

NEW REPUBLIC

The Period Is Pissed

When did our plainest punctuation mark become so aggressive?

by Ben Crair | November 25, 2013

The period was always the humblest of punctuation marks. Recently, however, it's started getting angry. I've noticed it in my text messages and online chats, where people use the period not simply to conclude a sentence, but to announce "I am not happy about the sentence I just concluded."

Say you find yourself limping to the finish of a wearing workday. You text your girlfriend: "I know we made a reservation for your bday tonight but wouldn't it be more romantic if we ate in instead?" If she replies,

Then you can ring up Papa John's and order something special. But if she replies,

Then you should probably drink a cup of coffee: You're either going out or you're eating Papa John's alone.

This is an unlikely heel turn in linguistics. In most written language, the period is a neutral way to mark a pause or complete a thought; but digital communications are turning it into something more aggressive. "Not long ago, my 17-year-old son noted that many of my texts to him seemed excessively assertive or even harsh, because I routinely used a period at the end," Mark Liberman, a professor of linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania, told me by email. How and why did the period get so pissed off?

It might be feeling rejected. On text and instant message, punctuation marks have largely been replaced by the line break. I am much more likely to type two separate messages without punctuation:

Than I am to send a single punctuated message:

And, because it seems begrudging, I would *never* type:

"The unpunctuated, un-ended sentence is incredibly addicting," said Choire Sicha, editor of the Awl. "I feel liberated to make statements without that emphasis, and like I'm continuing the conversation, even when I'm definitely not."

Other people probably just find line breaks more efficient. An [American University study](#) of college students' texting and instant messaging habits found they only used sentence-final punctuation 39 percent of the time in texts and 45 percent of the time in online chats. The percentages were even lower for "transmission-final punctuation": 29 percent for texts and 35 percent for IMs. The same is likely true of Twitter, where the 140-character limit has made most punctuation seem dispensable.

Are you angry?

Really?

No.

No.

Delivered

photo credit:

“In the world of texting and IMing ... the default is to end just by stopping, with no punctuation mark at all,” Liberman wrote me. “In that situation, choosing to add a period also adds meaning because the reader(s) need to figure out why you did it. And what they infer, plausibly enough, is something like ‘This is final, this is the end of the discussion or at least the end of what I have to contribute to it.’”

It’s a remarkable innovation. The period was one of the first punctuation marks to enter written language as a way to indicate a pause, back when writing was used primarily as a record of (and script for) speech. Over time, as the written word gained autonomy from the spoken word, punctuation became a way to structure a text according to its own unique hierarchy and logic. While punctuation could still be used to create or suggest the rhythms of speech, only the exclamation point and question mark indicated anything like what an orator would call “tone.”

“Explicit representations of the emotional state of the person doing the writing are fairly rare,” said Keith Houston, author of *Shady Characters: The Secret Life of Punctuation, Symbols, and Other Typographical Marks*. Writers, linguists, and philosophers have occasionally tried to invent new punctuation marks to ease the difficulty of inflecting tone in writing.¹ The “irony mark,” in particular, has [been proposed many times](#). But none of these efforts has been successful.

Now, however, technology has led us to use written language more like speech—that is, in a real-time, back-and-forth between two or more people. “[P]eople are communicating like they are talking, but encoding that talk in writing,” Clay Shirky [recently told Slate](#). This might help explain the rise of the line break: It allows people to more accurately emulate in writing the rhythm of speech. It has also confronted people with the problem of tone in writing, and they’re trying to solve it with the familiar punctuation marks that the line break largely displaced.

It’s not just the period. Nearly everyone has struggled to figure out whether or not a received message is sarcastic. So people began using exclamation points almost as sincerity markers: “I really mean the sentence I just concluded!” (This is especially true of exclamation points used in sequence: “Are you being sarcastic?” “No!!!!!!”) And as problems of tone kept arising on text and instant message, people turned to other punctuation marks on their keyboards rather than inventing new ones.² The question mark has similarly outgrown its traditional purpose. I notice it more and more as a way to temper straightforward statements that might otherwise seem cocky, as in “I’m pretty sure he likes me?” The ellipsis, [as Slate noted](#), has come to serve a whole range of purposes. I often see people using it as a passive-aggressive alternative to the period’s outright hostility—an invitation to the offender to guess at his mistake and remedy it. (“No.” shuts down the conversation; “No...” allows it to continue.)

Medial punctuation, like the comma and parentheses, has yet to take on emotional significance (at least as far as I’ve observed). And these newfangled, emotional uses of terminal punctuation haven’t crossed over into more traditional, thoughtful writing. (I have used the period throughout this story, and I’m in a perfectly pleasant mood.) Perhaps one day it will, though, and our descendants will wonder why everyone used to be so angry. For posterity’s sake, then, let my author bio be clear:

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