



Paul Rössler, Peter Besl & Anna Saller (Hg.). 2021. *Vergleichende Interpunktion – Comparative Punctuation* (Linguistik – Impulse & Tendenzen 96). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter. 454 S.

Reviewed by **Dimitrios Meletis**: Universität Zürich, Deutsches Seminar, Schönberggasse 9, CH-8001 Zürich, E-Mail: dimitrios.meletis@uzh.ch

<https://doi.org/10.1515/zrs-2022-2088>

## Establishing comparative punctuation research

A common feature of linguistic works focusing on writing is that they bemoan the marginal role it has played in the past when contrasted with the treatment of speech, which is itself often falsely equated with ‘language’. This tradition is continued by the present volume as the editors mention specifically the “long prevailing disinterest of linguists in the study of these inconspicuous non-alphabetic characters” (p. VIII), echoing that even within the marginalized research dedicated to writing, punctuation is often treated as a side note. Their book, as the result of an international 2019 conference, rectifies this impressively by collecting contributions that cover many relevant aspects of what is labelled here as “comparative punctuation research” (p. VIII). The introduction (presented in both German and English, reflecting the volume’s bilingual conception) explains that the 16 papers have more or less roughly been assigned to four thematic categories, with the first two – *system* and *norm* – of theoretical and the latter two – *use* and *acquisition* – of a more practical nature; they will be discussed in separate sections in this review. A very useful overview table on p. XV additionally lists the language(s) and punctuation mark(s) each paper focuses on as well as whether the perspective adopted is synchronic or diachronic, showing at one glance the breadth of the volume – and the potential of this new field.

### System

In the volume’s first contribution (in German), NEEF focuses on comma placement in the contemporary German writing system. Based on syntactic structural information, he identifies three positions that – in general – require marking. The “inviolable, unordered conditions” (p. 3) proposed are (i) subordinate order (e.g., elements in enumerations), (ii) subordination of sentences, and (iii) subordination of infinitive constructions (although the latter is subject to further condi-

tions). Crucially, the comma is only the default mark that can occur if the identified conditions are met, with other punctuation marks (such as the colon) and conjunctions functioning as alternative non-default markers. The conditions apply within the mainly pragmatically defined ‘written utterance’ (proposed in Neef 2021) rather than a more syntactically grounded graphematic reading of ‘sentence’ (cf. Schmidt 2016). While Neef’s conditions elegantly translate the 33 normative ‘comma rules’ stated in the *Amtliche Regelung*<sup>1</sup> into only three linguistically motivated conditions, an answer to the relevant question of what these have in common remains an implicit desideratum.

In a paper impressive in the scope of the data analyzed and meticulous in the approach adopted, LEMKE (in German) traces select aspects of the typographic (and, in part, functional) variation and change of the virgule and the comma at the beginning of the 18th century. She illustrates the initial alternation between the virgule and the small round Antiqua comma after foreign-language elements printed in Antiqua as well as the introduction of a ‘hybrid’ small but straight comma very similar in form to the virgule, which first supplemented and then replaced the virgule in Fraktur texts. The final part of the paper adopts a more theoretical perspective on punctuation, arguing for the comma’s status as a grapheme and conceptualizing its described variants as allographs.

In the volume’s first contrastive paper – and one of several addressing Italian –, FERRARI & STOJMEANOVA WEBER compare (in German) the comma in Italian and German. Their main argument is that in Italian the use of punctuation in “cultivated writing” (p. 57, my translation), likely referring to norm-conforming standard writing in formal registers, depends on communicative-textual factors rather than (morpho)syntactic ones, distinguishing it from German. Punctuation marks in general are divided in (a) segmenting marks, signaling semantic units in texts, and (b) interactive marks (reminiscent of a similar distinction made in Bredel 2008, which remains unreferenced here). While part of the former group, the comma in Italian functions to “show informative boundaries and hierarchies that on different levels of discourse can have interpretative influences” (p. 70, my translation).

