

Typography: A “punctuated” interpretation

Jayagovindan Menon

Professor & Head, Communication Design, D J Academy of Design, Coimbatore-Pollachi Highway, Ottakalmandapam, Coimbatore 641032. E mail: menon@djad.in. M: 9840077916

Abstract: Scripts, in most languages, are phonetic notations of speech. The form of letters in different languages has a cultural bearing. Cultures that used palm leaves and sharp tools for writing have rounded characters, sculpting letters on stone with chisel produced the ‘serif’ of letters; brush on cloth/papyrus produced more decorative forms.

The invention of printing, and typography as mechanized writing brought in an entirely new system of written communication. Though printed books emulated the codex to begin with, typography as a specialized discipline went through several refinements through the years.

‘Typography’ is the art of disposing type over a given space. Type styles, along with other non-phonetic elements like punctuations; letter, word, line and paragraph spacing; margins etc. are the main stay of typography in delivering clarity, hierarchy and meaning to printed text. Even though such conventions originated in the West, they have become a part of good practice in typography in many other cultures as well. Many of the conventions set during the incunabula are still relevant in today’s digital era. Whether we talk of text in print or on screen, the basic tenets of typography work the same way.

This paper examines the role of non-phonetic elements and visual punctuations in modern-day typographic practices across Latin and Malayalam script, one of the Indian languages.

Key words: punctuations, spacing, visual punctuations, heirarchy, articulation, meaning

1. Introduction

Punctuations are graphic marks to represent meaningful pauses in a written communication. There are eleven commonly used punctuation marks in the English language: comma, semi colon, colon, full stop, bracket, quotation marks, question mark, exclamation mark, hyphen, dash and apostrophe.

There were attempts to design newer graphic marks such as ‘interbang’ that did not find popular use. All punctuation marks and numbers may be called as non-phonetic graphic signs since they do not represent any spoken sound like the letters of an alphabet. Other such signs are diacritical marks used especially as pronunciation guides for foreign words.



Figure 1. New punctuation marks: interbang, irony & cercasm

Punctuation marks are of a much later origin. Until the invention of printing, punctuations were used idiosyncratically from region to region and from scribe to scribe. Latin was written in all capital letters. One of the earliest known system introduced by Aristophanes, the librarian of Alexandria, circa 260 BC used a centered dot called ‘comma’ for the shortest segment in a sentence, a lower dot called ‘colon’ for the longer section and a raised dot called ‘period’ for the longest section. These were easily identifiable since the capital letters are of uniform height. More punctuation marks appeared during 7th and 8th centuries. Punctuations were originally used to provide breathing cues while reading a text and not to clarify sentence structure or meaning.

