



## Constructive Use of Punctuation in Indian English News Headlines

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### Abstract

Newspaper headlines are a fascinating aspect of a newspaper article, and Linguists have been interested in them for years, as do researchers in Natural Language Processing (NLP). Linguists have found that news headlines have their grammar, which intrigues them. While for NLP researchers, it is the use of news headlines for solving various NLP problems. From text summarization to sentiment analysis, news headlines have been a significantly important part of the corpus database in several machine learning tools.

Various studies of the structures of news headlines have been conducted so far, but this time, the punctuation has caught our attention.

From separating and listing things to clarifying meanings, punctuation helps us express ourselves clearly. However, in News Headlines, it does much more than that. Punctuation has a very innovative use in the construction and interpretation of News Headlines.

In order to use headline data, we need to understand their structures, in which we found that punctuation plays a very significant role. We have studied different functions of punctuation marks used in different sentential positions of news headlines. We have presented our observations in this paper, which we hope will advance our understanding of the structure of news headlines for further Linguistic analysis and NLP applications.

**Keywords:** Punctuation; Newspaper headlines; Indian English Headlines; IndEN; IndENH

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### 1. Introduction

Language is not always explicit and easy to comprehend. And mass media textual interpretation can be tricky, especially news headlines of newspapers as they have their own grammar (Roy et al, 2020). Grammar is primarily concerned with the structural constructions and the rules work as a guideline. In which punctuation plays a significant role in aiding semantic interpretation. Previous studies have pointed out that a news article comprises a headline, a lead, a body, and a conclusion. Amongst all these, it is the news headline (NH) that draws the readers' attention first. They are solely responsible for drawing the readers' attention towards an article. In order to do that news editors incorporate various ways. It shows remarkable creativity in language use. The headlines are created in such a way that it satisfies the needs of both the readers and editors. Editors face space constraints that compelled them to take creative liberty for shortening their headlines. As a result, headlines work as a teaser for readers as

they draw more attention to the news article. We found out that editors have many ways to make a headline shorter and more interesting. In this paper, we have provided an account of the interesting usages of the punctuation marks in NHs.

From clarifying meaning, separating clauses and listing elements, punctuation marks help us to express ourselves adequately in a written text. There are 14 punctuation marks in English: the period, question mark, exclamation mark, comma, semi-colon, colon, dash, hyphen, parentheses, brackets, braces, apostrophes, quotation marks, and ellipsis. Each of the punctuation marks has its purpose of serving. For instance, we use a period (.) at the end of sentences (declarative), complete statements, and after abbreviations; to indicate a direct question, we place a question mark (?) at the end of a sentence; to express an outcry or add emphasis we use an exclamation mark (!).

Though we use the comma, semi-colon, and colon to indicate a pause in a sentence, it is for different purposes: the comma (,) is used for separating ideas (like a list) within a sentence structure or while writing salutations, dates, and numbers. While a semicolon (;) is for connecting independent clauses. On the other hand, a colon (:) is used after a word that is followed by a quotation, an explanation, an example, or a series of elements in a sentence. Another use of colon is between independent clauses when the second explains the first, and it is quite similar to a semi-colon.

Another set of punctuation are a dash and a hyphen. We use a dash (--) for separating words into statements, while a hyphen (-) is for conjoining two or sometimes more than two words together into a compound term that is not separated by spaces.

Though we will not be discussing the following punctuation marks, we still find it important to mention them and the role they play. We use brackets, braces, and parentheses to contain words that are a further explanation or are considered a group. Brackets are the squared-off notations ([ ]) used for technical explanations or to clarify meaning, and braces ( { } ) are for containing two or more text lines or are listed items to show that they are considered a unit, parentheses ( ( ) ) are notations which we use any qualifying remarks. However, we can replace parentheses with commas without affecting the semantic in most cases. An apostrophe ( ' ) indicates clitics and the possessive case. Quotation marks ( " " ) are used primarily to mark the beginning and end of a passage attributed to another and repeated word for word. They are also used to indicate meanings as well as paradoxical meanings of words. The ellipsis ( ... ) is to indicate an omission, they are frequently used within quotations to leap one phrase to another, thus omitting unnecessary words without affecting the semantics.

