marks to encode a particular reading cannot always be taken advantage of despite inherent syntactic ambiguity, cf. (4) also from Levinson (1985: 152).

(4) <They called Susan a waitress.>

Whether an 'SVOO'- or an 'SVOC'-pattern is intended in the ambiguous example (4) is not resolvable by adding punctuation marks. The two 'deep structures' of the sentence, which are relevant at this stage, can be paraphrased as (i) 'They called a waitress for Susan' ('SVOO') and (ii) 'They said that Susan was a waitress' ('SVOC'). It goes without saying that in such cases only the context can tell the meaning, and that in some borderline cases

momentary confusion on the part of the reader is either deliberately or tacitly acquiesced to. Compare the newspaper headline in (5) as recorded by Long (1965 [1961]: 468):

(5) <GIRLS SAY DOCTORS HAVE MORE BIRTHMARKS THAN BOYS>

To begin with, the reader is left in doubt over which part, i.e. (i) the initial *GIRLS SAY* or (ii) the intruded and inversed *SAY DOCTORS*, has to be interpreted as the reporting clause of an alleged sequence of *direct* speech. The recognition of this sequence is even more demanding since no quotation marks are employed. As to (i), a comma or a colon is commonly employed to mark off the part in question from the rest; in the case of (ii), correlative commas would be indicative. Furthermore, it is also possible to interpret *GIRLS SAY* as a reporting clause introducing *indirect* speech. Consequentially, the rest of the sequence then represents the reported statement, structurally realised by a reduced nominal *that*-clause functioning as direct object. Characteristic punctuation is non-existent in this case. In short, as regards content, it remains unclear whether boys are compared with girls or rather with doctors since the unpunctuated written stretch certainly allows for both readings.

A consistent indication or corroboration of syntactic structures in writing by means of punctuation, in effect, does not take place. And thus punctuation does not seem to be developing entirely or automatically out of the syntax of a language, cf. Pawley/Syder (1983: 572–577). Nevertheless, the significance of punctuation as a syntactic cue system is emphasised by Baldwin/Coady (1978) and Hill/Murray (2000). This position will be resorted to again in section 7.2.2.4 below.

Interestingly, a syntax-driven approach to punctuation is often amalgamated with rhetorical concepts. Here is what Gleason (1970 [1955]: 432) has to say, initiating the above-mentioned claim that punctuation co-occurs with syntactic boundaries:

> The punctuation marks, however, are not conceived of as representing features of speech. Instead they mark logical units of connected writing like "sentences," "statements," "questions," "dependent clauses," and the like. Since these are phrased in terms of logic, they are generally assumed to be universal.

From a theoretical point of view, the quotation, obviously, reveals an undecided attitude towards the status of descriptive units like 'sentence' and 'dependent clause' on the one hand as well as 'statement' and 'question' on the other. Categories of grammar and categories of logic (or locution) are not explicitly distinguished, resulting in fuzzy terminology, cf. e.g. Quirk et al. (1985: 78, 803f.). Comparable to the structuralist position, this might lead to

a blurred, misleading and simplified view on the functionality of punctuation.

Notwithstanding any terminological inconsistencies, the concurrent implication of understanding punctuation broadly as a 'rhetorical tool', cf. Dawkins (1995), as it were, not only indicating "[…] what goes with what" (Long 1965 [1961]: 467) but also *how*, can still be considered an appealing theoretical position. It opens up a view on the functionality of punctuation marks that does not negate their possible reference to grammatical structure and intonation, but bonds them more firmly to the form and content of written text, too. So, punctuation is weighed up as an element of style which functions similarly as do deliberately chosen words and structures in the composition of text, a view which is implicitly or explicitly shared (although partly with highly different theoretical overtones and scope) already by Summey (1949), Irmscher (1979), Chafe (1988a; b), Halliday (1992 [1985]), Dawkins (1995), Jones (1995) and Esser (2006). It is this last-mentioned hypothesis which seems to provide the most fruitful basis for any further analysis, all the more, because Quirk et al. (1985: 1610) state – somewhat provisionary though – that punctuation, like intonation in speech, communicates "[…] grammatical and other distinctions […]."

The present work explores these functions, and it tries to answer the question in how far structural punctuation – or ultimately the symbiosis of punctuation and text – carries semantic potential and how this potential shows. Therefore, an integrative approach to punctuation practice should overcome the exclusionary fallacy in the above-mentioned bias of American structuralism as well as in the inconsistencies of a purely syntactic approach. However, since the results of these advances are probably not to be dismissed in their entirety, the present work investigates, by and large, to which extent punctuation usage virtually coincides with and reflects syntactic as well as spoken but also semantic boundaries or features. Ultimately, it is hoped to gain further insights as to how the relations between punctuation and other linguistic units and levels of description are called on by writers and readers alike to successfully encode and decode verbal messages in writing.

