

**Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Palackého**



**Punctuation Mistakes in English Resulting  
in Ambiguity**

**(Diplomová práce)**

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# **Punctuation Mistakes in English Resulting in Ambiguity**

(Diplomová práce)

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## **Abstract**

The master's thesis is focused on the analysis of the effects of an incorrect use of punctuation. The aim of the thesis was to describe fundamental punctuation rules in British English, to compare them to Czech punctuation rules, to characterize the concept of ambiguity, and to analyse the effects of punctuation mistakes in English on the reader. For this purpose, research was conducted via questionnaire in order to analyse the respondents' interpretations of grammatical and ungrammatical sentences and whether they result in ambiguity or not. The sub-objective of the research was to analyse the respondents' ability to distinguish correctly punctuated sentences and the ability to punctuate sentences correctly. The results showed that punctuation mistakes certainly result in ambiguity as various respondents interpreted the meanings of individual examples differently. In conclusion, the ability to punctuate a text correctly is the only way to prevent punctuation ambiguity.

## **Key words**

ambiguity, punctuation, English, punctuation marks, punctuation rules

## **Abstrakt**

Diplomová práce je zaměřená na zkoumání důsledků nesprávného užití interpunkčních znamének v anglickém jazyce. Cílem práce bylo popsat a shrnout základní interpunkční pravidla britské angličtiny, porovnat je s českými interpunkčními pravidly, vysvětlit pojem nejednoznačnost a analyzovat dopady interpunkčních chyb v angličtině. Za tímto účelem byl proveden výzkum prostřednictvím dotazníku, jehož cílem bylo analyzovat interpretace gramatických a negramatických příkladů souvětí a to, zda se projevují v nejednoznačnosti. Dílčím cílem výzkumu bylo analyzovat schopnost respondentů rozlišit souvětí se správnou interpunkcí a schopnost správně využívat interpunkční znaménka. Z výsledků je patrné, že chyby v interpunkci se opravdu projevují v nejednoznačnosti, neboť interpretace souvětí s nesprávnou interpunkcí se u respondentů lišily. Jediným spolehlivým způsobem, jak předejít nejednoznačnosti, je správně a gramaticky užívat interpunkční znaménka.

## **Klíčová slova**

nejednoznačnost, interpunkce, anglický jazyk, interpunkční znaménka, pravidla interpunkce

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a uvedla jsem úplný seznam citované a použité literatury.

V Olomouci dne 05.05.2022

**Ing. Anna Břežná**

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English is, like any other language, ambiguous and punctuation mistakes can certainly change the intended meaning of the sentence. The aim of the thesis is to define punctuation rules in English, compare them to the Czech punctuation rules and analyse the effects of incorrect punctuation on the reader. The student will focus on the grammatical rules of punctuation in English and the nature of ambiguity and will conduct a research concerning the effects of both grammatically correct and incorrect examples of punctuation in English and whether they result in ambiguity or not.

Seznam doporučené literatury:

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# 1 Introduction

Ambiguity is a phenomenon that we encounter every day both in written and spoken language. Specifically, written language with regard to incorrect usage of punctuation marks can be indistinct and obscure. English can be, like any other language, ambiguous and punctuation mistakes can certainly change the intended meaning of the sentence. In today's busy and digital world people are omitting punctuation signs and as a result of that words, phrases and even whole sentences can be interpreted differently than initially desired, resulting in ambiguity. To some people, punctuation is invisible, they simply do not use it, and others did not obtain the knowledge to use it correctly. When it comes to written language, punctuation ambiguity is a serious difficulty for readers since the intended meaning cannot be verified as easily as it could have been in a spoken language.

The aim of the thesis was to describe and characterize the concept of ambiguity, punctuation rules in British English, compare them to the Czech punctuation rules and analyse the effects of incorrect punctuation on the reader. For this purpose, research was conducted whose aim was to analyse the effect of both grammatical and ungrammatical examples of various sentences and whether they result in ambiguity or not. The sub-objective of the research was to analyse the respondents' ability to distinguish correctly punctuated sentences and the ability to punctuate sentences correctly.

The thesis is divided into theoretical and practical part. The theoretical part of the thesis includes two main chapters: Punctuation and Ambiguity. In the theoretical part, I summarize and describe punctuation rules and standards, and the concept of ambiguity as well. The two seemingly unconnected topics are subsequently interconnected in the practical part of the thesis which focuses on the research conducted for the purpose of this thesis and the analysis of its results.

In the theoretical part of the thesis, the grammatical and punctuation aspect of British English were described along with individual punctuation marks and the description of their use. The main punctuation standards were subsequently compared with Czech punctuation rules. I would like to emphasise that the focus of this thesis was mainly British English since American and British English use distinct punctuation standards. By standards I mean rather recommendations

and suggestions as English is more forgiving than Czech when it comes to punctuation considering that the choice to apply light or heavy punctuation is up to the author. On the contrary, Czech language has complex sentence structure and punctuation rules which are predominantly compulsory and must be met.

In this thesis, I derived information from various grammatical and linguistic sources including traditional grammar books but also contemporary and modern documents and handbooks. The individual sources differ in the amount of information they cover on the topic of punctuation, some of them are less thorough in the characterization of the rules. Mostly, I acquired the facts from *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* by Huddleston and Pullum (2002) and from *The Chicago Manual of Style* by The University of Chicago Press (2017) as I find these sources to be the most detailed and comprehensive in covering the amount of information on the topic. Although *The Chicago Manual of Style* was published in USA, it covers both British and American English and the individual differences between the two systems are clearly distinguished in the manual. I find this source to be the most precise and detailed in relation to description of punctuation rules; moreover, it is clearly structured and well arranged.

With regard to academic thesis and documents, I would certainly recommend relying on the sources mentioned above as they describe in-depth grammar and punctuation rules and explain them on specific examples. However, searching for information in books may be lengthy; fortunately, nowadays there are many websites and online manuals which share information on the topic and make a search for a specific information much easier in an online environment. One of the most favourite grammar tools is Grammarly which is an application detecting, rephrasing, and correcting mistakes in a text. Of course, I am not suggesting relying only on online tools; nevertheless, they are a useful addition to a study of academic sources.

The second chapter of the theoretical part focuses on the notion of ambiguity from a pragmatic perspective. The chapter focuses on the definition of ambiguity and the differentiation of the phenomenon from other concepts it often gets mistaken for, specifically vagueness, generality, fuzziness, or polysemy. Three types of ambiguity are described in the chapter as well.

In the practical part of the thesis, the methodology of the research was described along with the preparation and realization phase of the research itself. The research focused on speakers of English who actively use the language, without age or gender restrictions. Both native and non-native English speakers participated in the research.

## **2 Punctuation**

In this chapter, the theoretical aspects of punctuation in British English are described and subsequently compared to the Czech punctuation rules. The chapter includes discussions about punctuation definition, punctuation functions, punctuation indicators and characters, primary, and secondary boundary marks. It is by no means a complete description of all punctuation rules, but rather a summary of most common phenomena which may result in ambiguity. The theoretical information presented in this chapter was used as a foundation for completion of the practical part of the thesis.

### **2.1 Punctuation in English**

Punctuation developed and underwent many changes over time until it acquired contemporary punctuation standards which are followed and respected by the community. It was not until the 5th century B.C. that the Greek began to use actual punctuation marks such as “vertically arranged dots” and the Romans started to utilize marks to indicate pauses. Punctuation developed massively after the invention of printing in the 14th and 15th century which necessitated the creation of standard punctuation system (Gulsara 2020, 343).

It is important to note that for the purpose of the thesis, the discourse was focused on British English punctuation rules as British and American English punctuation systems function differently. Although Yaffe (2020, 2) argues that no accurate punctuation standards for English or other languages exist as long as the punctuation fulfils its purpose, which is to help to convey the author’s message to the reader and to highlight the key thoughts and arguments, despite the fact that various nationalities use it differently. I must disagree with this point of view since, in my opinion, mistakes in punctuation result in ambiguity; and by adhering to correct grammar and punctuation rules, such confusion in interpreted meaning may be prevented.

### 2.1.1 Defining Punctuation

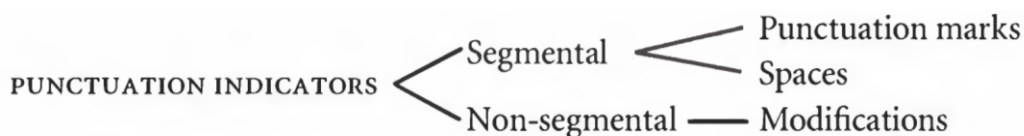
The aim of the punctuation is to make utterances apparent and easy to understand to a reader. It is an essential aspect of language, and it should only be used to an extent that is necessary for interacting with readers. The use of punctuation is crucial for accurate delivery of information and its misuse can cause the utterance to be difficult to understand or confusing to a reader (Allen 2002, 8).

Moreover, “[p]unctuation exists in order to indicate the boundaries of grammatical units and to indicate grammatical information that is marked in spoken language by means of intonation, pitch, etc” (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 838). As the University of Chicago Press (2017, 6.1) states:

Punctuation should be governed by its function, which in ordinary text is to promote ease of reading by clarifying relationships within and between sentences. This function, although it allows for a degree of subjectivity, should in turn be governed by the consistent application of some basic principles lest the subjective element obscure meaning.

The usage of punctuation marks, “such as the full stop, comma, semicolon, colon, question mark, quotation marks, parentheses, and so on” (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1724), is the fundamental issue of punctuation. Punctuation indicators may be divided into segmental and non-segmental, as can be seen in Figure 2.1. **The segmental indicators** are “units of writing- i.e., they fully occupy a position in the linear sequence of written symbols.” Further, the **non-segmental indicators** or so-called **modifications** cover “features as italics, capital letters, bold face, and small capitals.” Typically, segmental features as a full stop, exclamation mark or question mark signify the ending of a sentence while capitalization of the first letter at the start of the sentence is signified non-segmentally. Moreover, an essential feature space, which is used to divide one word from another, is segmental feature of punctuation as well (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1724).

**Figure 2.1** The classification of punctuation indicators according to Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 1724)



### 2.1.2 Functions of Punctuation

According to Quirk et al. (1985, 1610) the two main purposes of the punctuation system are **separation** and **specification**. Specifically, the separation of successive units, which are separated by a full stop or a space, and of included units, which are incorporated into a bigger unit. The specification applies to certain pragmatic, semantic and grammatical functions often additionally to the marks of separation. For example, “the apostrophe in *the reader’s* specifies the ending as genitive in contrast to the phonologically identical plural in *the readers*” (Quirk et al. 1985, 1611).

Moreover, Quirk et al. (1985, 1611) adds that in relation to the above mentioned purposes:

...punctuation practice is governed primarily by grammatical considerations and is related to grammatical distinctions. Sometimes it is linked to intonation, stress, rhythm, pause or any other of the prosodic features which convey distinctions in speech, but the link is neither simple nor systematic, and traditional attempts to relate punctuation directly to (in particular) pauses are misguided. Nor, except to a minor and peripheral extent, is punctuation concerned with expressing emotive or rhetorical overtones, as prosodic features frequently are.

Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 1729-30) on the other hand distinguish **four main functions of punctuation**:

- 1) indicating boundaries,
- 2) indicating status,
- 3) indicating omission,
- 4) indicating linkage.

The four main functions above are demonstrated and explained on the examples 1-4. The first and primary function of punctuation marks is **indication of boundaries**. As demonstrated on the example (1)a, the capital letter at the beginning and the full stop at the end separates the sequence of two sentences. Additionally, the boundaries between words are indicated by spaces. The example (1)b shows a single



sentence which combines two main clauses separated by the boundary marking comma (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1729-30).

- (1) a. *You will have to make a decision soon. It is not for me to try to influence you.*
- b. *By all means take the book with you, but be sure to return it.*
- (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1729)

The following examples show punctuation marks **indicating status**. The question mark in the example (2)a not only indicates the boundary of the sentence, but also the fact that it is a question; and the capitalised letter at the beginning of *Frank* signifies a proper name status. The apostrophe in the example (2)b indicates that the noun is genitive, the exclamation mark serves both as a sentence boundary indication and an exclamation status of the sentence (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1729-30).

- (2) a. *What does Frank think about it?*
- b. *The boys' behaviour was hardly likely to make her change her mind!*
- (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1729)

Number (3) is an example of **indication of omission**. The ellipsis points indicator in (3)a signifies that one or more words, which originally filled this space, were omitted from the reported speech. "In (3)b the asterisks mark the suppression of letters from the taboo word ..., while the apostrophe signals the reduction and cliticisation of the word *will*" (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1730).

- (3) a. *She goes on to say, 'But Johnson... was willing to accept a fee for the work!'*
- b. *'F\*\*\* off!' he yelled, 'or I'll call the police.'*
- (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1730)

The following examples demonstrates the function of **indication of linkage**. The slash, the standard and the long hyphen are used to connect the elements on each side of them. In (4)a, the slash is used to indicate the word *or* to denote the meaning "the programme of redevelopment or acquisition." In (4)b the two noun bases were

combined into one compound noun using the ordinary hyphen to form a word *dining-car*, whereas the single modifier of the head *express* was formed using the names of two places combined by a long hyphen to interpretate the meaning “express going from London to Glasgow” (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1730).

(4) a. *The Management will continue to concentrate on completing the redevelopment/acquisition programme outlined above.*

b. *I met her in the dining-car of the London–Glasgow express.*

(Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1730)

### 2.1.3 Punctuation Indicators

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the main punctuation marks and the rules regarding their usage, some of the more complex practises are discussed separately in the following chapters. Written language can be punctuated in a variety of ways. Full stops, question marks, commas, exclamation marks, colons, semi-colons, apostrophes, and dashes are the fundamental punctuation marks. Moreover, the full stop and the comma are the most common types (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 838). The Table 2.1 lists the major and most frequently used punctuation marks and their characters.

**Table 2.1** The table of punctuation marks and its graphical characters

Character	Punctuation mark
.	full stop
,	comma
;	semi-colon
:	colon
?	question mark
!	exclamation mark
—	dash (em-dash)
-	ordinary hyphen
–	long hyphen (en-dash)
()	parenthesis

[ ]	square bracket
...	ellipsis points
‘ ’	single quotation mark
“ ”	double quotation mark
’	apostrophe
/	slash
*	asterisk
@	at sign

### 2.1.3.1 Full Stop

A full stop, also known as a period, is the most frequently used punctuation mark for **the conclusion of a sentence** (Greenbaum 1996, 515). In addition to concluding sentences, full stops are commonly used to signify the end of sentences which are not grammatically autonomous, i.e., sentence fragments or orthographic sentences. The orthographic sentences “can involve ellipsis but single words are also common, especially in advertisements, in dialogue involving responses and in writing which seeks to create a dramatic effect” (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 839).

Moreover, full stops are used in **personal names initials** as in the example (5)a, **after abbreviations** as in (5)b (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 840), and **after an indirect question** as in the example (5)c (Straus 2008, 53). Nevertheless, the rules of personal names initials, and abbreviations are progressively being omitted nowadays. However, “[w]here abbreviations are curtailed words (words with the end cut off), they take a full stop. For example, *Addr.* (*address*), *Arr.* (*arrival*), *Prof.* (*professor*) and *etc.* (*etcetera*). Where abbreviations of words include the last letter of the word, they do not require a full stop.” For example, *St* (*Street*) or *Dr* (*Doctor*) (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 840).

- (5) a. *J.A. Wilson*
- b. *The event will take place in Wigmore Hall at 5 p.m. on Fri. Sep. 16th.*
- c. *He asked where MacDougal Street was.*

### 2.1.3.2 Comma

The comma signifies a small break in sentence and frequently signifies a pause. The aim of the comma is to help the reader understand the sentence and an effective use of it involves a common sense (The University of Chicago Press 2017, 6.16). Comma is certainly the most commonly used internal punctuation mark. It is the simplest and most flexible punctuation mark which is used for a division and isolations of units. Moreover, a comma is the most adaptable mark since authors can decide themselves whether to use it or not. By the use of a comma, a writer can demonstrate his/her punctuation abilities. Excessive use of commas can restrict comprehension and slow down reading; but on the other hand, insufficient use of commas can cause ambiguity (Greenbaum 1996, 529).

Between **adjectives**, a comma is used in attributive and predicative position (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 844) and when a group of descriptive adjectives refers to the same concept such as physical condition or a person's character, as demonstrated in example (6). When *and* follows an adjective, a comma is usually not incorporated (Allen 2002, 48).

(6) *He was a stubborn, prickly old man.* (Allen 2002, 48)

When it comes to punctuating **adjuncts**, commas are especially useful when they serve as a comment or a link. In these situations, the comma is frequently followed by a pause in speech (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 844). See example (7).

- (7) a. *It was, however, the best decision taken at that point in the company.*  
b. *Unfortunately, the proposal was turned down without any explanation.* (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 844)

Comma is also used in **tags** and **yes-no responses** ((8)a), with **interjections**, **vocatives**, and **discourse markers** ((8)b), and when indicating a **direct speech** ((8)c) (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 844-45).

- (8) a. *John is at home, isn't he? Yes, he is.*  
b. *Ouch, can you hand me a plaster, Jake? Oh, for sure.*  
c. *She said, "I saw a rabbit outside."*

The use of comma for separation of main clauses, separation of main and subordinate clauses and supplementation is further discussed in chapter 2.1.4 Primary and Secondary Boundary marks because of its complexity.

### 2.1.3.3 *Semi-colon*

Semicolons are specifically connected to formal writing (Quirk et al. 1985, 1622) and they are often used to break up lengthy phrases and provide the same structural function as linking words like *and* or *but* do in compound sentences. Every part makes a small single clause, yet there is a strong relation between them which would be lost if the two phrases were separated by a full stop (Allen 2002, 34). Meaning, “a semicolon is most commonly used **between two independent clauses** not joined by a conjunction to signal a closer connection between them than a period would” (The University of Chicago Press 2017, 6.56), see example (9).

(9) *She spent much of her free time immersed in the ocean; no mere*

*water-resistant watch would do.* (The University of Chicago Press 2017, 6.56)

According to Trask (1997, 41) a semicolon is used when the following conditions are fulfilled:

- the two phrases are too strongly associated to be divided by a full stop;
- the sentence contains no linking words (*and* or *but*) that would necessitate the use of a comma;
- there are no specific circumstances that necessitate the use of a colon.

### 2.1.3.4 *Colon*

A colon is used to introduce a feature or a set of features that **explain** or **intensify what came before the colon** as can be seen in (10)a. It serves a similar function as a semicolon between independent sentences, and in certain circumstances both of the marks would work. However, a colon should be used only when the second clause intensifies or explains the first clause (The University of Chicago Press 2017, 6.61).

