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The Graphic and Grammatical Structure of Written Texts

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ABSTRACT
From a linguistic perspective, punctuation relates to grammar and semantics as well as to pragmatics and stylistics. In this paper, I will focus on some grammatical aspects of punctuation in contemporary Swedish, or rather: how awareness of punctuation is necessary for understanding the structure of written texts; but also, how the understanding of punctuation requires an awareness of the partly specific conditions of written language. Punctuation defines entities and hierarchies that may or may not correspond to abstract linguistic categories like phrases and clauses. The graphic word and the graphic sentence, for example, are structural units that in actual written texts follow conventions independent from abstract grammar, as they are defined respectively by word-spacing and initial capital plus final period, exclamation mark or question mark. This makes possible an interesting interplay between grammatical and graphic units. The study is based on a qualitative analysis of the punctuation in three contemporary Swedish novels.

Introduction
Although research on punctuation has always been scarce, scholars of various fields have taken occasional interest in punctuation: apart from linguistics and literature, there are studies on the subject within palaeography (Parkes 1992), performance theory (DeVere Brody 2008), philosophy (Adorno 1978 [1958]), etc. Among the many handbooks and style guides, one of the most academically influential in English is Partridge’s You have a point there (1953).

Even within linguistics, the approach is not obvious. Punctuation is integrated in written language, which today is an independent linguistic medium, from which follows that punctuation is involved in all the various and complex aspects of language. A popular folk linguistic approach, often brought forward in normative discussions, is the semantic one. The title of Lynne Truss’ bestselling book Eats, shoots & leaves (2003) provides an example: the comma changes the semantic meaning in the case of the following two sentences, since the comma implies a verb phrase of three coordinated verbs, rather than a single verb followed by an object consisting of two coordinated nouns:

The panda eats shoots and leaves.
The panda eats, shoots and leaves.

In Swedish, a common punctuation error with semantic consequences is the writing of compounds as two graphic words instead of one. (As we will return to, I include...
word-spacing in the realm of punctuation marks.) In Swedish, there is a semantic difference between, to use a frequently occurring example in folk linguistic discussions about the phenomenon: en sjuksköterska (‘a nurse’) and en sjuk sköterska (‘a nurse that is ill’). In speech, there is a clear prosodic difference between the two; in writing, the distinction is made clear by the use of word spacing. However, neither Truss’ example nor mine are likely to cause many actual misunderstandings; a reader might be confused for a second, and annoyed, but most fairly competent readers can probably quite easily infer the intended meaning from context. More importantly, sorting out semantic ambiguities is just a small part of what punctuation does in actual texts (cf. Crystal 2015: ix).

Next, we can look at punctuation from a stylistic perspective; for instance, there is often an obvious stylistic difference between using a comma, a semicolon or a dash, between two independent clauses:

Hon bryter av, hennes ögon är blanka. \hspace{1cm} \textit{She pauses, her eyes are shiny.}
Hon bryter av; hennes ögon är blanka. \hspace{1cm} \textit{She pauses; her eyes are shiny.}
Hon bryter av – hennes ögon är blanka. \hspace{1cm} \textit{She pauses – her eyes are shiny.}

All of these alternatives are approved by the most important Swedish style guide (\textit{Svenska skrivregler 2017}). The first alternative, however, the comma splice, is considered informal, and many school teachers would probably mark it as incorrect, although critics and stylisticians might consider it an important stylistic feature. The semicolon, in its turn, is perceived by many as highly formal and overly pretentious, and many Swedish news editors seem to have banned it completely from their pages. The dash is not as stylistically charged, but unusual and probably used mostly in creative genres. It is clear, thus, that it’s not enough to know the codified conventions when choosing which mark is stylistically appropriate in a specific situation. As Nebrig & Spoerhase (2012: 11) put it, ‘Selbst wenn sich alle Autoren mit ihrer poetischen Zeichensetzung strikt an die Duden-Regeln halten würden, ließe dieses Regelwerk noch einen erheblichen stilistischen Freiraum.’\footnote{Even if every author follows the orthographic standard rules strictly in their poetic punctuation, these rules still allow for considerable stylistic freedom [my translation].} (My own observations about the stylistic wiggle room within established conventions are put forward in more detail in Dahl 2016.)

