



Punctuation Marks in Newspaper Reporting: Focus on the Vanguard Newspaper

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ABSTRACT

“Punctuation Marks in Newspaper Reporting: Focus on the Vanguard Newspaper”, examines the vital role played by punctuation marks in a discourse. The correct use of punctuation marks adds meaning, clarity and beauty to a written piece. When these are not appropriately used, the written discourse becomes flawed, marring the whole discourse, thereby making it difficult to be understood. Five articles are analyzed from different editions of the newspaper- an old article and current articles to determine the progression of appropriateness in the use of punctuation marks. At the end of the study, the paper reveals that there are shortcomings in the appropriate use of punctuation marks by the writers of news articles. Newspaper article writers should therefore carefully study the appropriate uses and roles of punctuation marks to avoid misinterpretation by the readers.

Keywords: Punctuation marks, Newspaper, Reporting, Discourse, Articles

INTRODUCTION

Punctuation marks are essential tools to be considered in any form of writing. This study focuses on the roles played by punctuation marks in newspaper reporting – the impact of punctuation marks, their usefulness, rules guiding the use of each and the appropriateness of usage in Vanguard newspaper, as the case in this research.

Punctuation marks constitute important components in a discourse. When they are properly used by writers, the intended meanings conveyed are easily grasped by readers. Readers are also saved time trying to make sense out of a discourse that is not punctuated properly. Punctuation, according to Patridge (1953), forms an integral part of composition and an invaluable assistance to both the public expression and perhaps even the private formulation of lucid thinking.

There is a high level of dependence and connection between discourse and punctuation, as punctuation marks serve as tools that connect all the basic ideas in speech and writing for adequate understanding. For any discourse to be comprehended adequately, one would employ the use of punctuation marks. Punctuation marks are vital tools for an effective communication through writing. They are represented by marks, other than letters and facial expression. They do not operate alone; they are used within a sentence or words in a discourse to add clarity, meaning and understanding. Their roles are usually auxiliary (helping) in form. Punctuation marks are necessary, not as ornaments but components of a structure. Without them, a structure becomes meaningless – except after a tiring examination.

Punctuation marks, according to different scholars have been defined in several ways. These definitions have made it difficult to adapt to a particular characterization. However, Wren and Martin (2005), define

punctuation mark as a word derived from the Latin word “Punctum”, a point(.), which means the right use of putting in points or stops in writing to give it meaning.

According to Lindley Murray in Patridge (2005), “Punctuation is the art of dividing a written composition into sentences, by points or stops, for the purpose or marking the different pauses which the sense and an accurate pronunciation require.”

William Cobbett in Patridge (2005), in the same vein observes that, the sense, or meaning of the words is very much dependent upon the points which are used along with the words. Similarly, Deaver (1996) sees punctuation marks as the traffic road signs that show the reader when to slow down or stop, where to change direction or where he is going. According to him, punctuation marks are like tools, and individual writers have their respective ways of using them. Thus, it depends on the meaning a writer wants to convey to his/her readers. The choices made can either make or mar a piece of writing. The appropriate use of punctuation marks makes a piece of writing meaningful. Deaver explains that if a writer makes a wrong use of punctuation marks in writing, it would destroy his piece of work.

Deaver’s definition points out the importance of the correct use of punctuation marks and symbols in a discourse to convey meaning. Punctuation marks perform the functions of maintaining social relations between words and sentences in a discourse or texts. They help in conveying meaning in a text, and they help to bind words, phrases and sentences together to enhance meaning. They are indispensable elements in a discourse because of their relevance. A reflection of this is in William Caxton’s works, the first printer of books in English language. He used three punctuation marks:

- i. The stroke (/) is used for marking groups
- ii. The colon (:) is used for marking distinct syntactic pauses.
- iii. The period (.) is used for marking the end of a sentence and brief pauses.

The marks are represented below:

The thyre temptation that the devil maketh to theymdeye.
is by impacyen: that is ayendecharyte/for by charyte beholden to
to love god abouveallethynges.

Writers soon stopped the use of periods for brief pause as well as the full stop at the end of a sentence because of the inconvenience. This conforms to Brown’s view that the inappropriate use of punctuation marks can destroy a written piece.

Tyndales Gospels (1535) eliminated that practice and other ambiguities of Caxton’s system of punctuation. Soon, the comma (,) replaced the stroke, and the semicolon (;) was introduced at that time.

