

Behind the Slash

The slash is appearing with increasing frequency in constructions like *listener/speaker* and *memory/motor skills*. It sometimes joins coordinate words that are alternatives in a sentence, but more often joins coordinates additively, especially nouns and noun compounds. Constructions with a slash are useful in providing lexical cohesion over extended passages. Like other devices in written English, they contribute to making information more integrated in writing than in speech.

In becoming literate, readers must learn to interpret those aspects of a language that are peculiar to its written form as well as those that relate directly to its spoken form. Punctuation plays a part in both aspects, following conventions both independent of the grammatical structures of the language and congruent to them. The period indicates an abbreviation of a written form on the one hand and marks off syntactic boundaries on the other; the hyphen at the end of a line indicates that there is more of a word to come and also serves to join words grammatically, as in *clear-eyed* and *late-blooming*. The slash (or slant, virgule, shilling, diagonal, or solidus) is a punctuation mark whose place in the English writing system is not so well-fixed. But it is eye-catching because its use seems to be expanding in expository and technical writing, not only in frequency, but in functions that are not given attention in standard handbooks. These are our guides to written usage, but writers outpace them in current use of the slash. How we are to interpret it and the structures it appears in is my small question here.

Dictionaries, college handbooks, and guides for writers such as the *Chicago Manual of Style* (1982) and the *Britannica Book of English Usage* (Timmons and Gibney 1980) note the use of the slash in several specialized ways. It directly represents *per*, as in expressions like *ft/sec*². It serves to separate entities, setting off phonemic symbols and marking off lines of poetry when they are printed continuously. The slash also serves to join entities as it separates them. For instance, it joins numerals into a fraction while separating the numerator from the denominator, as in $3/4$, and it joins numerals into a date, as in $3/4/43$.

Furthermore, the slash joins words in discourse, the dictionaries and handbooks point out, separating alternatives so that either word can be used to interpret a sentence, for instance, *his/her* in *Every writer needs to know at least something about his/her audience*. But the examples offered show that

the slash is not at all limited to alternatives that are mutually exclusive. Even *and/or*, the prototypical example of the slash, requires that both *and* and *or* be used to interpret sentences like *Judge Sirica could have sentenced the burglar to five years in jail and/or a \$50,000 fine*. In such cases readers cannot choose one of the words on either side of the slash and then move on. Rather, both words apply. After all, the slash not only joins alternatives, as the handbooks say, but more often joins coordinates in an additive relation.

The slash is prospering, especially in academic writing, feature writing in popular magazines, and the technical prose of the corporate world. By and large, it occurs in coordinate constructions, usually joining nouns, noun compounds, and less frequently adjectives and other classes. Thus,

- (1) listener/speaker
reading/language arts achievement
background knowledge/text relationship
African/Afro-American studies
regionally/socially different

The frequent appearance of the slash in discourse is paralleled by the growing use of the slash in proper names and headings, particularly titles of books, category headings in indices, catalogs, and programs, occupational titles, and institutional names:

- (2) *Notebooks/Memoirs/Archives: Reading and Rereading Doris Lessing*
Speeches/Meetings
folk singer/composer/story teller
Doubleday/Britannica Books.

It is in such cases, especially in academic settings, that the slash now and then appears in constructions whose constituents are not coordinate. In such cases, it is the second constituent that limits the first, e.g.,

- (3) UC/Berkeley
Vice President/Academic Affairs
Psychology/Physiological

The use of the slash in titles and institutional names corresponds to its popularity in the typographic design of brochures, reference books, newspaper advertizing, and the like. In many such cases the relationship between the entities joined by the slash is not interpretable grammatically but rather pragmatically. For instance, *Television / 2-12* appears on the cover of a Sunday newspaper supplement, *Television Week / C. Gerald Fraser* appears on page 3, *Sunday / May 22* appears on page 4, and *Sunday / continued* on page 5. In each case we interpret the relationship by virtue of our knowledge of the content and form of such a supplement, such as the title of a regular column and a by-line.