Furthermore, a colon can be used when introducing **a list of items** ((10)b) or **a direct quotation** which is longer than three lines (Straus 2008, 58-60). Moreover, in

British English, unlike the American, the colon is not usually followed by a capitalized word (Trask 1997, 39).

- (10) a. *The watch came with a choice of three bands: stainless steel, plastic, or leather.* (The University of Chicago Press 2017, 6.61)
- b. *I want the following items: butter, sugar, and flour.* (Straus 2008, 58)

A colon signifies a closer relationship between the clauses than the semi-colon (Quirk et al. 1985, 1620) and the essential difference between them is that a **semi-colon** is used to create a balance between the two clauses, while a **colon** is used in order to follow the meaning from the first clause into the second (Allen 2002, 37).

### **2.1.3.5 Question Mark**

As Greenbaum (1996, 520) addresses “[a] question mark is placed at the end of a sentence to signal that the sentence is a question. It therefore has a dual purpose: it marks the end of a sentence (thereby replacing the sentence period and indeed including the period in its appearance) and **it specifies that the sentence is a question.**” A question mark can also be used at the conclusion of a declarative or imperative phrase to imply doubt or to show astonishment, disbelief, or uncertainty (The University of Chicago Press 2017, 6.68).

A question mark usually follows a direct question ((11)a); however, it is not used when the question is indirect as can be seen in (11)b (The University of Chicago Press 2017, 6.69).

- (11) a. *Is it worth the risk?*
- b. *He wondered whether it was worth the risk.*

### **2.1.3.6 Exclamation Mark**

As The University of Chicago Press (2017, 6.71) asserts “[a]n exclamation point (which should be used sparingly to be effective) **marks an outcry or an emphatic or ironic comment.**” Moreover, it can also be used to show emphasis or amazement and it should be avoided in formal correspondence (Straus 2008, 61), see (12).

- (12) *I'm shocked by your decision!*

Combinations of two or more exclamation marks, or question marks with exclamation marks, are occasionally used in informal writing. Furthermore, an exclamation mark is used after exclamation beginning with *what* or *how* (example (13)a), after conventional wishes and curses ((13)b), warnings ((13)c) and interjections ((13)d) (Greenbaum 1996, 521-22).

- (13) a.        *What a nice surprise!*
- b.        *Merry Christmas!*
- c.        *Watch out, Luke!*
- d.        *Oh God!*

### **2.1.3.7 Dash and Hyphen**

Hyphens and dashes have distinctive uses and functions even though the differences between them are sometimes slight (The University of Chicago Press 2017, 6.75). In writing, a dash is always longer than a hyphen (Allen 2002, 69).

In formal writing, **dash** (also called m-dash) is more frequent, and its use can be similar to the function of a comma (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 850). Greenbaum (1996, 535) compares the dash to colon:

Like the colon, the dash separates two units only, but it signals a sharper break between the units and it is also used in contexts where a comma is equally appropriate. One such context is when the second unit is linked to the first by a co-ordinator (*and*, *or*, or *but*). ... A colon would be a more formal alternative to the dash; an initial capital is not an option after the dash, though a capital is possible for independent clauses after colons in British English and usual after colons in American English.

Dashes are either used single or in pairs to indicate a break or pause in a text. They do not separate coordinates; therefore, they don't appear in open-ended series like the comma or the semicolon. Dashes help to separate an element from the remaining text when they appear **in pairs** and give it the effect of an interpolation. The interpolation usually serves as a clarification or explanation of what comes before it, see example (14)a (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1750). As Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 1751) states “[i]n many cases **a single dash** is like the first member of a pair of dashes with the second member being superseded by or

absorbed into an indicator that marks a higher-level boundary,” as can be seen in the example (14)b.

- (14) a. *There’s a difference over goals, but the end — namely freedom — is the same.*
- b. *We could invite one of the ladies from next door — Miss Savage, for example.* (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1750-51)

A **hyphen** is used in a variety of applications; in any case it demonstrates that the object to which it is linked does not constitute a full word on its own (Trask 1997, 59). There are two types of hyphen characters, an ordinary and a long hyphen. Among **the ordinary hyphen**, the lexical and syntactic hyphens are generally distinguished. The lexical hyphen is usually found between words to form a compound (*stage-manager*) or a derivative affix or a base (*non-aligned*). See Figure 2.2 for the most frequent lexical hyphen examples (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1760-61). Syntactic “[h]yphens are ... used to join into a single orthographic word sequences of two or more grammatical words functioning as attributive modifier in the structure of a nominal” such as past participle *a well-argued reply* (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1762). **The long hyphen** (en-dash) is applied to modifiers which are comprised of proper names or nouns to form a semantic connection “between X and Y” or “from X to Y” (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1762), see the example (15)a and b.

- (15) a. *a French–English dictionary*
- b. *the 1914–18 war* (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1762)



**Figure 2.2** A set of morphological categories in which hyphens occur in the majority or a significant part of the time (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1761)

i	compound adjective	<i>bone-dry, oil-rich, red-hot, snow-white</i>
ii	contains transitive prep	<i>free-for-all, sergeant-at-arms, sister-in-law</i>
iii	intransitive prep as 2nd base	<i>break-in, build-up, drop-out, phone-in, stand-off</i>
iv	coordinative compound	<i>Alsace-Lorraine, freeze-dry, murder-suicide</i>
v	nominal compound + <i>·ed</i>	<i>one-eyed, red-faced, three-bedroomed</i>
vi	numerals and fractions	<i>twenty-one, ninety-nine, five-eighths</i>
vii	dephrasal compounds	<i>cold-shoulder (V), has-been (N), old-maidish</i>
viii	verb with noun as 1st base	<i>baby-sit, gift-wrap, hand-wash, tape-record</i>
ix	1st base is letter-name	<i>H-bomb, t-shirt, U-turn, V-sign</i>
x	rhyiming-base compounds	<i>clap-trap, hoity-toity, teeny-weeny, walkie-talkie</i>

### 2.1.3.8 Parenthesis and Square Brackets

**Parenthesis**, also known as round brackets, are nearly always used in pairs. They are frequently used to mark “a strong or weak interruption,” similarly to pair of dashes or commas. With the condition that the break is strong, pair of dashes or parenthesis may possibly be acceptable (Trask 1997, 119), as can be seen in the example (16)a and b.

- (16) a.        *The destruction of Guernica — and there is no doubt that  
the destruction was deliberate — horrified the world.*
- b.        *The destruction of Guernica (and there is no doubt that  
the destruction was deliberate) horrified the world.* (Trask 1997, 119)

As Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 1748) asserts:

[p]arenthesis ... enclose what we will call a parenthesised element. Their function is to present that element as extraneous to a minimal interpretation of the text, as inessential material that can be omitted without affecting the well-formedness and without any serious loss of information. They provide **an elaboration, illustration, refinement of, or comment** on, the content of the accompanying text.

**Square brackets**, on the other hand, often indicate that the content was added into the text by a person other than the initial author and is **not part of the original sentence**. “Brackets surround editorial interpolations, explanations, translations of

phrases from other languages, and revisions in quoted text, reprints, anthologies, and other nonoriginal material” (The University of Chicago Press 2017, 6.99). The example (17) illustrates a comment added into the text by someone else than the original author.

(17) *"They [the free-silver Democrats] asserted that the ratio could be maintained."*

(The University of Chicago Press 2017, 6.99)

### ***2.1.3.9 Ellipsis Points***

Ellipsis points, most frequently consisting of three dots, indicate **an omission of words, sentences, lines, paragraphs** and others from a quoted text (Straus 2008, 53). According to Allen (2002, 88), there are two fundamental functions of ellipsis: an omission of words from a text in order to make it more appropriate for a reader; and an indication of an interruption at the end of an utterance in order to imply that the author of the message left something out for the sake of a receiver’s imagination or did not finish the sentence (as in the example (18)).

(18) *"I think I'll go home and ..."*

### ***2.1.3.10 Single and Double Quotation Mark***

A text surrounded by **quotation marks**, which can range from a single word to a series of paragraphs, is given **a special status**. “Usually they [quotation marks] indicate that the wording of the matter enclosed is taken from another source instead of being freely selected by the writer, as with ordinary text.” The main functions of quotation marks are listed below, all of which may be indicated by double or single quotation marks, with the corresponding examples (19)a, b, c, d, and e (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1753):

- direct speech;
- quotation from another author’s work;
- specific types of proper names, such as article titles or radio/TV programs;
- technical terminology, or phrases used sarcastically;
- phrases in a metalinguistic context.

- (19) a. *'Let's not bother,' he replied.*
- b. *Fowler suggested that many mistakes made in writing result  
'from the attempt to avoid what are rightly or wrongly taken to be  
faults of grammar or style'.*
- c. *'Neighbours' is Channel Nine's longest-running soap.*
- d. *Their 'mansion' was in fact a very ordinary three-bedroom house  
in suburbia.*
- e. *He doesn't know how to spell 'supersede'. (Huddleston and Pullum  
2002, 1753)*

In general, British use of quotation marks is divided. Although British language manuals favour **single quotation marks** for ordinary purpose, **double quotation marks** are also common for “special metalinguistic function of indicating meaning;” American usage prefers double quotation marks for ordinary purpose (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1753).

As Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 1754) proposes “[w]hen an expression is enclosed within quotation marks inside a larger matrix sentence we need to consider the distribution of punctuation marks within the quotation itself and in the matrix sentence.” A punctuation mark can be either **internal** or **external** depending on whether its position is within or outside the quotation marks. An internal full stop should not be used medially within the matrix, as demonstrated in the incorrect example (20)a; however, it can be fixed when replacing the full stop with a comma. Moreover, a comma should be used to separate the matrix verb from a direct speech, see the example (20)b.

- (20) a. *\* 'I don't know.' she said, and stormed out of the room.*
- b. *She replied, 'Why are you wasting my time?' and stormed out  
of the room. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1754)*

### 2.1.3.11 Apostrophe

An apostrophe has three main functions: it serves as an indication of **genitive** (*Lucy's*), **reduction** of negative “inflectional forms of auxiliary verbs” (*can't*) or auxiliary verb cliticization (*there's*), and **separation** of suffix from a base (*1960's*) (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1763). The use of apostrophe is often wrongly applied and incorrect and it can make a text seem illiterate (Trask 1997, 48). When applying an apostrophe in singular words (or plural ending with a letter other than -s), a possessive is formed by adding -s (*dog's tail*); however, when a noun is plural ending with -s, an apostrophe is added after the letter (*dogs' tails*) (Allen 2002, 78-79).

### 2.1.3.12 Slash

A slash, also called virgule, solidus, or oblique, has a variety of rather minor functions. It is used **to isolate alternatives** (as in the example (21)a), **to represent an extent of time** (as in the example (21)b), or **to serve as the word *per*** in scientific documents (Trask 1997, 124).

- (21) a.        *The university is looking for a lecturer/senior lecturer in history.*  
b.        *This office is open Tuesday/Saturday each week.*  
c.        *The density of iron is 7.87 g/cm<sup>3</sup>.* (Trask 1997, 124-25)

## 2.1.4 Primary and Secondary Boundary marks

**The primary boundary marks** include a terminal full stop (a full stop used to end a sentence), an exclamation mark, and a question mark. Their fundamental function is to mark status and terminal boundary between sentences. On the other hand, **secondary boundary marks** include a comma, a semicolon, and a colon. Unlike the primary marks, secondary boundary marks signify boundaries within a sentence, not between them (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1731).

The uses of primary terminals were concisely outlined in the previous chapter 2.1.3 Punctuation Indicators and do not need additional commentary. This chapter mainly focuses on the uses of secondary boundary marks, specifically coordination, supplementation, subordination, relative clauses, and delimiting commas since these matters require further discussion because of their complexity.

### 2.1.4.1 Coordination

Two or more elements of **equivalent status** are combined to form a bigger unit in a coordination. The most common coordinators in English are *and*, *but* and *or* (Huddleston and Pullum 2005, 225). “In coordination, punctuation is commonly used to separate one coordinate from the next. The comma is the default mark; under certain conditions, however, a semicolon (but not a colon) is used instead” (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1739).

Although a coordinator (*and*, *but* and *or*) is frequently used to mark the construction, it may be substituted by a punctuation mark. If a punctuation mark is used in the structure, the coordination is said to be **asyndetic**. When a coordinator is used, the coordination is called **syndetic** (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1276).

- (22) a. *He invited [all his colleagues and all his students].* [syndetic]  
b. *He invited [all his colleagues, all his students].* [asyndetic]

(Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1276)

When joining two **independent clauses** with coordinating conjunctions such as *or*, *and*, *so*, *but*, *yet*, a comma generally precedes it (see (23)a). However, the punctuation mark may be skipped if the sentences are short and tightly related (The University of Chicago Press 2017, 6.22), as can be seen in (23)b.

- (23) a. *We activated the alarm, but the intruder was already inside.*  
b. *Raise your right hand and repeat after me.* (The University of Chicago Press 2017, 6.22)

In the example (24)a, the underlined coordinate is **non-initial and bare** (it is not marked by a coordinator); therefore, the mark at the left boundary is rigidly essential. However, when a coordinator precedes the coordinate, the uses of light and heavy punctuation vary. In (24)b, a comma before *and Pat* is inappropriate, but it is optional preceding *and Portugal*. The comma in parenthesis is called the Oxford (or serial) comma (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1740). **The Oxford comma** “is a comma that immediately precedes any of the conjunctions *and*, *or*, or *nor* before the last item in a list of three or more. The main reason for using the Oxford comma is to avoid ambiguity” (Fransz and Kitzen 2021, 1). An example of such a case is

demonstrated in (24)c, where the omission of the comma preceding *and Johnny Depp* would imply that the parents are Madonna and Johnny Depp.

- (24) a. *The President, Dr Jones, and I myself will chair the first three sessions.*
- b. *Kim and Pat were planning a trip to France, Spain (,) and Portugal.*  
(Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1739)
- c. *I love my parents, Madonna, and Johnny Depp.*

In certain cases of coordination, a **semi-colon** may be used instead of a comma. In a complex coordinate, “the punctuation helps in the perception of the hierarchical structure, with the semi-colon separating constituents higher in the tree structure than the commas” (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1740), see (25).

- (25) *His band members are Phil Palmer, guitar; Steve Ferrone, drums; Alan Clark and Greg Phillinganes, keyboards; Nathan East, bass; and Ray Copper, percussion.* (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1740)

#### **2.1.4.2 Supplementation**

**Supplements** are “elements which occupy a position in linear sequence without being integrated into the syntactic structure of the sentence.” They may be separated from the rest of the sentence by commas, or stronger punctuation marks such as parenthesis, dashes or a colon. Most frequently, they represent interpolations or appendages. **An interpolation** interrupts the phrase flow “between the beginning and end of a main clause,” as demonstrated in (26)a. **An appendage** is linked freely to the beginning or end of a clause (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1350), see the example (26)b. Supplements may be represented by phrases such as *for example*, *namely*, *in particular*, *that is to say*, *that is*, *see*, and so on ((26)c). Any of the secondary boundary markers might be used to precede supplements provided by such expressions (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1740).

- (26) a. *He claimed — and everyone believed him — that it was all my fault.*
- b. *Having reviewed all the evidence, they decided he had no case to answer. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1355)*
- c. *One way of speaking about this is to say that images in a dream seem to appear simultaneously; that is, no part precedes or causes another part of the dream. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1741)*

As (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1350-51) affirms:

It is the lack of integration into the syntactic structure that distinguishes supplementation from dependency constructions and coordination. But supplementation is like coordination in being non-headed: since the supplement is not integrated into the structure it cannot function as a dependent to any head. ... Although supplements are not syntactically dependent on a head, they are semantically related to what we will call their anchor. [An anchor is the NP or the clause the supplement follows or interrupts]

#### **2.1.4.3 Subordination**

Subordinate clauses essentially work as dependent clauses inside bigger sentence structures. The clause superior to the dependent clause is known as **the matrix clause**. The structure of a subordinate clause frequently varies from that of a main clause (Huddleston and Pullum 2005, 174). **Subordinators**, also called subordinating conjunctions, in a way relate to the function of prepositions and they are frequently formed by a single word likewise (*after, that, as, because, if*, and so on). However, complex subordinators (*but that, given that, as long as, in case*, and so on), which function as a single conjunction, consist of two or more words (Quirk et al. 1985, 998).

A subordinate clause which is restrictive (meaning it is necessary for a full comprehension of the main clause meaning) and follows a main independent clause is not preceded by a comma. See the example (27)a where the main clause is not inevitably true since the subordinate clause beginning with *if* carries the crucial information. On the contrary, a subordinate clause which is **non-restrictive** (i.e., it is

not crucial for the comprehension of the main clause meaning) is preceded by a comma, as demonstrated in (27)b (The University of Chicago Press 2017, 6.25).

- (27) a. *We will agree to the proposal if you accept our conditions.*  
b. *At last she arrived, when the food was cold.* (The University of Chicago Press 2017, 6.25)

A **relative clause** is a distinctive type of subordinate clause that serves primarily as a noun or nominal modifier (Huddleston and Pullum 2005, 183). “A clause is said to be **restrictive** (or defining) if it provides information that is essential to understanding the intended meaning of the rest of the sentence.” Words such as *that*, *who*, *whose*, *which* or *whom* frequently introduce restrictive relative clauses which are never separated from the rest of the sentence by commas. The pronouns *whom*, *who*, or *that* may be excluded if the statement is clear enough without them or if it is not in the position of a subject, as can be seen in (28)a. As The University of Chicago Press (2017, 6.27) remark “[a] clause is said to be **non-restrictive** (or nondefining or parenthetical) if it could be omitted without obscuring the identity of the noun to which it refers or otherwise changing the intended meaning of the rest of the sentence.” Words such as *which*, *whose*, *who*, or *whom* commonly introduce non-restrictive relative clauses which are separated from the rest of the sentence by commas. For a non-restrictive relative clause set off by commas see example (28)b.

- (28) a. *The drivers [whom] we hire to make deliveries must have good driving records.*  
b. *The final manuscript, which was well formatted, was submitted to the publisher on time.* (The University of Chicago Press 2017, 6.27)

Although in a restrictive clause, *which* can be exchanged for *that* (as is usual in British English), many authors prefer to maintain the differentiation between the restrictive usage of *that* (without commas) and non-restrictive usage of *which* (with commas) (The University of Chicago Press 2017, 6.27).



#### 2.1.4.4 Delimiting Commas

Delimiting commas **mark boundaries of various elements** including an adjunct, a parenthetical, a supplementary relative, or a vocative. In example (29)a, the commas set the right and the left boundary of the element (in this case an adjunct), which is separated from the main section of the sentence, suggesting that it is less vital to the message in some way. However, “[i]f the left or right boundary coincides with that of a larger construction that is marked by a stronger indicator, then the comma is superseded by, absorbed into, the latter.” In examples (29)b, c and d, the left boundary is substituted by a full stop, colon, and semicolon; while in the examples (29)e, f, and g, it is the right boundary that is substituted. This phenomenon occurs most commonly when the delimited constituent is in the initial or final position in the structure. Nevertheless, it is not possible for both the right and the left boundaries to coincide with a higher one; therefore, a delimited component will frequently have a comma at one of its boundaries. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1745).

