

## Abstract

*A special issue of Visible Language (Winter 1978, 12:1) was devoted to the interface between reading and listening. It is significant that, among the six articles in that issue, there is no mention of punctuation or of intonation. These two topics are among the least-studied aspect of visual and auditory language. This article represents an effort to explore one aspect of the relationship between intonation and punctuation. The historical development of marks of punctuation is outlined, and uses and prescriptions for the comma from the sixteenth century onwards are described. Prescriptive recommendations for the comma in the twentieth century are examined in detail and compared with what is known about the division of connected speech into intonation-groups. It is suggested that, where syntactic prescription and intonational usage conflict, a return to more elocutionary punctuation would in many cases aid intelligibility.*

## Intonation and the Comma

Alan Cruttenden

### Historical Background

#### *Pre-printing*

Greek rhetorical theory divided discourse into sections of different lengths called κομμα κῶλον and περιόδος. According to Sandys (1903:125) and Brown (1974-82:274), Aristophanes of Byzantium (approximately 260 B.C.) was the first to use a system of punctuation which was related to these rhetorical divisions; the three relevant marks were known as υποστιγμη, “subordinate mark,” μεση στιγμη, “intermediate mark” and τελεια στιγμη, “full mark.” Υποστιγμη (at the end of a κομμα) involved a point after the middle of the last letter of the section, μεση στιγμη a point after the bottom of the letter and τελεια στιγμη a point after the top of the letter. The names for the lengths of sections were eventually used also for the different heights of points. (But, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, even as late as the eighteenth century, “comma” was still sometimes used in English with the meaning “a group of words in a sentence” rather in the way that a phrase like “measured periods” is used today.) No system of punctuation ever appears to have been in regular use in Greek and Latin manuscripts, single dots, double dots, treble dots and virgules (see below) being in use variously for purposes of word separation, pausing, indicating ends of sentences and larger sections (Skelton, 1949:157-9). By the ninth century, commas and inverted semi-colons appeared in Greek manuscripts, as did the ordinary semi-colon used as a question mark, a usage which continues into modern Greek.

The situation in early English prior to the invention of printing appears to have been similar to that in the later Greek manuscripts (Husband and Husband, 1905:17-31 and Strang, 1970:343-5). As early as A.D. 900 Manuscript Hatton 20 of King Alfred’s translation of Pope Gregory’s *Cura Pastoralis* has a dot (present-day comma), inverted semi-colon (present-day semi-colon) and semi-colon (full stop). On the other hand, the Cotton Manuscript of

Department of Linguistics  
University of Manchester  
Oxford Road  
Manchester M13 9PL  
United Kingdom

*Visible Language*, 25:1  
Alan Cruttenden, pp. 54-73  
© *Visible Language*, 1990  
Rhode Island School of Design  
Providence, RI 02903

Beowulf (circa 1000) uses only the dot at low and middle levels, and this only erratically; the Laud Manuscript of the Peterborough Chronicle (circa 1150) is similar. The Douce Manuscript of Wycliffe's translation of the Bible (circa 1380) uses / . . : although it is difficult to determine on what system. None of these manuscripts uses the simple comma; indeed, despite the fact that Campbell (1959:13) says that the comma is used freely in Old English, it appears to have been used mainly in combination in the semi-colon.

Although the most common equivalent of the present-day comma in classical and early English was some sort of dot (often a middle-height dot), there was certainly no prescriptive usage laid down. The dot (and indeed every punctuation mark) was used on an ad hoc basis to aid intelligibility (and of course to aid reading aloud).

#### *Early Post-printing*

The earliest books printed in English are sparsely and arbitrarily punctuated (compared with the elaborate punctuation used for contemporary Latin and Greek printing, e.g., the *Gutenberg Bible*, 1455). Caxton, printing at Westminster from 1476-91, used only three marks (and these only irregularly): full stop, colon and virgule (/ from Latin *virgula*, "rod"), which served as a comma. In 1490, Manutius founded the Aldine Press in Venice and his grandson Manutius the Younger described the system of punctuation used by the Press in *Orthographiae Ratio*, 1561 (partially translated in Appendix B of Husband and Husband, 1905). The marks , ; : . ? were used with approximately their present values. By Shakespeare's time (see Hart, 1551, 1569), this system of punctuation was as widely used in England as it is today, although the single dot continued to be known as the "period," until the term "full stop," became more common in the late nineteenth century. In this first century of printing, guidance on the use of marks (including the comma) was mainly elocutionary (i.e., concerned with reading aloud), e.g., "comma . . . is in reading the shortest rest" (Hart, 1569:200). But there was already hints of syntactic prescription, e.g., "the comma . . . does not indeed close a complete sentence, but it separates names, or words, that differ only slightly from each other, as, when we say, An upright, and learned man: or By dint of earnestness, exertion, and effort: and in

other cases.” (Manutius, 1561, translated in Husband and Husband, 1905:131, keeping Manutius’ punctuation).

