D CUMENT RESUME

ED 214 183 CS 206 792

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TITLE Errors in Expectations: A Reanalysis of the Problem of Sentence Completeness.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (33rd, San Francisco. CA, March 18-20, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Discourse Analysis; Higher Education; *Punctuation; Semantics; *Sentence Structure; *Writing Instruction; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Writing Difficulties

ABSTRACT

Punctuation is not necessary in a sentence if a pair of adjacent words suggests an intentional conceptual relationship. However, when the pair suggests a relationship that is not a part of the intended communication, the writer must alert the reader, so some punctuation is necessary. When members of an adjacent pair do not suggest a plausible semantic relationship, the reader will try to associate the second word of the pair with an earlier element in the discourse. In cases where a more distant association does not exist, the reader must be prevented from looking for one by means of punctuation. The relevant factor in the choice between a comma and a period is the presence or absence of a lexically suggested relationship between nonadjacent words. If there is a lexical relationship between nonadjacent items, a comma is chosen. A period will be chosen where there are no lexical relationships between any two meanings on either side of the point at which punctuation is called for. Students whose writing is characterized by fragments and run-on sentences have difficulty in discerning lexical relationships. Consequently, remediation that concentrates on developing sentence skills such as analysis into subject and predicate has met with only mixed success. Remediation should concentrate on developing skills at the word level, heightening the students' awareness of the lexical relations implied by the meanings of individual words. (HOD)

ERRORS IN EXP ECTATIONS: A REANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEM OF SENTENCE COMPLETENESS

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The title of this paper, as you already may have guessed, is inspired by Mina Shaugnessy's book Errors and Expectations. In that book she presents an insightful analysis of the problems of punctuation for the basic writing student. Shaugnessy characterizes punctuation as a system of marks used by the writer to aid the reader in his ongoing attempt to construct an interpretation of a text. Specifically, punctuation helps the reader to predict grammatical structure, to "see in advance how that part he is about to read relates to what he has just read (p. 26)".

On the basis of this conception of punctuation she goes on to characterize the punctuation strategy of basic writers. First of all she notes that basic writers are unaware of the use of punctuation as an aid to the reader, and punctuate in an expressive fashion in direct response to the junctures of their thought. Thus she finds that basic writers typically use periods to mark off the end of rhetorical units, leaving everything else connected by either commas or nothing. Hence the pattern of run-ons.

Second, she suggests that while basic writers are able to produce coherent spoken and written discourse, they do not possess the analytical grasp of grammatical structure necessary to determine where punctuation is needed. Thus she sees fragments as resulting from the difficulty of keeping track of abstract grammatical relations over a distance.

While we are in essential agreement with her insight our views diverge with respect to the nature of the grammatical structure relevant to punctuation. Shaugnessy, like most others, assumes that punctuation is a response to sentence

structure. That is, she assumes that the grammatical unit relevant to an understanding of punctuation is the sentence and its parts.

> Punctuation is a response to sentence structure. It does not initiate forms so much as supply them in the wake of larger choices that affect the way a sentence is shaped. And if this is so, then the study of punctuation ought to be a study of sentence structure, not merely a definition of the marks themselves.
>
> Shaugnessy, p. 40.

In this paper we will present a new view of punctuation, specifically of periods and commas, a view in which the notion of sentence does not play a central role.

We were led to pursue this line of analysis by the familiar, but nevertheless striking fact that skilled writing is filled with sentence fragments and, to a lesser extent, run-ons, that are structurally indistinguishable from those produced by unskilled writers. By skilled writing we mean that found in newspapers, magazines, and books covering the whole range of formality, and content. On the handout you see a few examples.

"No wife."	Stanley Kauffman, The New Republic
"And so forth."	Michael K Brame, Conjectures and Refutations in Syntax and Semantics
"Garbage in, garbage out."	The Absolute Sound
"So much for expert opinion."	Newsweek
"But more on the sound presently."	High Fidelity
"Which is not to suggest that he'll live happily ever after."	Newsweek
"Which is always careless, especially when you are only forty-eight."	Clive Barnes, The New York Post
"Not that the performance is incompetent."	High Fidelity
"From England."	William Safire The New York Times Magazine

"Of anyone."

Colette Dowling
Playbill

"Tried to choke him to death and, according to a brief dip we take into Michael's point of view, rather enjoyed it."

Christopher Lehmann-Haupt,
The New York Times

"Pretty too, to see young women flock to dining rooms in bathrobes and slippers, looking rather other-worldly-drowsy, perhaps from predinner naps, or still immersed in classroom concerns."