In his historical study, \textit{Pause and effect} (1992), Parkes suggests that in the European history of written language, punctuation marks have had two main functions: to make clear the various aspects of structure of the text and to serve as ‘a feature of the “pragmatics” of the written medium.’ The pragmatic function includes the role of punctuation in shifts of voice and tone (cf. Dahl 2014). This paper, however, will focus mainly on Parkes’ first function, the structural, text-grammatical perspective, and consider how punctuation gives shape to graphic, textual units and hierarchies (as seen in actual texts) that may or may not correspond to abstract conventions (as codified in grammars). This role of punctuation is closely related to what is sometimes called its cognitive function (cf. Strömquist 1992; Nebrig & Spoerhase 2012); the structuring of texts is related to the structuring of ideas. The different approaches mentioned here are nevertheless interconnected, which means that semantic, pragmatic

\footnote{This example is taken from the novel \textit{Förvandling} (Adolfsson, 2005: 127), where the semicolon is used. The sentence can be translated thus: ‘She pauses; her eyes glimmer.’}
and stylistic aspects will come up as well. The study was part of my PhD thesis and is further described in Dahl (2015).

Following Lennard (2005: 151), I define punctuation marks as non-alphabetic and non-numeral ‘marks, spaces and other signs (such as distinguishing type-faces or founts) placed within the text to articulate, dis/ambiguate, or otherwise refine and/or display the sense’. Apart from segmental marks like the period, comma, etc., as well as spaces between words and paragraphs, Lennard’s definition includes various sorts of case variation. Instead of listing a specific number of punctuation marks, Lennard defines the category as an open set of marks with a similar function. In the analysis, the scholar must therefore explore of the function of specific marks in specific texts, in order to decide what is relevant on the level of punctuation. In one of the novels in this study, for example, some passages are written in a smaller font, indicating a viewpoint shift. In this specific novel, font size is thus a relevant feature of punctuation, since it is very closely intertwined with the text and cannot be understood apart from it; it helps ‘articulate, dis/ambiguate, or otherwise refine and/or display the sense’, in a way that is similar to the use of parenthesis marks, quotation marks etc. In the other novels in the study, there are no such shifts in font size; hence, it is not a relevant feature on the level of punctuation in those cases.

**Integrating punctuation in a dialogical linguistic framework**

Parkes’ pioneering historical study of punctuation (1992), and the following studies by Lennard (1992, 1995, 1998), underlined the need to study each sign in its local context; Lennard (1995: 69) states:

> [T]he significance of any mark, space, or unit of punctuation is in the end relative, not determined by an absolute value which every ,, , or, must have, but interpreted by the reader with greater or lesser regard for convention and for the contexts of writing and reading.

According to Parkes and Lennard, studying punctuation thus necessarily requires awareness of contextual aspects. In order to integrate the role of punctuation in a larger linguistic framework, I have found the dialogical perspective on language, linguistics and meaning-making, whose foundations go back to the writings of the Bakhtin circle (Bakhtin, Voloshinov, Medvedev, and others), to be extremely helpful. From a dialogical perspective, language exists in concrete, situated and contextualized utterances with responsivity and addressivity. This implies that linguistic research should study language in such concrete utterances, rather than constructed examples (such as ‘The panda eats, shoots and leaves’ or ‘sick nurse’) or short passages abstracted from context. Instead, it is necessary to be attentive to various situational and contextual factors, since they are crucial for determining meaning. Linguistic research with an explicit dialogical framework, such as interactional linguistics, has mostly been interested in talk-in-interaction, despite the fact that the members of the Bakhtin circle themselves were very much interested in written texts, especially novels. However, the main assumptions of dialogism, as presented by e.g. Linell (2009), are valid for written language as well as spoken language, since they concern basic principles about

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3 In the paratexts, font size varies in all three novels. See also Dahl (2015).

4 Other scholars, like Bredel (2011), consider the meaning of individual punctuation marks to be much more definite and consistent.
human meaning-making. Bakhtin himself was of course extremely interested in novels as linguistic utterances (see e.g. Bakhtin 1981, 1984). In later years, textual scholars have also been influenced by interactional linguistics (see e.g. Makkonen-Craig 2014; Dahl 2016).

Written language is simultaneously linear and spatial. Reading, as an active and co-creative process of interpretation (cf. Bakhtin 1986: 68), involves following a linear string of text as well as perceiving the spatial arrangement of the text and other aspects of typography and layout (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996). Furthermore, it involves relating those impressions to both concrete and abstract linguistic conventions, like grammatical forms and units.

