Punctuation Marks Make a Difference in Translation: Practical Examples

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“The writer who neglects punctuation, or mispunctuates, is liable to be misunderstood.”

American Writer: Edgar Allan Poe

ABSTRACT

This article deals with the issue of using punctuation marks correctly. The misuse of punctuation marks affects meaning; therefore, it affects translation. As a result, the writer should pay more attention to punctuation marks and not to use them randomly. Simultaneously, the reader has to take care of the punctuation marks when interpreting a certain text for translation. The article tackles the jobs done by punctuation marks such as the use of the comma to set off nonessential information, the comma to set off interrupters, the comma separating direct-address expressions, the comma with short introductory statements and the comma before a relative pronoun. Moreover, the difficulties caused by lack of a comma will be discussed. The problematic use of comma before "and" will be handled. Cases in which no comma is needed in the target language will be provided. The current article provides some practical and illustrative examples, especially the comma and the full stop. Translation from English into Arabic and vice versa is considered.

Keywords
Punctuation, Translation, English, Arabic, Meaning, Writing, Reading, Contrastive Analysis

1. Introduction

Punctuation plays a vital role in the interpretation of a certain text. So using it haphazardly leads to misunderstanding the text and consequently the wrong translation. There are many differences between languages with regard to punctuation marks, particularly Arabic and English, which have to be taken into consideration by translators.

In order to realize the importance of punctuation, consider the following string of words with various punctuation marks. Try to decide what they are supposed to mean and the effect of the changed meaning on translation. Examples are taken from Trask (1997 :3) with some modifications. What is the problem in each sentence?

Example 1: We had one problem: only Adel knew we faced bankruptcy.
Example 2: We had one problem only: Adel knew we faced bankruptcy.
Example 3: We had one problem only, Adel knew: we faced bankruptcy.
Example 4: We had one problem only Adel knew we faced: bankruptcy.

The underlined text is the problem in each sentence. Following are translations of the previous example:

مثال 1: لم تواجهنا إلا مشكلة واحدة آلا وهي أن عادل وحده علم بتعرضنا للإفلاس.
مثال 2: لم تواجهنا إلا واحدة آلا وهي أن عادل علم بتعرضنا للإفلاس.
مثال 3: علم عادل أنه لم تواجهنا إلا مشكلة واحدة آلا وهي ت تعرضنا للإفلاس.
مثال 4: واجهتنا مشكلة واحدة علم عادل وحده بها آلا وهي الإفلاس.

Based on the above Arabic translation, it became clear the use of different punctuation marks in one sentence leads to different meanings.
To attract and keep the reader’s serious attention, the writer must write and punctuate correctly. "Too many stops and commas make the text look spotty" is a wrong remark that ignores the proper function of punctuation. The following example will refute it.

Example 5: I have taken several science courses this year; my favorite was neuroscience.
Example 6: I have taken several science courses this year, but my favorite was neuroscience.

In Example 5, the semicolon (;) is used primarily to join two closely related independent clauses in a single sentence. When using a semicolon to join clauses, make sure they are independent; that is, they can stand alone as sentences. On the other hand, in Example 6, the two clauses are joined with the conjunction but. This changes the meaning slightly from the previous version; it emphasizes the contrast between the group of courses in the first clause and the single course in the second clause. As a result of the change in meaning, the Arabic translation will be different as follows:

ماًثاٰٰل ٥ : أَفْتَتْ حَذَٰلَ الذِّكْرَ ﻣَن ٌدَرَّﺳَ، ﻋَﻠِى ﻣَدَارِ ذِٰلِكَ ﺍﻟْﻠَمْٰمُ، ﻭَكَٰنْ أَفْضُلُهُ ﻣَهْرُ ﻋَلَمِ ﺍﻟْﺥِئْبَاتِ وَالْاٰصِﻝَاتِ.
ماًثاٰٰل ٦ : أَفْتَتْ حَذَٰلَ الذِّكْرَ ﻣَن ٌدَرَّﺳَ، ﻋَﻠِى ﻣَدَارِ ذِٰلِكَ ﺍﻟْﻠَمْٰمُ، ﻭَلَكِنْ أَفْضُلُهُ ﻣَهْرُ ﻋَلَمِ ﺍﻟْﺥِئْبَاتِ وَالْاٰصِﻝَاتِ.

