Between the Words

Emotional Punctuation in the Digital Age Communication

Olga Kulish

Abstract. A hidden, yet very important part of the written language is punctuation. Traditionally, punctuation is primarily used for grammatical purposes, serving to structure a written text. On the other hand, a variety of previously unseen options for using punctuation nowadays give it a new role and a separate meaning, different from what we previously knew. More specifically, an important aspect of using punctuation in digital communication is the tendency to use it as a way of expressing personal emotions and non-verbal signals, similar to facial expressions and gestures in live, face-to-face communication, that are typically not possible to convey otherwise. This article aims to analyze different contemporary ways of using punctuation in the areas of graphic design and digital communication. In particular, the study looks into novel, unconventional punctuation marks, as well as their possible combinations. As a practical contribution, this study also presents a collection of novel signs created by peer students and colleagues, which were combined and assembled into a common system. Each sign represents a specific human emotion, a mood, or a state of mind, and provides written text with a new meaning and/or different phonation. This project is rather an experiment, but despite its seemingly informal and casual nature, it reflects the existing tendencies in modern digital communication.

1. Introduction

Early punctuation primarily served for oral communication, helping speakers to structure their speech (e.g., Aristophanes' system of dots, Lupton and Miller, 1999). The technological advances enabled further development of written communication through book printing, mass production, advertisements, and posters. As a result, punctuation gradually became more systematized and universalized, eventually turning into an integral part of many alphabets. Nowadays, punctuation undertakes not only grammatical functions, but also enables more complete and comprehensive expression of emotions in written communication.

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Among the most widely used "emotional" punctuation marks are the exclamation and question marks, the ellipsis, and the quotation marks. Their manifold functionality allows expressing a wide range of emotions in a written form. People express their excitement, sadness and anger, or simply ask questions by placing one of these marks or a sequence of them at the end of a sentence. To achieve this well-defined set of marks and corresponding emotions, for several centuries, people continuously experimented with shapes and curves, trying to express their feelings and emotions through different marks.

Nowadays when using punctuation marks in written communication, people seem to consider only the currently adopted use of a punctuation mark, whereas its possibly different historical meanings are neglected. The same applies to the new meanings emerged in the Digital Era. That is, one and the same punctuation mark could have completely different functions and convey completely different meanings in the past, when it first appeared, and in the present time, more and more dependent on digital communication. Indeed, with the invention of digital forms of communication and information representation, the role of punctuation is changing. As we more often use computers, smartphones and other digital channels to communicate (e.g., e-mails, instant messengers, blogs, comments, etc.), we are witnessing a change in the accustomed writing system and the established way of using punctuation marks. More specifically, in the Digital Age, punctuation marks are often combined in some novel ways, thereby providing a completely different semantic meaning. They are also frequently used even without a textual context as independent stand-alone elements. Moreover, even when used in a text, their original role changes to such an extent that they can modify the overall meaning of a sentence. In modern digital communication, we often treat punctuation very casually, skipping some marks or—vice versa—putting extra marks or combining several of them, thus aiming to add an emotional connotation to the written text. This way, punctuation often provides non-verbal signals to the written language, which usually lacks the usual benefits of the live, face-to-face communication and is unable to unambiguously express human emotions.

In this context, this paper looks into novel, unconventional punctuation marks, as well as their possible combinations. It focuses on the lack of emotional expressivity in written digital communication, and explores the potential of punctuation marks to communicate human emotions, primarily from a graphic designer's point of view. The study contributes to the research on punctuation marks by exploring how their role in human communication has evolved since the early days until the Digital Age. As a practical contribution, this study also presents a collection of novel signs created by peer students and colleagues, which were combined and assembled into a common system. Each sign represents a specific human emotion, a mood, or a state of mind, and provides written usage descrip-

tion with a new meaning and/or different phonation. These newly de-
signed signs are unique to their authors and reflect their personal feelings
and views, and are, therefore, not necessarily understandable by the oth-
ers, as revealed by a conducted survey, also included in this study.

2.   Conventional Punctuation: Changing the Meaning

The use of punctuation marks in the modern written language varies de-
pending on the media and the target audience, for which a certain text
is written. For example, scientific writing uses a formal technical lan-
guage with relatively strict punctuation rules, where a casual unstruc-
tured arrangement of signs is unacceptable, especially when it concerns
strict mathematical formulas and/or scientific statements. On the other
hand, in poetic pieces of literature, the author's arrangement of punc-
tuation marks often does not follow the established rules but is still ac-
ceptable. Punctuation in this case is used by the author to convey the
emotional message of the piece, improve the interaction between the
reader and the piece, and establish a connection between the reader and
the author. Some authors even aim to experiment with how their works
are communicated to the reader using punctuation signs. For example,
in some of his poems the French writer Guillaume Apollinaire did not
use punctuation at all (Apollinaire, 1918).

According to Adrian Frutiger's classification (Frutiger, 1989), punc-
tuation marks can be divided into three main groups depending on their
main purpose: sentence-structuring signs, expression signs, and refer-
ence signs. Among the three groups, expression signs are of particular
relevance to this study. This group includes three punctuation marks:
the *exclamation mark* (used for expressing affirmation or exclamation), the
question mark (used for expressing a question or a doubt), and the *quotation
marks* (used for expressing different types of quoted speech).

