

Indigenizing punctuation marks

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[Topics: punctuation]

1. Introduction

All the newly designed orthographies include punctuation marks and some styling conventions. In most cases, however, no effort has been made to teach literacy clients the functions and the significance of each punctuation mark. The importance of punctuation and styling conventions is overlooked because they are assumed to be universal. Gleason ([1955](#):432) remarks that “people do not expect to find differences in punctuation from language to language.” Since orthography specialists are literate in at least one European language, it does not even occur to them that punctuation marks and styling conventions found in these languages cannot always be duplicated for newly written languages. Consequently, as has been indicated by Samarin ([1964](#):161), such naive assumptions have been very costly to literacy teachers and Bible translators. He notes that “an imperfect system of punctuation, whether in the use of periods, commas, colons, semi-colons, exclamation marks, questions marks, etc., can vitiate any good work done by a translator on the text itself. It can confuse or mislead the reader.”

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it seeks to find out the relevant punctuation marks that should be used in newly designed orthographies. It does so by examining the syntactic and semantic functions of major punctuation marks. It is important to emphasize that only punctuation marks that have grammatical value—commas, periods, question marks, and exclamation points will be investigated here. The second goal of this article is to find appropriate labels for punctuation marks so that newly literate people can have a way of naming them. It will be argued in this article that names that represent familiar objects are to be preferred over names that depict abstract realities.

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2. The syntactic and semantic functions of punctuation

Some linguists, including Hockett ([1958:548](#)), have questioned the relevance of several punctuation marks and styling conventions in new orthographies. Attempts to change styling conventions have been made for centuries by orthography reformers. However, the criticisms of orthography reformers are not shared by the editors of *Webster's standard American style manual* who argue that:

Punctuation marks are used in English writing to help clarify the structure and meaning of sentences. To some degree, they achieve this end corresponding to certain elements of the spoken language, such as pitch, volume, pause, and stress. To an even greater degree, however, punctuation marks serve to clarify structure and meaning by virtue of the fact that they conventionally accompany certain grammatical elements in a sentence, no matter how those elements might be spoken. In many cases, the relationship between punctuation and grammatical structure is such that the choice of which mark of punctuation to use in a sentence is clear and unambiguous ([Morse 1985:1](#)).

If punctuation reflects something in speech as suggested in this quotation, and if some styling conventions are syntactically significant, it means that they must be represented in the orthography of every language. I should hasten to add that not all the punctuation and styling conventions found in European languages deserve to be represented in newly designed orthographies. Proposals have been made to reduce the number of these punctuation marks and styling conventions to a minimum because, according to Hockett ([1958:541](#)) “writing systems must avoid inadequate and superfluous representations.” To avoid baffling our literacy clients with unnecessary conventions, we would do well to heed the advice given by Mundhenk ([1981:228](#)). He cautions that we “should not introduce punctuation marks which are not needed in the language.” For this reason, I think that for newly written languages only six punctuation marks (the comma, the period, the colon, the quotation mark, the question mark, and the exclamation mark) are really needed at the beginning. These six are necessary because they play important roles in written discourse. Moreover, they have semantic and syntactic correspondents with orality.

3. Justification of Anyi punctuation

[Topics: Africa: Cote d'Ivoire: Anyin]

In order to show the relevance of the punctuation marks and the styling conventions that are pertinent to written communication, we will use the Anyi language spoken in Côte d'Ivoire as an example. The guidelines presented here are not language specific. My experience with a large number of newly written languages allows me to say that the suggestions made here can be duplicated for many other languages. Of course, it is desirable that as each language develops its written literature, it will find it necessary to improve on various aspects of the proposals being made.