2. The Jobs of Punctuation Marks

Punctuation marks are integral parts of writing. They do two jobs. One is grammatical and the other is rhetorical (Kirkman, 2006).

• Grammatical: they show where the boundaries are meant to be between segments of larger statements, and how segments of text are meant to relate to each other. Here is an example that illustrates the boundary-marking role:

Example 7: Executors delay giving information about substantial deviations from agreed dates. Because of this action cannot be taken in time.

The reader mis-reads that statement at first, since he/she reads "Because of this action" as a group; but then he/she realized that the group at the beginning of the second sentence was intended to be just "Because of this". If the writer had supplied a comma at the meaning-boundary between "this" and "action", the reader should not have been misled as follows:

Example 8: Executors delay giving information about substantial deviations from agreed dates. Because of this, action cannot be taken in time.

In the same vein, the reader should note how punctuation marks signal the relations between segments of text in the following statements:

Example 9: Take no action as the camera operates automatically … (The as … group tells us when)
Example 10: Take no action, as the camera operates automatically ... (The as ... group tells us why)

The words in the previous two statements are exactly the same, but the relations between the words change in accordance with whether a comma is present or absent.

• Rhetorical: they show the emphasis or tone the writer wants to give to a word or word-group.

The next three examples illustrate the rhetorical job done by punctuation marks. Note how they signal the emphasis or tone the writer wants to give a word or word-group – information which, if we were speaking, we would express by inflections of voice:

Example 11: This is known as exact replacement of the old medicine.
Example 12: You must report the burglary to the police.
Example 13: Rescue parties were sent out immediately AFTER the avalanche.

As all these examples show, punctuation marks (including the use of italics, underlining and capital letters) are vital parts of our signaling system. They are not just optional extras.

Punctuation marks have been introduced rather recently into the Arabic writing system. Arabic writers shift between ideas using conjugating conjunctions instead of punctuation marks. In Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), however, due to the influence if translation which, to some extent, transfers punctuation marks from the target languages, and due to the tendency of modern writers to use punctuation marks more consistently, Arabic has come to see more punctuation. Yet, even in modern writing, it is rather impossible to rely on the period, for example, as a demarcation of the sentence boundary (Attia, 2004).

Punctuation marks facilitate reading as they guide the reader to the appropriate meaning as shown in the following instances:

Based on the use of punctuation marks in the previous examples, the first sentence is a statement, the second an exclamation and the third a question. Thus, the punctuation mark makes a difference to meaning in target and source languages.
Following are the different uses of the comma and the full-stop and how they affect meaning accordingly.

3. Comma

As with all punctuation, the most important reason to place a comma is to clarify the meaning of the sentence. There is a world of difference between sentences with and without commas (Woods, 2006) as follows:

Example 17: Ahmed tipped Hani because he appreciated good service.
Example 18: Ahmed tipped, Hani, because he appreciated good service.

In the first sentence Ahmed tipped someone named Hani. In the second, Hani is being addressed, and the reader does not know whom Ahmed tipped—a waiter, a taxi driver, or a housecleaner. Ahmed may even have tipped Hani himself. The translation into Arabic may be:

مثال 17: أعطي أحمد هاني بقيشيا لأنه يقدر الخدمة الجيدة.
مثال 18: أعلم يا هاني أن أحمد قدم بقيشيا لأنه يقدر الخدمة الجيدة.

In the following sentences, the separation created by commas radically changes the meaning of the second sentence:

Example 19: Students who are obnoxious should be disciplined firmly.
Example 20: Students, who are obnoxious, should be disciplined firmly.

If you read this pair of sentences aloud, pausing at the commas in sentence two, you will probably hear the difference in meaning. In the first sentence, no commas set off who are obnoxious from the rest of the sentence. The main idea is the entire sentence: The students who are obnoxious—but not those who are not—should be disciplined firmly. In the second sentence, which may have been written by a burned-out teacher, the separated material may be lifted out. The main idea of sentence two is what is left: Students should be disciplined firmly. In this version, all students should be disciplined firmly because all students are obnoxious (Woods, 2006). The translation into Arabic could be:

مثال 19: علينا تأدب الطلاب المشاغبين بحزم.
مثال 20: علينا تأديب كل الطلاب بحزم وبخاصة المشاغبين.