A single misplaced punctuation mark can be catastrophic. As per grammar, we use punctuation to convey our messages and there are certain rules we abide by while using punctuation. But newspapers follow their own grammar and thus their treatment of punctuation extends from the standard grammatical usage. As Dijk (1988a, 76) and Crystal & Davy (1969, 174) pointed out, newspaper language is an amalgamation of different kinds of stylistic features, a mixture of several kinds of material is undoubtedly proper when it comes to punctuation. We observed that newspapers have a fascinating use of punctuation marks like comma, colon, semi-colon, hyphen, quotation marks, apostrophe, and question marks. In our data, we found that the comma is the highest at 0.19%, followed by the colon with 0.14%. The language used by the press may be of a specific discourse that has its style and vocabulary (Pape & Featherstone 2005, 49). At the same time, punctuation marks like a full stop, brackets, braces, and a dash are very limited or near to no use. In this paper, we tried to lay out a detailed account of the very distinctive uses of punctuation in contemporary newspaper headlines.

### 1.1. Literature review

Many NLP researchers have focused on headlines amongst which Banko, et al (2002) headline generation, Ono (2016) translating NHs. Fairclough (1995) has done some intertextual analysis for linguistic analysis. Shie (2010) has focused on lexical feature variations between the news headlines of Time Supplement and The New York Times. Lombardi (2018) has done a critical discourse analysis of online NHs to understand how online NHs represent the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting.

Several authors have observed various features of news headlines as in news reporting by Nordlund (2003), 'Linguistic Analysis of Newspaper Discourse in Theory and Practice' by Pajunen (2008), a Linguistic and stylistic analysis of newspaper reportage by Agu (2015), tense in NHs by Hameed (2008). It is definite that these headlines have different grammar, which differs from that of ordinary sentence grammar (Yoneoka, 2002). It includes linguistic aspects like the unusual use of tenses (Chovanec, 2014) and deliberate ambiguity (Brône and Coulson, 2010). All these works, as mentioned above, are sublime. Still, the creative use of punctuation in newspaper headlines is not a well studied area. In this paper, we have tried to fill this gap.

### 1.2. Research questions

This paper addresses the question, is the usage of punctuation in newspaper headlines as stereotypical as we use in written text or has the usage been extended to provide more semantic content?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Data Collection Procedures

An Indian English news headlines (IndENH) corpus is created from print and digital media, from the top three Indian newspapers as per their wide circulation (Audit Bureau of Circulations) for this study: 1) The Hindu (TH), 2) The Times of India (TOI), and 3) Hindustan Times (HT). 3000 NHs (1000 from each newspaper) have been studied from the general domain. We took three different newspapers to study the structures of NHs to confirm whether the points of discussion are newspaper specific or they all follow the same pattern.

### 2.2. Methodology

For the criteria of inclusion we have included only newspaper headlines of any article and the various punctuation used are our parameters. We have observed the data and established conceptual categories for each type of construction. We used the method of comparing and contrasting the NHs with standard English grammar to understand the distinction between them, to understand the structure and language usage of NHs.

For this, we had to choose the appropriate model to analyse the data. We found out that the generative models are perfect for analysing the ability to distinguish the correct and incorrect language.

### 2.3. Linguistic analysis of the data

We have found that the role the punctuation marks play in news headlines is somewhat distinctive from what we encounter in grammar. The punctuation marks used by the news editors are remarkably

creative. Driving by the motive to save spaces and yet provide the necessary information, the editors came up with a unique idea of using the punctuation marks for more than what they have settled.

After studying a certain number of news headlines, we found out the semantic interpretation of the functions of these punctuation marks. They are used in various positions in headlines. We have classified these functions of punctuation marks under four major categories: 1) speech speaker, 2) incidents conjoiner, 3) list conjoiner, and 4) cause-effect. These four categories may not apply to all the punctuation marks. The common syntax of these punctuation marks is that they are used as divider/conjoiner of two clauses in the above mentioned categories.

**1. Comma:** Comma (,) is used to indicate a brief pause; it is not as final as a period. Comma is used to mark clause boundaries but in news headlines, the comma has different functions in different positions of a news headline. We know that the most common use of commas is listing, e.g. ‘New dinosaur looks like mix of duck, crocodile, ostrich, swan’. As grammar tells us, commas can be used to separate words, groups of words, clauses, introductory phrases, or non-essentials. But in news headlines comma has got more usage

as follows:

#### Category 1: Speech-Speaker

The comma plays a certain function in the specific ‘speech-speaker’ structure of headlines. In this case the punctuation comma ‘,’ served the common purpose of conjoining two clauses : the speaker and the speech by the speaker.

TH- SEC acting as per CM’s whims, says Vaiko

HT- Monsoon likely on June 8, says MD

TOI- JD(U) is BJP's advanced version, says Tejashwi Yadav

The speech-speaker class is the most common usage of a comma in NHs.

#### Category 2: To conjoin two incidents

Generally, in sentences where two independent clauses are joined by connectors such as and, or, but, etc., in news headlines the editors put a comma at the end of the first clause. Here, the two clauses inform readers about two incidents, two actions carried out simultaneously.