It is impossible to ignore the fact that communication through writ-
ten messages is deprived of the physical, personal communication, when
we can see a person, their emotions and feelings, as well as other non-
verbal signals. In informal writing we often replace all these by words,
punctuation, emoticons, "emojis," pictures, voice messages, etc. Con-
cerning punctuation, for example, two opponents in a dialogue can
use an excessive number of characters, such as several exclamation and
question marks in a row, as well as many full stops. Some punctuation
marks change their meaning in texting nowadays: for example, a full
stop at the end of a phrase might be perceived not just as the end of
it, but makes the message appear less sincere (Gunraj et al., 2016), or
convey negative emotions. Such a full stop at the end of the message in
texting is often referred to as a "dot of hate".

A full stop has acquired yet another role in the design works of Un
Mundo Feliz—a public initiative that unites cultural activists and graphic
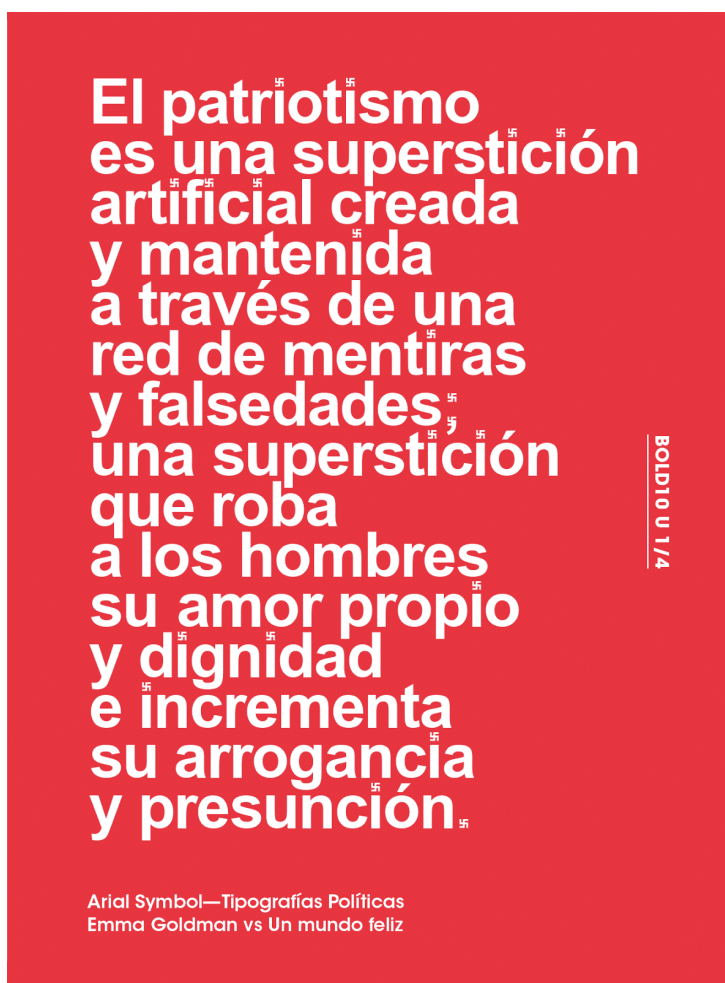
designers who aim to disseminate social and political messages through
their artworks in new digital media, such as the Internet. They consider
graphic activism as a controversial site for promoting public debates and
confrontations (Jiménez, García, and Fernández, 2011). In their work, all
the dots in the Arial font were changed to a swastika symbol (Fig. 1).

Speaking of less frequently used symbols and signs, it is worth men-
tioning that some symbols, albeit not used today in everyday writing, are
still widely used by the graphic designers to prepare books, corporate

identity, posters and other graphic materials. Due to their unusual shape and semiotic meaning of the past, they have become quite popular nowadays.

A good example of this is the *index* ☞ —an index translated from Latin as "little hand". The symbol represents a pointing hand, which literally means "pay attention to" or "look at the direction of the pointing finger". The modern function of this sign in many graphic design projects is to catch the attention of the reader, user, consumer or any other person staring at the sign, when, for example, passing by a café, thereby inviting them to enter inside (Fig. 2). In a broad sense, the meaning of this punctuation sign nowadays is the same as in the 12th century, when it first appeared (Houston, 2013).

FIGURE 2. Manicules on advertising signs in Poland, Ukraine and Russia. Source: author's personal archive.

Punctuation in logotypes typically conveys some semantic information, such as, for example, in the personal logotype of the type designer Martin Majoor who creates font families, consisting of both serif and sans serif typefaces (Fig. 3). Accordingly, his logo represents a handshake of a serif and a sans serif manicules.

FIGURE 3. Martin Majoor's personal logotype. Source: http://martinmajoor.com

Another example is the book cover for *The scarlet letter* novel (1850). The pointing hands perfectly reflect the main topic of the novel—social shaming and stigmatizing (Fig. 4).
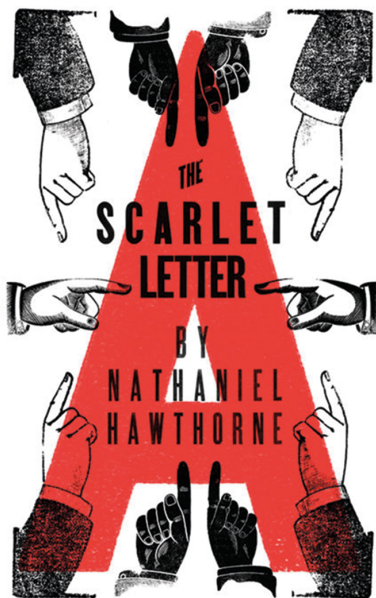

FIGURE 4. Cover for the novel *The Scarlet Letter* by Mr Furious. Source: `http://recoveringtheclassics.com`

The usage and the meaning of punctuation marks constantly change, in the same way as, for example, the economic and social situation. Today we interpret a semicolon and a bracket as a smiling face:) when receiving a digital message from a friend. Similarly, full stops appearing in the middle of a word have acquired a new connotation in the French language, since they commonly represent a unisex, gender-neutral version of a word (Vernooij, 2018).

