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## The Punctator's World: A Discursion, Part X

Gwen G. Robinson

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# The Punctator's World: A Discursion

BY GWEN G. ROBINSON

PART X

1950: ONWARDS! BUT WHERE?

*In today's fast play of short sentences and gunfire dialogue, punctuation has grown to be less and less the required organizer of a writer's transmission. To compete with the here-now excitements of TV, electronic internetting and pantechnic film, verbal constructs for the static page are better kept simple, quick, and close to sensorial immediacy. Modern readers are impatient with the old priorities of literary artistry whose fulness of expression, clever turns of phrase, prosodic rhythms, and agglomerating sequences were once so pleasing.*

TEXTBOOKS for budding journalists are recommending short sentences of fifteen to twenty words and vertical lists for 'a clear layout' of difficult materials. They instruct that to be successful, authors need not embellish every sentence with a verb, nor, in fact, worry very much about 'grammar'. Language should be pitched to suit the sophistication levels of the reading masses, of whom there are an estimated seventy-seven million incompetents lurking in the U.K. and the U.S. alone. Such are the guiding directives for practising writers, and by extension, for editors, publishers, and book sellers, all of whom are scrambling to accommodate the public. While they race to make text easier, readers become less inclined (and less able) to deal with language that is demanding. Today, even careful writers must "face the fact that fine distinctions between such marks as colons and semicolons will be lost on many of their readers".<sup>1</sup>

FASTER AND FASTER

The human, we remember, is physiologically constituted to speak and hear, not write and read. Nevertheless, writing and reading have dominated our civilized history. They have done much for us, and changed us in the process. By enabling words to cross time and space, they liberated

1. Martin Cutts, *The Plain English Guide* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3, 81. See also Harold Evans, *Newsman's English* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972).

Gwen G. Robinson was editor of the *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* from 1983 to 1992. She continues to pursue her own research and writing.

us from the conditions of overpowering aurality. They cultivated knowledge to the extent that oral-aural learning traditions switched their allegiance to the eye. Once the action had moved fully into the visual domain, writing gave a special opportunity to wordsmiths. Working alone and in silence, those who wrote could see where and how to tighten the syntactic joints of word clusters, and thereby expand sentences, enlarge the scope of clauses, and qualify meanings in ways that reached beyond the comfortable limits of time-bound aural reception.<sup>2</sup> To make their results more accessible to readers, they grew to rely on the logic of grammar. They delineated that grammar with punctuation, whose task became trifold: to clarify structure; disambiguate semantic snarls; and restore (when possible) the emotional subtleties of speech that contribute so much to meaning: that is, emphasis, intonation, and rhythm. In this manner was the range of a coherent sentence augmented. Gradually, the printed sentence ceased to follow the rambling voice patterns that had been so evident in manuscript production and became itself the ordered, often complex exemplar for ‘educated’ speech, whose best documented proponent was Samuel Johnson.

Though the brimming sentences that result from orthographic maneuverings may require effort both to write and to read, they are worth something, for they relate, assort, and hierarchize the otherwise undifferentiated substances of what word groups are charged to transmit. In addition, their frequent digressions and impulsive inclusions draw the reader into a mood of exploration, where verbal articulation and the play of wit presage insight and pleasure. The care that sustains such writing is not generally appreciated in these rushed, informal days. At a time when recreational excitements are everywhere available and information floods the cranial cavity like water from a fire hydrant, writers are pressed to style their prose for instantaneous grasp. To do this, they have learned to punch the message—however disjointed—directly into the circuitry behind the reader’s eye. By breaking up the old-fashioned sentential constructions, they have sought to restore the immediacy of speech values to the silent word-ghosts stamped on the page—and, so, liven them up a bit. The push

2. That writing can extend the reach of comprehension is accepted today by computational linguists as proven. See, for example, Wallace Chafe, “Punctuation and the Prosody of Written Language”, *Written Communication* 5 (October 1988): 395–426. Chafe argues that “punctuation units” (i.e., stretches of written language between punctuation marks) are standardly ten words long (and can be much longer), whereas their oral counterparts, “intonation units”, are invariably shorter, i.e., some five or six words long, and that this difference is possible because the nature of writing is static.

to make reading a competitively ‘fun experience’ has led written language to behave, in so far as it can, like ordinary talk, for it is true that the closer a typographed line is to its natural, oral-based source, the more readily it is understood. If the context is sufficiently obvious and the language sufficiently conventional, then even true-to-life empathetic silences can be made to respire on paper.

Short vigorous statement became a staple of literary output following the work of James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, and Ernest Hemingway (see Part Nine). Its history carried on with Nobel laureate Samuel Beckett, who, pushing brevity to the brink of silence, painstakingly scalped away all extraneous matter (including his authorial self) to make his words seem truly objective. Witness the opening to *The Lost Ones*, published in 1972:

Abode where lost bodies roam each searching for its lost one.  
Vast enough for search to be in vain. Narrow enough for flight to be in vain. Inside a flattened cylinder fifty metres round and sixteen high for the sake of harmony. The light. Its dimness. Its yellowness. Its omnipresence as though every separate square centimetre were a gleam [*sic*] of the some twelve million of total surface. Its restlessness at long intervals suddenly stilled like panting at the last. Then all go dead still.<sup>3</sup>

The boundary-busting grammar of so august an artist contributed to the widening ways of journalistic novelty. Short, full-stopped word clusters (that were here directed to echo clamor inside a perceiving mind) became negotiable coin for many purposes. Unencumbered and sharp in the cut of their outline, sentence fragments proved, in fact, to be splendidly forceful. The more vibrantly they stirred the senses, the better they socked home. Look for a moment at the following samples: “The squeal of metal”; “Ice-cream dripping off her elbow”; or best of all, Stephen Pinker’s “Cherries jubilee on a white suit”<sup>4</sup>—all of these nugget phrases transmit splendidly without the support of an subject-verb-predicate structure.

Meanwhile, from a different direction, Ray Carver was delivering his brand of simple language in complete short sentences. Though they too suppressed more than they exposed, they were nothing if not user-friendly. Whatever readers could supply from their own imaginations

3. Samuel Beckett, *The Lost Ones* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1972), 7. Additionally interesting about this book is the absolute absence of internal stops. The reader must read some of the longer sentences several times in order to retrieve their sense.

4. Stephen Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: William Morrow, 1994), 15.

Carver left unsaid. Most of his work concerned the imperfect communication of those who are inarticulate and abnormally laid-back—a timely topic that he excellently illustrated. Here follows a typical opening paragraph, from “Night School” in his short story collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*.

My marriage had just fallen apart. I couldn't find a job. I had another girl. But she wasn't in town. So I was at a bar having a glass of beer, and two women were sitting a few stools down, and one of them began to talk to me.<sup>5</sup>

Carver's artistry is real. Those sketchy sentences convey a bleak despair. The conversation that follows these lines (Carver's stories abound in conversation—a must if one wishes to be popular in this age of image and instantcy) is also couched in spare, sometimes atomized structures, whose very ordinariness makes them go down like Jell-O. Beyond the use of the final stop and the childlike *comma-plus-and*, punctuation for Carver is scarcely a consideration. Generally speaking, the music of intonation and the actual words of his style impart very little sparkle.

