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CHAPTER NUMBER

THE SEMICOLON—A FUNNY KIND OF SILENCE

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Abstract

Punctuation or “pointing” as it was originally termed, plays a predominate role in regards to emphasis, meaning, an ultimately the interpretation of texts. The semicolon, defined by Rozakis as the “love child of a period and a comma”, plays a specific and complex role in regards to pause, rhythm, and expectation. It thus offers both the writer and the reader what I have termed a “funny kind of silence”. This paper will examine the semicolon first through an historical perspective with regard to how it first came to be in the history of punctuation. We will then consider it through a more contemporary lens, examining some of the controversy it has stirred up and the issues raised by its use in recent times. We will conclude with a study of how the semicolon is used in news articles and literature—notably in *The New Yorker* magazine. Visually more outstanding than the comma or the period, the semicolon is the most demanding of punctuation marks for the reader. It is the most intimate of punctuation marks, and it is perhaps for this reason that it is the most controversial.

The comma with a point

Punctuation or “pointing” as it was originally termed, plays a predominate role in regard to emphasis, meaning, and ultimately the interpretation of texts. The semicolon, defined by Rozakis as the “love child of a period and a comma”, plays a specific and complex role in regards to pause, rhythm, and expectation (Rozakis 2007, 196). It thus offers both the writer and the reader what I have termed a “funny kind of silence”. This paper will examine the semicolon first through an historical perspective in regards to how it first came to be in the history of punctuation and then more specifically its contemporary role in a text.

Visually more outstanding than the comma or the period, the semicolon is the most demanding of punctuation marks for the reader. What follows the mark can be the answer to an invisible question, thus evoking a perhaps undetected question as well as answering it. It is sometimes surreptitiously slipped into the sentence instead of a comma throwing the reader off course. But more outstandingly, the semicolon is the most intimate of punctuation marks, and it is perhaps for this reason that it is the most controversial and both writer and editor nurture a complex relationship with it. *Slate's* Paul Collins noted that in 1887, two French law professors duelled with swords not over a woman, but over the choice of a colon over the semicolon (Collins 2008). Also in 2008, Collins reports that the online publication *Rue '89* published an article stating that French President Sarkozy had issued an official statement that all official documents contain at least three semi-colons per page. Though it was the April 1st issue, it would seem that the practical joke was all that was needed to kindle a debate that illustrated how seriously the French nation took the question of the “point virgule”, and what appeared to be its demise. Collins reports, the blame was placed partially on the ever-encroaching influence of English and its penchant for short sentences. But in the good riddance vein, French author Francois Cavanna stated with his characteristic humour that the semicolon was simply “a parasite, a timid, fainthearted, insipid thing, denoting merely uncertainty, a lack of audacity, a fuzziness of thought” (Henley 2008).

Lynn Truss in her hilarious and informative work on punctuation comes to its defence. While conceding that it is more formal than a dash she notes that it enables more subtle effects (Truss 2003, 122). Before we look more closely into the semicolon, we shall first look more generally into the question of punctuation.

Pointing the way

The history of punctuation coincides with what Danny Karlin maintains to have been “the most important shift in the theory of writing to have taken place in our culture” (Karlin 1993). Because for centuries, written text and spoken were one and the same. Texts were the libretti of performances so there was no need for elaborate *pointing* as punctuation was first termed. Indeed there wasn’t even word division. Classical texts were copied in *scriptio continua*, and the exercise was more like reading a partition. Reading meant reading aloud. If we were to apply this to a contemporary text what we would have is this:

inside the pharaonic parlor of the people's assembly building in downtown Cairo a man named Rifaat has been shining the shoes of Egyptian politicians since 1964 parliamentarians spend their breaks in the parlor which features a marble floor pillars painted to resemble palm trees and a bronze statue of Horus the falcon-headed national god of ancient Egypt Rifaat stashes his cans of shoe polish behind the statue of Horus

Inside the Pharaonic parlor of the People’s Assembly Building, in downtown Cairo, a man named Rifaat has been shining shoes since 1964. Parliamentarians spend their breaks in the parlour which features a marble floor, pillars painted to resemble palm trees, and a bronze statue of Horus, the falcon-headed national God of ancient Egypt. Rifaat stashes his cans of shoe polish behind the statue of Horus. (Hessler 2012)

We have here the opening paragraph of a *New Yorker* article on the 2012 anniversary of the “Arab Spring” in Egypt imitating a Roman monumental inscription, and following the conventions prominent from the late classical period through to about 600 A.D (Parkes 1993, 12).