### *Elocutionary Punctuation in Post-printing*

From the start two principles have been in conflict in English punctuation, the elocutionary (i.e., how to read aloud) and the syntactic (often called logical). In three famous texts Simpson (1911), Pollard (1920) and Wilson (1921), the idea was put forward that the punctuation of Shakespeare’s plays, in both the quartos and the first folio, was principally elocutionary. According to Pollard, “. . . in Shakespeare’s day, at any rate in poetry and drama, all the four stops . . . could be and (on occasion) were, used simply and solely to denote pauses of different length, irrespective of grammar and syntax” (1920:90). Wilson (1921), having asserted that the punctuation of both quartos and first folio was partly Shakespeare’s own, but stemmed partly from other members of his playhouse and also partly from compositors, went on to say that this punctuation is dramatic, and quite independent of syntax. According to Wilson, a comma indicates a short pause, a semi-colon a longer one, a colon one longer still, and a full stop a *full* stop [Wilson’s emphasis], which sometimes occurs in the middle of a sentence. Further, absence of punctuation, where a modern reader would expect it, implies rapid delivery. A.C. Partridge (1964) took issue with Wilson in suggesting that the first folio, as opposed to the quartos, represented a compromise between an elocutionary and a syntactic system. Partridge considered that playhouse pointing was, for many plays, the basis of the first folio; but he also suggested that much was later grafted on to it, and in the process older punctuation marks were not always deleted, which produced overstepping, and sometimes confusion. (There have been others who have doubted the theory of pausal punctuation altogether, e.g., Fries, 1925.) Contemporary Elizabethan and Jacobean grammarians, when describing punctuation marks, gave at least equal weight to the phonetics associated with each mark as to its syntactic uses. Table 1 displays the phonetics and the meaning associated with each mark in Butler (1634). It can be seen that the phonetic correlates of each mark are described principally in terms of pitch and pause; and in no sense is the meaning associated with each mark as prescriptively syntactic as is the case today. Although Butler’s writing (and other’s) gives

Table 1

**Semantics and Phonetics of Each Punctuation Mark in Butler (1634)**

	<b>Semantics</b>	<b>Phonetics</b>
<b>Period</b> , page 58	Period is a point of perfect sens, and perfect sentence:	which, in the last woord, falleth the tone of the voice below its ordinari tenour, with a long paus
<b>Colon</b> , page 58	Colon is a point of perfect sens, but not of perfect sentence:	which falleth the tone of the voice, with a shorter paus
<b>Semicolon</b> , pge 59	Colon is a point of imperfect sens, in the middle of a Colon or Period: commonly, when it is a compound axiom; whose parts are joynd together, by a dubble, and soom-time by a single conjunction:	and it continueth the tenour or tone of the voice to the last woord, with a Colon-paus
<b>Comma</b> , page 59	Comma is a point of more imperfect sens, in a simple axiom, or in either part of a compound:	which continueth the tenour of the voice to the last, with the shortest paus
<b>Erotesis</b> , page 61 ( <i>Question mark</i> )	Erotesis is a note, not only (1) of Asking; . . . and (2) of Urging or instance in reprehension: . . . but also (3) of earnest Avouching the contrari; wheither the Interrogation bee affirmative or negative	Erotesis, if it be pure, raiseth the common tone or tenour of the voice in the last word; unless Emphasis draw it: but if it begin with an interrogative; as [who, what, how, where, when, why, &c;] it falleth as a Period, and raiseth the tone in the Interrogative . . . . . . This point, in the 2 last uses thereof, straineth the sound of the voice thoorow-out the whole Interrogation
<b>Ecphonesis</b> , page 61 ( <i>Exclamation mark</i> )	Ecphonesis is a note of Exclamation: when soom great passion of the minde is pathetically uttered: wheither it bee in Admiration, Indignation; Exoptation, Desperation; Exultation, Lamentation; Terrour, Commiseration; or the like	Ecphonesis falleth as a period, and raiseth the tone in the particule of Exclamation, . . . or, for want of such, in soom Emphatical woord: and always requireth a louder sound; and, when it makes perfect sens, pauseth as a Period
<b>Parenthesis</b> , page 61	Parenthesis is 2 semicircles enclosing one or more woords of perfect sens, in a sentence; for the perfecting thereof: without which yet, the sens is perfect	Parenthesis is wholly sounded with a lower voice: & always endeth with a comma; unless the part precedent of the sentence bee noted with some other simple point: for then it is according to that point
<b>Parathesis</b> , page 62 ( <i>Square brackets</i> )	Parathesis is 2 semiqadrats, enclosing one or more woords of Imperfect sens, for distinction or declaration of that which goeth before; and wherewith it is construed by Apposition	And it is wholly sounded as Parenthesis; ending as his simple point: or, if it have none, as a Comma

the impression of being written primarily for the reader (and especially the reader aloud), such writing also makes clear that any writer of that period would not have been governed by the details of syntax to the extent that he is today.

