The Use of Punctuation in Online Discourse

1. Introduction

It has been noted by many that writing in computer mediated communication (CMC) differs from standard writing in various ways (Herring et al. 3). In fact, by some metrics written CMC appears to be closer to speech (Baron 145). One such difference between standard writing and CMC is in the use of punctuation. As Encyclopedia Britannica stated, the purpose of punctuation in typical writing is largely to clarify the grammar rather than convey any additional information (Brown). However, due to the limited amount of information that can be conveyed through text (for example information about tone, facial expressions, body language, is almost entirely lost), internet users have repurposed standard punctuation marks and other symbols in order to convey more information about their messages. In this essay, I argue that punctuation plays an important role in allowing users of written CMC to convey additional information about their utterances, such as intonation, sincerity and formality.

2. Period

The period serves as a very good place to start. In standard writing, the period is typically only used to separate out sentences and doesn't tend to convey much information on its own. However, when looking at text messages, researchers noted that texts that ended with a period tended to be seen and read differently from texts without them. A good example of this "okay" and "okay.". Text messages like these that end with a period are generally taken more seriously and may be considered to be less sincere (Houghton). This may be due to a flouting of the maxim of manner. The addition of the punctuation creates an added layer of unnecessary complexity and formality, which implicates disapproval in the above example. Arguably, another reason is the falling intonation that we associate with the period which

gives utterances a serious tone. This serious tone conflicts with the otherwise informality of the conversation, leading readers to believe that the agreement is insincere. The linguist Tyler Schnoebelen found that text messages that contain words like haha, lol, u, yup did not contain a period, while messages with words like felt, sad, date, feelings, etc. did (Steinmetz). From the words being used, we can infer that the content of the latter type of messages is much more serious than the former, which provides further evidence that the purpose of the period is to convey at least some tonal information. What is particularly interesting is that this perception of the period does not seem to hold in non-CMC writing, like in handwritten notes to a friend (Houghton). This highlights that this is a behaviour borne of and particular to the internet.

3. Exclamation Marks

Generally, in order to convey an excited tone, writers will use an exclamation mark. This was how things initially started on the internet, but over time the meaning of the mark seems to have evolved. Namely, over time the mark seems to have become a 'sincerity marker', used to convey that an utterance is sincere, rather than convey excitement on the sender's part (Beck). For example people will often send messages like "See you there!", "Well done!" or "Hi!" where the sender simply wants to appear friendly. Much like how the period was used to give such messages a serious tone, the exclamation mark is used to give these messages a more casual tone. This evolution of the exclamation mark not only highlights the necessity of a way to clearly mark utterances as being friendly and sincere but its widespread usage also shows users' strong desire to convey a variety of tones in writing.

Interestingly, it seems that norms are shifting once again. With exclamation marks becoming sincerity markers, people began to use multiple exclamation marks in order to convey genuine excitement. Informal polls by the linguist Gretchen McCulloch on Twitter suggested that one needs 3 exclamation marks (!!!) in order to convey genuine excitement

(@GretchenAMcC). However, multiple exclamation marks now seem to be appearing in places like work emails, where it seems unlikely that the sender wishes to convey excitement. It is possible that these multiple exclamation marks may begin to replace their single counterpart as a sincerity marker. This will of course just push the problem further back. McCulloch has suggested that perhaps users will switch to an entirely different punctuation in order to work around this problem (Beck).

4. Minimal Punctuation

One of the most intriguing cases is where minimal punctuation is used. While this may seem counter to the thesis of this essay, once we examine these closely we will find this behaviour in fact elevates the importance of punctuation. As we saw previously, text messages are an example of this. Punctuation tends to be avoided unless absolutely necessary, which means that the addition of punctuation will often lead to implicatures being drawn about the message. However, this minimal punctuation also appears in other places, like Tumblr, and to a much greater extent than in text messages. Tumblr is a fairly popular blogging and social media platform. Linguistically, it is particularly interesting as a majority of the users are fairly young and since existing friendships play a fairly small role (as compared to other social media sites like Instagram and Snapchat), so users tend to be a bit more creative and liberal with their use of language (Grant 4).

Example 1 in the appendix is a typical post on Tumblr, where the lack of punctuation is quite stark (see also Appendix Example 2). Note that not all the punctuation marks are gone; there still remain the quotation marks and exclamation mark, so we can infer that this is not a matter of laziness. However, there are no periods or commas to separate out the different sentences. This makes the post seem spontaneous and casual, at least more than it would with the correct punctuation in place (Grant 3). As argued previously, this is similar to text messages where the period is omitted so as to not seem too serious. Interestingly, this

minimal punctuation has essentially become the norm on Tumblr. The prevalence of this typography means that any deviation from it leads to implicatures. For example, when people use 'correct' punctuation (see Appendix Example 3), it indicates the content of the post is more serious and meant to be taken as such. One could argue this arises from the flouting of the maxim of manner. Since minimal punctuation is the norm, proper punctuation adds an added layer of complexity that the reader must work through, which leads to an implicature being drawn. Since the user is deliberately rejecting the common standards used to indicate casualness, they must be indicating a more serious tone and more formal message.