And if it difficult for us to read, it is because we can no longer handle a text without the mediation of punctuation. In a text written in *scriptio continua* as this excerpt illustrates above, the responsibility of the reader was enormous.

The merit of *scriptio continua* was that it presented the reader with a neutral text. To introduce graded pauses while reading required an interpretation of the text, an activity requiring literary judgement and therefore one properly reserved to the reader. In ancient Rome readers of literary texts were mostly a social élite, whereas full-time scribes were usually freedmen or slaves. (Parkes 1993, 11)

The reader became the writer’s cohort, responsible for providing the pause and thus the effect. Intonation, rhythm and more specifically how the text was to be interpreted were all left to the individual’s literary judgment. But punctuation came about because of a new way that writing was perceived. Parkes recounts how for Augustine written words were the “signs of sounds”, and Isidore of Seville saw letters as “having the power to convey to us silently, the sayings of those who are absent”. For Augustine reading aloud was intimately tied with the responsibility inherent in reading the word of God. This could not be put into the hands (the voice) of just anybody. There needed to be something to guide the reader along. The way the word of God was to be conveyed was, as Parkes points out, one of the major influences in the way textual theory was to evolve and the appearance of punctuation. Karlin gives the following example of how mastering the basic syntax of a passage when reading aloud was tantamount to conveying the divinity of the Word. Unpunctuated texts would leave readers in doubt about:

[...] where to pause in the correct (that is, orthodox) delivery of the opening verse of St. John’s Gospel: *in principio erat verbum et verbum erat apud deum et deus erat verbum hoc erat in principio apud deum*. It was heretical to pause after *et deus erat*, Augustine pointed out: it denied the divinity of the Word. How was the reader to know this? By knowledge of Christian doctrine derived from other parts of Scripture, and by the authority of the Church; but the former argument is circular, and the latter merely dogmatic. Augustine’s difficulty would have been (and eventually was) resolved by punctuation, a means of putting the doctrinal fix in texts. (Karlin 1993)

Thanks to *pointing* the reader would be guided as to where the correct pause was to be placed. And as Richard Hanna points out in his review of Parkes:

[...] the sentence ending dot can be aligned with major movements of intellectual history, i.e. the major turns in Western knowledge and sophistication occur in the Carolingian renaissance and in the Italian quattrocento. The first in its need to produce standardized liturgical books for widespread use transformed the punctuation system it had inherited in the interests of oratorical performance (pp 35-37 in Parkes). The second, in its rejection of a logic ridden scholastic pointing in favour of a flexible appreciation of the ancients’ *eloquentia* underwrote the proliferation of pointing that marks our print world (46-49: 83-87 in Parkes). (Hanna 1994, 380-381)

The semicolon was a late arrival on the punctuation scene. While the other marks of punctuation were derived from the handwritten forms, the semicolon was a deliberate invention of Venetian printers and saw the day with the advent of humanist printing at the end of the fifteenth century (Parkes 1993, 83).

Most often associated with formal writing, the modern day grammatical rules that dictate its use place the semicolon just below the period in hierarchy concerning pauses. Huddleston & Pullum consider it to be near in value to the coordinating conjunction “and”. In order to be used correctly it can only be placed between two independent clauses, or in complex enumerations instead of a comma. Here, is a sentence taken from the June 18 2012 article from *The New Yorker* commemorating the first anniversary of the Arab spring:

Comments were scathing: the Brothers were liars; they had made a mess of parliament; they cared only about their own interests. (Hessler 2012)

The colon is traditionally used to warn the reader that what follows is an example, as is the case here. The semicolon is justified because canonically, a comma can only separate phrases. But as we will see further down, the use or the non-use of the semicolon is often more subtle and more subversive than the simple grammatical rule may lead us to believe. Here for example, the use of the semicolon enables the journalist to sum up the comments in reported speech and to give to each a comment- an importance that would disappear if the comma had been chosen. It establishes a parallelism in the structure and above all it provides an invitation to the reader to reflect.

As Parkes points out, the decision to place semicolons was the choice of publishers, and Karlin illustrates this by comparing this modern day publication of Wordsworth’s ‘Resolution and Independence’ (here below), with the original which follows and finally Coleridge’s editing hand on the first manuscript:

I
 There was a roaring in the wind of night;
 The rain came heavily and fell in floods;
 But now the sun is rising calm and bright;
 The birds are singing in the distant woods;
 Over his own sweet voice the Stock-dove broods;
 The Jay makes answer as the Magpie chatters;
 And all the air is filled wit pleasant noise of waters.
 (Wordsworth 1966, 136)

But in its earliest extant version copied out in Sarah Hutchinson’s hand we discover an austere and more ascetic version:

There was a roaring in the wind of night
 The rain came heavily and fell in floods
 But now the sun is rising calm and bright
 The Birds are singing in the distant woods
 Over his own sweet voice the stock-dove broods
 The Jay makes answer as the magpie chatters
 And all the air is filled wit pleasant noise of waters.

