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Abstract
This paper investigates the patterns of verbalisation and the pragmatic functions of punctuation in spoken English. Punctuation marks are visual signs that lack phonetic realisation and are not typically verbalised. As communication becomes increasingly shaped by digital media, the boundaries between writing and speech, i.e., between visual and auditory modalities, are becoming more porous. Computer-mediated communication, such as social media and messaging apps, has amplified exposure to written signs and facilitated their migration into speech (Baron 1984; Crystal 2001). Adopting a multimodal pragmatic perspective (Haryanti, Saddhoro, Anindyarini 2023), this study presents preliminary findings on the pragmatic functions of spoken punctuation in English. Drawing on data from scripted dialogue (Davies 2019), it maps selected instances of verbalised punctuation and discusses their emerging roles in meaning-making.

Keywords: verbalised punctuation, multimodality, written language, punctuation marks.

1. Introduction

In January 2025, Italian rapper M¥SS KETA[1] released her new album, "." ("*punto*", i.e., *period*). The artist's lyrics and production have always been attentive to contemporary topics and frequently feature references to Internet culture and online-mediated communication. For instance, the title of her 2018 album, *UNA VITA IN CAPSLOCK* (literally: "A LIFE IN CAPSLOCK", i.e., "a life in all caps") refers to the use of all caps in online chats as a

[1] This is the spelling of the artist's name as it appears on her artwork and official communications.

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marker of shouting, loudness, and emphasis, which has become a metaphor for living intensely.

In one of the promotional videos of the latest album, the singer appears with the Italo-Korean influencer Eric Shin (@noterection). In the video, they translate some idiomatic phrases and pragmatic markers from English into Italian. This is the script of the short video:

(1) Eric Shin (ES): In Italian, how do you say "exactly"?
Myss Keta (MK): *Esatto.*
ES: And how do you say "absolutely"?
MK: *Assolutamente.*
Together: But if you're a bad b*tch, you say
MK: *Punto.*

In the short passage, the two artists create a short narrative according to which English adverbs *exactly* and *absolutely*, frequently used to answer positively to questions, correspond to the Italian *punto*, but with an assertive twist: an assertive bad b*tch prefers *punto* over *assolutamente*.

The video testifies to the evolution of the English pragmatic marker *period* from expressing procedural finality to a marker of assertive stance. This is particularly evident in the spelling variation *periodt*, "an interjection used to signal the end of a discussion or to emphasise a point" (https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/periodt/). This spelling is often credited to African American Vernacular English, which in turn spread on the Internet and is now recognised as part of Gen Z slang, raising issues of cultural appropriation (Chery 2022; Tenbarge 2020).

Thus, this specific meaning of the pragmatic marker *period* reflects the perceived seriousness and enhanced assertiveness of the use of the punctuation mark < . > at the end of sentences in online chats (Harrison-Caldwell 2021; Bilefsky 2016). This change in the use of punctuation in online communications was already noted by Ling and Baron (2007), who analysed text-messaging practices of American students. They conclude that in virtual environments, the simple act of sending a text coincides with sentence completion. This makes sentence-final punctuation superfluous, to the point that its use may be perceived as angry and "pissed off" (Crair 2013).

Gunraj *et al.* (2016) investigated empirically these intuitions and found that "text messages that ended with a period were rated as less sincere than text messages that did not end with a period. This pattern, however, was not found in handwritten notes" (Gunraj *et al.* 2016: 9). According to the authors, these results resonate with the general role of punctuation in computer mediated communication, which is mainly used to convey pragmatic information otherwise communicated through prosody, pauses, gestures, filler words, and eye gaze (Gunraj *et al.* 2016: 9)[2].

The rise of the Internet and more specifically of online computer-mediated communication, such as instant messaging and web chats, has blurred the boundaries between spoken and written forms of linguistic exchange (Crystal 2001; Cerruti and Onesti 2013). While the influence of speech on written forms of language has been observed by numerous scholars (see, among others, Baron 1984; Fiorentino 2004; Gheno 2009), there are examples of linguistic change proceeding in the opposite direction, i.e., from written to spoken forms (see, for instance, Baron 1984: 123ff for air quotes; Pistolesi 2004 for acronyms; Curzan 2013 on the use of 'slash'; Fiorentini and Miola 2020 on the use of Italian *barra*).