In discourse, however, a grammatical relationship usually binds the constituents joined by a slash and that relationship is usually a coordinate one. It is tempting to suggest that such coordinate constructions derive simply from extending the application of the optional conjunct erasure rule (Keyser and Postal 1976), so that while in speech we have *Dick or Jane or Sally* and *Dick, Jane or Sally*, in writing we can have *Dick/Jane/Sally*. The conjuncts *and*, *or*, and *nor* are erased and the slash appears in their places. But there are various restrictions on this possibility. It turns out that the slash resists appearance in constructions realized as surface subject and object, thriving rather in complexly derived constructions such as the *Dick/Jane distinction* or the *institutionalization of Dick/Jane/Sally*, but seldom in something like *Dick/Jane/Sally now rest in peace*. The slash does not occur at all in constructions that would seem congenial, such as **either Dick/Jane; *neither Dick/Jane; both Dick/Jane* and hardly appears in negative contexts. It also turns out that, unlike its closest lexical counterparts, *and* and *or*, the slash generally does not join verbs, verb phrases, noun phrases other than compounds, or, in particular, sentences. Conjoined sentences such as *Dick can run and Jane can play* are not to be found as *Dick can run/Jane can play*, unless as an attributive constituent of a noun phrase such as *the Dick can run/Jane can play style*. By and large, the slash joins lexical items, usually nouns and noun compounds, rather than larger entities.

The lexical items so joined usually stand in an additive relation. In addition to (1) and (2) above, here are various examples with their apparent meaning as clear from their place in context:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| (4) the author/illustrator | the referent of the coordinates is the same person |
| Brazilians/Portuguese | the two referents are combined into a single group |
| a rural/suburban area | both characteristics apply |
| linguistic/cultural background | both attributes apply |

In joining items in an alternative relation, the slash corresponds to *or*. This is the case in the pairs *he/she* (and its orthographically condensed version *s/he*), *his/her* and *her/him*, as in *Each student must pay his/her share*. Alternatives joined by *or* may be mutually exclusive, as in *She studied Sinhala or Tamil, I can't remember which*. But it is frequently the case that *or* joins coordinates with the additive meaning of *and*. So-called inclusive *or* can be easily seen in the negative, as in *He couldn't speak Sinhala or Tamil*, where not speaking either language means not speaking both. It is because *or* is so often inclusive that the usefulness of *and/or* is questioned in the usage handbooks (e.g., Evans and Evans 1957). An announcement calling for papers on

theoretical and/or clinical questions on child language could have simply read *theoretical or clinical questions*; the *or* alone would have included the possibility for papers on both. Given this inclusive meaning, it is not surprising that the slash, the sometime counterpart of *or*, serves to join coordinates in an inclusive, additive relation, as the examples in (4) illustrate.

Or also serves to join synonymous or nearly synonymous terms, the second giving an alternative form, a definition, or a restatement of the first, such as *darning needle or dragon fly* and *hypnophobia or fear of sleep*. Likewise, the slash appears in this role. For example, in an essay assuring us that Malay and Indonesian are one and the same language, the author uses *Malay or Indonesian*, then *Malay/Indonesian*, and then simply *Malay*. In some cases writers who use the slash in this way seem reluctant to choose one term over another, as though they want to avoid losing a subtle shade of meaning or taking an undesirable point of view, thus *Tagalog/Pilipino*; *miscue/error*; *gender/sex*; *garlic/onions*.

The slash is a device in written English that contributes to its distinctive quality. Like other characteristics of written language, constructions with the slash generally serve to integrate meaning in discourse, to use Chafe's (1982) term, making the presentation of information more compressed, complex, and deeply-layered than it usually is in speech. As Chafe points out, among the structures that appear in writing with greater frequency than in speech are nominalizations (*differential treatment of children* in contrast to *they treated the children differently*), conjoined phrases (*The traders are greedy and gullible*) and attributive rather than predicate adjectives (*the old house* in contrast to *the house was old*). These are the sorts of structures that are packed together even more tightly in a favorite type of slash construction illustrated by:

- (5) spoken/written classification
- speed/accuracy tradeoff
- assistantship/fellowship allocation
- scholarship/research requirements.

