

The Well Bred Sentence

Chapter 9: Speech Marks and Other Raised Commas

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Contact: sophie.johnson@proofreadereditorwriter.co.uk

A basic fact

There is a considerable departure between the English and the American conventions of using the raised commas. This departure is specifically in the placing of the punctuation mark of a direct-speech sequence in relation to the closing raised comma. In the American convention, the closing raised comma contains all punctuation marks of the sentence or sentence part. The English convention is rather more complicated. This Chapter will discuss only the English convention. (There are many discussions available of the American convention.)

Function

The function of raised commas is to mark:

- attributed speech;
- quotation;
- ironic use;
- reference.

The raised commas are always a set of two marks. Traditionally, the opening mark has a bottom curl rather like the figure 6, [‘] and the closing mark has a top curl rather like the figure nine 9 [’].

Attributed speech

Attributed-speech marks show that the writer is reporting what someone said by quoting that person:

‘The English pub is not the special place it is cracked up to be’, John remarked wryly.

A report of what someone said can be made without quoting. In such a report, there is no role for attributed-speech marks because no speech is attributed:

John said that the English pub is not the special place it is cracked up to be.

Punctuating the attributed-speech marked sentence

Only the words that quote a person are enclosed by attributed-speech marks, and only the markers that punctuate the quoted words are contained in that enclosure. In this sentence, the exclamation mark punctuates the words quoted to mark that they are the words *he* shouted. The exclamation mark is part of the quotation:

‘Will you all be quiet for a moment!’ he shouted.

Quotation within a quotation

Quite commonly, the person quoted also quotes. In that event, the full text of the person quoted is contained between single attributed-speech-marks, and that person's own quotation is marked by double attributed-speech marks:

‘Did you hear him shout “will you all be quiet for a moment”?’ she asked her friend’

In the foregoing sentence, *she* is the person quoted. But *she* also quotes. So both what *she* said and what *she* quoted are part of the text that quotes *she*, who is quoted to have said: ‘Did you hear him shout?’ The full text of what *she* said, however, includes her own quotation of *him*: *Will you all be quiet for a moment?* Both what she said and what she quoted are contained by **the dominant attributed-speech mark**, which in the foregoing sentence is the single attributed-speech mark.

Notice that the dominant attributed-speech mark contains the punctuation mark (in this sentence, the question mark) that marks the entire quoted sentence.

Just to be awkward...

The irritating thing is that not all publishing houses observe the convention that the dominant attributed-speech marker is the single set of attributed-speech marks. Although this is the most commonly observed convention, some publishing houses still prefer to use the double set of attributed-speech marks as the dominant marker:

When the double attributed-speech mark is the dominant marker, the second quotation is contained between single attributed-speech marks:

“Did you hear him shout ‘will you all be quiet for a moment’?” she asked her friend.

Whichever of these two conventions the writer chooses to use, consistency is essential! Either way, the quotation within a quotation loses its punctuation mark. And the attributing sentence, in this case, *she asked her friend*, is begun with a lower case letter.

Quoting a text

Attributed-speech marks are not used when the sequence quoted is an extract from an extended text. Instead, the quoted text is displayed as an indented paragraph. The font is usually dropped to a size smaller than the text in which it features as a quotation. But too much reduction of print size can be rather hard on the reader. Appreciating this, many publishing houses do not drop font size at all:

It is no longer fashionable to engage in work-a-day efforts to determine what a novel is. These days one is expected to master critical theory and the jiggery-pokery of its terms, subscribe to one or another of its political correctnesses, and talk in terms of them. But critical theorists' tools give me neither pleasure nor insight. I benefit more from reading, say, DH Lawrence, who speaks in human terms.

Attributed-speech marks and the comma

The guiding principle is that only those punctuation marks that punctuate the quoted sequence may be enclosed by attributed-speech marks:

‘Papa, do you think I can be a proper actress when I grow up?’ she asked innocently.

This principle holds good even when an attributing sentence interrupts a quoted-speech sequence. In this sentence, the comma after *Papa* belongs to the speech sequence *Papa, do you think I can be a proper actress when I grow up?*, and is therefore naturally enclosed by the final attributed-speech mark:

‘Papa,² she asked innocently, ‘do you think I can be a proper actress when I grow up?’

