

Effect of Punctuation on Complexity of Blindness by Saramago

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ABSTRACT: *Jose Saramago is believed to possess unique form of writing style which is both defined as complicated and easy to read at the same time. Certain elements have their share in such effect; however, central emphasize of present study is on punctuation and particular use of different punctuations in Blindness. The original book is in Portuguese but English translation by Giovanni Pontiero is the main focus of present study. Theories for the present study is a combination of Nunberg (1990) and Briscoe (1995). Employing descriptive analytical method, punctuations are grouped into 7 categories followed by explanation and examples from the text. The results revealed that particular use of punctuation in the text is unique and extraordinary, and it has a significant impact on both complexity of the text and style of the writer.*

KEYWORDS: Blindness, Saramago, Punctuation, Complexity of style

INTRODUCTION

Works by Saramago like any other authors winning Nobel Prize undergoes numerous and excessive explorations and studies and it is due to its importance and novelties of such authors. Yet, there has been no proper investigation regarding punctuation or even text. Present study investigates all major punctuations such as: colon and semi-colon, comma, period, exclamation mark, question mark, dashes, slashes, parenthesis, brackets and the remaining punctuations are discussed generally as other punctuations.

In addition to major punctuation analysis, there is a short opening on structure of paragraphs and lines; therefore, punctuations' relation to the whole text will be significantly illustrated. The procedure is plain and for every item examples from the book will be used for better understanding of the debate. Now the appropriate question would be what are these punctuations discussed in this study?

“At its late medieval zenith that repertoire covered every mode and level of punctuation, but had only four principal marks, the punctus, punctus interrogativus, punctus elevatus, and virgula (roughly [.] [?] [:] and [,] or [/]). The Humanists, to complement their newly joined-up

handwriting, added the exclamation mark (1360s), lunulae (1390s), and the semicolon (1490s), as well as an outstanding clarity of script and print.” (590 cudden) Also, other punctuations will be investigated briefly in the present study proceeded by appropriate instances from Blindness if exist any. The English translation of Blindness by Giovanni Pontiero (ISBN 1-86046-297-9) is the source book for present study. For complexity of the text, mechanics of the physical demonstration of text, text structure and all punctuations are investigated throughout the entire text.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing formally in any language requires more than merely choosing the right words and putting them in a grammatically appropriate order. (enago academy) Using punctuation helps the readers to read at its best form and as it was intended to be read by the author. Dale believes that regarding structure of discourse has critical use; however, he suggests further research between punctuation and other criteria such as: lexical markers, taxonomy of relations etc. (1991) Manipulating these punctuation rules brings about various problems like misreading, misinterpretation of the sentence, ambiguity, distortion and in some severe cases inability to read and communicate.

Any great writer possess specific style of writing regardless of what type of work he is working on it. Some authors write in plain and simple language, some others prefer complicated and sophisticated text and yet there is no superiority of one style over the other. Saramago in his Blindness has used simple language but many readers reported to have difficulty dealing with the text. Aside from complexity on the narration part as discussed by H. Armstrong or Selen Çalik, the punctuation in the text is unique. “Like most works by Saramago, the novel contains many long, breathless sentences in which commas take the place of periods. The lack of quotation marks around dialogue means that the speakers' identities (or the fact that dialogue is occurring) may not be immediately apparent to the reader.” (Wikipedia)

PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE

The first thing that any reader would easily pick up on the punctuation starts from the first page with the long paragraphs. These paragraphs are not long because of necessity and in fact there should have been new paragraphs and yet there is not. It is obviously a deliberate act from such author who has been editor for different magazines; moreover, the whole story has got the same pattern of paragraph formation. The excerpt below is one among countless examples:

The doctor asked him, Has anything like this ever happened to you before, or something similar, No, doctor, I don't even use glasses. And you say it came on all of a sudden, Yes, doctor, Like a light going out, More like a light going on, During the last few days have you felt any difference in your eyesight, No, doctor, Is there, or has there ever been any case of blindness in your family, Among the relatives I've known or have heard discussed, no one, Do you suffer from diabetes, No, doctor, From syphilis, No, doc-tor. From hypertension of the arteries or the brain cells, I'm not sure about the brain cells, but none of these other things, we

