

Typography: A “punctuated” interpretation

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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.

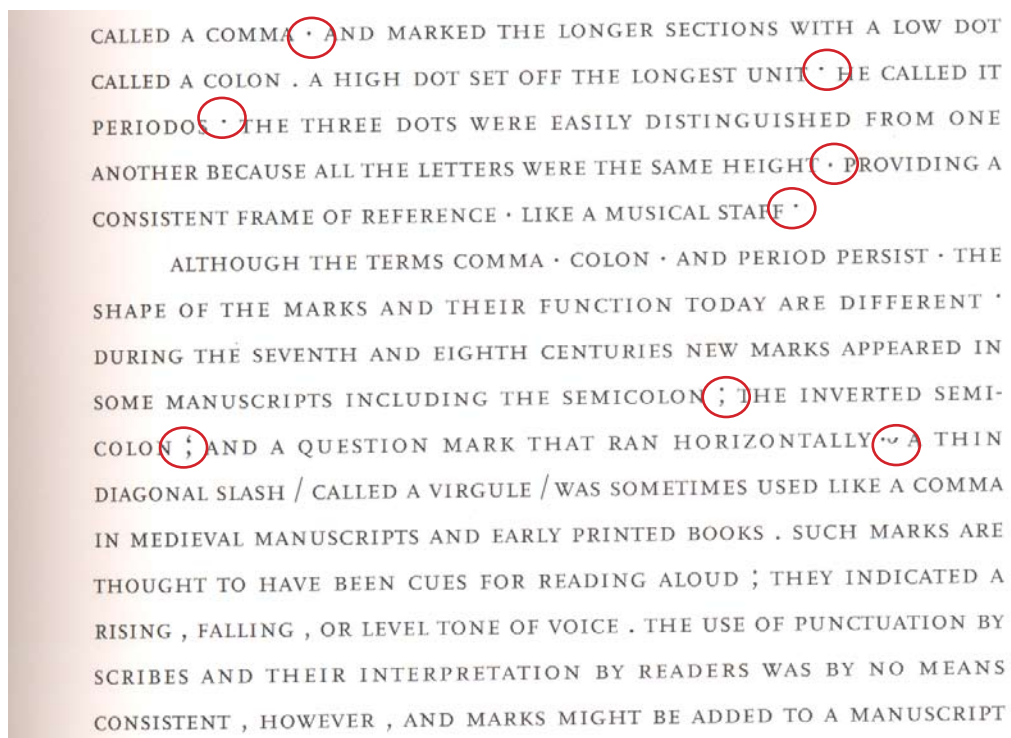


Figure 2. Early punctuation marks

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.