Barbara Grizzuti Harrison
Harpers

"The publishing scheme went bankrupt, the unions were no longer interested in radical activity, the commune lost heat and heart as the Cold War coagulated."

John Leonard
The New York Times

The usual reaction to such examples is that they are stylistic departures from the punctuation code, and so do not have to be accounted for by the normal rules of punctuation. We find this response unsatisfactory on two counts: first of all, as long as the rationale for the departure is left unarticulated the suspicion arises that this is merely a convenient way to disregard troubling data; secondly, when the rationale is articulated--that is to say, when the communicative purpose motivating the departure from the normal code is spelled out--the possibility arises that the same rationale can be applied to the "normal" cases as well.

The Alerting Strategy

We began with Shaugnessy's insight that the key to punctuation is to look at it from the reader's point of view. Commas and periods are alerting devices. The crucial question, however, is what it is that the reader is being alerted to. Alerting the reader to something he already expects makes little sense.

What is of use is to alert the reader to something that he doesn't expect, to a departure from his expectations. The key to understanding punctuation then, is to figure out what readers expect and what readers do not expect.

In coherent discourse readers do not have to be told that words are related; they expect them to be related and regularly infer the most likely relationship on the basis of the semantic content of each word as well as the grammatical signals of the language. In particular, readers will assume that adjacent words are related in ways suggested by the semantic content--the meaning--of each word; and if the meanings of adjacent words suggest no plausible conceptual relationship, they will assume that each is associated with a different word earlier in the discourse.

This basic reading strategy suggests that readers need to be alerted when a lexically suggested relationship between words does not obtain. e primary purpose of commas and periods then is to keep the reader from going astray. Both commas and periods signal that words which, on the basis of their individual meanings, would initially be taken as related, are in fact not related in the way they first appear.

We can thus take every pair of adjacent words in a text and ask whether their meanings suggest a relationship between them. If they do suggest a conceptual relationship and this relationship is, in fact, a part of the intended communication, no punctuation is necessary. However, when the pair suggests a relationship but that relationship is not a part of the intended communication, the writer must alert the reader, so here some punctuation is necessary. On the other hand, if the members of a adjacent pair do not suggest a plausible semantic relationship, the reader will try to associate the second word of the pair with an earlier element in the discourse. In cases where there is such a relationship with an earlier element there is no problem of being misled

and the reader is left to work the message out. If, however, a more distant association does not exist, the reader must be prevented from looking for one, and punctuation alerts him to this fact.

To illustrate, we will examine the two sequences underlined in the first line of the text numbered 1 on your handout. As we will see, in neither sequence is any punctuation called for.

1. The smell of alfalfa in the tightly packed bales of hay I sat on was strong and fresh. With my knees tucked up, my arms curled around my leg, I watched the cows come into the open barn for their evening meal.

The adjacent pair we will examine first is of alfalfa. The semantic content of a preposition is such that it expresses a relationship of some sort, usually between an entity and something else. Thus whenever a word or phrase directly after a preposition expresses an entity, the favored interpretation in the immediate "micro" context is that the entity is related to something else in the manner suggested by the preposition. And indeed the larger "macro" context of the text fulfills the expectation suggested by the micro-context; of alfalfa is directly related to (the) smell. Hence no punctuation of this sequence is necessary.

In contrast, the sequence on was does not suggest any semantic relation. The semantic content of was does not suggest an entity which can be related to anything else; that is, was is not a plausible "object of a preposition." However, the meaning SINGULAR SUBJECT of was does suggest that it is related to a singular entity earlier in the discourse, for example, I, hay, alfalfa, smell. So although the reader will have to decide from among these candidates, one of them (the smell) is the intended communication. Hence the reader does not need to be alerted and no punctuation is required.

To summarize: in both of these cases the reader's provisional assessment of the message, based on the two word sequence, is in fact the intended message when judged against the wider context. Punctuation would serve no purpose here because the reader does not have to be alerted to anything that is contrary to his or her expectations.

In the next two examples, some punctuation is called for. For the moment we will focus only on why it is the reader needs punctuation, and postpone discussion of the choice between a comma and a period. The third example, up my (arms), is again a micro-context in which we have a preposition + entity. As with the earlier sequence of alfalfa, the meanings of up and my (arms) suggest a semantic relation, namely that up will relate my (arms) to something else. The preceding word tucked is the most immediate possible candidate, yielding "(knees) tucked up my (arms)". However, here the interpretation suggested by the micro-context is contrary to the intended communication as assessed from the macro-context. Thus the writer will use punctuation to alert the reader that the reader's interpretive expectations will not be fulfilled. That is, punctuation is needed to prevent the reader from being misled.

