

Digitalization of punctuation: The ‘interactional principle’ in digitally mediated writing

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The paper discusses how punctuation is deployed by writers in digitally mediated, interaction-oriented written communication. In early research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) in the 1990s, the repetition and omission of certain punctuation signs is already reported as a salient feature of digital language use (Bieswanger 2013). However, this research was mostly limited to charting punctuation in terms of deviation from orthographic norms and/or as an emulation of spoken-language features. Furthermore, early CMC studies on punctuation remained detached from the more grammatically oriented research on graphemic systems and the systemic research on the historical evolution of punctuation.

Against this backdrop, the paper focuses on how syntactic and communicative tasks of punctuation shift and evolve under the conditions of interactional writing in digitally mediated contexts. To this effect, the paper proposes to investigate digital punctuation with regard to its emergent ‘interactional principle’: Whereas the rhetorical principle (i.e. marking intonational structures) and the grammatical principle (i.e. marking syntactical structures) of punctuation are well-known and broadly discussed in the history of writing, digital punctuation operates in a new functional realm of writing, being deployed by co-constructing writers to organize their mediated interactional order.

By drawing on a sample of 48 German messenger-chatlogs by 23 adolescent writers (301.987 tokens), the paper aims to illustrate the interactional principle of digital punctuation and examines the full stop <.>, the question mark <?> and the ellipsis <...> in particular. By in-depth sequential analysis the codified functions of these punctuation marks are contrasted with their innovative functionalization in digitally mediated, informal writing. The findings suggest that even though the codification of these signs in descriptive and prescriptive grammars is based on syntactic criteria, they are actually deployed by writers to achieve interactional management and socio-pragmatic contextualization.

References: Bieswanger, M. (2013). Micro-linguistic structural features of computer-mediated communication. In Herring, S., D. Stein & T. Virtanen (eds.). *Pragmatics of computer-mediated communication*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 463–488.

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