The Mistaken Use of
Punctuation Marks by Some
Arab Writers

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the mistaken use of punctuation marks by some Arab writers. It tries to shed some light on such mistakes and to propose correct solutions for this problem. Since punctuation is seen as a universal phenomenon, this study tries to suggest that the Arab system of punctuation should be in accordance with punctuation systems in other languages. Hence, the proposed solutions to the Arab system of punctuation are derived from the punctuation system in English.
Besides, it seems that Arab writers differ in using punctuation marks; therefore, this paper is intended to be a step in the way of inventing a unified system of punctuation in Arabic compatible with punctuation systems in other live languages.
Introduction

This paper deals with the mistaken use of punctuation marks by some Arab writers. It tries to shed some light on such mistakes and propose solutions for this problem. Since punctuation is seen as a universal phenomenon, this study tries to suggest that the Arab system of punctuation should be harmonized with punctuation systems in other languages. Hence, the proposed solutions for such mistakes are derived from the English system of punctuation.

Besides, it seems that most Arab writers differ in the way they manipulate the various punctuation marks. Sometimes, they use a particular punctuation mark in the wrong place; other times, they do not use a particular punctuation mark (e.g. a question mark) although it is indispensable. As a result, it has become necessary to diagnose such a problem and offer adequate explanation for that aspect of language study.

In this study, it is hypothesized that the punctuation system is a universal phenomenon. This means that all live languages can make use of the various punctuation marks in the same way.

Besides, it is hypothesized that most Arab writers do not use punctuation marks in the same way. Moreover, it seems that their manipulation of such marks is often haphazard. For that reason, this study tries to offer solutions to these misuses. It also tries to arrive at a unified system of punctuation marks in Arabic compatible to the one available in other live languages.

In this study, the main punctuation marks will be explained with examples on each one. Then, some extracts from some novels written by prominent Arab writers will be analyzed to show the wrong manipulation of different punctuation marks in these extracts. Furthermore, only end punctuation marks and non—end punctuation marks will be dealt with in this study. Enclosing punctuation marks (brackets and inverted commas) and punctuation marks used within the word (apostrophes and hyphens) fall outside the scope of this study. In addition, capitalization is not taken into consideration here since Arabic does not make use of this device in punctuation.
2. Classification of Punctuation Marks

When we write, we have to use signs or symbols to make our meaning clear. These symbols are called punctuation marks. They have their own meanings, and these meanings "supplement the meanings of words" (Razzak and al Hassan 1981: 90).

Punctuation marks help to obviate ambiguity and confusion. To punctuate properly, you ought to be familiar with the proper conventions of punctuation that are widely adopted by the writers of composition. In this study, we will account for two classes of punctuation marks: end – punctuation marks and non-end punctuation marks.

2.1. End Punctuation Marks

End punctuation marks are those used at the end of sentences. They include three marks: full – stops, question marks, and exclamation marks.

2.1.1. The Full Stop (.)

The full – stop (or period) is used to mark the end of a declarative sentence (statement), or an imperative sentence (command) which issues its command mildly rather than forcefully (Waldhorn and Zeiger 1981: 96, Gray et al 1987: 242).

It is also used at the end of an indirect question (Jamil, 1989: 115). See the following examples:

1. I met George in the market. (statement)
2. Open the window, please. (command)
3. I asked him when he would come back. (indirect question)

Thus, a full – stop is used at the end of a sentence if its meaning is completed (Salama 2004: 55).
2.1.2. The Question Mark ( ? )


Consider the following examples :-

4. Why didn't you oil the machine ?
5. Could you bring me that book ?

A question mark is not used after indirect questions : instead a full – stop is used .

   e.g.) 6. He asked why she came quickly .

2.1.3. The Exclamation Mark ( ! )

The exclamation mark is used after exclamatory sentences to express " some kind of astonishment or a sharp outburst or comment " ( Al – Nu'a'imi and Al- Khayal 1990 : 14 ). Furthermore , an exclamation mark is used to point a vigorous interjection or a nominative of address when a strong feeling is present ( Waldhorn and Zeiger 1981 : 97 and Gray et al 1987 : 242 ).

For Turabian ( 1987 : 49 ) , an exclamation mark is used to mark an outcry or an emphatic or ironical comment .

Exclamatory sentences are those which start with such words as ' What ' , ' How ' , ' Such ' .

   e.g.)
    7. How beautiful she is !
    8. What a funny story it was !
    9. Such an amazing spectacle !

