The Use of Punctuation Marks in Written Comments of Photoportal on Yahoo! OMG!

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Abstract

This research aims at investigating the uses of punctuation marks in the written comments on photo portal on Yahoo! OMG! It examines the marks that are mostly used and that violated the standard forms of English punctuation. In accordance with this purpose, the data are three hundred out of 4,659 written comments on Obama's picture. Those data are then analysed by using the standard of English punctuation marks. The result shows that the frequent punctuation used is the exclamation mark which shows strong emotion of anger, sarcasm, and support. On the contrary, the ellipsis is highly used to violate the standard functions that displays pause in the spoken language property. Far more, the other improper uses of punctuation marks led to the new functions that are likely to amalgamate the written and spoken language behaviours which are the characteristics of hybrid language. In addition, the use of punctuation marks might be seen as a simple case in writing whereas it is a crucial matter in the reading. It affects the risks of ambiguity and sense of alteration that may appear within a sentence.

Keywords: Asynchronous; Comment; Punctuation Mark; Standard.

1. Overview of the issue

Along with the advances of technology, language may deviate from the current standard form to then so called non-standard form. According to Crystal (2011, p. 62), he argues that some people see the use of nonstandard forms as a symptom of decline in educational and linguistic standards, and are vociferous in their condemnation.However, the non-standard forms can be observed not only in the words and sentences, but also in the use of punctuation. As investigated by Crystal (2011, p. 63), "the use of exclamations is only 19 (9.5 per cent) of 118 tweets which expressed excitability and far more were used for other functions, such as markers of friendly interaction (32 per cent), including thanking, or to emphasize a statement of fact (29.5 per cent)". These functions of an exclamation mark are increasing from the current standard where it is used to end expression of strong emotion (Biays & Wershoven, 2007). It is supported by Benzer (2010) who argues that the rules of punctuation are still not uniform and change over time in accordance with the location.

An online communication, such as Yahoo! OMG! might be a prosperous research object to investigate the varied uses of punctuation. Furthermore, giving comments in an online communication is suggested as an appropriate platform of analysis, which is the fourth linguistic dimension (Crystal, 2011, p. 16). Yahoo! OMG! provides thousands of comments that are available through its 6 attracting portals: *News & Features*, *Photos*, *Videos*, *Celebs*, *OMG! Insider*, and *OSCARS*. Moreover, Yahoo! is seen as "the first online navigational guide to the Web and a leading global Internet communications, commerce, and media company that offers a comprehensive branded network of services…"(Inc., 2005). Yahoo! OMG! of America is appropriate for this study since the language of the written comments analysed is an English language.

The written comments in online communication are considered as the other style of oral language but both have extreme distinctions (Crystal, 2004, p. 26). On the other hand, Crystal (Crystal, 2011, p. 21) stated that the language called as the written speech or write the way of people talk because it displays both properties of speech and writing and it is impossible to compare either of the mediums as well. Furthermore, this new collaboration of both speech and writing features called as a hybrid language (Crystal, 2011, p. 21). Here, the written comments are

investigated as textual language instead of spoken language as asserted by Crystal (2011, p. 21), "Internet Language is better seen as written language which has been pulled some way in the direction of speech than as spoken language which has been written down."

Since written comment is lack of expression and intonation such as loudness, tempo, pauses, rhythm, and tone (Crystal, 2004, p. 26)), it is usually easier to identify through punctuation and layout because it consists of unit of discourse (sentences, paragraphs) (Crystal, 2011, p. 26). Hence, it is almost certain that punctuation is persistently needed to avoid the difficulty in reading written text. As stated by Hamilton (2007), "words contain the risks of ambiguity and serious misunderstanding if punctuation is eliminated." This type of communication can be referred as asynchronous where the interaction are postponed or not directly answered (Crystal, 2006). Furthermore, Crystal (2004, p. 129) also identified that "asynchronous groups have far more members, because there is no limit to the number of people who can access the group, and there is no complication caused by members belonging to different time zones."

A few works similar to this analysis have been conducted. Ahmet Benzer (2010) investigated the students' problems in educational faculties that deal with the punctuation from their written essays. From the result, he concluded where the incorrect or non-standard usage of punctuation can be traced back into the educational concept nowadays.

Alan Hirvela, et al. (2012) identified the attitude of university students toward English punctuation as a step to generate deeper understanding of punctuation usages, despite the fact that they may have different notions of its functions and use in their native language. Since the study used quantitative approach, the result reported that most of the students are lack of confidence and attention on recognizing and using English punctuation.