ŽAGAR compares (in English) practices of punctuating in the complex “‘triscritical’ and ‘trilingual’” (p. 78) situation in mid-16th century Croatian using biblical texts printed at Urach (near Tübingen) in the Glagolitic, Cyrillic, and Latin scripts. In the oldest texts, punctuation was based on medieval Greek practice, with the influence of Latin growing steadily, leading Žagar to conclude that “the

---

<sup>1</sup> The *Amtliche Regelung* is a rulebook regulating many aspects of German orthography including punctuation. It is issued by the *Council for German Orthography* (Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung), a pluricentric authority of linguistic policy deciding on orthographic matters in the Germanophone region.

Glagolitic and Cyrillic New Testaments were the first Croatian texts written in these scripts to align their punctuation practices with those of contemporaneous Latin script texts” (p. 85). Unfortunately, apart from a section titled ‘Summary’, this valuable contribution has no further subdivisions or headings to structure it, distinguishing it in this regard from the rest of the volume.

## Norm

Opening the volume’s shortest part, REINER, in a nutshell, seeks to analyze (in English) the connection between norm-deviating uses of punctuation and the possible psychological reality of certain mental syntactic representations, arguing that the use of punctuation is guided by internal ‘rules’ or systematics (cf. also Kohrt 1990). She focuses on the ‘prefield comma’ (German *Vorfeldkomma*), i.e., a comma used after non-sentence adverbials in a sentence’s prefield<sup>2</sup> and not licensed by the norm – which in the Germanophone region is currently a much-discussed and -researched phenomenon of didactic and syntax-theoretical relevance (cf. p. 106). The main question, which is preliminarily answered through the analysis of comma usage in five term papers written by German L1 writers, is “whether prefields trigger non-standard commas at their right edge just because they are prefields” (p. 99). Reiner concludes – very broadly – that topology appears to indeed play a role in the placement of (prefield) commas.

In a thought-provoking contribution that (without exaggeration) focuses on explaining “fundamental changes” (p. 109) in how punctuation is used, RINAS traces (in German) how the increasing regulation of punctuation – with standardization efforts going back to the 17th century – can be seen as a response to text composition becoming more liberal. Central developments reflecting this are a decline of the periodic sentence at the expense of a more logical-grammatical reading of ‘sentence’ (cf. p. 125) as well as the marginalization of the colon and the semicolon and the concurrent rise of the comma (which is also reflected in it being the most-studied punctuation mark today). Rinas argues that punctuation is only one (albeit important) means of rendering texts comprehensible and should always be viewed as related to other such means.

---

<sup>2</sup> According to the model of topological fields, which has been influential in German linguistics, the prefield precedes the predicate in sentences with V2 word order (i.e., with verbs taking the position of the second constituent). It is occupied by a noun phrase, an adverbial phrase, or a clause. The example given by Reiner (p. 92) – which in this case triggered an incorrect comma following the prefield – is “Nach einer über 2000-jährigen Phase einer vergleichsweise langsamen Entwicklung” (‘After a 2000-year phase of a comparatively slow development’).

## Use

Taking up some general points made in Rinas' chapter, in providing two case studies, NEUMANN & VOESTE (in German) study German manuscripts and incunabula from the 15th and early 16th centuries to highlight the respective scribal practices of scribes, typesetters, and rubricators as well as the motivations underlying them. They conclude that varying practices of segmenting texts coexisted, and differences can be observed in handwriting vs. print but also in various types of processes (e.g., transposition). Generally, actors did not display group-specific behavior, instead following their own respective principles. How this idioscriptural variation eventually developed into a “concerted approach” (p. 159, my translation) remains to be explained.