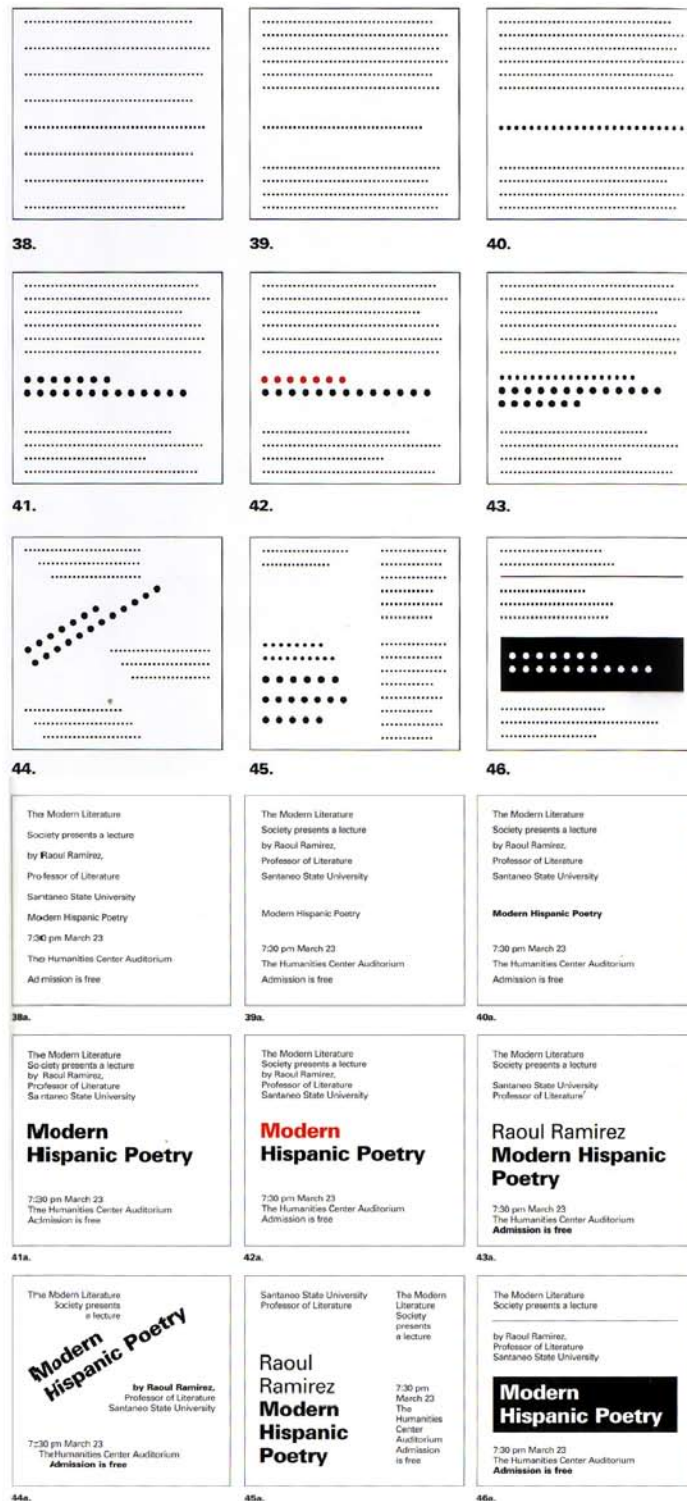


Figure 3. John Roach, heirarchy grids. Other than the graphic symbols for punctuations, effective typographic design makes use of space and style of typefaces to articulate text. By changing space, type style/size, and colour, varied approaches to text articulation can be created to suit the task at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

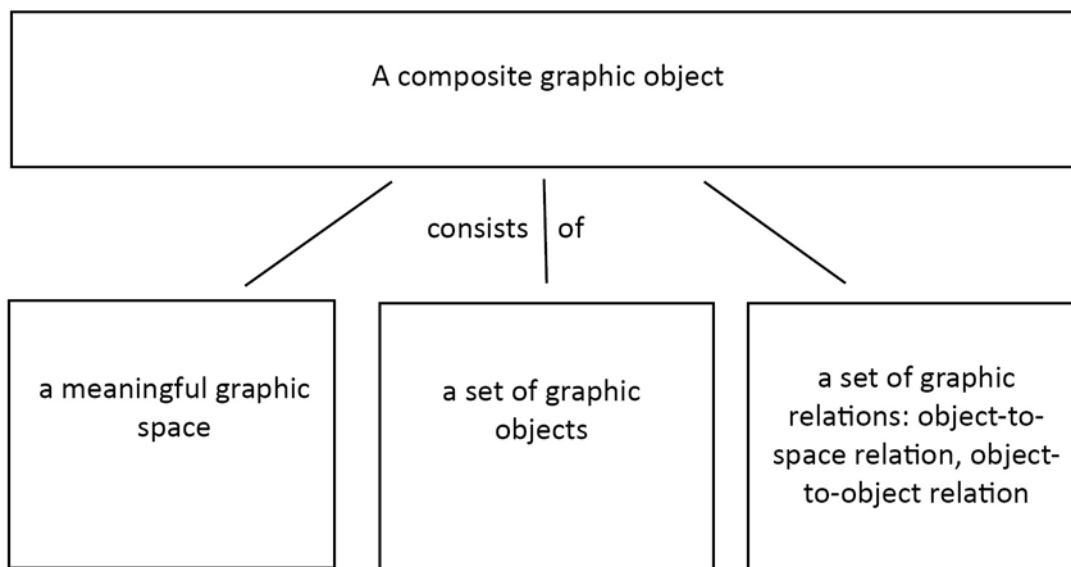


Figure 4. Graphic object, space and their relationship in a composition.