We encounter a more lustrous simple-sentence style in Rory MacLean's recent work, *The Oatmeal Ark*, where the imagery, we note, is more tactile than Beckett's and the vocabulary more telling than Carver's. The historical content of *The Oatmeal Ark* demands some intellectual attention—as does its four-generational pileup of male protagonists, whose voices (sometimes confusingly) overlay one another. The constant refocusing (*Whom are we talking about now?*) derives from the customs of motion picture photography and is quickly becoming a ploy of published storytellers. Carver's terseness is easier for readers to follow, for it is pure narrative and unadornedly human. Though MacLean's sentence structures vary at times, they tend to accrete by simple addition, controlled by commas. Embedding is rare. Without the relief of frequent conversation à la Carver, the prolonged buildups of simple sentences, so regularly present at the beginning of paragraphs, tend to weary the tracking mind as the expectation of them grows. Nevertheless, MacLean is a thoughtful craftsman, committed to disencumbering the written word in a useful way.

At the end of the watch Pereira led Beagan down four flights, deep into the bowels of the ship towards the sound of singing. The smell of incense hung in the air. Plastic sandals stood on mats

5. Ray Carver, “Night School”, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 92.



by each cabin door. On the walls hung garish prints of Brahma and Bombay movie stars. Small studio portraits of sons and daughters were tacked to the head of every bunk.<sup>6</sup>

It is plain that the old art of word structuring is dying away, as is the habit of intellectual application required to appreciate it. Elaborate syntax with recondite vocabulary has become unappealing to average readers, no matter what meaningful insights it brings. A recent study of the changes in popular writing shows that between 1936 and 1996 sentence lengths in best-selling books decreased by some two-fifths, while dialogue increased by a third. As for punctuation, its frequency of use has been essentially halved.<sup>7</sup> Only the full stop is holding its own. That the demands on it are heavy has been delightfully spoofed by the *New Yorker* magazine in *very long sentences*, one of which follows:

Representatives of the popular Times Roman font recently announced a shortage of periods and have offered substitutes—such as inverted commas, exclamation marks, and semicolons—until the crisis is overcome by people such as yourself, who through creative management of surplus punctuation can perhaps allay the constant demand for periods, whose heavy usage in the last ten years (not only in English but in virtually every language in the world) is creating a burden on writers everywhere, thus generating a litany of comments, among them: “What the hell am I supposed to do without my periods? How am I going to write? Isn’t this a terrible disaster? Are they crazy? Won’t this just lead to misuse of other, less interesting punctuation???”<sup>8</sup>

In matters of enjoyable cultural intake, it is plain that a passive, film-watching mode is now the preferred one. Complication must be avoided, for no one is feeling quite up to it. Why, indeed, should we push our brains along the bumpy byways of prolonged, outmoded sentences—those mazes of dry reason and wispy nuance—when alternative occupations beep, thump, and flicker at us, inviting us to enjoy ourselves? to ‘let it happen’? Though the thrills that they offer may claim to inform us (or

6. Rory MacLean, *The Oatmeal Ark* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 46.

7. Todd Gitlin, “The Dumb-Down”, *Nation*, (17 March 1997), 28. See also Rudolf Flesch, *The Art of Readable Writing* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1949), wherein we are told (pp. 106–17) that on average the Elizabethan sentence ran to 45 words and the Victorian to 29, while ours (in 1949) were getting down towards 20.

8. Steve Martin, “Times Roman Font Announces Shortage of Periods”, *New Yorker* (9 June 1997), 110.

at least to diminish the boredom of self-improving activity), they are in fact emotionally riling. Blunt in their brevity, disordered, sensational, and relating to little but themselves, they play a cynical game. Addressing the ear, they are blaring; addressing the eye, kaleidoscopic. Though their message is trivial, they allow no peace. With television and computer games leading the way, they have made entertainment a “natural format for the representation of all experience”.<sup>9</sup>

There is almost nothing in common between the villager [of previous centuries] conning his book of scriptures by lantern-light and the contemporary apartment dweller riffling the pages of a newspaper while attending to live televised reports from Bosnia.<sup>10</sup>

Where are they leading us, these teeming bits and bats of information fun? Where will it end?

As Marshall McLuhan and others have argued, the media are restructuring our perceptions. Voice sounds on our film screens are accompanied by virtually-real people, who wiggle their lips and waggle their eyebrows so that we both hear and see the processes of their communication—and seeing them, can flesh out what they are trying to say (but are not) by watching their hands and faces. The language they use can be minimally complete, since the environment in which it is spoken has already been established in virtual-reality picture form. As these screen characters rampage about, burbling love and killing each other, our hearts thump. Visual stimulation has supplanted thought; the spectacle of so much virtual ‘us-ness’ is overwhelming.

Twentieth-century technology, it would seem, has triumphed over our sensibilities. It has lured us like small children into the precincts of tunnel-visioned geeks, for whom an experience must be had if the equipment allows it. And so, the music gets louder, the screen broader, the pixel count higher, the colors more vibrant, and the sentences shorter. All these wonders pluck at the human sensorium, stimulating hyperkinetic, ill-sustained mental images that shatter the quiet we used to use to such benefit. We are hard put to it to measure quality as we once did, to reflect on meaning, or savor subtlety. With rare exception, Electronic-Age art-forms do not encourage extended in-depth thinking, argument, discourse, nor the acute examination of motive. They do not deal in verbal

9. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (England: Methuen, 1997), 89.

10. Sven Birkerts, *Gutenberg Elegies* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1995), 73.

precision. Their job is to please and instruct an ever more restive audience, and this they do by quick delivery, which even itself stirs up emotion. Topics that might prove slowing are abandoned as soon as they are mentioned. Most TV commentary is headline stuff, brief snippets of verbiage shaped not for content, but for potential camera theatrics. Film narrative is impatient of logical sequence and historical fact. It blows the mind with pulsating music and panoramic, ultra-virtual photography.<sup>11</sup> Reading, by contrast, must limp along without the aid of screen or sound, let alone the additives of hot ‘technology’. It is a slogging, cerebral sort of activity that used to promise exactitude of fact and focussed thinking, neither of which cut much of a figure in today’s popular amusement inventories. The experience offered by books is unlike that of other current entertainments, for it is so patently vicarious, so *unvirtual*. When an uncommon vocabulary and a layered syntax are added to writing’s inbuilt load of awkwardnesses, the immediacy of meaning is removed to less accessible spheres. The electronically revved-up modern mind cannot easily relate to them.

Can it be possible that we are reversing towards some deviate form of our pre-print, aural-oral, intuitive selves? that, like bored school children, we are yearning for that Eden-like dream-garden where we can just jig around snapping our fingers and be our basic selves?—selves that have melded into a mass consciousness and work only to have fun and avoid stress? If it is to be the case that our hard-earned, read-write equipment is no longer used for aesthetic pleasures but only for utilitarian communication, then words will go back where they came from: to the mouth, that is, and to the ever responsive, present-tense, emotional ear—or even, possibly (given the popularity of headsets, boom-boxes, and discos), to a silence more complete than even Beckett could have coped with. Already, we see that yesteryear’s alliance with grammar is not crucial to the career of a text.