Moreover , exclamation marks should be used after imperative sentences .

   e.g.)
    10. Don't go !
Non – end punctuation marks are those marks that are used " to indicate the relationship and the relative importance of elements within the sentence " ( Jamil 1989 : 118 ). Waldhorn and Zeiger ( 1981 : 99 ) maintain that non – end punctuation marks are used to show that the flow of thought is being interrupted . Only three non – end marks will be explained in the following sub – sections : the comma , the semi – colon and the colon .

2 . 2 . 1 :  The Comma ( , )

The comma indicates a short pause . It helps to clarify the meaning of written sentences . Thus , a comma should be used whenever a slight pause is to be made ( Razzak and Al – Hassan 1981 : 98 ) . The main uses of the comma can be summarized as follows ( see Stone 1967 : 169 ; Temple 1978 : 22 ; Gray etal 1987 : 244 and Mustafa 1998 : 472 )

1 – It is used to separate words , phrases or clauses in a list ( see Salama 2004 : 54 ).

   11 – He was polite , calm , brave and clever .
   12 – Although it was raining , she went out .

2 – It is used before and after a phrase or clause in apposition .

   e.g.)
   13 – Jean , Bill's sister , left for Italy .

3 – It is used before tail questions .

   e.g.)
   14 – They played well , didn't they ?

4 – It is used to mark off an adjective clause which merely comments but does not limit or define .
The boys, who were fooling, were punished.

5 – It is used after the vocative (Salama 2004: 54).

16 – Linda, will you bring me my glasses?

2.2.2: The Semi–Colon (;)

The semi–colon (;) links closely related independent clauses or other grammatically equal sentence elements that are not linked by a coordinating conjunction (Gary et al 1987: 258 and Ebest et al 2000: 437). For Razzak and Al–Hassan (1981: 105), the semi–colon should be used when you want the reader to see that the thoughts contained in two independent clauses are closely related. In a sense, semi–colon is also a linking mark. It can show that two or more clauses are linked in meaning. (see also Shaw 1986: 142, Al–Nu’aimi and Al–Khayal 1990: 12). Eckersley and Eckersley (1960: 378) argue that a semi–colon is used when we do not want to break the line of thought as would happen if we used a full–stop.

16 – John drove fast; however, he lost the race.

Finally, a semi–colon is used between two clauses the second of which forms the cause of the first (Al–Nuiaymi and Al–Khayal 1990: 12).

17 – They took their overcoats; it was raining.

2.2.3: The Colon (:)

The colon indicates a discontinuity of grammatical construction greater than that indicated by the semi–colon (Shaw 1986: 146 and Mustafa 1998: 489).

The main uses of the colon are:

1– It is used to stand for "as follows as " in:–
18 – There are two types of sounds: consonants and vowels.

2 – It is used to prepare the reader for a second thought contrasting or balanced with the first part of the sentence (Razzak and al–Hassan 1981: 106).

e.g.) 19 – Speech is silver: Silence is gold.

3 – It is used to introduce a saying (Salama 2004: 56).

e.g.) 20 – John said: "I want to leave".

3. Sample Texts

In this section some extracts chosen randomly from several Arabic novels will be considered to see whether their authors have used different punctuation marks correctly or not. The main mistakes in using punctuation marks will be indicated and then some corrections will be suggested so that readers will recognize the effects of these misuses on the meaning of sentences.


In this sentence a full – stop is used to separate the first clause from the second. The full – stop is out of place here since the second clause ( .. عل  ييك .. عل  احدواك ) is dependent on the first main clause (وأغمض عينيه ... وعنقه ) . Hence, the full – stop would have been replaced by a comma.

2 - وتود لو تواتيها شجاعتها فتسألته أن يعفي نفسه من الدبأ علي السهر الذي لم تعد تنفعه به صحته بالاستخفاف المعهود قديما . ولكنها لم تدر كيف تفصح عن أفكارها الأسيفة ! (ibid: 5).

In this extract, the two punctuation marks (the full – stop and the exclamation mark) are misused. First, the full – stop should have been replaced by a comma since the second clause ( ولكنها ... الأسيفة ) is dependent on the first. Secondly, the exclamation mark should have been replaced by a full – stop since there is no exclamatory sentence. The existing sentence is a declarative one.
In this extract, all the existing punctuation marks are misused. The first comma should have been replaced by a full–stop since the declarative sentence ends there. Further, the colon is not needed here. The same thing can be said about the commas since the conjunction (و) is used.

Besides, the dots (…) are not needed here since the subsequent clause is dependent on the previous one; a comma would have been more convenient for that purpose. Further, the comma used before the sentence should have been replaced by a full–stop since we have two completely separate sentences.