In Example 20, the use of "while" as a subordinate conjunction means a short action (thunderbolts fell unceasingly over his head) interrupts a comparatively long action, which began before the short action (feeling his way in the dark). The interruption and surprise are reflected by the word "إقداة" or "فجاء" in Arabic.

Example 21: While feeling his way in the dark, thunderbolts fell unceasingly over his head.

مثال 21: بينما كان يتحسين طريق في الظلام، فاضبا بالصواعق تسقط فوق رأسه بلا توقف.
أو: بينما كان يتحسين طريق في الظلام، سقطت الصواعق فوق رأسه فجأة ولا توقف.

In Arabic, it is wrong to use the comma in conditional sentences/ clauses between the antecedent and the consequent if the consequent is short; but if it is long, it can be used. On
the other hand, it is normal to use it in English especially when the conditional conjunction comes at the beginning of the sentence.

Example 22: If you finish work early, I will visit you.
Example 23: If you finished work early, I would visit you.
Example 24: If you had finished work early, I would have visited you.

In certain cases fills the same function as the punctuation mark, comma, in English, e.g.:

Example 25: As for the translated part, it is very diverse.

In English, the comma must not be used instead of a full stop. A sentence with two main clauses separated by a comma is wrong, either put a full stop between them or use a conjunction to link them (Field, 2009) or use a semicolon. What is wrong with this sentence?

Example 26: My name is Yasser, I live in Mansoura.*

(* indicates that it is a wrong sentence)

The mistake is called a comma splice: the use of a comma to join two independent clauses. However, splices are sometimes acceptable when the clauses are short and alike in form, such as:

Example 27: The gate swung apart, the bridge fell, the portcullis was drawn up.

Example 26 can be corrected as follows:

Example 28: My name is Yasser. I live in Mansoura.
Example 29: My name is Yasser and I live in Mansoura.
Example 30: My name is Yasser; I live in Mansoura.

Examples 28, 29 and 30 could be translated into Arabic:

The following sentence, for example, uses commas abundantly. Hardly any of these commas will be transferred in the translation into Arabic.

Example 31: This year, the man, however, and his wife, too, will go on holiday.

* مثال 25: أما القسم/الجزء المترجم فمتتنوع جداً.

** مثال 26: اسمي ياسر، أعيش في مانسورة.*

*** مثال 27: الأبواب فتحت، القنطرة سقطت، الركاب فاتت.

**** مثال 31: هذا العام، الرجل، ومع ذلك، وطريقة زوجته أيضًا، سيعود على إجازة هذا العام.
Example 31 is provided to show that the translator should not follow the source text exactly, but he/she hast to observe the norms of the target text.

3.1. The Comma to Set off Nonessential Information

Grammarians label some elements as either essential or nonessential to the meaning of the sentence. The terms restrictive and nonrestrictive are also used at times to describe the same elements. These elements are usually descriptive, explaining how or when something happened or giving information about a person or a thing. In grammar terminology, adjective and adverb clauses and phrases may be essential or nonessential (Woods, 2006).

If the writer separates a nonessential element, he/she should be sure to do so completely. It is not enough to place one comma and let the beginning or the end of the element blend into the rest of the sentence. The following examples show that:

Example 32: My oldest sister, Sara plans to become an oral surgeon.*

The nonessential element (Sara) is preceded by a comma but not followed by one. Hence, it should be:

Example 32: My oldest sister, Sara, plans to become an oral surgeon.

Example 33: The attempted coup in Uganda, involving many senior officers, was quickly foiled.

Example 33: The attempted coup in Uganda, involving many senior officers, was quickly foiled.

3.2. The Comma to Set off Interrupters

An interrupter, as its name implies, may be left out of the sentence without changing the main idea. Interrupters resemble nonessential elements, discussed earlier in this article, in that they give the reader extra information. An interrupter may indicate a contrast, an example, or an extra comment. Like nonessential elements, interrupters are always set off by commas (Woods, 2006).