Since punctuation belongs to written language, a grammatical perspective on punctuation necessarily involves letting go of the assumptions of the widespread ‘written language bias’ paradox (Linell 2005) that consider spoken language primary and written language secondary, but still use writing to explain and correct speech. Linguists have studied spoken utterances in relation to norms of written texts, while they simultaneously considered written utterances an incomplete, secondary version of speech. When we let go of these assumptions, written as well as spoken utterances can be studied independently, on their own terms.

The importance of studying written language as independent has been put forward by grammatically oriented punctuation scholars like Nunberg (1990), Bredel (2008) and others. The present study shares their concern, but departs from them by its dialogical perspective, taking less interest in a supposed abstract written language system governing punctuation (meaning that specific grammatical preconditions ‘generate’ specific punctuation marks), and instead focusing on actual (including literary) usage, which involves great variation. The dialogical emphasis on the importance of situational as well as situation-transcending contexts in the process of meaning-making is coherent with the emphasis on the pragmatic role of punctuation in the above-mentioned empirical studies by Parkes and Lennard.

Methodology and corpus

Empirical studies of punctuation in fiction have often focused on the characteristics of a specific author. This paper uses a corpus of three contemporary Swedish novels but is interested in discerning recurring, conventionalized patterns rather than pointing out what’s remarkable about these specific texts. After all, an important task for linguistics is to understand what it is that makes communication actually work, that is, what different utterances have in common. The studied novels are DIVA (‘DIVA’, 1998) by Monika Fagerholm, Förvandling (‘Transformation’, 2005) by Eva Adolfsson and Fadevår, tack för ljuset! (‘Our Father, thanks for the light!’, 2010) by Fredrik

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5 Therefore, modern linguistics is partly characterised by a paradox: there is an almost unanimous agreement on the absolute primacy of spoken language, yet language is explored from theoretical and methodological points of departure that are ultimately derived from concerns with cultivating, standardising and teaching forms of written language.’ Linell 2005: viii.

6 See e.g. Gómez Jiménez 2013; and various papers in Bray, Handley & Henry 2000.
Ekelund. The reason for choosing fiction as material for the study was not mainly an interest in the specifics of literary punctuation; rather, literary texts were expected to provide a wide and rich selection of the general ways punctuation can be used, since novels integrate language from different registers and genres (cf. Bakhtin 1981). The novels are studied as examples of (advanced) written language.

However, all fiction writers are not likely to use punctuation as a stylistic resource to the same extent. Hence, the specific novels were selected on the basis of their punctuation having attracted attention in reviews (see Dahl 2015: 19f., 220). That is, I went through newspaper reviews of books published over the past fifteen years where I thought the punctuation would be interesting to study, to see if more than one reviewer had commented on their punctuation. When three novels had passed the test, I stopped looking. These novels, thus, provide examples of what professional authors with advanced literacy and acknowledged use of punctuation as a stylistic resource can do with punctuation. Incidentally, they are all published by the same house in Sweden; DIVA, however, was published in Finland by another house first (in Swedish), though the Swedish publisher used the same typesetting and layout.

Because of the lack of previous research on punctuation, an explorative, qualitative method was necessary. I did not have any hypotheses about the outcome, though the study has an explicit dialogical perspective; this means, for example, that I did not look for the meaning of specific marks, but searched for patterns regarding the general role of punctuation in relation to different aspects of context: local linguistic and thematic contexts, intertextual contexts, contemporary literary movements and technological developments, etc.

The qualitative analyses attempted to acknowledge the communicative richness in linguistic details, and contextual factors on various levels were recognized when doing so seemed to further the understanding. Thus, I have combined contextual awareness with detailed text analyses, being attentive to both internal norms and innovations in the specific novel or passage, and intersubjective norms that may be codified or not. Influenced by Bakhtin as well as Iser (1975) and Gadamer (1960) I acknowledge the scholar’s position as situated and involved in a dialogical relationship with the material. If meaning exists in interaction, and I, as a scholar, want to understand meaning-making, my active participation as a reflective subject is a necessary tool in this research. From a Bakhtinian perspective, the notion of the third party is also relevant to the understanding of the reading process. As a reader, I am not exclusively oriented towards the text, but also towards third parties. The contextual factors mentioned above are such third parties, as well as my ideas about linguistic conventions, the responsibility of the reader, etc. A scholarly reading is different from an everyday reading when it is systematic, and when it pursues open and transparent argumentation (cf. Stockwell 2009: 11). Thus, I have tried to present my analyses and interpretations clearly, in order for others to be able to question them.