### *Syntactic Punctuation in Post-printing*

It is often claimed that syntactic punctuation became uppermost during the eighteenth century (Skelton, 1949:165). But not all the grammarians writing in the eighteenth century are quite as rigorous in their grammatical prescription as is often claimed today. To consider one example: in 1785, Joseph Robertson published *An Essay on Punctuation* (reprinted 1969) which is described in a note at the beginning of the book as being the earliest systematic survey of English punctuation. One chapter is devoted to each of the marks of punctuation. Chapter two gives forty syntactic rules for the use of the comma; but these rules are very often not absolutely prescriptive. So, for example, sentences should “generally” have a comma before a conjunction (page 52); two substantives “connected by the disjunctive ‘or’ *may* admit of a comma between them” (page 23, my emphasis). Moreover, the application of a syntactic rule is often dependent on the length of particular syntactic constituents. Thus Robertson tells us that great regard must be paid to the length of clauses: “where the clauses are short and closely connected, the comma may be omitted” (page 75). We are even told that a long sentence, where “the nominative case is accompanied with inseparable adjuncts, may admit of a pause before the verb.” *The navigation of the ancient Romans, was chiefly confined to the*

*Mediterranean area.* Robertson, 1969:73

In another passage Robertson notes that “An ingenious writer has observed, that not half the pauses are found in printing, which are heard in the pronunciation of a good reader or speaker; and that, if we would read or speak well, we must pause, upon an average, at every fifth or sixth word” (1969:75). These passages make it clear that Robertson, even if he does see punctuation as mainly syntactic, also sees marks of punctuation as saying something about pausing, even if not marking all the pauses. Thus, in a period which is often said to be the high watermark of syntactic punctuation, elocutionary punctuation had not been forgotten. Indeed, around the same time as Robertson was writing, opposition to syntactic punctua-

tion began to appear in the form of “rhetorical” (elocutionary) punctuation. At first this was considered an *alternative* type of punctuation for the purposes of reading aloud (see, for example, Walker, 1781, II:8) but later practitioners (chiefly phoneticians, who at that time called themselves professors of elocution) wished to supplant existing pronunciation practice. Alexander Bell (1835:xviii-ix, not to be confused with his son, Alexander Melville Bell or his grandson, Alexander Graham Bell) wrote: “It is certain, and cannot be denied, that the mode of punctuation, at present in use, is worthless, in so far as it bears on Eloquence,” and “Punctuation, is the art of dividing a written composition into sentences, or, parts of sentences, by means of certain signs agreed upon, for the purpose of regulating the pauses of the voice in reading, and of rendering more intelligible, and perspicuous, the construction, and meaning of the sentences.” As can be seen from these extracts, Bell practised what he preached. But rhetorical punctuation never really took off and, then as now, printers (and later publishers) were the prime arbiters of punctuation, and syntactic punctuation is easier for printers and publishers because it can be carried out by rule.

### *The Modern Period*

Prescriptive punctuation seems to have gathered strength in the late nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century even more so. Punctuation is today generally described in syntactic terms, although it is occasionally indicated that, in special circumstances, such punctuation by syntax may be overruled. Manuals of style vary in the amount to which they allow such special circumstances. *The Chicago Manual of Style* (1982:137) states: “There are a few rules governing its [the comma’s] use that have become almost obligatory. Aside from these, the use of the comma is mainly a matter of good judgment, with ease of reading as the end in view.” But, in general, special circumstances are less frequently mentioned than they were, for example, in Robertson (see above); writers are generally more concerned to stress the priority of syntax. Carey (1957:vi) says: “Punctuation should serve the eye before the tongue and ear . . . therefore the best punctuation is based on the structure, or syntax, of the sentence, not on the need to pause for breath.” Vallins (1955:126), offers the sentence:

*The only students I have ever met who ever believed their ears were blind.*

He proscribes the use of a comma after ears, saying: “In

general, punctuation for the convenience of the reader should not clash with the punctuation demanded by the syntax. The reader has to play his part; indeed, to over-punctuate is sometimes to underrate his intelligence and insult him." E. Partridge (1953:97) considers that "It is better to avoid difficulties syntactically than to have to resolve them by subtle punctuation; if they are syntactically unavoidable, punctuation has to be especially good." Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1972:1055) write that ". . . punctuation practice is governed primarily by grammatical considerations and is related to grammatical distinctions. Sometimes it is linked to intonation, stress, rhythm, pause or any other of the prosodic features which convey distinctions in speech, but this is neither simple nor systematic, and traditional attempts to relate punctuation directly to (in particular) pauses are misguided . . . Punctuation marks tend, therefore, to be used according to fairly strict conventions and even in the peripheral areas where universal convention does not obtain, each individual publishing house imposes one for all materials that it puts forth in print."

