# The Role of Punctuation in Translation

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*Abstract.* The objective of this paper is to address the problem of translating punctuation marks: is it really possible to translate punctuation the same way we translate vocabulary? or is it only a transfer of the functional use of punctuation marks from a source language to a target language? In order to study the role of punctuation marks in translation theories and practice, we first attempt to identify the nature and function of punctuation from a traductological perspective. The second part of our paper is a French-Arabic corpus analysis of the translation of punctuation marks. Our corpus analysis is based on Amin Maalouf's book *Les identités meurtrières* and its translation into Arabic.

## Introduction

Punctuation marks have an important role in forming a logical sentence in order to communicate accurate meaning. Nevertheless, few studies highlight the importance of punctuation in the translation process. Previous research on the topic of punctuation in translation consist of contrastive linguistic analysis from a functional perspective and is targeted towards translation students. Those studies, though important, are descriptive, not based on a bilingual corpus analysis to support their findings and focus on the grammatical aspect of punctuation, hence discarding the cognitive nature of those marks.

In this paper, we suggest different methods to translate punctuation marks based on translation theories and we observe the translation of

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punctuation by a professional translator based on a French-Arabic corpus of Amin Maalouf's *Les identités meurtrières* and its translation into Arabic. Our paper aims to highlight the important role of translating punctuation marks not only in sentence structure, but also in communicating the tacit meanings intended by the author.

## Related Works

Previous research on the importance of punctuation in translation either have a didactic approach centered towards translation students or a contrastive linguistic approach; we have failed to find a research paper that studies punctuation from a traductological perspective.

The didactic approach offers a method to train students to translate punctuation by relating it to the grammatical system of the source and target languages, and then to create benchmarks of the main differences. Spilka (1988) categorized those differences between French and English into the following:

– orthographic differences, such as the difference between English and French quotation marks;
– typographic differences, such as spaces before or after a punctuation mark;
– syntactic differences (Spilka gives the example of different French and English enumerations and adding punctuation between connectors, but this can also include differences in organizing independent and dependent clauses);
– textual differences[1].

Another didactic approach study is written by Mogahed (2012). In his paper, Mogahed tries to show the importance of punctuation in keeping or changing the meaning of the source text by using examples of English-Arabic translations. For example, he points out how the meaning changes in the following sentence when a semicolon is used instead of a comma (Mogahed, 2012, p. 3):

> I have taken several science courses this year; my favorite was neuroscience.
> I have taken several science courses this year, but my favorite was neuroscience.

Mogahed explains that joining the two independent clauses with a comma and a conjunction (but)

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1. By textual differences, Spilka refers to paragraph segmentation and the use of the typographic mark *alinea* to indicate a new paragraph. Although the topic of paragraph segmentation is, like punctuation, related to the organization and cohesion of ideas, we will focus in this paper on punctuation marks as linguistic signs.

changes the meaning slightly from the previous version; it emphasizes the contrast between the group of courses in the first clause and the single course in the second clause. (ibid.)

Although these studies are important, their interest is specifically for translation students and the examples they use are not based on a corpus[2]. Nevertheless, those studies make an important point: punctuation marks, in translation teaching and practice, are sometimes unstated. The reason for this might be that they are considered universal, so even if the standard use of punctuation is not respected, the TL reader will be able to decipher the ST meaning. This is also because general rules of punctuation (at the syntactic level) are almost similar in all languages: a comma always coordinates words and dependent clauses; a semicolon always coordinates independent clauses, etc.

Research based on contrastive linguistics (Alqinai, 2013; Ponge, 2011) focus on the importance of linguistic analysis of punctuation and on comparing the relationship between punctuation and sentence structure in a source and a target language. When both language systems are very distinct, orthographic marks are also added, for example, Alqinai mentions the absence of capitalization in Arabic and how, when necessary, capitalization is translated into round brackets or quotation marks. Ponge (2010) bases her linguistic analysis of punctuation on Nina Catach's work, and although her work is about punctuation in translation, most of her research paper is a about the nature of punctuation from a linguistic point of view. According to Ponge, who is inspired by N. Catach's work, punctuation is similar to ideograms that have an international connotation, which makes them "*semantically stable*" (Ponge, 2011, p. 124), and therefore, a creation of benchmarks for translators is easy.