And here is a copy by Coleridge of a transcript given to him by Dorothy Wordsworth. Karlin assumes that it is Coleridge who edited, but whether it be this version below or the modern version at the top, the plethora of semicolons in each begs comment.

There was a roaring in the wind of night;
 The rain came heavily, - and fell in floods;
 But now the sun is rising calm and bright,
 The Birds are singing in the distant woods;
 Over his own sweet voice the stock-dove broods,
 The jay makes answer as the magpie chatters;
 And all the air is filled wit pleasant noise of waters.

Karlin notes that Wordsworth’s approach to punctuation is “primitive, not to say Classical” (Karlin 1993). But the onslaught of semicolons in the modern version and the alternate comma/semicolon in Coleridge’s indicate to what extent Wordsworth had given up a good deal of control on how the poem would be discovered

by readers. What is even more troubling is how the meaning of the poem is altered by what Huddleston & Pullum designate as “heavy punctuation”.¹

The semicolon end stops each line in the modern version and in every second line in Coleridge’s. Karlin maintains that the half rhymes become even more evident because of all the semicolons in today’s version. I myself think that in giving each line more autonomy, the half rhymes seem less surprising. Surely periods would have been more restful for the reader in lines 2, and 4. The poem becomes a complex enumeration and the constellation of semicolons is a tad heavy-handed.² As a strict linguistic marker for the 21st century reader this plethora of punctuation functions almost like a fluorescent underliner, begging us to look for links, almost as though the editor fears that the reader might not be able to do it themselves. Instead of offering a pregnant pause inviting reflection, the reader feels overwhelmed with visual clues on how to read the poem. It is almost as if the punctuation is harping on us to *get the point*.

Though the domain of prosody belongs to oral production, and it would be misleading on my part to maintain that punctuation gives us all the clues a reader needs to get the tone right, Huddleston and Pullum concede that the equivalent of the semicolon in oral production would be a narrow pitch range or a rising nucleus at the end of the first clause with or without a coordinating conjunction. A rising nucleus is the one we find in yes/no questions, and we are going to discover examples where the semicolon does indeed appear to camouflage a hidden question. It is interesting to note that the ancient Greeks use of the semicolon for the question mark is still in use today, and in many examples we can find traces of this still in its usage in English. “The semicolon tells you that there is still some question about the preceding full sentence, something needs to be added” (Thomas 1979, 104).

Surely in all great literary texts something must always be added, and that which is to be added comes from the reader. This is the greatest part of the pleasure in reading. But the modern edition of Wordsworth’s poem, and its abundance of semicolons functions almost like a fill-in-the-blanks text with each semicolon outrageously signalling to the reader that MEANING IS TO BE FOUND HERE. Ben Dolnick in an article that appeared in *The New York Times* comments that “deft use of the semicolon to pile on clauses is a way of saying to the reader, who is already holding a bag of groceries, *Here, I know it’s a lot, but can you take another* (Dolnick 2012). When the semicolon appears without restraint it is not only asking a lot of the reader—that is something all good readers thrive on—it is not according them enough intuition and skill to figure things out for themselves. It is this sort of use of the semicolon that justifiably gets on one’s nerves. So that due respect to this specific manner of *pointing* be sustained, certain particularities must be kept in mind, and this is what we shall look at next.

“Telling Two”

We have seen above that according to linguists, the grammatical element that it is the closest to is the coordinate conjunction “and”, and in this way it is a linking device. But because of its physical manifestation on the page, it separates much more than “and” does, and stands out more than the comma. For the semicolon to be well used it must be a mediator between the writer and the reader. How can this be so? First of all the semicolon is an invitation to pause. When punctuation was still largely taught around oratorical pauses, the 1737 *Bibliotheca Technologica* recognizes, “the Comma which stops the voice while you tell one; the Semicolon pauseth while you tell two. The Colon while you tell three, and then the Period or full stop while you tell four.” (Collins 2008) It’s this “telling two” that makes the semicolon so subtle.