5. New Punctuation

One of the most fascinating things is what one could argue is the introduction of new punctuation. A great example of this is #, also known as the hashtag, number sign or pound sign. This symbol had little use in conversations before the internet, but has since grown to the point of entering the standard vernacular. Originally, the hashtag was used as a way of categorising conversations on the internet, allowing users to easily find messages relating to some topic (McCulloch "Because Internet" 80). However, users also began to use these hashtags to provide metacommentary on their comments, for example by using #irony or #sarcasm to clearly indicate that their utterances are not meant to be taken seriously.

A more subtle case occurs with #brag. Bragging is generally frowned upon in conversation as it is considered impolite. However, social media can be viewed as "sites of self presentation" (Matley), which by definition requires some level of 'bragging' or sharing of one's achievements. In order to balance these two contradicting factors, users use #brag to name the speech act in order to show that they are aware of societal norms being broken. This prevents them from being seen as people who inadvertently praise themselves, allowing them to maintain a positive image online. This simple example demonstrates how vital hashtags are for "positive presentation of self online" and thus how vital they are in general (Matley). This

also suggests that there are some differences in the norms between face-to-face conversations and online conversations, since bragging seems to be more acceptable in the latter, if done appropriately.

A more recent and much less popular symbol that one could argue is new punctuation is the trademark symbol (™). This seems to be particularly popular on Tumblr although it has appeared in other places. Dictionary.com describes how the trademark symbol can be used to ironically mark something as important or unique ("™ Trade Mark Emoji"). Tumblr users themselves say they use the symbol to indicate emphasis (see Appendix Example 4 & Example 5). We can see one such example below, where ™ is used to emphasize 'bad', in order to indicate that 'humans are bad' is an overused or exaggerated idea. However it can also be used more strongly to indicate sarcasm (McCulloch "A Linguist Explains"). One might imagine that italics would be used for such purposes as in standard writing, however italics are not always available (for example Twitter) and as noted in the example, italics and ™ are inherently different ways of emphasis with different connotations. This is a particularly interesting case given the seeming randomness of the symbol. The hashtag, at least, had its roots in programming languages that later spread to the internet (McCulloch "Because Internet" 81). The trademark symbol, on the other hand, seems entirely unrelated. Perhaps this indicates people's desire to indicate emphasis/sarcasm more explicitly in text that the trademark symbol was able to fulfill.

In conclusion, we have seen various examples of punctuation that have been repurposed by the internet. In general, punctuation is far less common in written CMC, so its appearance often leads to implicatures. In particular, punctuation use can allow users to modify the seriousness of their message, the sincerity, the level of formality intended, etc. Additionally, internet users seem to have introduced new punctuation allowing them to convey an even greater variety of information.

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Appendix

celestia

once i had a dream that my cat was working at mcdonalds w/ me and she had a lil uniform and she kept getting fur in the fries and everyone was yelling at me and saying "ur cat sucks on fries" and i was like "shes just a cat give her a break!" and i woke up crying

Example 1

copperbooms

when did tumblr collectively decide not to use punctuation like when did this happen why is this a thing

atomicairspace

it just looks so smooth I mean look at this sentence flow like a jungle river

Example 2

nentuaby:

blue-author:

afloweroutofstone:

Do you ever think about how different your view of everything would be if you thought in a numerical system that wasn't base 10

"Wow, 823543. What a nice, round number!"

This is an interesting knob to twist in speculative fiction, because like, we think it's perfectly obvious that "10 digits (fingers) = 10 digits (numerals)" but that doesn't need to be true. Like it could be as trivial as if we had just picked up the habit of counting a finger by touching it to our thumb instead of sticking it out. That'd mean we'd work in base 8. (Which would have been an unexpected blessing when we invented computers.) Or if we came up with the notion of place values *and then assigned them to our fingers* we'd be counting to 255 on our hands, in base 2. (This is a neat trick to learn, by the way.)

Plus there are actual historical peoples who count in bases that have nothing to do with their total inventory of fingers, like the Mayan (5)20 system. (Their system is based on grouping things into fives, and it transitions from counting into multiplication at 20.) Or 60, which the Babylonians used because it has lots of whole divisors, and they hadn't really worked out fractions very nicely. (This survives as our weird base 60 time system, which is BTW another thing specficcers often forget civilizations do: Inconsistency and legacy systems!)

Example 3

eternalgirlscout

i think it's really Cool how there are so many ways to express emphasis™ on tumblr and they're all c o m p l e t e l y different it's #wild

Example 4

spacefroggity Follow

Also acting like the human race as a whole is inherently Bad™ is just an excuse to try not to do better. "Oh that's just the way it is" it doesn't have to be bitch!!!

Example 5

Source list:

Example 1:
https://meshoinpink.tumblr.com/post/83491344577/celestia-once-i-had-a-dream-that-my-cat-was

Example 2:
https://prismatic-bell.tumblr.com/post/121650071961/atomicairspace-copperbooms-when-did-tumblr

Example 3:
https://jacobayden.tumblr.com/post/118507447053/blue-author-nentuaby-blue-author

Example 4:
https://lightsaroundyourvanity.tumblr.com/post/148940929762/eternalgirlscout-takethebullets outyourson/amp

Example 5: https://violet-the-phantom.tumblr.com/post/636354985579380736