Idioscriptural variation also features in EBER-HAMMERL'S (German-language) chapter, where she examines the use of punctuation in texts written by patients in psychiatric facilities. Crucial in explaining this variation, she shows, are foreign-language elements and the question of how patients punctuate them when incorporating them into their texts. Their idiolectal choices have various functions, among them indexical ones, as they potentially signal, for example, their level of education.

In the first contribution whose subject is a non-alphabetical writing system, OBERWINKLER (in German) gives an overview of the development of Japanese punctuation. She reconstructs four phases: in the first, when Chinese characters – adopted through Korea – came into use, additional characters were added between lines with the aim of facilitating reading. In the second phase, in texts written in hiragana, a fast brush writing style indicated the ends of sentences. The third phase is then shaped by contact with the West and its punctuation, and the government published first official recommendations for the use of punctuation in 1906. With the fourth phase we arrive at the present, in which, as Oberwinkler traces, given the dominance of digital contexts of writing, we witness great variation in how texts are punctuated, with alternatives like emoji on the rise.

A synchronic view on problems caused by the elusive nature of the ‘sentence’ in Chinese is given in SUN'S (English-language) contribution. Specifically, he investigates the use of *juhao*, which is occasionally translated as ‘period’ here and as ‘dot’ in the overview table in the volume's introduction. *Juhao* marks complete ideas, with the perception of what constitutes such a ‘complete idea’ being shaped by ‘unspoken’ rules. In an empirical analysis, Sun carves out a model to explain the use of *juhao*, showing that the relevant factors are “closely related to discourse rather than to syntax” (p. 234).

The following paper shifts the focus to the colon. STRÖM HEROLD & LEVIN analyze (in English) German, English, and Swedish non-fiction books from the

2000's – both originals and translations – in striving to rectify that punctuation (or the actual practices of using it) is usually but a footnote in translation studies. Their main questions are how punctuation is translated and how this is affected by the common, conventionalized practices of punctuating in the target language. Usually, translations tend to be more explicit than originals and prefer to expand “less complete source-text units into more complete target-text structures” (p. 259). An interesting counterexample is German, as the colon allows using syntactic fragments (before it) that in the originals may have been complete sentences.

FUHRHOP & HETTWER compare (in English) the use of the apostrophe and the hyphen – both of which are word marks, i.e., operate at the word level rather than the sentence level (cf. Buchmann 2015) – in German, English, Dutch, and French. Based on rules in dictionaries and grammars (lending the analysis a prescriptive bias even though it is categorized here under ‘use’) they carve out features such as [±obligatory] for their comparison. While of value as an individual analysis, this contribution (which echoes some of Fuhrhop’s other work, e.g., Fuhrhop 2018, 2021) is also immensely relevant from more general theoretical and methodological perspectives, providing a possible useful blueprint for a comparative graphematics.

Rounding out the volume’s usage-oriented part, PECORARI & LONGO (in English) study the functional overlap of the dash and the ellipsis in English and Italian. As done in the preceding chapter, they also rely on characterizations of punctuation in “grammars and manuals” (p. 291) and identify different communicative and prosodic functions like the ellipsis signaling prosodic fragmentation as exhibited in sentence breaks or reformulations.

## Acquisition

The volume’s final part commences with an enlightening (German-language) survey by THURMAIR. After discussing various hypotheses of why punctuation assumes a marginal role in teaching German as a Foreign Language (GFL), the results of 108 interviews conducted with (mostly non-native) GFL teachers provide actual answers. Programmatic considerations for an incorporation of punctuation into GFL teaching conclude the chapter; hope is they will resonate with the relevant communities and practitioners (also beyond the Germanophone world) as many of them can be generalized to teaching punctuation both to L2 and – arguably – L1 writers.

The exclamation mark in German and Danish is at the heart of SIMONSEN’S (German-language) study. The usually assumed pragmatic (and ‘dramatic’) func-

tions of increasing intensity and emphasizing writers' involvement are analyzed and scrutinized with data from emails and commentaries written by German and Danish L1 writers as well as Danish L2 writers (with German as L1). Simonsen concludes that the exclamation mark is an interactive sign and discusses didactic implications of her findings.

