

## **The relevance of the inconspicuous**

Farewell lecture at the University of Basel, September 25, 2007 (English version, June 2017)

What does an ageing professor of English think of when he is about to leave? All too easily Prospero from Shakespeare's *Tempest* comes to his mind. He, too, has loved his books, he, too has taught. But he has not been exiled to a lonely island. He has no magic wand to be broken, and the storms he has raised may have had room in a teacup. Whether he was surrounded by airy spirits or Calibans may be left open—more probably by airy spirits. He cannot exclude that his labours have brought two young people together .... The parallels and differences may be spun further, but where do they lead?

What, then, should he be talking about on such an occasion? Draw a summa, to leave behind what he has experienced in the institution? Summarize his insights once more, hoping to carve them deeply into the memories of his listeners? Set a final mark at the end of a long activity? All these factors may have a role to play, and accordingly he would tend to announce his farewell lecture with a rather general title, a title which, in hindsight, sounds rather abstract for a student of English.

Well, the relevance of the inconspicuous I want to talk about is that of punctuation: comma, semicolon, colon, question and exclamation mark, and, of course, the full stop.

The correct use of punctuation marks may make us feel insecure, and it is often neglected. At the same

time, it is often used to assess the intellectual and cultural competence of a person. In recent years there have been attempts to revive interest in it—I am thinking in particular of Lynn Truss’s book *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves*. Truss dedicates her book to the memory of the bolshevik typesetters in St. Petersburg, who demanded to be paid for punctuation marks at the same rate as for letters, and thus contributed to the first Russian revolution.

Punctuation is neglected not only in daily life but also in scholarship. When scholars prepare a critical edition, they may have to choose between variants in different source texts. In doing so, they tend to distinguish between *substantive* and *incidental* variants. Substantive variants are those that produce a relevant difference in meaning—whatever the editors may understand by “relevant” and by “meaning”. Punctuation is usually considered incidental, and standardized by the editors as they see fit. Many years ago, when we were preparing the bilingual *Englisch-deutsche Studienausgabe der Dramen Shakespeares*, which includes a German prose translation,<sup>1</sup> the question arose whether we should use the English text prepared by a specialized editor and pay royalties for it. A highly respected German colleague suggested: No problem, let us use such a text, change the punctuation a bit, and save the cost—evidence that punctuation may not be negligible in *some* cases.

As so often when we have closer look at a topic it turns out to cover a wider and more interesting field

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<sup>1</sup> By now more than two dozen volumes have appeared Shakespeare et al. 1977-. I formulated its style-sheet and edited the first volume, Shakespeare, Engler op. 1977--

than we may have thought. This is no different with punctuation. The same marks may be used subtly differently in different languages and at different times, and I must restrict myself. Actually, I wanted to focus on the comma, but in the end, as you will see, I have decided to include the colon.

The inconspicuous comma, whose place in a sentence often remains uncertain, may be definitely relevant, as Lynn Truss has shown (the cryptic title *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* refers to what a panda may be doing, depending on the place of the comma). A comma may decide on the life, even on the life and death of a person. In Beaumarchais' *Le mariage de Figaro* it is a comma that helps decide Figaro's fate.<sup>2</sup> In Marlowe's history play *Edward II* the absence of a comma is responsible for the king's death. Mortimer, the usurper, avoiding the charge of regicide, has a message sent to the noblemen who keep the king prisoner. It

Contains his death, yet bids them save his life.

*Edwardum occidere nolite timere bonum est.*

*Fear not to kill the king tis good he die.*

But read it thus, and that's another sense:

*Edwardum occidere nolite timere bonum est.*

*Kill not the king tis good to fear the worst.*

Unpointed as it is, thus shall it go. (Marlowe 1955, p. 285 [V,4])

The message is ambiguous, and forces the recipients to guess what the intention of the sender may have been.

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<sup>2</sup> In Act III, Scene 15: FIGARO: ... Ainsi, je la payerai dans ce château, *virgule*, ou je l'épouserai...BARTHOLO, *vite*. Sans virgule. FIGARO, *vite*. Elle y est. C'est, *virgule*, messieurs, ou bien je l'épouserai. BARTHOLO, *regardant le papier*, *vite*. Sans virgule, messieurs. FIGARO, *vite*. Elle y était, messieurs. Beaumarchais, p. 163

The ambiguity, however, only works if the message is transmitted in writing. If passed on orally, pauses and intonation would resolve it. Punctuation marks may therefore be described as instructions on how a text should be understood, but also on how it should be used. It is the second aspect, which takes us to the medial dimension of texts, on which I should like to focus here. In rough terms three types of text-use may be distinguished according to their punctuation marks. Few of them will ever be represented in pure form.