3. Emoticons

In text communication (especially in texting) that is partially limited by the set of characters on the keyboard, people "invented" a new way of conveying emotions by using combinations of punctuation marks, as well as numbers and letters—that is, by using emoticons. The first digital emoticon (at least in the way we use it today) was used by Scott Ruan

(2011) when he included a smiling face :-) and a sad face :-(in his e-mail.

A system of such signs has become widely adopted in digital communication, when writing electronic messages and posts. The system of emoticons is constantly supplemented with new signs, as well as with the so-called ASCII[1] Text Art. Such text art, however, existed before the era of personal computers. For example, in 1948, Paul Hadley published an article Keyboard Art in the "Popular Mechanics" magazine (Hadley, 1948), where he provided a creative master class on creating own emoticons using a usual typewriter (Fig. 5).
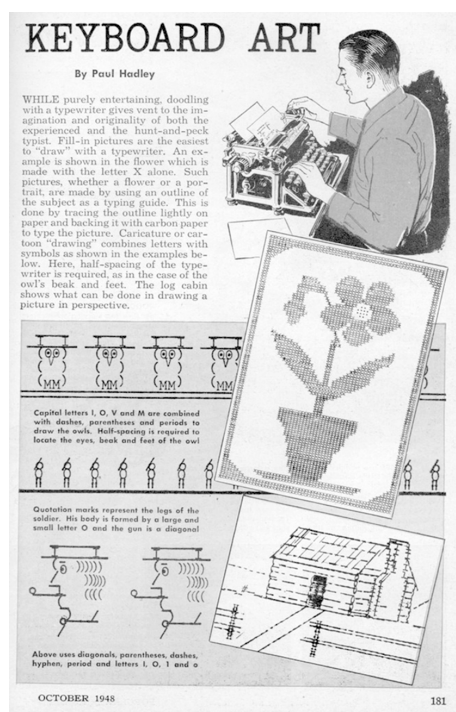

FIGURE 5. "Keyboard Art" by Paul Hadley. Source: `http://blog.modernmechanix.com/ascii-art-1948`

Interestingly, the first emoticons appeared long before the mankind was able to send electronic messages. The first use of the emoticon is related to the American satirical magazine Puck that published an article titled "Typographical Art" in 1881 ("Typographical Art" 1881). The

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1. ASCII Table and Description `https://www.asciitable.com/`.

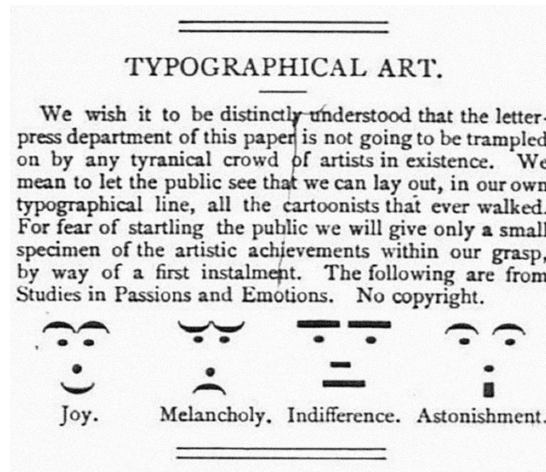article was illustrated with four pictograms symbolizing melancholy, indifference, astonishment and joy (Fig. 6).

FIGURE 6. "Typographical Art" in Puck Magazine. Source: `https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puck_(magazine)`

Nowadays, the popularity of emoticons has also been supported and promoted by various instant messengers, where multiple combinations of characters from different written systems are widely adopted by Internet users. The popularity of emoticons and emojis rapidly grew in the Digital Age, making it the subject of research for psychologists, philologists, and linguists. From these scientific perspectives, these signs are considered as a natural change of the written language, caused by the ubiquitous spread of mobile networks and the Internet.

Emoticons (particularly faces) communicate emotions in a very literal way, and the widest category among them is a smiling happy face (see Annex A). The smiley face is a very recognizable symbol, and it is widely used everywhere in visual communication: labels, magazines, street signs, etc. (Fig. 7).

Some other examples include the logotypes of type foundries, companies and conferences, where it is easy to spot a smiling face, resembling the famous emoticon Smiley (Fig. 8).