Now that technology has made verbal exuberance suspect and syntactic masonry an endangered skill, writers are writing the same kind of telegraphic “plainspeak” with surface-skimming, switch-about topic changes that have proved so effective in television realms, where words play sec-

11. *The English Patient*, for example, with its convincing historical aura was full of erroneous facts—a memorable one being the monastic double bed. In *Crocodile Dundee II* a raging bush fire was entirely forgotten in the following scene, when all the harassed characters simply resumed the action as though it had never happened. With film so overpowering, viewers accept false representations, simplifications, anachronisms, etc., as factually true. Thus are the valuable lessons of life’s chronicle lost in a blaze of blockbuster drama.

ond fiddle to pictures.<sup>12</sup> Humanity, it would seem, is undergoing a vast and psychic shift. The values of left-hemisphere linear thinking, with its bias for visual, proportional space, are yielding to those of the right hemisphere—the seat of dynamic, multicentered and unboundaried acoustic space, aptly likened to a “symphonic surround.”<sup>13</sup> In neglecting our left-brain, print-heightened language abilities, electronic technology is causing a rearrangement in the ranks of our senses. As in the early years of print, hearing and seeing are again sharing the duties of information intake. However, there is a difference between our earlier selves and our present recycled versions, and it lies in today’s hyped-up quality of stimuli. With each increment of electronic sensation, we become that bit less responsive to delicate distinctions—less patient with all the pastimes and pleasures that require intellectual discrimination. For that reason, the ambitious writer of plenary statement—our golden-haired, punct-loving hero, who in years past used to thread his pearls on long, long strings so that we might more clearly perceive his total and very personal mind-view—has been driven to change hats and quicken his gait, the better to run with the crowd.

Traditionally, in writing, the puncts (or stops) assorted important or intrusive elements within sentences for easier decipherability. They allowed perceptions that were felt to be simultaneous to unify in a single linear utterance and taught the eye to follow the author in the march of his thinking. Used rhetorically, they exposed the prosodic inner voices that connote authorial emotion. Readers, in no way ungrateful for these lavish attentions, gobbled up pages of cornucopian sentences without distress. Alas, less rigor in the classroom and the constantly multiplying choices of alternative enjoyments have not been kind to the literary artist. *Who will read me if my words are different and my sentences exceed the fifteen-to-twenty limit?* Today’s ear-oriented, jumpy-sentenced, short-paragraphed incursion into popular literature, magazines, and advertizing spiel tends to hobble literary aspiration in its exercise of verbal play. Everything now tugs at the serious writer to jack up the ratio of purport to word; to hyperbolize despite the evidence; and to keep written words as common and winged as their most casual spoken models. Therefore, when word groups can be ‘understood’ without verb or connector, it is acceptable to let them be. When the drive for exactitude is as fierce as was Beckett’s, the result may yet be gratifying—should anyone happen to notice.

12. Newspapers like *USA Today* make topic switching a major selling point.

13. Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, *The Global Village* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 8.

Now that all topics are subject to pictorial accompaniment and theatrical expression, old standards of coherent debate, dialogue, and discourse no longer prevail in the oratory of politics, religion, or law. Where, in Abraham Lincoln's time, national issues were dealt with at great length *in words strung into full-blown sentences*, they are now evaluated by film-footage views of participants, none of whom seem willing (or able) to articulate their reasoning.<sup>14</sup> Rock music, anecdotal chitchat, and even belly-dancing have in many cases replaced serious theological exegesis as appropriate fare for church congregations. As for lawyers and judges, they are rarely the guardians of lucid language that they used to be. Our current disregard for The Word is ripping from memory some three millennia's worth of ancestral tissue. We have thrown away the words of prayers and poems that generations out-of-sight loved and spoke before us. The fun of a good conversation and the beauty of incisive expression are beyond the ken of today's man-on-the-street. The overall decline in verbal skill is sustaining a market for dumbed-down versions of famous books; it is shunting our spare hours entertainment-centerwards. The human intellect has come to ground in what Postman calls "a peek-a-boo world", a world of constant interruption—a deformed analogue of what our senses were only recently enjoying.

Not for nothing is 'impactful' a favorite word these days. Classical volumes that once honed the minds and language usage of the reading populace are now more readily appreciated in film form, interpreted by third parties, who not only delimit our imaginations with their own faces<sup>15</sup> and experiential rationales, but encourage our ineptitudes. The original authors of those videoed masterpieces no longer bond with us, for alas, being physiologically constructed so that nothing grabs us like a moving photographic image, we have deserted them. The fact is simple: Pictures zing us up, and moving pictures accompanied by speech scraps, by 'media' chatter and information one-liners, zing us up even more. Smart publishers, wanting to cash in on the ubiquitous bird-talk, have urged their authors to imitate it. Says Neil Postman of our submissive addiction to the electronic technologies: they are making us "sillier by the minute"<sup>16</sup>—as even the birds must agree.

To see what caviar the general public is missing these days, let us look

14. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 45–63, *passim*.

15. The statue of William Wallace recently unveiled in Stirling, Scotland, is described (in the *New York Times*, 12 September 1997, A3) as looking like Mel Gibson, the actor who played Wallace in *Braveheart*.

16. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 24.

for a moment at a few of those old-fashioned sentence types and observe the language they were couched in. Do the pleasures they embody recompense the labor required to decipher them? Our samplings endeavor to illustrate the charm factor of a so-called difficult full periodic sentence. One should notice the quality of vocabulary, the variety of viewpoint, the effects of delayed impact, play of wit, interesting turns of phrase, presence of authorial mentor, and instructive philosophical pith. We start with a sentence written by Jane Austin in 1816. Here is Emma musing about Harriet's matrimonial chances:

He was reckoned very handsome; his person much admired in general, though not by her, there being a want of elegance of feature which she could not dispense with:—but the girl who could be gratified by a Robert Martin's riding about the country to get walnuts for her, might very well be conquered by Mr. Elton's admiration.<sup>17</sup>

And here, a sentence from George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, published in 1859:

Mrs. Poyser would probably have brought her rejoinder to a further climax, if every one's attention had not at this moment been called to the other end of the table, where the lyrism, which had at first only manifested itself by David's *sotto voce* performance of "My love's a rose without a thorn," had gradually assumed a rather deafening and complex character.<sup>18</sup>

Alice James, the sister of Henry James, spent her declining years on an invalid's couch "composing sentences" for her journal. Here is one, written in 1891.

She was a refined mortal, and although fifty years of age, embodied still, as K. said, the Wordsworthian maiden, having that wearying quality which always oozes from attenuated purity.<sup>19</sup>

And finally, here is Bernard Levin, a modern stylist in the classical tradition, writing as late as 1978:

Mr. Harrison begins by declaring that 'it's books that I'm into' and goes on to make clear that he is interested in what his local

17. Jane Austin, *Emma* (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994), 28.

18. George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, vol. 2 (New York and London: Harper and Bros., 1885), 356.

19. Alice James, *The Diary of Alice James* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 173.

community 'is all about and where it's at'—a statement of faith which hardly leads to a belief that it is literacy that Mr. Harrison is into or that the English Language is where he's at.<sup>20</sup>

One feels that a responsible mind is hovering over a formal complex sentence, for both ingenuity and experience are needed to bring one's scattered percepts into a unified field. In developing a thought, the author must classify its aspects by word groups that will fit the constraints of syntactic linearity. His is an occupation of reconstruction, and hence more painterly than photographic. In silent concentration he fiddles and fusses to make his structures both solid and translucent. Since they are complex as well as soundless, they must be made to obey readerly expectations. They must show their grammatical bones.

The typographed derivative of popular fragmentary speech has less need of the clues and signposts once used for more complicated text. It is accessed instead through the common database of spoken language. Familiarity with linguistic habit gives the reader a range of possibilities from which to expunge inappropriate interpretation of ambiguous wordage. It leads him to piece together fractured utterances, to excuse mistakes in diction, "to guess the referents of pronouns and descriptions, and to fill in the missing steps of an argument".<sup>21</sup> In actual conversation, the transmission of fragments is much helped by thoroughly established contexts—the speakers often standing in the middle of them, or meeting because of them. By interruption and query, talkers can clear up references and gesticulate nuance into their skittish, chopped-up phrases. Oral exchange is full of life. It is now the ambition of writing to imitate that liveliness.

