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## **A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE DAWKINS'S ARTICLE : "TEACHING PUNCTUATION AS A RHETORICAL TOOL**

### **Abstract:**

This paper critically reviews Dawkins's article entitled "Teaching Punctuation as a Rhetorical Tool". The main argument of this Dawkins's article is: if good writers punctuate effectively without paying any attention to handbooks rules, there should be a system worth teaching. His approach calls for teaching punctuation semantically and rhetorically. This paper reveals that there are some similarities and dissimilarities between the syntactic—based approach (handbooks) and the semantic /rhetoric—based approach. The former calls for certain rules writers have to follow, whereas the latter gives writers a great number of choices regarding how to punctuate effectively. Dawkins creates two concepts: raising and lowering. Raising is a device for gaining rhetorical effect and separation (emphasis) and lowering is a device for gaining connectedness. Dawkins's approach is not for budding writers as it presupposes a great deal of prior knowledge of grammar—particularly the notion of a sentence; furthermore, they (budding writers) need something approaching the stability and simplicity in punctuation. Based on Dawkins's approach, students can use punctuation properly based on their intentions taking into consideration that certain handbook rules should be administrated. Although Dawkins's article is mainly for native speakers of English context, it will be useful and productive in the EFL context. Moreover, Dawkins legitimates fragments and comma splices which are not allowed in handbooks. Such legitimacy should be brought to students' repertoire. This paper would conclude with the finding that English teachers have to eliminate the gap between the two approaches and try to use both as much as they can while teaching punctuation.

### **Keywords:**

Punctuation, handbook rules, syntactic approach, semantic approach, raising and lowering.

## Introduction

The uses of punctuation marks are conventional; they change over time and vary from language to language. In English, there was a considerable debate between two schools: one believed punctuation should be based on elocution (how a sentence is spoken when it is read out aloud) and the other believed punctuation should be based on the grammar (Petit: 2003; Curtis, 2007). The latter (the syntactic-based approach) is the one we use today. However, a great number of studies (Dawkins, 2003; Dawkins, 1995; Calkins, 1994; Cordeiro et al, 1983; Schuster, 2006; Nigel and Robinson, 1996; Crutis, 2007) claim that teaching punctuation by rules is ineffective. Teachers receive a trivial support with teaching punctuation; therefore, they resort to grammar handbooks and exercises. This may be ascribed to the nonexistence of a standard approach for teaching punctuation and little understanding about how it is learned. Dawkins (1995 and 2003) suggests another approach (the semantic-based approach). In this paper, an attempt will be made to present a critical review of Dawkins's approach. This article was chosen for the following reasons. First of all, the article provides a new approach to the treatment of punctuation. This approach has helped the author of this paper to recognise that writers can punctuate effectively depending on their intent rather than the rules of handbooks. Secondly, writers can violate the rules of handbooks and yet their writing is still good—if not improved. Thirdly, although Dawkins's article is mainly for native speakers of English context, it will be useful and productive in the EFL context: in the EFL context, say, Libya, teaching grammar in general and punctuation in particular gives students a prevailing impression that they should learn punctuation rules simply in order to learn about punctuation. Students then tend to repeat such approach when they go into a classroom as teachers and teach exactly as they themselves had been taught. Dawkins gives students enough reliable background, takes them away (to a considerable extent) from handbook rules to focus on practical rules, helps students to become competent at using punctuation, and shows them how punctuation can achieve emphasis and clarity. An attempt will be made to contrast the semantic perspective of punctuation in Dawkins's article with a syntactic perspective to see which would yield the most useful insights to be used. At the end of the critical review, some conclusions will be drawn as to which approach (semantic, syntactic or a combination of both) seems the most appropriate.

## A brief summary of the article

Punctuation is a "system that enables writers to achieve important—even subtle—rhetorical effects." maintains John Dawkins in his article entitled "Teaching Punctuation as a Rhetorical Tool" (1995). Basing his approach on a great number of extracts from good writers of nonfiction, Dawkins identifies a hierarchy of punctuation marks. The following simple table provides a visualization of Dawkins's approach (p.535):

Mark	degree of separation
Sentence final (. ? !)	Maximum
Semicolon (;)	Medium
Colon (:)	Medium
dash (—)	medium (anticipatory)
comma (,)	Minimum
zero (Ø)	none (that is, connection)

Table (1) Hierarchy of functional punctuation marks (Dawkins: 535)

Punctuation marks are hierarchically ordered, based on the degree of separation between the ideas they provide to create either a dramatic pause for emphasis when it is high or connectedness when it is low. For illustration, sentence-final marks (full stop, exclamation mark, and question mark) enable a maximum degree of separation, whereas commas and absent punctuation marks grant the minimum degree of separation. Colon, semicolon, and dash give medium separation and have extra meaning: anticipatory, logical connection and emphatic, respectively.