Since contrastive linguistics is closely related to translation studies, such research work is important to highlight the relationship between punctuation and target text readability and organization of information. Although some translation techniques are mentioned, like back translation to insure that punctuation did not change the meaning in the source text, previous contrastive linguistics centered work on the subject fail to properly place punctuation within translation theories.

In our paper, we attempt to fill this aforementioned gap by attempting to integrate punctuation into existing translation theories, and we will demonstrate the role of punctuation in translation practice via a corpus analysis of Amin Maalouf's book *Les identitiés meurtrières* and its Arabic translation. Based on this analysis, we will see if the translation of punctuation is only functional[3], due to syntactic differences between both languages, or if there is a semantic translation to punctuation.

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2. The source of the examples is not mentioned in those studies.

3. What we call functional translation is the translation process of grammatical entities that do not have a meaning, but a function like tenses and pronouns.

In order to relate punctuation marks to translation theories, we searched for theories that focus on the form of the source and target text and its relation to meaning rather than theories that focus on equivalence[4] or on the question of fidelity in translation. We specifically attempt to give a traductological approach to the role of punctuation in translation through the works of Eugine Nida's *Toward a science of translating* (1964) and Marianne Lederer's interpretive method of translation (1994). In order to integrate punctuation to these theories, we find it necessary to categorize[5] the different roles of punctuation marks[6]:

1. Syntactic punctuation marks that organize knowledge in sentences and paragraphs and that hierarchize information, making some information essential to communicate in the text and other information less important or only necessary to clarify or enhance the essential information. These punctuation marks are the period, comma, double commas, semicolon, colon, parenthesis and double dashes.
2. Semantic punctuation marks that add a connotation that can only be communicated by punctuation such as quotation marks, question mark, exclamation point and ellipsis.
3. Punctuation marks that give reference to another author or speaker such as quotation marks, colon and dash.

## Form and Meaning in Translation Theories

Nida wrote his book *Toward a science of translating* to answer the dilemma translators face when translating literary work, which is whether to keep the translation literal even if this would result in a target text stylistically foreign to the target language, or to translate the meaning while changing the form to a stylistically acceptable one in the target language. This dilemma, which he calls "*the letter vs. the spirit*" (Nida, 1964, p. 3) is due to the fact that languages are very different; while translating literally is a kind of "protection" for the translator as a proof of fidelity to the text, it can hinder the communicative purpose of translation. In order to solve this dilemma, Nida referred to translation as a science rather than an art, providing a scientific description of the process of transmitting a

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4. One of the results of our corpus analysis is that change of punctuation in the target text is often the result of the translator's choice to change the form of the source text. Nevertheless, we found examples of punctuation translated by a functional equivalence.

5. This is a general categorization in order to integrate punctuation into translation theories; we suggest a slightly different categorization in our corpus analysis.

6. Due to the multi functionality of each punctuation mark, some punctuation marks exist in more than one category, and, if one conducts a monolingual corpus analysis of punctuation, all punctuation marks can exist in all categories in some languages, such as Arabic (Awad, 2013).

message from one language to another.  By considering translation a science, we separate translation from the art of writing and in that way, when a translator chooses to change the form of the source text, he is not writing a different literary text[7] but adapting a scientific process of translation. Nida sees translation as a practice that can be divided into three types:

1. Intralinguistic: within the same language using different words.
2. Interlinguistic:  or, as he calls it, translation proper, which is the transmission of verbal signs of a language by the verbal signs of another.
3. Intersemiotic: translating from one system of symbols to another.

Nida's interlinguistic translation process incorporates Chomsky's transformational grammar theory in order to produce a "science" of the translation process (Munday, 2008, p. 57), thus turning the practice of translating into a rigorous process of transferring knowledge and to organizing this knowledge in an accepted way in the TL. Nida's science of interlinguistic translation is a process of decoding the source text and recoding the target text: a sentence or a paragraph in the source text is called, by reference to its form, a *surface structure.* When translating, the surface structure is decoded in order to understand its *deep structure* (the message it conveys), and the translator recodes this deep structure into another surface structure in the target language.  In the final surface structure, the translator has to choose words and form according to the target language system in order to create a meaningful and readable content for the target audience[8].