To intuit appropriate choices of meaning from the shards of 'popular' writing, the reading eye must count on whatever is supplied of context and more than ever consult the database of speech. This is easy enough if the material stays plain. If anything obscure is advanced, however, a slack is likely to develop between the writer's intention and the reader's cognition. It is there, in that chasm of discrepancy, where the tight-mouthed, TV-oriented heir to the experimental successes of Beckett may yet find his chance for fame. The geeks will help him, of course. They will invent a typography that heightens laconic ardor with music and (for some mega-bucks extra) emits personality-enhancing odors so that readers may be sure which of the characterless characters to like and which ones to hate.

With all the excitement of flying speech fragments, we must expect to

20. Bernard Levin, "All those in favour", *Taking Sides* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), 96.

21. Pinker, *Language Instinct*, 228.

grow less confident with older, more disciplined language, less willing to test ourselves against its special requirements of concentration and solitude. Since our cultural history is essentially preserved in the complex 'periodic' medium, much will be lost if popular authors do not sometimes redeem the old style, and readers contrive to handle it. Even so, if elegant exposition is to survive at all, the practising writer of extended formal structures will have to adjust to make the old fit the new, for he dare not imprison himself in a "linguistic contour which no longer matches, or matches only at certain ritual, arbitrary points, the changing landscape of fact".<sup>22</sup> While his future is plainly precarious, he has been graced with a passion for language and a magically sleight of hand. We hope for him. We turn now to have a look at several modern writers' answer to the oxymoronic activity of writing complex sentences in an Age of Instantaneousness. As will be observed, the notable characteristic of this refurbished 'formal' style is the meltdown of Latinate hierarchical formalization into rivulets of motif, whose comfortable meanderings (directed by commas and dashes) elicit the impression of 'listening in' on the talk of intimate mental voices. The following illustration is an excerpt from Tim Park's *Europa*:

And what amazes me, going back now over this conversation with my drunken but endearing colleague, Welsh of Indian extraction, as I seem to be condemned to going over and over all my conversations, so that if I'm not engaging in a conversation you can be sure that I am going over one and generally wishing I hadn't engaged in it—what amazes me is how I have never been able to be either an earnest supporter of good causes, or a manipulator, as Vikram Griffiths is somehow both, never an idealist and never a pragmatist, as *she* is somehow both, so idealistic in her love and so pragmatic in its distribution, but always as it were almost an idealist, yet not quite ingenuous enough, almost a pragmatist, yet too romantic, too scared perhaps, until at some point I fell into this role of the eternally rancorous detractor, but dreaming of some unimaginable commitment, some unimaginable propriety, which I almost achieved with *her*, but never properly believed in, until the day she made it impossible.<sup>23</sup>

22. George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 2d ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 22.

23. Tim Parks, *Europa* (Great Britain: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1997), 106.



Here is a passage from Kate Atkinson's *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*:

She doesn't understand why she feels like this (Go ask Alice—see Footnote (i) again) but it's beginning to happen now, which is why when George wanders back into the kitchen, takes another fairy cake, and announces that he has to go out and 'see a man about a dog' (even tapping his nose as he does so—more and more I'm beginning to feel that we're all trapped in some dire black-and-white film here), Bunty turns a contorted, murderous face on him and lifts the knife as if she's considering stabbing him.<sup>24</sup>

The following excerpt, from Thomas Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon*, grandly pokes fun at old-fashioned verbosity and the periodic penchant to embrace whatever it possibly can:

It has become an afternoon habit for the Twins and their Sister, and what Friends old and young may find their way here, to gather for another Tale from their far-travel'd Uncle, the Revd Wicks Cherrycoke, who arrived here back in October for the funeral of a Friend of years ago,—too late for the Burial, as it prov'd,—and has linger'd as a Guest in the Home of his sister Elizabeth, the Wife, for many years, of Mr. J. Wade LeSpark, a respected Merchant active in Town Affairs, whilst in his home yet Sultan enough to convey to the Revd, tho' without ever so stipulating, that, for as long as he can keep the children amus'd, he may remain,—too much evidence of Juvenile Rampage at the wrong moment, however, and Boppo! 'twill be Out the Door with him, where waits the Winter's Block and Blade.<sup>25</sup>

#### THE ANATOMY OF A SENTENCE

Though grammarians have yet to devise a definitive meaning for 'sentence', full stops are the rage these days; and since our literature now has so many of them, we had better discuss them. The finishing boundary of a sentence has always been vague. Being 'instinctually recognizable' instead of actually described, it more resembles a harmonic resolution than an ending post. Traditionally, a sentence was seen as something (but what?) that arranged ideas in a circuit which ended where it began, as does a race course—the source of its ancient names (*periodos* in Greek and

24. Kate Atkinson, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (London: Black Swan, 1996), 24–5.

25. Thomas Pynchon, *Mason and Dixon* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 6–7.

*circuitus* in Latin). It is now perceived as being linear—a straight (or even zigzagged) run across the field. But whatever shape or direction a sentence may take, a mysterious tonal repose is sensed at its termination. The mind is pulled to the mat and there it rests. But still, who can say why? or how? How can we know when an utterance has come to an end? This question, so long a puzzle to grammarians, begins today to be addressed, not in librarial seminar rooms but in laboratories and psychology clinics, where cognitive, neurological, and physiological sciences are the focus. A satisfying answer is yet to be found.

To appreciate how dense the forests behind us once were, let us quickly review our progress through them, keeping in mind the likelihood that a fixed sentential ending was not an across-the-board specific of grammar until after writing (perhaps even printing) got under way. As we well know, the wayward word-spurts of oral language do not always align with authorized ‘grammatical principle’. That the concept of a perfectly finished grammatical sentence is innate, a gift from Adam himself, seems especially worth questioning now that science begins seriously to hypothesize that we humans develop neural network extensions for processing new material; or, to phrase it another way: that we use “spare capacities” of the brain to wire up new skills. Under pressures of desire and need, the primate brain will indeed accommodate a tremendous degree of change.<sup>26</sup> We have seen some possible verification of the neural-network-extension hypothesis in the sensorial and cognitive modifications that humans underwent when alphabet letters first hove into view, and again when print took over. Out of chaotic oral-aural circumstances developed a faculty (indeed, a preference) for following trains of thought, for classifying, making inferences, avoiding contradiction, and for viewing narrative sequence in terms of cause and effect. In earlier sections of our *Discursion*, we saw how the difficulty of having to interpret the static words on paper forced our capricious speech patterns into more stable formulations, and how pedagogues systematized those over the centuries. Again, we see change, as electronic invention shifts us back towards right-hemispheric immediacies. It would seem that we—not just

26. Cf., for example, Julian Jaynes’ *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976) 123–5; Jerome Bruner, *Studies in Cognitive Growth* (New York: John Wiley, 1966), 1–2; Oliver Sachs, *Seeing Voices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 7–9. Instances of the human brain adapting to new stimuli are regularly brought to the public’s attention. It is a hot topic amongst linguists and brain specialists these days (cf. also Sandra Blakeslee’s article “Workings of Split Brain Challenge Notions of How Language Evolved”, *New York Times*, 26 November 1996, C3).

the pundits, but huge numbers of ordinary people—have altered and adjusted and are realtering in the most profound ways. Though scarcely provable, it is worth a thought that writing encouraged the development of fully expounded architectural sentences and that they in turn encouraged our tenacious yearning for ‘completed’ sentences. As long as we stay literate, our current sense of ‘sentence’ is likely to prevail.