Dawkins goes on to demonstrate how good writers have used the punctuation marks to achieve maximum effects and at times have disregarded the rules and yet have been able to achieve the intended effect.

The author goes on to discuss these rhetorical devices in some detail and particularly the methods he has termed as raising and lowering—the former being the use of the higher scale from zero to period—consisting of no punctuation leading on to gradually more forceful devices beginning with the comma, the semicolon, the hyphen and finally the full stop. The opposite of raising is lowering, which is the same process in reverse order.

The author concurs with the conclusion reached by Summey (1949) in his book "American Punctuation": The notion, that there is only one accurate method of punctuating a given word pattern, is true only in a limited degree. Good writers have learned that they must make attentive and successful choices between periods and semicolons, semicolons and commas, commas and dashes, and dashes and parentheses, according to meaning and intended emphasis."

Finally Dawkins gives pointers to the practitioners of ELT engaged in improving English as a global language: "By teaching raising and lowering we will be adding to our students' repertoire of skills; we will be encouraging students to clarify the meaning of sentences and to gain intended emphasis. Such instruction illustrates what in our composition classes we like to proclaim but don't always demonstrate: writing is thinking." (p.548).

### **Critical evaluation**

Dawkins's approach is definitely not for budding writers as they need something approaching the stability and simplicity in punctuation. It presupposes a great deal of prior knowledge of grammar—particularly the notion of a sentence. Moreover, as his approach relies on a numerous examples from good writers. Punctuation is a system designed equally for readers and writers, who know the language, and comprehend sentences and word meanings (Haney, 1999, p174). Furthermore, the hierarchical principles, proposed by Dawkins, seems to be acquired by those who read extensively.

Dawkins is concerned about writer's intents but disregards reader's interpretations. In other words, I agree with Hassett (1996) when he argues that Dawkins ignored readers' interpretations in his analysis of punctuations. In his approach, Dawkins defines comma as a minimum mark (lower than a dash); however, I feel commas and brackets can also be not only minimum but also medium emphatic marks as much as a dash is. Hassett (1996: 420) claims that:

When I saw where he placed the dash, as medium “emphatic” mark, I had to disagree. I have tendency to read dashes less as punctuation, moving me quickly through the offset material and on through the remainder of the main clause. It may be due to the dash's appearance, that long straight line, seems to lead my eye quickly through the text.

Consider the examples below:

- 1- Most handbooks present, but do not duly explain, our conventional uses of punctuation.
- 2- Most handbooks present—but do not duly explain—our conventional uses of punctuation

He concentrates narrowly on a literary subset of written language; he largely ignores non-literary subset of written language as different writing styles have different punctuation conventions. Such disregard of some types of genre may limit the effectiveness of deliberate rule violation. Quirk et al (1972:1069) note that “The decision to coordinate several independent clauses with one sentence or to separate them as different sentences, with or without formal sign of their logical connection, is dependent largely upon the style of material one is handling or indeed upon the personal preference of the writer.”

Some students have not been exposed to models from good writers, but they use different punctuation marks effectively. If students are exposed to Dawkins's approach, they will imitate a number of good writers (without knowing why and how they punctuate that way) to show that their writing looks like the writing of those prolific writers, and to identify themselves with writers of the highest standard. In other words, Dawkins disregards “writer's identification” Hassett (1996). Moreover, Dawkins legitimates and supports students to use comma splices and fragmentary sentences. This can absolutely be acceptable and logical if students are able to categorize what are “good” and “not good” comma splices and sentence fragments (Schuster, 2006).

### **Punctuation as a syntactic tool vs. punctuation as a rhetorical tool**

The two main functions of punctuation—to indicate emphasis for rhetorical effect and to demarcate the syntactic boundaries of the text—are to a considerable extent contradictory. Such contradiction makes punctuation both complex to teach and

confusing to learn. In this section an attempt will be made to compromise between the two functions.

### Independent clause with an attachment(s)

There are overlaps between Dawkins's approach and handbook rules: a prerequisite for writers is an understanding of the independent clause. It can have three possible attachments (embedded word/ phrase/clause): pre-clausal, post-clausal, and medial (Greenbaum and Nelson, 2002; Quirk et al, 1972; Sinclair, 2007; Dawkins, 2003; Dawkins, 1995; Crystal, 2000)

Based on the independent clause and its attachments, Dawkins suggests three basic functions of punctuation which are subject to the handbook rules. These functions are summed up in the following table.

