

On the Use of the Oxford Comma in Early Modern English Scientific Writing

Abstract [paper]:

Punctuation has traditionally been disregarded in the literature due to its suggested arbitrariness and inconsistency in pre-modern English. Some of the factors that have contributed to this neglect are the lack of systematisation and correspondence to modern punctuation and the overlapping functions of punctuation symbols (Lucas 1971, 19; Mitchell 1980, 412; Calle-Martín and Miranda-García 2005, 28). The Renaissance stands out as the transitional period towards the consolidation of the English system of punctuation, the establishment of the printing press contributing to the standardisation of both the inventory of marks of punctuation and the functions attributed to them. The press allowed the printing of “multiple copies of a text with identical punctuation, and the circulation of the copies led to wide dissemination of texts which could serve as models of usage” (Parkes 1992, 87).

The study of historical punctuation has been mainly concerned with Old and Middle English. Even though the early Modern English system of punctuation has also received editorial attention, most of the studies are concerned with literary compositions, while the other text types have been hitherto disregarded, scientific texts in particular (Alonso-Almeida and Ortega-Barrera 2014; Calle-Martín and Esteban-Segura 2018). The unexplored condition of punctuation is even more significant in the particular case of early Modern printed texts, despite their active participation in the process of standardisation. Curiously enough, no studies have focused on the use of the Oxford comma in the history of English. The *Oxford comma* (also known as *serial comma*) refers to the existence of a pause (either a period or a comma) immediately before the conjunctions *and/or* in a series of three or more elements in a nominal clause. This use of the comma is still controversial today as it is subjected to diatopic variation, generally omitted in British English and regarded as standard in American English. The present paper assesses the use of the so-called Oxford comma in early Modern English handwritten and printed documents. In the light of this, this paper pursues the following objectives: a) to study the use and distribution of the Oxford comma in the period 1500-1700; and b) to evaluate the distribution of this punctuation mark in the two types of writing, i.e. handwriting and printing. The study will show some evidence on the process of standardisation of punctuation in the period and the contribution of the printing press to the dissemination of the standard. It relies on handwritten material from *The Málaga Corpus of Late Middle English Scientific Prose* and *The Málaga Corpus of Early Modern English Scientific Prose* together with a selection of printed editions from the 16th and 17th centuries.

(434 words)

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Keywords

Punctuation; Oxford comma; late Middle English; early Modern English; standardisation