- (1) Texts that remind the reader of a performance and only serve as a memory aid. They do not really need any systematic punctuation. The words, perhaps even in shortened form, will suffice. Indeed, an early manuscript like the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*, which seems to take up oral tradition, does not have any systematic punctuation.

Punctuation only becomes important when the text no longer serves the memory of an experience, but is its source, for a person who encounters it for the first time—like the poor jailers in *Edward II*. Punctuation may then be determined by how the text is meant to be used, whether it should be read aloud or read silently.

- (2) Texts meant to be read aloud will favour punctuation that indicates how the text should be performed. The punctuation will preferably suggest different kinds of pauses and the intonation. This kind of punctuation has been called “rhythmical-oratorical”. the comma, the semicolon, the colon, and the full stop indicate pauses of growing length. Other marks, like the

question mark, indicate the intonation to be used.

- (3) Texts meant for silent reading will use punctuation to clarify the relations between clauses and to facilitate understanding. This kind of punctuation has been called “grammatical-logical”.

The two types of punctuation cannot always be neatly distinguished. The stop marking the end of a sentence grammatically, will also be useful to the performer in placing a pause. Still, the punctuation marks can tell us something about how the texts were supposed to be used.

These types of punctuation also tell us something about media history. They document a gradual change from rhythmical-oratorical to grammatical-logical punctuation. In Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost* in the second half of the seventeenth century punctuation marks still suggest the length of pauses in delivery (Treip). At the end of the eighteenth century James Burgh in his *Art of Speaking* wrote:

[...] The common rule, for holding [the stops] out to their just length, is too exact for practice, viz. That a comma is to hold the length of a syllable, a semicolon of two, a colon of three, and a period of four. In some cases, there is no stop to be made at a comma, as they are often put merely to render the sense clear; as those, which, by Mr. Ward, and many other learned editors of books, are put before every relative.

Burgh (1792, p. 8)

Burgh found himself in a phase between the two types of punctuation and significantly associates grammatical-logical punctuation with publications by scholars. Today silent reading is taken for granted: All traces of rhythmical-oratorical punctuation have disappeared. Not surprisingly this also the only type of punctuation with which computer programs can cope.

Studying these developments in the use of punctuation is made more difficult by the fact that, as indicated, punctuation has usually been regarded as not particularly significant. For instance, it is unclear to what extent the punctuation in the first editions of Shakespeare's works goes back to the author, to what extent to the compositors in the printing shop. (Many things speak for the second possibility). In any case the punctuation follows the as yet less standardized rules of the period, and there is no reason to regard it as merely incidental.

Shakespeare's texts also lend themselves for sketching the history of punctuation, for two reasons: There has been an unbroken editorial tradition since 1623; and his texts have usually been printed in modernized form because he has always been regarded as in a way contemporary. The spelling and punctuation, but not his words, are translated into modern English.<sup>3</sup> Modernization can lead to irreconcilable problems: for example, the Elizabethans would use the sign we today call the question mark, also with exclamations (Simpson

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<sup>3</sup> 5.8 "Die Interpunktion ist primär eine Verständnishilfe und soll deshalb in der Regel nach grammatikalischen Gesichtspunkten vereinheitlicht werden.» [Punctuation is primarily an understanding aid and should therefore be standardized as a rule according to grammatical aspects." Arbeitskreis "Editionprobleme der frühen Neuzeit" Empfehlungen zur Edition frühneuzeitlicher Texte (<http://www.ahfmuenchen.de/arbeitskreise/empfehlungen.shtml>) (28.09.2007)

1969, pp. 85–86). Editors modernizing the text, therefore, must make a decision that did not exist yet then: whether a phrase is a question or an exclamation.

The colon shows the development from rhythmical-oratorical to grammatical-logical punctuation most clearly. In rhythmical-oratorical punctuation it marks a pause the length of which lies between the full stop and the semicolon— three syllables according to Burgh—and it appears in places where it would be impossible today. Today, according to the rules of handbooks, it does not mark a pause but a semantic link.<sup>4</sup> Randolph Quirk's *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, defines it as follows: “The functions of the colon [...] can be summed up as follows; What follows (as in this sentence) is an explication of what precedes it or a fulfillment of the expectation raised.” (III.10, 1520). In other words, the colon raises expectations.

I should like to illustrate this development—you won't be surprised—by the ending of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, where the actor slips out of his role as Prospero, and turns, in the transition as it were, to the audience. He asks them to release him from his part; in doing so he compares their applause to a prayer.