Degree of Separation	Mark	Function
Maximum	Top (full stop, semicolon)	separate independent clauses
Medium	Middle (colon and dash)	separate independent clauses or dependent clause element(s) from the independent clause
Minimum / zero	Bottom (comma and zero)	separate dependent clause element(s) from the independent clause

Table (2) Basic functions (adopted from Dawkins 1995:536)

Based on the previous three functions, Dawkins posits three patterns and rules, which are somewhat similar to the rules in handbooks. "Pct" refers to punctuation.

Pattern I	(word/ phrase/ clause) + <i>pct?</i> + S V O	Rule 1	Only zero, comma, dash, or colon are permissible.
Pattern II	S V O + <i>pct?</i> + (word/ phrase/ clause).	Rule 2	All functional marks are permissible
Pattern III	S + <i>pct?</i> + (word/ phrase/ clause) + <i>pct?</i> + V O.	Rule 3	Only pairs of marks (commas, dashes, zeros, and parentheses) are permissible.

Table (3) Patterns and rules

In accordance with the above tables, the following section will deal with the similarities and dissimilarities between punctuation as a syntactic tool and punctuation as a rhetorical tool by giving some illustrative examples. Dawkins's examples will be quoted.

3- Surely (zero, comma, dash, or colon) the kid will come clean.

Here, based on Dawkins's approach, writers have alternative options to separate "surely" from the independent clause. According to handbooks, comma and zero are the most appropriate marks.

4- Surely, the kid will come clean. Or,

5- Surely the kid will come clean.

According to the syntactic approach and Dawkins's approach, (12) is understandable, but the word "surely" (a one-word syntactic unit) takes delivery of much less emphasis than in (11). It is a syntactic unit whether or not it is separated by a comma. The act of separating it signals to the reader that the word is a syntactic unit, and encourages the reader to perceive it as an emphatic on it (Dawkins, 2003; Dawkins, 1995).

### **Punctuation with coordinator**

When we need to connect two independent clauses with a comma, that comma should be combined with a coordinator (and, so, or, but, yet) (Thompson, 2004; Huddleston 2005); however, it is not uncommon to find independent clauses separated only by comma, particularly when the clauses are short and usually analogous in structure (as in (6) below) (Brosnahan: 1976; Borjars and Burridge, 2001; Crystal, 2007).

6- Italy will win, Brazil will lose. ( acceptable comma splice)

7- The kid will come clean (any functional mark) and he will go home for a good night's sleep.

8- The kid will come clean (any functional mark) and go home for a good night's sleep.

According to Dawkins, writers have choices: in (7) and (8) writers can insert any mark according to their intents. Dawkins claims: "coordinator plus comma creates greater separation, greater emphasis, than coordinator alone." (542). Based on the rules of handbooks, (7) is well-formed if zero or a comma are used, as they are the most appropriate marks. For (8), zero punctuation is the most appropriate mark as comma or any other functional mark is unnecessary and undesirable as one of the conditions for the use of comma is that there is no ellipsis in the second sentence; moreover, the closer the relation between the elements of a clause, the less need there is for punctuation (Quirk et al: 1972: 1061). Hence, it is preferable not to insert any punctuation in (8). To sum up, Dawkins obtains less prescriptive standpoint as he allows punctuation which would not be accepted by the handbooks.

### **Punctuation with restrictive and non-restrictive**

Regarding restrictive and non-restrictive, the two approaches, to a considerable extent, call for the same rules. Both syntactic and rhetorical approaches refer to the writer's intentions. Rhetorically and semantically, to gain connectedness, zero punctuation should be used, but to gain separation, the next one(s) up (comma, dash, parentheses) to the lowest mark should be used. Syntactically, if restrictive, the clause should not be set off using any form of punctuation. If non-restrictive, the clause should be set off by using commas, dashes, or parentheses as, according to handbooks, such marks are correlative punctuation marks and can be used to mark the separation of such included units. In these cases, the comma is more heavily used than dashes and parentheses (Sinclair, 2007; Quirk et al: 1972; Börjars and Burridge, 2001; Green, 2006; Ehrenworth, 2003; Huddleston, 2005).

9- The kid (zero, comma, dash, parenthesis) who has a guilty conscience (zero, comma, dash, parenthesis—each paired with the first) will come clean.

10-The kid who has a guilty conscience will come clean. (Restrictive clause).

## Raising and lowering

Dawkins introduced the two concepts of raising and lowering. The nature of the hierarchy of punctuation says: “the higher the marker, the greater the emphasis.” Based on his theory, Dawkins defines raising as “a device for gaining rhetorical effect and separation (emphasis) and lowering is a device for gaining connectedness” (536). In (11) below, a full stop is used instead of zero to gain emphasis, and in (12) and (13) a comma and zero are used instead of terminal marks (semicolon, full stop) to gain connectedness:

11-John asked for a date. When he got the nerve.