With the emergence of *emojis*, they become popular not only as a supplement to the text but become a text itself. One of the examples is *Book from the ground* (Xu, 2014), which is written in emoticons, where you can still see the punctuation marks, which serve their conventional role (Fig. 9).
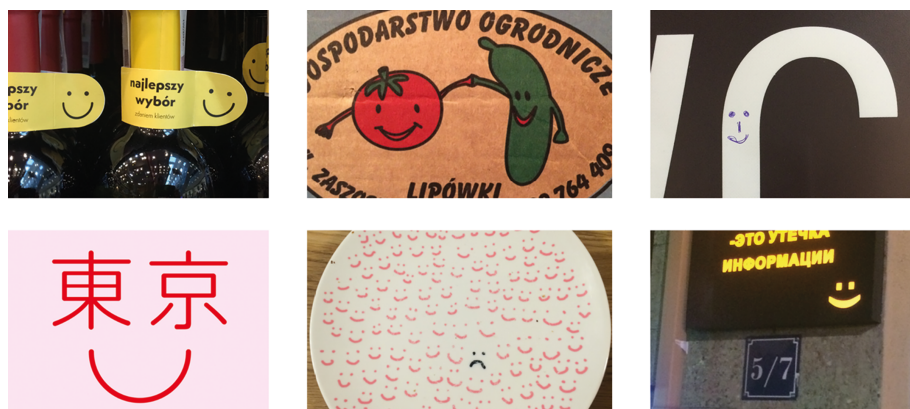
FIGURE 7. Smiling faces on different objects and in advertisement. Source: https://slanted.de, author's personal archive.

FIGURE 8. Examples of smiling faces in the logotypes of: Laughter Conference, Threedotstype Type Foundry, DesignByHumans, Laïc: Type Foundry. Source: https://laughter.pja.edu.pl, https://threedotstype.com, https://designbyhumans.com, https://laic.pl

Another beautiful example is the book "Genesis" by Juli Gudehus (1997), where the biblical creation story was translated into pictograms, symbols and logos (Fig. 10).

World-wide use of emoticons has also been adopted in the typographic practice, where a written language is supplemented by new signs integrated into a text. Nevertheless, combinations of standard punctuation marks in the form of emotional faces does not lose its popularity. This is mainly due to the possibility of expressing emotions even without using words, which makes such a "language" universal to a certain extent, as well as shortens the time spent on writing, in particular, when typing short text messages. As a result, punctuation marks are often given a new meaning and a new role.
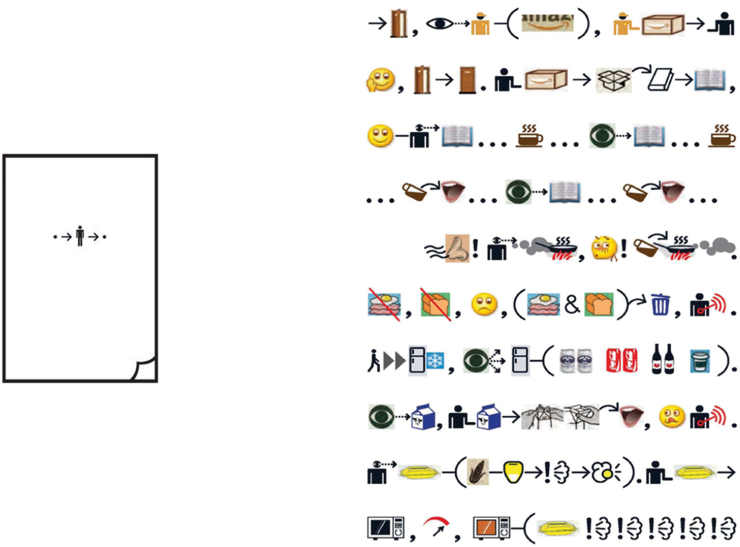
FIGURE 9. *Book from the Ground* by Xu Bing. Source: `http://xubing.com`
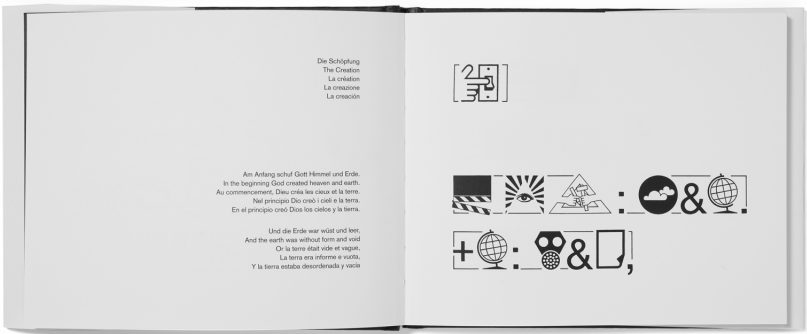
FIGURE 10. "Genesis" by Juli Gudehus. Source: `https://juligudehus.net`

4.   Unconventional Punctuation

4.1.   An Overview of Existing Signs

The first documented attempt to express thoughts without explicitly using words, but rather using a specific sign in written communication

dates back to the 16th century and was made by the London printers Parkes (2016). The *percontativus* symbol ⸮ was used by them to mark a *percontatio*, or a rhetorical question, and was "employed not to elicit information, but for purposes of rhetorical effect instead of a positive statement" (ibid.). This punctuation mark looks like a reversed question mark, and appears in several books in 1580 and 1581 (and less frequently in the 17th century)—for example, in hand-written works of the English poets Robert Herrick and Thomas Middleton.