The fiction-convention comma

There is an annoyingly prevalent convention in fiction that insists on slapping in a comma before the closing attributed-speech mark even when that comma does not belong to the quoted speech sequence. It is a convention that very few publishers ignore:

‘They seem to think,’ he observed, ‘that we are prisoners here.’

The comma after *think* is not a part of the quoted-speech sequence: *They seem to think that we are prisoners here*. So logically, the closing attributed-speech mark should not enclose the comma, which in this case demarcates the sequence that interrupts the quoted text *he observed*. But the champions of the fiction-convention comma are not much bothered by this logic.

Confining the fiction-convention comma

The fiction-convention comma should be confined to novels and short stories. But it is so insidious that some publications use it even when they are reporting actual, not fictional, speech:

‘Life demands that the earth should produce and that livestock units should produce because that produce is greatly needed by our society,’ the visiting statesman told the meeting.

MISUSED FICTION-CONVENTION COMMA

If we must respect the fiction-convention comma, then we should at least confine it to fiction. The comma in the foregoing sentence correctly demarcates the attributing sentence *the visiting statesman told the meeting*. But that comma should not have been enclosed by the speech mark:

‘Life demands that the earth should produce and that livestock units should produce because that produce is greatly needed by our society,’ the visiting statesman told the meeting.

Attributed-speech marks and paragraphs in fiction convention

The following text is an extract from a short story. (Its paragraphs are numbered only for easy reference.) Green font picks out the narrator’s remarks. The rest of the text consists of the actual words of characters, i.e., of direct speech. Those words are contained between quotation marks.

1. ‘He’s too conventional to be evil.’
2. ‘Peter?’ she almost protested. ‘You described him differently, once.’
3. ‘That was before I’d met him. When I did he took away all scope for fantasy.’ Pretending a need to still her fidgeting fingers, he clasped her hands in his. ‘This is the seamy side of me, darling.’ Fixing the inert gaze of one who intends confession then baulks at the ice-water of it, he maintained

an irresolute silence before plunging. ‘I thought at one time, when you went to him, that he was going to cut you about. In fact, I hoped he would. So that I could get to be the one who rescues you.

4. ‘I lied when I told you I’d hoped to find you happy. So read from this that I would have found the rogue in him if I could have. And I would have worked on making you see it. But I didn’t. So I haven’t,’ he economised droll afterthought with a smile, hoping his affability might head off her brewing storm.

That a character has begun to speak is indicated by the open-attributed-speech mark. That he has finished speaking is indicated by the close-attributed-speech mark. When another character begins to speak, a new paragraph is opened, and the same process with the attributed-speech marks is repeated. Only one character speaks in one paragraph. A paragraph is never shared by speakers. As speakers change, a new paragraph opens. This procedure is evident in the paragraphs numbered 1, 2 and 3 in the extract above.

If a character’s speech extends over several paragraphs, and is not interrupted by the narrator’s sequences, the beginning of each paragraph is marked with the open-attributed-speech mark, but only the paragraph in which he finishes speaking is marked by the close-attributed-speech mark. Note in the text above that the open-attributed-speech mark heads paragraphs 3 and 4, although the speaker has not changed. The close-attributed-speech mark appears only when that character has finished speaking at the end of paragraph 4.

Note also, in paragraphs 2, 3 and 4, that direct-speech sequences are closed when the narrator’s sequences intervene.

The raised commas as marks of reference

Careful writers use raised commas to distinguish words to which they *refer* from words they *use*. The following sentences illustrate the difference between using a word and referring to it:

Western European **culture** has long admired the habits of Third World cultures without adapting any of them.

USING THE WORD ‘CULTURE’

Every time I hear the word **{culture}** I reach for my revolver.

REFERRING TO THE WORD ‘CULTURE’

The raised commas as marks of irony and sarcasm

Raised commas around a word or an expression can indicate that the writer is using them tongue-in-cheek to modify their literal or commonly-accepted meaning:

Police sources have said that car theft is now an ‘industry’ that has attracted organised crime to its huge profits.

‘Industry’ is the name normally given to legitimate business enterprise. The raised commas call attention to the irony in using it to name a lucrative criminal activity.

The writer of the next sentence alerts the reader to the irony with which he is using the expression *the satisfaction that my work gives me*. His raised commas point out the disjunction between what he says about his attitude to the firm that employs him and what that attitude really is.

I talked at length about ‘the satisfaction my work gives me’, knowing meanwhile that I am doing the giving, and that the only satisfaction in my employment is my employer’s.

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