12-And it is true that all of us write traditions, we all have a history and a context

13-And it is true that all of us write traditions we all have a history and a context.  
(12 and 13 from Donald Murray cited in Dawkins).

In (11), even though it is difficult to evaluate the effect of the punctuation in isolated sentences, the probability of John actually asking for a date shrinks, and the irony of tone increases, as the punctuation marks get higher than would normally be used. This is the sole justification for such a violation. Hence, Dawkins’s view is that good writers use punctuation not merely to indicate sentence boundaries, but to create rhetorical effects.

According to the rules of handbooks (11), (12) and (13) are ill-formed sentences: in (11), the second sentence is a fragment sentence; in (12) there is a comma splice; and (13) is a run-on sentence. Therefore, according to the handbook rules, a full stop should be replaced by zero in (11), and zero and comma should be replaced with semicolon or full stop in (12) and (13). Syntactically, in (11) the comma is unnecessary and undesirable, though it is sometimes used. (Haney, 2003: 174) says that “a syntactic juncture or interface needs not to be separated by a punctuation mark when the juncture is predictable by means other than a mark.” According to Haney, the other means is “stress placement and recognizable syntactic interfaces”.

If the second clause (dependent clause) comes initially, a comma should be inserted between the dependent clause and independent clause, as no marker (the juncture) is left at the boundary. So, the key is the word order (Thompson, 2004; Peck and Coyle 2005).

14-John asked for a date when he got the nerve.

15-When he got the nerve, John asked for a date.

Sometimes the "because clause" must, nevertheless, be set off with a comma to avoid misreading.

16-I knew that the coach of our national team would resign that morning, because my brother-in-law was a player and he called me with the news.

Semantically, without that comma, the sentence could be understood to say that the coach’s resignation was the fault of the brother-in-law. Since that was not case, the dependent clause should be separated to make the meaning clearer.

In this case, Dawkins’s notion of ‘degree of separation’ seems useful – the dependent clauses is separated from what it does not refer to [that the coach...morning]. In fact, the logical connection is to ‘I knew’. The notion of

'emphasis' seems less useful here (perhaps because the comma is obligatory), but perhaps one can say that the comma has the effect of 'backgrounding' the dependent clause. One would have to test it on a wide range of examples to be sure that this is an accurate description of the effect however.

### **Handbooks are wrong**

Dawkins suggests handbooks and manual styles are wholly wrong when they deal with punctuation. He says: "... manuals and styles and college handbooks have it wrong when it comes to punctuation" (533). This is unfair to a large extent. He agrees with handbooks when he starts his sentences with capital letters and ends them with the final marks. The punctuation system forbids a comma between the subject and predicate unless the comma is the first of a pair of commas, and none of Dawkins's example violates this rule. Handbook-based teaching calls for such rules, too. The problem with handbooks, according to Mann (2003:360), is "handbook-based teaching fails because the handbooks are not effectively organised... the writer's question is never "How do I use semicolon?" but "How do I punctuate X?" Unfamiliarity with some grammatical concepts hinders students' attempts to use punctuation effectively. Hence, the best way is to teach the two simultaneously.

The common criticism of handbooks is that they are too theoretical: they are irrelative to the real (practice) punctuation system. Dawkins's approach is very useful and promising. It leaves writers with many choices regarding punctuation. Based on Dawkins's approach, punctuation should be introduced to students as a matter of style and emphasis, but not through a set of rules. It is noticeable that a great number of examples Dawkins uses are fragment sentences and comma splices. Handbooks do not allow for these. The differences between Dawkins's approach and the approach of handbooks is that: (a) the former marks the junctures between independent clauses according to an intended meaning and emphasis, whereas the latter marks the junctures according to the phrase, clause, and sentence boundaries; and (b) Dawkins gives writers choices: they can punctuate according to their intent even if they violate the rules (to some extent), whereas the handbooks always instruct writers to stick to certain rules and not break them.

### **Conclusion**

The gap between practical use and handbook prescriptions of punctuation should be closed. In the EFL classrooms (where handbook is used as a course book, not as a reference one as the case in the native English context), students are asked to stick with handbooks rules and at the same time they are asked to expose themselves to different genre, where handbook rules are apparently broken. This can raise a great confusion because practical punctuation (the punctuation practices we come across when we read a newspaper, catalogue, etc.) allows for using sentence fragments, comma splices, and run-on sentences, which are different from those taught in the handbooks rules (Mann, 2003; Schuster, 2006; Johnson, 2006). Moreover, the variation between good and bad comma splices, sentence fragments should be condensed to rules (Schuster, 2006; Brosnahan, 1976). Handbook compilers should admit them, teachers should teach them, and students should learn them.



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