have regular medical check-ups at work. Have you taken a sharp knock on the head, today or yesterday, No, doctor, How old are you, Thirty-eight, Fine, let's take a look at these eyes. The blind man opened them wide, as if to facilitate the examination, but the doctor took him by the arm and installed him behind a scanner which anyone with imagination might see as a new version of the confessional, eyes replacing words, and the confessor looking directly into the sinner's soul, Rest your chin here, he advised him, keep your eyes open, and don't move. The woman drew close to her husband, put her hand on his shoulder, and said, This will be sorted out, you'll see. The doctor raised and lowered the binocular system at his side, turned finely adjusted knobs, and began his examination. He could find nothing in the cornea, nothing in the sclera, nothing in the iris, nothing in the retina, nothing in the lens of the eye, nothing in the luteous macula, nothing in the optic nerve, nothing elsewhere. He pushed the apparatus aside, rubbed his eyes, then carried out a second examination from the start, without speaking, and when he had finished there was a puzzled expression on his face, I cannot find any lesion, your eyes are perfect. (Saramago 16-17)

In the example above, one can clearly recognize that it is out of fashion to use such a long paragraph while standard punctuation rules says the otherwise.

LINE STRUCTURE

The next obvious complexity is on line structures. It is patent in the text. There is, most of the time, no sign of ending a line with a period. Lines are continued and are kept going as the author desires. Periods in this text is mostly used to signal strong pause, in comparison with commas, used as moderate pause. Although there are numerous dialogues in the text, there is no new line applied for that. There are also new ideas and the author must have absolutely started a new line and even new paragraph for them, whereas he has decided not to. Example above in 2. Paragraph Structure is adequate for all the fact aforementioned.

COLON AND SEMI-COLON

A closer look proves that in the whole 355 pages of such complicated novel, there is no sign of semi-colon, not even one; which is entirely strange. According to The best punctuation book, period. (2014) on the use of semi-colon; it is used to make the readers pause, or between two independent clauses, but more importantly to connect two related ideas. (Casagrande 68-71) the possibility of none of these in such a text is highly under question.

A very similar incident happens with use of colons. In entire novel, there is only one use of colon on page 22:

When the old man with the black eye patch left and the nurse said there were no more patients in the waiting-room, the doctor took out the file of the man who had turned up blind, he read it once, twice, reflected for several minutes and finally rang a colleague with whom he held the following conversation: I must tell you, today I dealt with the strangest case, a man who totally

lost his sight from one instant to the next, the examination revealed no perceptible lesion or signs of any malformation from birth, [...]

And it is completely improbable. Based on the definition and use of the colons they must be used: to introduce a list, or only after statements that are complete sentences, or to connect two sentences when the second sentence summarizes, sharpens, or explains the first; (Casagrande 68-71); however, more importantly “before a quotation, and sometimes before direct speech” (Oxford Editors) There are absolutely more than one statement in form of dialogue or in form of introducing a list.

USE OF EXCLAMATION MARKS

Akin to semi-colon, there is also no sign of using exclamation mark which is odd indeed. Based on the wide range of usage for exclamation mark and its definition in The associated Guide in Press: Guide to Punctuation, it is used mostly: to show and express feelings such and wonder or surprise or any other strong emotion, emphasis, strong command, and as the name implies any exclamatory sentence. (Cappon 59-63) Technically speaking, it is impossible for a novel of 355 pages, full of dialogues and plays on emotion to have no exclamation mark at all; which once more indicates deliberate act from author.

USE OF QUESTION MARKS

There are only four instances of question mark as following in the text:

1. “The idea, aired at the outset, that someone should assume responsibility for each ward, might have helped, who knows? to solve these difficulties and others, alas, more serious, on condition however, that the authority of the person in charge, [...]” (Saramago 97)
2. He could hear the shuffling footsteps of someone who must also have been looking for the lavatories, and who kept tripping, Where the hell are they? (102)
3. Those of good faith, who are always to be found no matter what people may say, protested with indignation, that they couldn't live like this. If we cannot trust each other, where are we going to end up? (114)
4. There were two new ball-point pens next to the lamp. Here it is, said the writer. The doctor's wife asked, May I? without waiting for a reply she picked up the written pages, there must have been about twenty, [...]" (319)

The first and the last one uses question marks, clearly for the sake of clarification of ambiguity and misreading. The other two instances may have ambiguities in them, they are not causing any major misreading of the text. Although one may argue that at least the second and the third instances are as legitimate as the rest of the text, examples of which follows at the bottom. But one must consider that if there is an ambiguity, it is completely deliberate on the author's side and it is part of his unique style of writing that after a while the readers get accustomed to reading by such style without difficulty. Those reader, on the other hand, also enjoy reading it

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with more pleasure emanating from innovation and novelty. Other instances that must have had question marks and had not among countless examples include:

