
‘His maiestie chargeth, that no person shall engrose any maner of corne’. The Standardization of Punctuation in Early Modern English Legal Proclamations

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Abstract

Punctuation is historically noted to develop from the rhetorical to the grammatical, from the speaker to the reader, the Renaissance standing out as the transitional period with the adoption of syntactic and pragmatic functions to organize the written information. This standardization is elsewhere regarded as a consequence of the introduction of Caxton’s printing press in England, the increasing activity of Westminster’s Royal Chancery, and a growing number of professional scribes engaged in the writing of all sort of documents, from guild’s records to private letters.

The study of historical punctuation, however, has been mostly based on Old and Middle English handwritten material, literary and scientific texts in particular. Unfortunately, the Early Modern English period has been an exception with the publication of a limited number of studies investigating the scribal attitudes in different text-types, the list including scientific, legal and literary texts, drama in particular (Calle-Martín and Miranda-García 2008: 356–360). The unexplored condition of Early Modern English punctuation is even more significant in the particular case of printed texts, despite their active participation in the process of standardization. Legal material is not an exception, proclamations being “one of the most overlooked categories of printed material in the field of early modern history” (Kyle 2015: 771). In the light of this, the present study therefore analyses the punctuation system in Early Modern English printed legal material with the following objectives: a) to provide the inventory of marks of punctuation in Early Modern English printed texts; b) to offer a detailed account of the use and pragmatic functions of these symbols; and c) to assess the level of standardization of punctuation in these sources.

The present study relies on *The Corpus of Early Modern English Statutes* (compiled by Anu Lehto at the University of Helsinki), containing approximately 214,000 words for the historical period 1491-1707 (Lehto 2013: 239). The corpus is divided into 25-year sub-periods for diachronic comparison and they have been compiled to include two proclamations for each time period, with samples printed during the reign of each sovereign. Legal material has been chosen in view of a) its orality, written to be read aloud; b) its conservativeness, hostile to individual creativity in favour of the standard practice; and c) its complex syntax, requiring a complex set of marks for all kinds of syntactic relationships.

*Speaker

This material has allowed us to gather conclusive data to ascertain a) the existence of an inventory of punctuation marks with a preconceived set of rules, corroborating an ongoing process of specialization at that time; and b) more importantly, the historical development of particular punctuation symbols, offering grounds as to the actual rise and fall of particular symbols and their functions in the history of English.

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Keywords: Early Modern English, proclamations, punctuation, standardization