If all punctuation marks the end of an intonation unit in English, the longer pause required by the semicolon in a sentence not yet completed is not innocuous. And though, as stated above, punctuation cannot give us all the information necessary to capture in accurate detail the prosody of a work of prose, close attention must be paid to this invitation to pause.

¹ Huddleston & Pullum stipulate that the rules of punctuation are by no means entirely uniform. The distinction they establish between light and heavy punctuation refers to an option writers have in regards to the comma. I have extended the term of heavy punctuation to include the semicolon here.

² Lewis Thomas, in his defence of semicolons on T.S. Eliot’s poems states that it is what he likes the best. “You cannot hear them, but they are there, laying out the connections between images and ideas. Sometimes you get a glimpse of a semicolon coming, a few lines further on, and it is like climbing a steep path through woods and seeing a wooden bench just at the bend in the road ahead, a pace where you can expect to sit for a moment catching your breath. Commas cannot do that sort of thing, they can only tell you how the difficult parts of a complicated thought are to be fitted together, but you can’t sit, not even take a breath, just because of a comma, (sic) (105).

In an interview with Andy Ross, *The New Yorker's* copyeditor, Mary Ross explained how the fine-toothed-comb editing of the magazine is organized. Though all final decisions are hers, the task is distributed between what she terms “four full-time O.K.’ers as well as a team of six proofreaders. Here is her description of how a piece is edited before it publishing:

Basically, on the day a piece closes, you read it, and give the editor your query proof, which will also contain the queries of a second proofreader, and after the editor has entered all the acceptable changes and sent the new version to the Makeup Department, you read the new version. There will sometimes be a “closing meeting,” when the editor, the writer, the fact checker, and the O.K.’er sit down together over the page proof and discuss final changes. The O.K.’er then copies these changes onto a pristine proof called the Reader’s (to keep the paper trail) and enters them into the electronic file, and sends the revised piece back to Makeup. The next version is read against the Reader’s proof by another layer of proofreaders, the night foundry readers. [...] Next [...] a piece is “Goulded.” This used to be the domains of the legendary Eleanor Gould Packard, a grammarian and a genius. [...] One of the query proofreaders, on a day when she is not O.K.’ing a piece, reads the galleys of a piece that is scheduled for a future issue, fixing spelling and punctuation, of course, but also making more subtle suggestions. Query proofreaders at *The New Yorker* are probably more like line editors at other publications. We go over the piece twice. We fix danglers. We try to improve sentences, making sure that the author is saying what he or she intends to say. [...] When a piece is scheduled to run in the magazine, we read it again, twice. As I said above, in addition to the O.K.’er, each piece has a second reader, to back up the O.K.’er. The O.K.’er then has the duty of reading the piece yet again, to make sure no mistakes have been introduced, and also to smooth things out. Sometimes a fact checker’s language does not blend in with the writer’s voice, although the checkers work closely with the writers, Any material added by the writer or the checker has to be copy-edited. This takes as long as it takes, and we don’t rush out at 6 P.M. (Ross 2009)

I have included Norris’ full explanation because of its relevance to the case at hand. The gruelling editing that each article is submitted to implies that each sentence, each word, each punctuation mark has been granted the stamp of approval. Though the magazine’s editing team has loudly defended their use of the “serial comma”,³ Norris has come out strongly against the semicolon:

I have a friend [...] [who] is very fond of the semicolon. [...] She likes to think of a semicolon as a comma with vibrato. [...] I have never liked vibrato. I like a clear sound, without a lot of throb in it. (Norris, "Semicolons: So Tricky" 2012)

Norris goes on to say that semicolons are defensible when they are not in dialogue (“In general, people—even people in love—do not speak in flights that demand semicolons.”). She gives as an example “She looked at me; I was lost for words.” She admits something would be lost without the semicolon and though she would spontaneously be tempted by a period, she admits that it would make the words sink at the end. SHE LOOKED at me. Norris adds, “The semicolon keeps the words above water: because of that semicolon something about her look is going to be significant.” Indeed, Norris correctly perceives that the semicolon adjusts the intonation of the passage. With a full stop the nucleus falls on “looked” because it can’t fall on a pronoun. The nucleus remains the same with the semicolon, but since it retains something of the interrogative to it, orally there would be the narrow pitch raise and the rising nucleus. And though we are reading silently, we bring our skills of competent reader with us, and thus the intonation. Arabyan explains:

