

Proposition: The “Quexclamation Mark” (QM) --- A Long-Needed Addition to Emphatic Interrogative/Rhetorical Grammar and Punctuation

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Abstract: Typical questions, as sentences, are punctuated by the use of a question mark (?) at the end of the sentence. This informs the reader that the sentence is of an interrogative nature, and the, in spoken language, it requires a higher pitch than the ordinary statement type of sentence, which the writer intended, as a true question. Sometimes statements/sentences are posed as *rhetorical* questions, which do not require an answer and are often posed sarcastically. Often, there sarcastic/rhetorical questions (which are not intended as questions at all), are posed emphatically, in which case it is questionable whether the writer should punctuate it with a question mark (?) or an exclamation point (!), if not both. Persons learning English for the first time, such as school children, or those whose native language is not English, may not easily recognize an emphatic rhetorical question if it is punctuated merely by a question mark. Likewise, such individuals might not comprehend the question if it is punctuated merely by an exclamation point. Of course, the writer might use *both* (!?) together to punctuate the sentence, but this may cause more confusion. To remedy this problem, I propose the use of a new symbol which combines both items into one. I call this herewith proposed symbol the “quexclamation mark”.

Keywords: Question, Question Mark, Rhetorical Question, Exclamation Point, Punctuation, Quexclamation Mark

1. Introduction

Several years ago I was involved in a telephone conversation with a merchant who sold old, rare vinyl phonograph records. As a collector (hobbyist) of rare, vinyl phonograph records I had previously purchased several records from him, probably about three dozen over the previous five years. We had often argued over the prices he would ask. He, as a good businessman, and I, as a good customer, would finally arrive at a mutually suitable price for each record, although this came after much bickering back and forth. On one particular occasion, we were arguing over the price of a rare 33RPM long-playing (LP) vinyl record. The merchant insisted on a price of \$ 125.00, but I insisted that such a price was too expensive. He told me that the record jacket already had a \$ 125.00 price tag attached to it, so I reluctantly, agreed to purchase the record at that price. I sent him a check for \$ 125.00, and after it cleared through the bank, he shipped the record to me. Upon receipt of the record, I became infuriated! Yes---there indeed was a price

tag on it for \$ 125.00, but it was a label that was handwritten! Any person could have placed a tag on the item, with a price that he had hand-written by himself. It was not an official, pre-printed tag. I then wrote the merchant a letter of complaint, explaining my dissatisfaction. I explained that ANYONE could place a tag on the record jacket, and could write in, with a pen, ANY price that they desired! How could I know what the true price really should have been?

In that letter, I made a number of emphatic rhetorical question-statements, including the following:

“Do you really think I’m stupid?”

“How do I know that \$125.00 is the true price?”

“Do you think I’m so gullible that you can so easily swindle me?”

“Do you think that I’m unaware of your crooked little tricks?”

In my letter to the merchant, after proof-reading these rhetorical questions several times, I noticed problem: officially, they were written as questions, each punctuated with the typical question mark (?); however, they were

NOT intended to be questions. They were intended to be emphatic rhetorical questions, actually *statements*, which did not require an answer. In reality, these were harsh, emphatic statements rather than interrogative “questions”! The rules of grammar, however, state that each of these rhetorical questions must be punctuated with a question mark, rather than with an exclamation point. I believe that such a practice is misleading and confusing. It is especially confusing to someone not familiar with the use of everyday English, or to some who is learning English, in particular to school age children. People in these categories who happen to read an emphatic, rhetorical question like those mentioned above, upon seeing that they were punctuated with a question mark, might interpret them as actual interrogative questions, and as a result might not understand their true meanings.

2. Methods and Discussion

To remedy this confusion, I hereby propose that such emphatic, rhetorical questions (and the ones listed above as merely a few examples), should be punctuated with a NEW mark---a combination of a question mark and an exclamation point. I coin this new punctuation mark a “quexclamation mark” (QM). Next, I shall consider and choose the actual form that this new punctuation mark should embody, shown below as Figure 1:

Figure 1 (below): The proposed Quexclamation Mark, (QM), is composed of a question mark and an exclamation point, combined into a single entity.



Figure 1. Proposed symbol for the Quexclamation Mark (QM).

As shown in figure 1 above, the QM consists of a question mark placed at a slightly acute angle followed by an exclamation point placed at a slightly obtuse angle; they both share the same dot at the base. The question mark is constructed first because the sentence is a question, albeit a rhetorical one. The exclamation point follows because the statement is emphatic. The two marks joined together indicate that although the statement is posed as a question, it is rhetorical and more of an emphatic statement rather than a true interrogative question.