An attention concentrates on the use of punctuation in online communication as well, which is conducted by Mersandy (2012) who observed the internet linguistics features in which one of the analysed feature comprises multiple punctuations by male and female adolescents' blogs. To contrast with the Mersandy's focus of the study, the writer's research did not specify written comments based on the gender and also the examination was limited to the use of the punctuation in the written comments in online communication of photos portal on Yahoo! OMG!

None of those findings purposed to identify and elaborate the use of punctuation in online communication. For this reason, the writer intends to investigate the written comments on Yahoo! OMG! by finding out whether the punctuation marks are used properly or not toward the standard rules, and what the new functions of punctuation mark used by the comments writers are identified in this research.

2. Data and Methodology

In collecting the data, the writer of the study visited OMG! from Yahoo! news network site at http://omg.yahoo.com on March 29, 2013. It did not need to sign into a Yahoo! account since it is accessible for public. The writer clicked the photo portal and selected the most popular galleries. The most commented photo at the time was a picture of Obama nuzzling a ball on his head which was displayed on the web on March 27, 2013. Since the existing comments of the picture were 4,659, the writer limited the data collected for the research into 300 hundred written comments based on the certain criteria. The writer bookmarked the page to ease accessing these data later and consistently payed attention to the increasing number of data until the following 6 weeks from the first visit on March 29th, 2013.

The criteria for selecting the comments are that the language used in the comment must be in English, the length of the written comments is limited onone to three sentences, and use punctuation marks that might violate or not toward the use of standard punctuation marks. Next, the writer scrolled the page down to reach the commentaries that were below the photo. Last, the 300 selected comments copied and pasted into Microsoft Word.

For analysis, first the data collected were classified by the frequency of the punctuation marks used and the violated punctuation in the written comments. It was analyzed using a guidebook from Biays, et.al (2007) entitled *ALONG THESE LINES: Writing Paragraphs and Essays*. It provides

eleven punctuation marks; period, question mark, comma, semicolon, colon, apostrophe, exclamation mark, dash, parentheses, quotation mark, and hyphen. However, the writer of the study also added two supplementary punctuation marks that are ellipsis and slash in *The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation* (Straus, 2008) and *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Hornby, 1995), to provide the comprehensive analysis and evaluation of the data. After all, the writer made interpretation of the new function found in the data.

3. Findings & Interpretation

The result is then described into three points of analysis. The firstpoint is the classification of punctuations types mostly used by the writers of the comments. The second is the frequent types of violating punctuation on the photo portal on Yahoo! OMG! For each part, the writer of the study reports the top five of the result with the aim of obtaining the deeper and detailed analysis. Henceforth, the writer ranks the findings into a percentage. In addition, the writer self-interpreted the new functions of punctuation marks used in the final part.

The comment is a written or spoken remark giving an opinion on, explaining or criticizing an event, a person, a situation, etc.(Hornby, 1995, p. 227). Since the spoken language is transferred into the text form, it is necessary to give several marks which help readers to understand the uttered sentence as well as the spoken language.

3.1 Types of Punctuation Mostly Used in The Written Comments

From 13 punctuation marks provided (Biays & Wershoven, 2007, p. 513-538; Hornby, 1995, p. 1403; Straus, 2008, p. 53), there are only 12 marks identified. Furthermore, the types of punctuation marks that are frequently used are seen below.

Types	F	%	Rank
Exclamation mark	253	27.6	1
Period	205	22.4	2
Comma	120	13.1	3
Ellipsis	98	10.7	4
Apostrophe	92	10	5

Table 3.1

Generally, these marks are oftenly used because the comments observed are mostly statements. For example, (254) '*Fix the budget first, then bounce the ball all you want.*' However, the sentences frequently represent the strong emotion toward Obama's activity in the picture which is supported by the use of exclamation mark, i.e., (253) '*BALANCE THE BUDGET, NOT A BALL!!!!*' Moreover, the writers of the comment uses the *apostrophe* that indicates the contractions of the words omitted which may facilitate their writings. Here is the extract, (157) '*Guys, loosen up. It's just a moment of fun.'* The use of ellipsis is also identified in the examination, i.e., (64) *'"And for my next magical trick ..."'*. Beside the appropriate uses of punctuation mark, this study also noticed the improper uses of punctuation that violated the standard form which will be discussed later in the next section.