None of these novels exist in English translation; all English translations of the quotes below are mine. All the quotes in this paper happen to be taken from Ekelund and Adolfsson. This is mainly because Fagerholm is a graphically more complex novel; there is so much going on at the same time that examples of one specific phenomenon are more rare. Nevertheless, the results presented are based on a study of all three novels, and the specific phenomena discussed are seen in Fagerholm’s novel as well.
As bibliographers and textual scholars have shown, punctuation has historically belonged to the sphere of *accidentals*, and been manipulated by printers, publishers, editors and other agents involved in publishing and printing (see, e.g., McGann 1983; Bray, Handley & Henry 2000). In order to know who authorized the punctuation in a specific work we have to study both the historical circumstances of a certain work and the relationship between a particular author and her or his publishers and/or printers. However, this knowledge is not always necessary; it depends on the purpose of the study. From a Bakhtinian perspective, we, as readers, attribute an utterance in its completeness to the *author*, a notion that in this aspect should be perceived as a position rather than a physical person (cf. Bakhtin 1984: 184). Of course, any textual research needs to be aware of historical circumstances, but from the perspective of the reader, knowledge of the actual historical production process is not necessarily crucial, since the reader understands an utterance as if it came from one, unifying voice. Furthermore, studies on individual authors’ punctuation have shown that the involvement of printers and publishers generally has a normalizing effect. The most remarkable features are therefore likely to be chosen, and perhaps fought for, by the author. Thus, the present study, based on a contemporary corpus, leaves aside the issue of whether the actual empirical author’s intention is behind every punctuation mark.

One case where both general conventions for contemporary Swedish punctuation and internal norms of the particular text need consideration is when we interpret features that depart from the general conventions. For example, in Swedish style guides, ellipsis dots should be preceded/followed by word-space, except when they occur within words (*Svenska skrivregler* 2017: 195). This, however, is never the case in the corpus, which has led me to consider this as neither an error nor a conscious stylistic feature, but as following the internal conventions within these novels (and, in this case, possibly those of their publisher).

In the case of singular deviations from general conventions, I have tried to interpret them in the light of the style and content of the local co-text, that is, the immediate verbal surrounding, what is written immediately before or after the specific deviation. If this is not possible, that is, if they cannot be understood as meaningful with regards to the local co-text, I have interpreted them as incidental errors and left them out of the analysis. Such cases are, however, rare in the corpus; had they been more frequent, there might have been reason to bring them up in the analysis, since higher frequencies of erratic punctuation might make the reader less attentive to variation on the level on punctuation, hence decreasing its meaning potential.

The structural units of written texts and their relationships

In the corpus studied, punctuation structures and modifies texts in graphic units: graphemes, graphic words, graphic sentences, paragraphs and chapters. These units are at once separated and brought together in various ways by punctuation. Punctuation is integrated in the forming of grammatical constructions in writing.

8While most graphemes are alphabetic, the above definition of punctuation includes non-segmental marks, such as the use of italics, bold, and case variation, which can modify individual graphemes.
Syntactic and graphic units often overlap, but mismatches between them are not infrequent and generally create a tension and some sort of stylistic effect.

**Graphic words and word-parts**

The graphic word is defined in the study as a unit of one or more graphemes surrounded by word-space. Punctuation can, however, occur within a graphic word, in the corpus. On the graphematical level, word-parts as well as words can be italicized, bolded or written with case variation. In Swedish, generally only sentences and names are capitalized. Apart from this, capitalization can give a word a name-like character, limiting its reference or marking the word as a fixed philosophical term or as referring to someone or something with special authority. A creative author can use capitalization to modify the meaning of an ordinary word like *mother*:

> Då en Mor ska veckla ut sig i hela sin väldiga gestalt…

*When a Mother is to unfold in all of her immense being…*

The initial capital here shows that the narrator imagines an idealized picture of a mother, rather than a specific mother, and that this ideal mother is a figure with special authority. Like uppercase letters inside a lowercase word, capitalization can, in other cases, set up an allusion to commercial names and signs.