4. Naming punctuation markers

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From Senegal to Kenya, from Sudan to South Africa, hardly any of the African languages which have been recently reduced to writing have developed a system for naming the punctuation marks that are used in their orthographies. Readers and writers of these languages who are not educated in a European language do not have any understanding of the punctuation marks they use or see in their manuals. They encounter these punctuation marks in books, but nobody has explained to them how and when they are to be used. Worse, they do not even have names in the native language to refer to these marks. It is very important that labels be given to punctuation marks in order to help literacy clients acquire some metalinguistic knowledge of the orthography of their language. For this reason I suggest, based on the Anyi example, that practical labels be found to name punctuation marks. The names I have proposed for Anyi have been carefully selected so as to reflect the shape of natural objects or to convey an ideophonic concept already used in the language. The choice of each label is followed by a brief description to show its relevance to the milieu in which the client of literacy lives. The resources the language offers can be used to the fullest to minimize the effort exerted in learning the names of the punctuation marks.

4.1. The comma

The name I propose for the comma is *tɔɛ*. It is an ideophone which represents the movement the hand makes when pinching somebody. There seems to be a cultural differences in how people pinch. When the Anyi pinch somebody, they grab a little part of the skin and turn the hand slightly clockwise. The movement thus made closely resembles how a comma is formed. For this reason, pinching is a good mnemonic device for naming the comma.

The editors of *Webster's Standard American Style Manual* ([Morse 1985](#):11–13) indicate that commas are used to show where a pause occurs naturally in speech. When one listens to oral communication, one notices that pauses occur naturally in enumerations and after certain grammatical units. Wherever such pauses occur, the orthography should take notice and use a comma to signal it in the written text. Two examples will be used to illustrate this point. The first sentence is a listing of the names of the people who went to the farm. After each name there is a small pause. In the orthography, the pause is shown by placing a comma between the listed elements:

(1)

Kasi, Ya ɔ, Ama, Koffi, n in Aya b'a h ɔ boo nun el ɔ.

Kasi Yao Ama Koffi and Aya have gone farm in there
Kasi, Yao, Ama, Koffi, and Aya went to the farm.

Additionally in Anyi there is a pause when *kɛ* and *sɛ* are used to set off the main clause from the subordinate clause. Therefore, the Anyi orthography should place a comma whenever these two particles occur between the main clause and the dependent clause as in example 2 below:

(2)

Kεɔ ba, ɔ wunlɪ ewóo.

as he came he saw snake

As he was coming, he saw a snake.

There is also a slight pause between the demonstrative adjective and the coreferential subject in subject copying constructions as in example 3:

(3)

Kasi ɛka, ɔ tɪ man kpa.

Kasi this he be not good

This guy, Kasi, is not nice.

Between *ɛka*, the demonstrative adjective, and *ɔ*, the resumptive pronoun coreferential with *Kasi*, there is a slight pause that needs to be marked in the orthography by a comma. The orthography should mark a comma in all instances where a natural pause occurs between structures.

4.2. The period

The name proposed for the period is *kp ɔ*. It is an ideophone used to describe the noise that is made when water drips or when a pointed object comes into contact with a hard surface. There are some conventions that are attached to the use of the period. Since these conventions are much debated in the literature, we should take time to analyze the pros and cons of using special styling conventions for newly written languages.

The use of a capital letter after a period or in proper names has come under attack by orthography reformers, especially from the activists of the Simplified Spelling Society. They argue that the distinction between upper case and lower case letters is useless and constitutes a burden for learners because “the beginner has to learn two or more different letters for each character in the alphabet” ([Vallins 1973](#):139). Therefore, they argue that allographs should not be represented in the orthography. It seems that the Direction Nationale de l’Aphabétisation Fonctionnelle (DNAFLA) in Mali has opted for this solution. In some of their newer manuals no upper case letter is used at the beginning of a sentence nor for proper names.

