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Functions of the semicolon in British news media

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Abstract

Background. The article focuses on the functions of the semicolon in British news media discourse. Being a part of the written standard, a tool to give sense to writing, punctuation must be considered a very important set of norms of usage. Still, the semicolon, which is considered to be a relatively "young" punctuation mark, is one of the most misused punctuation marks in modern English. The semicolons were examined from the perspective of standard norms of punctuation usage. The study provides an overview of both standard uses and cases of standard deviation.

Purpose. The purpose of this study is to examine specific features of the use of the semicolon in British news media discourse.

Materials and methods. The study reveals the findings of a detailed analysis of the use of semicolons in *The Guardian* articles. It involved communicative-pragmatic text analysis, partial sampling, and comparative description.

Results. The results show that the most common function of semicolon is joining parts of the sentence; cases of separating and contrasting functions are not frequent. The findings reveal a difference in the use of the semicolon in various parts of the newspaper and genres of articles. Due to the fact that news media discourse serves an expressive purpose as well, semicolons can help express irony, cause indignation or shock. The article is an attempt to reveal tendencies in modern news media discourse in the usage of the semicolon.

Keywords: semicolon; punctuation; news media discourse; punctuation marks; English language; functions of punctuation marks; genre; news articles

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Точка с запятой в британских новостных СМИ

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Аннотация

Обоснование. Статья посвящена функциям точки с запятой в британском новостном медийном дискурсе. Будучи частью письменного стандарта, инструментом для придания смысла написанному, пунктуация должна считаться очень важным набором норм употребления. Такой пунктуационный знак, как точка с запятой, является одним из наиболее часто неправильно используемых знаков препинания в современном английском языке. Случаи употребления точки с запятой были рассмотрены с точки зрения стандартных правил. Исследование дает обзор как стандартных случаев использования, так и случаев стандартного отклонения.

Цель. Данное исследование выявляет особенности функционирования точки с запятой в британском новостном медийном дискурсе.

Материалы и методы. В качестве материалов исследования были выбраны английские тексты газеты *The Guardian*. В исследовании применялись методы коммуникативно-прагматического анализ анализа, прием частичной выборки, описательный метод.

Результаты. Наиболее распространенной функцией точки с запятой является соединение частей предложения, случаи разделительной и контрастной функции нечасты. Результаты показывают разницу в использовании точки с запятой в различных газетных рубриках и жанрах статей. В связи с тем, что новостные медиатексты и медиадискурс также служат экспрессивной цели, точка с запятой может помочь выразить иронию, вызвать у читателя возмущение или шок. Статья представляет собой попытку выявить тенденции в современном новостном медиадискурсе в использовании точки с запятой.

Ключевые слова: точка с запятой; пунктуация; новостной медиадискурс; знаки препинания; английский язык; функции знаков препинания; жанр; новостные статьи

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Introduction

Written English is believed to have developed a consistent and sensible conventional punctuation system, in which every punctuation mark has its own function [19].

For many years, English punctuation remained in the shade of prosody or grammatical relations. However, attempts to define it, as Krahn writes, are 'usually very general or couched in some metaphoric way'. Considered as an integral part of written discourse to bind elements of a text, punctuation is regarded as a highly developed system that modifies linguistic forms across phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic strata in written texts [12]. We adhere to Krahn's definition who treats punctuation as an independent linguistic feature of the written modality and calls punctuation a "symbol system in a graphic domain", "a system of symbols and graphic features used to protect the integrity of the sentence in the English writing system and make it visible" [12].

Much attention was given by linguists to the history of the development of punctuation [9; 11; 12]; much research has been done on every period in the development of the English punctuation system. The 20th century is sometimes called "the Century of Little Progress" as it did not make a big contribution to the existing knowledge of punctuation [12].

Some researchers view punctuation in the context of psychology. Linguists take a broad view on punctuation, stating that punctuation is much more than a means to guide the pauses of persons reading a sentence and their recognition of its grammatical structure and meaning. Punctuation, as Thorndike writes, 'influences emphasis, movement, and style' [18]. Baldwin views punctuation in the context of its ability to predict and explain reading behaviours involving punctuation [6].

Researchers state that, for many years, both in classroom and textbooks punctuation has been presented as a number of seemingly unrelated rules. Being presented as a mass of punctuation marks, this hid the true nature of punctuation as a system, largely determined by syntax and operating on the following well-defined principles: 1. various functions of punctuation are: separation, termination, introduction, combination, and enclosure of grammatical units; 2. the length of parallelism of syntactic units affects their punctuation; 3. units that are considered semantically subordinate by the writer need punctuation [13].

Misuse in punctuation, which usually includes omission, comma splice, overuse, and misordering of punctuation marks, is a relevant

topic as it has an impact on both writing and the meaning that it should transmit.