The first documented evidence of using an *irony mark* dates to 1668 and can be found in Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language authored by the English philosopher John Houston (2013). The sign he proposed looks like an inverted exclamation mark ¡ (ibid.). It was not used very widely, but the idea of a punctuation mark to represent irony has been quite popular until very recently, judging from the number of various designed signs: *Irony* by Marcelline Jobard in 1842 (Jobard, 1842); *Point d'ironie* by Alcanter de Brahm in 1899 (De Brahm, 2018); *SarcMark™* by Douglas and Paul Sak in 2006; *Ironieteken*[2] by Underware in 2007 (see Annex B). However, none of these marks is being actively used nowadays.

A whole new system of emotional punctuation marks was proposed by the French writer Hervé Bazin in his essay "Plumons l'Oiseau" ("Let's pluck the bird") in 1966 (Bazin, 1966). Bazin's signs expressed a range of emotions, such as doubt ϸ, certitude ⸘, acclamation ⱱ, authority ⸮, love point ⸮, and irony ⸘. This project was brought back to life by Mykyta Yevstifeyev and Karl Pentzlin in 2011 (Yevstifeyev and Pentzlin, 2012), who proposed to include these 6 characters in the Unicode standard. Furthermore, the newly-developed font Bazin that includes these unconventional symbols is freely available for downloading and installing for digital use (Zong, 2015). There are also other new punctuation marks, available online, that aim to address narrow-tailored purposes in written communication, such as Sarkmark by Jacob Smith[3] (Smith, 2015) or the set of "Legal marks" (Stewart, 2015).

Noteworthy, quite a few of the invented punctuation marks mentioned above are intended to express irony. In most cases, it is quite typical to use quotation marks to show that the enclosed expression should be understood in a way, different from what is actually written. In this case, however, there is no guarantee that the irony will be correctly understood by the reader, since the quotation marks can be missed or misinterpreted by the reader. On the contrary, if the irony is indicated in a

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2. https://underware.nl/logotypes/irony_mark/

3. Please note the difference between the two symbols with similar functions and slightly different names—SarcMark by Douglas and Paul Sak and Sarcmark by Jacob Smith.

clear and unambiguous way by some kind of an irony mark, will there be any room left for the readers to interpret the text in their own way?

Another widely known unconventional emotional sign is the *interrobang*. Designed by Martin K. Speckter in 1962 (Houston, 2013), it represents a combination of the question and exclamation marks merged in a single glyph ‽ to replace the disjoint combination of the two marks. Speckter proposed several designs for the new sign in his paper for the Typo Talks journal, after which invited interested readers to contribute to the design by sharing their own versions. The offer was successfully accepted by a wider audience, resulting in multiple appearances of the new sign not only in newspapers, such as Wall Street Journal and New York Herald Tribune, but also in the next issue of the Typo Talks journal, which gathered and presented all the possible design variations proposed by graphic designers and typographers (ibid.).

In 2017, a novel punctuation system was proposed by the Austrian graphic designer and typographer Walter Bohatsch. In his book "Typojis" (Bohatsch, 2018), he describes philosophical and linguistic ideas that provided a foundation for creating a completely new system of previously unseen signs. The system includes 30 symbols that serve to represent different emotions and human moods, such as, for example, sympathy, solidarity, curiosity, scepticism, boredom, etc.—all these are typically difficult to express in written communication as "messages with the kinds of additional meanings that are conveyed instantly when speaking face to face" (ibid.). The main goal of the project was to eliminate ambiguity in written messages for better inter-human communication.

Taken together, the developed set of characters supplements a font created by the author, thereby making Typojis look organic and natural when typing. Glyphs representing the signs are unified and have a dot at the bottom, just below the baseline. Unlike emoticons that often look like icons or pictograms, the typoji graphemes are abstract signs of various asymmetric shapes. Nevertheless, to some extent they tend to mimic familiar symbols, thereby invoking certain associations when people are looking at them. For example, the sign of tolerance resembles an agreement tick, and the irony sign reminds of its long-standing predecessors—various modifications of the well-known question mark.

A common question asked by readers when reading sentences with these signs: what intonation should I be using for such sentences? If in the speech of a person I can imagine what punctuation mark I would put at the end of a sentence, is it possible to recognize and visualize these signs in oral communication?

The main difference of the new unconventional punctuation marks from usual punctuation marks is their singular function. That is, each of these new marks undertakes a single function of, for example, expressing a specific emotion, feeling or mood that the author would like to

communicate to the reader. As far as the digital media are concerned, another difference is that the new punctuation marks are not present on a typical modern keyboard of a PC or a smartphone, which we use to write digital messages. Accessibility and a constant visual reminder of the symbols' presence could significantly increase the distribution of these signs in written communication, while recognition would depend on the frequency of their appearance in electronic and printed media.

4.2.   New Shapes, New Meaning

Our alphabet has gone through a long evolution from simple drawings and pictograms to abstract shapes, which we combine in different orders, thereby composing words, sentences, or even whole novels. Admittedly, the first thing that comes to mind when talking about an alphabet is letters. There are, however, many other signs and symbols that serve to structure a written text, provide it with a different phonation, or even completely change the meaning of words. Among these symbols are punctuation marks, which we use in written communication. What if there were much more punctuation marks to express virtually unlimited human emotions, moods, and states that need to be expressed by the humans when writing messages?

The spectrum of human emotions is virtually unlimited, and expressing them even in a live communication, either in a verbal or a non-verbal manner, is already a challenge. In this respect, is it possible to think that punctuation marks can be sufficient to express all these subtle emotions, moods, and states in written communication? If yes, what kind of signs and how many of them do we need? How to ensure that these signs are unambiguously understood by people from different language and cultural backgrounds?