Further, the full–stop used before the coordinating clause (و كيف تعمدوا … به) is also out of place here since the clause is joined with the previous clauses by the coordinating conjunction (و). Hence, the above extract could be repunctuated correctly as follows:

In this complex sentence, the three object clauses (كيف تقبّل … الأنس).
In this example, a comma is used to separate the first sentence from the second. It is clear that a full stop would have been more appropriate.

( ibid : 6 )

In this example, the comma is misused here because we have two sentences and a full stop would have been more appropriate to separate them.

( Mahfooz : al – Sarab : 219 ) .

In this sentence there are two misuses of punctuation marks. First, after the exclamation particle " يا جا " two dots are used. It seems that an exclamation mark should have been used instead. Secondly, using two marks ( a question mark and an exclamation marks ) in the same place is inappropriate. Using a question mark only would have been more appropriate since the sentence is interrogative.

( ibid : 6 )

Two mistakes are made in this example. First, an exclamation mark is used to separate the conditional clause from the main clause. A comma should have been used instead. Secondly, a question mark and exclamation mark are used together at the end of the sentence. A question mark only would have been more appropriate since the sentence is interrogative.

( ibid : 6 )
Both of the two punctuation marks used in this example are out of place. The comma should have been replaced by a full-stop and the exclamation mark by a full-stop since we have a declarative sentence not an exclamative one.

The second sentence is an exclamative one; therefore, it should have been marked by an exclamation mark; not by a full-stop.

In this extract, one may think that we have only one sentence due to the wrong punctuation. In fact, we have five sentences here; each two sentences should have been separated by a full-stop not a comma. The first sentence is " fåلت لنفسي ... قلبي هناء " ; the second is " وقولت ... ابتسمة حبتي " ; the third is " وفرت بابتسمة ... اليوم التالي " ; the fourth is " ولكن لا يجوز ... بعد اليوم " and the fifth is " وشعرت بأنه ... بالعمل الحاسم " .

Besides, there should be a colon in the first sentence instead of comma. Moreover, the exclamation mark used after the first sentence is misused also, since the sentence is declarative and not exclamations. It should be written as follows:

" as follows " ( see section 2–2–3 above ).
In this extract, we have two sentences: the first is a declarative one, and the second is an exclamative one. Nevertheless, we find that the first is followed by two exclamation marks, while the second by a full–stop.

In this compound sentence, there are two clauses: the first is and the second is (ibid: 194). In the first clause, commas should have been used between the three adjectival phrases

Besides, a semi–colon should have been added between the two clauses since the second clause is an explanation to the first (see section 2–2 above).

Thus, the extract above can be repunctuated as follows:

In this extract, there are several punctuational mistakes. Here we have two sentences. The first sentence is " ثم أقبل علي وأخرج من حضنه شيئاً فغرت فمي حين رأيته بعد أن أخرج من غلافه. صورة زيتية لي قدمها هدية لوالده في عيد ميلاده ... أعني ميلاد وحيد!! فقبلته في حيده ودعوت له وقلت وأنا في مرقدي: علقي هناك ... هناك بجانب صورة جدك ... سيفعل ابنك هكذا يا وحيد!! (ibid: 194)

In the first sentence, a colon should have been used instead of the full–stop.
Besides, there is no need to use the 'double' exclamation mark at all since the sentence is by no means exclamative. In the second sentence, on the other hand, the direct speech should have been put between inverted commas ("...") and commas. Moreover, the 'double' dots and 'double' exclamation marks are definitely out of place here.

In this extract, there are two sentences. The first is ("كان كل شيء ... سكن الظلام") and the second is ("فإذا ما أجبته ... كافاً كانت الوجود").

The two sentences should have been separated by a full-stop. Moreover, we see double dots between the first three things and commas between the last three as if the first three differ from the last. This part can be repunctuated as follows:

"أخرج من حضنه شيئاً فغرث في حين أخرجه من غلافه: صورة زيتية...

In this extract, various punctuational blunders have been made. Here, we have three sentences. The first is ("واعتلت صحتي فرأيت أنه من الخير لي أن أرحل عن منزلها هذا وعن مهد الذكريات، وقد فعلت و..."); the second is ("ولست أنسي الليلة التي حملت فيها حفيتي بعد أن سارت بمتاعي عربة صغيرة، ثم خرجت من عتبة بيتها. لآخر مرة، لست أنسي هذه اللحظة لأنني خلت أنيال ثوبها خارجة من بين حديد الإطار وهي في الشفقة وسمعتها وكأنها تقول: وداعاً.") and the third is ("لست أنسي هذه اللحظة ... وكافاً تقول: وداعاً.")