Comma prescription according to syntax falls into two categories. First, there are contexts in which the use of a comma is absolutely disallowed. For example, it is generally held that no comma may intervene between subject and predicate; it would not be acceptable, say, to put a comma between *that* and *was* in the following example.

*The first man who ever did that was John Armstrong.*

But one might insert a parenthetical element, in which case it would be proper to separate off the parenthetical by means of a pair of commas. *The first man who ever did that, I'm pretty sure, was John Armstrong.*

Second, there are contexts in which the commas is allowed, e.g., between sentence adverb and clause remainder.

*Unfortunately, their best player was injured.*

In such contexts two factors may make the use of the comma the preferred option. The first is potential ambiguity, or wrong signposting. Potential ambiguity is illustrated in a sentence like the following. *He didn't do it really.*

*Really* may be a verb modifier (He didn't do it in actual fact), or a sentence modifier (I am definitely telling you he didn't do it). The latter use usually involves a comma before *really*. Wrong signposting is what Fowler and Fowler (1931:273) call a "false scent" and illustrate with the following example.

*After that, having once fallen off from their course, they at length succeeded in crossing the Aegean, and beating up in the teeth of the Etesian winds, only yesterday, seventy days out from Egypt, put in at the Piraeus.*

The problem here is the omission of a comma after *and*. The second factor that may influence use in optional position is style, particularly the length of the constituents on one or both sides of the comma. Wood (1962:56) states that excessive use of commas should be avoided, because it produces a chopped-up impression, and reproduces the following quotation from Fowler and Fowler (1931:241).

*Jeannie, too, is, just occasionally, like a good girl out of a book by a sentimental lady novelist.* The Times

(Compare the rhetorical punctuation mentioned at the end of the previous section.)

The principal way in which modern punctuation is often said to differ from eighteenth and nineteenth century punctuation is this: that in the optional positions the comma is omitted unless ambiguity or wrong signposting is involved, or unless very long constituents are involved. With sentence adverbials, for example, the tendency today is to omit commas, producing so-called “light” punctuation as in the following.

*Unfortunately he didn't come.*

The exception is where such adverbials are very long.

*On Monday January fifth, nineteen hundred and fifty-four, it was decided . . .*

To summarize comma prescription, we have structural positions where comma useage is:

A disallowed

B allowed, particularly for the sake of

a disambiguation or avoidance of wrong signposting

b stylistic reasons

It is to be noted that, where A is involved, a comma is not allowed for a or b, i.e., disambiguation or stylistic reasons do not affect the absolute proscription. Indeed some, like E. Partridge, quoted above, suggest that, where a comma would be required for disambiguation, syntax should rather be rewritten to avoid breaking prescriptivist punctuational rules. A comma is not allowed even in sentences which are almost inevitably misread on first reading if there is no punctuation.

*Disease that could spread like wildfire.*

### Disallowance and Allowance

This section summarizes briefly what recent prescriptive writing disallows or allows in the use of the comma (for a more detailed survey of present-day usage and prescription, see Meyer, 1987). Current prescription is dealt with here by dividing this section into three subsections:

- 1 commas between major clause constituents i.e., subject, verb, object (or complement) and sentence adverbial;
- 2 commas within these major clause constituents;
- 3 commas between clauses.

#### *Commas Between Major Constituents*

Almost all writers disallow use of a comma between subject and verb, or between verb and object (or complement). Fowler (1965:587) warns against “separating inseparables.” Others among many who proscribe such use are E. Partridge (1953), Quirk et al. (1972), and Vallins (1955). So a comma is not allowed in the following.

*The man over there in the corner, \* is obviously drunk.* Quirk et al., 1985:1619

(Proscribed commas are indicated by an asterisk following the comma.) A restrictive relative appended to the subject forms part of this proscription.

*My entirely unscientific opinion poll of over 400 Europeans who visit the USA frequently, \* produced an overwhelming number of votes for San Francisco as the country's most pleasant city.* Quoted in Perera, 1984:175

Also a “fronted” direct or indirect object or similar normally late-occurring phrasal constituent takes a comma.

*Someone from a Public School, \* they will readily accept.*

*With this group, \* the Archbishop is out of sympathy.* Carey, 1957:9

*To the very top of the mountain, \* they climbed.* Quirk et al., 1985:1627

Wood (1965:56) is one of the few who allow a comma in these positions for stylistic reasons, saying, for example: “It is legitimate to put a comma after a long, diffuse or intricate subject.”

Commas are generally allowed (and by some writers are actually made obligatory) around various types of parentheticals which intervene between subject and verb such as non-restrictive relatives, vocatives, appositional phrases, verbless clauses used adjectivally, and sentence adverbials.