What we expect to read as one graphic word can be deconstructed by spaces, points or hyphens. A common example of this in Swedish, mentioned above, is the division of compounds, which are normally written as one word, into two graphic words. The introduction gave an example of how incidental division of compounds can cause ambiguity, which is often publicly recognized in a joking manner; in the present corpus, however, this and other sorts of graphical deconstruction of a word are used as a conscious stylistic tool, to highlight the different word-parts, e.g. with regards to their semantic, phonetic or visual qualities. In the quote below, the incidentally homonymic relationship between the Swedish word *mun*, ‘mouth’, and part of the word *kommunicera*, ‘communicate’, is highlighted as the latter word is divided with hyphens:

> Och munnen, hon gör luftkyssar med läpparna: 'kom-mun-icera'

*And her mouth, she kisses the air with her lips: ’com-mun-icate’*

Hyphen-divided words are also repeatedly used to mimic a certain prosody; the specific effect of these sorts of mismatches between abstract grammar and concrete graphic units can only be determined in the local context.

In an analogous way, phrases can be conjoined to a single graphic word, when the space between what we are used to seeing as separate words is missing or replaced by hyphens. In the corpus, this is used to give a more iconically accurate representation of the sound of the spoken word or to show that a string of words is established as a phrase and concept. A hyphen can establish a new, provisional, compound, and a colon can allow indeclinable words to take suffixes (as when the band name *The Who* is translated in *Fadevår*: ‘Vem:et’, with ‘-et’ representing the definite article in Swedish).

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10 From Adolfsson (2005).
**Graphic sentences**

Graphic sentences are defined as units beginning with a capital letter and ending with a period, an exclamation mark, a question mark or ellipsis dots. From a syntactic point of view, there are roughly four types of graphic sentences in the corpus.

1. The graphic sentence coincides with a syntactic sentence.

   ‘Men jag skriver om hungern.’
   *But I write about the hunger.*

2. The graphic sentence contains several syntactic sentences, coordinated by punctuation or conjunction.

   ‘Han är klädd i kostym, han har en portfölj i handen, nu kommer han i genom dörren.’
   *He’s wearing a suit, he has a briefcase in his hand, he’s coming through the door now.*

3. The graphic sentence consists of one or more syntactic sentences, along with one or more isolated elements, separated from the rest by punctuation.

   ‘En helt tydlig vårdag kommer, på eftermiddagen går jag ut: sjöpromenad.’
   *An obvious spring day arrives, in the afternoon I go out: lake walk.*

4. The graphic sentence consists of an element that is syntactically dependent on (cooperating with) another sentence or some other contextual factor.

   ‘Och alltihop är egentligen vårt. Eller ingens.’
   *And everything is really ours. Or nobody’s.*

While most sentences are type 1 or 2, types 3 and 4 are frequently used for various stylistic purposes, in all three novels. The term *isolated elements* covers different categories of dependent sentence parts, including dislocations (Geluykens 1992) and other annexed constituents (Teleman 2005: 1623). One such category is insertions within the sentence, often called parentheticals, surrounded by a pair of commas, dashes or parenthesis marks. The sentence they are part of is not syntactically dependent on them, while they themselves are radically dependent on the rest of the sentence for their interpretation:

   Hon kan knappt bärga sej och ser ut att vilja skrika men tvingas viska och jag vet – innerst inne – vad det gäller, vem det gäller.
   *She can barely control herself and looks like she’d rather scream but is being forced to whisper and I know – deep inside – what it’s about, who it’s about.*

Another category is add-on elements that begin or end a sentence, which they are separated from by a punctuation mark – usually a comma, dash, colon (as in the above example) or ellipsis dots. Reporting clauses (‘, she thinks’; ‘, momma said’) can be understood as a special variant of this add-on category.

   Isolated elements can also form their own graphic sentences (i.e., type 4). This is a case of a mismatch between syntactical and graphic units, since a unit that is syntactically dependent on another unit forms its own, graphically independent sentence. We can call these

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11 The examples in this list are all from Adolfsson 2005.

12 Cf. Leech and Short 2007: 175: ‘the two notions of sentencehood usually match, but in principle they are matters of independent choice.’ In my descriptions of written constructions, I avoid negative terms like ‘incomplete sentences’, focusing instead on the functions of various constructions in their specific contexts.