The study is arranged in nine chapters. After the introductory chapter, a closer look at linguistic description and presentational structuring is offered as a theoretical basis in chapter 2, following a comprehensive framework developed by Esser (2006). In this respect, the seminal stance has been adopted that a viable language model should be based theoretically on the 'principle of medium-transferability'; this, in turn, must have repercussions on the theoretical understanding of the linguistic sign (sec. 2.1.1). Consequentially, medium-dependent and medium-independent levels of linguistic description as well as their distinctive units of analysis are carefully distinguished (sec. 2.1.3). Here, particular emphasis is placed on the fact that no obscurity remains about the precise status of these units. The communicative function

of language allows for a varying presentation of linguistic units and structures. This awareness will help to reveal encoder-based choices along the different levels of linguistic description: changeable arrangements of the analysable units and categories in question (sec. 2.2). Whether these might partially be reflected, indicated or called upon by punctuation remains to be seen. As to linguistic analysis, all this, finally, entails in a logical differentiation between verbal and nonverbal information, shedding light on the theoretical position of punctuation in linguistics (sec. 2.3). Punctuation marks can be understood as 'indices' in a basic semiotic sense. They predominantly convey paralinguistic information. A reinforcement of these meticulous distinctions with the aid of a brief diachronic survey (ch. 3) complements the theoretical understanding of modern punctuation practice as a means of medium-dependent presentation structure.

The intent to explore the relationship between punctuation and other linguistic units and levels of description is explicitly taken up in chapter 4, where a model is illustrated which has been developed elsewhere to allow for a systematic description of the structure of written text. It is suggested that this so-called 'script unit model' will serve as the theoretical and practical interface for any further steps of analysis, encountering the apparent predicament that readers decode information on at least two channels at the same time. Next, chapter 5 deals with the concept 'punctuation' and gives a concise overview of the conventionalised elements of punctuation in present-day English; the set of marks is defined which is relevant for this study.

Since the present work has to be rated as a conceptual study, it endeavours to yield 'type-exhaustiveness' in the description of the communicative value of punctuation. The aim is to paint a complete picture of its functionality, i.e. of its communicative value, without approaching the all but impossible task of discussing every single instance of punctuation usage. This must have consequences for the process of data collection, which is discussed in chapter 6.

Chapter 7 is then concerned with the actual manifestations of the communicative value of punctuation, programmatically termed its 'guide functions'. To this end, general principles of punctuation usage are outlined first, avoiding clear-cut usage rules (sec. 7.1). After that, the relationship of punctuation with spoken and structural patterns as well as its textual function are explored. This is done in connection with categories typically associated with punctuation in grammar handbooks and linguistic theory (sec. 7.2). A distinction is made in this context between clearly syntactic categories (sec. 7.2.2) and those that arise from more comprehensive textual concerns (sec. 7.2.3). It is suggested that the outcome of this discussion contributes rewardingly to the above-mentioned conceptualisation of punctuation marks as indices and specifies their paralinguistic role.

In chapter 8, the main findings are captured in a systematic overview, which eventually summarises what can be termed 'the (specific) guide func-

tions of punctuation'. Besides, the overview considers important parameters for both the use and the interpretation of punctuation marks. After all, this allows for a novel and more plausible understanding of punctuation in linguistics, opening up a cognitive and, to some extent, pragmatic perspective on its communicative value. In chapter 9, the study concludes with a condensed look at the practical consequences of this new perspective. Punctuation marks have meaning potential. The reader of a piece of writing is identified as the decisive factor in assessing this potential. To exploit the guide function(s) of punctuation marks, he or she must apply context-dependent routines of dynamic, i.e. on-line, meaning construal. What is new is that such a view leaves behind many of the traditional approaches which are rule-based and analyse punctuation in a fairly static and decontextualised manner. Arguably, they can only give a very limited account of what punctuation is actually capable of communicating, and this may be one of the reasons why punctuation has so far not been implemented satisfactorily in linguistic theory.

2 Linguistic description, presentation structure and the status of punctuation

2.1 Issues of linguistic description

2.1.1 Medium-transferability and the linguistic sign

It has been addressed in the introductory chapter that one reason for a neglect of studies in punctuation is certainly to be found in linguistic structuralism. The spoken word has been given absolute theoretical precedence over any description of writing, eventually even dismissing the latter as an object of linguistic analysis in total, cf. e.g. Hughes (1996: 128f.). Or to put it in the words of de Saussure (1978 [1915]: 45):

> Langue et écriture sont deux systèmes de signes distinct; l'unique raison d'être du second est de représenter le premier; l'objet linguistique n'est pas défini par la combinaison du mot écrit et du mot parlé; ce dernier constitue à lui seul cet objet.