Source sentence —— The message it conveys —— Target sentence

SL surface structure ——— Deep structure ——— TL surface structure

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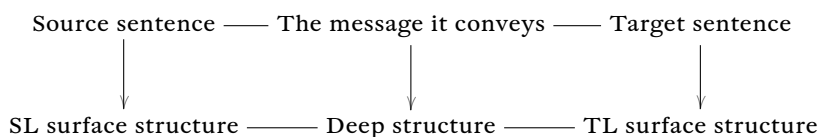
7. In the introduction of his book, Nida cites incidents where authors and reviewers of translations were reluctant to the communicative approach of translations for not being loyal to the stylistic aspects of the source text.  He gives an example of translations being criticized or rejected because the form of the target text was very different from the source text, which was "a descriptive essay of rhythmical sentences, simple phrases and well-chosen words." (Nida, 1964, p. 1), which, in result, made a back translation impossible.

8. This theory is similar to Catford's notion of "translation shifts" (Catford, 1965, p. 20), in (Munday, 2008, p. 95) and achieving a textual equivalence through different categories of shifts including structural shifts (syntactic structure) and rank shifts that refer to linguistic units such as clause, sentence etc. Although, like all other translation theories, punctuation is not mentioned, but we think that syntactic punctuation is implied as included in the "structural shifts".

We find that Nida's science of translation can be adapted in the process of translating punctuation. Creating a TL appropriate surface structure includes the formal aspects of punctuation, such as different spacing before and after a punctuation mark, and syntactic differences between two languages. An example of syntactic differences is the relationship between punctuation marks and connectors: using punctuation before, after or instead of a connector. Translating deep structure of punctuation focuses on the semantic properties of punctuation and on keeping the same hierarchy of knowledge of the ST deep structure. By applying Nida's science of translation, translators will focus on the deep structure of the source sentence and then recode it into a surface structure appropriate to the target language system instead of having a list of functions for punctuation marks and their equivalences in another language[9].

The connotative nature of punctuation marks adds a meaning that cannot be transmitted by words or gives connotation of the importance of information. Translators, therefore, need to acquire the skill of interpreting the use of punctuation in the source text: is punctuation used by the ST author an "auxiliary" for grammatical and syntactic purposes, a necessary tool for semantic connotation or a stylistic tool that transmits the author's individuality and spirit? We attempt to adapt this interpretative process to Marianne Lederer's interpretative approach to translation.

The interpretative approach to translation takes into account all compositions of a text: the linguistic elements as well as the extra linguistic elements that belong to printed characters (layout). The latter should be distinguished from linguistic elements because, according to Lederer, layout of the printed text is not taught in schools as language is[10]. Therefore, the translator must separate sentence structure and text structure when translating. The translation process includes three levels: language (words), sentence construction and text[11].

Although the different stages of the translation process in the interpretative method resembles Nida's stages (understanding, deverbalization and re-expression), Lederer is more focused on the cognitive aspect of translation. The first stage in the translation process is understating

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9. It is, however, important for translators to have a list of equivalences for nonexistent typographic marks (in the case of Arabic, capital letters and italics) and replacing them with punctuation when needed.

10. On this point, we disagree with Lederer because some layout elements, such as paragraph separation, is taught in schools. However, even though paragraph separation rules are universal (separation of paragraphs is related to separation or linking distinct ideas), we can notice that the number of paragraphs slightly differs when translating from one language to another. This difference can be explained by the separation of linguistic and extra linguistic elements in the translation process.

11. Lederer developed this process for interpretation and for written translation.

through reading the entire text and analyzing the intentions of the author before re-expressing those intentions in a TL. This includes vocabulary, segmentation, and punctuation (though the latter is not specifically mentioned by Lederer).

By applying Lederer's theory to the translation of punctuation marks, they will be considered as not only signs associated with a function, but also as holders of *cognitive complements* that are constructed in the language system and that are part of the reader's background knowledge. For example, in an Arabic reader's background knowledge, a double dash is used for parenthetical elements repeatedly written after the name of a religious or an authoritative figure. Therefore, the element between double dashes will be discarded or read with less attention. The translator would therefore translate the double dash into Arabic with another punctuation mark that holds the same cognition of the double dash in the source text. Another example is the colon that is rarely used in Arabic texts[12], unlike English or French where a colon is used to coordinate clauses.