- (29) a. *Some, however, complained about the air-conditioning.*
- b. *Most of them liked it. However, some complained about the air-conditioning.*
- c. *Things are quite difficult: unlike you, I don't get an allowance from my parents.*
- d. *We've been making good progress; even so, we've still a long way to go.*
- e. *The plumber had omitted to replace the washer, it seems.*
- f. *They want to question Henry, who hasn't even read the report: it's quite unfair.*
- g. *I suggest you drop the idea, Audrey; it would be better to stay where you are. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1744-45)*

## 2.2 Comparison of Czech and English Punctuation Rules

Although punctuation marks are interlingual, meaning they have the same fundamental qualities in various languages, their density and distinguishing usage may differ depending on local customs and traditions. In Czech and English languages, there are variations in the general standards and conventions in the use of punctuation. The **Czech** use of punctuation is primarily driven by grammar and syntactic rules, specifically in the usage of the comma. **English** punctuation, on the other hand, is “more prosodic and logical” (Nádvořníková 2020, 30-32).

The following chapter includes discussions on the differences between Czech and English punctuation systems. For an in-depth description of English punctuation standards see 2.1.3 Punctuation Indicators and 2.1.4 Primary and Secondary Boundary marks.

### 2.2.1 Coordination

According to Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 1739) in **English**, punctuation marks, most frequently a comma, are used to set off one coordinate from the other. However, coordinates may be linked by a coordinator as well, most frequently by conjunctions *and*, *or*, or *but* (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1275). When it comes to coordination of main clauses, the structure commonly involves declarative and interrogative ((30)a) or imperative and declarative clauses ((30)b) (Dušková 2012). A comma is usually used when independent coordinates are joined by conjunctions such as *or*, *and*, *but*, *so*, and so on; however, it may be omitted, especially in simple and closely related clauses (The University of Chicago Press 2017, 6.22). For further information on coordination in English, see chapter 2.1.4 Primary and Secondary Boundary marks.

(30) a.        *[I'll send her a reminder,] [but will it be any good?]*

[declarative + interrogative]

b.        *[Take it away] [or I'll eat it all.]* (Dušková 2012)

[imperative + declarative]

When coordinating main clauses in a copulative connection in **Czech**, a comma is not used before conjunctions *a*, *i*, *ani*, *nebo*, *či* (“and”, “nor”, “or”), as demonstrated on the example (31) a. *Utábořili se na kopci a večer rozdělali oheň.*a. However, if the clauses are joined in a connection other than simply copulative, they are separated by a comma (Internetová jazyková příručka © 2008–2021a). A copulative clause consists of two or more elements that are equivalent to each other. The elements are simply placed side by side and as a whole they enter the relation of the structure (Daneš, Hlavsa, and Grepl 1987, 398). An adversative, disjunctive, and causal clauses, which are set off by a comma, are shown in the examples (31)b, c, and d.

- (31) a. *Utábořili se na kopci a večer rozdělali oheň.* [copulative]  
 b. *Tahal jsem ho několik minut, a nakonec se mi utrhl.* [adversative]  
 c. *Udělalí jsme kampaň, a dokonce jsme se dostali do novin.*[disjunctive]  
 d. *Nedostali jsme zprávu včas, a proto jsme nemohli přijít.* [causal]

(Internetová jazyková příručka © 2008–2021b)

### 2.2.2 Subordination

In **English**, when a subordinate clause appears before a main clause, commas are usually used to set it off. A comma can be used to separate subordinate clauses from a preceding main clause, particularly when the relationship between them is unclear due to the length of the clauses or when the subordinate clause that supplies extra information or expand on information presented in the main phrase (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 842). As for relative clauses, wh-relatives *which* and *who* are frequently used with non-restrictive clauses, and they are separated by a comma (32)a. While in restrictive relative clauses, *that* is typically employed instead; however, wh-pronouns are used as well (Greenbaum 1996, 225), as in (32)b.

- (32) a. *The book, which I bought yesterday, is amazing.*  
 b. *The man who lives there is very old.*

In **Czech**, the structure of the subordinate clause is based primarily on the relations of dominance and subordination. A clause incorporated into another clause (meaning subordinate to it) is dominated by one of the superordinate elements.

Depending on the type of dominance and on the nature of the dominating article, different relations are distinguished in the subordinate clause, and these form the foundation of its hierarchical structure (Daneš, Hlavsa, and Grepl 1987, 539). Commas always separate the main and the subordinate clause. Subordinate clauses may be introduced by the subordinating conjunctions *aby, ač, ačkoli, at', až, byť, jelikož, jestliže, jako, kdyby, pokud, protože, že* (“in order to”, “although”, “though”, “so that”, “even though”, “since”, “if”, “unless”, “because”, “that”), and so on, as can be seen in (33)a (Internetová jazyková příručka © 2008–2021a).

As mentioned earlier, all subordinate clauses in Czech, including relative clauses, are separated by a comma. Subordinate relative clauses may be introduced by the relative pronouns *kdo, co, který, jaký, či, jenž* (Internetová jazyková příručka © 2008–2021a). A relative clause functions as an attribute of a noun in the main clause (Čechová et al. 2000, 319). See (33)b.

- (33) a. *Koupí si plátno, aby mohl namalovat obraz.*  
b. *Dort, který upekla, zůstal celý.*

### 2.2.3 Quotation marks

As already discussed in previous chapters, the usage of quotation marks in both American and British **English** is divided. As for British English, which is the focus of the thesis, “single marks [are] used for general purposes and double marks [are] used for the special metalinguistic function of indicating meanings.” A comma should be used to separate the matrix verb from a direct speech. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1753-54).

- (34) *'Let's go home,' she said.*

In **Czech**, quotation marks are used to indicate direct speech, literary quotations, exact names, foreign expressions, ungrammatical expressions, ironic expressions, interpretations of word meanings, and so on. In Czech various types of quotation marks are applicable: double (,, “), single (, ‘) and side (» «) quotation marks. The characters used in Czech and English significantly differ, the first pair of quotation marks is written at the bottom and the second at the top in Czech, while in English both pairs are written at the top. If the whole sentence is in quotation marks,

the second quotation mark is written at the end of the sentence after the terminal punctuation mark, see the example (35)a. If a part of another text is included in a sentence without being introduced by a reporting clause, the second quotation mark is placed before the terminal punctuation mark (Internetová jazyková příručka © 2008–2021c), as demonstrated on the example (35)b.

- (35) a. „*Terka s Honzou si odskočili do kina, vrátí se až večer.*“  
b. *Můj tatínek říkával, že „bez práce nejsou koláče“.*

#### 2.2.4 Numerals

When it comes to punctuation, perhaps numerals are the most unlike in the two systems. In **English**, “[c]ommas are used in numbers to indicate units of thousands and millions. Full stops are used to indicate decimal points” (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 851). See the example (36)a and b for the usage of comma and full stop in numerals.

- (36) a. *4,620 (four thousand six hundred and twenty)*  
b. *5.9 (five point nine)*

In **Czech**, on the other hand, numbers are separated before and after the decimal point with spaces, as can be seen in the example (37)a. Decimal numbers are indicated by a comma. However, when writing monetary amounts in administrative texts, groups of three digits may be separated by a full stop (Internetová jazyková příručka © 2008–2021d), see (37)b.

- (37) a. *1 300 768 (jeden milion tři sta tisíc sedm set šedesát osm)*  
b. *604.351,50 Kč*

### **3 Ambiguity**

Ambiguity is not only connected to spoken language and consequently to ambiguous jokes and puns, but also to written language in which case, the true meaning of a message may be impossible to verify, and therefore incorrectly implicated. Although ambiguity may be employed due to its humorous aspect in TV shows or signs, it can resolve in misunderstanding, especially when it comes to mistakes in punctuation.

Missing and misleading punctuation can be seen everywhere, on signs, in an advertisement or even in a movie title. People nowadays do not pay attention to punctuation signs, they are invisible to them (Truss 2006, 2-3). Truss (2006, 7) describes punctuation as “a basting that holds the fabric of language in shape” and continues that “punctuation marks are the traffic signal of language: they tell us to slow down, notice this, take a detour, and stop.” Nevertheless, we should aim for a proper punctuation as it connects the words carrying the meaning together and sets the rest aside. Moreover, punctuation instructs the reader on how to properly read and understand a sentence; without it, there would be no other reliable way of conveying meaning (Truss 2006, 20).

In the following chapter, the concept of ambiguity is defined as well as the terms it is often confused with, the types of ambiguity and Grice’s Cooperative Principle.

#### **3.1 Defining the Notion of Ambiguity**

Grice (1975) discussed the term ambiguity in the Cooperative Principle as a part of the Maxim of Manner. The Cooperative Principle defines the conversational contribution a speaker should make when uttering a sentence: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice 1975, 45). It revolves around four conversational maxims: maxim of quantity, quality, manner, relation; and one supermaxim. Specifically, the Maxim of Manner says, besides other things, to avoid ambiguity. Unlike the other three maxims,

the Maxim of Manner is directed at how the is utterance said, not on the content of what is said (Grice 1975, 46).

In order to fulfil the Maxim of Manner, the following conditions must be met (Grice 1975, 46):

Be perspicuous.

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly.

According to Oxford English Dictionary (2021), the term *ambiguity* “[o]riginally and chiefly with reference to language [means]: the fact or quality of having different possible meanings; capacity for being interpreted in more than one way; (also) lack of specificity or exactness.”

It is a phenomenon we encounter on a daily basis and might not even know about it. Ambiguity in language is related to a narrower occurrence than merely various interpretations of phrases or words. Moreover, *ambiguity* as a concept often gets confused with terms such as vagueness, fuzziness, or generality. Distinguishing ambiguity from these associated concepts may sometimes be challenging (Sennet 2021). The following chapter includes discussions on the differences between the terms.

### **3.1.1 Ambiguity**

As for definitions on the term *ambiguity*, many authors offer different views on the phenomenon. Birner (2013, 10-11) states that “[a]n ambiguous word, phrase, or sentence is simply one that has two or more distinct meanings,” referring only to the lexical aspect of ambiguity. Oxford English Dictionary (2021) offers various definitions among the one mentioned above: “uncertain meaning; a doubt; an uncertainty,” “[a] word or phrase that can be interpreted in more than one way,” or “[u]ncertainty about one's course of action; doubt, hesitation.”

Sennet (2021) confirms the variation of OED definitions and asserts that the term *ambiguous* is ambiguous itself:

The word ‘ambiguous’, at least according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is ambiguous: it can mean uncertainty or dubiousness on the one hand and a sign bearing multiple meanings on the other. I mention this merely to disambiguate what this entry is about, which concerns a word or phrase enjoying multiple meanings. In this sense, ambiguity has been the source of much frustration, bemusement, and amusement for philosophers, lexicographers, linguists, cognitive scientists, literary theorists and critics, authors, poets, orators and pretty much every other being who uses language regularly to communicate.

As for an opposite view on the concept of ambiguity, some linguists seem to deny the existence of such a phenomenon, claiming “first, that ambiguous words represent only an anomalous minority of all words, and second, that context is so strong on normal language processing that, functionally, ambiguity does not even exist” (Small, Cottrell, and Tanenhaus 1988, 272). Mey (2001, 12) shares this opinion and asserts that in everyday life, real language speakers do not find expressions or sentences ambiguous, expect for instances where it is intentional.

To summarize the above-mentioned definitions and points of view, an **ambiguous expression has “more than one semantically unrelated meaning.** In other words, an expression is ambiguous if it has several paraphrases which are not paraphrases of each other” (Zhang 1998, 5).

The most evident examples of ambiguity involve expressions having two or more distinct meanings. The word *bank* is a common example, it may refer to the rim of a river or a financial organization; another example is the word *long* which can refer to size as an adjective but is essentially equivalent with *yearn* when used as a verb. However, in some circumstances, phrases or words with numerous disjoint denotations are not ambiguous. As can be demonstrated on the example (38), the verb *eat* can implicate either good consumption (as in (38)a), or destruction (see (38)b); however, the word *eat* itself is not ambiguous in these sentences (Wasow, Perfors, and Beaver 2005, 1-2).

(38) a.        *We ate the cake.*



- b. *Salt ate the paint on the right fender.* (Wasow, Perfors, and Beaver 2005, 2)

A sentence often used to illustrate the concept of ambiguity can be seen in the example (39)a. The showcased sentence is ambiguous as the phrase *flying planes* has two discrete meanings: one being planes which are operated by people, and the other planes that fly in the air (Zhang 1998, 5). Similarly, the word *chicken* in (39)b might be comprehended as the one who consumes the food or as the meal itself. This case of ambiguity cannot simply be assigned to the ambiguity of a single word neither to distinct parses (Wasow, Perfors, and Beaver 2005, 3).

(39) a. *Flying planes can be dangerous.* (Zhang 1998, 5)

- b. *The chicken is ready to eat.* (Wasow, Perfors, and Beaver 2005, 3)

Another example of an ambiguous word is a *bat*. The word *bat* itself is a case of ambiguity since it either represents a piece of equipment or an animal. However, when used in a sentence in the example (40), it is no longer ambiguous, but sensitive to the context. “**Context sensitivity** is (potential) variability in content due purely to changes in the context of utterance without a change in the convention of word usage. ... Of course, knowledge of context may well help disambiguate an ambiguous utterance. Nonetheless, ambiguity is not characterized by interaction with (extralinguistic) context but is a property of the meanings of the terms” (Sennet 2021).

(40) *He saw a bat.*

### 3.1.2 Vagueness

Peirce (1902, 748) defines the term vagueness in the Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology along these lines:

A proposition is vague when there are possible states of things concerning which it is intrinsically uncertain whether, had they been contemplated by the speaker, he would have regarded them as excluded or allowed by the proposition. By intrinsically uncertain we mean not uncertain in consequence of any ignorance of the interpreter, but because the speaker’s habits of language were indeterminate.

As Sennet (2021) states, **the concept of vagueness “involves borderline cases:** possible cases that are neither clearly in the extension of the vague term nor clearly not in its extension.”

Keefe (2004, 6) shares a similar point of view and adds that vague expressions share three complementary features: admission of borderline cases, at least seeming lack of distinct boundaries, and a susceptibility to sorites paradoxes. **Borderline cases** are those which make it uncertain if the predicate applies; for example, some people are borderline tall, meaning they are neither definitely tall nor clearly short. Some reddish orange spots are on the verge of red. Vague phrases **lack well-defined boundaries** since there is no clear distinction between tall and short people. And finally, “typically vague predicates are **susceptible to sorites paradoxes**. Intuitively, a hundredth of an inch cannot make a difference to whether or not a man counts as tall – such tiny variations, undetectable using the naked eye and everyday measuring instruments, are just too small to matter” (Keefe 2004, 7).

To illustrate the concept on an example, the word *tall* was incorporated in (41). The word *tall* is vague since a person, who is 1.8 meters tall, is neither obviously tall nor obviously not tall. “No amount of conceptual analysis or empirical investigation can settle whether a 1.8 meter man is tall. Borderline cases are inquiry resistant.” (Sorensen 2018).

(41) *My friend, who is 1.8 meters, is tall.*

Ambiguity should be differentiated from vagueness, in which case the word has imprecise boundaries to what it actually refers to. The expression *pleasant* is vague in a way that it does not distinguish what is without any doubt pleasant and what is not. On the other hand, the expression *present*, is ambiguous since it can convey either "gift" or "current time," but neither of the meaning is characterized by the word itself (Birner 2013, 11). Moreover, vagueness and ambiguity diverge with regard to speaker’s judgment. If an expression is ambiguous, the speaker can disambiguate it without deviating from its literal meaning. A speaker may say, for example, that he uses the word *child* to convey the idea of an immature offspring. However, the speaker is unable to resolve the borderline case if an expression is vague. For an illustration, “the speaker cannot make [*child*] literally mean anyone under eighteen just by intending it. ... He would be understood as taking a special

liberty with the term to suit a special purpose. Acknowledging departure from ordinary usage would relieve him of the obligation to defend the sharp cut-off” (Sorensen 2018).

### 3.1.3 Generality

As Zhang (1998, 5) claims “[t]he meaning of an expression is general in the sense that **it does not specify certain details**; i.e. generality is a matter of under-specification.” And continues with an example: “[*m*]y *friend* is general, as it could mean a female friend, a male friend, or just a friend from New Zealand.”

According to Sennet (2021) “[under-specification] and generality may **leave open many possibilities without being ambiguous between those possibilities**, ... [a] sentence [or an expression] is ‘sense-general’; it doesn’t specify some detail without thereby being ambiguous with respect to that detail.” He illustrates this point of view on the example (42)a, where the phrase *one of my sisters* underspecifies which sister is the person referring to. In this case, however, the phrase *one of my sisters* is not ambiguous, since its meaning is distinct; it is the sentence which is general.

- (42) a. *I am going to visit one of my sisters.*  
b. *I ordered filet mignon.* (Sennet 2021)

Kempson (1977, 124-28) identifies four types of vagueness:

- 1)**referential vagueness**, where the meaning of an expression is obvious, but it is difficult to determine whether it may be connected to specific objects;
- 2)**indeterminacy of meaning**, where the meaning of an expression itself seems indefinite;
- 3)**lack of specification** in the meaning of an expression, where the meaning is obvious yet only generally defined;
- 4)**disjunction in the specification** of the meaning of an expression, where the meaning includes various possible interpretations.

Generality and ambiguity are easily confused for each other considering “the extension of a univocal term can break up into two or more distinct salient

categories.” From the example (42)b it is not clear whether the person order a cooked or a raw fish. A person at a restaurant would expect the filet to be cooked, while customer at a butcher market would prefer the fish to be raw. “Often it is difficult to tell when the distinction in extension corresponds to an ambiguity in the meaning of the term. But difficulty in telling these apart in some cases should not lead us to abjure the distinction” (Sennet 2021).

### 3.1.4 Fuzziness

Zhang (2005, 1) defines fuzziness “as a linguistic unit (word, phrase, sentence, utterance etc) with no clear-cut meaning boundary. For example, ‘dead’ or ‘living’ appear at first glance clear-cut. However, how would we classify a person who has been in a coma for say six months? Another pair is ‘man’ and ‘woman’, which side would a person who was born with both sex organs go?”

Fuzziness should be differentiated from generality, vagueness, and ambiguity as it “**refers to an indeterminate referential boundary and is an inherent property of language**” (Zhang 2005, 2). It is not resolvable even with the use of context since it is inherent, unlike vagueness, generality, and ambiguity, whose indeterminacy can be obviated by their incompatibility with a certain context. Moreover, expressions which appear fuzzy typically share several features: the fundamental meaning of the phrase is clear, but its reference appears obscure; fuzzy quantifiers as for example *about 100 roses* tend to be compositional and develop a semantic patterns (Zhang 2005, 2).