If it is the written language we are speaking of, we can postulate that the written text is indeed a representation of that language. If, on the other hand, it is the system of verbal interaction—the act of speaking aloud—that is our concern, the act of speaking aloud which only encounters the written text when a text is read aloud, we must conclude that the written text is not the image of the spoken word, but rather the image which written language as an autonomous system gives to speech. [...] The act of reading, in a way, precedes the act of writing—thus the following possible definition: writing is the capacity to anticipate on the reading that the reader will give to the text when read aloud, taking into consideration all the alphanumerical and punctuation instructions as well as the page settings which will enable the reader to simulate the contours of the human voice. (Arabyan 2001, 215 *translation mine*)

The New Yorker does not go overboard with semicolons. Even in their long articles they are accepted sparingly. That is why I was fascinated when coming across the six-page article on the anniversary of the “Arab spring” in June 2012 to find 17 semicolons. There is no the space to cite them all here, but here are some of the sentences:

³ The serial comma or Oxford comma is the optional comma before a coordinate conjunction in a series of three or more terms.

1. Even today, basic facts like membership and finding are a mystery. One spokesman told me the Brotherhood has around four hundred thousand members, another said seven hundred thousand; and Rashad El-Bayouni, one of the top leaders, told me that some estimates are as high as two million, although he said that he didn't know the real figures.

2. Many in Cairo saw the Brothers as opportunists who had dodged the square in order to focus on their own campaigns. And their election machine ran brilliantly; the Freedom and Justice Party was by far the most organized, and candidates emphasized their desire to collaborate with Christians and secularists.

3. Members offer proposals; some are good and others are not so good.

4. But it's too late; millions of Egyptians watched intently during the early weeks when the parliament seemed to represent the first real fruit of the revolution. Yet it has little power without a new executive branch or a constitution, and the military council ignored the parliament's attempt to replace the provisional government.

5. After the Party's first candidate was disqualified, on a technicality, it nominated Mohamed Morsi, an American educated engineer. He had little charisma and was best known for supporting more powerful figures in the Brotherhood; the press immediately labelled him the spare tire.

6. They found him too theoretical; they said that a real Muslim Brother focuses on the grass roots.

7. They had been covering demonstrations in the Cairo neighborhood of Abbasuya; the situation had turned violent and the military held a number of journalists overnight and mistreated them. (Hessler 2012)

What can be noted in these sentences is that with the exception of examples 3, and 6 the semicolon could not be replaced by "and" either because the coordinate conjunction appears already directly after the semicolon (1), or because it appears further ahead in the following clause (2 and 7), or because it already present in the preceding clause (5).

If a grammatical element were to be inserted in its place it would be the period. Or in 6 the resultative "so". We might note in 4 that the expectation that is established by the semicolon is drawn out for the rest of the clause and one more sentence before it is satisfied. It is the expectation that the semicolon builds up which makes it so intricate. The fact that the semicolon appears with such frequency in an article treating so sensitive an area as the "Arab Spring" superbly illustrates its role as a mediator. If the copyediting people at *The New Yorker* allowed such ample use of the semicolon here, it is perhaps because Hessler found in it an efficient tool to assist him in the delicate task of reporting a situation, which as we have sadly witnessed, has become more and more complex. The semicolon in its capacity to separate and at the same time link enables the author to "argufy". The term is William Empson's from his 1988 collection of essays of the same name. David Trotter sums it up perfectly:

"This portable caesura allows the author to pause for anticipation and renewal rather than completion. [...] the semicolon rounds off a judicious and rather impersonal summary, but leaves room for a more personal, less guarded supplement. The change of perspective will not harden into law. (Trotter 1988)

Hessler, preferring to tread softly in dealing with a situation where there are no easy answers (especially from an American journalist) is careful not to turn what he says into law. Michel Volkrvitch quoted in *The Guardian* article expresses it best:

The "point virgule" is needed when the subject matter is complex, for constructing a piece properly, distinguishing themes, sections and subsections—in short for dissipating any haziness or imprecision of thought. It puts things in order. It clarifies. But it also comes in handy for adding softness, a little lightness—it can stop a sentence from touching the ground, from grounding it to a halt, it keeps it suspended, it keeps it awake. It is the most upmarket mark.

The semicolon is like a drum roll announcing more to come. As Jeannette Winterston has said in its defence it creates "the right pause, the right possibility of a pause, in a sense, which in a world where everybody reads as fast as possible can be a very useful intervention or hesitation." (Henley]. Even though we don't "tell two" anymore when we encounter the semicolon, this most upmarket mark keeps us on our toes. It is an outstretched arm inviting us to pause, to reflect and to... "wait for it".

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