## Contrastive Analysis of Punctuation and Its Role in Translation

In order to conduct a contrastive analysis of the use of punctuation marks between a source and a target text, We would categorize punctuation marks into the following:

1. Punctuation for syntactic purposes: this includes punctuation necessary for sentence structure (comma, semicolon, period) and the order of clauses. In this case, a contrastive analysis of punctuation is related to contrastive grammar. For example, how independent and dependent clauses are separated differently in two languages, how words are connected in case of enumeration (when to use a comma and when to use a semicolon, for example), and the relationship between the comma and connectors in a language. Although this contrastive analysis seems intuitive for translators, who have full master of source and target languages, questions regarding punctuation seem to occur often. For example, whether to put a space before or after a punctuation mark. Another question regarding the structural purposes is the attachment, or not, of a comma with the Arabic connectors *wāw* and *fāʾ*. Since both convey several meanings, the comma determines the meaning of those polysemic connectors. For example, when using a comma before *fāʾ*, the particle in this case conveys a cause/result relation, and when we don't use a comma before *fāʾ*, it

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12. In general, the colon is used in Arabic academic texts, dialogues (after the name of the speaker), and in newspaper titles.

indicates the chronological order in which verbs occurred. We can divide punctuation marks in this category into:

- Punctuation that divides clauses;
- Punctuation marks that are used with a connector;
- Punctuation marks that act as connectors: like the colon and the semicolon, for example.

For syntactic punctuation, literal translation is possible if both languages have similar grammatical systems (for example, Italian and French). In general, there is a degree of universality to the grammatical functions: punctuation marks are either separators of clauses or of sentences. The question of translating syntactic punctuation therefore lies in the language's preference in relating clauses using punctuation, another connector, or both, and in the different structure of clauses between both languages. Changes in placement of punctuation marks is, therefore, dependent on the target language and structuring sentences in a "native"[13] way.

2. Punctuation for hierarchization of information: to hierarchize information, double punctuation is used: a double comma, parenthesis, quotation marks for sentences, double dashes. In regards to the hierarchy of knowledge, punctuation marks have different connotations in different languages. For example, double dashes connote unimportance of information in Arabic, while in French the information would be more important if we use dashes instead of parenthesis. Extra linguistic knowledge of the role of punctuation in highlighting or marginalizing information is necessary to understand the writer's intentions and to translate them accordingly. Regarding this role, Literal translation of punctuation is not possible because each punctuation mark hierarchizes a text differently in different languages.

3. Punctuation for expressing emotions and intentions: like the exclamation point, question mark, ellipsis and quotation marks for words. In practice, translators often choose to keep punctuation for emotions and intentions as they are in the source text because they are cautious not to "over analyze" or over interpret them, even if their connotation is expressed by another punctuation mark in the target language[14].

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13. Changing syntactic punctuation of the source text is for the target text to become "natural" according to the target language syntactic rules so that the reader does not feel that the text is a translation. Most of the time, the target text is readable and understandable whether syntactic punctuation is translated literally or not, but the reader can notice the foreignness in language structure.

14. For example, irony in Arabic is often expressed in Arabic literal and journalistic texts by an ellipsis before the word and an exclamation point after it; however, translations usually keep the ironic quotation marks when used in the source text.

When translators analyze the components of a source text, syntactic and hierarchical punctuation marks are considered as part of the written language system. On the other hand, punctuation marks for emotions and intentions are dependent on the author's style. Therefore, translators try to keep them as they are to protect the authenticity and the spirit of the writer who, for translators, uses punctuation marks for emotions and intentions as tacit marks that are understandable in the text, but what is understood should not be translated.

## Corpus Analysis

Our French-Arabic corpus analysis is of Amin's Maalouf's book *Les iden- tités meurtrières* (Maalouf, 1998) and its Arabic translation (Maalouf, 2011). Our analysis process was to collect punctuation from the source and tar- get text, classify them according to the aforementioned categories and analyze the translator's behavior in translating punctuation and why did she choose to punctuate her text differently.