3.2 Frequent Types of Violated Punctuation

From the analysis of the written comments, there only 9 out of 12 punctuation marks were used inappropriately. The detailed analysis is discussed in the next section.

Types	F	%	Rank
Ellipsis	95	26.8	1
Comma	84	23.7	2
Period	80	22.6	3
Exclamation mark	33	9.3	4
Question mark	31	8.8	5

Table 3.2

The analysis shows that the ellipsis are used in the middle of the sentences which separates one word from another unnecessarily. It is speculated as a violation toward the right use of ellipsis since the mark is not applied to show the word omission. Perhaps, the writers of the comment use it deliberately and are expected to have certain purposes in their writings. For example, (165) '*Acting as the clown he is..... showing his natural talent!*'

Many comments are written by placing no comma to clarify the sentences. The writers of the comment do not put commas after introductory words, phrases, or clauses in sentences. For instance:

(18) *Based on the Yahoo comments (not just on this piece)I would say that three quarters of Yahoo readers are Right Wing Obama haters.*

Moreover, the frequent violation identified is the misuse of a period in the final position. For instance, (164) '*His greatest trick is pretending to be a president*' Since the comment is a complete sentence that is a statement. It is important to use a period at the end of the sentence (Straus, 2008, p. 52).

Additionally, the writers of the comment put a lot of marks of exclamation at once. Nevertheless, the use of a single exclamation mark within a sentence is representative enough to indicate the strong emotion contained. Additionally, Biays et al.(2007, p. 536) argues that such uses are inappropriate. For examples:

(220) *someone should tell him* "GET BACK TO WORKKKKKK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Similar to the other punctuation marks analysed before, the writers also overly use the question marks within their comments. For instance, (272) '*What an entertainer. Does he tap dance and sing too ???*' Here, the writer of the comment uses several question marks at once in which indicated as the overuse. Adopting an idea from Biays & Wershoven (2007, p. 536) that the overuse of an exclamation mark is unnecessary, the writer of the study regards that this rule also applies to the other punctuation marks. Thus, the writer of the comment uses punctuation marks improperly.

3.3 The New Functions of Punctuation Marks Used by The Comments Writers

3.1.2. Ellipsis

End a complete statement within the sentence

(99) *For this I have ZERO comment.....*

Here, the use of an ellipsis is deliberately placed at the end of the sentence which is expected to indicate a long stop. Since that purpose cannot be expressed in the written language, it is believed that the writer of the comment is supposed to place an ellipsis as the most suitable mark to represent his intention.

Pause the words within the sentences

Straus (2008, p. 53) stated that ellipsis is used to omit the words, phrases, or clauses with a quoted sentences which is usually in the initial or final position. Nonetheless, it is not used to omit the unit of a sentence, but it is mostly used to indicate a gap between the words as in the spoken language. Here is the extract:

(154) W*hoopee...he can balance something...but not the budget.*

It is presumed that the writer of the comment knows the use of standard punctuation well. It is indicated from the proper placement of the capitalization and a period in which ends the statement. However, the writer of the comment is likely to put several ellipsis to separate the phrases within the sentence. The writer of the study suggests that the writer of the comment puts them in the writing as the replication of a gap in pronouncing the words as in the spoken language. Since the written does not have such expression, people tend to use multiple periods in which indicate the longer pause if it is placed in the middle sentence and the longer stop if it is put on the final position.

Separate the introductory word within a sentence

The function mentioned above is appropriately referred to a comma. However, the result finds another use of ellipsis in this written online communication.

(266) *Such talent... notice the looks on the by-standers... They think he's lost it too.*

It is believed that the first ellipsis used replaces the function of comma which separated the introductory word to clarify the sentence, since it is inappropriate to set a period after the phrase that is incomplete. Regardless of the reason, the explanation of this new function is deemed similar to the previous point, where the writer of the comment uses the ellipsis to show the gap expression

in the written form. Notice that people usually pause their speech when recognize the comma in reading. Thus, it may assume that the writer of the comment puts the ellipsis to give a quite long gap to the next sentence in which he considers that placing a comma is less representative to the intended expression.

End an interrogative sentence

An interrogative sentence necessarily ends with a question mark, but the writer of the comment is likely to use an ellipsis that may assume more to represent the sense of the question purposed.