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’) |

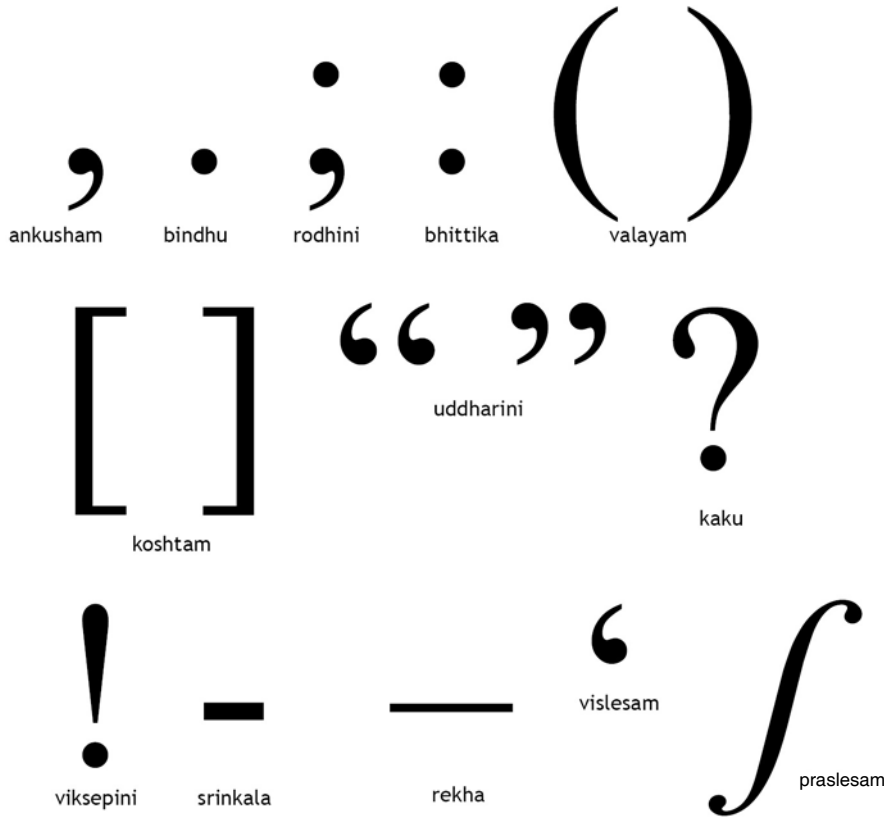


Figure 6. Malayalam names for punctuations.

(In printing, there is also the parenthetical dash (m-dash) which probably was not in use in English language at that time.)

The advent of printing, spearheaded by Western missionaries, and later, the influence of Western media, establishment of vernacular newspapers modeled on the English counterparts etc. gave rise to the wide-spread use of punctuation marks in printed and web communications. Comma, full-stop, question mark, quotation marks and exclamation marks are some of the most commonly used punctuations used in Malayalam. End of the line hyphens, a hallmark of English language in print set in justified columns, are not used in Malayalam typesetting. This is the case even with narrow newspaper columns set justified. Apostrophes are hardly used since Malayalam manages it with an appropriate suffix [such as *nte* or *ude*: *daivathinte* (God's), *pakshiyude* (bird's) etc.]. Though *Kerala panineeyam* recommended use of apostrophe for missing letters in compound words and end-of-the-line hyphens, they were rarely practiced.

നടത്തിപ്പ മാത്രമല്ല എല്ലാം ഞങ്ങളാണ് -കെ.എസ്.ആർ.ടി.സി. JnNURM ബസ് കിട്ടിയത് നഗരസഭയ്ക്ക്, പദ്ധതി കേന്ദ്ര സർക്കാരിന്റേതല്ല

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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!