In some languages, such as Spanish, questions are written using two question marks; the upright one at the end of the sentence and an inverted one at the beginning of the sentence. Likewise, I propose that the QM be constructed the same way in such languages, the upright QM at the end of the sentence and an inverted QM at the beginning of the

sentence, as proposed and depicted in figure 2, below:



Figure 2. In some languages, such as Spanish, the QM would be inverted at the beginning of a sentence and upright at the end of the sentence.

Figure 2 (above). The QM can be inverted at the beginning of a sentence, and written upright at the end of the sentence, just as the question mark is written in some languages, such as Spanish.

To illustrate the need for this newly proposed punctuation mark, I wish to cite its usefulness in writing using two books that I had published, “The Natural Classroom” (Edelman 1996) [1] and another book, written using my pen name (nom de plume), R. J. Nobleman: “Sorry for the Inconvenience/Going Your Way” (2013) [2].

In my book “The Natural Classroom” (Edelman, 1996), there are no sentences which would necessitate the use of a QM, because the book is a reference type of work with the intent to relay information to teachers, students, and other interested persons about various courses and summer programs available in the natural sciences. It is completely non-fiction without any satire, comedy situations, or intent to entertain its readers. On the other hand, “Sorry for the Inconvenience/Going Your Way” (Nobleman, 2013), although also non-fiction, has as its main purpose, humor. It describes, as an anecdotal collection of short stories, comical, humorous, explosive situations with many emphatic rhetorical questions. This book could make much use of QM’s, but QM’s were not used because to date the QM had not yet been invented, unfortunately. Below are some examples of emphatic, rhetorical questions written in the book (with their page numbers) that had been punctuated with only a question mark, but which really should more appropriately have been punctuated with QMs, had it existed at the time:

- “You think you’re a TOUGH guy?” (page 30);
- “Are YOU on DRUGS?” (page 31);
- “So WHAT?---YOU have FISTS” (page 32);
- “What was THAT?” (page 32);
- “On the ROAD it’s OK, but HERE it’s NOT OK?” (page 35);
- “Why don’t you quiet down?” (page 36);
- “What the hell?” (page 39);
- “Think THAT’S bad, huh?” (page 53);
- “.....what’s so funny?” (page 73);
- “How am I going to go into store and by pack of cigarettes with HUNDRED DOLLAR BILL?” (page 73).

While the above sentences were punctuated with a question mark, it is clearly evident that they should more accurately have been punctuated with a QM, because they are not true interrogative questions. These sentences are clearly emphatic statements, written in rhetorical question form! A person learning English would not read or understand these ‘questions’ in proper context. The use of the (proposed) QM

would remedy this situation!

3. The Interrobang

This is not the first time that a new punctuation mark has been proposed for a rhetorical emphatic question. According to Wikipedia, [3,4] the punctuation mark called the “interrobang” was invented by Martin K. Specter in 1962. He noted that “bang” was a slang name given to the exclamation point in the printing industry. Eventually, an interrobang key had also appeared on certain typewriters in the late 1960’s. The interrobang, like the proposed quexclamation mark (QM) is a combination of a question mark and an exclamation point. However, unlike the QM, in which both punctuation marks are separated by a small space and connected at the bottom dot, both marks are upright and compressed together, as shown in Figure 3, below:



Figure 3. Symbol for the interrobang. While it was supposed to be a combination of a question mark and exclamation point, it resembles the letter “P” instead.

Figure 3 (above). The previously proposed symbol for the interrobang [3,4]. It was a combination of a question mark and an exclamation point, but it resembles neither! It appears like the letter “P” rather than a punctuation mark. The proposed QM (Figure 1, above) better resembles a combination of a question mark and an exclamation point in combination, giving the potential reader a better connotation of the proposed new punctuation symbol.

It is my opinion that this construction of the interrobang in such a manner is confusing and does not portray the true ‘effect’ of the proposed QM. The interrobang looks more like a strange form of the letter “P”, rather than a combination of a question mark and an exclamation point. In that structure, it is difficult to visualize/conceptualize that it is composed on a question mark and an exclamation point; it resembles a ‘strange’ symbol that looks like a variant of the letter “P” or a dollar symbol (\$). In addition, when writing by hand (by printing or by script), it is more difficult to construct correctly or distinctly. When using the proposed QM, both punctuation marks are clear and distinct. It does not resemble a variant of the letter “P”, not does it resemble a variant of a dollar sign. In addition, it is much easier to write when writing by hand.

