



When 'book' is the new 'cool' and punctuation takes on a new meaning

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How important is punctuation in this day and age of texting and emailing? Would you consider yourself to be at the forefront of the

English language of today?

Try this little exercise and decide for yourself how important punctuation is and then read on to find out how good a handle you have on present-day language.

Exercise

Taken from *Body Language* by G. Ribbens and G. Whitear, 2007.

Read the paragraph below and add punctuation to denote your understanding of the meaning. Check the answer at the bottom of this article.

Dear John I want a man who knows what love is all about you are generous kind thoughtful people who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior you have ruined me for other men I yearn for you I have no feelings whatsoever when we're apart I can be forever happy will you let me be yours Gloria.

Punctuation, meaning and emotions

How do we convey our feelings in texts and emails, the sole purpose of which are speed and conciseness?

Colons, semi-colons and parenthesis have taken on a completely new meaning. :-) denotes a smile, so your message is meant positively. :-(denotes a sad face, so that negative emotion is passed on in your written message. And for a bit of complicity there is ;-) the wink! It was recently explained to me by my son that if you turn these bits of punctuation round by 90 degrees clockwise you can see the expression on the face, so in the case of the happy face, two eyes, a nose and a smiley mouth and so on. These symbols taken from punctuation marks and previously established symbols once known as 'smileys', have combined and evolved into emoticons, there for you to add abbreviated emotion to your text or email!

Language and punctuation are moving forward at an incredible pace. This is partly because the younger generation are driving this and have created a language between themselves that could exclude adults (POS – parents over shoulder!). They use punctuation differently in their texts and emails and they also have their own acronyms and new meanings for existing words.

It is wonderful to know that our language is evolving and is not stuck in a timewarp – would people 50 years ago have known what you were talking about if you had used words like 'email' and 'timewarp'? Wonderful though it is, however, I find



myself asking “where does that leave traditionalists like me?” The reality is that we have to adapt and yet it is not time to give up all things traditional.

Some conventional uses of punctuation are still crucial to meaning. According to Albert Mehrabian, who carried out research on body language in the 1950s and is currently Professor Emeritus of UCLA (University College Los Angeles), the tone of your voice conveys approximately 38% of meaning. Punctuation provides tone to the written word. Take a simple word such as the name – Jack. By using different punctuation, you can alter the meaning behind the word completely, for example: - “Jack?”, “Jack!” or simply “Jack”.

The importance of punctuation is such that Lynn Truss in 2007 wrote a bestseller entitled “Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation”. There has to be a middle ground, though, and I suspect the use of punctuation to denote tone and emotion will increase and punctuation which only provides unnecessary nuances will decrease. In other words, we might lose commas to convey a clause, a dependent clause, an independent clause or an adverb clause. Similarly, we might lose semi-colons to split up two thoughts in one sentence. However, where punctuation changes the meaning or is used as an indication of emotion, there is most likely to be an increase and a change of use :-)

And where does that leave the dreaded apostrophe? It can completely alter the meaning of words. Look at the following: ‘the managers meeting’ or ‘the funders money’. Do we mean the meeting of one manager (manager’s) or the meeting of several managers (managers’)? Do we mean the money of one funder (funder’s) or the money of several funders (funders’)? Where we put the apostrophe makes all the difference to the meaning.

Text speak and our changing language

As if it isn’t enough that the use of punctuation is changing, we also now have to contend with the new meaning of words thanks to the onset of texting. I recently heard that ‘book’ is the new ‘cool’, since that is the first word which comes up in predictive text when you type in ‘cool’. Also, B-) means ‘cool’, as the ‘B’ looks like designer sunglasses which are still considered cool! I was feeling quite proud of myself that I already knew that gr8 means ‘great’, but now we also have BBT, BFN, CID, GTG, IOH and ROFL to name but a few acronyms (‘be back tomorrow’, ‘by for now’, ‘consider it done’, ‘got to go’, ‘I’m outta here’, and ‘rolling on the floor laughing’). To confuse things further, KISS no longer means puckering up, but ‘keep it simple stupid’.

It is not alright to think that we can bury our heads in the sand and continue as before – “After all”, we can say to ourselves, “this is the language of a young generation and cannot leak into our world of work”. Unfortunately for us traditionalists, that is not the case. A friend who works in the law courts recently told me they had a statement in which was written “no1”. They deliberated over who Number One was. They eventually established that the writer meant ‘no-one’. Text speak is definitely filtering through to mainstream work and education. After all, in 2006 the Scottish Qualifications Authority agreed to allow “2b r nt 2b” as long as candidates showed they understood the subject.*



If we would like to continue communicating fluently in writing, we need to learn the new language. We also need to learn how to convey feelings and emotions more clearly in written communication so that misunderstandings are kept to a minimum. We need to be more aware than ever of punctuation and how it is used and we also need to start understanding the language of the young people of today - text speak.

TM communic8 4 TOM!

(Trust me, communicate for tomorrow).

*<http://www.24dash.com/news/Education/2006-11-01-Politicians-condemn-exam-chiefs-for-accepting-text-speak>

References

Mehrabian, A. (1971). *Silent Messages*. California, US: Belmont.

Ribbens, G., & Whitear, G. (2007). *Body Language*. London, UK. The Chartered Management Institute.

Truss, L. (2003). *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. London, UK: Profile Books Ltd.

24dash.com. (2008). Politicians condemn exam chiefs for accepting 'text speak'. Retrieved 14 February 2008 from <http://www.24dash.com/news/Education/2006-11-01-Politicians-condemn-exam-chiefs-for-accepting-text-speak>.

Further Reading on Text Speak

Acronyms and Text messaging for parents

<http://www.tiscali.co.uk/community/textspeak.html> - accessed 12 February 2008.

Text speak: U 2 can communic8

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/connected/main.jhtml?xml=/connected/2007/08/18/dltext118.xml> - accessed 12 February 2008.



Answer to the exercise

There are two ways of punctuating the 'Dear John' letter which provide completely different meanings. Which one did you go for?

Dear John,

I want a man who knows what love is all about. You are generous, kind, thoughtful. People who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me for other men. I yearn for you. I have no feelings whatsoever when we're apart. I can be forever happy. Will you let me be yours?

Gloria

Dear John,

I want a man who knows what love is. All about you are generous, kind, thoughtful people, who are not like you. Admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me. For other men, I yearn. For you, I have no feelings whatsoever. When we're apart, I can be forever happy. Will you let me be?

Yours, Gloria