I suggest that the distinction be maintained between upper and lower case letters in newly designed orthographies because the argument against it is too weak. If human beings can store billions of bytes of information, they can certainly remember forty or so alphabetic symbols. There has not been any documented proof that Hebrew or Greek children have a harder time reading and writing their respective languages because of allographs. Furthermore, the distinction between lower case letters and upper case letters is so universal that if it is not maintained in new orthographies, the speakers of the language who are already proficient in one of the European languages may boycott the new orthography. Mundhenk ([1981](#):228) notes that “in order to get people to accept the punctuation system, you may have to make it look like that of the punctuation used in languages they are already familiar with.” Since European languages use upper and lower case letters in their orthographies, I propose that capital letters be used in new orthographies as well. Orthography specialists should bear in mind that for many governments and

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for many literacy clients, literacy in a local language should ultimately facilitate the transfer of literacy skills from that language into the European or national language used in the country. It is, therefore, better to maintain, as much as possible, the same styling conventions used in the dominant European language. Smalley remarks that

for areas where Roman writing systems are known, however, Roman orthographies without capital letters for minority languages in which the speakers feel cultural insecurity may contribute to the rejection of the system. It appears to them as being substandard, less than completely identified with the prestige system ([Smalley 1964](#):4).

The current sociolinguistic situation indicates clearly that many of our literacy clients still have some cultural insecurity vis-à-vis the former colonial languages. For our literacy programs to have a chance to succeed, we need to be realistic and take this social dimension into account. Therefore, I propose that capital letters be used in abbreviations, for proper names, and for the first letter of sentences after a period, a question mark, and an exclamation point.

4.3. The colon

The name *kp okp o* that I propose is simply the reduplicated form of the word *kp o*, the name for the period. Since reduplication is used to signal plurality in Anyi, it seems logical to name the colon *kp okp o* instead of finding another label for it. In *Webster's Standard American Style Manual* it is argued that a colon introduces a clause or phrase that explains, illustrates, or restates what has gone before. It is also used in long quotations. Furthermore, it directs attention to an appositive, it is used in dialogues or follows a brief heading or an introductory term. In the example below, colons are used in a morning salutation exchange between Koffi and Aya:

(4)

Koffi: *Mmo ah un o o o.*
Koffi Madam morning
Koffi: Good morning, Madam.
Aya: *Nja ey er e o o o.*
Aya Sir coldness
Aya: Good morning, Sir.

4.4. Quotation mark

The name *t ot oe* is also the reduplicated form of the word *t oe* used above to refer to the comma. The plural form of *t oe* is used here to refer to the quotation mark. It is used because of the similarities in shape between the quotation mark and the comma. Anyi has two quotative words which are *wan*, a verb-like structure, and the particle *k e*. *K e* has several other functions in the language, one of which is to serve as a quotative marker. Both words are used by speakers when they want to explain themselves or quote somebody else, as illustrated by example 5: (1995). *Notes on Literacy*, 21(2).

(5)

Kasi bisa^l ɪ Aya kasan. Y ɪ wan: "wan waá yiele w ɔ?"

Kasi ask COMPLETED ACTION MORPHEME Aya question he said who
child it you

Kasi asked Aya a question. He said: "Whose child are you?"

The colon should occur immediately after *wan* and the material quoted should be enclosed within quotation marks.

It has been argued that quotation marks are not needed for some African languages because they have quotative markers such as *wan* and *kɛ* above. Though this is a valid point, it should nevertheless be noted that these quotation markers only introduce the piece of discourse that is quoted. There is no language which to my knowledge has a lexical element which indicates the end of quotations. If one relies only on quotation openers that these languages have, and one does not use quotation marks in the orthography, one will find it difficult to know exactly where a quotation ends. To avoid such problems, it is better to use quotation mark conventions to mark off clearly the beginning and the end of quoted discourse.

4.5. The question mark

The question mark, *tɔkɔlɔ* is named after an instrument which is like a sickle. It is used by farmers to hold tall grass while the other hand uses the machete to cut it. It has a curve at the upper end and a long tail. It looks just like the form of a question mark.