Mentalfloss.com [5] lists the interrobang as one of thirteen little-known punctuation marks that have been proposed but which are seldom used. BuzzFeed.com [6] also lists the

interrobang as one of fourteen little-known punctuation marks and are of the opinion that they should be used more often.

According to the Economist.com, the reason that the interrobang is rarely used or seen is that languages develop slowly, therefore “most attempts to shape it fail”. They indicate, however, that since the internet has made use of rare symbols which are becoming more common, such as the @ (“at”), there exists the possibility that the interrobang may re-emerge.

Google.com [8,9] suggests and displays dozens of possible constructive forms for the interrobang, including the form that this report proposes for the QM. However, Google calls this and all the other proposed forms the “interrobang”, while I call the proposed form the “quexclamation mark”. I believe that “interrobang” is a poor choice for a name, since “bang” is a term used for the exclamation point primarily by the printing industry. The average speaker of English does not recognize the word “bang” as signifying an exclamation point. My choice of a name “quexclamation mark”, makes it much easier for the reader/speaker of English to conceptualize that the name represents a combination/hybridization of a question mark and an exclamation point. On a further note, in depicting dozens of possible forms for the interrobang, Google [8,9] does not discuss the construction of the dozens of pictures it exhibits, nor does it cite the sources of each picture. For each depiction shown, the reader does not know whether each picture was created by an individual or group of persons, who the developer(s) were, when each was developed,, and whether any or all of these depictions were formally published in a recognized journal.

4. Conclusions

In English, as in other languages, question marks are generally used for truly interrogative questions, such as, for example, “What is the weather like today?”. There are instances, however, where questions are classified as rhetorical, in which an answer is not needed nor expected. Often,, such rhetorical questions are intended as emphatic statements, yet they are nevertheless punctuated with ordinary question marks (?). Examples of such rhetorical, emphatic statements are described in this paper. It is my opinion that such questions should not be punctuated with a standard question mark (?), because the reader may not understand that the sentence was intended as an rhetorical, emphatic statement rather than a genuine, interrogative question in which the voice needs to be high-pitched and an answer to the question is necessary and expected. This would be true especially of a reader who is learning English for the first time. I propose the introduction of a new punctuation mark, the quexclamation mark (QM), which is the combination of both a question mark and an exclamation point; this would remediate any ambiguity of how such a statement should be read/spoken/understood. Interrobang-mks.com [10] recommends that the interrobang should be

used regularly. They advocate changing the interrobang from “the obscure (punctuation mark) to the ubiquitous”. I recommend the same course of action, but with a name change from the “interrobang” to the “quexclamation mark”.

Again, the use of the proposed QM would be especially helpful to learners of English as a new or second language, on order to clarify the exact use of a sentence which is emphatic and simultaneously punctuated as a question. Use of a typical question mark (?) in such a sentence might cause the reader/speaker to interpret the sentence as a typical interrogative inquiry, rather than an emphatic statement which is of a rhetorical nature. He or she might spend unnecessary time in an attempt to contemplate an answer to such a sentence. As an example, if a sentence were written: “Do you really think I’m the kind of person thty would do such a thing?” An English language learner, seeing the typical question mark (?) at the end of such a sentence might think that it is a bona fide interrogative question. In that case, he or she might pause a while to contemplate an answer, not realizing that the sentence was a rhetorical and emphatic one which did not require thought. Use of the proposed QM should alleviate this ambiguity.

While the QM has been introduced and advocated for everyday use in writing in the past, (as the “interrobang”) it has apparently ‘fallen by the wayside’! It is not used today and is not seen on the keyboard of typewriters nor computers. In this report, I am re-introducing the interrobang under a different title (the “quexclamation mark”, QM) and I am herewith imploring educational institutions, at all levels, the computer and printing industries, and others to advocate its use in everyday writing. It is a necessary and useful punctuation mark which has much value in sentence construction and English language comprehension. It is especially helpful to learners of the English language in the ability to decipher real interrogative questions from those that are rhetorical and emphatic. It facilitates the understanding that answers to such questions are unnecessary and unexpected. Although the proposed QM has been previously advocated several decades ago as the “interrobang”, and many potential symbols had been proposed (including those presented here), this report attempts to officially change the title to the quexclamation mark (QM), limits its form to that

shown in Figure 1, and implores academia, the printing and publishing industries, and the general public (on a global level) to recognize its importance and actually and actively begin using it!

The Quexclamation Mark: isn’t it really about time that this proposed punctuation mark were born? *(1)

*(1): This final statement is a perfect example of a sentence that should be punctuated with a QM, but since the QM has not yet been officially recognized, only a standard question mark (?) is available for its punctuation on the keyboard.

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