A fuzzy expression is characterized by referential opacity as can be seen in the example (43) using phrases *about 20 beers* and *a few apples*. Even though the primary meaning of the phrase, “20 plus-or-minus”, is not fuzzy; when a receiver of such a message attempts to resolve its denotation, he/she may encounter a gray peripheral area. The response to what is the boundary of *about 20* varies depending on the situation and the individual (Zhang 1998, 2).

(43) *Please buy about 20 beers and a few apples.* (Zhang 1998, 2)

### 3.1.5 Polysemy

According to Sennet (2021) “polysemy refers to a phenomenon that is closely related to ambiguity, but often is characterized as **a term with multiple meanings that are, in some hard to specify sense, interestingly related.**” Example of such a concept is the word *nickel* which can either represent the coin or the metal. However, this notion should be distinguished from a similar concept: homonyms, which represent two or more meanings of completely distinct words (and senses) symbolized by the same lexical word (Birner 2013, 11). Some authors even define polysemy as a part of ambiguity, Rueschemeyer and Gaskell (2018, ch. 5.2) classify polysemy as a kind of lexical ambiguity.

Ravin and Leacock (2000, 1-2) share a very much alike view and argue that polysemy is a “multiplicity of meanings of words ... [which] are systematically related.” For example, if the recipient read a sentence (44), he would probably wonder whether the author was referencing to “the animal” or “the meat of that animal” (Klepousniotou 2002, 206).

(44) *I brought a chicken for you.*

## 3.2 Types of ambiguity

Ambiguity is a feature which may occur both in written and spoken language. However, ambiguity is very much more frequent in spoken language since written sentences may be disambiguated more easily depending on the context. Moreover, in some written syntactic cases (*I want to see you duck.*), the ambiguity will not occur whatsoever; while in spoken discussion the same example could have resulted in ambiguity (Sennet 2021).

There are many opinions and views on the total number of ambiguity types. For example, Abbott (1997) recognizes seven types of ambiguity, i.e. seven types of occasions, where the recipient can interpret the meaning differently. Nevertheless, for the purpose of the thesis, three types of ambiguity are distinguished: lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic.

### 3.2.1 Lexical

Sennet (2021) describes lexical ambiguity as an “**ambiguity in sound or in notation (or in sign).**” This type of ambiguity can be without difficulty disambiguated, especially when the senses of an identical words extensively differ. Lexical ambiguity therefore covers concepts as homonyms, homophones, and homographs. Sennet (2021) elaborates as follows:

The lexicon contains entries that are homophonous, or even co-spelled, but differ in meanings and even syntactic categories. ‘Duck’ is both a verb and a noun as is ‘cover’. ‘Bat’ is a noun with two different meanings and a verb with at least one meaning. ‘Kick the bucket’ is arguably ambiguous between one meaning involving dying and one meaning involving application of foot to bucket.

Approximately 80 % of words in English language have more than one dictionary definition, meaning words which have various meanings (Rueschemeyer and Gaskell 2018, ch. 5.1); lexical ambiguity is therefore fairly common in English (Wasow, Perfors, and Beaver 2005, 5). Despite the fact that some words have various meanings and are therefore potentially ambiguous, their meanings are usually clear due to the context and possible alternations of the meaning are often not even noticed (Rueschemeyer and Gaskell 2018, ch. 5.1).

The homonymous word *bat* in (45)a is an example of lexical ambiguity since the recipient of the message can understand it as a piece of equipment or as an animal. However, homonyms are not always ambiguous, as in (45)b, where the meaning of the word *bat* is clear as the result of the context.

- (45) a.        *Let me show you my bat.*  
      b.        *The bat is flying around the house.*

### 3.2.2 Syntactic

As Birner (2013, 14) clarifies “sentences may also exhibit structural ambiguity, due to **the existence of two distinct syntactic analyses for the sentence**, as in *Jenny ate the pizza on the table*, in which either *Jenny or the pizza might be on the table*, depending on the structure assigned to the sentence, specifically how much of the

postverbal material is taken to be part of the direct object: *Jenny ate [the pizza on the table]* vs. *Jenny ate [the pizza] on the table.*”

According to Sennet (2021) “[s]yntactic ambiguity occurs when there are many LFs [logical forms] that correspond to the same sentence – assuming we don’t think of sentences as distinct if their LFs are distinct. This may be the result of scope, movement or binding, and the level at which the ambiguity is localized can involve full sentences or phrases.” A syntactic ambiguity emerges either from phrases (thematic roles) or scope.

The example (46)a can be understood either as “the chicken is ready to be fed or to be fed to someone” (Sennet 2021), because *chicken* can refer to various thematic roles: an agent or a patient. In (46)b, the ambiguity arises from qualifier and operator and apart from the original meaning of the sentence (*car accident happens every 10 seconds*), the sentence can be interpreted as well as *one particular driver is involved in accident every 10 seconds*. However, this kind of ambiguity is often difficult to notice and not recognized at all by recipients (Sennet 2021).

- (46) a.        *The chicken is ready to eat.*  
          b.        *Someone is in a car accident every 10 seconds.* (Sennet 2021)

### 3.2.3 Pragmatic

The third type of ambiguity is called pragmatic, it focuses mainly on the speech act and conditional pragmatics. Although the study of **speech acts** is far more complex, for the purpose of the thesis, I summarize it by stating that the structure involves three types of speech acts: “a locutionary act (performing the act *of* saying something), an illocutionary act (performing the act *in* saying something), and a perlocutionary act (performing the act *by* saying something)” (Leech 1983, 199).

In other words, “an utterance (locutionary act) of the sentence ‘The cops are coming’ can be an assertion, a warning, or an expression of relief. ‘I’m sorry you were raised so badly’ can be an assertion or an apology. ‘You want to cook dinner’ can function as a request or as an assertion. ‘Can you pick me up later?’ can function as a request or a question or both” (Sennet 2021).

Ambiguity can arise from **presuppositions** as well, especially when using the word *too*. The sentence *Maria solved the problem too* can be interpreted with the presupposition that Maria and someone else solved the problem or “that Maria solved the problem as well as having done something else” (Sennet 2021).

For example, we can interpret the speech act of the sentence in (47)a as a request or as an actual question concerning the capability to perform the task (Sennet, 2011). A statement in (47)b can be interpreted at least in four distinct ways: I love you just like you love me, I love you and someone else, I love you just like someone else, I love you and bear other feeling toward you (Bach 1982, 593).

(47) a. *Can you pass the salt?* (Sennet 2021)

b. *I love you too.* (Bach 1982, 593)



## 4 Research Methodology

The Research Methodology chapter describes the preparation and realization phase of the research focused on the punctuation mistakes in English which result in different interpretations, i.e., in ambiguity. The aim of the research was to analyse the effect of incorrect or missing punctuation on the respondents' resulting interpretation of an utterance.

### 4.1 Preparation Phase

The preparation of research design is crucial for a smooth implementation of the research as such. The preparation phase is a strategy for the research process and was used as a framework based on which the research was carried out. The chapter defines the problem specification, research question, data sources, data collection method, sample of respondents, pre-research, and research schedule.

#### 4.1.1 Problem Specification

In nowadays world of technology, more and more people are either unconsciously or intentionally omitting punctuation marks. To many people, punctuation is invisible; they simply do not use it and often do not see the mistakes or fuzzy meanings in an incorrectly punctuated sentence. On the contrary, many people use punctuation inaccurately due to unfamiliarity with grammar and stylistic rules or because of insufficient attention when writing a text.

As Bočková (2019, 40) claims in her study, 41,25 % of authors of comments on YouTube do not use punctuation marks whatsoever. This proves my presumption that punctuation is disappearing with the use of internet, social media, and technology. Such situations open up the possibility of ambiguous interpretations of initially clearly intended meaning.

**The research problem** is the ambiguity arising from the incorrect or insufficient use of punctuation marks. Such ambiguity may emerge from spoken (when not properly pronounced and articulated) and especially written language, which is the focus of this thesis. The source of this kind of misunderstanding are mistakes in punctuation, which take place as a consequence of an ignorance to

punctuation rules, inattention when writing a text and as a result inadequately produced sentence. The resulting ambiguity leads to incorrect interpretation of an utterance, ambiguous interpretations, and sometimes even violent interpretations. Moreover, punctuation ambiguity is difficult to disambiguate since the text is written; often there are no opportunities to verify the originally intended meaning.

#### **4.1.2 Research Question**

**The aim of the research** is to answer the question: what impact has the use of incorrect punctuation or omission of punctuation marks on the reader, and does it resolve in ambiguity? The sub-objectives of the research were to analyse the ability to choose correctly punctuated sentence; to test the ability to punctuate sentences correctly according to the given meaning; to analyse various interpretations of incorrectly punctuated sentences; and to analyse what impact the respondent's level of English has on the capability to uncover ambiguity.

In order to analyse what impact the use of incorrect punctuation has on the reader and the punctuation ambiguity itself, the respondents were presented with both correctly and incorrectly punctuated sentences and were given various tasks. This enabled me to record their interpretations of each sentence and meaning. Moreover, they were given multiple tasks to complete and choose correctly punctuated sentences; this helped to analyse the respondents' ability to identify correct punctuation. The questionnaire included both my own examples and examples taken from the book focusing on punctuation ambiguity: *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* by Lynne Truss (2006). The various interpretations and answers to each task were then examined in the chapter 5 Analysis of the Results.

#### **4.1.3 Data Sources**

Within the research, both primary and secondary data were used in virtue of its length and complexity. **The primary data** were collected by means of the research itself and served as a fundamental source of the thesis. The primary data were acquired via questionnaire as their usage is beneficial to the research since such data are original and not biased. **The secondary data** were obtained from literature,

research papers and studies, specialized internet websites and other internet sources. The secondary data served as a basis for compiling and completing the research.

#### **4.1.4 Data Collection Method**

For the purpose of this thesis, **quantitative research** was chosen as a research method, more specifically a survey. The technique CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) was chosen as the most suitable for this research and was conducted online via a **questionnaire** which was placed on a web platform Google Forms. Online questionnaire was chosen as the best possible option since the research took place during the pandemic and the aim was to not endanger the health of the respondents. Moreover, respondents were given the option to complete the questionnaire in place where they felt comfortable and not stressed. Please see the appendix 8.1 for the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was mainly targeted at people who actively use English language i.e., students, teachers, translators, interpreters, or people who use English at work. Thus, the target group were native speakers and ESL speakers who use and understand the language at not less than an intermediate level, with no age restrictions. Beginners and non-active speakers were eliminated from the research as the results could have been skewed due to the complexity of the questionnaire. The data collection was realized during January 2022.

The questionnaire consists of 27 open-ended and multiple-choice questions and was structured into the following five sections:

- 1) respondents' interpretations of a sentence,
- 2) choice of the correctly punctuated sentence,
- 3) description of meaning in respondents' own words,
- 4) completion of punctuation marks,
- 5) respondents' personal information.

#### **4.1.5 Sample of Respondents**

All of the respondents were acquainted with the purpose of the questionnaire and their answers were completely anonymous. Moreover, the respondents were given

correct answers after completing the questionnaire and therefore could check whether they answered correctly or not, which was given very positive feedback. Therefore, the questionnaire served as a punctuation exercise as well.

**The sample size** was set to 172 respondents. The non-probability sampling was chosen as the most suitable sampling strategy for this research, more specifically the Snowball and the Convenience sampling method. The snowball method was used for respondents who corresponded to the previously given characteristics. They were given the questionnaire link and after completing it, they sent it over to other suitable respondents. The convenience sampling method, on the other hand, was used to collect respondents on Facebook groups specialized in translation, interpreting, and teaching English language. The questionnaire was also distributed at secondary school Masarykovo gymnázium Příbor in an English lesson.

#### **4.1.6 Pre-research**

The pre-research, also known as piloting, was carried out before the start of the research itself to ensure the questionnaire was comprehensible to the respondents, and without any grammatical mistakes or typing errors. Two participants took part in the pre-research: one native speaker of English (male), and one secondary speaker (woman). The questionnaire was presented to the native speaker to assure that the sentences and examples included in the research were understandable and their meanings were correctly intended. The pre-research was successful, no mistakes or errors were found in the questionnaire.

#### **4.1.7 Research Schedule**

The

Table 4.1 shows schedule and timetable of the research, the conclusion of the diploma thesis, and consequently periods when the individual activities were carried out. The research method and questionnaire draft were prepared whilst studying literature on the topic and consecutively completing the theoretical part of the thesis.

**Table 4.1** Research schedule and timetable

Activities/Period	10/2021	11/2021	12/2021	01/2022	02/2022
Research Method					
Questionnaire Draft					
Pre-research					
Data Collection					
Data Analysis					
Discussion					

## **4.2 Realization Phase**

This chapter includes description of the realization of the research itself, as well as the characterization of the data collection, data processing and the resulting respondents' structure. In the chapter, the realization phase is compared to the preparation phase.

### **4.2.1 Data Collection**

The data collection was implemented online via Google Forms from the 4 January to the 20 January 2022. Total of 172 respondents participated in the research. The respondents, who took part in the research, were chosen accordingly to the given characteristics by means of the Snowball and the Convenience sampling method. The aim was to collect respondents of various nationalities; however, the sample size was not pre-established based on a quota. The majority of the respondents were mainly Czech because of the scope of activity, but other nationalities participated in the research as well, such as British, Canadian, Polish and so on. For further description on respondents' structure see chapter 4.2.3.

The questionnaire was given very positive feedback as the respondents could check their answers after submitting it. Some of the respondents even contacted me to ask for permission to use the questionnaire or a part of it as a study material for their students.

### **4.2.2 Data Processing Method**

After concluding the data collection and the questionnaire, the data were downloaded as a file in excel format and subsequently processed and analysed in the programme Microsoft Excel. Using this programme, the data were coded, analysed and transformed into charts. The file did not include any incomplete questionnaires or errors; therefore, the data were not cleaned of any records. As all of the questions were compulsory, the data do not include any system missing values.

Subsequently, the data were coded, meaning they were given a label according to which category they belong to. Each of the answers was then assigned to the correct category. Especially answers to open-ended questions had to be closely analysed and divided into categories.

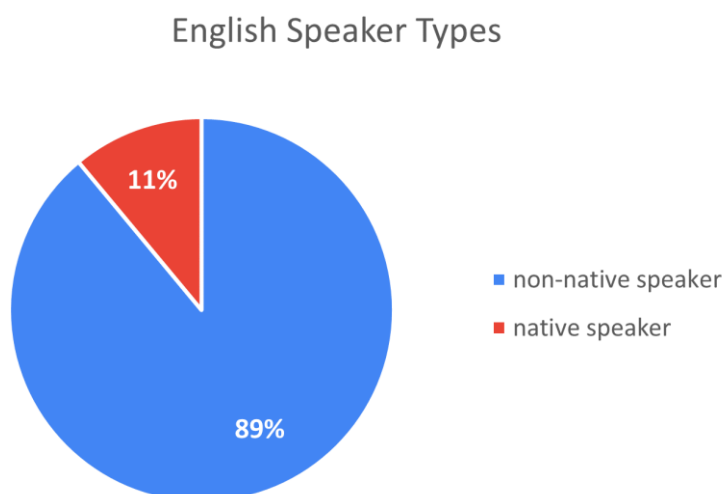
The majority of the analysed data were nominal, such data were processed into frequency tables which include both absolute and relative frequencies. Part of the data were cross analysed with characteristics of respondents and processed into pivot tables which include column and row percentages.

### **4.2.3 Respondents' Structure**

As already mentioned, the research focused on active speakers and users of English who understand and use the language either at school, at university, at work, at home, or in everyday life in general. The majority of the respondents were non-native speakers of English, they comprised 89% of the sample size. Native speakers comprised 11% of the structure. See the Figure 4.1.

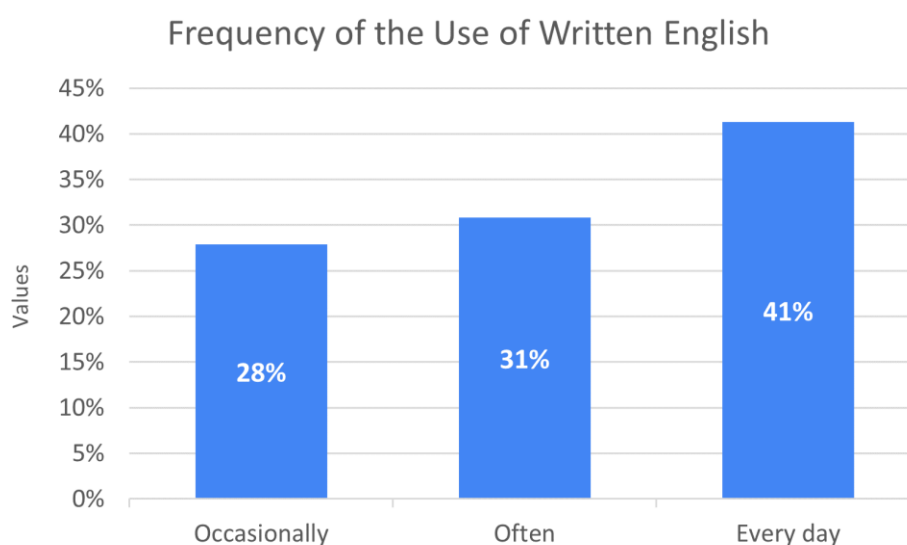
The aim was to, at least partially, involve into the research respondents of various nationalities and respondents who use English either as a primary or a secondary language since grammar rules and consequently punctuation standards which are given for a certain nationality most likely affect the way a secondary speaker of English uses them. As a result, the possible ambiguous interpretation resulting from the use of punctuation may vary as well.

**Figure 4.1** Types of English speakers who participated in the research



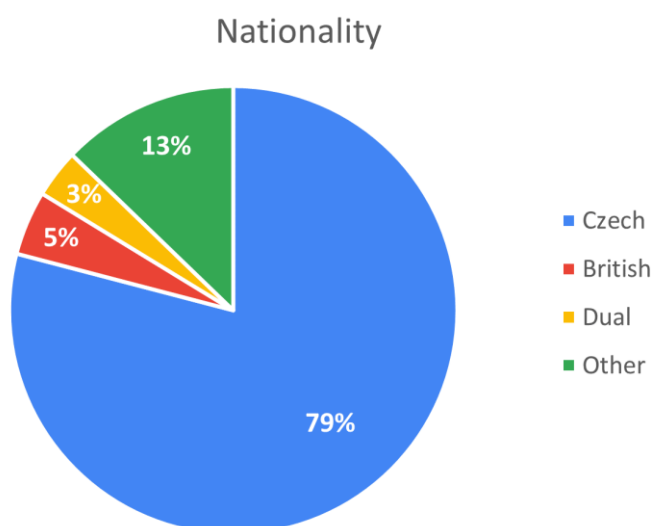
Another important aspect which may lead to punctuation mistakes and punctuation ambiguity is the speaker's frequency of usage of written English. The focus of this question was written English since in spoken English, speakers do not use punctuation and therefore do not think about punctuation standards and rules; even though they may articulate and make pauses to signify a certain punctuation mark. Out of the total number of respondents, 41% of them use English every day, 31% of them use English often, and 28% answered they use English occasionally. See the Figure 4.2.