Plato (*The Sophist*) recognized that a simple statement required at least a subject-noun and a verb,<sup>27</sup> but failed to discuss the extensions and limits that might apply. Aristotle, accepting the basic rule that combining subject and verb would give a sense of unity (see *De interpretatione*, chapter 3), was also aware of larger issues. In *The “Art” of Rhetoric*, he described a written sentence as being either *continuous* (that is, connecting simple statements with particles until some undefined body of sense was accomplished); or, *periodic*, by which he meant that a discernible beginning and end would allow the sentence’s total magnitude to be “easily grasped”. Though the parts of a periodic sentence might seem multitudinous to the modern eye, each part was felt to bring (to its ancient receiver, at least) the sense that something was being secured “and that some conclusion [had] been reached”. Like most of us today, Aristotle disliked the endlessness of the continuous mode, because it was (and still is) “unpleasant neither to foresee nor to get to the end of anything”.<sup>28</sup> The sprawl of the continuous sentence was, he said, archaic and no longer popular—an interesting comment, suggesting, as it does, that the gush of the continuous writing style was close to the origins of ritualized or formal speech.

To ease the custom of reading written words aloud, early grammarians pointed text where breathing (their own, that is) demanded. For a long time, two methods of bringing word strings to rest—the one grammatical (to distinguish the parts of a period) and the other rhetorical (to enhance oral phrasing)—developed in parallel, often intermingling. The placement of the stops (or puncts) for both lines of attack could be (and often were) the same. Depending on circumstances, they might cause the voice to rise in a continuing mode, or drop to denote some notion of finish. The full stop indicated a final knotting off of a collection of word groups at a place to satisfy that so-indefinable sense of completeness. The aim of all stopping was to guide the reader towards sense acquisition. In practice

27. Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett, vol. 2 (New York: Random House, 1937), 272–3.

28. Aristotle, *The “Art” of Rhetoric*, trans. John Henry Freese (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 387. Aristotle wasn’t too keen on short sentences either (cf. same edition, p. 389).

the writer, or copier, would plant the variously weighted cadence signals not only at obvious grammatical junctures but wherever his own prosodic inner voice suggested. Until print regularized their idiosyncracies, the puncts, colometric line cuts, and rhythmic motifs apportioned text in creatively idiosyncratic ways. Modern experiment has explained the diversity of preprint cadencing decisions by showing how differently we each perceive intonational units, that is, the relatively brief stretches of vocalization that terminate in some distinguishing pitch contour. Neither writers nor readers are governed by exactly the same temporal processing constraints. The silent voices in our heads that lead us as we deal out and gather up meaning along the sentential line respond to differing subvocal (always oral-based) rhythms, which bespeak our individuality.<sup>29</sup> Those aroused auditory images often match (but sometimes too, conflict with) the prescribed boundaries of grammatically discerned structural segments. Punctuation's history of confusion derives from this mix.

The disintegration of political order during the Middle Ages halted the advance of European literary development; but Renaissance thinkers soon found their way again. In the new intellectual stirrings, writers once again lifted their pens and, following Cicero, began to muster the plural facets of an 'idea' into single periodic sentences. In the Venice of 1561, Aldus Manutius II (see Part Four) published a program of punctating rules. By then, vernacular Italian had dismantled the pyramid-prone literary structures of highly inflected Latin and was in need of some formula for distributing the linearized parts in print. Manutius II defined the stops in terms of sentential divisions (commas, colons, etc.) more or less as we know them today, and assigned them their places in the grammatical hierarchy of the governing statement. But alas, he too accepted the common assumption that everyone knows instinctively where the precise end of a sentence is,<sup>30</sup> and so, found no reason to define it in his otherwise sophisticated and precocious (he was only fourteen!) *Orthographiae ratio*.

Nor was anything specific about the sentence being said in early Renaissance England. There, visual objectivity was still egressing from an oral-aural mindset. Although the native sentence was more naturally simple, scholastic influence encouraged English literaries to imitate Latin's concentration and inward ramification with the uncertain tool of a lan-

29. Wallace Chafe, "Punctuation and Prosody", 407-15.

30. "It is not difficult to understand for one cannot fail to notice, with what word a sentence ends. . . ." Aldus Manutius II, *Orthographiae ratio*, as translated by T. F. and M. F. A. Husband, *Punctuation: Its Principles and Practice* (London: Geo. Routledge and Sons, 1905), 134.

guage more notably free of inflections than any of its continental cousins. To demonstrate his mental fecundity in accordance with classic exemplar, an Englishman felt forced to distend his sentences into the very continuousness that Aristotle had so long ago lamented. The full-blown result generated a high frequency of loosely connected relative clauses, which were often widely distanced from their antecedents and tended to obscure the argument's development.<sup>31</sup> Chains of clauses and phrases could produce page-long statements, wherein the segmental relationships were often submerged, indeed sometimes not there at all. Our example of such a sentence was written by Sir Thomas More to Cardinal Wolsey in (1522):

And ffor as mych as the same bare date the viiiith day of this present moneth, at which tyme his Grace perceiveth no thyng done but such as he was advertized of byfore by lettres of my sayed Lord sent vn to his Grace by yours; his Grace therfore esteemed the lettres lesse, savyng that in as mych as hit appered by the same, that in consideration that the Kingis ordonauns could not passe over Staynes More towardis Carlile, hit was therfore by my said Lord and the Kingis counsaile there thought good that my Lord with his cumpany shold avaunce theym self un to thest marchis, and there, if they myght haue all thingis requisite, entre in to Scotland and so to proced forward in doing the hurt that they could till such tyme as they shold mete with the Duke in his retourne, fro the west borders towardis Edenborogh, onles they were by necessite forced to repaire to my Lord Dacre toward Carlile for his relief.<sup>32</sup>

When More was writing his piece, he was addressing his own educated inner circle in a language of sufficient complication to impress his correspondents of his superior wisdom and taste, and to show that he could manipulate his knowledge with an elegance acceptable to his day. Nonetheless, he too seemed troubled by the endlessness of his statements, for he sometimes (as though suddenly tired) would bring all to a full-

31. Mats Rydén, *Relative Constructions in Early Sixteenth-Century English* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksells, 1966), 365.

32. Sir Thomas More, *The Correspondence of Thomas More*, ed. Elizabeth Frances Rogers (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 260. Dr. Rogers writes (xi) that she has replaced a few of the commas with semicolons, but otherwise kept the sentences unchanged. In More's Latin letters to his daughter, Margaret Roper, the sentences are noticeably shorter—an interesting indication of his more natural English style affecting his Latin.

stopped halt and begin anew with the very conjunction that was the obvious link to the preceding segment.

Among grammarians, matters of clausal and phrasal relativities were settled quite rapidly during the next century, though the common public remained for some time in considerable puzzlement. Nevertheless, the essential character of a sentence remained undefined. "A perfect distinction closes a perfect sense and is marked with a round punct, thus .", proclaimed Alexander Hume in his *Of the Orthographie and Congruitie of the Britan Tongue* (1617).<sup>33</sup> And that was that. Ben Jonson in his little grammar book does not attempt to reason about the full stop. As opposed to the clause or the phrase, it is simply "in all respects perfect".<sup>34</sup> Other grammarians of the period do no better, and definitions (despite the ever more controlled structures of such as Milton, Hooker, and Clarendon) continue through the seventeenth century in terms of "laying it down", "lowering the voice", "feeling a satisfaction", "resting the spirit", and so on. Grammatical elements are discussed, but always the sentence itself eludes.