The fourth example is from a review of the re-edited version of the movie Heaven's Gate.

2. The very last sequence has, if I'm remembering rightly, been drastically revised through editing. Originally, it showed Kristofferson, returned to his social class, on his immense yacht, brooding Byronically on deck, then going below to join his sleeping wife, presumably the girl he had met at the Harvard graduation ball. Now, after a title that tells us 20 years have elapsed and that we are off Newport, Rhode Island, we see the yacht, then we see Kristofferson brooding below deck, with a flashback of the killing of Hubbert; then there's a shot of him brooding on deck. No wife. In the new version the Harvard girl is all the more superfluous and the ending a little less callous: Kristoffe on is being gallantly faithful to Hubbert's memory.

Stanley Kauffman
The New Republic, 5/16/81, p. 24.

The adjacent pair deck no does not readily suggest a semantic relation. That is, the meaning of deck and the meaning of no, taken together, do not readily suggest any coherent part of a larger communication. In such a case the reader would assume that no was related to an element earlier in the discourse, just as with the sequence on was where the reader assumes the word was is related to an earlier word in the discourse. Here, however, there is no previous word to which no is related. Here, then, the reader needs to be alerted so that he does not struggle to relate no to any other previous element. Punctuation serves to alert the reader to this fact.

It is important to note that although the decisions we have described are categorical in that either a relation does obtain between two words or it does not, they are by no means decisions that can be made automatically or on any formal ground. Determining the need for punctuation involves the ability to detect discrepancies between the most likely inference from a micro-context and the message the writer wishes to convey. In this sense, it is not mechanical.

The Choice between a Comma and a Period

We turn now to the choice between a comma and a period. The relevant factor is the presence or absence of a lexically suggested relationship between non-adjacent words. If there is a lexical relationship between non-adjacent items a comma is chosen; here the reader is being alerted that although adjacent words are not to be construed together, the second one is related to an element farther back. For example, we have seen that some punctuation is needed to prevent the reader from directly associating up with my (arms) in passage 1 repeated below.

1'. The smell of alfalfa in the tightly packed bales of hay I sat on was strong and fresh. With my knees tucked up, my (arms) curled around my leg, I watched the cows come into the open barn for their evening meal.

A comma is chosen because my (arms) is related to something further back, namely with; the intended message is "with...my arms (curled...)".

In contrast, a period will be chosen when there are no lexical relationships between any two meanings on either side of the point at which punctuation is called for. For example, the pair fresh with underscored in passage 1' requires some punctuation. Even though fresh is a likely candidate to which the preposition with will relate its objects, e.g. "fresh with the fragrance of", this suggested relationship is not part of the intended message. A period rather than a comma is chosen because the macro-context does not confirm any lexically suggested relation between any other two meanings on either side of this point. (Just as the lexically suggested relationship between fresh and with is not confirmed by the macro-context, the potential relationship between strong and with, e.g., "strong with the smell of...", is not confirmed either.)

Similarly, we have seen that there is no lexically suggested relationship between the members of the pair deck no in passage 2, repeated below.

2. ...; then there's a shot of him brooding on deck. No wife. In the new version the Harvard girl is...

We can also see that there is no lexical relationship between the word no and any previous element in the discourse. A period after deck, then, tells the reader that no subsequent material is lexically related to any previous material. It is interesting to note in passing that in punctuating the sentence fragment "No wife" the writer follows exactly the same strategy as in punctuating grammatically complete sentences. Admittedly, it is worthy of comment that that the author chooses to write "No wife" rather than, say, "His wife is not present", but this "stylistic" choice is irrelevant to the issue of punctuation.

In Table I on the handout we summarize the exploitation of the alerting strategy for the determination of both the need for punctuation and the choice of punctuation for the examples we have discussed.

	Suggested Lexical Relation Between Adjacent Words	± Confirmation From the Macro-Context	Suggested Lexical Relation With Earlier Elements	± Confirmation From the Macro-Context	Punctuation Required
of alfalfa	Yes	Confirmed	---	---	None
on was	No	---	Yes	Confirmed	None
up my (arms)	Yes	Not Confirmed	Yes	Confirmed	Comma
deck no	No	---	?	Not Confirmed	Period
fresh with	Yes	Not Confirmed	Yes	Not Confirmed	Period

Lexical Relationships and Thematic Relationships

It is important to note that we are making a distinction between lexically suggested relationships and what might be called rhetorical, or thematic relationships. Lexical relationships arise directly from the semantic content of individual words or the grammatical signals of the language. Thematic relationships, on the other hand, have to do with the notional content of the communication, --relations between chunks of the message--and need not be tied to any delimitable stretch of linguistic expression. Punctuation is concerned with the former and not the latter, and learning to punctuate correctly requires learning to distinguish them. The problem is that all lexical relationships are thematic relationships as well, but some thematic relationships are only thematic and not lexical. Most punctuation mistakes of basic writers can be traced to a confusion between these two kinds of relationship.