**Figure 4.2** Respondents' frequency of a use of written English



The majority of the respondents were Czech as expected, since the research took place in the Czech Republic. Czech citizens comprised 79% of the total number of respondents, 5% of the respondents were British a 3% of them were of dual nationality, namely Czech/Canadian, Czech/Australian, Czech/Russian, Czech/Syrian or Czech/American. However, respondents of various nationalities participated in the research; they were clustered together into a group of other nationalities since they could not form adequately big category by themselves. Such nationalities included for example Canadian, Irish, Scottish, Polish, Bulgarian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Taiwan, Brazilian, Malaysian, Thai, Cypriot, or Japanese. See the Figure 4.3 for the structure of respondents' nationalities.

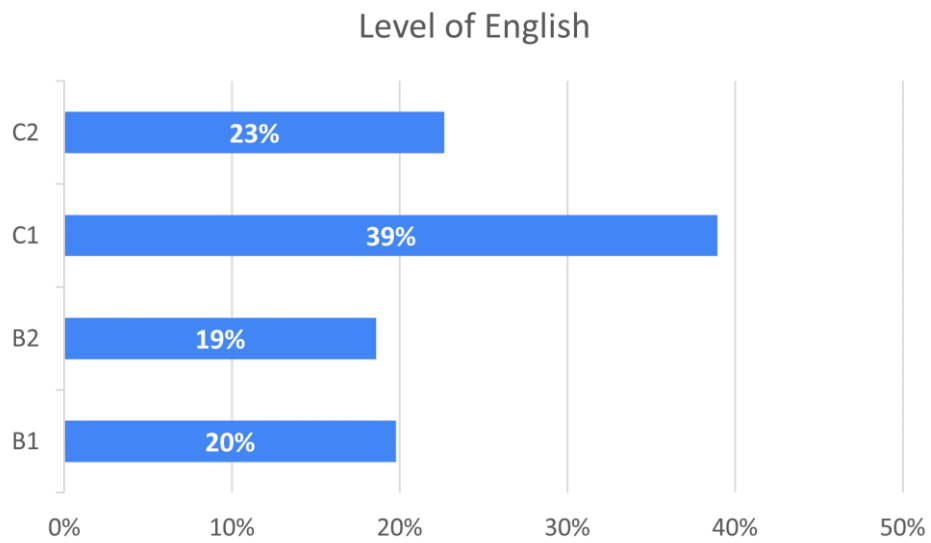
**Figure 4.3** The structure of respondents' nationalities



According to previously given characteristics, the research was aimed at speakers with communicative level of English, therefore the respondents were required to have minimally intermediate level of English because of the complexity of the research. Beginner and elementary speakers or students of English would most probably not understand the assignment and the task would be too difficult to complete for them. Moreover, because of the misapprehension, such data would have skewed the outcome. Out of the total, 39% of the respondents claim to have C2 (Proficient) level of English, 23% achieved C1 (Advanced) level, 20% said to have B1 (Intermediate) level, and 19% answered they have B2 (Upper Intermediate) level as can be seen in Figure 4.4.

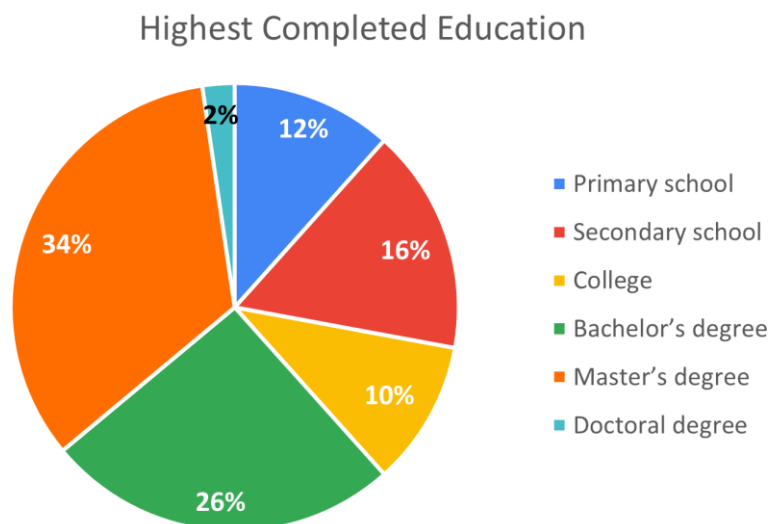


**Figure 4.4** Respondents' approximate level of English



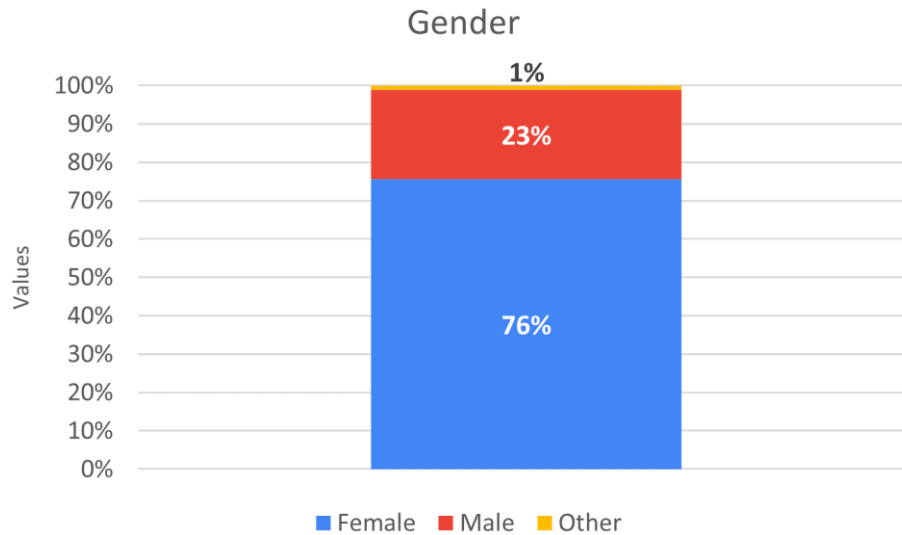
Respondents of various education levels participated in the research, from a primary level of education to a doctoral degree. The biggest category was composed of respondents with master's degree, they account for 34%. 26% of respondents achieved bachelor's degree, 16% completed secondary school, 12% completed primary school, 10% of the respondents attended college (higher or further education), and 2% of the respondents acquired doctoral degree. For complete visualisation of respondents' highest completed education level see Figure 4.5.

**Figure 4.5** The structure of respondents' highest completed education



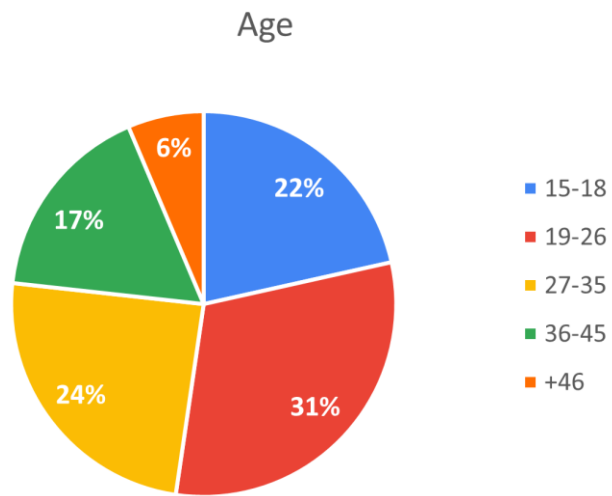
The research was not restricted to any gender and the respondents were not chosen according to a previously given quota on gender structure. Out of the total number of respondents, 76% comprised of women, 23% were formed by men, and 1% of the respondents did not identify as either and opted for *other*. See the Figure 4.6.

**Figure 4.6** The structure of respondents according to gender



The respondents were not chosen according to a previously given quota on age structure; however, the aim of the research was to obtain data from every age category. The biggest category was formed by respondents aged between 19 and 26, they comprised 31% of the total number. The second biggest group comprised of respondents aged between 27 and 35 years, they composed 24%; followed by 22% of respondents at the age from 15 to 18 years, 17% of respondents from 36 to 45 years, and 6% of respondents who were older than 46 years. See Figure 4.7 for the structure of respondents according to their age.

**Figure 4.7** The structure of respondents according to age



## 5 Analysis of the Results

This chapter includes the analysis of the results of the research on the effects of punctuation mistakes. The aim of this chapter was to analyse the outcome of various tasks incorporated in the questionnaire which focused on respondents' interpretations of ambiguous sentences, the ability to punctuate a sentence correctly in order to prevent the ambiguity, and the capability to uncover the ambiguity and understand an utterance correctly. This chapter serves as a summary of facts collected via the research, the discussion on the effects of punctuation mistakes and whether they result in ambiguity or not is included at the end of the chapter.

The structure of this chapter corresponds to the structure of the questionnaire itself. The analysis includes respondents' interpretations of various sentences, evaluation of respondents' choice of the correctly punctuated sentence from multiple choice questions, respondents' description of their interpretation of a sentence meaning, and the assessment of completion of punctuation marks in given sentences.

### 5.1 Respondents' Interpretations of a Sentence

This part of the questionnaire focused on respondents' interpretation of ambiguous sentences which are either incorrectly punctuated or not punctuated at all. The questions included multiple choice answers from which the respondents could choose the one which they felt most likely covers their interpretation of the meaning of a certain sentence.

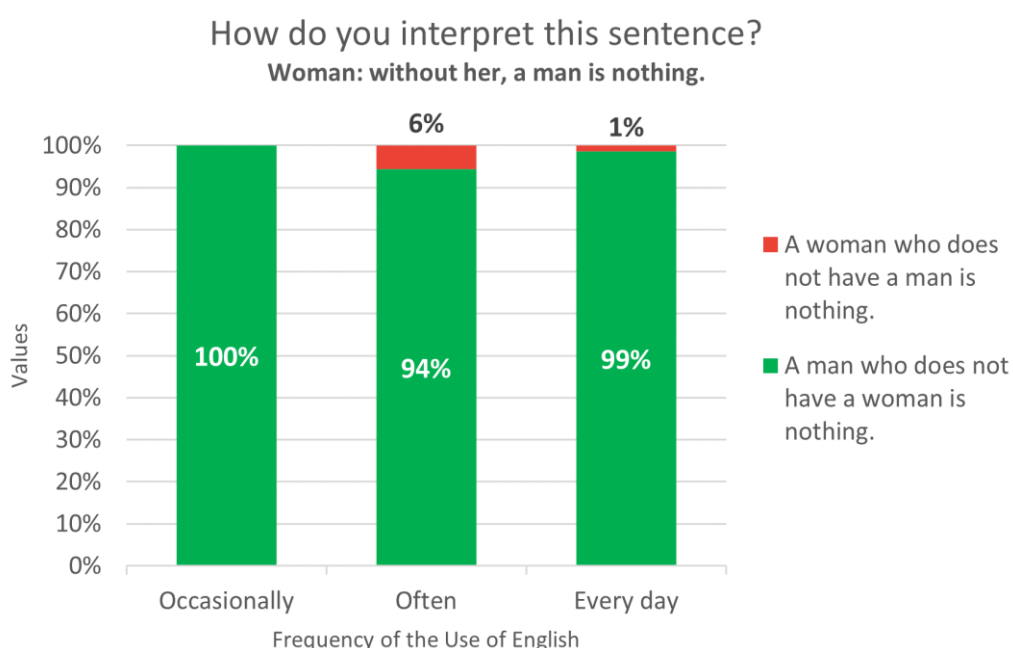
The first example of a sentence was taken from a well-known book on punctuation ambiguity: *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* by Lynne Truss (2006). The sentence *A woman without her man is nothing* is ambiguous without punctuation as it offers two meanings (Truss 2006, 9):

- *A woman: without her, man is nothing.*
- *A woman without her man, is nothing.*

As the fact that this sentence is ambiguous is already known, I decided to analyse the respondents' interpretations of one of its meanings already correctly

punctuated, specifically the first one. The majority of the respondents interpreted the sentence correctly as *A man who does not have a woman is nothing*. The results were cross analysed with the respondents' frequency of the use of written English and paradoxically, 100% of the respondents who claim to use English only occasionally answered correctly, while 6% of respondents who use English often chose the incorrect answer, and 1% of the respondents who use English on every day basis answered incorrectly. See Figure 5.1 The interpretation of the sentence: Woman: without her, a man is nothing.

**Figure 5.1** The interpretation of the sentence: Woman: without her, a man is nothing.



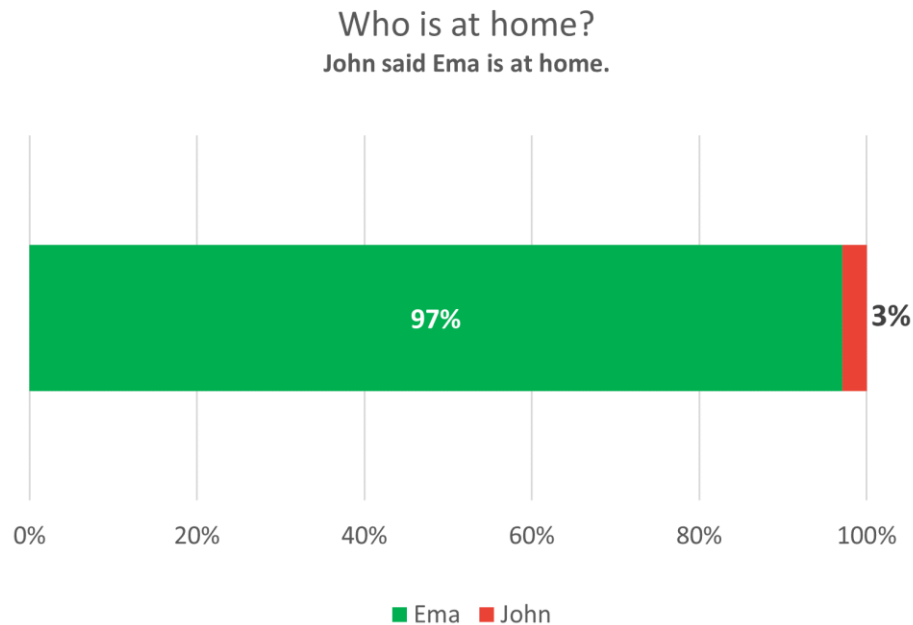
Following question involves an example (*John said Ema is at home.*) which is not punctuated at all and therefore could be ambiguous to the reader as it offers two various meanings when incorporating quotation marks to signify direct speech. One interpretation suggests that Ema is at home, while according to the other, it is John who is at home:

- *John said, "Ema is at home."*
- *"John," said Ema, "is at home."*

In this unpunctuated case, however, the most plausible interpretation of the sentence is the fact that Ema is at home. The respondents were asked to answer the

question: who is at home? As Figure 5.2 The interpretation of the sentence: who is at home? suggests, 97% of the respondents share the same interpretation; on the other hand, 3% of the respondents assumed that it is John who is at home.

**Figure 5.2** The interpretation of the sentence: who is at home?



The third question included another example taken from Truss (2006), it is an incorrectly punctuated sentence followed by a short story:

A panda walks into a café. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and fires two shots in the air.

"Why?" asks the confused waiter, as the panda makes towards the exit. The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife annual and tosses it over his shoulder.

"I'm a panda," he says, at the door. "Look it up."

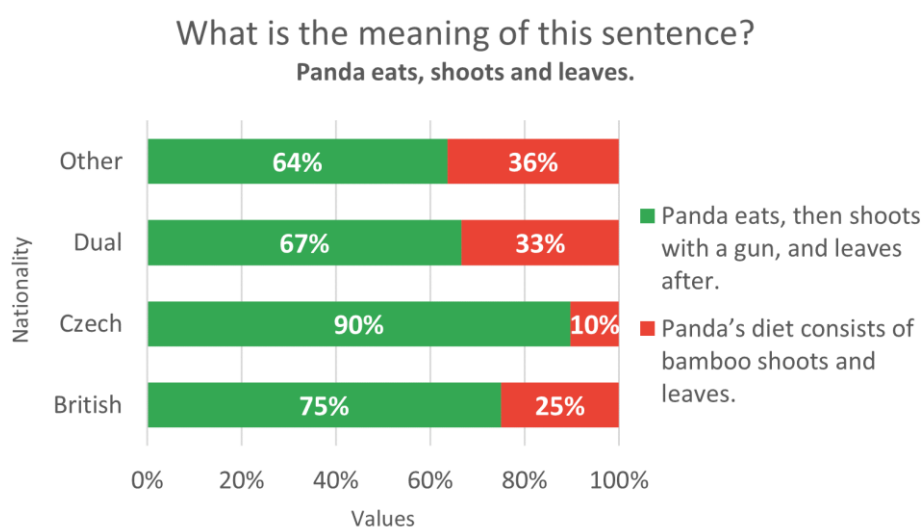
The waiter turns to the relevant entry and, sure enough, finds an explanation.

Panda. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves. (Truss 2006, back cover)

The respondents were asked to choose the correct meaning of the sentence *Panda eats, shoots and leaves* from the given options: *Panda's diet consists of*

*bamboo shoots and leaves* (incorrect), or *Panda eats, then shoots with a gun, and leaves after* (correct). Out of all nationalities participated in the research, Czech were the most successful, 90% of Czech respondents chose the correct answer. Followed by British, 75% of them answered correctly; 67% of respondents with dual nationality and 64% of respondents with mixed nationalities chose the correct answer. See the Figure 5.3 for the full visualisation of incorrect and correct answers.