13 From Ekelund (2010).
dependent sentences \textit{parasitic} (cf. Linell 2005: 74), or, in more positive terms, \textit{cooperating sentences}. In the following example, the two later sentences would be parasitic – or all three cooperating, depending on which term we prefer:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

\textit{Got to get home, pull myself together. Draw up the directions for my future writing. And for the article, the money!}

\textbf{Text-level units: Paragraphs, sections, chapters}

Units above sentence level are also structured by punctuation. Texts are divided into chapters and paragraphs, which can in turn be hierarchically subdivided. Paragraphs can be ordered so that the highest level is preceded by an asterisk, the second highest by a blank line, and the subtlest by indentation. Chapter breaks are often shown with page-breaks and dropped heads. The levels of layout and punctuation here intersect, as sections and chapters on different levels are separated by different sizes of space and headlines.\footnote{Cf. Lennard’s wide definition of punctuation as everything between the letter-form and the book itself (Lennard 2000: 5–6).} Paragraph breaks, section breaks and chapter breaks have many functions, but they often indicate some sort of contextual shift. Paragraph breaks with indentation can also iconically refer to a chain of thoughts or events following each other.

\textbf{Punctuation texture}

So far, we have looked at the individual units of the text. To understand the role of punctuation in a given text, however, it is just as necessary to be aware of the interplay between the instances of punctuation in that text, an interplay that forms what I refer to here as the text’s \textit{punctuation texture}. My intention with this concept is to emphasize the situatedness of the relationship and difference between the various punctuation marks, and to add the distinction between \textit{tight} and \textit{loose} to the more familiar distinction between \textit{heavy} and \textit{light} punctuation. The first axis (tight/loose) concerns frequency, while the latter concerns the choice between different punctuation marks, which may be heavier or lighter depending on what hierarchical level they are associated with. These values are decided in relation to the other marks in the local context; if periods usually separate sentences, commas units within sentences and dashes words or word-parts, periods will be interpreted as the heaviest and dashes as the lightest of these three marks. In order to understand the functions of punctuation, we have to study it not sign by sign, but rather look at the punctuation texture in e.g. a passage, a paragraph or a chapter, in relation to the text as a whole and its internal norms. A paragraph break is generally heavier than a comma, but in deciding what distinctions are relevant and in what way, we need to take into consideration aspects of narrative and theme in the particular passage, text or genre.

The punctuation texture of a text makes possible variation across genres and individual texts as well as variation within a text; the latter possibly a potential that is used more frequently in novels, such as the corpus of this study, than in functional texts. The punctuation texture gives rhythm to the text, but also generally determines...
what we perceive as foregrounded in the text, semantically, phonetically and/or referentially. Short sentences, paragraphs or chapters can be interpreted as especially relevant, but also as summaries of more developed or detailed sections preceding or following them. Lightly, loosely punctuated sections of the text can give the impression of simultaneity or higher tempo. The punctuation texture can also iconically represent the perceived concrete rhythm of a specific event or action, as in the following passage:


No, I like it best when I’m alone at the golf course with my clubs. Hit, hit, walk, walk, alone in the fields, by the sea. Hit, hit, walk, walk. With the five-iron, grazing forward. Hit, hit, walk, walk, nine holes, eighteen holes, hit, walk.

The very tight, but rather light punctuation texture here helps characterizing the young narrator’s experience of playing golf. Since the punctuation texture needs to be studied on higher levels, it is a bit misleading to show just a short example like this. Compared to the surrounding passages and the general punctuation texture in the novel, however, the punctuation texture is tightening up this passage, depicting a visit at the golf course; the rhythm of the punctuation texture is part of the iconic representation of the rhythm of golf playing as activity.

**Pointing forward, pointing backward**

The linear and spatial organization of a text is seen in the conventional ways of text-internal references: ‘see above’, ‘in the following paragraph’, etc. More subtle references forward and backward, however, are constantly made with punctuation marks, which put the focus on or modify the phrase, clause, sentence, etc. following or preceding it. In this respect, the different punctuation marks function differently. While the colon (in Swedish, and many other languages) always points forward, except in some special cases, such as when it is used between abbreviations and suffixes (e.g. *lp:ar*, ‘LPs’), exclamation marks and question marks always point backwards; that is, they modify what precedes them. Left and right parenthesis marks and quotation marks each point in their respective directions; they frame an utterance in this respect. Indentations, dashes and ellipsis dots, however, are more flexible in the corpus; they can point either way. Nunberg (1990) has a specific term for the text-grammatical unit following a colon: *colon-expansion*. Nevertheless, in the corpus studied here, similar units can follow a dash or ellipsis dots. In the following example, the dash is pointing forward, like a colon.

