

Punctuation Today: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Inspired by new literacy studies, this investigation into how *literate* adults today make use of punctuation exemplifies the evolution of research by adopting an ethnographic approach, a contemporary style of research in the domain of Education and, more specifically, literacy practices (Dyson 1997; Gregory and Williams 2003; Hall 2003; Hamilton 2003; Lee 1996; Lillis 2001; Maybin 2003; McKinney 2003; Rampton 1995; Street 1995; Zubair 2003), which facilitates the examination of phenomena in the reality of people's lives. This methodology allows the researcher to observe her participants' practices and obtain their perspectives, in order to examine punctuation attributes in context and acknowledge their social roles. As an aspect of literacy, punctuation is analysed within current domain specific discourses, around the themes of social construction, power relations, contextual variability, semiotics and the effects of technological advance. The evidence released by qualitative methods exposes the complexity of punctuation as a tool for communication. It depicts different levels of influential contexts for punctuation, the contradictory logics of punctuation in multimodal socio-cultural systems, the co-existence of conventions and opportunities for choice in punctuation practice, the roles that both rules and choice play in the individuals' identity construction through their relation with others, and finally, the *prosodic* and *graphic* phenomena of punctuation. Beyond its literary properties, punctuation is used to connect speech and writing, as a prosodic, design and/or emotion conveying tool, possibly overriding its graphic, syntactic function. Teaching approaches to punctuation are discussed in the light of all these characteristics.

Key Words: punctuation, ethnography, 'talk around text', 'new literacy studies', multimodality, communication, semiotics, design, emoticons.