**Figure 5.3** Interpretation of the sentence: Panda eats, shoots and leaves.



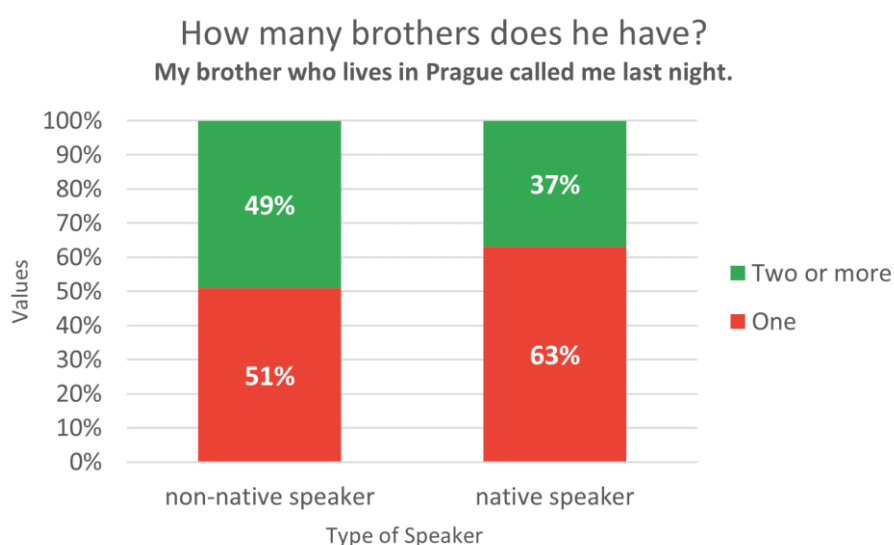
Many people make mistakes in relative clauses, especially when it comes to punctuation. Moreover, omitting punctuation marks or using them incorrectly may result in ambiguity. For example, the sentence *My brother who lives in Prague called me last night* is ambiguous in the actual number of brothers the speaker has. As already discussed in chapter 2.1.4.3, restrictive relative clauses carry an essential piece of information and they are never separated from the rest of the clause, while non-restrictive clauses are set off from the rest of the sentence by a comma and they carry additional information. The example therefore carries two distinct meanings:

- *My brother, who lives in Prague, called me last night.*  
The person has only one brother – the clause *lives in Prague* is additional information.
- *My brother who lives in Prague called me last night.*  
The person has two or more brothers – the clause *lives in Prague* is essential

information. The one brother who lives in Prague called him; the other brother lives in Ostrava.

This question was the most frequently misunderstood, the correct response rate was less than 50%. Interestingly enough, non-native speakers were more successful in choosing the correct option than native speakers, 49% of non-native respondents chose a correct option, while only 37% of native speakers were successful. See Figure 5.4 for a full response rate.

**Figure 5.4** Interpretation of the sentence: My brother who lives in Prague called me last night.



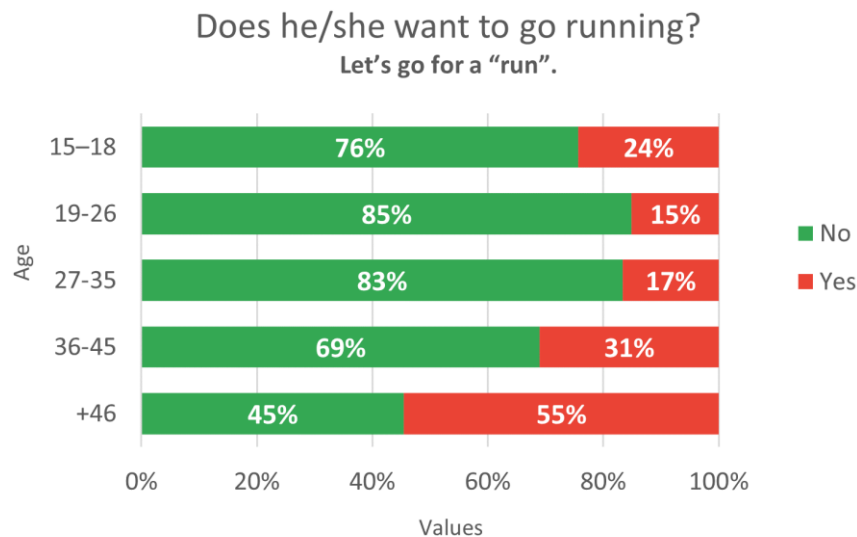
The following example was focused on the incorrect use of quotation marks. As discussed in the chapter 2.1.3.10, quotation marks are used to express direct speech, quotation, terminology, proper names, or sarcasm. However, their incorrect or ungrammatical use can cause ambiguity, as for example in the sentence *Let's go for a "run"*. The initially clear imperative sentence in a form of command to go for a run becomes ambiguous and obscure since the employed quotation marks now suggest that the word *run* is used ironically with an actual meaning along the lines *let's go out for a walk, let's get some junk food and watch TV*, or any other activity opposite to running.

The respondents were asked to answer the question: *Does he/she want to go running?* As demonstrated in Figure 5.5, the interpretations of the sentence differ in various age categories. The age category 19–26 was the most successful one, 85% of



the respondents answered that the speaker does not want to go for a run. 83% of the respondents at the age 27–35 chose the correct answer, followed by the category of 15–18 year-old respondents with 76% correct response rate, 36–45 year-old respondents with 69% correct response rate, and respondents at the age +46 from whom only 45% of respondents answered correctly.

Figure 5.5 Interpretation of the sentence: Let’s go for a “run”.

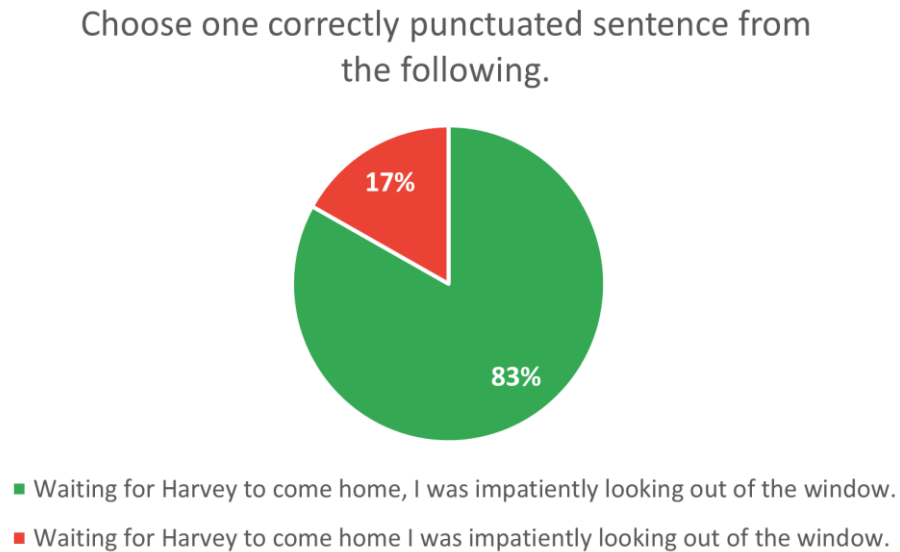


## 5.2 Choice of Correctly Punctuated Sentence

The second part of the questionnaire was focused on the ability to choose a correctly punctuated sentence out of various multiple-choice answers. The respondents were asked to choose only one correctly punctuated sentence from the given answers. The following examples included in the questionnaire were not meant to be ambiguous since this part of the research concentrated on the respondents’ grammar skills and punctuation knowledge.

The first question of this portion included a sentence with an introductory phrase: *Waiting for Harvey to come home, I was impatiently looking out of the window.* As the phrase *waiting for Harvey to come home* introduces the clause, it should be set off from the rest of the sentence by a comma. The respondents were offered two options: with and without a comma. The successful response rate was 83%, 17% of the respondents chose the incorrect answer. See Figure 5.6.

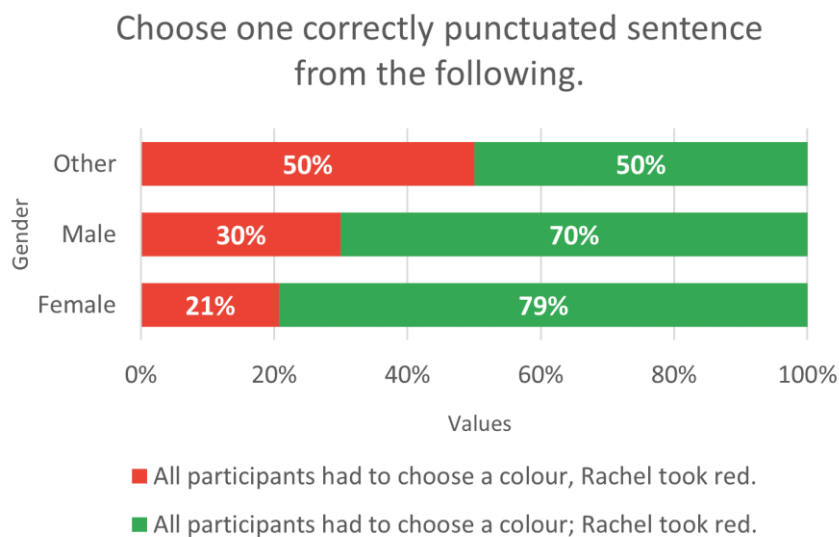
**Figure 5.6** The response rate structure of the choice of correctly punctuated sentence: Waiting for Harvey to come home, I was impatiently looking out of the window.



The following example demonstrated the use of a semi-colon. A semi-colon is frequently used to indicate an elaboration of a clause; moreover, it signifies greater connection than a comma and a smaller connection than a full stop would. For a further definition and the use of a semi-colon, see chapter 2.1.3.3. In the sentence *All participants had to choose a colour; Rachel took red*, the phrase *Rachel took red* elaborates on the clause preceding it. Therefore, a semi-colon should be used instead of a comma.

Women were the most successful in choosing the correct option, 79% of them answered correctly. 70% of men chose the correct answer and 50% of respondents, who did not identify as one of the binary genders, chose the correct answer. For the full structure of response rate divided according to gender see Figure 5.7.

**Figure 5.7** The response rate structure of the choice of correctly punctuated sentence: All participants had to choose a colour; Rachel took red.

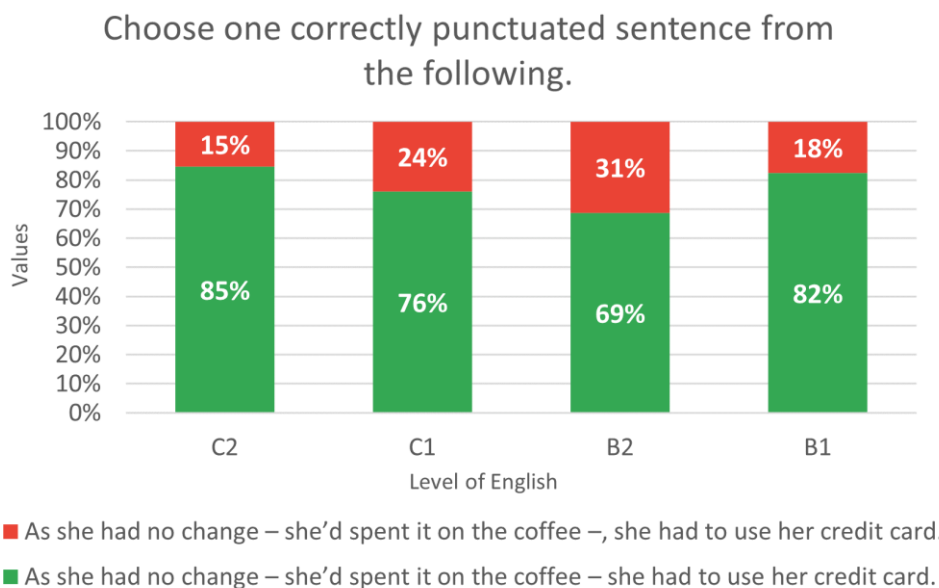


As explained in chapter 2.1.3.7, a dash may be used in a similar way as a comma; moreover, in some situations, they can be even interchangeable. However, a dash should not be used together with a comma within one sentence. The respondents were asked to choose the correctly punctuated sentence from the following alternatives:

- *As she had no change — she'd spent it on the coffee — she had to use her credit card.*
- *As she had no change — she'd spent it on the coffee —, she had to use her credit card.*

The correct option is the one without the comma. The phrase positioned between the pair of dashes *she'd spent it on the coffee* clarifies the preceding phrase *as she had no change*. The response rate among respondents with various approximate levels of English was relatively even. The most successful were the respondents in the category C2, 85% of them chose the correct answer. Followed by respondents in the category B1 with an 82% correct response rate, respondents in the category C1 with a 76% correct response rate, and lastly category B2 from which 69% of the respondents answered correctly. See Figure 5.8 for a full response rate structure.

**Figure 5.8** The response rate structure of the choice of correctly punctuated sentence: As she had no change — she'd spent it on the coffee — she had to use her credit card.



The following question focused on the use of pronouns and punctuation marks in relative clauses. The respondents were asked to choose one correctly punctuated sentence from provided options:

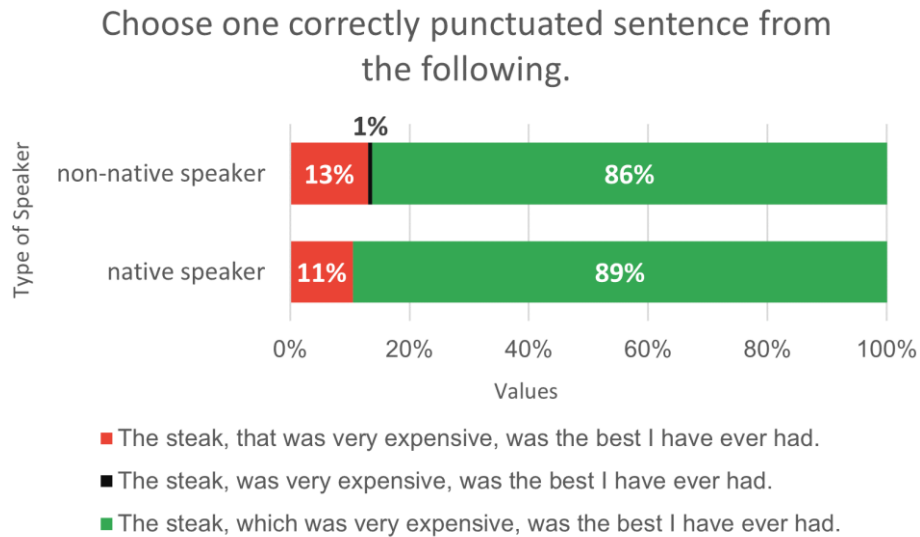
- *The steak, that was very expensive, was the best I have ever had.*
- *The steak, was very expensive, was the best I have ever had.*
- *The steak, which was very expensive, was the best I have ever had.*

The only possible and correct answer is the third one: *The steak, which was very expensive, was the best I have ever had.* As discussed in chapter 2.1.4.3, non-restrictive relative clauses are separated from the rest of the sentence by commas. Furthermore, the pronoun *that* can only be used to introduce a restrictive relative clause; therefore, the first example is ungrammatical. The second option is unacceptable since the pronoun is missing completely and the relative clause is lacking a subject.

The majority of respondents answered correctly. As for native speakers, 89% of them chose the correct answer, 11% chose the incorrect answer with the pronoun *that*. Out of non-native speakers, 86% of them answered correctly, 13% chose an

incorrect alternative with the pronoun *that*, and 1% of them chose the incorrect alternative with a missing pronoun. See Figure 5.9.

**Figure 5.9** The response rate structure of the choice of correctly punctuated sentence: The steak, which was very expensive, was the best I have ever had.

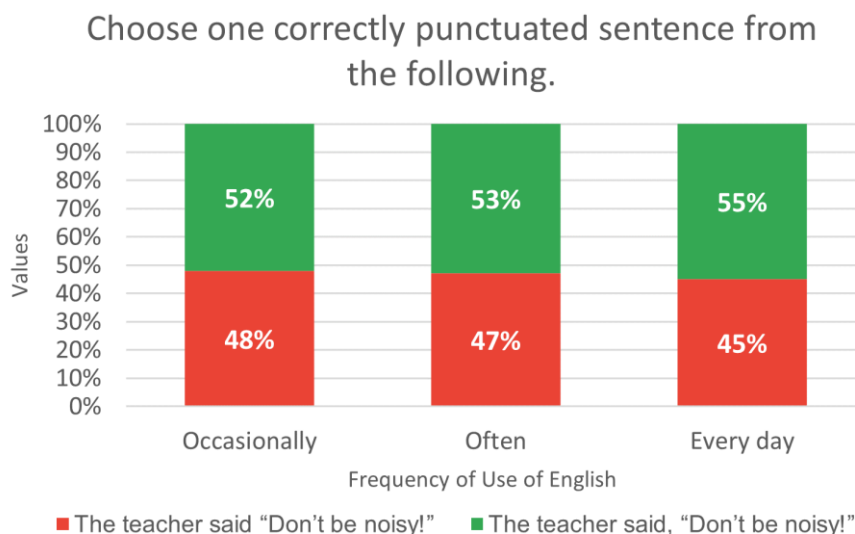


The last question of this section of the research was focused on the use of quotation marks, more specifically on the punctuation employed in direct speech sentences enclosed in quotation marks. As discussed in chapter 2.1.3.10, when incorporating direct speech in a larger sentence unit, the verb should always be separated from a direct speech by a comma, but not an internal full stop. The respondents were asked to choose between the options:

- *The teacher said "Don't be noisy!"*
- *The teacher said, "Don't be noisy!"*

Only the second option is grammatically correct as it contains the comma separating the matrix verb from the direct speech. The respondents' answers were cross analysed with the frequency of their use of English. The respondents who use English every day were the most successful, 55% of them chose the correct answer. Out of respondents who use English often, 53% answered correctly, followed by respondents who use English occasionally, 52% of them chose the correct answer. For a full response rate structure see Figure 5.10.

**Figure 5.10** The response rate structure of the choice of correctly punctuated sentence: The teacher said, “Don’t be noisy!”



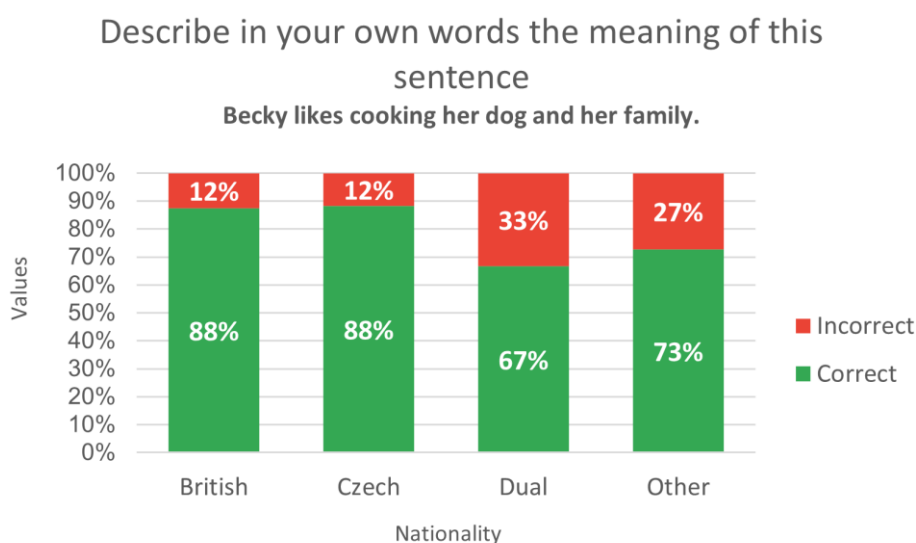
### 5.3 Description of Meaning

The aim of the following part of the research was to acquire various interpretations of sentences which contained an incorrect punctuation mark or did not contain punctuation at all in order to ascertain whether they offer different meanings i.e., whether they are ambiguous. The respondents were asked to describe the meaning of a given sentence in their own words in an open-ended question. Afterwards, the answers were analysed and divided into corresponding number of categories depending on whether their answer was correct, incorrect, or involved additional interpretation of a sentence.