During the Enlightenment, writing concerns became more syntactic and less rhetorical. Sentence parts were described with precision. Though clarity was fast becoming a literary issue, the inexplicable sentence was not. Samuel Johnson in 1755 could offer nothing but a round-about of interdependencies. A sentence, he said, is a short paragraph or a period in writing. At the same time a period is a complete sentence from one full stop to another. A full stop is a point in writing by which sentences are distinguished.<sup>35</sup> In short, because it is a 'perfect thing', *we all recognize a sentence when we meet one*. In his assessment of 1823, William Cobbett declared that the "Full-Point" was to be used at the "end of every collection of words, which make a full and complete meaning, and is not necessarily connected with other collections of words".<sup>36</sup> But how to interpret *full and complete?* or *necessarily connected?* In its elusiveness to definition, the sentence acquired an aspect of mystery that did not become vigorously addressed until, in the nineteenth century, psychology

33. Alexander Hume, *Of the Orthographie and Congruitie of the Britan Tongue* (ca. 1617), ed. Henry B. Wheatley for The Early English Text Society (London: Trübner and Son, 1865), 34.

34. Ben Jonson, *The English Grammar* (London, 1640), 74.

35. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. "sentence", "period", "full stop".

36. William Cobbett, *A Grammar of the English Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 59.

became a recognized academic pursuit. Nevertheless, throughout these earlier centuries, the published sentence reveals an enlarging perception of what it actually needed to contain. As the grammar of it gradually supplanted the rhetoric of it, so did the points, the relative pronouns, and overall adverbial guidance rise to the surface. Compare with More's ramble of less than a century earlier the following 1665 sample from Henry Oldenburg's Introduction to the first issue of the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions*.

Whereas there is nothing more necessary for promoting the improvement of philosophical Matters, than the communicating to such, as apply their Studies and Endeavours that way, such things as are discovered or put in practice by others; It is therefore thought fit to employ the *Press*, as the most proper way to gratifie those, whose engagement in such Studies, and delight in the advancement of Learning and profitable Discoveries, doth entitle them to the knowledge of what this Kingdom, or other parts of the World, so, from time to time, afford, as well of the Progress of the Studies, Labors and attempts of the Curious and Learned in things of this kind, as of their complete Discoveries and Performances: To the end, that such Productions being clearly and truly communicated, desires after solide and useful knowledge may be further entertained, ingenious Endeavours and Undertakings cherished, and invited and encouraged to search, try, and find out new things, impart their knowledge to one another, and contribute what they can to the Grand Design of improving Natural knowledge, and perfecting all Philosophical Arts, and Sciences.<sup>37</sup>

As public education, the printing press, and the edicts of the Enlightenment steadied the written language, so it grew less exclusively a property for Members of the Club Only. The more they read, the more easily could ordinary folk unravel the configurations of elaborate sentences to retrieve their message. Meanwhile popular speech habits became more complicated, more patterned after printed constructions, and so reflected, we argue, an increase in analytic management of knowledge. (Was the public growing, like little horns, the requisite neural stuff to cope?) Punctuation and grammar (with its logical word links, *on the one/other hand, and, then, but, because*) were tools to nudge the sentential

37. Taken from Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers* (New York: Vintage, 1985), 393.

elements towards the completion of an overarching idea. The connections above the sentence level (such as *howbeit, contrary to expectation, quite apart from the Internet, as we were saying before*), though largely semantic, are also quasi-grammatical links. In its full-blown form, the archaic period (often of paragraphic length) had constituted a semantic and construc-tural whole, which Aristotle himself marked off with a *paragraphos* in the margin. The perfect formulation of such a sentence called for an assured management of relationships. By the time of the eighteenth century, a man who wished to set down a thought in formal writing would first think through (most likely *say*) his entire sentence (as did Edward Gibbon and Samuel Johnson), and arrange the parts to form a taut, well-balanced structure.

Although some contemporary authors are composing well-turned complex sentences for their diminishing numbers of appreciative readers, most writers nowadays aim only to penetrate that pachydermic resistance to words of a possibly neurally re-wired populace. With the familiar publishing houses now nestling under some eight big roofs, and throwing money at a handful of ‘big-name’ authors, a more concerted hold over fashions in word style is being exercised than ever before. The intention is neither aesthetic nor intellectual. The schooling of journalists and popular writers deals frankly with the saleability of reading products to a non-reading public.

But back to our mutttons. By the turn of the twentieth century, deeper analyses of what a sentence might be began to appear. A new notion had floated to the surface, namely that within a well-formed sentence some difficulty is presented and resolved. Herewith is Robert Louis Stevenson’s analysis of 1912:

Communication may be made in broken words, the business of life be carried on with substantives alone; but that is not what we call literature; and the true business of the literary artist is to plait or weave his meaning, involving it around itself; so that each sentence, by successive phrases, shall first come into a kind of knot, and then, after a moment of suspended meaning, solve and clear itself. In every properly constructed sentence there should be observed this knot or hitch; so that (however delicately) we are led to foresee, to expect, and then to welcome the successive phrases.<sup>38</sup>

38. Robert Louis Stevenson, “Elements of Style”, *Essays in the Art of Writing* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1912), 9–10.



Stevenson is suggesting that a disturbance contained in the initial “given” creates a tension, an effect of incompleteness and dependencies, that fades when relationships settle into fresh balance, bringing symmetry and calm.

Only a few years later, Ernest Fenollosa’s 1908 essay on Chinese kanji (posthumously translated and annotated by Ezra Pound, but not published until the mid-1930s) presented to the English-speaking world a number of intriguing speculations about the sentence.

I wonder how many people have asked themselves why the sentence form exists at all, why it seems so universally necessary *in all languages?* . . .

I fancy the professional grammarians have given but a lame response to this inquiry. Their definitions fall into two types: one, that a sentence expresses a “complete thought”; the other, that in it we bring about a union of subject and predicate.

Fenollosa discards the ‘complete thought’ idea on the grounds that everything is interdependent. All acts

are successive, even continuous; one causes or passes into another. . . . All processes in nature are interrelated; and thus there could be no complete sentence (according to this definition) save one which it would take all time to pronounce.

He rejects the subject-predicate definition as an accident of man’s ego, for man selects and arranges his subject and predicate where and how he wants to, that is, arbitrarily, according to his own point of view. A more accurate definition of a sentence, he feels, will come from science.

Valid scientific thought consists in following as closely as may be the actual and entangled lines of forces as they pulse through things. . . .

The sentence form was forced upon primitive men by nature itself. It was not we who made it; it was a reflection of the temporal order in causation. All truth has to be expressed in sentences because all truth is the *transference of power*.