After collection of punctuation in the ST and the TT, the result was that the translator used less punctuation than in the original version:

| Punctuation mark | Number of occurrences in the source text | Number of occurrences in the target text |
|---|---|---|
| Period | 1,097 | 911 |
| Comma | 3,784 | 2,415 |
| Semicolon | 242 | 86 |
| Exclamation point | 25 | 24 |
| Question mark | 164 | 163 |
| Colon | 77 | 70 |
| Double dashes | 159 | 132 |
| ellipsis | 36 | 42 |
| Quotation marks | 275 | 275 |
| italics | 6 | 0 |

From the table, we see that Amin Maalouf's punctuation for this book is classified as follows:

1. Syntactic punctuation: period, comma, semicolon;
2. Punctuation for hierarchization of information: quotation marks, double dashes, and italics (as a typographical mark);
3. Punctuation for emotions or intentions: question mark[15], exclama- tion point, ellipsis, quotation marks.

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15. The question mark can also be syntactic if its use is to mark the end of a ques- tion. In this paper, we categorized the interrogative nature of the question mark as "intention".

From the previous table, we can say that the translator chose not to translate some punctuation marks and that she chose to use connectors instead of punctuation in some sentences. We will show examples of sentences that were punctuated differently in the translation.

## Examples From the Corpus

### Quotation Marks

In the following example, both quotation marks and the words between quotation marks are omitted in the translation. The author intended to add a sarcastic connotation to the expression by using quotation marks. The translator, however, chose to omit the full segment instead of translating it. Our hypothesis is that since the segment is part of a long list of enumeration of the physical aspects of a person, the translator felt that removing a part of this enumeration would not affect the general meaning of the sentence.

Les autres lui font sentir, par leurs paroles, par leurs regards, qu'il est pauvre, ou boiteux, ou petit de taille, ou "**haut-sur-pattes**", ou basané, ou trop blond, ou circoncis, ou non circoncis, ou orphelin—ces innombrables différences, minimes ou majeures, qui tracent le contours de chaque personnalité

فالآخرون يُشعرونه، بكلامهم وبنظراتهم أنه فقير، أو أظلع، أو أسمر البشرة، أو شديد البياض، أو مختوناً، أو غير مختون، أو يتيما إنّ كل هذه الإختلافات العديدة، الثانوية منها والجوهرية، هي التي ترسم ملامح كل شخصية،

In the following example, the translator did not consider the importance of highlighting the word between quotation marks to draw the reader's attention. By omitting the quotation marks, the author's intention was not accomplished. The bold character[16] would be an equivalence for quotation marks in this case.

Si l'on vit dans un pays où l'on a peur d'avouer qu'on se nomme Pierre, ou Mahmoud, ou Baruch, et que cela dure depuis quatre générations, ou quarante; si l'on vit dans un pays où l'on n'a même pas de faire un tel "**aveu**", parce qu'on porte

فإذاعاش المرء في بلد يخشى فيه الإعتراف بأن اسمه بيير أو محمود أو باروخ، وكان هذا الوضع مستمراً منذ أربعة أجيال أو أربعين جيلا ، إّذا عاش المرء في بلد لا يحتاج فيه إلى مثل هذا **الإعتراف** لأنه يحمل أصلاً على وجهه

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16. We added the bold character both in the French text and in the Arabic translation of the example.

déjà sur son visage la couleur de son appartenance, parce qu'on fait partie de ceux qu'on appelle dans certaines contrées "les minorités visibles"; alors on n'a pas besoin de longues explications pour comprendre que les mots de "majorité" et de "minorité" n'appartiennent pas toujours au vocabulaire de la démocratie.

لون انتمائه، ولأنه ينتمي إلى أولئك الذين يعرفون في بعض الدول «بالأقليات المرئية»، فلا حاجة عندئذٍ لتفسيرات مطولة كي نفهم أن مفردات على غرار «أكثرية» و «أقلية» لا تندرج دوما في قاموس الديمقراطية.