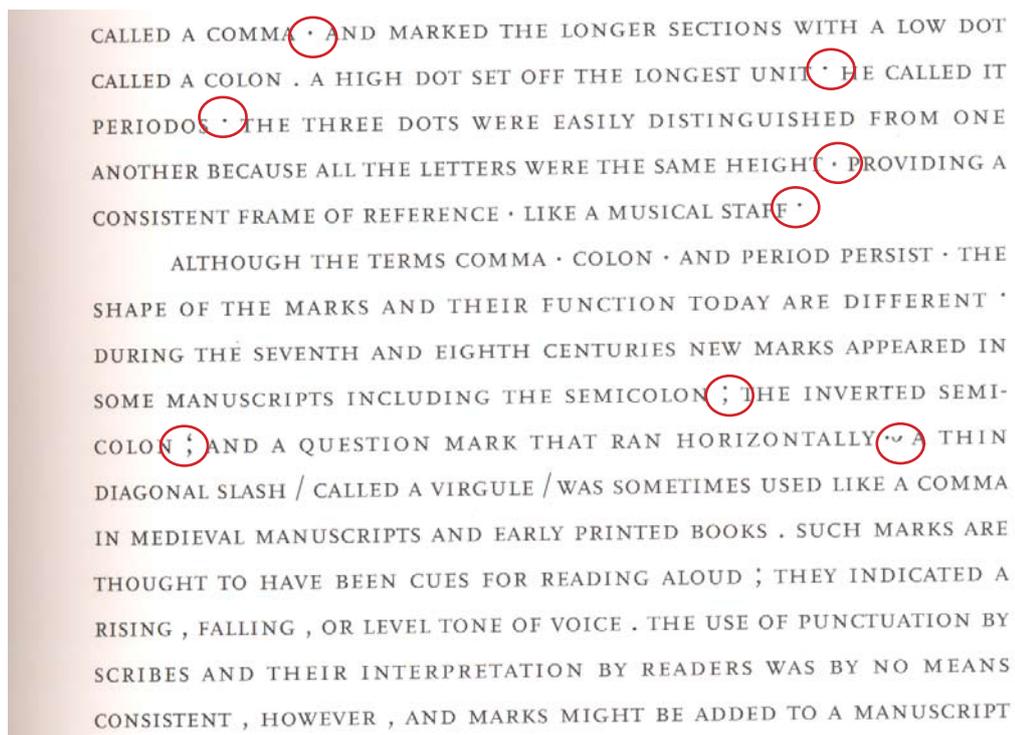


Figure 2. Early punctuation marks

The invention of printing revolutionized the way we write with its grammatical structure and use of punctuations to aid clarity in meaning. The advent of printing set standards in the art of typography and introduced punctuation marks as refined non-phonetic graphic marks. Apart from these graphic signs, typography and book design also introduced non-phonetic ‘visual punctuations’ by means of disposition of ‘space’ and its relationship to form, size and style of typefaces on a spread to articulate structure and meaning of text.