Here *classification* and the other nominalizations have conjoined direct objects (loosely speaking) that are preposed to attributive position and joined by the slash, making for tightly compressed phrases.

Constructions like these and others, if considered in isolation may seem to be difficult to interpret, unclear, and ambiguous. It is easy to trip on *language gender/sex interactions*, *chance/skill folk theories*, *speaker/listener rights and duties*, since the potential for ambiguity grows with the number or coordinates. In fact, many instances like these can be interpreted unambiguously in context because they partly derive their meaning from it, often serving to refer back to previously mentioned material. As a topic is unfolded, more and more information is laid out by the writer, bits and pieces related to one

another, previously mentioned characters, events, facts, constructs, and categories mentioned again and worked into the expression. There are various devices in English available to establish such ties (Halliday and Hasan 1976), especially in adjoining nearby sentences, such as the use of pronouns, ellipsis, and repetition of lexical items. Constructions with a slash add to the possibilities of lexical cohesion through extended passages in written English. For example, in mentioning a list of books including *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, a magazine writer referred back to it as *Bodies/Selves*. Similarly, to summarize the findings of a study, a researcher drew together the strands of an experiment, reporting that *good and poor readers' same/different responses to word/word or picture/word pairs do not differ*. Likewise, in an article analyzing children's first attempts at writing and putting down language in visible form, the author says, "Two predominant bases for segmentation were found in these data: a syntactic basis and a phonological or morphological one" (Edelsky 1983:138). In the next few pages of the article we find various references back to these analytic categories through the use of the slash, for instance:

- (6) The two ways phonologically/morphologically-based segmentation was realized (141)
 flagrant violations of either syntactic or phonological/morphological categories (142)
 among syntactic and phonological/morphological types (149).

The slash construction is not necessary here, of course. A single, inclusive term such as *segmental* or an abbreviation such as *PM* could have done the same job. Or the sentences might have been recast in a more discursive style, e.g., "among the types based on syntax and phonology or morphology."

In fact, full extended phrases in some types of discourse may be tedious to the practiced reader of technical material. Constructions with the slash may be lacking in grace, especially to the nonspecialist reader, but efficient and economical for particular purposes. Describing the stack-up nouns such as *attitude control system* and *separation and destruct ordinance equipment* in the jargon of space scientists, McNeill (1966) pointed out that these constructions in writing serve the scientists' real need for an accessible technical vocabulary. They are, by the way, more frequently used in writing than in speech. McNeill also pointed out, however, that magazine writers reporting on space use these nominal compounds more frequently than scientists themselves, perhaps pretending that they have a greater degree of scientific understanding than they really have. At times the slash may reveal similar pretensions to precision, comprehensiveness, or modishness. Its effect may be tiresome, as in

Under such circumstances dialects/sociolects that are common in other parts of the country/region/district may be generally unmastered and non-functional *within* particular administrative units

or remarkably gratuitous, as in *rewards too numerous to count in our love/marriage/family relationship*.

It is worth noting that the slash may be competing with other punctuation in coordinate constructions, sometimes the comma, sometimes the hyphen. The comma separates coordinates in a series, but sometimes the slash appears instead, as in *words/syllables/blends/letters*. In particular, it may join doublets in a series, as in *warden/guardian; warranty/guarantee; reward/regard*. Sometimes it is used instead of a comma to stave off ambiguity by pairing coordinates against a contrasting third, as in *gender/sex and language systems*. The hyphen, on the other hand, often joins coordinates when the coordinate construction is itself attributive, as in

- (7) the oral-written dichotomy
the Chomsky-Jackendoff position
the cardinal-goldfinch-bluebird division.

It is in such cases that the slash often appears instead of a hyphen, as in *oral/written dichotomy*, and so on. The examples in (7) appeared in their respective texts first one way, then the other, demonstrating that the use of the slash is far from established.

Like other punctuation marks, the slash has come to play several roles in written English. Its place on the standard typewriter keyboard was probably gained by its conventional uses with numerals and measures. Its current typographic favor, not to say its functions in widely used computer languages, complements its current use to join grammatical coordinates in discourse. The slash extends the distinctiveness of English in its visible form.

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