Accordingly, this section of the paper presents a collection of novel signs created by authors friends and colleagues, which were combined and assembled into a common system. Each sign reflects a very specific human emotion or a mood, so that a written text acquires a new meaning and different phonation, when combined with one of these signs.

Essentially, this project is a creative exercise on possible ways of expressing human emotions in written communication by means of graphic signs. Despite this seemingly informal and casual nature, the project actually reflects the existing tendencies in modern digital communication, such as the insertion of emoticons in texts, the absence of punctuation marks in place where they are typically used, and—vice versa—the presence of punctuation marks in unusual, unconventional places.

The 9 participants of this project come from three different professional backgrounds: linguists, software developers, and designers, who

were asked to create their own punctuation mark to express an emotion or a mood. The author got the original drawings (Fig. 11), each of which represented specific emotion, mood, or state, together with the description of each sign and an example of how this sign can be used in writing (see Annex C). All the resulting images were post-processed by the author to create a single system compatible with the font *Ayka Regular*Ayka by Maciej Połczyński[4] (Fig. 12).
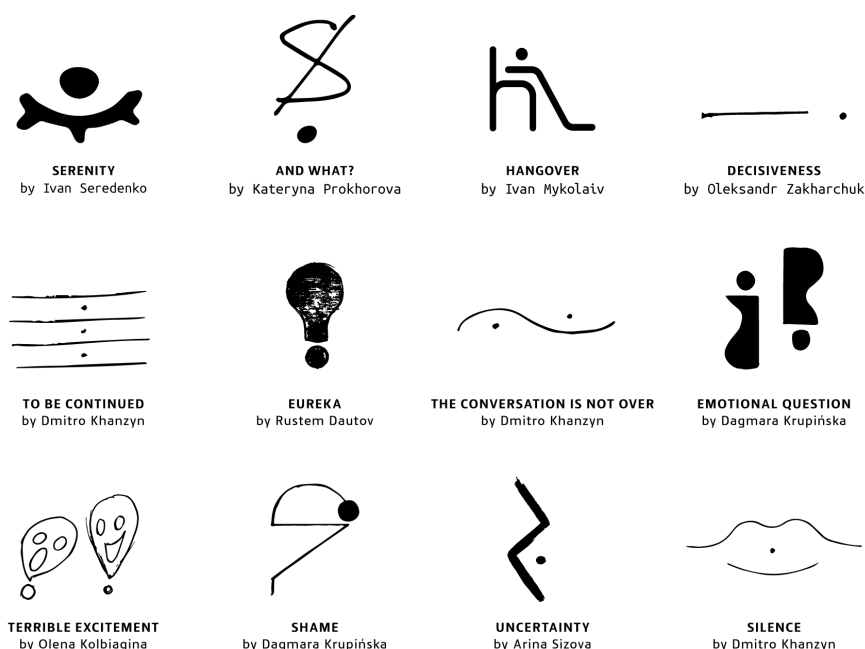
FIGURE 11. Original drawings of suggested punctuation marks.

This study on the new, unconventional punctuation marks, has resulted in the following interesting observations:

– Newly-invented marks match to the character of their creators and correlate with their backgrounds. To a great extent, all participants have expressed their own personalities through their suggested signs.
– An ambiguous and uncertain opinion on using additional unconventional punctuation marks. That is, when answering whether we need more punctuation marks, the distribution of votes was 60% for *Yes*
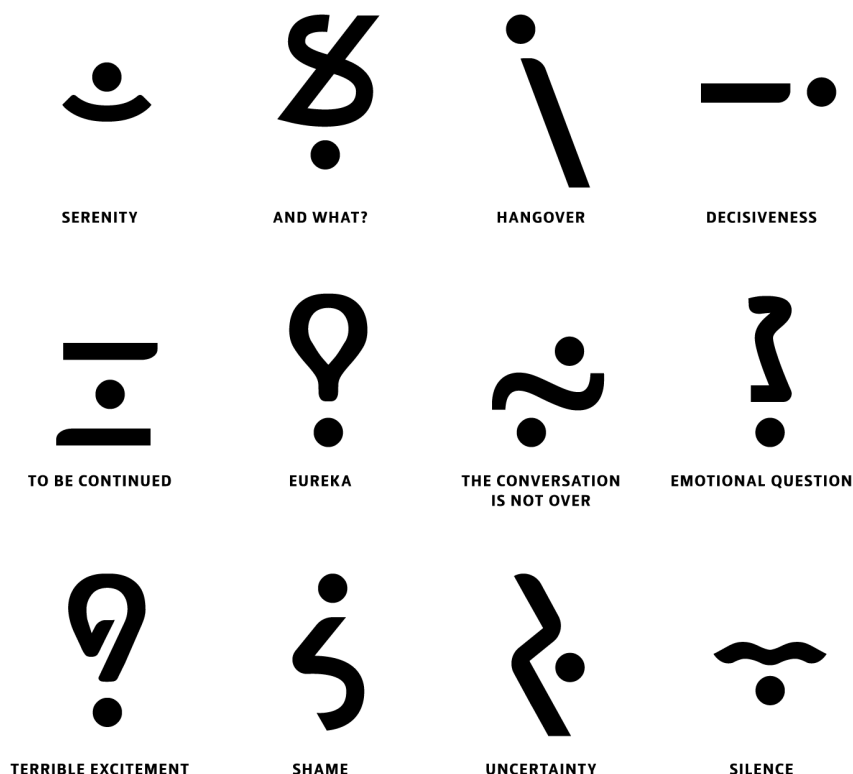
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4. http://laic.pl/

FIGURE 12. Post-processed images.

and 40% for *No*. Even though this statistics is not representative enough due to the limited number of participants, it is a promising finding that can serve as a starting point for further research.