In the first complete edition of Shakespeare's plays of 1623, this passage still seems to be bound by rhythmical-oratorical punctuation, and uses the colon in

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<sup>4</sup>, Kunkel-Razum describes the colon as follows „Der Doppelpunkt [...] signalisiert, dass etwas folgt. Er schafft ohne Konnektoren eine enge sinngemässe Verbindung zwischen einzelnen Sätzen oder Satzteilen, die inhaltlich z.B. einer Schlussfolgerung entsprechen kann. (section 1726, p. 1074) [The colon [...] signals that something follows. Without connectives, it creates a close, meaningful connection between individual sentences or sentence parts, which, for example, contain a conclusion.]

a manner which scarcely implies any logical connection.

[...] release me from my bands  
With the helpe of your good hands :  
Gentle breath of yours, my Sailes  
Must fill, or else my proiect failes,  
Which was to please : Now I want  
Spirits to enforce : Art to inchant,  
And my ending is despaire,  
Vnlesse I be relieu'd by praier  
Which pierces so, that it assaults  
Mercy it selfe, and frees all faults. (Shakespeare

1968, epilogue, p. 37)

One hundred years later, Alexander Pope (1723-25) modernizes the spelling. He removes the colons, and replaces one of them by "For", a logical link, which also makes the verse more regular.

[...] release me from my bands,  
With the help of your good hands.  
Gentle breath of yours my sails  
Must fill, or else my project fails,  
Which was to please. For now I want  
Spirits t' enforce, art to enchant;  
And my ending is despair,  
Unless I be reliev'd by prayer;  
Which pierces so, that it assaults  
Mercy it self, and frees all faults.

(Shakespeare 1723-1725)

Again a century later, in 1823, Edmund Malone has the following text:

[...] release me from my bands,  
With the help of your good hands<sup>7</sup>.



Gentle breath of yours my sails  
Must fill, or else my project fails,  
Which was to please : Now I want  
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;  
And my ending is despair,  
Unless I be reliev'd by prayer<sup>8</sup> ;  
Which pierces so, that it assaults  
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.

7 With the help of your good hands.] By your applause, by clapping hands. Johnson. Noise what supposed to dissolve a spell. [...]

8 And my ending is despair, Unless I be reliev'd by prayer ;] This alludes told stories told about necromancers in their last moments, [...]  
(Shakespeare 1821)

Instead of Pope's "For", the colon is restored, but now suggesting a logical link. At the same time, the footnotes explaining passages show that the text favours visual reading.

Finally, the Norton edition of 1997, which is widely used today as a reference text. Here, too, the flow of reading is interrupted by explanations. The colons have disappeared. Punctuation is used solely for grammar and logic.

release me from my bands <sup>o</sup>	<i>fetters</i>
With the help of your good hands. <sup>o</sup>	<i>applause</i>
Gentle breath <sup>o</sup> of yours my sails	<i>Favorable comment</i>
Must fill or else my project fails,	
Which was to please. Now I want <sup>o</sup>	<i>lack</i>
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;	
And my ending <sup>1</sup> is despair,	
Unless I am relieved by prayer,	
Which pierces so, that it assaults	
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.	

<sup>1</sup> Punning on the sense 'death.'

(Shakespeare et al. 1997)

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You may find that I have said a great deal about the inconspicuous, but little about its relevance. The change from rhythmical-oratorical to grammatical logical punctuation also documents a change in the practice of reading, and this has had considerable consequences.<sup>5</sup> The development proceeds not only from reading aloud to silent reading, but also from the shared social experience to the solitude of the reading self.<sup>6</sup> This development, strengthened by the spread of extensive reading—“devour[ing] a large number and a wide variety of ephemeral print matter” (Cavallo, Chartier, p. 25)—in the 18th century, favours prose and made the success of new genres possible, like the novel.

Once this type of reading was taken for granted, as “natural”, this has also had consequences for the study of literature, which to me has always meant “learning how to read”. The consequences are negative: First, the historical dimension of dealing with texts has been blotted out; second, the voice has almost totally been silenced. Rhythm and sound have been neglected. The text has become an object facing the reader, which has to be analyzed in terms of its semantics, and gives rise to philosophical and cultural-historical considerations. *Interpreting* then means only one thing: to attribute meanings. Experience shows that many students, who may well be good dancers, no longer have

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<sup>5</sup> The history of the book and reading has been explored with increasing intensity in recent years; The reference to two classical studies may suffice here: Alberto Manguel's *History of Reading* (1996), and the *Histoire de la lecture dans le monde occidental*, edited by Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier 2003

<sup>6</sup> We need not go back to St. Ambrose in the fourth century, who supposedly was the first person to read without moving his lips. (Manguel 1996, pp. 41–43)

any sense for sound and rhythm in literature and find it difficult to read verse. They often read haltingly, and their intonation remains flat, reproducing the printed line.