Ex. TH- Family opts for burial, memorial to be set up

HT- Centre faults fire dept, AAP govt says bid to shield MCDs

TOI- Chandrayaan-3 is official, Isro seeks Rs 75 crore

#### Category 3: Comma as a conjunction

In traditional grammar, commas are commonly used as a conjunction for listing of things, persons, parties or institutions, etc.

Ex. TH- Footbridge to link railway, metro stations at Cantonment

HT- 7 Purvanchalis, Kapil Mishra get tickets

TOI- cabinet clears merger of Dena Bank, Vijaya Bank with Bank of Baroda

In these examples, the comma would have been replaced with ‘and’ in standard English. If we take an example, ‘Call for unity between Kapus, SCs’ will be written as Call for unity between Kapus and SCs.

#### Category 4: cause-effect function of comma

A headline may have two clauses informing readers about two incidents that had occurred but one clause refers to the cause and other refers to the effect/result. This distinction of incident and result is shown by the use of a comma in news headlines.

Ex. TH- Couple attacked at house, 1 dead

HT- Over 400 march to India Gate, police use water cannons

TOI- Speeding car hits girl in Mumbai, victim thrown in air on impact

In standard English, the first example can be interpreted as Bhalswa landfill fired as a result of smog that has residents in chokehold. The comma in all these examples can be replaced by the phrase ‘ as a result.

#### Category 5: Topic-information

The topic-information classification depicts that the commas ‘,’ has been used for depicting a topic-information relation between two clauses.

Ex. TH- ATS seizes mephedrone worth Rs. 5 cr., 2 arrested

HT- Delhi records 1,647 new cases, a dip after 3 days

TOI- Youth found dead in Mussoorie, police suspect suicide

#### Category 6: Pausal effect, separate vocatives, discourse markers and interjections with commas

Pausal effect, separate vocatives, discourse markers and interjections are commonly used in literature. But we can see the same usage in formal mode of communication like newspapers.

Ex. TH- For thieves, onions are the bling thing

HT- In a first, queer, transgender groups march against CAA

TOI- In a first, Filmfare is taking glitz of Bollywood to ‘Awesome Assam’

**2. Colon:** Colons are used to ‘introduce lists, to indicate a sub-title, or to indicate a subdivision of a topic’(CGE, pg. 845) or to show that some more is following but in news headlines it performs different functions in different positions in headlines.

#### Category 1: Speech-speaker

TH- Justice can never be instant: CJI

HT- Won’t copy models of the West: CDS Rawat

TOI- Jaitley misquoted James Bond to suit himself: Derek O'Brien

In this above-mentioned example, we can see that colon is conjoining the speech and the speaker without many additional elements that would have been required in standard grammar. So, in the example, ‘Recruitment policy in T.N. flawed: TVK’, we can rewrite it as ‘TVK said Recruitment policy in T.N. flawed’

#### Category 2: Cause-effect

If we try to construct the sentence we need to conjoin both the clauses by causative preposition like for, because of etc.

Ex. TH- No Fathers in Kashmir: a crisis of compassion

OR, Sexual abuse of girl: man arrested

HT- Hoarding of O2: Look-out circular against Khan Market restaurateur

TOI- Handshake rejected, speech torn: Trump's SOTU speech shows divided America

Here, colon conjoins two incidents (clauses) where one is the result of the other. The headline 'Beating up of teenager: mother to launch indefinite fast' can be read as 'mother is going to launch indefinite fast for beating up of teenager'

### Category 3: Topic-Information

This classification states that the colons ':' has been used for depicting a topic information relation between two clauses.

Ex. TH- Rohini murders: accused bought knife five days ago

HT- India vs Australia: Poor Rajkot record a concern for India ahead of 2nd ODI

TOI- Section 377: It's time for gender-neutral laws

Here, colon is used to provide the readers some information about the progress related to a topic of discussion or event. If we take the first example, 'Businessman murder case: no arrests yet', it states that there has been no arrests made yet in the murder case of a businessman.

### Category 4: Topic- Description

TH- Fraudulent trades: I-T raids on brokers

HT- Telangana hate crime: Couple kills 20-yr-old daughter

TOI- Central Vista plan: DDA to start 2-day hearing today

Here, colon is used to provide detailed information about the topic itself. The clause describing the clause is elaborating the topic of discussion.

**3. Semi-colon:** these are used to separate lists, instead of full stops (CGE, pg. 845-846). Semicolon is used for quotations and also to conjoin/separate two independent clauses.

### Category 1: incident-result relation

Ex. TH- Brothers held for robbery; Rs. 27 lakh cash recovered

HT- Minor alleges gang rape in Tikri, police register FIR; nab two sweepers

TOI- Snap CFO Tim Stone resigns in 8 months; shares drop 8%

Here, semicolon is used to conjoin two clauses, one of which is about an incident that happened and the other is the result.