*Their hostess, radiant as ever, was awaiting to greet them.* Nash: 1986:119

*He, very ably, made the whole thing sound as simple as in fact it was.* Partridge, 1953:99

Commas are also allowed after or before sentence adverbials which occur in initial or final position. But style is often invoked to condemn the over-use of commas in such

positions. Carey (1957:9) condemns “too much hedging of adverbs and adverbial phrases.”

*In 1879, \* a treaty was made with Great Britain.*

Vallins (1955:132), following Carey, recommends that all adverbs and adverbial phrases at the beginning of sentences should not be comma'd off unless there is a likelihood of wrong signposting or ambiguity. Wrong signposting is potentially present in a sentence like the following.

*Shortly after, twelve of them turned up.*

Ambiguity is often present in final position where an adverb can be taken as sentence-modifying or clause-modifying.

*He wasn't speaking, honestly. (versus) He wasn't speaking honestly.*

### *Commas Within Major Constituents*

The use of a comma under this heading always involves some sort of cumulative, or alternative, listing. Commas are generally allowed between each item of a list, which may involve a variety of constituents, such as nouns in subject or object position or following a preposition, adjectives or prepositions before a noun, and adverbs modifying a following adverb or adjective.

*Towers, spires, chimneys, rose on the skyline.* Nash, 1987:116

*A great, wise, and beneficent measure.* Hart, 1967:36

*He slowly, carefully moved the chair.* Quirk et al., 1972:1064

*People with generally similar, but generally more proficient, abilities.*

Two particular problems regarding the use of the commas arise in such listings. The first problem, much discussed by all writers on punctuation, concerns whether there should be a comma before an *and* which occurs before the last two items of the list. All agree that actual usage is variable, but some, quite arbitrarily, prescribe use with or without the comma. Collins (1979:351), gives the example *potatoes, peas, and carrots* stating: “The comma after peas is Oxford University Press practice, and logically justified.”

The other problem is whether a comma should be written between the last item in a list and any “head” word or phrase (the term is used loosely here but the way I am using it will be apparent from the examples). Most writers do not mention the problem although Nash (1986:117) calls it an “expressive option,” while Carey (1957:9) calls it “questionable.” Examples of the sort of context in which this problem arises follow.

*Jars, tins, pots, packages, tumbled out of the cupboard.* Nash, 1986:117  
*A typewriter, a portable wireless, and a fishing-rod, comprised my luggage.* Carey, 1957:9  
*A second, closely-related, issue . . . Characteristics of, and interpretation of, that stage. Many, if not most of, the customs . . .*

Prescription appears to be completely capricious in this area (no recommendations are ever made which are in any way related to any distinction in syntax, e.g., between subject . . . verb versus adjective . . . noun, between presence of a “deleted” item or not, or between the presence of a list-final *and* or not).

Use of a comma within major constituents where no sort of listing is involved is proscribed. No comma is allowed between indirect and direct object.

*He gave the leading lady, \* a bouquet.* Quirk et al, 1972:1063.

Similarly, my own prescriptive intuition suggests that a comma is not allowed in comparisons with *with*.

*She contrasts the difficulty prelingually deaf children have learning oral language, \* with the ease with which they learn manual signs.*

### *Commas Between Clauses*

In this area the use of a comma or commas is always allowed (and with some constructions is obligatory). Commas may occur between clauses linked by *and*, *but* and *or*; between adverbial clause and main clause; and where a clause is used as a fronted direct or indirect object.

*What thoughts went through my mind, I leave you to imagine.* Nash, 1986:122

(But fronted objects which are not clausal are not, by most writers, permitted to take a comma—as mentioned above.)

Commas are obligatory before tag questions.

*Voltaire wrote *Candide*, didn't he?* Nash, 1986:118

They are also obligatory around parenthetical clauses (of which non-restrictive relatives are a subtype).

*If I were a millionaire, which I am not, I would . . .* Wood, 1962:169

In such positions dashes or parentheses may be used instead of commas. Commas are also obligatory with “absolute constructions,” which refers to constructions where a noun is not subject, object, or governed by a preposition, but is attached to a participle or an infinitive.

*Summoning all his strength, he rose from the chair.* Nash, 1986:120

*To secure the boat, a stern-line . . .* Nash, 1986:121

*But these objections were overruled, and the accused, having pleaded not guilty, the hearing of evidence commenced.* Fowler, 1965:588

It should by now be clear that the basis of present-day prescription for the comma is syntactic, with some secondary influence from semantics (in particular, disambiguation), and from stylistics (in particular, length of constituents). It will also be remembered that, in the seventeenth century, prescription based on syntax was less apparent (and certainly less detailed) than it is today. Guidelines on punctuation were related to length of pause, and only indirectly, via notions of assisting “sense,” to syntax.