One of the widely misunderstood and misused marks is the semicolon. In contrast to other punctuation marks, the semicolon has a short history. The semicolon first appeared in writing in 1494. It was Aldus Manutius, a printer and publisher, who paired up the comma and the colon to create the semicolon. The first literary Latin text he issued was De Aetna by his contemporary Pietro Bembo, where the new hybrid mark appeared [21]. The new mark was quickly adapted by publishers, in comparison to most of the other new punctuation ideas.

In the course of time, the linguists' view of the semicolon, its functions, peculiarities and use has changed [7; 11]. Researchers state that since the end of the Middle English period, when the semicolon indicated the length of a pause, a function called by some linguists aesthetic, its function has considerably changed to providing syntactic information [10]. With punctuation marks becoming more formalized in the course of time, it used to be fashionable in one period and unfashionable in another. In the early 19th century, it used to replace a colon as well as when joining independent and dependent clauses [21, p. 659]. Researchers state that recently there has been a decrease in the use of semicolons in all styles of writing, which Sun and Wang explain by the fact that a semicolon tends to be replaced by a colon in some rhetorical functions [16].

Crystal states that the semicolon, being a feature of a more formal and complex style of writing, is very seldom used in contemporary fiction. This happens since colloquialization and popularization influenced the change in the use of punctuation, as texts were made more engaging or accessible [7]. While changes in the use of several punctuation marks showed no clear trends, a significant decline in the number of semicolons was observed; in poetry, it is used more often as it helps create a rhythm [9].

There is a large number of grammarians who have given detailed descriptions of punctuation marks; still, there is a strong disagreement between them. Graham calls the semicolon one of the most misunderstood and shunned marks. He emphasizes the fact that the semicolon

has been dismissed by writers and teachers, but it is still ‘a very clever punctuation tool with a number of important grammatical and stylistic functions’ [11, p. 60-62].

Materials and methods

In this study the use of the semicolon in news articles from *The Guardian* newspaper published in October 2023-January 2026 using a continuous sampling method was analysed [17].

The method of partial sampling was used to focus on cases of semicolons in the articles texts. 250 instances of semicolons were chosen and analysed. The analysis was based on five functions of semicolons in articles.

Semicolons in the texts of newspaper articles that cover political, economic, sports, social news as well as viewpoints and, in a wider sense, interpretations of the social and cultural world were under consideration.

A communicative-pragmatic analysis of article texts was done to identify the ways to indirectly influence public opinion in terms of using irony, humor, expressing author’s feelings using the semicolon.

Comparative description was used to analyse the use of semicolons in such article types as news articles, feature articles, columns, editorials and reviews.

Results and discussion

The semicolon is known to operate at a quasi-textual level, acting like a textual shortcut incorporated into a grammatical string [12]. It can be found at only a certain place in a sentence and is not found between words or ordinary phrases at random thus having a subordinate role in the punctuation system.

There is a number of views of the semicolon’s functions in the sentence. Most linguists state that the semicolon has two contrastive roles as a space-saving feature and modifier on a graphical level and a more mechanical one, being just a comma upgrade [12].

A large number of grammar and punctuation books provide a lot of rules on the use of the semicolon, with many cases and functions described. Some of them vary greatly in description. Stilman points out the

two main functions of the semicolon that are to separate elements, when the semicolon acts a substitute for a comma or marks a pause of shift in direction in a sentence, and to link them to make the writing smoother and create an elegant alternative to other sentence constructions, which gives a more vivid sense of the relation between the two [15, 19].

Based on different views on the semicolons functioning, we point out the following functions of the semicolon in news articles: 1. to join closely related independent clauses without a coordinating conjunction; 2. to join closely related independent clauses with a coordinator in-between; 3. to join two independent clauses with a conjunctive adverb or transition word; 4. to separate independent clauses that already contain commas or "extensive punctuation" to avoid complexity in the sentence; 5. to separate individual items, longer than a single word, in a list. These functions were indicated in Table.

Table 1.

Cases of the use of semicolons in The Guardian articles

	Political, economic, social news	**Culture and lifestyle**	**Opinion**
1. To join closely related independent clauses without a coordinating conjunction	47	45	64
2. To join closely related independent clauses with a coordinator in-between	1	9	21
3. To join two independent clauses with a conjunctive adverb or transition word	0	8	15
4. To separate independent clauses that already contain commas	5	0	18
5. To separate individual items, longer than a single word, in a list	8	9	0
Total – 250	61	71	118

As can be seen from Table 1, such types of articles as *news articles* contain the fewest semicolons in their texts; this can be explained by the fact that they convey exact information in a clear and precise way; it is quite obvious to see short sentences, brief and concise descriptions of current events; therefore, the number of semicolons is small there. This also explains the number of examples of listing semicolons.