Som månen alltså – stulen glans. 17

*Like the moon, in other words – stolen radiance*

In the next example, however, taken from the same novel, the dash is pointing backward, while the colon is pointing forward; the middle part of the sentence is referring in two directions: backward, to the quote from a book, and forward, to an inner exclamation provoked by the quote.

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16 From Ekelund (2010). The rhyming is here lost in the English translation.

17 From Ekelund (2010).
'Lomonosovs oden är inriktade på framförande i stora slottssalar’ – en sådan mening läser jag och den ger mig en formlig stöt av lycka: å, nu uppenbarar sig ett sammanhang! 

‘Lomonosov’s odes are written for delivery in large castle halls’ – as I read such a sentence it gives me an absolute kick of joy: yes, things are falling into place!

A semicolon points both ways, showing that the sentence-part preceding it and the one following it have to be understood in the light of each other.

Conclusion

Through the case study presented in this paper, I hope to have shown how punctuation is not an isolated or decorative level above the text, but deeply integrated in the structure of written texts. Punctuation defines and enables a constant interplay between abstract/syntactical and graphic grammatical units. Punctuation shows boundaries as well as connections and makes complex linguistic constructions possible to interpret in writing. I have emphasized the need to study written language on its own conditions, and with attention to pragmatics; the study provides an example of how the dialogical framework for understanding meaning-making can be used in such research on written texts as linguistic utterances.

I hope to have shown that text analyses need to make a clear distinction between graphic and syntactical units, and that studies on punctuation need to focus on the graphic units that punctuation defines and modifies. It is evident that there is much flexibility and many options available for punctuating text. The rules in handbooks cover only a small part of the actual possibilities used by the authors in the novels studied here, even in parts that can hardly be called experimental. This means that the punctuation strategy is highly relevant stylistically.

Although this study is based on a very limited corpus, I find it reasonable to assume that the most general conclusions about the role of punctuation in the structuring of written language are valid for texts in most contemporary alphabetic languages, and in many contemporary genres. The basic principles for the use of punctuation are often similar between languages (for example, the use of the graphic word and the graphic sentence), although more specific conventions can vary (for example, the use of commas and semicolons between clauses).

That is not to say that the results of this study are exhaustive in any way, or that a different corpus might not have shed light on other potentials and aspects of punctuation. Different genres have partly different conventions, and some common features occur more frequently in novels than in advertisements or law texts, to name just a few genres. There are also punctuation conventions that are specific to certain sub-genres or even particular texts. Another important aspect of the present corpus is that it consists of texts by professional authors whose literacy is advanced and independent (cf. Edlund 2012: 140). Rather than being representative of writing in general, an impossible expectation on any actual piece of writing, the corpus here used provides examples of various aspects of the potentials of punctuation – what advanced and creative writers and readers can do with punctuation.18 Preferably, the results could be compared to studies of the punctuation of texts in other genres, epochs and languages.

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18For a more extensive and detailed description of the functions of punctuation in the three novels, see Dahl (2015).
Vološinov (1973: 111) points out that paragraphs often discuss what was said in the previous paragraph, and that:

Were we to probe deeper into the linguistic nature of paragraphs, we would surely find that in certain crucial respects paragraphs are analogous to exchanges in dialogue. The paragraph is something like a vitiated dialogue worked into the body of a monologic utterance. Behind the device of partitioning speech in units, which are termed paragraphs in their written form, lie orientation toward listener or reader and calculation of the latter’s possible reactions. The weaker this orientation and calculation are, the less organized, as regards paragraphs, our speech will be.

I would suggest that Vološinov’s remarks on the paragraph can be applied to the structure of writing more generally. Although writing is an independent medium with its own prerequisites, the units of the written text address and direct themselves to each other and to the reader, in ways that can be compared to the turn-taking of spoken interaction.

References
Primary sources

Secondary sources