### Category 2: Two incidents

Ex. TH- Two held, four minors detained for stealing bikes; 12 cases cracked

HT- Man jumps on to metro tracks, dies; another saved by alert train driver

TOI- Virus toll close to 500; 5 more suspects in RML

Here, colon is used to conjoin two incidents, but unlike the cause-result category these incidents are not caused by one another. But they may or may not be related incidents.

#### Category 3: Topic-Description

Ex. TH- Arjuna awardee archer's car stolen in Rohini; accused on the run

HT- UP police back in encounter mode; 1 killed, 5 injured

TOI- Virus toll close to 500; 5 more suspects in RML

#### 4. Hyphen :

Hyphens are used to link elements in a sentence. They are not dashes.

Ex. TH- Get water connection through toll-free number

HT- Police lathi-charge marching students

TOI- Lockdown in Delhi-NCR for a week

In news headlines, hyphens are mostly used to conjoin two words which can be proper nouns, noun-verb, noun-adjective and so on. In standard grammar, hyphen is used to conjoin two lexical items which can belong to various categories as mentioned above. News headlines tend to use this feature at its convenience.

**5. Exclamation marks:** these are 'used for exclamations and after interjections'(CGE, pg.841). Exclamation marks are mostly used to draw readers attention, to make them believe the newspaper has brought in some exciting or surprising news for them. We can find this use as similar to standard grammar.

Ex. TH- Even whales have to exfoliate!

HT- Travelling in style!

TOI- ₹350 auto fare for Andheri stn to airport!

OR, Well, well! Liquor flows from kitchen taps in Kerala town

**6. Quotation Marks:** quotation marks are used as per grammar, for quotation statements given by a speaker, but interestingly the quote is not followed by the name of the speaker. So, interested readers will eventually be compelled to read the article. This is a literary use which we can find in a formal mode of communication like newspapers.

Ex. TH- 'I treat every project equally'

HT- 'We stay away from politics'

TOI- 'Cops on horses across state soon'

**7. Scare-Quotes:** quotation marks that a writer places around a word or phrase to signal that they are using it in a non-standard, ironic, or otherwise special sense.

Ex. TH- Hiding in 'plane' sight

HT- Delhi has a 'normal' cold day; air severe

TOI- Pakistan claims it shot down 'Indian spy quadcopter'

### 3. Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed various constructions where punctuation played various roles. The roles of the punctuation marks are significant as they are used to convey different meanings. Punctuation marks like comma, colon, semicolon, quotation marks have been used for various purposes. Though it is hard to find a period (.) in hard copy, it certainly can be found in online news as online news has the liberty of space.

We showed that the use of punctuation marks is very different from traditional usage. They are used in a much more creative way and serve more purpose. Punctuation is used by news editors in much more varied ways than the traditional norms.

The scarcity of place had led to this creative usage of these punctuation marks, and the outcome is remarkable. The comma has been used for stating the relationships like speech-speaker, cause effect, conjoiner of two incidents, conjoiner of two words, topic-description, topic-info, as well as for Pausal effect, separate vocatives, discourse markers, and interjections. On the other hand, the colon has been used for speech-speakers, cause-effect, topic-information, and topic description. Semicolons are only used with headlines depicting incident-result headlines and also while stating about two incidents. The usage of the hyphen, quotation marks, and scare-quotes are also present but their uses are similar to the uses we find in standard English.

There are certain categories common to different punctuation marks. The reason behind the usage of different punctuation marks i.e. comma, colon and semicolon for similar constructions like speech-speaker, cause-effect, conjoining two incidents, and topic-information remains inconclusive. Still, we have made certain observations. In the ‘Speech-speaker’ category, both comma and colon are used in similar construction semantically but syntactically they are a bit different. We have observed that the colon not only replaced the comma but also the verb followed. While the ‘Cause-effect’ category is common in comma, colon and semi-colon. One of the reasons that we could observe for using three different punctuation marks while depicting the same type of headlines is that if either of the two clauses already uses a comma to convey meaning clearly then using a comma for such a headline might lead to unclarity. Again in the ‘Two Incidents’, comma and semicolon both have this similar category. Semicolon is used for the same reason as the cause-effect. If either of the two clauses already uses a comma in between to convey meaning clearly then using a comma again to conjoin two incidents will lead to confusion. We could not find any linguistic reason behind the usage of different punctuation marks i.e. comma, colon and semicolon for similar constructions like incident-result, topic information, cause-effect etc. Perhaps to break the monosity, different punctuation marks are used for similar constructions.

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