The first question contained the example *Becky likes cooking her dog and her family*. As the sentence did not contain any commas which are needed to separate the individual items in a list, it switched from the originally intended meaning to *Becky enjoys cooking her dog and her family as a meal*. The results were cross analysed with respondents’ nationalities. Czech and British respondents gained the highest correct response rate, 88% of the respondents of both nationalities interpreted the meaning correctly. The second most successful were respondents with mixed nationalities (other), 73% answered correctly, followed by respondents with dual nationality, 67% of them interpreted the meaning correctly. See Figure 5.11.

As for the incorrect interpretations of the sentence, some of the respondents interpreted it as *Becky likes to Cook for her dog and family*. This meaning is unacceptable as the preposition *for* is missing in the original sentence. To a few of the respondents, punctuation is invisible, and they interpreted the sentence as if the commas were present as *Becky likes to cook, her dog, and her family*.

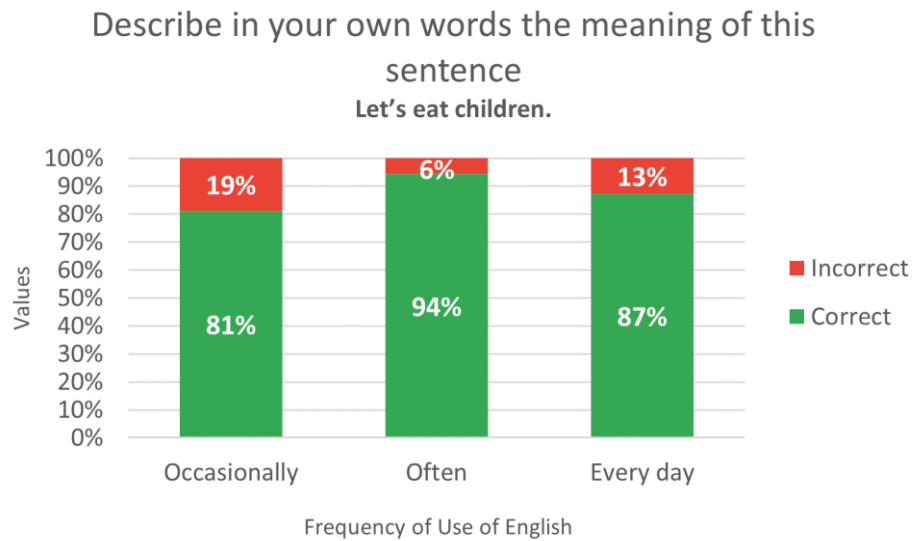
**Figure 5.11** Respondents' description of meaning of the sentence: Becky likes cooking her dog and her family.



The following question focused on the use of commas together with a vocative. For a further explanation on the use of comma with vocatives see chapter 2.1.3.2. As the comma before the addressee was omitted, the meaning switched from vocative directed at children who should eat their meal to a cannibalistic imperative actually inviting to eat the children as a meal. The correctly punctuated sentence would thus look followingly: *Let's eat, children*.

The results were cross analysed with the respondents' frequency of the use of English. The largest part of the respondents interpreted the sentence correctly. The category with the respondents who use English often was the most successful, 94% of them interpreted the meaning correctly as an encouragement to consume the children. Followed by 87% of the respondents who use English every day, and 81% of the respondents who use English occasionally. The fact that the category of respondents who said they use English every day is the second most successful in the response rate is interesting. See Figure 5.12.

**Figure 5.12** Respondents' description of meaning of the sentence: Let's eat children.



The sentence *Is this my dinner or the dogs?* used in the next question provides an illustration of an omission of an apostrophe. In this prototypical example, the apostrophe in the word *dogs* was omitted intentionally. Thus, the original structure and meaning of the sentence would have been: *Is this my dinner or the dog's?* However, since the apostrophe was omitted, the meaning of the sentence switched to the one where the speaker cannot differentiate the dogs from his/her dinner.

Initially, I distinguished only two possible interpretations when creating the research: correct and incorrect. However, when analysing the results of the questionnaire, some of the respondents suggested a third possible interpretation as *Are the dogs my dinner?*

- *Is this my dinner or do I see dogs?* [Correct]
- *Is this dinner for me or for the dog?* [Incorrect]
- *Is this my usual dinner or did you serve me dogs?* [Other]

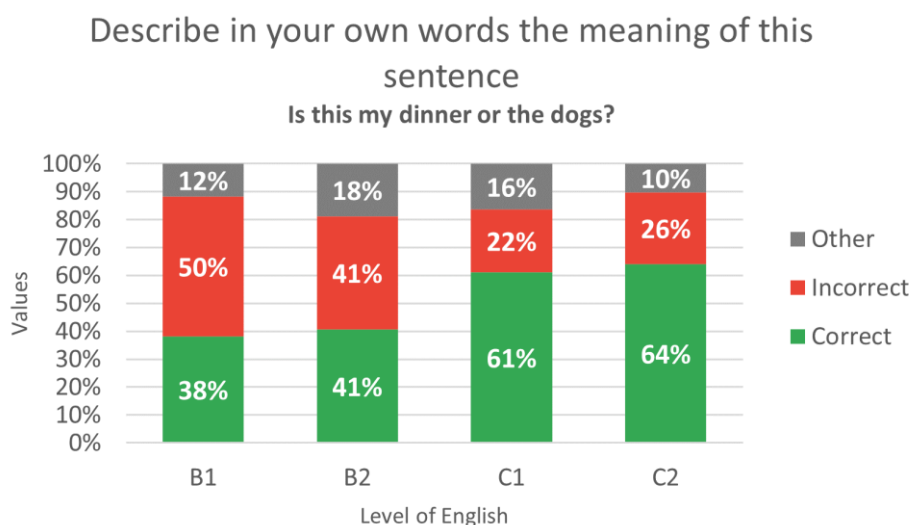
Therefore, the respondents' answers were divided into three categories in this case: correct, incorrect, and other. The third category was named Other since my personal interpretation of the incorrectly punctuated sentence used in this question was *Is this my dinner or do I see dogs?* and thus, my intention was to communicate this particular meaning. As a result, the third interpretation was not included in the category Incorrect, since this interpretation is indeed possible. The fact that the



incorrectly punctuated sentence may be interpreted in several ways only confirms that punctuation mistakes result in ambiguity; and in this case, at least three interpretations of the sentence are possible.

The results were cross analysed with the respondents' level of English. Respondents in the categories C2 and C1 were the most successful. In the category C2, 64% of the respondents answered correctly, 26% of them answered incorrectly, and 10% answered alternatively. As for the category C1, 61% of the respondents answered correctly, 22% answered incorrectly, and 16% gave the alternative answer. In the category B2, 41% answered correctly, 41% answered incorrectly, and 18% of them interpreted the sentence alternatively. The category B1 was the least successful one, 50% of the respondents interpreted the sentence incorrectly, 38% answered correctly, and 12% interpreted the sentence alternatively. See Figure 5.13 for a full visualisation of the results.

**Figure 5.13** Respondents' description of meaning of the sentence: Is this my dinner or the dogs?

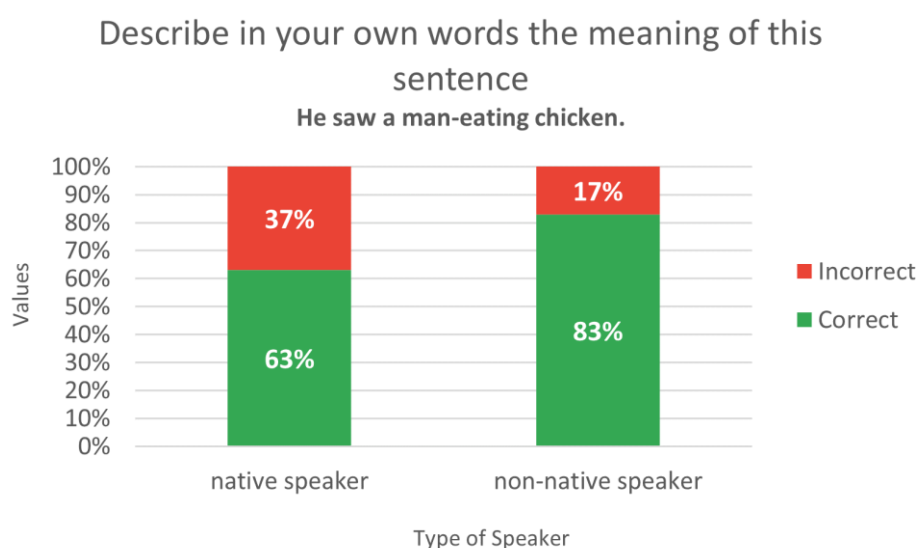


The following question demonstrated the incorrect use of a hyphen on the sentence *He saw a man-eating chicken*. For a further information on the use of hyphen see chapter 2.1.3.7. The original and intended meaning of a correctly punctuated sentence would have been *He saw a man that was eating a chicken*. However, the incorrect use of a hyphen transforms the individual words *man* and

*eating* into a compound adjective *man-eating*. The resulting and correct meaning of the sentence therefore indicates that the person saw a chicken which eats people.

As can be seen in Figure 5.14, non-native speakers gained a higher correct response rate which would be rather expected from the native speakers of English. As for non-native speakers, 83% of them answered correctly and 17% interpreted the sentence incorrectly. With regard to native speakers, 63% of them interpreted the sentence correctly, and 37% answered incorrectly.

**Figure 5.14** Respondents’ description of meaning of the sentence: He saw a man-eating chicken.

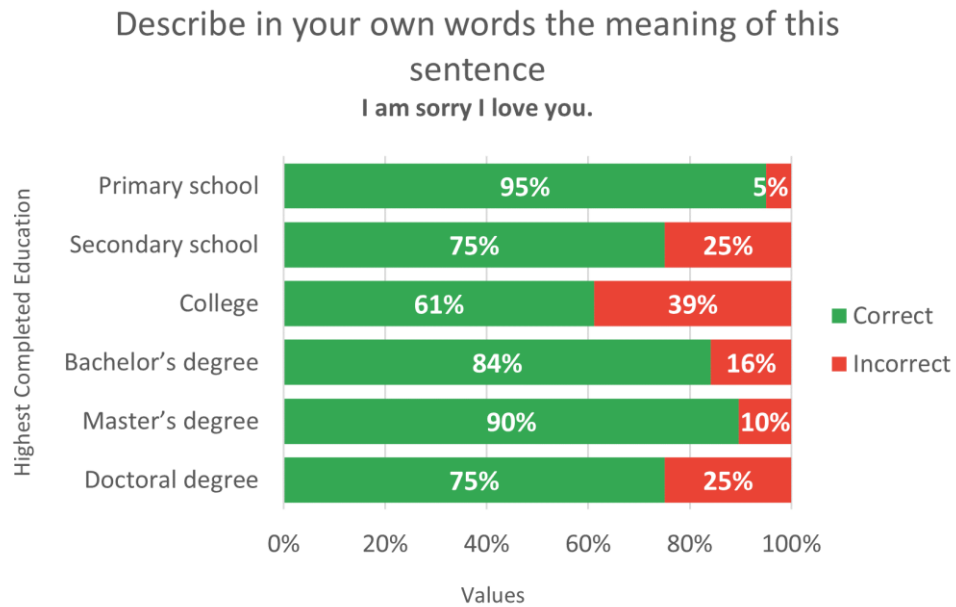


The last example of this part of the questionnaire focused on the use of commas. In the sentence *I am sorry I love you* a comma was omitted. The original correctly punctuated sentence would have implied a situation when someone is apologizing for something and then confesses love. However, the missing comma implies the meaning *I am sorry that I love you*, or in other words *I regret my feelings for you*.

The results were cross analysed with the respondents’ highest completed education. Surprisingly, the respondents who completed primary education were the most successful, 95% of them interpreted the sentence correctly. Followed by the respondents with a master’s degree, 90% of them responded correctly. The third most successful category included respondents with a bachelor’s degree with 84% correct response rate. The next were respondents with a doctoral degree and

respondents with completed secondary school; in both of these, 75% of the respondents answered correctly. The respondents who completed college (further or higher education) gained 61% correct response rate. See Figure 5.15.

**Figure 5.15** Respondents’ description of meaning of the sentence: I am sorry I love you.



## 5.4 Completion of Punctuation Marks

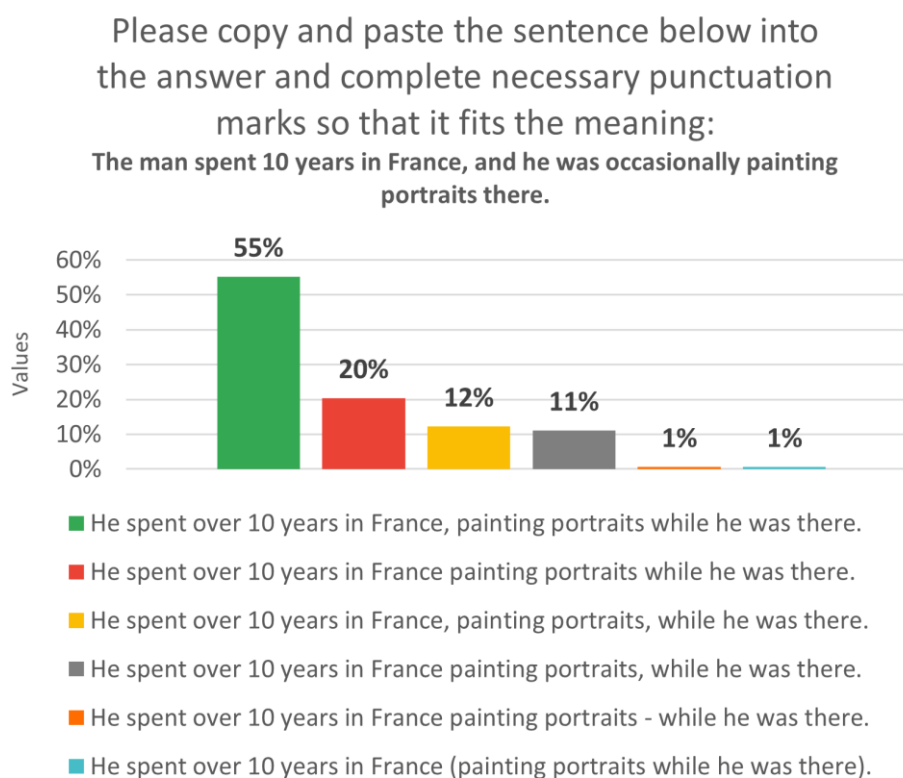
The last part of the research focused on the completion of punctuation marks. The respondents were asked to copy and paste a sentence into the open-ended answer and complete necessary punctuation marks so that it fits the meaning which was given to them. The aim of this part of the questionnaire was to analyse respondents’ ability to punctuate given sentences correctly. Four of the questions were open-ended and one included multiple-choice answers.

The respondents were asked to complete punctuation to the sentence *He spent over 10 years in France painting portraits while he was there* so that it fits the meaning that the man spent 10 years in France, and he was occasionally painting portraits while he was there. Out of the total number of respondents, 55% of them punctuated the sentence correctly with a comma in the right position: *He spent over 10 years in France, painting portraits while he was there*. On the contrary, 20% of

the respondents did not punctuate the sentence at all, leaving it with the interpretation that the man spent 10 years only painting portraits in France, which is incorrect.

The rest of the respondents suggested alternative punctuation completion, 12% of the respondents separated the phrase *painting portraits* with commas from the rest of the sentence, 11% of the respondents placed the comma after the word *portraits*, and 1% of them used hyphen after *portraits*; however, none of the three alternative approaches are correct. Another alternative approach suggested by 1% of the respondents would be acceptable, enclosing the *clause painting portraits while he was there* in round brackets. See Figure 5.16 for full respondents' responses.

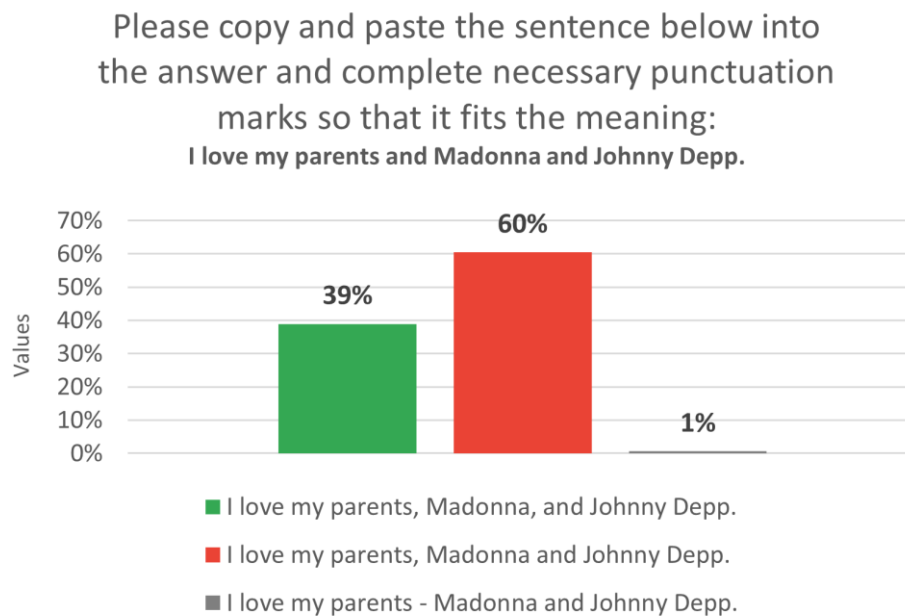
**Figure 5.16** Completion of punctuation marks in the sentence: He spent over 10 years in France painting portraits while he was there.



Another example demonstrated the use of a comma, so called Oxford Comma in this case. See chapter 2.1.4.1 for further information and use of Oxford Comma. The respondents were given an unpunctuated sentence *I love my parents Madonna and Johnny Depp* and they were asked to complete punctuation accordingly to the meaning: the person loves his/her parents and Madonna and Johnny Depp.