More instances of the semicolon can be found in *Culture* and *Lifestyle* sections as they present interpretation and creative description of news, trends, events or people and are aimed at educating, entertaining, adding colour, and illuminating. They are characterized by a more emotional language; therefore, the sentences used by an author are complex, full of details.

Opinion section presented by c*olumns, editorials and reviews* reveals personal interpretation of events, critic's opinions and expertise, and the sentences used by an author tend to abound in details, be complex and long; therefore, many instances of the semicolon can be found in them; no listing was found in any of them since provision of concise information, enumerations and lists are not peculiar to them.

The overall frequency of the use of the semicolon in such genres as fiction, non-fiction, newspapers and magazines from 1920 to 2019 was studied and analysed by researchers, who state that it has greatly declined [7; 16]. This can be seen in the results of our study, which revealed a small number of semicolons in comparison to other punctuation marks.

In addition, our study revealed that joining independent clauses without a coordinator is the most common syntactic construction across all news media texts. Our findings support Crystal's view that modern writing is moving towards a simpler style and shorter sentences, as they reveal an overall low frequency of structures involving conjunctive adverbs and transition words [9].

Sun and Wang in their detailed corpus study focusing on a place different punctuation marks have in various registers, too, point out such common function of the semicolon as marking asyndetic coordination in a sentence: "*But since then, major nations and markets have responded with surprising force and urgency**;** global carbon dioxide emissions have significantly slowed, and in many countries, per capita emissions are falling even while per capita GDP and energy use are going up*" [16].

In making a decision, whether to use the semicolon or not, much depends on the author's idea, as it is difficult to objectively define whether there is a close connection between the clauses joined; therefore, transition words can be used to strengthen or indicate the writer's intention

to mark a relationship. Stilman also emphasizes the role of the author by saying that the semicolon should be used instead of the comma if the author "feels" that a comma would not be strong enough or in order to make distinctiveness of the idea stand out more clearly [15].

Very often, skilled writers exploit the semicolon's function to administer mild shock or censure: *It matters that these things, investigated by media outlets, reported by human rights organisations and narrated by Palestinians on the ground, are collected and listed in one address: 6,000 bombs a week in the first three weeks of the conflict**;** 2,000lb bombs deployed at least 200 times**;** 85% of Gazans displaced**;** 93% of the population facing crisis levels of hunger*. Sometimes the author makes the reader come to a certain conclusion: "*But with energy abundance driving new growth and economic modalities, we can expect to see the downward trend continue**;** ultimately, we should strive for no less than a 0% rate of poverty globally*." In other sentences, the semicolon is used to create certain suspense: "*No future is guaranteed**;** there will be injustices and suffering in every path forward, just as there have been forever*." The suspense also seems to be reached by using the direct appeal to the reader: "*Treating prisoners badly makes the public less safe when they are released**;** fail to deal with homelessness and this will cost us when people must be kept in emergency housing*." In some cases, the semicolon can be used as a means to express irony: *In the mid-1960s, for instance, there were more than 80 public toilets in Newcastle**;** today there are no council-run facilities in the city at all"*.

Rarely, the semicolon can be used with contrasting statements, but it is still one of its functions: *Goldman's lawyers said in defence documents that: "If he [Dodd] felt pressure, it was self-generated**;** it was not imposed on him"*. The interesting detail here is that the author doesn't use the coordinator *but* to express the contrast, and the structure of the sentence itself does it. Another example reveals the focus on the contrast, too: "*This dramatic increase is thanks to huge advances in medicine, public health and living standards, but also by a stunning fall in child mortality: for most of human history, about half of all children died before their 15th birthday**;** today the figure is less than 5% globally and*

as low as 0.4% in some wealthy nations." The contrast very often can be used a means of expressing irony: "*The rich man hasn't**;** he can go away to New Guinea in a yacht*."

It has been stated by grammarians that the semicolon joining two independent clauses with a conjunctive adverb is chiefly used in formal writing, and, as Sun and Wang write, it is the academic register that tends to display many cases of this use of thesemicolon [16]; nevertheless, there were found several examples where the semicolon is followed by a coordinating conjunction, which, according to the general punctuation rules, should be followed by a comma, but it is not: *By this time, the Allies had been fighting their way across the Netherlands for a month**;** meanwhile the "satirical resistance" The Underwater Cabaret – now known by the acronym OWC – lives on.* As Casagrande writes, too, the use of the comma in such constructions tends to be more peculiar to the book style [8].