Traditional accounts of the distinction between written and spoken language have considered the two modalities to be distinct and independent (Scribner and Cole 1981; Coulmas 2002). In this view, written language is considered durable, official, planned, well-structured, objective, and formal (Chafe and Danielewicz 1987; Horowitz and Samuels 1987; Baron 2001), while spoken language is typically thought of as ephemeral, interpersonal, dialogic, spontaneous, loosely structured, and informal. Recent ethnographic studies have pointed out that the relationship between these two modalities is not as dichotomous as previously thought. Rather, their relationship is more nuanced: depending on specific contexts, a written text may display spoken-language characteristics, while oral speech may have more written-like features (Tannen 1982; Chafe and Tannen 1987; Biber 1988; Baron 2001).

[2] Kemp, Kovacic, Beyersmann (2025) replicated the findings by Gunraj *et al.* (2016) for short texts (1-4 words) but found that for longer texts (6 words or more) the same effect did not hold.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen, "writing is itself a form of visual communication" (2006: 17), thus implying that oral forms of language are instead mainly aural phenomena. I argue that the osmosis between written and spoken modes of language may be successfully analysed through a multimodal pragmatic lens (Haryanti, Saddhoro, Anindyarini 2023). In particular, the lexicalisation patterns of punctuation represent a fertile ground for analysis. Punctuation marks are visual signs found in written forms of language; however, unlike other signs, such as letters, punctuation marks lack a phonetic realisation. They developed mainly to regulate the relationship between oral and written forms of language, thus performing mainly grammatical and/or rhetorical functions of signalling sentence breaks and/or suprasegmental features such as pauses, rhythm, and tone (Nunberg 1990; Baron 2001: 16; Fiorentini and Sansò 2019: 105; Claridge and Kytö 2020: 12ff).

The present paper aims to identify and classify the cases in which punctuation marks are verbalised in spoken interactions. To do so, it presents the results of a corpus analysis through which occurrences containing the names of the most common punctuation marks were retrieved. After an introduction and framing of the issue (1), it proceeds to the definition and characterisation of the forms and functions of punctuation (2), followed by a discussion of the methodology adopted to retrieve the data (3). Section (4) illustrates the results of the analysis, while section (5) provides a discussion, before concluding and setting the scene for further research with (6).

2. Punctuation: Forms and Functions

Punctuation marks are a set of visual signs that contribute to the realisation of meaning in written forms of language by indicating the grammatical structure and/or suprasegmental features of a portion of text (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1610; Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1724). There is consensus that punctuation marks take on both structural-grammatical and attitudinal-semantic functions. Their appearance may convey different meanings and contribute to the resolution of potential ambiguities, both structural and semantic (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1611; Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1724; Claridge and Kytö 2020: 9).

Traditional grammatical accounts of the functions of punctuation prioritise their grammatical role in structuring a text, while still recognising a rhetorical and attitudinal role. For instance, according to Quirk *et al.*,

> 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 that convey distinctions in speech, but the link is neither simple nor systematic [...]. (1985: 1611)

Recent scholarship has focused more on the attitudinal-semantic function. For instance, Arcari (2025: 3) claims that punctuation marks are as important as lexical items and syntax in conveying meaning. Claridge and Kytö (2020) edited a volume with the aim of understanding the functions of punctuation marks in a broader sense, including textual, stylistic-rhetorical, and attitudinal-emotive functions. According to the editors, "this conglomeration of not always distinct and often overlapping functions together with its conventional nature makes punctuation a largely pragmatic phenomenon" (p. 10).

The rules that govern the usage of punctuation marks are strict and conventional (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1611; Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1724), but they may also display a considerable level of arbitrariness, thus leaving space for personal expression of inter-subjectivity (Claridge and Kytö 2020: 10). Each writer may deliberately decide to infringe standard rules that govern punctuation to convey specific meanings for creative or emotive purposes, or even to create their own set of marks[3].