Punctuations marks began to be developed gradually when large numbers and copies of Christian Bibles were produced. In the eighteenth century, punctuations principally aided in reading aloud, and it soon became a mechanism for ensuring that a text made sense when read.

Over the years, the concept of punctuation has been a major concern. The use of punctuation marks by writers has become a major cause of concern. It is not very rare to come across a whole paragraph of sentence that is poorly punctuated, or not punctuated at all. This is as a result of the inadequate knowledge or poor awareness of people on the topic under discourse. Often times, writers make use of punctuation marks indiscriminately - they misuse, misplace or ignore them.

It is in the light of these problems that the researches attempts to look at the problems associated with the use of punctuation marks. This research is an attempt to educate readers on reasons why punctuation marks have been neglected in daily use, address poor use and taking a critical look at some of the errors associated with the use of punctuation marks in newspaper reporting , with reference to Vanguard Newspapers.

Broadly speaking, there are different punctuation marks used in a piece of writing or discourse. Some of the common types of punctuation marks include; The period of full stop (.), The colon (:), The hyphen (-), The dash (—), The bracket (), The parenthesis { },The comma (,), The semicolon (;),The ellipsis (...), The apostrophe (‘), The question mark (?), The exclamation mark (!), The inverted commas (“ ”). Punctuation marks are therefore important in any discourse, because their proper use make such discourse meaningful, beautiful, clear and precise.

The sources of data for this work are mainly from secondary sources. Data for this study were collected from Vanguard newspaper. Five articles in five editions of the newspaper were selected for analysis. Emphasis was placed on usage of punctuation marks, their proper use and errors of usage.

Punctuation Marks

Punctuation marks are vital elements in writing. They are used to disambiguate the meaning of sentences in a text. Punctuation marks aid in the comprehension of any written material. We are in an era where little attention is given to the study of punctuation marks because, the aspect of grammar is intact, forgetting that, what brings meaning to a sentence is beyond a correct tense. Punctuation marks serve to give indication to grammatical structure and/or meaning of stretches of written texts.

Quirk and Greenbaum (1985) define punctuation marks as successful unit of devices that divide a sentence structure into smaller parts to make it meaningful. They suggest that punctuation practice is governed primarily by grammatical consideration and is related to grammatical distinctions.

The Roles and Classification of Punctuation Marks

Punctuation marks may be argued as playing irreplaceable roles in writing generally. According to Partridge (1953), "Punctuation is not something that, like a best suit of clothes, you put on for special occasions. Punctuation is not something you add to writing, even the humblest; it forms an inescapable part of writing. To change the metaphor, punctuation might be compared to the railway line along which the train (composition, style, and writing) must travel if it isn't to run away with its driver..."

The role of punctuation is to be treated with utmost importance. Some of the roles of punctuation marks are given in Hart (1886):

- a. The period permits conclusion in a text.
- b. The semi colon links equal or balanced clauses.
- c. The colon marks a step forward from the introduction to the main theme, from cause to effect.

Huddleston and Pullum (2012) say, "The punctuation indicators serve a range of functions which can be grouped (leaving aside a few minor special uses) into four main types."

- a. Indicating boundaries: boundaries are indicated with the use of capital letters at the beginning, and full stop at the end.

Examples:

- i. You will have to make a decision soon. It is not for me to try to influence you.
- ii. By all means, you can take the book with you.
- b. Indicating status: Punctuation marks are used to indicate the status of a sentence, either by stating is as a question or command beyond indication of sentence boundary. A capital letter at the beginning of a word indicates that it has the status of a proper noun (i.e John), while apostrophe marks genitive, and exclamation marks combines the function of marking the sentence boundary.

Examples:

- i. What does John think about it?
- ii. The boy's behaviour was hardly likely to make her change her mind.
- c. Indicating omission: The ellipsis point indicate an omission from a reported speech of one or more words that occupied this position in the original.

Examples:

- She goes on to say, "But Johnson ... was willing to accept a fee."
- d. Indicating linkage: the slash and hyphen serve to link, to relate the items on either side of them.
Example:
 - i. The management will continue to concentrate on completing the redevelopment/acquisition programme outlined above.
 - ii. I met her in the dining car of the Lagos – Ibadan Express Way.

It is therefore pertinent to note that converting spoken words into written words undergo a critical process, if the intended meaning to be conveyed is put into cognizance. This can be done with the use of the appropriate punctuation marks.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Data Presentation

The primary data for this study on punctuation marks are five articles from different editions of the Vanguard newspaper.