Bloomfield (1979 [1933]: 21) voices a similar view: "Writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks." However, the precise relation between speech and writing has remained a matter of debate despite these decided positions. The somewhat obvious consideration that the spoken and the written language rely on different systems of signs, i.e. they are of different symbolic nature, leads Hockett (1965 [1958]: 4) to presume that for laymen arguably "[…] speech and writing are merely two different manifestations of something fundamentally the same." While intended almost contemptuously, this position unwillingly adds to the confusion about the exact status of speech and writing – not least arising from their fundamental difference in materialisation – and about what also language actually is. These uncertainties make it necessary to enquire about the nature of the relationship between speech and writing, and to take this as a starting point for all further statements about written language featuring punctuation.

Quite generally, verbal messages, if understood as communicative acts, can be expressed via the spoken or the written medium. In the following, 'medium' will be used as referring to substance, i.e. spoken or written. A synopsis of the various meanings and applications of the polysemous term 'medium' can be found in Esser (2002: 84f.; 2006: 18f.). At first sight, the medium-bound graphic and phonic realisations do not show any similarities. The

former is perceived visually, the latter is perceived acoustically. Abercrombie (1967: 1) pointedly summarises this as follows:

> If we compare a piece of written English with a piece of spoken English, regarding them simply as physical objects or events and forgetting for the moment the fact that they convey meaning to us, it is apparent that they bear no resemblance to each other whatever. The piece of written English consists of groups of small black marks arranged on a white surface, while the piece of spoken English consists of a succession of constantly varying noises. It would hardly be possible for two things to be more different.

However, both spoken and written realisations can clearly be applied to convey the same meaning: what can be spoken can be written down and vice versa. This basic fact is given weight in the exemplary quotations by Lyons (1975 [1972]: 65) and Nunberg (1990: 3f.) respectively.

> People can learn, fairly easily and successfully for the most part, to transfer from one medium to the other, holding invariant much of the verbal part of language.

> Both speech and writing are, after all, extremely versatile: when it comes to the crunch, there are few if any features of the spoken language that cannot be at last approximately transcribed in certain written texts (say in reporting dialogue) and conversely, very few features of the written language that cannot be rendered in reading aloud.

It is the qualifications 'much of the verbal part', 'very few features' and 'approximately' in both quotations that shows that, potentially, not all features of spoken or written language can be relocated to the other medium: for each medium there are certain constraints as to what can be expressed. This has been nicely captured in Figure 2.1 below, taken from Esser (2006: 36).

Figure 2.1: Transferring a linguistic utterance from one medium to the other

About the information provided by the figure, Esser (ib.) writes:

> The horizontal border line separates the area of speech (upper part) and the area of writing (lower part). The incomplete nature of the translation from the sound-wave to the graphic symbolization and vice versa is indicated by the dotted parts of the arrows after crossing the horizontal line.

Specific medium-bound details as, for example, the colour or shape of written letters as well as the tone of the voice cannot be recovered when transferring a linguistic utterance from one medium to the other. So, for this process it is characteristic that in some cases there is a loss of medium-specific information.

At this point already it becomes clear that, as Harris (2001) comments, a structuralist interpretation of written language as "[…] a copy or mirror image of the speech system […]" (ib.: 52) surely meets its limits, cf. ch. 1 above. That is to say, the mentioned limitations on changing between speech and writing make any interpretation questionable that sees writing as a (secondary) one-to-one effigy of speech. The system of speech and the system of written language often do not correspond. Consequentially, Halliday (1992 [1985]: 30) formulates a decided answer to the question whether writing incorporates all the features of the spoken language:

> Clearly it does not. There are various aspects of spoken language that have no counterpart in writing: rhythm, intonation, degrees of loudness, variation in voice quality ('tamber'), pausing, and phrasing – as well as indexical features by which we recognise that it is Mary talking and not Jane, the individual characteristics of a particular person's speech.

Similarly, the elementary potential of changing back and forth between spoken and written realisations ('holding invariant much of the verbal part of language') does not axiomatically allocate a special role to spoken language. Hence, any structuralist view which judges the theoretical value of speech and writing differently proves to be unsatisfactory. But not understanding exactly their relation ultimately leads to a misconception of language itself. To avoid any further fallacious argumentation, a quotation by Uldall (1966 [1944]: 147) might be of assistance, which summarises the whole situation precisely:

> If either of these two substances, the stream of air or the stream of ink, were an integral part of the language itself, it would not be possible to go from one to the other without changing the language.

Uldall's statement reveals an important theoretical hypothesis, namely that spoken and written language constitute equivalent manifestations of a 'third system', namely of the abstract language-system ('the language itself'). Adopting his view, Abercrombie (1967: 1) explains: