

# New Marks for Old

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*The Internet presents teachers with a new linguistic world, in which we see departures from traditional Standard English usage. This article explores some of the interesting things happening to punctuation, especially among younger users.*

Two big things have been happening on the Internet, in relation to orthography. New styles have proliferated; and old punctuation marks have begun to develop new meanings.

Regular emailers will have encountered the new styles, and may use all of them. One I call orthographic minimalism - the omission of punctuation marks, avoidance of capitalisation, and the use of nonstandard spelling. So not long ago I got this message from a colleague:

*dave sorry but i wont be able to get to the meetintg after all*

I don't react by sending a return message:

*Mike, it's about time you learned to spell. There is only one 't' in meeting.*

I recognise a busy person who wants to send a message off as quickly as possible without bothering to correct it. There is no problem of intelligibility. He has got his message across. And he is not alone. There

are millions more like him sending messages like this every day. It is a new style which some may not like, most tolerate, and many welcome.

Some commentators have concluded from this that punctuation is on the way out. But actually, minimalism makes up only a tiny percentage of the written language that is 'out there'. And it has to be weighed against the opposite style: orthographic maximalism. Here's another message I received, after telling someone about a successful enterprise:

*That's fantastic!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

There were only a dozen exclamation marks. I've had messages with 20 or more. I've also seen multiple question marks, and all kinds of odd mixtures, such as *??!???!!* This is novel. I know no precedent in the history of language for this sort of thing.

These styles are of course characteristic of informal e-communication. The more formal the interaction, the less they are

likely to occur, and the more they will be construed as inappropriate. So it's important for youngsters experimenting with Internet styles to realise that breaking the conventions of the standard language is dangerous in certain settings. It is not likely to be appreciated if an employer reads an e-application:

*I hope you think i;m the right person for this job :)))*

We need to be able to style-switch. My apologetic colleague later that day sent me a summary of a paper in perfect standard English, with every orthographic convention respected. That is the norm. Competent users of English have different orthographic styles at their disposal just as they have different tones of voice. The longer the message, as in blogging and most Web pages, the less likely we are to encounter nonstandard orthography. Minimalism has been noticed because it is characteristic of short-messaging services. After all, if we have only 160 or 140 characters to play with, we are likely to make economies in the area where intelligibility is least threatened, such as punctuation and capitalisation. We need to recall that punctuation arrived relatively late in the history of English. The earliest Anglo-Saxon texts have no punctuation - sometimes not even spaces between words. Yes, there are cases like *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* where there is ambiguity, but these are infrequent.

A consequence of minimalism is the emergence of new uses of old marks, and here the period takes center stage. In instant messaging and a great deal of social forum chat, we see the

punctuationless style as a norm. The screen boundaries suffice to mark sentence-ending, and there are few sentence sequences which need to be separated by a period. Users sense this, so that even those who would routinely use a period in other writing find themselves dropping it when engaged in a written exchange where there are pressures of space. The line-break has taken over the function. We don't need both.

What I wasn't expecting, in analysing exchanges between young people (and increasingly among the less young) was to see a shift in the semantic values attached to the period. In a style where the default punctuation is zero, any marks are likely to take on new values. Traditionally, the period is the 'neutral' mark, conveying the least amount of emotion. If zero becomes the neutral mark, then the role of the period will change. It will convey to the reader that something semantically extra has been added. And this 'extra' is some indication of seriousness, aggression, sarcasm, and other such emotions. I found many examples like this:

*A: what time do we meet*

*B: seven oclock [=neutral]*

*B: seven oclock. [=I've told you already.*

*You should know, stupid!]*

The use of a period may also express finality. Starting a chat is easy enough. Ending it is much trickier, as we never know whether our interlocutor is going to add an extra message. The period is a useful way of saying 'I'm finished' or 'I'm winding up', as here:

A: *11-12 tomo is a v good time to call.*  
B: *excellent.*

Emoticons do the job very well. Instead of 'excellent', H might have typed :)), or some sort of emoji.

What we are seeing here, then, is a stylistic shift. A new variety of English has emerged in these Internet settings, and motivated new patterns of usage, which include a realignment of some semantic values in punctuation. There are also pragmatic factors underlying the development - ergonomic factors to do with the ease and speed of typing, and

fashion factors reflecting the informality, spontaneity, and playfulness associated with electronic communication. A traditional view of punctuation is not going to help in explaining what's going on electronically; nor, of course, is an account of what's happening on the Internet going to help in relation to traditional writing. From a teaching point of view, the primary aim must be to ensure that students know the nature of the linguistic differences, and are able to 'translate' between styles as occasion demands. That's the aim: to become MPs - Masters of Punctuation.

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