Another interesting detail is that all the participants put their signs at the end of a sentence, thus following the conventional rules. Moreover, the first example of using a particular sign contained the same meaning in words. This could be due to the fact that the sign was just artificially invented and not evolved naturally, and the sign creators did not have necessary skills to use it correctly, even though they invented it.

5. Conclusion

Nowadays, punctuation undertakes not only grammatical functions, but also enables a more complete and comprehensive expression of emotions

in written communication. Among the most widely used "emotional" punctuation marks are the exclamation and question marks, the ellipsis, and the quotation marks. Their manifold functionality allows expressing a wide range of emotions in a written form. Despite this wide use and adoption of these marks, for many centuries new punctuation marks have been invented, serving to express different emotions and feelings, ranging from irony to asking a rhetorical question. Most of these newly invented marks are not being widely used today.

With the emergence and further development of digital media, punctuation has gained new functions and a new meaning. Punctuation marks were widely used as separate "pictograms"—emoticons, which later evolved into emojis. Nevertheless, since their first appearance in 1982, using textual emoticons still remains very popular.

Two opposite trends are observed in modern digital communication. On the one hand, people often do not follow generally accepted grammar rules, by, for example, not using a full stop at the end of a sentence (while the conventional full stop itself has received an additional negative connotation in informal digital messages). On the other hand, people tend to combine multiple punctuation marks as a way of expressing their emotions. This way, these combined marks act not as part of an alphabet, but rather as individual stand-alone pictograms.

In oral communication, human emotions are expressed through the voice tone and intonation. In written communication, however, the existing punctuation marks can only express a very limited set of basic emotions and human moods. As a result, it is often difficult if not impossible to share the exact emotional state with the reader in a written form.

Aiming to address this limitation (at least partially), the conducted case study suggested 9 participants to create their own to express very precise emotions, moods, or situations. As a result, each participant has proposed a unique emotion and a matching unique sign, none of which overlapped with each other. This project is rather an experiment, than a direct statement. Each of the newly-invented signs needs time for evolution, as well as the real demand from the society and the implementation in the digital technologies. A new sign should be recognizable by a group of people; it should exist in different typefaces and be accessible. In texting we often value minimum time delays, so probably will not search for hidden characters, rather type the most accessible symbols on a keyboard. Of course, it is opposite when it comes to experiments, artistic books or projects.

The practical experiment involved only 9 participants, but what if there were 100 or even 1,000 of them? Given the extreme range of human emotions and life situations, as well as the multitude of graphical forms to express them, how many unique, non-repeating signs would be proposed then? On the other hand, would it be possible to systematize

such a variety of signs and make them all recognizable and unambiguously understandable by all people? There is probably no immediate answer to all these questions, and the search is to be continued.

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A.   Annex A

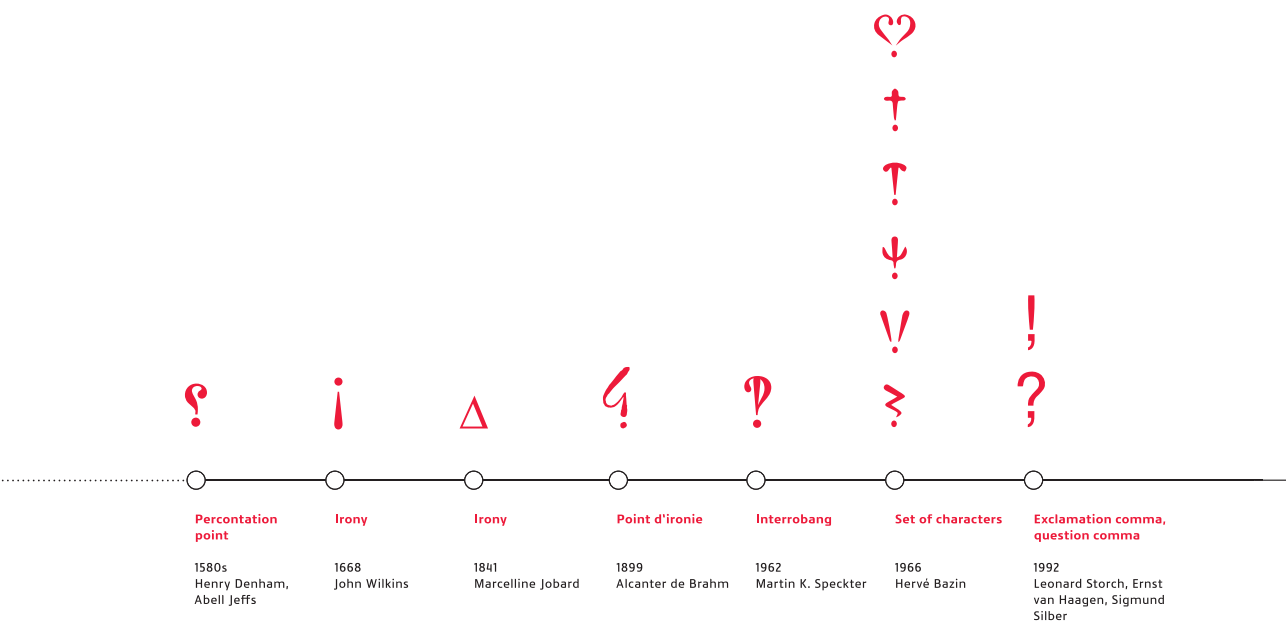|							
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))	:|)	:-D	@-)	B-)	0:D	:-*>	\:D/
:3	:{)	=^}	:~)	B-D	=^D	:-">	:-{}
=]	:-)	:-]	(*8	8-)	0:-)	<:o)	x{|:)
8D	(-:	I-)	:-}	%-)	:'-)	<|:0	*<(:)
X3	=D>	:*)	:'D	#-)	:.-)	*<:)	8|___)
XD	:">	$-)	:{D	B-}	8:-)	>.-)	*<|:o)