A study of these articles (news) was carried out and analysis of each article was done to determine the appropriateness in the use of punctuation marks by the writers of these articles.

Data Analysis

ARTICLE ONE

VANGUARD (1ST JULY, 2008:6)

Extract One:

Warri- opinion leaders in the Niger-Delta weekend, expressed surprise at the resolution of the Under-Secretary for Political Affairs at the United Nations, Prof Ibrahim Gambari to accept the chairmanship of the Steering Committee of the proposed Niger-Delta Summit, notwithstanding, the muscular opposition against him on the grounds that he is an alien to the Niger-Delta problem.

Comment:

A comma is appropriate after **Gambari**, and there is no need for a comma after **notwithstanding**. The comma placed after **notwithstanding** creates confusion in the comprehension of the entire statement.

A full stop is needed after **Prof**, since it is the short form of professor.

Extract Two:

“It is with all due respect a specific problem or a devastated ecology, it is certainly not an entire Nigeria problem because it is not all Nigerians that suffer the problem, it is only the fall-out that the affect or will affect other Nigerians”, he said.

Comment:

A full-stop would be appropriate after **ecology**, and the next word should begin with a capital letter. A semicolon should be used to separate “problem” and “it”, instead of comma used. Although the grammar did not pass a clear-cut message.

The comma outside the quotation should be in the quotation marks.

Extract Three:

According to him, “The interest of Nigerians on the Niger-Delta is on the money they get out of the oil and gas from the region, and not on the well being of the people”.

Comment:

A hyphen is appropriate in **well being** and the full-stop before the closing quotation.

ARTICLE TWO

VANGUARD (13th NOVEMBER, 2014)

Extract One:

The governorship candidates laying claims to the PDP ticket are Senator Ayogu Eze, Hon. Ifeanyi Ugwuanyi and Professor Onyeke O. Onyeke, all from Enugu North senatorial zone where the governorship slot had been zoned by the party.

Comment:

The colon should be used in introducing the list in the extract above. It should come after “are”, followed by the names of the candidates.

A comma is also appropriate after “zone”, and before ‘where’ to separate the clauses.

Extract Two:

Other members of the panel were Ukpai Ukairo (secretary), Saratu Umar, Engr. Alamu Adeyemi and Ikeje Asogwa.

Comment:

A colon should be used after “were”. A colon is used in introducing a series.

Extract Three:

Although, there were parallel primaries in some of the constituencies, the exercise was conducted with the list of authentic delegates duly certified by the Federal High court, Abuja.

Comment:

A comma does not come after although. The comma after although in the above extract is inappropriate.

ARTICLE THREE

VANGUARD (7TH OCTOBER 2015:4)

Extract One:

Enugu-Traders in the South-East geopolitical zone have vowed to resist any plan by the Bureau of Public Enterprises, BPE, to hand over the Aba and Ariara power distribution unit to Afrigem.

Comments:

The commas after “Enterprises” and “BPE”, are inappropriate BPE should be enclosed in brackets, since it is the abbreviation for Bureau of Public Enterprises. A comma should come after the letters in brackets.

Extract Two:

President-General of the group, Ichie Okwudili Ezenwankwo, told South-East Voice after an enlarged meeting of the traders in Enugu, threatened that any move to take the power unit away from the Enugu Electricity Distribution Company, EEDC, would be totally unacceptable.

Comment:

The use of comma after Company is not necessary. “EEDC” should be in brackets, followed by comma.

Extract Three:

He said if the alleged plan was allowed to stand, it would cripple businesses in the area.

Comment:

The above is a direct speech and as such, should be treated as one. A comma is necessary after said, and the next statement should be enclosed in quotation marks with the first letter in capital letter. “If” in the statement should begin with a capital letter.

ARTICLE FOUR

VANGUARD (23rd October, 2015: 6)

Extract One:

LAGOS – THE IMF is pressing Nigeria to further devalue its currency amid uncertainty over the political and economic outlook for Africa’s biggest oil producer and economy a news agency has reported.

Comment:

A comma should be placed after economy to separate the clauses.

Extract Two:

The report quoted Antoinette Sayeh, the International Monetary Fund’s Africa Director, who had alleged that restrictions placed on 41 items access to foreign exchange was “quite detrimental saying that in Nigerians they “are already making it harder for the average person to buy milk,” at the IMF annual meeting that ended in Peru two weeks ago.