A sentence, then, is like a flash of lightning that passes between two terms. In its most primitive form it tells of a redistribution of force: from agent, through action, to object—as in ‘Farmer pounds rice’—and thus corresponds to the universal form of action in Nature through the order of cause and effect. As does all Aryan etymology, both *farmer* and *rice* have evolved from original verb concepts. Thus the farmer farms, and the rice

is what grows in its special way. *Farmer* and *rice* are the noun-out-of-verb terms that define the extremes of the pounding. And so we learn that in the end everything reduces to action. Under the metaphorical super-structures of English words (be they nouns, adjectives, or adverbs), one can to this day identify primitive Sanskrit verb roots, and in the case of Chinese kanji, actually *see* the history of their evolution.<sup>39</sup>

The decades that preceded World War II brought a flux of insight to challenge the practising stylist. The integrity of a sentence—its shape and carrying power—became matters of accelerating concern. Against a background of commentary about what “natural” or “effective” ought to mean, the writer was pressed to say his piece in a natural and effective way. The peculiarities that separate what is written from what is spoken, and both from what is thought, were being made more distinct. In this period of exploration, we find short, disconnected, full-stopped spurts of ‘mentalese’ à la James Joyce; and the rat-a-tat stops of stream-of-consciousness sentences à la Virginia Woolf. Hemingway was popularizing short easy-to-follow descriptive sentences, which he often linked with simple *ands*. All these diminutive structures circumvented the punctator’s beloved and fertile province—the wide-scanning, logic-driven, formal sentence of expository or descriptive prose. With the subsequent falling off of the reading habit (and the shrinkage of our hypothetical neural network extensions that had abetted it), that province has daily grown smaller. Anarchic speech is our default mode. The very ‘naturalness’ of it is the effect that writers now seek. Their cut-and-thrust style is especially

suitable for the emotional side of human nature. When anyone wants to give vent to a strong feeling he does not stop to consider the logical analysis of his ideas.<sup>40</sup>

The frequency of the full stop in modern texts owes much to the rhythms of grammar-indifferent, casual speech. In relaxed discussion we let go our allegiance to classroom decree. We like to play it cool. We flick our thoughts into the public domain like apple cores out the car window. Our failure to focus concentratedly on how we say what we are saying is a plague to our hearers. But, as anyone knows who has tried to parse an ad-libbed statement on TV, that’s the way we are these days. Transcripts of

39. Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, trans. Ezra Pound (New York: Arrow Editions, 1936), 14–20.

40. Otto Jespersen, *Essentials of English Grammar* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1933), 105–6.

talk are replete with evidence of grammatical lapse. Here, by way of example, is the taped Lee Clow, the chairman of TBWA Chiat/Day ad agency (whose modest resumé claims him an “artist who happens to be in the advertising business”), publicly expounding on ABC’s forty-million-dollar deal to use yellow for its logos and ads.

What do we call this yellow?—we call this yellow color ‘yellow’. . . . It seemed to have a kind of an urgency, but also a fun to it. Yet it was—it just seemed like a different color than you kind of expect from a big network launching a season. When we approached the whole problem, it was kind of like, well, let’s try not to look like every network has looked every year, and we came up with yellow.<sup>41</sup>

Awful as his statement is—seventy-nine words!—it can, nevertheless, truly be said that we “know what he means”.

In 1968 Barbara Strang defined the mysterious sentence as a linguistic sequence that has internal but no external grammatical relations—a description not too far from Cobbett’s. Hence, it is a grammatical, self-contained structure, which (unlike its cousinly oral utterance) does not tend to buckle under pressure, being braced as it is by education. In English, she points out,

the disjunction of what is grammatically self-contained from what is not is one of the most absolute in the language.

but even so, the term *sentence* continues to generate much dissatisfaction, as is

indicated by the number of attempts at definition . . . , for there is no need to redefine a term unless you are dissatisfied with your predecessors’ use of it.<sup>42</sup>

In 1985 Randolph Quirk et al. had this to say:

‘What counts as a grammatical English sentence?’ is not always a question which permits a decisive answer; and this is not only because of the difficulty of segmenting a discourse into sentences but because questions of grammatical acceptability inevitably become involved with questions of meaning, with questions of

41. *New York Times*, 23 July 1997, A25.

42. Barbara M. H. Strang, *Modern English Structure* (London: Edward Arnold, 1971), 71–3.

good or bad style, with questions of lexical acceptability, with questions of acceptability in context, etc.<sup>43</sup>

The culminating opinion in the history of the ‘standardly complete’ sentence is perhaps Stephen Pinker’s, as expressed in *The Language Instinct*. To perform the act of utterance (which is, the ‘outring’ of thought into words), he says, the human mind must balance lexicographic instructions with the rules of grammar—a complicated business, but our adaptable neurals take it in stride. The first word of an utterance will introduce a trail of requisite follow-ups that must be slotted in along the grammatical line in keeping with their lexicographic constraints. Thus, each determiner must have (and accord with) its noun, each adjective also must have (and accord with) its noun, nouns that are subjects must have their suitable verbs, each transitive verb a suitable object, and so on. Thus, as we begin our sentence, “The cat and the dog ate their dinner”, the very first “the” forces us onward through every unfulfilled element until we reach the end. When every word has matched its lexicographic requirements, “when memory has been emptied of all its incomplete dangling branches, we experience the mental ‘click’ that signals that we have just heard a complete grammatical sentence.”<sup>44</sup> And there we take our stand. Full stop.

#### WHITHER NOW?

In today’s dynamic environment, punctuation is unlikely to excite new literary experimentation. The irascible eccentrics of grammatical and lexical history have deserted our stage, leaving writers and readers to settle between them, in their lenient and uncommitted way, how best (indeed, even *whether*) to demark word groups to aid the assimilation of text. At the moment, punctuation is experiencing a resurrection of esteem in natural language processing systems, where the cues provided by their values are being made use of for their semantic, intonational, and discourse-related implications in machine translation. Layout-oriented punctuation devices (such as bulleted items, tables, and lists) are also being examined for ease of absorption. Laboratory projects are addressing the problem of automatic intonation assignment in order to produce prosodic transcriptions from written forms of punctuated, spoken texts. Linguistic researchers are categorizing punctuational functions with regard to their

43. Randolph Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, Jan Svartvik, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (London and New York: Longman, 1985), 47.

44. Pinker, *Language Instinct*, 200.

“delimiting, distinguishing (specifying emphasis, etc.), separating (indicating syntactic units), and morphological” aspects. To this end they have composed percentage analyses of the points from many millions of words taken from printed texts of all sorts, and compared by complexity and genre the punctuation marks used therein. In all directions computer studies are firming up, indeed proving, ideas about the stops that grammarians have been inexplicitly holding for a very long time. Punctators will note with pleasure that experiments in automatic parsing are more highly successful (up to 50 percent in some cases) when punctuation is present. Out of all this, some seventy-nine natural rules (as opposed to the rules of prescription) about the colon, semicolon, dash, comma, and period have been identified. Lexicons for machine translation now include information extracted from the use of punctuation marks, as well as guidance in their use.<sup>45</sup> In cognitive work centers, punctuation’s reputation is reacquiring some shine.

In the breakup of the literate world, serious writers still tinker with punctuation in order to extract from the sentence (or the paragraph, or text) important nuances of meaning—and they count on a sensitive audience to care. Outside that diminishing circle, the points are used more perfunctorily, as is the language they are marshalling. The fuss quite legitimately kicked up by Stephen Joyce about the new “reader friendly” edition of his father’s *Ulysses* includes the issue of updating the book’s punctuation with all the concomitant prospects of changing the sense. If the book is so changed, the author’s intended meanings will be changed as well. Will no one care?

“Punctuation aids precision, and precision is the glory of the craftsman”, said Marianne Moore, herself a glorious craftsman.<sup>46</sup> All literary artists fight for their line breaks, commas, and colons, because they perceive them to be decisive signals towards what they wish to say. Trained as they are in the focussed world of writing, exactitude to them is crucial. Because this is so, they willingly, frequently, and stubbornly engage in argument with their editors over the minutiae of their sentences. Editorial files are full of suggestion and response over the details of punctuation, over the expressive value of this or that, most notably of a specific point within a specific line of text. To illustrate the sort of thing that is so

45. Bilge Say and Varol Akman, “Current Approaches to Punctuation in Computational Linguistics”, *Computers and the Humanities* 30 (1997): 457–69.