STUDENT RUN-ONS

We now turn directly to the problem of run-ons and fragments. Shaugnessy observes that run-ons occur in a pattern that suggests that basic writers are punctuating in response to rhetorical clusters; that commas hold closely related sentences together while periods mark the ends of the sentence clusters or terminate narrative sentences that advance an anecdote (p. 22). It's difficult to understand why the pattern is the way it is given the sentence approach to punctuation. If we take the conception of the sentence found in traditional grammar ---"the expression of a complete thought"---this definition fails to predict that this punctuation is incorrect. If we take the more contemporary conception of the sentence as a purely formal structure, it fails to explain the tendencies of run-ons to occur in places where there is a close relation of content.

Within our conception of the presence or absence of lexical, and therefore content, relations, the pattern is clear. What the student is doing is failing to distinguish relationships that are both lexical and thematic from those which are only thematic.

a. By the phrase "Goodie two-shoes" means that a Christian does nothing wrong, everything is perfect and because of this they don't have any fun.

b. New York is quite different, there is alway's alot of load noises such as horns bumping, police sirens, people shouting, and machinery from the building's.

c. My self confidence was the pits, I was hiding inside myself.

d. College has brought out the best in me, it has changed my personality in a positive way.

John Langan, in his textbook English Skills, offers a characterization of the pattern of run-ons in terms of individual signal words. This is more illuminating from our point of view since it describes the environment conducive to run-ons in terms of specific words rather than co ert structures.

A Warning: Words that Can Lead to Run-Ons

People often write run-ons when the second complete thought (c) begins with one of the following words: I, you, he, she, it, we, they, there, this, that, now, then, next.

The thing that is striking about Langan's list is that the words all belong to a class that linguists have called deictics. Deictics are words whose interpretation requires reference to the communicative context. The referent of the word I, for example, can only be determined if you can ascertain who the speaker or writer is. Sometimes the reader gets the information helpful to the interpretation of deictics from the text itself, and here is a likely place for us to find a confusion between lexical and thematic relationships. Here the unskilled writer confuses general information that he obtains from the entire text (or from the context) with lexical relations between linguistic elements in the text. In current linguistic theory this distinction is being characterized as a pragmatic relaton-ship as opposed to a linguistic relationship.

STUDENT FRAGMENTS

We turn now to the problem of sentence fragments. Given time restrictions, we will only be able to deal with one example, Roman numeral V a. on the handout.

a. Unfortunately, they end up drinking too much and getting sick. Most of the time making a fool out of yourself.

Using traditional sentence theory the analysis of this fragment is that the writer has difficulty perceiving the relationship between two abstract clausal structures, the independent clause "unfortunately they end up drinking too much and getting sick" and the dependent clause " most of the time making a fool out of yourself." An analysis such as this suggests that the difficulty is one of perception and processing of the text. But the defect of the analysis is that

it characterizes the problem in terms of units that comprise the successful solution to the processing problem--sentences, clauses, dependent and independent relationships--rather than in terms of the units that themselves figure in the processing--words and lexical relationships.

Focusing on the units the writer is actually working with, the analysis of this fragment is that the writer has difficulty holding on to lexical relationships at a distance: the fact that the writer used some punctuation indicates that he or she recognizes that most is not lexically related to what immediately precedes it. The choice of the period indicates that he or she does not see that there is a lexical connection between two words on either side of the point, namely they...making. This difficulty in perceiving relations at a distance is further evidenced by the mistake in pronoun reference; the writer says yourself rather than themselves.

CONCLUSION

Once we characterize fragments and run-ons as a difficulty in discerning lexical relationships, it is no surprise that remediation that concentrates on developing sentence skills such as analysis into subject and predicate, practice in embedding and sentence coordination, has met with only mixed success. A sentenced-based approach operates at a level of abstraction beyond the level at which the problem actually lies. Our approach to punctuation suggests that remediation should concentrate on developing skills at the word level: specifically, heightening the students' awareness of the relations implied by the semantic content of lexical items and grammatical morphology. Instead of burdening students with an elaborate abstract analytical framework that is not a natural part of the writing process, it would seem more profitable to develop a sensitivity to the lexical relations implied by the meanings of individual words, words whose meaning they already know and already use in creating discourse.