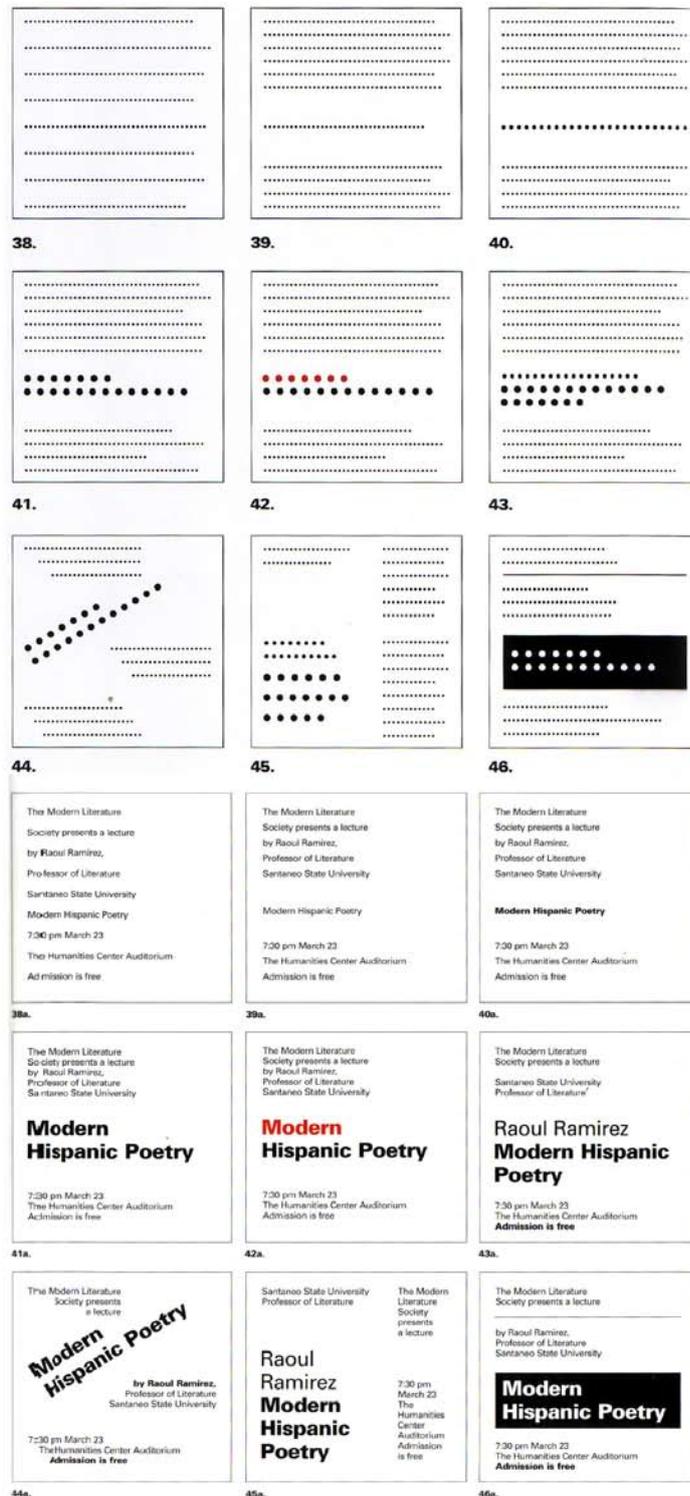


Figure 3. John Roach, heirarchy grids. Other than the graphic symbols for punctuations, effective typographic design makes use of space and style of typefaces to articulate text. By changing space, type style/size, and colour, varied approaches to text articulation can be created to suit the task at hand.

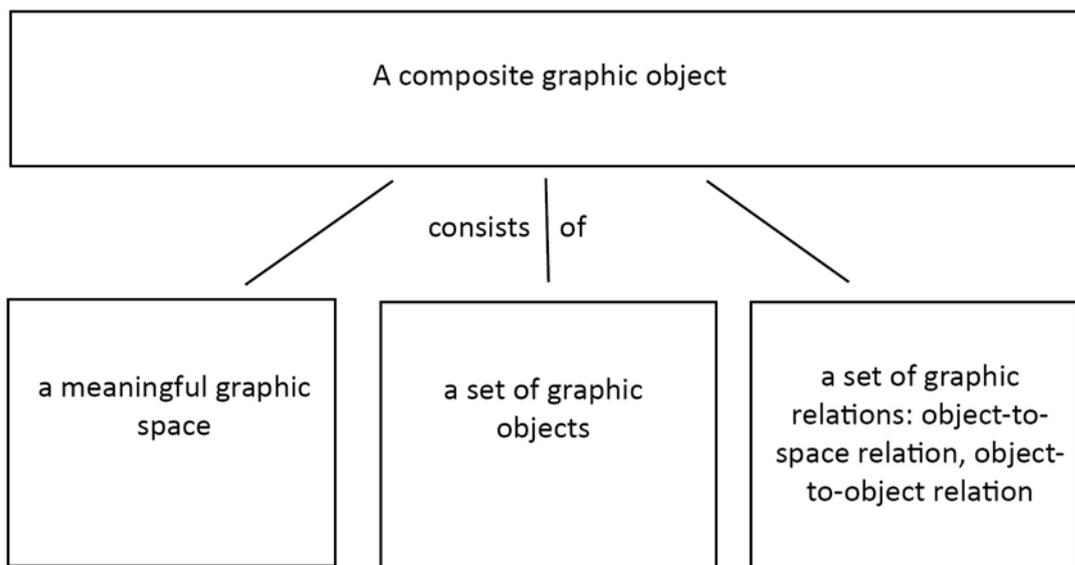


Figure 4. Graphic object, space and their relationship in a composition.

2. Objectives

Languages of the West, particularly English, have had and continue to have considerable influence on Indian languages. Introduction of printing, English education and availability of printed books from the West have all influenced Indian languages in many ways. Printing in India, started by European missionaries towards the 17th century, also brought in the nuances of book design and typography as practiced in the West. This influence got refined later as English newspaper editorials and production facilities were established in India.

This paper attempts to examine how Western influence contributed to the introduction of punctuations and visual punctuations in Malayalam print communication.