The use of question marks in newly designed orthographies is a much debated issue among specialists. Some advocate the use of question marks at the end of a sentence as they are used in many European languages. Others remark that for some languages, it is better to place the question mark at the beginning of interrogative sentences. Still others suggest a solution which consists in placing two question marks, one at the beginning and one at the end of interrogative sentences as is done in Spanish. In Spanish, however, the initial question mark is written upside down. This convention has been adopted by the translators of the Baule New Testament. Before accepting or refusing any one of these three proposals, it is important that orthography designers pay attention to the overall structure of the interrogative sentences in the language under consideration.

Many languages make a distinction between YES/NO QUESTIONS and WH-QUESTIONS. In general, there is no syntactic difference between a yes/no question and a declarative sentence. Only suprasegmental features (sentence-final phonetic features) can help distinguish the two. Unfortunately prosodic features which distinguish declarative sentences from yes/no questions in oral communication cannot be represented orthographically to differentiate written texts from oral texts. There is, therefore, a great risk of confusion, especially in longer sentences, if nothing is done in the orthography to distinguish yes/no questions from declarative sentences. For this reason, some have advocated the use of question marks at the beginning of yes/no sentences to set them off from declarative sentences. I have no objection to this convention if yes/no questions are the only types of questions that are found in this language. However, if wh-questions are also found, one should analyze them first before making a ruling on the issue.

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Wh-questions are defined as interrogative sentences in which question words such as when, which, what, where, who, why, and how occur. In general, where such question words exist, they appear at the beginning of sentences. Since yes/no questions occur infrequently in written literature, the decision about question mark conventions should be based on the distribution of wh-question words. Also, since in most cases these words occur primarily at the beginning of sentences, the question mark symbol should not be placed in sentence initial position but rather at the end of the sentence. However, if there are languages where wh-words occur only at the end of the sentence, then the question mark should occur at the beginning of the sentence. On the other hand, there are languages such as Anyi where the wh-words can occur both at the beginning of the sentence and at the end of the sentence. For such languages, the convention about the placement of the question mark should be based on frequency of occurrence. In Anyi like in English the wh-word may occur in sentence final position right after the verb for emphasis as seen in the examples below:

(6)

Kasi l ε di nzu?
 Kasi is eating what
 What is Kasi eating?

However, in non-emphatic sentences, the wh-word *nzu* occurs at the beginning of the sentence immediately followed by *yi ε* as in sentence 7 below:

(7)

Nzu yi ε Kasi l ε di?
 what that Kasi is eating
 What is Kasi eating?

For this group of languages the question mark should appear at the end of the sentence since the wh-word at the beginning of the sentence has already alerted the reader that that sentence is an interrogative sentence. In general, a good analysis of the distribution of question words will obviate the need for two question marks. There is, in my opinion, no need for two question marks in Baule because its question pattern is exactly like that of Anyi.

4.6. The exclamation mark

I propose that the exclamation mark be named *nvun ɔɔn* (which means surprise, excitement). Its function in many languages is to express interjections, surprises, excitement, and forceful comments. Exclamation marks can be used along with ideophonic expressions to express forceful comments as in sentence 8:

(8)

M in k ɔ, kpenzeyii! M in n in Kasi a yia.
 I go suddenly I and Kasi ASPECT
 MARKER meet
 Guess whom I saw, Kasi!

(1995). *Notes on Literacy*, 21(2).

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5. Conclusion

The heuristic principles which have helped us find suitable mnemonic devices to label some punctuation marks can be found in every language. Furthermore, they can be extended to other conventions, for example, the dashes —, the parentheses (), the curly brackets { }, the brackets [], and the angle brackets < >. As literacy takes deeper roots in the language, and as mathematics and other scientific subjects are taught, there will be the need to find other labels beyond the six grammatically-based punctuation marks that I have dealt with in this article. It is the responsibility of the orthography specialist not only to teach the use of those conventions, but also to find suitable labels for them. Experience has shown that the labels that are more easily remembered are those that represent objects with which the literacy client is already familiar.

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