The set of marks that should be considered part of punctuation is not fixed. Scholars may adopt different theories and criteria for the inclusion of specific signs that count towards punctuation. A maximalist account would include the different types of graphic modification that a text may undergo, such as capitalisations or bold-facing (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1757; Claridge and Kytö 2020: 10). Bredel (2011: 9) limits the set of marks to the following: <

[3] See, for instance, Safran Foer's (2002) *A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease*, and its analysis through a multimodal lens in Gibbons (2014).

. , : ; – – … ! ? ( ) ‘ “ ” >. Due to space limitations and to keep the data at a manageable proportion, the present paper deals with the most common punctuation marks, reported in Table 1.

TABLE 1
List of punctuation marks analysed in this paper

Punctuation mark	Name
.	period (AE), full stop (BE)
,	comma
:	colon
;	semicolon
“ ”	quotation mark (AE)
‘ ’	inverted commas (BE)[4]
!	exclamation point (AE), exclamation mark (BE)
?	question mark
()	parenthesis (AE), bracket (BE)

Table 1 reports the punctuation marks analysed in the present paper and their names. Some of the names are more frequent in American English, while others in British English. Considering the nature of the corpus (see Section 3), I included both forms in the analysis. In the case of *parenthesis*, I also considered the plural forms *parentheses* and *brackets*.

3. Methodology and Data

The data were retrieved from the Movies Corpus, a corpus of the English corpora family, consisting of 325 million tokens collected from written subtitles of TV shows. The lexical items selected to interrogate the corpus are those corresponding to the punctuation marks and reported in Table 1. The lexical items that refer to the

[4] Although the names *quotation marks* and *inverted com*mas refer to two graphically distinct marks, in the present paper the two lexical items are considered as alternative names for the same mark, considering that they have similar functions, especially when lexicalised. For a full account of the different names of punctuation marks, see Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1726).

same punctuation mark are discussed together. This includes the case of *quotation marks* and *inverted commas* (see footnote 3).

The raw occurrences of the different lexical items are reported in Table 2. These include occurrences of the homonyms of the punctuation marks (e.g., *period* could refer to a span of time; *colon* could refer to the digestive organ). To keep the data at a manageable proportion, I decided to manually analyse only the first 100 randomised occurrences retrieved. If the total number was lower than 100, I analysed all the occurrences. The third column reports the number of relevant occurrences (i.e., those that referred to the sign, after expunging homonyms) out of the total number of occurrences analysed, reported in brackets.

TABLE 2
Data Overview

Lexical item	Raw frequency	Relevant occurrences (tot. occurrences analysed)
period	9202	16 (tot. 100)
full stop	245	100 (tot. 100)
comma	295	100 (tot. 100)
colon	914	12 (tot. 100)
semicolon	40	40 (tot. 40)
quotation marks	26	26 (tot. 26)
inverted commas	15	15 (tot. 15)
question mark	437	100 (tot. 100)
exclamation mark	51	100 (tot. 100)
exclamation point	153	100 (tot. 100)
parenthesis	29	29 (tot. 29)
parentheses	77	77 (tot. 77)
bracket	264	1 (tot. 100)
brackets	147	37 (tot. 100)

The occurrences of the items were analysed and manually annotated according to their pragmatic status and function. I further analysed the occurrences in which punctuation is verbalised with no direct reference to a written piece of text, or to the actual sign. In other

words, I considered only the occurrences in which punctuation marks were used non-referentially (Brinton 1996), thus affording a multimodal pragmatic interpretation of their usage. The annotation process considered the item's context and function. In dubious cases, I analysed the original video in which the occurrence appeared, thus enabling me to have a full multimodal analysis of the context. This was possible only for a limited selection of videos, namely those available on Netflix, Amazon Prime, or Disney+.