### Intonation

The term “intonation” is today often used by many writers (particularly psychologists and syntacticians) to refer to anything which is not accountable for in the usual phoneme-size units of phonological analysis. Others (particularly phoneticians) limit the term principally to pitch variation. This pitch variation is often seen as performing three general functions (see Cruttenden, 1986):

- 1 dividing connected speech into intonation-groups;
- 2 making one syllable (and hence one word) especially prominent within each group—this syllable is often called the tonic or nucleus; and
- 3 by use of different tonal contours—often called tones—making differences of meaning which sometimes appear more discursal, sometimes more attitudinal. Tones obviously bear a relationship to the comparative uses of full stop, question mark and exclamation. The nucleus is generally not marked by punctuation, unless indicated by capital letters, underlining or italic.

Intonation-Groups (IGs) are obviously related to all the marks of punctuation, the occurrence of any mark generally indicating an IGB (Intonation-Group Boundary). The actual phonetic exponents of an IGB include the pitch of the syllable before the IGB, that of the syllable after the IGB, and the relationship between these two pitches; the lengthening of the syllable before the IGB and the shortening of any unstressed syllables following the IGB; and the potential use of a pause at the IGB. These exponents (in particular, pause) are obviously very close to those described in Butler (1634) as shown in table 1.

We have, then, a triangular relationship between punctuation, syntax and IGBs. In Shakespeare’s time punctuation was related to both syntax (this indirectly via “sense”) and intonation (if we count pausing as an exponent of intonation). In the twentieth century punctuation is prescribed

directly and almost solely by syntax. But it is also true that our study of intonation has today developed much further, and in much more detail, than it had in Shakespeare's time. It is therefore worth asking the question: would punctuation by intonation lead to a different result than punctuation by syntax? More particularly, within the limits of this article, we can ask the question: would using commas at IGBs lead to a different punctuation from punctuating by syntax? We can formulate the question in still another way: do IGBs occur at the same places in syntax as commas? The following sections describe the typical places in speech where IGBs occur and compare the occurrence of IGBs in speech with prescriptions concerning the comma in writing.

### *Intonation-Group Boundaries (IGBs)*

The occurrence of IGBs will be surveyed in the same way as comma prescription: 1 between major clause constituents; 2 within major clause constituents; 3 between clauses. But at the onset it has to be said that IGBs can, under special circumstances, occur anywhere; what I am describing here are the typical positions where they occur and do not occur. (Further detail on the occurrence of IGBs, in English particularly, can be found in Cruttenden, 1986, and in Altenberg, 1987: the former has references to the acoustic cues (e.g., silence, syllable duration, fundamental frequency of unstressed syllables) to perceived IGBs. (Another summary can be found in Freund, 1975.)

### *Boundaries Between Major Constituents*

IGBs commonly occur between the subject and verb, particularly when the subject is long and/or when the subject is postmodified.

*That man over there in the corner/is obviously drunk.*

(An IGB is marked here by a slash; what earlier centuries was called a virgule). This includes cases where the subject is postmodified by a restrictive relative clause.

*The man I want to see/is John Armstrong.*

Fronted direct and indirect objects also commonly take a separate group.

*John/I hate/whereas his wife/I just love.*

However, an IGB will almost never occur between verb and object or complement.

*I just love/\* his wife.*

(Atypical IGBs will be marked with an asterisk following the slash.)

Separate IGs are commonly given to all types of parentheses intervening between subject and verb, including sentence adverbials, which also commonly receive a separate

IG in clause-initial and clause-final position (see Allerton and Cruttenden, 1974, 1976, 1978).

*Unfortunately/their best player didn't turn up.*

*John/I think/would prefer to do otherwise.*

*They go to London/usually.*

Whether a particular adverbial is being used as a sentence modifier or as a verb modifier is regularly indicated by whether or not it is given a separate IG.

*He didn't like doing it seriously (versus) He didn't like doing it/seriously.*

### *Boundaries Within Major Constituents*

Separate IGs are commonly given to items in a list, whether these be nouns, or verbs, or adjectives, or adverbs.

*They bought apples/pears/and oranges.*

*When they got there/they washed/ate/andslept.*

*A very wise/charming/and beautiful/girl.*

*He slowly/carefully/cautiously/opened the door.*

In most cases (as in those above) the last item listed, whether or not an *and* is included, is given a separate IG from its "head." Contrary to comma prescription IGBs commonly occur between indirect and direct objects and in comparisons with *with*.

*He gave the leading lady/a bouquet (but not He gave a bouquet/\* to the leading lady). Contrast what I am doing/with what he did.*

### *Boundaries Between Clauses*

IGBs occur regularly between clauses, both when coordinate clauses are involved, and when main and subordinate clauses are involved.

*I ran to the station/and caught the train.*

*Because I was off sick/I wasn't aware of the latest development.*

An IGB is regularly used except where a subordinate clause is introduced by a main clause which is very short.