46. Marianne Moore, *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore* (New York: Viking, 1986), 539.

earnestly disputed, we offer the following selected extracts from a letter dated 1 December 1954 to the young John Updike from his *New Yorker* magazine editor, Katharine White. In a teasing tone, she calls this delightful, sensitive document a “treatise on punctuation”.

I think for example that you are right to take the comma out after that “yet” in “Sunflower.” That was prose punctuation in a poem, and it spoiled the line. I should have detected this before sending you the proof. Yet in this same poem, the proof of which I am able to return to you since the poem will not be used for many months, I don’t think we ought to allow your colon. You seem to have a special feeling about the appearance of colons but on the score of their meaning, you seem to me to interpret them in a way that no one else does. The colon *looks* very nice, I admit, is “compact, firm, and balanced.” I agree with you that a dash is less elegant-looking, but I can’t believe that a dash is “wishy-washy.” Often it is very emphatic. . . . We string along with Mr. Fowler in thinking that the colon in general usage nowadays has the special function of delivering the goods. Yet here you are delivering no goods. The line where you want the colon could carry a comma if you prefer it to a dash, but we think the dash makes for clearer reading. Do, please, try to feel more kindly toward the dash and admit it here! . . .

A punctuation mark comes, from habit, to have almost the value of a word. . . .

. . . stops at the end of lines of verse should be very light because the very fact that a line of verse ends makes a natural stop, both for the eye and for the ear. This is why I believe that your complaint that commas at the ends of all the lines would make the reader read the poem in too great a rush and too great a flurry is not sound, for the commas have much more weight than they do in the same lines, set as prose. On the other hand, to use full stops on the ends of all these lines would seem to me to be very awkward. It would make the poem absolutely leaden, and very jerky to read. You would come to a dead stop with every line, what with the period plus the natural stop caused by the ending of the line.<sup>47</sup>

47. Katharine S. White to John Updike, 1 December 1954, courtesy of Canaday Library, Bryn Mawr College.

Along with her many other correspondents, Katharine White carried on similar punctuational exchanges with Vladimir Nabokov. We look now at a few lines from his side of the net. They come from his letter of 21 April 1957 and concern her queried comma in “The Ballad of Longwood Glenn”. He writes:

I would like “retouched” to remain in commas. It is a very concise way of saying that her picture was taken by her new husband, a photographer, who, in technical parlance, retouched it. I do not mind if there is or is not a comma after “died” but there should be one after “retouched”.<sup>48</sup>

As the divisions of textual material begin now to break free of their internal punctuational supports and move towards subliminal understanding, punctators quite rightly feel nervous. Who would have thought that in so short a time eloquent, fully thought-out periods would be hacked into chunks that no longer address our rational left hemispheres? Who would have thought that serious writers would *willingly* surrender their authorial rights to the marketing folk, the publicists, and graphic designers? Vesuvian upheavals are rocking the world of print. Heretofore, it has been the writer’s prerogative how he should break up and deliver his piece. His relationship with his reader was a personal, intimate matter. That, alas, is no longer the case.

Let us be bold and attempt like Canute to turn back the tide. First on our list of *indesiderata* is the confusion caused by unindented paragraphs. Their rectangular neatness would be all right, if some marker—a line space, a check, an arrow, a thumb print, *anything*—were inserted to clarify the very useful (indeed the author’s wanted) paragraphic division. Instead, a switch in topical direction is rendered uncertain (sometimes imperceptible), when, for example, the preceding paragraph terminates at the right-hand margin.

In the matter of quotation marks, American graphic ambition is particularly guilty in overriding an author’s intention. Designerly disdain for ‘unsightly’ white space is irrelevant when it comes to including internal or full stops (which have only to do with governance from higher quarters) within the demarking inverted commas, as though those stops were integral to the demarked item. The problem, which can become quite complicated, ought to be addressed by American presses as they have

48. Vladimir Nabokov to Katharine S. White, 21 April 1957, courtesy of the Canaday Library, Bryn Mawr College.

been elsewhere—the Italians being, perhaps, the most diligent champions of exactitude in this respect.

Another authorial concession, attributable to design and marketing factors, is the fading away of indexes, whose rigor and abundance were once so helpful in accessing information within the covers of a book. Also disheartening is the introduction of endnotes to replace footnotes. Endnotes are not known for sardonic humor nor the presence of quirky wit. Since the time that David Hume (in 1776: an auspicious year for change) insisted that Edward Gibbon make his endnotes into footnotes, footnotes have played a vital role in truth-seeking narrative. Their specificities show that authors have done responsible research, by democratizing issues with on-the-spot invitations to debate, criticism, and revision.<sup>49</sup> Endnotes can rarely reproduce the jabs and punches which make up the secondary, sometimes corrective, sometimes provisional voice of a footnoting author. In the world of endnotes we who have an interest in sources can no longer sweep in a reference by merely lowering the eye, but must, instead, flip to the back of the book, hunt up the section for the chapter in question, and locate the matching number. The search becomes an exertion for those of us with only ten fingers, and so, not surprisingly, we often do not bother. The very inaccessibility of an endnote excuses us the effort of checking attributions for ‘borrowed’ material. We therefore propose that, where applicable, future books restore full indexes and that endnotes reconvert to footnotes.

Lax or delayed credit-giving is remindful of bygone days when all that was written was more or less public property, and levels of authorial pride (let alone responsible truth telling) were very low. In scriptoria, a copying pen would adjust, embellish, and even remodel, another’s treatise so that a book on the shelf (despite its label of authorship) was generally the product of a number of anonymous contributors. Today, a similar phenomenon evolves from committee rooms. Committees ‘design’ the language and generate plots for TV and film. With feedback from sales, committees aim to attract a large, not necessarily discriminating readership. Committees package information for the public’s ever more blinkered view of the world. One sees these committee teams at work in the theater, on newspapers, in advertising offices, in industrial and governmental reports, and in the publication offices of museums and universities. It would seem that language conveyers are frightened of breaching some

49. Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; and London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 102–3.



rule of required uniformity. As 'group consensus' takes over individual idiom, so our utterances—the outerings of our deepest, most personal, separate selves—grow more alike, and less our own. It is a thing to worry about.

Meticulous language and the tomes of individual statement it used to propagate are everywhere slipping out of sight. Fortunately, however, a scent of aristocratic superiority trails after them, exciting mortal nostrils to stay in the chase. The good news is this. You can have a cultivated bookish image without actually having to own a book. For an unstated sum the Manor Bindery in Hampshire (England) will supply you with a made-to-measure imitation bookshelf of leather-covered classical titles *of your choice* with which to hide your TV cabinet. In this way great literature can live on.

Where literature and literacy go, there goes punctuation. Textual distinctions live in the tendering of thought from writer to reader. As long as writers have something to say to someone willing (and equipped) to read, the puncts, we presume, will continue to function. That we should suddenly chuck away the benefits so resolutely battled over for centuries is unthinkable. Instead, let us hope that the human race will find full voice once more, and that its literary spokesmen will learn to embrace all the best things of present and past invention. May The Word survive, and surviving, continue to be its eloquent and most precise self both on tongue and on page. When clarity is paramount and complexity necessary, when the elusive must be defined, then writers will once again whet their colons and weigh their commas, for they know that we, their admirers, *want to understand*.

THE END