3. Observations/results

Several scripts were used to write Malayalam in the past such as Vattezhuthu, Kolezhuthu and Malayanma. The modern Malayalam script is based on Grantha. It is a syllabic writing system – each unit representing a whole syllable – unlike the Latin where each letter represents a phonem.

Malayalam script contains 52 letters including 16 vowels and 36 consonants, which forms 576 syllabic characters. The earlier style of writing has been superseded by a new style as of 1981. This new script reduces the different letters for typesetting from 900 to fewer than 90. This was done to include Malayalam in the keyboards of typewriters and computers. Later, the design of Malayalam typefaces followed these glyphs.

	Old	New	
ക ഴ ka + u	ക	കു	ക ka → കു ku
ഗ ഴ ga + u	ഗ	ഗു	ന na → നു nu
ണ ഴ ṇa + u	ണ	ണു	ശ śa → ശു śu

Figure 5. Malayalam original script and its modification.

3.1 Peculiarities of sentence construction

Malayalam, like other languages in the world, did not have any punctuation marks to begin with. The peculiarities of the original sentence construction did not require punctuations. The most widely used punctuations are comma and full stop. Since every sentence in Malayalam ended in a finite verb, the sense was clear even without a full stop.

Mal: *ramane pambu katichu* (sub, obj, verb)

Eng: Ram was bitten by a snake (sub, verb, obj)

The task of a comma is rendered by suffixes like ‘*um*’:

Ramanum krishnanum gopium koodi kattil poyee. (Rama, Krishna, and Gopi together went to forest.)

Paranetical clauses – punctuations such as brackets or long dashes – were originally never used in Malayalam. Instead, such parts of a sentence would appear separately as a full sentence.

ente abhiprayam etanu. Athu ningal angikarikumo ellayo annu anikkariyilla.
(This is my opinion. I don’t know whether you will agree with it or not/ OR/ My opinion – whether you agree with it or not – is this.)

There are three ways in which Malayalam words are spaced out in present-day writing:

Sanskrit: *atu tettallenneniku tonunnu*

Mal: *attu tettalla ennanikku tonnunnu*

English influence: *atu tetu alla ennu aniku tonunnu*

(“ I do not think it is wrong.” The English influenced-malayalam will help to achieve better type texture in a narrow justified newspaper column.)

Nevertheless, the influence of the West, particularly the English language, popularized the use of punctuations. Prose emerging as a popular form of written expression (once again influenced by the spread of English literary forms) was another reason, where use of punctuations aided complex sentence structures. One of the early uses of English style punctuations was found in the Malayalam grammar book by George Matthan (1863). A later book, A R Raja Raja Varma’s *Kerala Panineeyam* (1893), recommended full use of English style punctuation marks in the construction of prose. “This system of using symbols which removes doubt and ambiguity in sentence construction has been accepted by us from English.” He recommended the use of 13 symbols and gave them Malayalam names:

- | | |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| 1. Ankusham (coma) | 8. Kaku chinnam (question mark) |
| 2. Bindhu (full-stop) | 9. Viksepini chinnam (exclamation mark) |
| 3. Rodhini (semi-colon) | 10. Srinkala (hyphen) |
| 4. Bhittika (colon) | 11. Rekha (dash) |
| 5. Valayam (bracket) | 12. Vislesam (apostrophe) |
| 6. Koshtam [square bracket] | 13. Praslesam (from Sanskrit to indicte |
| 7. Uddharini chinnam (quotation marks) | long ‘aa’ or ‘oo’) |

4. Conclusion

There could be a loss and gain as a result of the influence of Western culture on Malayalam languages in print. Certainly the West's contribution to Malayalam typography and its voluntary adaptation have been very valuable. Use of punctuations has indeed helped in experimenting with interesting, complex sentence structures and expressions in native languages in the hands of creative writers, while visual punctuations helped to create interesting layouts.