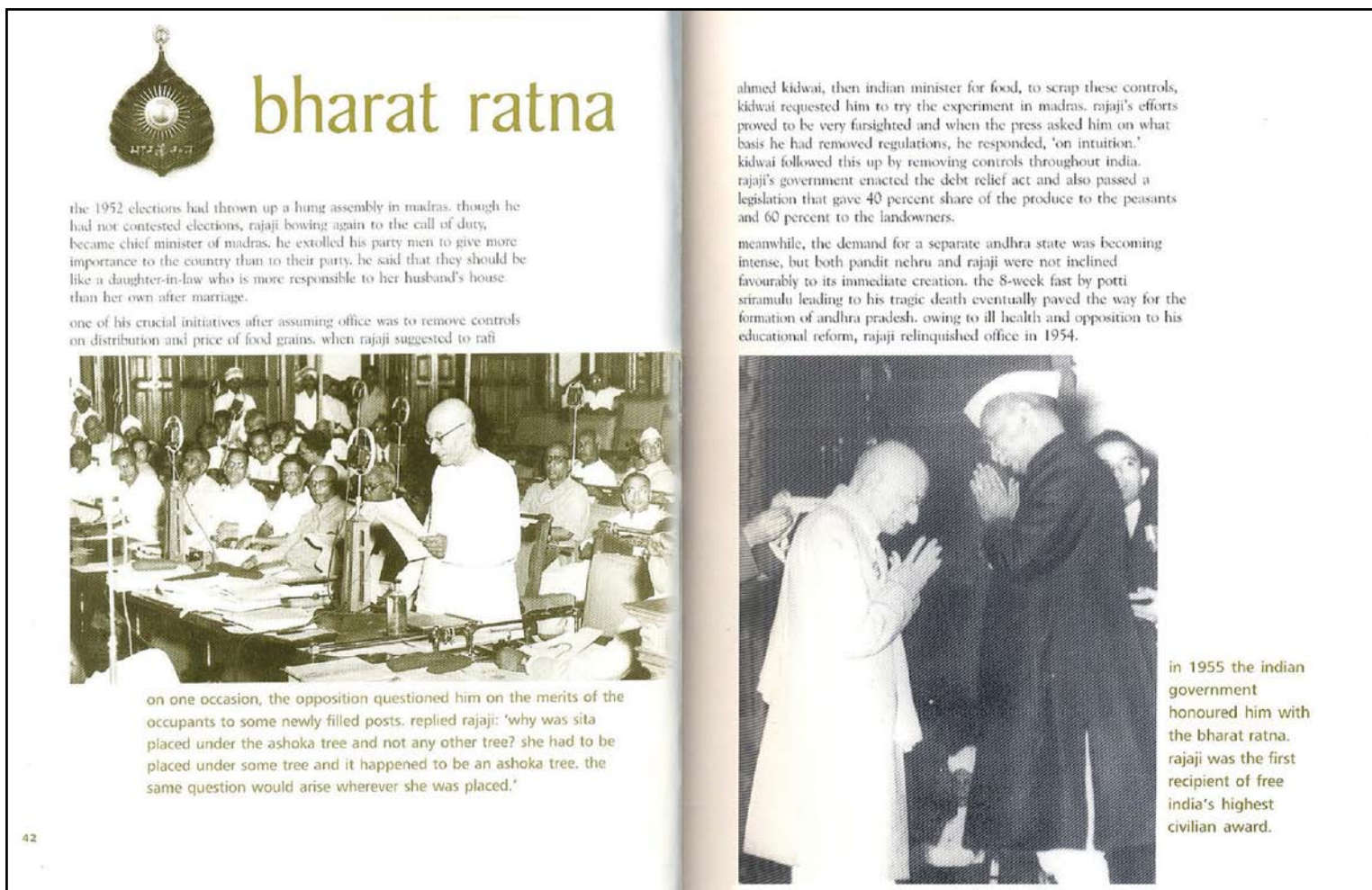


Figure 9. An English book designed entirely in lower case type.



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

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