Comment:

The above extract has not passed the message intended because of the inappropriate use of punctuation marks. The writer juggles between the direct and indirect speeches in the statement, making the statement all muddled up.

Extract Three: The International Monetary Fund IMF at the same annual meeting said that Exchange-rate devaluation which countries normally use during financial crisis could cause adverse effect on countries economy.

Comment:

IMF would be more appropriate in brackets, accompanied by a comma. A comma should come between “devaluation” and “which”.

An apostrophe should be placed after countries to indicate possession.

ARTICLE FIVE

VANGUARD (30th October, 2015:7)

Extract One:

YENAGOA-MOTHER of Elder Wilberforce Igiri, running mate to Chief Timipre Sylva, the All Progressive Congress APC governorship candidate in the December 5 governorship election in Bayelsa, has been kidnapped.

Comment:

APC would be appropriate if enclosed in brackets, and a comma after candidate.

Extract two: Though the spokesman of the State Police Command, Asinim Butswat, said the details of the incident were not available, the abduction of the centenarian yesterday sparked off claims and counter-claims between the campaign organization of Chief Timipre Sylva and Governor Seriake Dickson.

Comment:

A full-stop should be used after **available** to mark the end of a sentence that has expressed a complete thought, not a comma. The next sentence should begin on a new paragraph because it has an entirely new idea.

Extract Three:

While the Director of Publicity of Sylva-Igiri campaign Organization, Chief Nathan Egba, blamed the abduction of the centenarian on the alleged violent campaign embarked upon by the PDP candidate, the PDP, through the chairman of Bayelsa Media Team, Barrister Esueme Dan-kikile, said though the abduction of the centenarian was condemnable, the claims by the APC were unfounded and baseless.

Comment:

The small letter “c” preceding organization, should be in a capital letter. A full-stop would be appropriate after candidate, not a comma, to express the end of a sentence. The next statement should begin with a capital letter, and the statement made by Barrister Esueme Dan-kikile is a direct speech, thus it should be enclosed in quotation marks, with a comma before said.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious from this paper that punctuation marks play roles of importance in any written discourse. Wrong use of punctuation marks may result in clumsiness and lack of comprehension in a written discourse. This paper has examined to an extent, the roles of punctuation marks in a discourse. In the introductory chapter, the background to the study, aims and objectives of the study, the scope of the study, the statement of problem, research methodology and the significance of the study were highlighted. A review of existing literature was also carried out to establish the relationship between the present study and the work of other scholars on the study.

The data for study were gathered from different editions of the Vanguard newspaper. One of the articles from 2008 edition, with current articles between 2014 and 2015 were examined for comparison to determine the progression of appropriateness in the use of punctuation marks. The analysis reveals that

there is no significant improvement in the use of punctuation marks by the newspaper. There is therefore a serious need to revisit the issue of appropriate use of punctuation marks by the newspaper reporters for effective communication.

Punctuation marks undoubtedly, guide readers in comprehending a written discourse. There are advantages in the use of punctuation marks in writing. Speech on the other hand, is punctuated by: the indication of pauses of different lengths, facial expressions, speaker's tone, and in the case of questions, by the order of words.

The researcher carried out this study with the aim of identifying and examining the roles of punctuation marks in a discourse, as well as the right use of these marks in the data chosen (newspaper articles). It is pertinent to note that, this study is only an attempt to study the roles of punctuation marks. It has not exhausted the roles played by punctuation marks. The ones identified and analysed are only, but a few of what constitutes the roles of punctuation marks.

The right use of punctuation marks in newspaper writing can help readers to know the importance of punctuation marks in a written discourse, and the consequences of their abuse. Good use of punctuation marks make the meaning of a written text to be easily grasped; their wrong use can change the meaning of a text, or make a written text into complete nonsense.

The right use of punctuation marks in newspaper writing would go a long way in helping readers to get their thoughts right and putting down into writing perfectly what they have on their minds. Furthermore, the correct use of punctuation would help readers and learners of English in reading comprehension by observing pauses, stop and accurate pronunciation, and the use of hyphen for different aspects of grammar, parts of speech, phrasal verbs, noun-noun words, compound words, just to mention a few.

The study of punctuation and the use of punctuation marks may not be an entirely interesting topic in English, but its essence cannot be totally discarded. Therefore newspaper reporters and learners of English should be encouraged to study punctuation marks, and they could take a cue from writers who have demonstrated effective use of punctuation marks.

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