In such cases a single IG may span both clauses (although *I will if I can.*

when the clauses are reversed, both an IGB (and a comma)

seem likely. Clausal subjects are likely to have an IGB

following them.

*If I can, I will.*

*Everything I have ever worked for/is lost.*

Clausal complements are not followed by an IGB.

*I imagined what the outcome would be.*

This reflects the more general allowance of an IGB between subject and verb, but not between verb and complement.

All types of parenthetical clause are regularly given a separate IG (they are also commonly spoken with a lower pitch range—this was pointed out as early as Butler, 1634—see again table 1). *If I were a millionaire/which I am not/I would . . .*

A separate IG is also regularly used for “absolute constructions.” *Given the need to provide linguistic background so briefly/ . . .*

Table 2 **Correspondences Between the Occurrence of Commas and the Occurrence of Intonation-Group Boundaries.**

	Comma allowed Yes/No	IGB typical Yes/No
<b>Between major constituents:</b>		
Between subject and verb <sup>1</sup>	No	Yes
Between subject + restrictive relative and verb	No	Yes
Around a parenthesis intervening between subject and verb:		
Non-restrictive relative	Yes	Yes
Vocative	Yes	Yes
Appositional	Yes	Yes
Verbless adjectival	Yes	Yes
Sentence adverbial	Yes	Yes
Between verb and object or complement	No	No
Between fronted direct or indirect object and clause remainder	No	Yes
Between initial or final adverbial and remainder of clause	Yes	Yes
<b>Within major constituents:</b>		
Lists of nouns or verbs or adjectives or adverbs or prepositions	Yes	Yes
Between last item of list and a head word	Yes	Yes
Before last item of list	Yes	Yes
Before <i>and</i> + last item of list	Yes	Yes
Between direct object and indirect object	No	Yes
Comparisons with <i>with</i>	No	Yes
<b>Commas between clauses:</b>		
Between coordinate clauses	Yes	Yes
Between main clause and adverbial clause	Yes	Yes
After clause used as fronted direct or indirect object	Yes	Yes
Before tag questions	Yes	Yes
Around parenthetical clauses	Yes	Yes
‘Absolute constructions’	Yes	Yes

<sup>1</sup> The number of constructions included is not comprehensive, but based on those referred to in the guides to punctuation surveyed.

### Commas, Intonation-Groups and Meaning

A comparison of prescribed uses of the comma in writing and of IGBs in speech is laid out in table 2. It is clear that in the majority of cases there is agreement between where a comma is allowed in writing and the typical occurrence of an IGB in speech. However, what table 2 does not entirely show is that this agreement is of at least four different types (some overlap exists between items three and four):

- 1 where both the use of a comma and the occurrence of an IGB are disallowed, e.g., between verb and following object or complement.

- 2 where both the use of commas and the occurrence of IGBs are not only allowed but obligatory, e.g., around parentheses, whether clausal or not; between an "absolute construction" and main clauses; between main clause and tag; between each item in a list, including before the last item in a list if not linked by a conjunction.

- 3 where commas are allowed but often omitted, whereas the occurrence of IGBs is very typical, i.e., before *and*, *but*, and *or* in lists; before and introducing a coordinate clause; between the last item in a list and its "head"; between a fronted direct or indirect object clause and the remainder of the main clause; and between a subordinate clause and a main clause.

- 4 where commas are allowed and IGBs are typical, e.g., if a long constituent and/or wrong signposting is involved, i.e., between a sentence adverbial in initial or medial position and a main clause. (Wrong signposting may also be an additional factor in some of the optional uses of the comma mentioned under item three.)

There are only a few cases where there is a clear difference between comma prescription and occurrence of an IGB: between subject and verb (including subject plus restricted relative and verb); between a non-clausal fronted direct or indirect object; and in comparisons involving *with*. Of these the disallowance of commas as opposed to the common occurrence of IGBs between subject and verb is by far the most frequent type, even more so if cases involving a restrictive relative are included. Written examples like the following are not at all uncommon.

*The question whether it is ever legitimate to use a comma to mark the end of a long and complicated subject is an arguable one.* Fowler, 1965:588.

In this example, comprehension of the sentence would have been speeded by the use of a comma, as it would even more so in an (invented) example like the following.

*All those who could hit the target.*

It would seem to be a sensible reform of punctuational practice that the use of a comma should be allowed in all cases where it serves to avoid wrong signposting, and, further, in any case where more efficient understanding of the structure of a sentence would be produced. The use of question marks and exclamation marks is now accepted as discursal or attitudinal rather than grammatical. *You didn't? You didn't! You didn't.* Pragmatic rather than prescriptive use of commas would seem more sensible. Indeed current nonprescriptive practice is already spreading such a change: how often does one see a comma between subject and verb in newspapers, in personal letters, in student essays, or indeed, in articles submitted to journals? More widespread acceptance of this sort of use of the comma would of course represent a return to a more elocutionary usage, i.e., use of the commas to accord with IGBs.