In literature, however, a return of the voice can be observed since the early twentieth century. Joyce's *Ulysses* marks here, as in so many areas, a point of closure and revolution. At the end of the novel we get Molly Bloom's night-thoughts, which—how could it be any different in a novel—have to be reproduced as language. The language, however, tries not to follow the laws of speech but those of Molly's associations. Joyce attempts to render the associative flow by dispensing with punctuation (the lonely point at the end marks the end of the novel, not of the thought flow). But this procedure has paradoxical consequences for us readers: we get stuck, we have to read passages a second time. In order to follow the text, we must articulate it for ourselves, and thus take possession of it in a manner which, in the attempt to understand, leads us back to articulation, to the voice.

O and the sea the sea crimson sometimes like  
fire and the glorious sunsets and the figtrees in  
the Alameda gardens yes and all the queer little  
streets and pink and blue and yellow houses and  
the rosegardens and the jessamine and  
geraniums and cactuses and Gibraltar as a girl  
where I was a Flower of the mountain yes when  
I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls  
used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed  
me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as  
well him as another and then I asked him with

my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me  
would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and  
first I put my arms around him yes and drew him  
down to me so he could feel my breasts all  
perfume yes and his heart was going like mad  
and yes I said yes I will Yes. (Joyce 1960,  
pp. 932–933)

Elsewhere the voice has also become audible again: in the popularity of poetry readings and in performance poetry<sup>7</sup>. Today, poetry reaches more people in readings than in printed books, and the text thus again has become something that is not the source of the experience but a reminder of it. These developments are particularly impressive in popular culture, in rapping, and the institution of the poetry slam.<sup>8</sup>

What can be done against the loss of the voice in literary studies? I should like to make three very practical suggestions.

(1) Try to read with an open mouth. You will notice how difficult this is because it makes articulation impossible. This simple experiment shows that articulation may have been stunted, but has never stopped entirely.

(2) Read texts aloud. The values we ascribe to sounds depend essentially on how their articulation feels in our speech-organs. Feel the sensuality of the language.

(3) Learn texts by heart and recite them. This is not just a gesture against the robbery of our memories committed by media culture every day.

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<sup>7</sup>27 years ago, I gave my inaugural lecture on the topic.

<sup>8</sup> The first event of this kind took place in Chicago in 1986 Glazner 2000,

Above all, you are experiencing that the text is no longer an object opposite you, but something you possess and are possessed by—the peculiarly vivid experience of not reading a work from the page, but hearing its voice emerging from yourself.

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But let me conclude. The closer the date of this farewell lecture came, the more stubbornly I asked myself the question: Farewell to what? (I could have stayed on for seven more years according to my contract). It means: Farewell to a university that has successfully modernized itself in many ways, but is increasingly caught in the web of bureaucracy (to give just one example, learning contracts in triplicate, to be submitted to a commission for approval if someone wants to write a term paper). But we have already learned to bypass rules, or, as it is so nicely put, to apply them “pragmatically”). It means farewell to a university which formulated a modern mission statement and then often did the opposite of what it said (One should read this mission statement out loud every year.) It means farewell to an institutional culture that has been increasingly characterized by suspicion rather than trust, and which increasingly takes it for granted that only what can be counted has value. It means saying farewell to colleagues who could never spoil my dream that selfless cooperation is possible, and that we, as a faculty, are capable of managing ourselves. It means farewell to teaching in a subject that has gained increasing popularity, farewell to a department that actively participated in modernization and also made sacrifices for it, but did not gain anything by it: The

staff-student ratio, compared with other subjects, has massively deteriorated, and nothing has been done to improve it.

But above all else it means—not only Prospero feels forgiving— farewell to colleagues and students who challenged and encouraged me, and gave me a lot, and with whom I had—how should I put this without getting too emotive—an exceptionally good time. It means farewell to the old desk in my office, which once belonged to Melchior Berri, the famous local architect, but not to the desk in general—I hope so in any case. It does not mean farewell to books and projects, such as *HyperHamlet*, in which we follow the history of *Hamlet's* presence in discourse, or the European history of English studies.<sup>9</sup>

But let me conclude my conclusion. Since I have been talking about punctuation, I should like to return to it. At the end of my farewell lecture I'd put not a four-syllable pause, not a full stop but—in grammatical-logical terms: A colon.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.hyperhamlet.unibas.ch/>; Engler, Haas 2000; Haas, Engler 2008

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