## The Comma

In the following example, the author used a double comma as a form of hierarchizing information: what is between double commas has a double role in the French sentence: it highlights the discriminating nature of the question regarding his origins and, more importantly, it expresses the feelings of the author, who is not offended by the question. Although the main meaning is the same in the Arabic sentence, the role of the double comma was not translated.

[...] que de fois m'a-t-on demandé, avec les meilleures intentions du monde, si je me sentais "plutôt français" ou " plutôt libanais"

فكَم من مرّة سألني البعض عن طيب نيّة إن كنت أشعر بنفسي «فرنسيا» أم «لبنانيا».

The comma is often translated by the particle *wāw*, especially in enumeration.

Qu'il s'agisse de la langue, des croyances, du mode de vie, des relations familiales, des goûts artistiques ou culinaires, les influences françaises, européennes, occidentales se mêlent en lui à des influences arabes, berbères, africaine, [...]

سواء تعلّق الأمر باللغة والمعتقدات وأسلوب العيش والروابط الأسرية والأذواق الفنية أو أنواع المأكل لأن التأثيرات الفرنسية والأوروبية والغربية تمتزج في كيانه بالتأثيرات العربية والبربرية والأفريقية والإسلامية [...]

## The Colon

As we mentioned previously, the use of a colon gives an academic or journalistic aspect to Arabic text. Therefore, the translator uses connectors that convey the same meaning of the colon. In the first example, the translator translated the colon by the particle *kāf* (used before examples), and in the second example, she translated the colon by *wa hiya taqūm ʿalā* (it is based on).

Puis des idées nouvelles ont lentement réussi à s'imposer : l'idée que tout homme avait des droits qu'il fallait définir et respecter

ثم بدأت أفكار جديدة تفرض نفسها شيئاً فشيئاً كالفكرة القائلة إن كل إنسان يتمتع بحقوق يجب تحديدها وإحترامها،

[…] il y a un jeu mental éminemment révélateur : imaginer un nourrisson que l'on retirerait de son milieu à l'instant même de sa naissance pour le placer dans un environnement différent

[…] ثمة لعبة ذهنية معبّرة للغاية، وهي تقوم على تصور طفل رضيع فصل عن محيطه منذ ولادته،ونقل عن بيئة مختلفة عن بيئته الأصلية،

## The Period

The translator often chose to omit the period in order to connect two sentences instead in the original text for syntactic reasons. In the first example, the two sentences in the source text are semantically related to each other because the second sentences is an example of *éléments* in the first sentence. The preferred structure in Arabic would be to include the examples in the same sentence. In the second example, the second sentence starts with *mais* (but), and in Arabic, it is grammatically incorrect to use a period before *mais*, so keeping the period in the translation is impossible in this case.

[…] une foule d'éléments qui ne se limitent évidemment pas à ceux qui figurent, sur les registres officiels. Il y a, […]

[…] جملة عناصر لا تقتصر بدهيا فحسب على تلك الواردة في السجلات الرسمية،ومن بينها، […]

Le bon sens voudrait qu'il puisse revendiquer pleinement cette double appartenance. Mais rien dans les lois […]

ويفترض المنطق السليم أن يستطيع هذا الشخص المجاهرة بانتمائه المزدوج،ولكن لا شيء في القوانين […]

## Conclusion

Although translation theories mention textual equivalence to explain change of form and structure, they do not mention punctuation as an important element to achieve this structure. We believe the reason for this omission is either because translation theorists think it is a given addition not necessary to mention—because its inclusion is implied when we say text or structure—, or because of the highly interpretative nature of punctuation that might put the fidelity to the source text at risk if translated. In other words, if punctuation is overanalyzed, the process

might hinder the transmission of meaning since these extralinguistic units are highly interpretative both at the level of hierarchization of knowledge and of adding information or "emotions". This explains why, according to our findings, translators prefer to omit punctuation if it does not have a syntactic function in the original text and only translate the main meaning of a sentence. In doing so, their translation is incomplete because they exclude tacit information that the author expressed using punctuation marks, especially if it is a literary text. This omission also proves that punctuation marks do not have universal meanings or functions. In order to translate punctuation marks, they must be regarded as signs with a semantic capacity equal to words, and therefore, should be divided into different semantic categories that are specific to a language.

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