(120) *Why aren't they impressed.....they've seen this Prez …*

The first clause in the above sentence is an interrogative sentence since it is initialled with a question signal of '*why*'. To write properly, the writer of the comment should place a question mark instead of ellipsis. However, it cannot be justified that such use is incorrect. Perhaps, the writer of the comment has an aim to deliver more of expression than the question mark does in an interrogative. However, written communication has no measurement of how to write the loudness, pause, tempo or length of a sentence that are uttered. Thus, most of the writers of the comment may put several marks of a punctuation at once to catch up with the features of the spoken language. Finally, it is alsobelieved that the use of ellipsis or multiple periods is expected to show the surprise through a long pause.

Overuse denotes the emphasize of a long gap

Based on the analysis, some punctuations are overly used by the writers of comment to represent the same function as the emphasis of a current part within the sentence.

(92) *Showing off "serious skills?"Yawn.....*

The writer of the comment is expected to deliberate type of the multiple periods. Moreover, the computer also facilitates it by holding on the point board for a moment. By attending to the whole sentences, Obama is regarded as doing nothing significant. He should utilize his full skills in handling the United States better future seriously rather than show off ineffective activity toward the development of the nation. Therefore, it can be implied that the writer of the comment is not interested in the activity shown by Obama and use the ellipsis to emphasize the careless attitude.

3.1.3. Comma

Finish a complete sentence

A comma is used to finish a complete statement in the written comment in which inappropriate to the standard use (Biays & Wershoven, 2007, p. 513).

(174) The communists have a trained seal,

The writer of the comment is supposed to be less aware of the appropriate writing. On the other hand, it is believed that the writer of the comment knows the punctuation marks as well. It is indicated form the placement of the mark in the final position to end the sentence even though the writer of the comment does not put a proper mark. Furthermore, since an online communication does not require its users to write formally, then it permits the people to write down their opinion through the text which represent their feeling.

End an interrogative sentence

(246) *How about securing our borders and keeping the invaders out, that would be a skill.*

By comprehending the text carefully, the comma identified is aimed to convey the question within the comment. Following the standard rule, it is necessary to put a question mark at the end of an interrogative (Biays & Wershoven, 2007, p. 514). However, the writer of the study is likely to use the comma deliberately to represents the gap when this comment is spoken. Furthermore, the writer may only focus on the meaning contained within the comment rather than complicate the correct punctuation in the writing.

Overuse expresses a break within the sentence

Different from the previous interpretation of an overuse, this mark is overly used not to emphasize the emotion or the meaning inside of the sentence. For instance:

(287) *Hey Oblamemo..how's Indiana doing ??? LMFAO*

In reading a passage that contains commas, the readers are likely to pause their speech to facilitate understanding of the meaning aimed. Therefore, the double commas used by the writer of the comment is expected to show longer pause than just a single comma. Since the text cannot rate the long pause in the written, it is possible to consider that the number of marks used indicates the length of pause intended.

3.1.4. Period

End an interrogative sentence

Some writers of the comment are ignorant to use the question marks as the indication of the interrogative sentences in the written comments.

(167) *does anyone remember when the presidency was once a respected profession. what a joke we have now*

Although a question mark and a period have the same purpose which end the sentences, each of them represents the distinctive utilities. Since the online communication has no strict rules that require the writers of the comment to write following the standard, thus it leads to the new formation of the functions of the punctuation used. Furthermore, it allows people to blend their writing knowledge and their speech attitudes in which called as a hybrid language (Crystal, 2011, p. 21).

Separate the words within a sentence

(188) John Boehner is darker than Obama.And dumber too. Why don't you morons hate him instead.

The first period used by the writer of the comment is deemed as improper. It identifies that the sentence is unfinished because the second phrase is related to the meaning of the first. This writing does not represent the behaviour of a written language, but the behaviour of an oral language in which people can utter a complete sentence at once and pause it then try to continue the rest of the speech spontaneously. Since written text does not provide such feature, the writer of the comment may use a period to illustrate the short pause in the spoken language.

3.1.5. Exclamation mark

Overuse expresses stronger emotion

An exclamation mark is used to express the strong emotion (Biays & Wershoven, 2007, p. 536). Practically, some writers of the comment often overuse the marks in which aimed to show greater feeling.