In the final paper, STARK shows (in German) inter- and intralinguistic causes of errors in Italian learners' comma use when writing in German. While comma errors abound also in German L1 writing due to implicitly acquired strategies based on a variety of factors (not necessarily syntactic ones), the ones made by Italian writers reveal that the punctuation system (or practices) in writers' L1 can cause interference. This once again highlights the intricate interaction between different systems (and how writers acquire and use them).

The volume ends with both a subject index and a very welcome "index of punctuation marks" (arranged first alphabetically, then by complexity) that proves useful when searching for discussion of specific marks.

## Branch out, tie together

Giving an overall assessment for the present volume is easy: It is a success. Not only is it innovative and – given writing's marginal status in linguistics – daring to launch "comparative punctuation research" as an enterprise. The contributions' multifacetedness and their far-reaching questions and implications aptly show that this book has actually been a long overdue necessity. Thus, the constructive criticism that follows only pertains to some inevitable (and largely negligible) growing pains of this nascent field that can be considered in future contributions to it – and hopefully there will be many.

A delicate point to address is the volume's bilingual conception. While the volume's title, its preface, and introduction are given in both German and English, the individual chapters are, of course, written only in either. With ten of the 16 chapters, the bulk of the volume is in German. This is *per se* no problem, and my mentioning it here is not to be interpreted as a plea to publish only in English as an increasingly dominant academic lingua franca (which can justifiably be scrutinized, cf. Meletis 2021). However, as some of the papers – like Ferrari and Stojmenova Weber's – show, there appears to be a plethora of research on punctuation in other languages (in this case Italian), and giving it a wider audience is certainly beneficial from a comparative perspective. Also, most chapters focus on German punctuation (12 of 16), which, together with the fact that the majority of chapters are written in German, insinuates an imbalance. Such an asymmetry does exist – grapholinguistics is more popular in the German-speaking region –,

but in this volume specifically, the decision to include papers in German actively contributes to a further seclusion of highly valuable findings from what is certainly an international community of researchers interested in punctuation. Abstracts, at least, are given in English for all contributions.

The volume's papers showcase the breadth of matters concerning punctuation but at the same time exhibit some noteworthy omissions. This, for example, includes (more) psycholinguistic perspectives. As a consequence, most analyses adopt what has been termed the 'offline view' oriented towards structure. This is a departure from the arguably groundbreaking 'online view' proposed by Bredel (2008, 2011) which interprets punctuation marks as providing instructions to readers during the reading process.<sup>3</sup> Especially as multifunctionality is assumed for the respective marks in many of the contributions, Bredel's stripped-down instructional functions would have served as an interesting background for comparison. However, as Neef (p. 23, my translation) rightly argues, "grapholinguistic models are not easily comparable in an evaluative manner as they typically approach their subject differently", and in this sense, one must contend that each contribution included here is valuable in its own right. Another perspective that is missing is a more (meta)pragmatic one, which can explain the lack of nowadays highly relevant non-standard examples of punctuation that can be found especially in digital literacy practices (cf., for example, Androutsopoulos 2020, and also Oberwinkler's discussion of Japanese in the present volume).

Finally, although there are cross-references at certain points, when reading the entire volume, one cannot help but identify a lot of (unfulfilled) potential for stronger cohesion. Neef's use of a concept of 'written utterance', for example, could have been relevant to Kun's discussion of 'complete ideas' in Chinese, and important insight into related questions is given in Rinas' treatment of the loosening up of periodic sentence structures. The same goes – to name just one more example – for the *Vorfeldkomma* 'prefield comma', explicitly discussed by Reiner but also – without reference to Reiner – mentioned for Italian by Ferrari & Stojmenova Weber (on p. 70). Given that the authors (understandably) cannot be expected to cross-reference in such depth, a synoptic summary or large-scale conclusion that elevates the volume's many findings to a meta-level and thus integrates them into a bigger and coherent picture of 'comparative punctuation' would have proven extremely valuable. Granted, this only highlights the need for

---

<sup>3</sup> One reason for this may be that Bredel's (2008, 2011) work is published in German. However, there do now exist short overviews of her tenets in English in Kirchhoff & Primus (2016) and Meletis & Dürscheid (2022).

more comparative punctuation research – and expressing this need can also be regarded as one of this book’s many achievements.