Visual punctuations by means of judicious and creative use of space, typefaces, and styles such as bold, italics, caps and small caps are the devices for articulation in typography. Punctuation marks and the ampersand often lend themselves as impressive visual elements in a composition. We can see that the use of spacing as a means to convey structure and hierarchy has universal appeal beyond any cultural barrier – the gestalt laws of perception being the underlying universal principles. With reference to effective use of typefaces, and styles such as bold and italics, vernacular typography still need to go far to capitalize on this possibility. Many more text typefaces and specific italic styles have to be developed and so are specific punctuations to go with each type style.

Indian languages do not have capitals or small caps. Probably, English typography can borrow this feature and set running text using only lower case letters! This can save quite some time and energy by avoiding several key strokes (no shift keys!) while typesetting and formatting books. Capitals and small caps indeed have beautiful forms and they can be used exclusively for display purposes, leaving the text set entirely in lowercase!

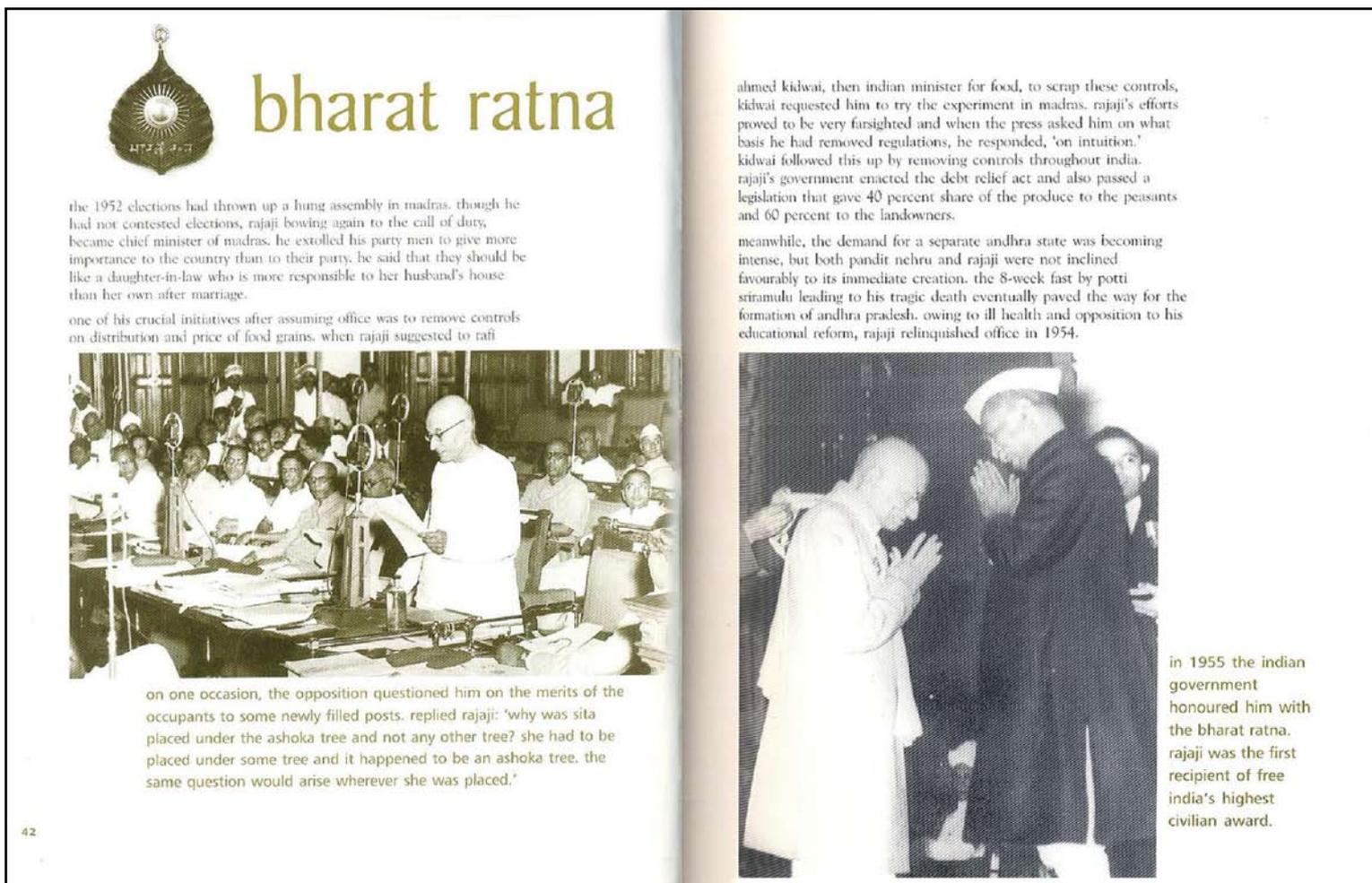


Figure 9. An English book designed entirely in lower case type.

MAKE YOUR DESIGN WORK

DANIEL WILL-HARRIS

when you start thinking about a design, your first question should not be how should it look. it should be how should it work? while design is a very intuitive process, graphic design is an applied art that means you don't just design something to be pretty, you design it to work, to serve a purpose. this is something that all too many books and articles on design overlook - they're so busy with the way it looks they overlook how it works. design projects that work are designed with a specific goal in mind: to sell, to teach, to warn, to communicate feelings or information. make your goal as simple as possible, boil it down to its essence.

one of the most exciting, and at the same time, frightening things about design is starting from a blank page.

when you start, the possibilities are endless, but the more you know about the project, the goal, and the readers, the more your choices are narrowed, the easier your job, and the more effective your solution. some of the more intuitive out there will balk at this: you just know what's best, you do what feels right. that's fine, but i'll guarantee you that you'll do better work if you also take into consideration the goal and the readers and then allow your creative process to percolate. constraints should stimulate creativity rather than limiting it. if you start with the "why" as in "why am i doing this: what is it meant to accomplish?" you will already be about 100 times ahead of designers who are just wondering "how should it look?" not only are you far more likely to come up