- “Who would have believed it.” (4)
- “how did this happen, she asked” (10)
- “How did you manage to escape this universal disaster, what is the name of the drops you put in your eyes, [...]” (228)
- The doctor asked him, Has anything like this ever happened to you before, or something similar, No, doctor, I don't even use glasses. And you say it came on all of a sudden, Yes, doctor, Like a light going out, More like a light going on, During the last few days have you felt any difference in your eyesight, No, doctor, Is there, or has there ever been any case of blindness in your family, Among the relatives I've known or have heard discussed, no one, Do you suffer from diabetes, No, doctor, From syphilis, No, doc-tor. From hypertension of the arteries or the brain cells, I'm not sure about the brain cells, but none of these other things, we have regular medical check-ups at work. Have you taken a sharp knock on the head, today or yesterday, No, doctor, How old are you, Thirty-eight, Fine, let's take a look at these eyes. (16)
- our man with the black eye patch is in for a shock, Why, Because of the cataract, after all the time since I last examined him it must have deteriorated, Is he going to stay blind, No, when life gets back to normal, and everything is working again, I shall operate, it is a matter of weeks, Why did we become blind, I don't know, perhaps one day we'll find out, Do you want me to tell you what I think, Yes, do, [...] (355)

USE OF COMMA

It is the most common type of punctuation found in the text exactly 14282 times, more than even period, 2244 times; and the reason is that most of the times it is used in place of other punctuations such as exclamation mark or question mark etc. Example above at the end of the book is among the best examples:

our man with the black eye patch is in for a shock, Why, Because of the cataract, after all the time since I last examined him it must have deteriorated, Is he going to stay blind, No, when life gets back to normal, and everything is working again, I shall operate, it is a matter of weeks, Why did we become blind, I don't know, perhaps one day we'll find out, Do you want me to tell you what I think, Yes, do, I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see. (Saramago 354-355)

USE OF PERIOD

As mentioned above, periodes are the second most repeated punctuation in the text, after commas. The use of period is frequent, mostly at the end of the sentences; however, it does not mean that its use is always and meticulously correct. On the contrary, there are countless instances that there must have been placed an uncontroversial period and the author has decided

not to. It is more apparent when characters are speaking in dialogue form and there is no period at the end of the sentences.

Another interesting fact concerning use of period at the end of the sentences is that when a sentence ends and new sentence wants to commence, the first letter of the new sentence is capitalized. In the text, the rule of capitalization mostly have met the standard convention; however, despite the fact that there is a signal from author by capitalization, there is no sign of period at the end of the sentence. Following example is one of the many instances in the text which proves the idea that author uses such punctuation deconstructions intentionally.

The boy with the squint murmured, he must be in the middle of a dream, perhaps he saw his mother and was asking her, Can you see me, can you see me, The doctor's wife asked, And the others, and the doctor answered, He will probably be cured by the time he wakes, it will be the same with the others, most likely they are already regaining their sight at this very moment, our man with the black eye patch is in for a shock, Why, Because of the cataract, after all the time since I last examined him it must have deteriorated, Is he going to stay blind, No, when life gets back to normal, and everything is working again, I shall operate, it is a matter of weeks, Why did we become blind, I don't know, perhaps one day we'll find out, Do you want me to tell you what I think, Yes, do, I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see. (Saramago 354-355)

OTHER PUNCTUATIONS

Other punctuations include dashes, slashes, parentheses, brackets etc. does not exist in the text. No one expects to find these punctuations present in all texts and novels, but considering absence of other punctuations; it highlights the absence of other elements more luculently and baldly.

It seems that Saramago deliberately has used this specific technique of replacement of punctuations with commas and periods, to imply the sense of blindness far better. For a blind person there is only voice coming from every corner and everything is transferred through voices. For a blind person pauses are really important. They have just different kinds of pauses. And perhaps because of that Saramago has preferred to use mostly period and commas more than and instead of other form of punctuations. It is logical and explains a lot considering structure of long, non-standard paragraphs and lines. However, one must not forget that it is just one possibility and need solid proofs to support and confirm the theory. Therefore, it is more probable to have other facts and premises as well.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Structure and punctuation of the text while intertwined with specific style of author, creates a pleasant ilk of complexity like Saramago's Blindness. Discussion above proves deliberate manipulation of punctuations to generate ambiguity and multiple interpretations. Ignoring punctuation in form of Saramago's Blindness may also indicates the sentences the blind people

encounter in form of hearing them without knowing who is talking. Long sentences from every corners without spotting speakers and sometimes mixing them up amplifies the blindness effect in the text itself. Such stylistic technicality is part of Saramago's plan for his book to give birth to his masterpiece.

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