For instance, consider (2-4):

(2) Do what must be done, just get them. **Exclamation point.** (*Grace and Frankie*, 2015)
(3) What? What? What's so funny about **colon** capital P? (*iCarly*, 2011)
(4) "Nooooo" **exclamation point, exclamation point, exclamation point.** (*Adventure Time*, 2014)

The occurrence in (2) refers to an example of dictation to a cell phone. Although the practice of dictating to a phone is a case of computer-mediated communication, there is no clear influence of writing practices on spoken language. Similarly, the example in (3) clearly refers to the verbalisation of an early form of emoji, whose linguistic and pragmatic status exceeds the scope of this contribution. Finally, the example in (4) refers to a written text being read aloud: the film shows the character uttering the line while writing (in other discarded cases, the speaker is reading out loud a printed document). These cases were discarded from further analysis because they fall outside the range of interest of the present paper, that is, the lexicalisation patterns of punctuation and their pragmatic functions in English[5].

4. Results

4.1. Period / Full Stop

The period is used to mark the end of a sentence. When lexicalised, both *period* and *full stop* are mainly used to mark the end of an argument as in (5)-(8):

[5] The occurrences in (2)-(4) were discarded after watching the corresponding videos.

(5) And what my client wants is for your client to not get what she wants, so you can't have the tabloid, **period**. (*Ally McBeal*, 1999)
(6) Well… I hate Olivia, and Olivia hates me. **Period**. (*Heartland*, 2014)
(7) I won't shag anyone either, and if I do, I'll tell you about it.
– Just don't shag anyone else, **full stop.** (*Misfits*, 2009)
(8) That girl's an addict. Her boyfriend, an addict. **Full stop.** (*The Cleaner*, 2009)

The occurrences in (5)-(8) showcase the use of *period* and *full stop* to convey the definitiveness of the point raised and to signal indisputability. In the examples above, the function of the written punctuation mark is transferred to speech, thus suggesting a semiotic transfer from the visual to the aural mode.

Following the analyses by Cignetti (2008) and Ferrari (2017) for the Italian *punto*, in a pragmatic perspective the uses reported in (5)-(8) suggest that the two lexical items may be considered pragmatic markers. They are non-referential, they are found in sentence-final position, and they are severed from the syntactic structure of the main clause either through a comma, as in (5) and (7), or they constitute their own utterance, as in (6) and (8). Furthermore, this use of *period* is glossed as an *interjectional use* by Merriam-Webster dictionary (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/period). Taken all together, the evidence suggests that *period* and *full stop* may be considered pragmatic markers, but further research should investigate the level of pragmaticalisation of these units.

The lexical item *full stop* is also found in clause-internal position within a phrase, as in (9) and (10).

(9) As soon as the attack began, the government ordered a **full stop** on all civilian vessels… (*Battlestar Galactica*, 2003)
(10) We've lost the Defiant's transponder signal. Coming to a **full stop**. (*Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, 1998)

The use in (9) and (10) shows how *full stop* may be used nominally to refer to a complete halt of a situation. These examples represent a metaphorical use of the name of the punctuation mark motivated by its main syntactic and pragmatic function (OED, *full stop*, 2). In (9), the meaning is still conceptualised as the end of a process, thus highlighting the metaphorical mapping from text to real life. In (10) the lexical item is conceptualised as the end of a linear path, whose

use and conceptualisation are motivated by the same underlying conceptual metaphor.

4.2. Comma

The lexical item *comma* < , > displays the highest variety of functions in English. It is typically used to signal clause boundaries, albeit with a lesser force than the colon or the semicolon (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1615). Its use may be strictly regulated by grammatical considerations and as such it may be used to convey (and disambiguate) syntactic structures, as in (11).

(11) You can kiss my wife, you can take her to bed, but you can not make her laugh. I wanna go back. You can kiss my wife, but only I can take her to bed and make her laugh. I wanna go back. Only I can take my wife to bed, **comma**, and make her laugh. (*Modern Family*, 2012)

In (11), Phil, one of the main characters of the TV show, addresses the camera in one of the show's trademark asides. His wife Claire has been laughing at another man's jokes, and Phil attempts to assert his role through a repeated line. Each rephrasing is separated by his metacomment "I wanna go back", which signals a repair.