(97) *You are doing an outstanding job Mr. President!!!*

Different from the spoken language, people are unable to recognize the loudness or intonation of a sentence pronounced in the form of written communication. Thus, it is certain that the writer of the comment considers an exclamation mark is not enough to express the emotion contained in the writing. Perhaps, the use of three exclamation is representative for the purpose he had. Related to the picture commented, the writer of the comment seems to convey the satire expression toward Obama's worthless activity in which regarded as an embarrassment to the American people. Moreover, this investigation also finds the other uses more than three marks in which regarded to show the great great feeling of the writing.

3.1.6. Question mark

End a statement

In a direct interrogative, it is usually easy to be recognized by the question signals such as '*what*', '*why*', '*where*', '*when*', '*who*', and '*how*'. Biays & Wershoven (Biays & Wershoven, 2007, p. 514) suggested that it is necessary to place a question mark at the final position of a direct

interrogative. Nevertheless, this study investigates an example that is not initialled by any question signals but uses a question mark to end the sentence.

(83) *let's see his skills of sitting in a church for 20 years and never hearing anything hateful?*

The writer of the study presumes the comment is preferred seen as a statement rather than as an interrogative. In a proper text, it is better to place a period to end the sentence. However, the reason of the writer of the comment chooses the question mark cannot be accused since an online communication such Yahoo! OMG! does not require the comments are in the standard rules. Thus, it allows people to release their opinion in any kind of expression and probably enable other writers to write similarly.

On the other hand, in an informal conversation within spoken language, people usually do not initiate the interrogative by providing such question signals. It is commonly noticeable from the raised intonation of the speaker. However, since the comment must in the text form, the writer then puts a question mark to replace the raised intonation, which is as the indication of the questioned part in the sentence. Thus, the writer of the study believes that the comment above is a result of a combination between the writer of the comment behaviour in oral language and the understanding of using a question mark in writing.

The overuse emphasizes the emotion within the question

Different with the overuse of exclamation marks and ellipsis or multiple periods, the overuse of the question mark is deemed has an aim to highlight the question introduced since it is an interrogative sentence. For example:

(70) *Why do they not looked thrilled????? Cause the President of the United States of American is acting like an idiot.*

Despite the overuse is considered as a violation of the standard rule(Biays & Wershoven, 2007, p. 536), its use is completely acceptable in writing. People are presumed tend to use several marks at once in their writing to express the feature of raised intonation and loudness in the spoken language (Crystal, 2011, p. 19) which is expected to emphasize the issue questioned. Furthermore, since an online communication is the lack of visual contact (2011, p. 18), the writer of the comment tends to rely on the mark used to make the interrogative clear and avoid the possible ambiguity. Here, the writer of the comment underlines a view of the fearless of other countries in challenging America, the most powerful nation in the world, because of the president's stupidity displayed in the photo.

4. Conclusion

The written comments on photo portal on Yahoo! OMG! indicate the use of non-standard punctuation marks, as stated by Crystal (2011, p. 62) where people see the use of non-standard forms as a symptom of decline in educational and linguistic standards, and are vociferous in their condemnation. It is seen from the the violations occur in which show the shift functions of other punctuation additionally. Punctuation and its standard use might be seen as a simple case in writing, whereas it such a crucial matter of the reading in which affects ambiguity and sense alteration of a sentence. Since the written comments analysed are statements, thus the most frequent punctuation marks used by the writers of the comment are exclamation mark, period, comma, ellipsis, and apostrophe. On the contrary, there several marks highly used inappropriate to the English standard rules are ellipsis, comma, period, exclamation mark, and question mark.

Those improper uses provide the new functions of punctuation marks used. The ellipsis is used to end a complete statement within the sentence, to pause the words within the sentences, to separate the introductory word within a sentence, to end an interrogative sentence, and the overuse denotes the emphasize of a long gap. For comma, it represents to finish a complete sentence, to end an interrogative sentence and the overuse expresses a break within the sentence. Moreover, the period is functioned to end an interrogative sentence and separate the words within a sentence. Since the exclamation mark has a main purpose, it is often used overly to expresses stronger

emotion. While the question mark is applied to end a statement and the overuse emphasizes the emotion within the question.

It is believed that the writers of the comment have good knowledge of punctuation used in writing as well. Since the precise reasons of the punctuation violation in the internet communication cannot be identified, the interpretation of the investigation recognizes the significant point. The findings confirm that the writers of the comment are likely to amalgamate the characteristics of spoken language and the characteristics of the written language as supported by Crystal (2011, p. 21) that "internet language is identical to neither speech nor writing, but selectively and adaptively displays properties of both".

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