Example 34: This bowl of sugar, however, could add more than 4000 calories to one’s diet. (However makes an extra comment and should be translated into Arabic as such)

Example 34: This bowl of sugar, however, could add more than 4000 calories to one’s diet. (However makes an extra comment and should be translated into Arabic as such)

Example 35: Ali did not, after all, run for office on an independent ticket. (After all comments on the main idea of the sentence.) (after all: used in order to say that what you expected did not happen)
Example 36: The salt shaker, not the pepper mill, was carved from solid marble.  
(Note that "not the pepper mill" creates a contrast)

Example 37: No newspaper is completely unbiased, in my expert opinion.  
(In my expert opinion is an extra comment.)

Example 38: Yasser has been appointed to a position of some importance, but not Ahmed.  
(But not Ajmed creates a contrast.)

Example 39: Steam, for example, is just as damaging as acid for that material.  
(For example labels an example.)

In the preceding examples (33, 34, 35, 36, 37 and 38), the interrupter occurs within or at the end of the sentence. If one of these expressions occurs at the beginning of a sentence, the writer may not need to separate it from the rest of the sentence with a comma.

Example 40: In my expert opinion no newspaper is completely unbiased. (Comment occurs at the beginning of the sentence and does not need to be separated by a comma.)

3.3. The comma Separating Direct-Address Expressions

Many writers wrongly place only one comma instead of the two needed to separate a direct-address statement from the middle of a sentence (Woods, 2006), as in the following sentence:

Example 41: He explained, Mohannad that you should never cross the street against the light.*

With only one comma, the word Mohannad is linked to the rest of the sentence. The reader tends to see Mohannad that and the words following as a unit. The meaning of the sentence, however, calls for Mohannad to be separate as shown in Example 42:

Example 42: He explained, Mohannad, that you should never cross the street against the light.
3.4. Commas with Short Introductory Statements

Very short introductory statements may not need commas. If the meaning is clear and the writer has a choice, he/she may omit these commas. Otherwise the writing may sound choppy (Woods, 2006), as shown in Example 43:

Example 43: Tomorrow, Hala will attend her karate class.*

No comma is needed because tomorrow is so short. It should be written as such in Example 44:

Example 44: Tomorrow Hala will attend her karate class.

Yes and no, when they are not part of the main statement of the sentence, are always followed by commas. However, if no is part of the main idea of the sentence, the writer does not place a comma after it. The following two sentences have very different meanings and thus different punctuation:

Example 45: No apples remain in the refrigerator.
(Meaning: the refrigerator is bare of apples.)

Example 46: No, apples remain in the refrigerator.
(Meaning: Don’t take the apples out of the refrigerator.)

The writer should always place a comma after an introductory expression if there is a chance the reader may link ideas that should be separate. Take a look at Example 47, which is poorly punctuated:

Example 47: Chanting the choir raised the volume as the celebrant intoned the prayer.*

Without a comma the reader naturally reads chanting the choir and then lapses into confusion. The point of punctuation is to make the reader’s task easier. Here is the same sentence, this time with a comma:

Example 48: Chanting, the choir raised the volume as the celebrant intoned the prayer.

Now chanting is clearly introductory and the main idea of the sentence, the choir raised the volume, is more understandable.
3.5. The Comma before a Relative Pronoun

The presence or absence of a comma before a relative pronoun is very important in signalling to the reader the intended meaning (Kirkman, 2006). Following are examples of defining use and commenting use:

Example 49: A six-month-old calf was submitted for examination, showing lameness in all four legs which had been present since soon after birth. (The which ... clause defines: it relates to legs, and tells us that the legs had been present since soon after birth) (the which ... clause defines, is restrictive)

مثال 49: خضع عجل عمره ستة أشهر للفحص الطبي، أصيب بالعجز في أرجله الأربعة كلها والتي كان يتمتع بها بعد ولادته بوقت قصير.

Example 50: A six-month-old calf was submitted for examination, showing lameness in all four legs, which had been present since soon after birth. (The which ... clause comments: it relates to lameness, and tells us that the lameness had been present since soon after birth) the which ... clause comments, is non-restrictive)

مثال 50: خضع عجل عمره ستة أشهر للفحص الطبي، أُصيب بالعجز في أرجله الأربعة كلها بعد ولادته بوقت قصير.