In the first version, "You can kiss my wife, you can take her to bed, but you cannot make her laugh", Phil inadvertently suggests that he would tolerate his wife having sex with another man. Realising this, he repairs the utterance: "You can kiss my wife, but only I can take her to bed and make her laugh". This syntactic structure implies a causal sequence – taking her to bed *and consequently* making her laugh – which still produces an awkward implicature of poor sexual performance.

In the third version, Phil explicitly lexicalises the punctuation mark *comma*: "Only I can take my wife to bed, *comma*, and make her laugh". By doing so, he disambiguates the syntax and clarifies that both *take* and *make* depend on the modal verb *can*, thus restoring his intended meaning. The strategy works by relying on the visual modality of writing and using its conventions to highlight the syntactic structure of the sentence. The meaning shift has pragmatic relevance: each formulation generates a different implicature, and only the last one communicates Phil's real intention.

Another use of the lexical item *comma* is exemplified in (12):

(12) From now on, when my name appears in print, it better read Blanche Devereaux, **comma**, 39. (*The Golden Girls*, 1987)

Here Blanche, responding to journalists after allegations of a sex scandal, imagines how her name will appear in the press. She insists that it should be followed by a comma and a number, which corresponds to a false age – a running joke in the show, since she constantly denies how old she really is. The lexicalisation of *comma* in this line illustrates a multimodal transfer from the visual modality of writing to spoken discourse. By verbalising the punctuation mark, Blanche frames her speech as if it were already in print, and makes explicit that the number following her name is to be interpreted as her age. This mirrors the journalistic convention of tabloids, which often place a person's age after their name, separated by a comma. In context, the device allows Blanche to project her preferred – and fictional – age, reinforcing her self-image of youth and attractiveness.

In a similar vein, the lexical item *comma* may be used to evoke scenarios of written lists containing names, thus suggesting institutional contexts, as exemplified in (13).

(13) Gary Blauman? Yeah. Gary Blauman? Yes. Blauman… **comma** Gary? (*How I Met Your Mother*, 2014)

In this exchange, one speaker expresses disbelief that the other is referring to Gary Blauman, a name that clearly provokes strong feelings. The repeated questioning builds to a crescendo that culminates in the final line: "Blauman… *comma* Gary?" Here the verbalisation of the punctuation mark conjures the image of a written list, where surnames precede first names and are separated by a comma. This convention is typical of institutional contexts such as school rollcalls or police records. By invoking it, the character momentarily reframes Blauman as an "official entry" in a register, which heightens the drama of the moment, the speaker's incredulity, and pragmatically functions as an official confirmation of the identity of Gary Blauman.

Across examples (11) to (13), the verbalisation of *comma* consistently illustrates how written conventions can be imported into

spoken interaction, yet the pragmatic effects differ. In (11), Phil uses *comma* to disambiguate syntax and clarify his intended meaning. In (12), Blanche mobilises the punctuation mark to stage-manage her public image, aligning her speech with tabloid conventions to project a fictional age. In (13), the device evokes bureaucratic and institutional contexts such as roll calls or police records, lending a sense of "officiality" to the name invoked. Although they are mainly creative, taken together, these cases show how the lexicalisation of punctuation not only bridges the visual and oral modalities of language, but also generates distinct pragmatic outcomes – from repairing ambiguity, to managing identity, to construing an official truth.

4.3. Colon

The punctuation mark *colon* < : > is used to separate clauses, marking a sharper separation than the comma (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1620). The occurrences of the verbalised form *colon* in the corpus mainly refer either to the human organ, or to the title in the army. The occurrences of the sequence *colon* that refer to the punctuation mark are used referentially, i.e., they all refer to an actual *colon* in a written piece of text and were, therefore, discarded from further analysis.

4.4. Semicolon

The mark *semicolon* < ; > marks an even sharper separation than *comma* and *colon*. It is mainly found in formal writing, and it is often characterised as the visual equivalent of the coordinating conjunction *and* (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1622). Most of the occurrences of *semicolon* retrieved in the corpus refer to an actual piece of written language in the film, and therefore were labelled as referential. These have been excluded from further analysis.