with something effective as well as attractive, you're less likely to make one of the most basic design errors: to say something with your design that contradicts the message of your text. so you've got a goal in mind. now it's time to ask the other basic questions: who? what? where? when? how? who will be reading this? what's their socioeconomic background? what's their age and eyesight like? do they need larger text or text with a larger x-height? what do they like? what are they used to seeing?

are they used to srv or readers digest? it's highly unlikely that you'd create the same design for two radically different groups of people. a radical design may appeal to younger/hipper readers but might confuse and appall more traditional readers. a traditional classic approach may be alluring to older, more upscale readers but might be too subtle or boring for younger readers or those who are used to those star-burst things, common in supermarket ads. knowing who your reader is will immediately help you focus your approach. what? there are actually three big whats: 1. what's the purpose/goal of the design?; 2. what kind of document are you creating?; a short document is going to require a very different approach than a long one. the short one probably wants to attract attention, while the long one wants to present information in an organized, easy-to-find way. 3. what's the budget? how many pages? how will it be distributed? how much are mailing costs, etc? how much color can

WORK

you afford? where is your audience reading your message? from a car looking at a billboard 200 feet away, or on a quick-reference card pulled from a wallet? on-screen? where will people see your design? does it have to stand out from many other competitors on a shelf or through the mail? how close are your readers to your publication? are they holding it in their hands? why? why are they reading? they're all reading for a reason - necessity, curiosity, business, pleasure, fear, love. do they want to read or do they have to? do they have to sell them on something or are they already convinced? are they going to be reading every single word or skimming and jumping from topic to topic? when? how much time do you have? time is a very important projects are often last minute and require results you can produce quickly. time can be a major limiting factor but just because you don't have a lot of time doesn't mean you can't have a lot of creativity. how? how will you produce the project? how will you output it? you may find that 600 dpi laser printers are now so good you don't need to imageset everything. will you be creating the final files, or will the project require gigantic scans where you'd be better off creating postscript files and sending them to a

Figure 10. Creative use of capitals and small caps combined with text set in all lower case letters.

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