

**What is the graphematic status of punctuation marks?
Toward basic operational concepts of comparative punctuation research**

Jonas Romstadt¹ & Dimitrios Meletis²

¹Universität Bonn, ²Universität Zürich

jromstad@uni-bonn.de, dimitrios.meletis@ds.uzh.ch

While research on punctuation is growing, with respect to discussions of a comparative concept of *grapheme*, punctuation marks and their status within writing systems have been largely ignored. Instead, the focus has remained on ‘default graphemes’ (cf. Meletis 2020) which correspond straightforwardly with units like phonemes, syllables, or morphemes and are not only instrumental in forming meaning-bearing written units but also in classifying distinct phono- and morphographic writing systems (cf. Joyce & Borgwaldt 2011).

Indeed, from this typological perspective, it is striking that several punctuation marks – e.g., the period and the comma – appear to be quite universal, occurring across otherwise graphematically diverse writing systems. This implies formal and functional commonalities of particular relevance for universal processes involved in reading. Against this background, investigating whether punctuation signs as a whole are graphemes in the same way as ‘default graphemes’ or whether they even have to be classified as graphemes of any kind (and doing so under a descriptive lens) may be partially misdirected endeavors.

While different formal and functional classes of punctuation marks have been assumed in grapholinguistic analyses (cf. Gallmann 1985, Günther 1988, Bredel 2008), the resulting classifications were restricted to German. In this paper we will extend these analyses, revealing that marks that appear more stable both formally and functionally across different writing systems may be more connected to general cognitive (or reading-instructive) functions while system-specific marks assume – similar to default graphemes – linguistic functions tied to specific languages. Crucially, the transition between universal and system-specific is fluid: For example, in German, the comma is used for indicating non-subordination and to separate clauses (cf. Bredel & Primus 2007), while in Chinese, the comma routinely occurs between independent clauses and can separate a subject from its predicate, with a separate comma <、 > being used in enumerations. Thus, while encompassing several graphematic functions, the comma’s universal task is to indicate syntactic boundaries for the parsing of sentences. By contrast, other marks appear system-specific, e.g., the Chinese title marks <《》 >. What must also be accounted for is formal variation (compare, e.g., <. > in German with <。 > in Chinese) and its functional implications.

The result of our analysis is a scalar and cross-grapholinguistic graphematic classification of punctuation useful in investigating general questions of comparative punctuation research: How do writing systems differ regarding ‘universal’ and more specific punctuation units? How can the historical development of punctuation be (re-)interpreted in this context? What are relevant psycholinguistic implications?

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