There are, however, a few cases in which *semicolon* is used to create irony as part of a pun that revolves around the confusion between the different meanings of the lexical sequence *colon*, which may refer to the organ part of the digestive system or to the punctuation mark, as in (14) and (15).

(14) You're still feeling sick, hon?
– Please. They gotta replace her colon with a **semicolon**. (*The Sopranos*, 2004)
(15) What if I get a punctured colon, Celia?
– Then you'd have a **semicolon**. (*Blunt Talk*, 2016)

In examples (14) and (15), the speakers use the punctuation mark nominally, and not to convey a specific pragmatic function. Nonetheless, they rely on the visual modality to create a pun with the two different meanings associated in English with the sequence *colon*, and another punctuation mark with a similar form (both in its visual representation and in its name) and even function. Although irony may arise purely from the linguistic level by playing on the similar forms of *colon* and *semicolon*, the audience needs to rely on their knowledge of punctuation to fully appreciate the meaning of the pun. The mention of the semicolon frames the entire utterance as a reference to visual cues in written language, thus qualifying for a multimodally based interpretation of meaning.

4.5. Quotation Marks / Inverted Commas

The functions of the punctuation marks < " " > are varied. Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1630) qualifies them as inclusion marks, i.e., unlike the marks analysed so far, they do not signal a strong separation in the clause. They are typically used as a marker of quotation (Cappelen and Lepore 1997; Abbott 2003). They may also be employed to indicate a "deviation from the standard, denotational use of a given expression, and giving rise to a non-stereotypical interpretation instead" (Schelchtweg and Härtl 2023: n.p.). This last function includes the use of scare quotes to signal irony in speech, whose pragmatic meaning and function have been empirically tested by recent contributions (Schelchtweg and Härtl 2023; Garfinkel *et al.* 2024; for an account of scare quotes as deontic modals see Wiślicki 2023). In conversation, they are often realised as air quotes, "a gesture made by raising and flexing the index and middle fingers of both hands that is used to call attention to a spoken word or expression" (merriamwebster.com). Cirillo (2019) analysed their use in academic presentations and concludes that their function in this specific genre is

to either hedge the vagueness/preciseness of a lexical representation or pre-empt specific inferences on the part of the listener regarding the speaker's commitment or attitudinal stance towards the propositional content expressed. (p. 12)

When lexicalised, both *quotation marks* and *inverted commas* are used to signal a deviation of the intended meaning from the standard, denotational meaning of the sequence that appears within the marks, as in (16) and (17).

(16) For your "book club"? Ugh, don't do **inverted commas**, it IS a book club. (*Bad Education*, 2014)
(17) I thought maybe your "friend" would be with you? Your implied ironic **quotation marks** are unnecessary. (*American Gothic*, 2016)

The occurrences in (16) and (17) illustrate the use of the verbalised punctuation marks to signal a non-standard interpretation of the utterance, which often creates verbal irony. Although air quotes may often appear as a visual marker of irony together with the verbalised realisation, irony may also be signalled by intonation, as the occurrence in (18) implies:

(18) How was your "business trip" with Julian?
– It was fine. And I heard those **quotation marks**, girl. I don't know what you're talking about. (*Deception*, 2013)

In (18), the sequence *quotation marks* is used to signal that the meaning of the enclosed portion of text should be interpreted as deviating from its usual, denotational meaning. In this case, the implied meaning is that the "business trip" the speaker had with Julian was not really a business trip, but something different, perhaps more personal. The speaker says they "heard" the *quotation marks*, thus implying that these were not realised visually (either in written format or as gesture), rather their meaning was realised through intonation. In this regard, (18) illustrates the use of verbal punctuation to refer to a specific suprasegmental feature of language, namely the intonation of an ironic utterance.

Another way to mark quotation in speech in English is to use the marker *quote-unquote*, as suggested by one of the generous anonymous reviewers. This use is exemplified in (19):

(19) We think there's enough aggressive behavior on the planet without creating more with **quote-unquote** "healthy competition". (*Daria*, 1998)

The occurrence in (19) showcases the use of the pragmatic marker *quote-unquote* to signal a direct quotation from someone's words. Its most common pragmatic value is to mark attitudinal distance from the quoted utterance. Although the punctuation mark < " " > may be referred to as *quote(s)*, the use of the item *unquote* suggests that the origin of the marker relies on a sentence matrix (Brinton 1996) of the type *I quote / I unquote*, more than in the verbalisation of punctuation. Further research is needed to ascertain this phenomenon.