Likewise, the following examples makes plain the point under discussion.

Example 51: Planning authorities should provide alternative locations for small businesses, which are or would be offensive in a residential area.

مثال 51: على سلطات التخطيط توفير مواقع بديلة للمشرووعات الصغيرة، على اعتبار أن هذا يُمثل أو سيُمثل ضرراً للمنطقة السكنية.

He did not intend to comment that all small businesses are offensive in a residential area: he wanted to restrict his remark just to the types of businesses that would be offensive. He should have written:

Example 52: Planning authorities should provide alternative locations for small businesses which are or would be offensive in a residential area.

مثال 52: على سلطات التخطيط توفير مواقع بديلة للمشرووعات الصغيرة التي تسبب أو قد تسبب ضرراً للمنطقة السكنية.

Example 53: He evolved a new theory for handling rural poverty, which seemed plausible enough, but the committee believed it required a great deal of elaboration before being considered for implementation.

مثال 53: ابدع نظرية جديدة للتصدي لمسألة الفقر في الريف، ورأى اللجنة أنها مقنعة إلى حد كبير، ولكنها طلبت منه تحري المزيد من الدقة وإدراج التفاصيل اللازمة قبل النظر في تنفيذها.

In deciding whether or not to put a comma before "which", you may find the following remark useful (Kirkman, 2006: 40): "Commenting clauses need a comma, defining clauses do not".

3.6. Difficulties Caused by Lack of a Comma
Forgetting to place a comma may distort the intended meaning altogether. Consider the following extract. The reader has to read it twice before he/she is able to interpret it correctly.

Example 53: As the machine develops the forms we use to record data from past projects will be amended.

Most people begin to interpret that sentence as a statement about a machine developing some forms; but then they have to adjust their understanding as they progress further along the lines. No doubt, the reader can see the cause of disturbance. If the writer had provided a comma after the preliminary word-group, the reader would not have had to stop and re-read the extract:

Example 54: As the machine develops, the forms we use to record data from past projects will be amended.

Here is another extract, which causes difficulty for readers in a different way:

Example 55: He draws an analogy between this and the learning process of a new-born child as it develops into maturity and quotes Freud: ...

To read that comfortably and without a smile at the ambiguity, a comma is needed before "and quotes Freud." as follows:

Example 56: He draws an analogy between this and the learning process of a new-born child as it develops into maturity, and quotes Freud: ...

The reader may be surprised by the suggestion that a comma should be put before and. Teachers of English seem to have left many people with a feeling that it is a cardinal sin to do such a thing. There are some circumstances in which a comma is not needed before and, and some in which it is.

If comma is missed out, the sense of the sentence is sometimes lost or it has to be read twice. Sometimes the meaning can be changed by the placing of the comma (Field, 2009). Look at the following:

Example 57: As mentioned, first impressions can be misleading.
Example 58: As mentioned first, impressions can be misleading.
3.7. The Comma Before "and"

It is not usual in British usage to put a listing comma before the word *and* or *or* itself (though American usage regularly puts one there). For that reason, in British usage, it is not usual to write (Trask, 1997):

Example 59: The three soldiers were Ali, Hani, and Radi.

This is reasonable, since the listing comma is a substitute for the word *and*, not an addition to it. However, the writer should put a comma in the following position. If he/she does so, the meaning would become clearer:

Example 60: My favourite opera composers are Verdi, Puccini, Mozart, and Gilbert and Sullivan.

Here the comma before *and* shows clearly that Gilbert and Sullivan worked together.

If the writer omit the comma, the result might be confusing:

Example 61: My favourite opera composers are Verdi, Puccini, Mozart and Gilbert and Sullivan.

Here, the reader might possibly take Mozart and Gilbert as the pair who worked together. The extra comma removes the problem. So the rule is clear: Put a listing comma before *and* or *or* only if this is necessary to make the meaning clear.

3.8. No Need for the Comma

Sometimes the translator does not need to use a comma in the target language, as the norms of the target language do not require the use of a comma in that context. Following are some examples to illustrate this point.

Example 62: When he heard of the collapse of his plan, he had an access of despair.

Example 63: The only problem with the new project, established in the desert at high cost, is the lack of good access roads.
Example 64: To put the commission into action, an executive order was required.