First, a full-stop, not a comma, should have been used at the end of the first and the second sentences. Secondly, a full-stop is strangely used before the adverbial "لآخر مرة" in the second sentence.
Here, a full–stop should have been used instead of the comma after the first sentence " ثم اعتمدت با علة فاستفشت الطبيب فلم تجد المشورة ، قال لي الناس : تغذ ، وقد قال الطبيب دواً ودروف الجوع!! (ibid : 128 )

Besides, an exclamation mark should have been used instead of the comma after the imperative clause نعم .'(see section 2–1–3 above).

Furthermore, the double exclamation marks used after ' دواً ودروف الجوع ' are misused here since the sentence is a declarative one.

The question mark is misused here since we have an indirect question. A full–stop should have been used instead (See Jamil 1989 : 115 ).

First, the double dots used after the conditional clause " فذإ كانت ... الدكتور حسن ... " should have been replaced by a comma. Secondly, a question mark should be used instead of the double dots after the interrogative clause " فما هي النقطة ... " انتهى به إلى هذه الحالة النفسية التي تسبب له نوبات الشلل المؤقت ؟ (Abdul Kuddus : Bi? r – ul- Hirman : 56 )

In this sentence, some punctuation marks are misused. First, the double dots are not necessary. Secondly, the exclamation mark should have been replaced by a full–stop since the sentence is declarative.
In this extract, there are several misuses of punctuation marks. First, the direct speech should be put between inverted commas. Then the interrogative sentence should have been followed by a question mark (سأشرح هول أودع الشيك في البنك؟). Furthermore, all the double dots, should have been replaced by a full – stop. Thus, the excerpt above can be repunctuated as follows:

"ثم فجأةً ذات صباح سألني "هل أودع الشيك في البنك؟" وعندما صمتت على أنه لم يعطني شيئاً، ففتح دولابي الخاص. فتحه بعنف كاد يكسره.

4 – Conclusions

The current study arrives at the following conclusions:

1 – Several Arab linguists use different punctuation marks wrongly. Sometimes, they use certain marks unnecessarily; other times, they do not use a particular mark although it is indispensable.

2 – Several Arab writers use the various punctuation marks almost randomly. For instance, they may use two different punctuation marks for the same clause type, in the same text.

3 – It seems that Arabic does not have a well – organized and unified system for using punctuation marks.

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"الاستخدام الخاطئ لعلامات التنقيط لدى عدد من الكتب العربية"

المستخلص

يتناول هذا البحث دراسة تحليلية للأخطاء التي يرتكبها عدد من الكتب العربية في استخدامهم لعلامات التنقيط المختلفة كالفارزة والنقطة وجهة الاستفهام وغيرها حيث لوحظ أن عددًا من الكتاب العرب يستخدمون عددًا من علامات التنقيط في غير مواضعها وينمولون استخدام البعض الآخر في أماكن أخرى على الرغم من أهميتها وعدم الاستغناء عنها لاكتمال المعنى. وبناءً أن التنقيط هو نظام لغوي عالمي فإن هذه الدراسة تحاول أن تقترح فكرة إن يكون نظام التنقيط في اللغة العربية متطابقاً مع أنظمة التنقيط في اللغات الحية الأخرى. لذلك فإن الحلول المقترحة لإصلاح نظام التنقيط العربي مشتركة مع نظام التنقيط في اللغة الإنجليزية. أما إن هناك اختلاف في استخدام علامات التنقيط المختلفة بين كتاب عربي وأيضا فإن هذه الدراسة تحاول اقتراح نظام تنبؤ موحد وتعدد عليه في اللغة العربية. وتمتع هذه الدراسة في قصرين رئيسيين بتناول الفصل الأول استعراض مختلف علامات التنقيط وذكر استخدامها في اللغة. أما الفصل الثاني يتناول على مقتطفات من عدد من الروايات العربية المشهورة تبين مدى التباين في استخدام علامات التنقيط المختلفة بين كتاب وأيضاً ونرى تبين الاستخدام الخاطئ لعدد من علامات التنقيط من قبل هؤلاء الكتاب ومن ثم اقتراح تنقيط بديل لهذه المقتطفات التي تم اختيارها لا على التعبيرات إثبات مدى خطورة المشكلة التي تعاني منها اللغة العربية في هذا المجال.