4.6. Question Mark

The *question mark* < ? > marks the end of a sentence, like the *period*, and it also conveys information about the pragmatic force of the utterance (Quirk *et al.* 1986: 1633). It typically corresponds to a specific intonation in speech that makes evident the illocutionary force of the utterance. The occurrences of the lexical item *question mark* are mainly used to convey the same function of the corresponding punctuation mark, as in (20)-(21):

(20) You wanna ask me a question?
– Yes. Tell me your story. **Question mark.** (*Veep*, 2014)
(21) Where do you see this taking you?
– Um… a PhD? I mean, my PhD. With a period, not a **question mark**. (*Degrassi: The Next Generation*, 2011)

In occurrences (20) and (21) the lexical item *question mark* is used to mark a question, although with different pragmatic functions. In (20), the verbalised mark is used at the end of an explicit order, realised with the imperative mood. The addition of the verbalised mark frames the previous sentence as a question, and helps the speaker keep face in the utterance, which otherwise would be perceived as impolite. In this perspective, the choice of adding the explicit mention of the question mark may be seen as a repair strategy.

In (21), the verbalised item is used in a sequence that aims at repairing a previous statement which was uttered with a misleading

tone. The speaker has answered to the addressee's question with the suprasegmental features of a dubitative question, marked in the subtitles by the appropriate punctuation mark < ? >. The intention of the speaker was that of conveying certainty. To meet this intention, the speaker utters again the line with the appropriate tone, and to level out every ambiguity decides to verbalise the punctuation that would appear in writing.

Another use of the name of the punctuation mark is illustrated in (22) and (23):

(23) You're a **question mark**, you know, Milly? (*Mission: Impossible*, 1971)
(24) Yep, it's from 8:00 to **question mark**. 'Cause you can't put a time limit to fun. (*Twins*, 2005)

Both occurrences in (22) and (23) illustrate the nominal use of *question mark* metonymically referring to "a question, a query, a doubt; (also) an enigma, an enigmatic person" (*OED*, *question mark*, 2). In (22), the speaker uses the punctuation mark in reference to a person, while the use in (23) illustrates a construction in which *question mark* represents the final goal of the linear path image schema, which is used here to conceptualise time. The meaning that emerges from (23) is that of an unspecified duration in time of the event that the speakers are about to attend. In this case, a party.

4.7. Exclamation Point / Exclamation Mark

Like the question mark, the mark < ! > is mainly used to indicate sentence break and to specify the illocutionary force of the utterance (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1633). The occurrences retrieved for the exclamation point mainly refer to scenes in which the characters are writing and verbalising their writing while doing so, or cases of dictation to a phone, and therefore were discarded from further analysis.

There is evidence however of the use of the verbalised punctuation mark to emphasise the tone of voice with no direct reference to writing, as in (24):

(24) Look, any guy who likes you because you are on that list is the wrong guy, **exclamation point, exclamation point, exclamation point.** (*Girlfriend's Guide to Divorce*, 2015)

In (24) the speaker chooses to verbalise the punctuation mark to intensify her stance. Notably, she repeats the mark three times, thus emphasising the tone of her utterance by relying on written conventions of language. In this regard, (24) represents a case in which verbal punctuation may be used to convey the pragmatic force of the utterance.

4.8. Parenthesis / Brackets

The punctuation marks < ( ) > "provide an elaboration, illustration, refinement on, or comment on, the content of the accompanying text" (Huddleston and Pullum 2001: 1748). Fiorentini and Sansò (2019) analyse the Italian phrasal adverb *tra/fra parentesi* and provide evidence of its development from a digressive marker to topic shifter. Merriam-webster dictionary reports the meaning of *parenthesis* as synonymous to *digression*, but only when used nominally and not adverbially or interjectionally, as Italian instead seems to prefer.