Although in many cases syntactic and elocutionary punctuation coincide, a too stringent (and often misinformed) concentration on prescriptive syntactic punctuation can undoubtedly hinder what should be the basic principle of punctuation: aiding communicative clarity. Historically, printed text was seen as something to be read aloud; even though today it is not, more regard for elocution (unfettered by the prescriptions imposed by publishers and grammarians) would enable use of the comma to return to this basic principle of communicative clarity.

## References

- Allerton, D.J. and A. Cruttenden.** 1974. "English Sentence Adverbials: Their Syntax and Their Intonation in British English." *Lingua*, 24:1-10.
- Allerton, D.J. and A. Cruttenden.** 1976. "The Intonation of Medial and Final Sentence Adverbials in British English." *Archivum Linguisticum*, 7: 29-59.
- Allerton, D.J. and A. Cruttenden.** 1978. "Syntactic, Elocutionary, Thematic and Attitudinal Factors in the Intonation of Adverbials." *Journal of Pragmatics*, 2: 155-88.
- Altenberg, B.** 1987. *Prosodic Patterns in Spoken English*. Lund: Lund University Press.
- Bell, A.** 1835. *The Practical Elocutionist*. London: Sherwood, Gilbert and Piper.
- Brown, T.J.** 1974-82. "Punctuation." In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Fifteenth Edition. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica.
- Butler, C.** 1634. *English Grammar*. A. Eichler, ed., 1910. Halle: Niemeyer.
- Campbell, A.** 1959. *Old English Grammar*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Carey, V.** 1957. *Punctuation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- The Chicago Manual of Style.** 1982. Thirteenth edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Collins, H.** 1973. *Authors and Printers Dictionary*. Eleventh Edition, revised by Stanley Beale. London: Oxford University Press.
- Cruttenden, A.** 1986. *Intonation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fowler, H.W.** 1965. *Modern English Usage*. Second Edition, revised by Sir Ernest Gowers. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fowler, H.W. and F. G. Fowler.** 1931. *The King's English*. Third Edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Freund, A.** 1975. "Word and Phrase Recognition in Speech Processing." In D.W. Massaro, ed. *Understanding Language*. New York: Academic Press.
- Fries, C.C.** 1925. "Shakespearean Punctuation." *Language and Literature*. Vol. 1. Studies in Shakespeare, Milton and Donne. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Hart, J.** 1551. "The Opening of the Unreasonable Writing of Our English Tongue." Reprinted in B. Danielsson, ed. 1948. *John Hart's Works on Orthography and Pronunciation, 1551, 1569, 1570*. Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell.
- Hart, J.** 1569. "An Orthographie." Reprinted in B. Danielsson, ed., 1948. *John Hart's Works on Orthography and Pronunciation, 1551, 1569, 1570*. Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell.
- Hart, H.** 1967. *Rules for Compositors and Readers at the University Press Oxford*. Thirty-seventh Edition. London: Oxford University Press.
- Husband, T.F. and M.F.A. Husband.** 1905. *Punctuation: Its Principles and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Manutius, A.** 1490. *Orthographiae Ratio*. Venice: Aldine Press.
- Meyer, C.F.** 1987. *A Linguistic Study of American Punctuation*. New York: Lang.
- Nash, W.** 1986. *English Usage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Partridge, A.C.** 1964. *Orthography in Shakespeare and Elizabethan Drama: A Study of Colloquial Contractions, Elision, Prosody and Punctuation*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Partridge, E.** 1953. *You Have a Point There*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Perera, K.M.** 1984. *Children's Writing and Reading*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Pollard, A.W.** 1920. *Shakespeare's Fight with the Pirates*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Quirk, R., S. Greenbaum, G. Leech and J. Svartvik.** 1972. *A Grammar of Contemporary English*. London: Longman.

- Quirk, R. S. Greenbaum, G. Leech and J. Svartvik.** 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.
- Robertson, J.** 1785. *An Essay on Punctuation*. Reprinted 1969. Menston, Yorks: Scolar Press.
- Sandys, J.E.** 1903. *A History of Classical Scholarship*. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Simpson, P.** 1911. *Shakespearean Punctuation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Skelton, R.** 1949. *Modern English Pronunciation*. Second Edition. London: Pitman.
- Strang, B.M.H.** 1970. *A History of English*. London: Methuen.
- Vallins, G.H.** 1953. *Better English*. London: Andre Deutsch.
- Walker, J.** 1781. *Elements of Elocution*. Two vols. London. Reprinted, 1969. Menston, Yorks: Scolar Press.
- Wilson, J. Dover.** 1921 *The Tempest*. Preface. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wood, F.T.** 1965. *Current English Usage*. London: Macmillan.

*The editor wishes to thank Timothy Jucovy for proofreading the Greek.*