## References

- Androutsopoulos, Jannis. 2020. Auslassungspunkte in der schriftbasierten Interaktion. In: Jannis Androutsopoulos & Florian Busch (eds.). *Register des Graphischen: Variation, Interaktion und Reflexion in der digitalen Schriftlichkeit* (Linguistik – Impulse & Tendenzen 87). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 133–158. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110673241-006>
- Bredel, Ursula. 2008. *Die Interpunktion des Deutschen: Ein kompositionelles System zur Online-Steuerung des Lesens* (Linguistische Arbeiten 522). Tübingen: Niemeyer. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783484970502>
- Bredel, Ursula. 2011. *Interpunktion* (Kurze Einführungen in die germanistische Linguistik 11). Heidelberg: Winter.
- Buchmann, Franziska. 2015. *Die Wortzeichen im Deutschen* (Germanistische Bibliothek 56). Heidelberg: Winter.
- Fuhrhop, Nanna. 2018. Graphematik des Deutschen im europäischen Vergleich. In: Angelika Wöllstein, Peter Gallmann, Mechthild Habermann & Manfred Krifka (eds.). *Grammatiktheorie und Empirie in der germanistischen Linguistik* (Germanistische Sprachwissenschaft um 2020 1). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 587–616. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110490992-020>
- Fuhrhop, Nanna. 2021. Vergleichende Graphematik. In: Henning Lobin, Andreas Witt & Angelika Wöllstein (eds.). *Deutsch in Europa: Sprachpolitisch, grammatisch, methodisch* (Jahrbuch des Instituts für Deutsche Sprache 2020). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 93–110. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110731514-007>
- Kirchhoff, Frank & Beatrice Primus. 2016. Punctuation. In: Vivian Cook & Des Ryan (eds.). *The Routledge handbook of the English writing system* (Routledge Handbooks in Linguistics). London: Routledge, 95–111.
- Kohrt, Manfred. 1990. Die ‚doppelte Kodifikation‘ der deutschen Orthographie. In: Christian Stetter (ed.). *Zu einer Theorie der Orthographie: Interdisziplinäre Aspekte gegenwärtiger Schrift- und Orthographieforschung* (Reihe Germanistische Linguistik 99). Tübingen: Niemeyer, 104–144. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111372280.104>
- Meletis, Dimitrios. 2021. On being a graphologist. In: Yannis Haralambous (ed.). *Grapholinguistics in the 21st Century, Proceedings, Part I, Paris, France, 2020* (Grapholinguistics and Its Applications 4). Brest: Fluxus Éditions, 47–62. <https://doi.org/10.36824/2020-graf-mele>
- Meletis, Dimitrios & Christa Dürscheid. 2022. *Writing systems and their use. An overview of grapholinguistics* (Trends in Linguistics. Studies and Monographs 369). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110757835>
- Neef, Martin. 2021. The written utterance as a core concept in grapholinguistics. In: Yannis Haralambous (ed.). *Grapholinguistics in the 21st Century, Proceedings, Part I, Paris, France, 2020* (Grapholinguistics and Its Applications 4). Brest: Fluxus Éditions, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.36824/2020-graf-neef>
- Schmidt, Karsten. 2016. Der graphematische Satz. Vom Schreibratz zur allgemeinen Satzvorstellung. In: *Zeitschrift für germanistische Linguistik* 44(2), 215–256. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zgl-2016-0011>