The occurrences retrieved frequently refer to written text. Two examples of these items used in speech are given in (25) and (26):

(25) And we bring sexy back.
– Okay, as the woodsmen...
– Right, yeah.
– **Parentheses**, not the pedophile movie But, like, badasses who can knock a deer out with one punch, **close parentheses**. (*Workaholics*, 2016)
(26) Scientists say that Everest – **Brackets** – the mountain – Just in case you confuse that with any other everests. (*The Ricky Gervais Show*, 2010)

The occurrences in both (25) and (26) illustrate the use of the lexical items corresponding to the punctuation mark to provide more information about the previous element, and to make sure that it is interpreted correctly. In (25), two characters are talking about the name of their club, "The woodsmen", which incidentally has the same name as a 2004 film directed by Nicole Kassel that deals with the theme of paedophilia. The speaker in (25) wants to specify that the reference is not to the film, but to "badasses who can knock a deer out with a one punch"; and does so between verbalised *parentheses*. Similarly, in (26) the stand-up comedian Ricky Gervais uses *brackets* to create irony by specifying that the Everest he is referring to is the mountain, and not another Everest.

5. Discussion

The analysis presented in the previous sections has traced how different punctuation marks may be employed in spoken interaction. What emerges from these examples is a tension at the heart of verbalised punctuation. On the one hand, these forms reveal the permeability of boundaries between writing and speech: signs that originated as visual cues in written texts are reinterpreted as audible resources in dialogue. On the other hand, once integrated into spoken interaction, they no longer simply replicate their written function, but take on new pragmatic roles. *Period* or *full stop* no longer signal the closure of a sentence, but the closure of an argument; *comma* is used not to segment clauses on a page, but to guide listeners through complex syntax; *quotation marks* index irony without the need for an actual written frame; *exclamation point* provides emphasis or affective colouring.

This process exemplifies how semiotic elements migrate across modalities and are pragmaticalised in the process. It also highlights the metalinguistic awareness of speakers and scriptwriters, who mobilise punctuation as an additional layer of commentary within interaction. Importantly, these uses are not confined to the verbal channel: they interact with prosody, gesture, and visual performance. Air quotes, intonation patterns, and body language often work alongside verbalised punctuation, reinforcing or reshaping its meaning. The phenomenon is therefore best understood through a multimodal lens, one that recognises the constant interplay of written, spoken, and embodied signs.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the lexicalisation of punctuation marks in spoken English, focusing on their pragmatic uses in a selection of scripted television dialogues. The analysis has shown that when punctuation is verbalised in non-referential contexts, it is not simply reproduced as a visual sign from writing but reinterpreted as a resource for interaction. Furthermore, the analysis has illustrated a transfer of meaning across modalities, from the visual to the aural, and points to the permeability of the boundary between writing and speech.

From a broader perspective, the examples discussed suggest that punctuation marks can undergo processes of pragmaticalisation, developing into discourse markers with functions comparable to those of more established pragmatic items. Their occurrence in speech thus underscores the multimodal nature of language, in which signs circulate across domains and acquire new values depending on context.

Further research could build on these observations in several directions. A cross-linguistic comparison would clarify whether similar patterns of verbalisation and pragmaticalisation are attested in other languages, as suggested by the Italian *punto* and other cases. A sociolinguistic approach could extend the analysis beyond scripted dialogues, investigating the use of verbalised punctuation in spontaneous spoken corpora or in online interactions, where the interplay of speech, text, and gesture is particularly dense. A diachronic perspective would also be valuable, not only to trace when items such as *period* or *full stop* began to circulate as pragmatic markers in speech, but also to map how verbalised punctuation has evolved in the transition from pre-computer mediated communication to the present internet era. Finally, a multimodal approach combining transcription, prosody, and gesture would allow us to account for the role of air quotes, intonation, and visual cues in reinforcing or reshaping these verbalised forms.

In this way, the study of punctuation in speech can shed light on broader questions of semiotic transfer, pragmaticalisation, and the dynamic relationship between written and spoken language.

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