Most of the respondents did not punctuate the sentence accordingly, 60% of the respondents situated the comma only after *parents*, but did not situate the comma in front of *and*. Although the Oxford comma is usually optional, in this case it is crucial since it cancels the ambiguity. Without the comma, the sentence suggests that the person’s parents are Madonna and Johnny Depp. On the other hand, 39% of the respondents punctuated the sentence correctly and used the Oxford comma as well. One percent of the respondents punctuated the sentence with a dash, which is incorrect as it implies the same meaning as the sentence without the comma i.e., that the parents are the celebrities. See Figure 5.17.

**Figure 5.17** Completion of punctuation marks in the sentence: I love my parents Madonna and Johnny Depp.

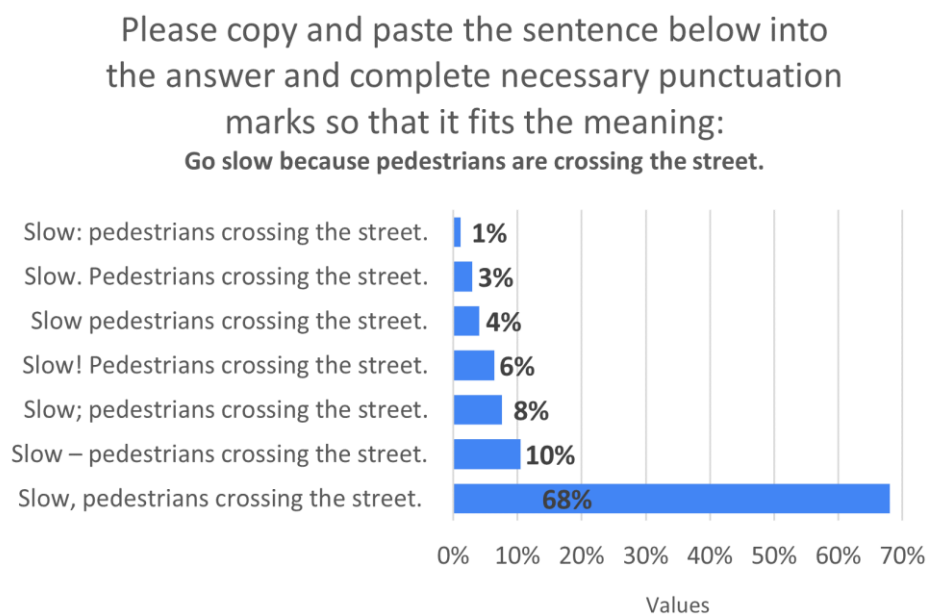


The next sentence usually can be seen on traffic signs. However, respondents were given the sentence *Slow pedestrians crossing the street* without punctuation and they were asked to complete it so that it fits the meaning of: “go slow because pedestrians are crossing the street”. The respondents suggested many options to punctuate the sentence using a full stop, comma, colon, semi-colon, exclamation point, or a dash.

The majority of the respondents suggested a comma, exactly 68% of them. Most of the suggested options are possible; however, the option with a colon, which

was suggested by 1% of the respondents, and the option without punctuation, which was suggested by 4% of the respondents, is not possible and is therefore incorrect. A colon is used to clarify or explain the word preceding it while in this example the clause justifies the instruction to go slow. Moreover, when omitting the punctuation completely, the word *slow* becomes an adjective and the sentence shifts from an imperative to a declarative clause. See Figure 5.18 for the respondents' punctuation suggestions.

**Figure 5.18** Completion of punctuation marks in the sentence: Slow pedestrians crossing the street.



This particular question was not open-ended, it was a multiple-choice question. The respondents were given a sentence *Firemen must have a difficult time sleeping because \_\_\_\_\_ often summoned in the middle of the night* and they were asked to fill in the gap with the following options:

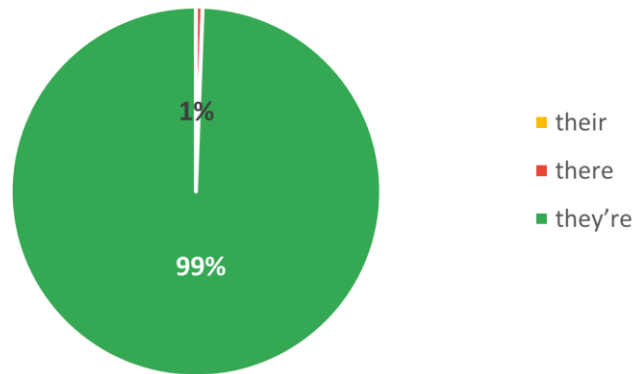
- *their,*
- *there,*
- *they're.*

The majority of the respondents answered correctly, in total 99% of them chose the option *they're*. Only 1% of the respondents chose an incorrect option *there*. The incorrect option *their* was not chosen by any respondents. See Figure 5.19.

**Figure 5.19** Completion of punctuation marks in the sentence: Firemen must have a difficult time sleeping because \_\_\_\_\_ often summoned in the middle of the night.

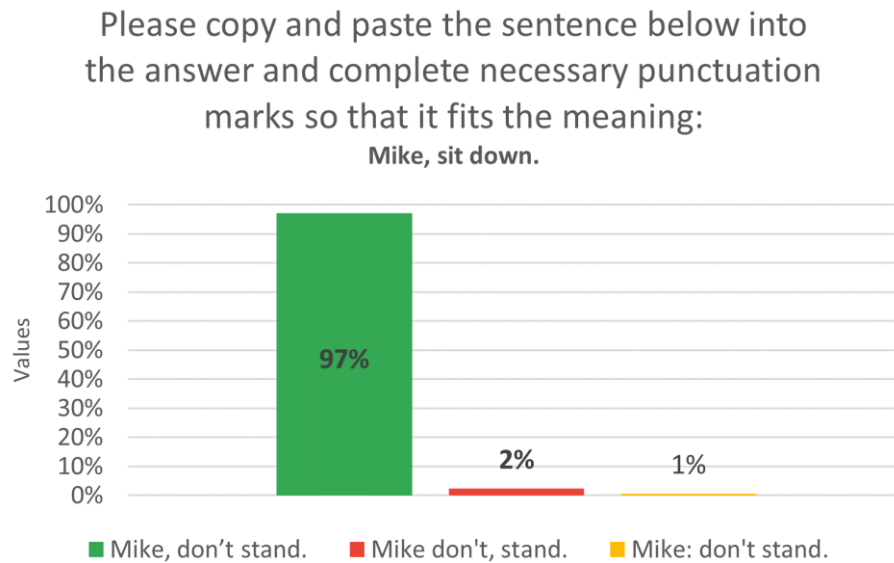
Please choose a correct option to fill in the gap in the sentence:

Firemen must have a difficult time sleeping because \_\_\_\_\_ often summoned in the middle of the night.



The last question of this portion of the research focused once again on the use of a comma. The respondents were given the sentence *Mike don't stand* without punctuation and they were asked to complete necessary punctuation marks to fit the meaning of telling somebody to sit down. The majority of the respondents answered correctly, 97% of them suggested to locate the comma after the vocative. As for incorrect answers, 2% of the respondents located the comma after the auxiliary verb as well, which is incorrect since the comma after vocative is missing and the comma after the auxiliary verb *don't* signifies an instruction to stand up instead of to sit down. Followed by 1% of the respondents who chose to punctuate the vocative with a colon which is incorrect as well as a colon is used to clarify or to further explain the phrase preceding it. See Figure 5.20.

**Figure 5.20** Completion of punctuation marks in the sentence: Mike don't stand.



## 5.5 Discussion

After the analysis of the research results, it is more than clear that punctuation mistakes certainly result in ambiguity. Some of the incorrectly punctuated sentences are ambiguous to a greater extent, some are less ambiguous. However, none of the questions which focused on respondents' interpretation of a meaning of a sentence gained 100% correct response; therefore, various respondents interpreted the meanings of individual sentences differently. Thus, the sentences included in the research which were purposely incorrectly punctuated are ambiguous. In this chapter, I will once again discuss some of the most interesting results of the research and comment on the ambiguity of various examples.

In the first part of the research, Respondents' Interpretations of a Sentence, most of the respondents seemed to interpret the sentence in the most probable way. For example, in Figure 5.3 in the sentence *Panda eats, shoots and leaves*, a significant part of the respondents understood that the sentence deals with the animal's diet even though the comma clearly separates the word *eats* from *shoots*. However, I assign the fact that over half of the respondents answered incorrectly in the example *My brother who lives in Prague called me last night* in Figure 5.4 to the ignorance and inexperience with relative clauses rather than the instinct to interpret the meaning in the most feasible way.



As for the number of interpretations, it is evident in the example *Is this my dinner or the dogs?* in Figure 5.13 that an ambiguous sentence can give rise to more than just two possible interpretations. I personally conceived of only two possible interpretations when creating this very example; however, significant part of the respondents who participated in the research interpreted the sentence in a third alternative meaning. Thus, mistakes in punctuation can result in multiple various meanings of a sentence.

Often, the respondents do not even realize the ambiguity of a sentence. See for example Figure 5.17 for an incorrectly punctuated answer *\*I love my parents, Madonna and Johnny Depp*. Over a half, more specifically 60% of the respondents, did not realize that the sentence without the Oxford comma suggests the person's parents are the celebrities and therefore that the sentence is ambiguous. Many other ambiguous sentences that have multiple meanings may be unnoticed as the reader simply interprets the sentence in the most reasonable way. As for example in this sentence *I am going out with my brothers, Gabriel and James*, the speaker cannot be sure whether the person's brother are Gabriel and James or whether they are his/her friends or other relatives, unless the speaker knows such facts, or he/she asks for additional information.

Concerning the individual categories of respondents who participated in the research, it seems that native speakers use punctuation more intuitively as non-native speakers were more successful in choosing the correct options. See for example Figure 5.4 where 63% of native speakers answered incorrectly while only 51% of non-native speakers chose the incorrect answer. Similarly, 37% of native speakers and only 17% of non-native speakers chose the incorrect answer in Figure 5.14. It may be because native speakers use punctuation intuitively and naturally, and interpret the sentence meaning, which is the most visible to them. Meaning, they do not necessarily see the ambiguity in a meaning while non-native speakers who study English language and have to learn the grammar by heart might be more attentive to ambiguity. In my opinion, however, this hypothesis should be analysed more thoroughly in future research as respondents of various nationalities, and therefore various punctuation standards, participated in the research.

It seems that the respondents' approximate level of English is not directly proportional to the ability to uncover the ambiguity, although Figure 5.13 says so. However, after the analysis of Figure 5.8 it looks like it might be proportional to the respondents' attention when reading a text. Or it may be the combination of both the level of English and reader's attention. Nevertheless, it seems that in not so obvious cases of ambiguity (Figure 5.13), the respondents' level of English plays its role in uncovering it.

As can be seen in Figure 5.15, it was not the category with the highest completed education which gained the most successful response rate as it would be expected naturally; 75 % of the respondents with highest completed education (doctoral degree) chose correct answer but 95% of the respondents with primary completed education answered correctly. It may be due the fact that respondents with primary education do not use punctuation in English yet (or not so often) and therefore interpret the meaning of the sentence in the most obvious way without it being confusing to them. Once again, this hypothesis leaves the opportunity to analyse ambiguity with relation to education even further.

As for the frequency of the use of written English, it seems that respondents who use written English every day are more successful in uncovering the ambiguity as can be seen in Figure 5.10; however, the differences in the response rate of various categories are mild. This may be due to the fact that respondents who are better at uncovering ambiguity do not necessarily use written English often; instead, they may use spoken English more often. After the analysis of Figure 5.1 and Figure 5.12 it appears that the frequency of the use of written English and the ability to uncover ambiguity do not directly correlate.

Regarding the respondents' nationality, the most successful were Czech and British respondents as can be seen in Figure 5.3 and Figure 5.11. This may be again due to the fact that English is the most educated frequently taught secondary language in the Czech Republic and therefore the Czechs are more attentive to its grammar than native speakers. As for respondents' age, the respondents in the category 19–26 gained the highest correct response rate, followed by the category 27–35 and 15–18.

In conclusion, it is evident from the results of the research that punctuation mistakes certainly result in ambiguity since various respondents interpreted incorrectly punctuated sentences differently. To summarize the results, the ability to punctuate a text correctly is the only way to prevent punctuation ambiguity. The only solution to disambiguate a written sentence is to verify the facts or to ask for an explanation which may not always be feasible as the author of the text may be unknown or unavailable.

## 6 Conclusion

Punctuation is an extremely extensive and demanding tool whose rules may be different based on the given language or even within one particular language. For example, English use of punctuation can be light or heavy and it is merely up to the author what type of punctuation style s/he chooses to use. However, there are rules in English which are obligatory and should be employed without exception to maintain grammatical structure of the text and to prevent ambiguity.

The aim of the thesis was to describe and summarize the broad punctuation rules whose incorrect use often results in ambiguity, and to characterize the concept of ambiguity. The focus of the theoretical part was British English as various types of English employ different punctuation standards. Definition and functions of punctuation were discussed, as well as individual punctuation indicators, their characters and possible usage. The major English punctuation rules were subsequently compared to Czech punctuation rules. The second chapter of the theoretical part was dedicated to the characterization of the ambiguity phenomenon from a pragmatic point of view. There, various concepts which often get mistaken for ambiguity were described and also various types of ambiguity were introduced.

An integral part of the thesis was the research which focused on the effects of punctuation mistakes in English on the reader of a certain text. The practical part of the thesis included detailed methodology of the research along with information about the research problem, sources of data, data collection method, sample of respondents, pre-research, research schedule, data collection method, data processing method, and the actual respondents' structure and their characteristics. The second part of the theoretical part focused on the analysis of the research results which were cross analysed with respondents' characteristics and complemented with data and charts visualisations.

The research problem was the ambiguity caused by incorrect or inadequate use of punctuation marks. Mistakes in punctuation, which occur as a result of a lack of knowledge of punctuation rules, inattention when creating a text are the basis of this type of misunderstanding. The aim of the research was to answer the question: what impact has the use of incorrect punctuation or omission of punctuation marks on

the reader, and does it resolve in ambiguity? The sub-objectives of the research were to analyse the respondents' ability to choose correctly punctuated sentence, and to punctuate sentences correctly according to given meaning.

Finally, the findings of the study show that punctuation mistakes result in ambiguity, as various respondents interpreted incorrectly punctuated sentences differently. To summarize, the ability to accurately and grammatically punctuate a text is the only way to avoid punctuation ambiguity. The results of the research bring new information on the topic of punctuation ambiguity which is, compared to other types of ambiguity, relatively insufficiently explored and described. The thesis serves as a contribution to already existing research in the area of ambiguity and punctuation.

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## 8 Appendix

### 8.1 Questionnaire

Dear respondent,

I would like to ask you to complete a questionnaire which focuses on punctuation errors and mistakes. I am a fifth-year student of English for Translation and Interpreting at the Faculty of Arts at UPOL.

This questionnaire serves as the basis for my master thesis. Your answers are completely anonymous and will serve solely as a source for my thesis. Thank you for your time, willingness, and participation.

Anna Břežná

**Unless otherwise indicated, please choose only one answer that best describes your opinion.**

1) How do you interpret this sentence?

**Woman: without her, a man is nothing.**

a) A woman who does not have a man is nothing.

b) A man who does not have a woman is nothing.

2) Who is at home? John or Ema?

**John said Ema is at home.**

a) Ema

b) John

3) What is the meaning of this sentence?

**Panda eats, shoots and leaves.**

- a) Panda's diet consists of bamboo shoots and leaves.
- b) Panda eats, then shoots with a gun, and leaves after.

4) How many brothers does he have?

**My brother who lives in Prague called me last night.**

- a) One
- b) Two or more

5) Does he/she want to go running?

**Let's go for a "run".**

- a) Yes
- b) No

6) Choose one correctly punctuated sentence from the following.

- a) Waiting for Harvey to come home I was impatiently looking out of the window.
- b) Waiting for Harvey to come home, I was impatiently looking out of the window.

7) Choose one correctly punctuated sentence from the following.

- a) All participants had to choose a colour, Rachel took red.
- b) All participants had to choose a colour; Rachel took red.

8) Choose one correctly punctuated sentence from the following.

a) As she had no change – she’d spent it on the coffee –, she had to use her credit card.

b) As she had no change – she’d spent it on the coffee – she had to use her credit card.

9) Choose one correctly punctuated sentence from the following.

a) The steak, that was very expensive, was the best I have ever had.

b) The steak, which was very expensive, was the best I have ever had.

c) The steak, was very expensive, was the best I have ever had.

10) Choose one correctly punctuated sentence from the following.

a) The teacher said “Don’t be noisy!”

b) The teacher said, “Don’t be noisy!”

11) Describe in your own words the meaning of this sentence:

**Becky likes cooking her dog and her family.**

Answer:

---

12) Describe in your own words the meaning of this sentence:

**Let’s eat children.**

Answer:

---

13) Describe in your own words the meaning of this sentence:

**Is this my dinner or the dogs?**

Answer:

---

14) Describe in your own words the meaning of this sentence:

**He saw a man-eating chicken.**

Answer:

---

15) Describe in your own words the meaning of this sentence:

**I am sorry I love you.**

Answer:

---

16) Please copy and paste the sentence below into the answer and complete necessary punctuation marks so that it fits the meaning: The man spent 10 years in France, and he was occasionally painting portraits there.

**He spent over 10 years in France painting portraits while he was there.**

Answer:

---

17) Please copy and paste the sentence below into the answer and complete necessary punctuation marks so that it fits the meaning: I love my parents and Madonna and Johnny Depp.

**I love my parents Madonna and Johnny Depp.**

Answer:

---

18) Please copy and paste the sentence below into the answer and complete necessary punctuation marks so that it fits the meaning: Go slow because pedestrians are crossing the street.

**Slow pedestrians crossing the street.**

Answer:

---

19) Please choose a correct option to fill in the gap in the sentence:

**Firemen must have a difficult time sleeping because \_\_\_\_\_ often summoned in the middle of the night.**

- a) their
- b) there
- c) they're

20) Please copy and paste the sentence below into the answer and complete necessary punctuation marks so that it fits the meaning: Mike, sit down.

**Mike don't stand.**

Answer:

---

21) Is English your primary or secondary language?

- a) English is my primary language. I am a native speaker.
- b) English is my secondary language.

22) What is your approximate level of English?

- a) A1 (Beginner)
- b) A2 (Elementary)
- c) B1 (Intermediate)

d)B2 (Upper Intermediate)

e)C1 (Advanced)

f) C2 (Proficient)

23) What is the highest education level you have completed?

a)Primary school

b)Secondary school

c)College (higher or further education)

d)Bachelor's degree

e)Master's degree

f) Doctoral degree

24) How often do you use written English?

a)Occasionally

b)Often

c)Every day

25) What is your nationality?

Answer:

---

26) What is your gender?

a)Male

b)Female

c)Other

27) How old are you?

a)15–18

b)19-26

c)27-35

d)36-45

e)+46