FIGURE 13. Smiling emoticons in different variations

B. Annex B

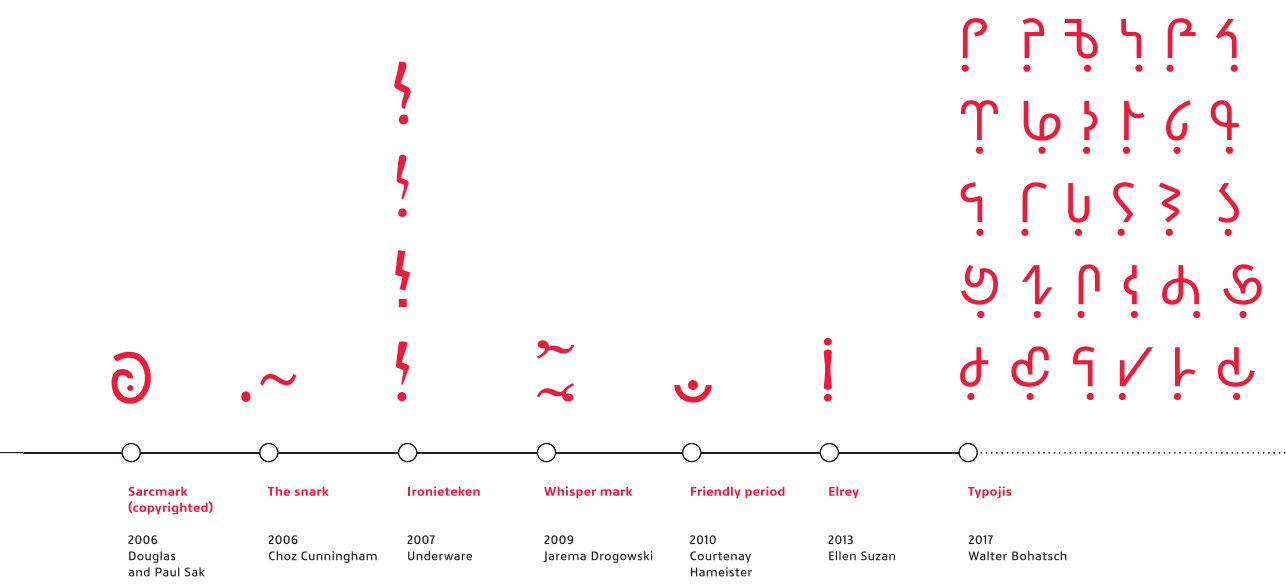FIGURE 14. Timeline of unconventional punctuation. Part 1/2

FIGURE 15. Timeline of unconventional punctuation. Part 2/2

C. Annex C

TO BE CONTINUED
it is supposed to suggest to the reader that the current storyline will continue shortly, but an additional scene or an episode will interrupt it for a while

Sorry, I must
be leaving
now ⲍ

EUREKA
it is not just an exclamation mark, since it additionally highlights the fact that there was some exploration, searching and trying at the background

Finally⸮
I managed
to solve this
annoying bug
in my code

SERENITY
the dot represents the integrity of body and mind; the closed eye that we can see under the dot represents relaxation

Sure ⸜

UNCERTAINTY
the sign shows a feeling when someone is not sure about the situation

I have some
plans, but
I will try ⸞

AND WHAT?
astonishment mixed with irritation/excitement

— I've met Mark!
   We started
   talking and
   I invited him
   for a dinner
   tonight.
— Great ⸕

SILENCE
sometimes you need to say something out of politeness, but you do not know what to write

— What did
   he tell you
   when I left
   yesterday?
— Nothing ⸏

DECISIVENESS

an indication of the fact that the author's opinion will not change

It's not going
to happen ⸚

THE CONVERSATION IS NOT OVER
the sign means that person is not satisfied with the result of the conversation

Will see ⸪

EMOTIONAL QUESTION

a combination of the exclamation mark and the question mark

Who are you ‽

SHAME
when a person is ashamed of what happened and wants to apologise

Hi... You know,
I am still
thinking about
what happened
yesterday ⸓

TERRIBLE EXCITEMENT
used for scary stories

You know
what happened
today⸮

HANGOVER
shows not just an emotional, but also a physical state

Omg dude,
the night was
amazing,
but today ⸜

FIGURE 16. New signs with descriptions and examples as suggested by their creators