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President's column for ICA Newsletter, November 2007

What's in a name? The politics of the comma, among other things

Sonia Livingstone

Juliet may have believed that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, but her family did not agree. While, in our field, matters of semantics and grammar are not fought over with such hostility as that between the Capulets and Montagues, they do, it seems, raise strong feelings. At several points during my tenure as President, I have found myself pondering the exact ways in which we express ourselves. What for example, is the name of our field? For most, it is 'Communication', though some put an 's' on the end and others strongly resist this (this 's' alone can occupy colleagues for hours!). For others, the words 'Media' or 'Culture' should figure in the name, though this cuts up the intellectual terrain differently, altering the balance of who or what is included and excluded.¹

Yet more hours can be spent discussing what is meant by 'international'. I hear American colleagues reserving the term for scholarship conducted outside the US. In Taiwan, however, Taiwanese research is not international but national; indeed, in Taiwan it is American research that is international. In the UK, the Government has incorporated these terms into the language of governance - 'international' research is, supposedly, the best (i.e. it is that which is valued by the international community) and so merits most funding, while 'national' research is only of national significance (whether, in terms of topic or publication outlet, it concerns London UK or London Ontario) and so it receives less money (hence over here, we are happy to be called 'international!').

So while Juliet has my sympathy, I stand with her family. Words matter. These strong feelings do not arise because we are pedants or even (for the most part) linguists. They arise because taken-for-granted and long-established traditions in one culture (disciplinary or national) come into conflict, often unexpectedly, with those of another. The names of disciplines – and hence of departments, journals and professorships – are rooted in distinctive cultural traditions that reflect both national histories and transnational flows. The labelling of scholars and scholarship – as national or international – positions the speaker as much as the scholar they speak about. The best way forward is not always obvious, beyond restating the vital yet easily forgotten principle of mutual tolerance.

One recent instance of this dilemma is in the exact naming of ICA's new journal – *Communication, Culture, and Critique*. Or, as I would write it in Britain, *Communication, Culture and Critique*. The latter simply looks wrong to those trained in American English. But the former looks equally wrong to those who learned English English (or what is still, I believe, called The Queen's English). This reminder of the Queen makes the politics of the comma is evident – and the journal must, of necessity, follow either one convention or the other, there being no 'third way'. Having become sensitised to the strong feelings that this dilemma occasioned among those involved (for if something looks incorrect to you, it's hard to see it as, merely, 'different'), I conducted a little research and this too, I think, is instructive.

The 'bible' I was brought up with – Fowler's *Modern English Usage* – states that in the case of our journal title, the second comma 'would be otiose', a view which matched my own sentiments, I confess.² Wikipedia recommends that the comma should be included rather than omitted (which may, to some, reinforce the unreliability of Wikipedia). I was intrigued to discover, first, that the proposed second comma in our new journal title is called the Oxford comma, being advocated most strongly by Oxford University Press, albeit as a preference to

¹ Although I, personally, have become used to 'communication', there is, I believe, no Department of Communication in the UK, and the UK is surely not alone in this respect.

² I'm afraid I had to look this word up too, having mistaken it for 'odious' on first reading. 'Otiose', for those who didn't know, means 'serving no practical purpose' (Oxford English Dictionary).

avoid ambiguity, not a requirement in all cases. Enlightenment arrived, however, when I turned to the Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language which observes that:

'usage varies as to the inclusion of a comma before ...the last item (*bring a chair, a bottle of wine, and a good book*). This practice is controversial and is known as the *serial comma* or *Oxford comma*, because it is part of the house style of Oxford University Press. It is often superfluous, and there are occasions when the sense requires it to be omitted, but on many occasions it serves to avoid ambiguity.'

I quote this in full because it makes a useful point. In short, the judgement of 'correct' or 'incorrect', however strongly we may feel about this, goes too far. This is, as in so many other cases of dispute, a matter of social practice. It is considered advisable where otherwise there would be ambiguity (something that the author of the sentence may fail to anticipate). But it is not a requirement, and nor too is its absence. Rather, custom and practice has led many to follow the recommendation of that powerful institution, Oxford University Press. The implication that we should let a thousand flowers bloom³ may not satisfy everyone and it doesn't solve the question of the journal title (even though ICA has moved from OUP to Blackwell!). At this point in my deliberations, Michael Haley reminded me that, whatever the outcome of 'the comma wars', ICA's Publication Manual states unwavering support for APA style. Hence, to be correct in terms of our procedures, the second comma remains.

But this leads me to a bigger issue. ICA's Publications Committee is currently deliberating over whether APA format (a term I have had to explain to a good number of my colleagues unfamiliar with psychology in the UK let alone in America) should continue to be applied to all ICA's publications – not only the journals but also the theme book series, other ICA publications, even this newsletter? Underlying this question is the sense, often expressed covertly and occasionally explicitly, that journal or conference submissions which use a different stylistic or referencing convention may be critically reviewed or even rejected – not just because they are seen as inappropriately formatted, according to ICA's rules (if that could be a sufficient justification), but as positively sloppy or unprofessional. This may be asserted, notwithstanding the care that may have gone into the manuscript as dictated by alternative professional conventions. I do not, by any means, intend here to slight the considerable and valued efforts of colleagues in reviewing and editing scholarly work for ICA, I would like to sensitise us all to the diversity of practice within communication scholarship and, if possible, to encourage a shift from perceptions of right and wrong to those of legitimate difference. So, while hoping that we are not, here, opening a 'can of worms',⁴ I wish the Publications Committee well with its deliberations.

Altering format rules will not, of course, solve the problem of mutual misperceptions. One positive initiative the ICA will launch in January 2008, in collaboration with Blackwell, is an Author Assistance Programme to aid authors. Details can be found on the Blackwell website at http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/bauthor/english_language.asp. Though there is currently a cost for this service, ICA is exploring ways to get funding to assist authors with the cost. Once an author has used this service, ICA staff will provide further editing assistance for free to ICA members to insure the best possible review, whether the article is submitted to an ICA journal or a non ICA journal.⁵ No doubt there are further initiatives that ICA might consider, so if you have thoughts or ideas, do let us know of them.

³ Commonly misquoted, it seems, from Chairman Mao Zedong.

⁴ The linguists among you will like to know that this phrase appears to have originated in the USA in the 1950s.

⁵ The Blackwell author assistance is for those authors where English is a second language. It allows authors to choose to have their manuscript professionally edited before submission or during the review process. English-language editing will (1) improve grammar, spelling, and punctuation; (2) improve clarity and resolve any ambiguity caused by poor phrasing; and (3) improve word-choice and ensure that the tone of the language is appropriate for an academic journal.