Example 65: The casino was full of upstarts wanting action, but the manager had decided to call it a day.

Example 66: If you take my advice and study hard, you'll pass the examination.

Example 67: Having failed in all previous attempts, he evolved a new plan which surprised everybody.

Example 68: When the film was developed, none of the pictures proved satisfactory.

Example 69: Though quite impressive, the project has been a disaster in financial terms.

Example 70: The school has adequate study facilities, but hardly any sports facilities.

Example 71: In his daily traffickings, a Cairene resident is often made conscious of the suffocating pollution.

Example 72: Muhammed ate while his friend was at home.
Example 73: Muhammed and his friend ate together at home.

It is clear from Examples 72 and 73 that the comma makes a great difference in meaning.

Example 74: This is made of glass, so please handle it with care!
Example 75: If drama implies conflict, and poetry metaphor, then poetic drama must imply the dramatization of metaphor!

مثال 75: إذا كانت الدراما تتمثل الصراع والشعر يتضمن الاستعارة، فلا بد أن تتضمن الدراما الشعرية المعالجة

Example 76: The idea of total equality is attractive, no doubt, but it cannot be put into practice.

مثال 76: فكرة الفتكة التامة، ولكن تعتبر لا شك في جاذبيَّة فكرة التامة، ولكن لا يمكن وضعها موضع التطبيق.

Base on the previous examples, the translator does not need to imitate the source language in terms of the use of the comma; on the contrary, he/she has to observe the norms of the target language.

4. Full Stop

In Arabic, a full stop is placed at the end of a complete meaning or a paragraph. In Arabic, a sentence is a stream of ideas with or without a full stop at the end. On the other hand, segmentation of sentences in English revolves around punctuation marks that signal the end of a sentence. In Arabic, a comma can signal a new sentence and also certain words can signal a new sentence: for example, (و بَهذَا، كَي وَعِلى، ذَٰلِكَ، وَهُمَا، وَكَذَٰلِكَ، وَقَالَ... وَأَوْلَٰدَ، وَأَوْلَٰدَاي и (Ryding, 2005). Other relationships include: sequence ثم، وَهُمَا، وَكَذَٰلِكَ، وَقَالَ... وَأَوْلَٰدَ، and first sentence is interpretative لذلك.

Translating the full stop from English into Arabic depends largely on the meaning relationship between the two sentences, e.g.:

Example 77: Teaching staff members conducted several research activities. This is important for their promotion.

The second sentence interprets the first, hence it is rendered:
Example 78: Teaching staff members conducted several research activities. They published papers and books and attended scientific conferences.

The second sentence could be interpretative or illustrative. If it is interpretative, it could be translated as:

Example 78: أجرى أعضاء الهيئة التدريس العديد من الأنشطة البحثية. فنشروا البحوث والكتب وكان لهم حضور في المؤتمرات العلمية.

If it is illustrative, it could be translated as:

Example 78: أجرى أعضاء الهيئة التدريس العديد من الأنشطة البحثية من خلال نشر البحوث والكتب والحضور في المؤتمرات العلمية.

Example 79: Success in life depends on patience and hard work. A pupil who starts learning his lesson from the beginning of the year will find no difficulty in passing his examination.

Example 80: It is indeed hard to underestimate the value of language in communication but it is even harder to underestimate its value in thinking. Language is tied to the very process of thought.

In Example 80, the idea in continuous throughout the text, so it is preferable to translate the "full stop" as ""ح bietet ""or ""أو"" as a suitable text connector in Arabic.

Example 81: The government always tries to increase production in all fields. In agriculture, for example, it has prepared a plan for land reclamation. Egypt has made great progress in this field.

Example 82: Some people prefer the life of the country. They avoid the smoke of factories. They enjoy the fresh air.
5. Conclusion

After the previous discussion of the effect of punctuation marks on meaning and consequently on translation into the target language, it is evident that the writer should use punctuation marks properly. At the same time, the reader should not belittle the importance of punctuation marks in understanding a certain text. Additionally, the translator does not need to imitate the source text in translation, but he/she has to observe the norms and context of the target text. Accordingly, punctuation marks differ from one language to another.

Biography

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