We agree with Sapunova, who focuses on the communicative and pragmatic function of the semicolon and writes that in some contexts, the semicolon not only indicates syntactic hierarchy within a sentence but also signals the introduction of significant information in the paragraph, the type of which is determined by the context and the author's message. The part of the sentence following the semicolon may have the following pragmatic implications: introducing clarification of information given in the preceding section ("*I'm such a southern woman**;** I've seen a lot and I've been through a lot*."); introduction of a consequence from a cause indicated in the previous part ("*They took their honeymoon on the Isle of Man and stayed for 12 years**;** Baillie Scott later joked sea sickness on the voyage out made him unable to face another trip across the Irish Sea*."); introducing a succinctly formulated – and often effective – conclusion from the preceding section ("*The customer directory today lists 216 companies, including car dealerships, fishing tackle retailers, tyre suppliers, self-storage units, a nursery, DJ-ing gear rental, skin-care services and an antiques emporium**;** all human life is here*") [4].

There is a tendency not to produce long, complicated sentences, and, as Casagrande states, news style permits a semicolon to connect

the clauses but recommends breaking up the sentence instead [8], as in "*The travel industry has experienced a surge in business this year after the end of pandemic restrictions on trips abroad. However, the heatwave scorching southern Europe may have given travellers pause for thought in booking a last-minute getaway"*. Still, some article authors may use the semicolon in a long sentence with the feeling that as the whole sentence is about a single subject, it should be kept as a single unity without being split: "*She can play things clean**;** raised in a strict religious household in Temecula, California, Tomlinson began her standup career as a teenager on the Christian church circuit, in part to process the death of her mother when she was eight"*.

As for the use of semicolons to join closely related independent clauses with a coordinator in-between, there were several cases, in which this use can be explained by expressive purpose. For instance, in the sentences "*Suburban York is no Yosemite**;** but it takes me out of my own exhausting head and gives me a fraction more perspective on my work problems*" and "*Labour knows that anti-net zero feeling hasn't contributed to its fall in the polls**;** but disappointment about unambitious environmental policies has*" the author emphasizes the contrast between the two ideas expressed in the two parts of the sentence. In the sentence "*And, critically, it's hard for newcomers to enter the exclusivity race since brand prestige is deemed to build up over decades**;** so a "moat" is built around profitability $20bn*" the author aims to lead the reader to the consequence, which might be unexpected and surprising.

The specifics of expressiveness in news texts have often become the focus of attention for many researchers [2; 5]. As many researchers state, the semicolon is in many cases used to create a greater pause or to give greater emphasis to clauses [1; 3; 4; 7; 11; 20; 21]. It is especially often found in the "*Opinions*" section, which usually contains articles that are distinguished by their emotional coloring. Moreover, the "*Opinions*" section generally contains examples of obvious overuse of punctuation marks, which makes the text overloaded: *"Essex man", "Stevenage woman", the "red wall"**;** "boomers" v "millennials", "ethnic minorities" v "the white working class" – and, of course, leave v remain.* It

should be mentioned here that the overuse of punctuation marks and semicolons in particular was found only in the *Opinion section* articles, as it is one of the parameters of expressive, vivid author's style. This proves the above-mentioned statement that it is the author who makes a decision, and much depends on their style of writing.

The previously mentioned fact doesn't take into account the simplification trends of modern punctuation and doesn't reveal the system's potential for variability. It makes it difficult to develop effective recommendations for the correct and authentic use of punctuation marks in "live" text. The recommendations analyzed often incompletely reflect punctuation practice and, in some cases, contradict each other.

Our results coincide with the ideas of Alexandrova, who mentions that the semicolon serves as a separation mark, but gives the examples of its use in other cases, such as joining closely related independent clauses, with the coordinator and; she also gives the example of the sentence where the semicolon is used to join homogeneous members of a sentence. All these, as she states, are done with the only aim to emphasise the ideas and make the text expressive; besides, the semicolon, being a "strong" punctuation mark, highlights syntagmatic sections of speech more contrastingly [1].

As stated by researchers and demonstrated above, the authors of modern grammar textbooks use a formal approach to describing punctuation, limiting themselves to listing the most common uses of a mark. However, this approach cannot be considered in any way representative as it doesn't take into account the tendency of modern punctuation toward simplification and fails to highlight the system's potential for variability [1; 3; 5].

Conclusion

1. There are certain characteristic features of the use of the semicolon in news media texts: their major function is joining closely related independent clauses, with or without a coordinating conjunction. Separating parts of a sentence with a large number of commas and making lists are other, rather rare functions of the semicolon. There is a tenden-

cy to break the prescribed punctuation rule of using a comma after a coordinating conjunction, as well as to overuse punctuation, especially in opinion columns.

2. The punctuation system of the English language shouldn't be discussed regardless of the style; the style and genres of the news media articles also have some peculiarities in terms of the use of the semicolon. It is the choice of the author whether to use the semicolon in the sentence, split the sentence or use a comma instead.

3. Though most authors tend not to produce long, complicated sentences, the semicolon remains the punctuation mark that still functions as a joining, separating and contrasting tool and can be used not only with informative purpose, but also with expressive one, as it can express irony as well as cause astonishment and shock in readers.

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