

## PUNCTUATION MARKS IN SPEECH: CONSTRUCTIONALIZATIONS

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- **ABSTRACT:** In this paper, we discuss some relatively stable expressions in spoken Portuguese that contain punctuation marks. As punctuation marks are graphic (visual) signs typical of writing, we analyze the functions that punctuation marks play both in writing and in speech. As a theoretical framework, we base our analyses mainly on Nunberg (1990), Dahlet (1995, 1998, 2002, 2006b, 2006a) and Bredel (2020) who offer mutually compatible systematization of punctuation marks, and Traugott and Trousdale (2021) in order to understand the constructionalization process that involves these signs in speech. Since our object of analysis are typographical signs and not words, we found no parallel examples of constructionalizations in the literature. We noticed that only seven (of the eleven) punctuation marks generally considered in Brazilian Portuguese gain expression in orality and that these punctuation marks are distributed in different gradients of lexicalization: the ending signs (period, question mark, exclamation and ellipsis) receive referential value in orality, while comma, quotes and parentheses remain with metalinguistic value – and the double signs can be gestured.
- **KEYWORDS:** punctuation marks; function; lexicalization; orality.

### Introduction

In this paper, we propose an exploratory study of a particular case of constructionalization (lexicalization) involving punctuation marks: conventionalized expressions in oral communication in Portuguese that contain punctuation marks. We will work with conventionalized constructions such as, for example, the following expressions, which are common in Brazilian Portuguese<sup>1</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to emphasize that we did not find any works on our subject in the specialized literature (i.e., on punctuation marks in speech as we investigate here). Therefore, we constructed our research subject based on our intuition of native speakers, and informal consultations with native speakers, Google searches, as well as audiovisual resources, as mentioned in this paper. Creating a corpus specifically dedicated to data like the ones we analyze here is

- 1) *Preciso pôr um ponto final nessa discussão.*  
“I need to put an end (put an end point/a period) to this discussion”
- 2) *Essa conversa acaba aqui e ponto final.*  
“This conversation ends here, period (and end point/period)”
- 3) *João é legal virgula...*  
“João is sort of nice (nice, comma...)”
- 4) *Ele abria parênteses dentro de parênteses e não chegava ao fim da história.*  
“He opened parentheses within parentheses and never reached the end of the story”
- 5) *Vou fazer um parêntese aqui.*  
“Let me make a parenthesis here”
- 6) *Ela fez uma cara de interrogação.*  
“She made a questioning face (question mark face)”
- 7) *Ele me olhou com uma cara de exclamação.*  
“He looked at me with an exclamation mark on his face (exclamation mark face)”
- 8) *Não aguento mais suas reticências.*  
“I can’t stand your ellipses anymore”
- 9) *Ele é simpático entre aspas, né!*  
“He is not exactly nice (nice between quotation marks), right!”
- 10) *Bota muitas aspas aí.*  
“Put a lot of quotation marks there”

Not all punctuation marks appear in contexts like the ones presented above (for example, semicolons are not typically used in spoken language). Our goal is to contrast (i) the role of punctuation marks in constructions used in oral communication with (ii) the role of punctuation marks in writing in order to understand how punctuation marks become part of expressions in spoken language. As we will argue in this paper, the punctuation marks we analyze here originate from writing (where they are visible) and gain prominence in oral communication (where they are spoken and sometimes even gestured) through a process of constructionalization (or lexicalization).

The first step in investigating which punctuation marks can appear in spoken language constructions, in contexts similar to the examples above, is precisely to define punctuation marks. This is the aim of the first section of this paper, in which we will present some forms and roles of punctuation marks in a minimal typology. In the second

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a task for future research; our intention is to provide an initial typology and analytical approach. The “Theoretical and Methodological Issues” section provides a more detailed description of the data search and compilation.

section we will examine punctuation marks that appear in spoken language constructions, their possible interpretations, and some of their linguistic properties, without aiming to be exhaustive. The third section aims to offer an explanation for this phenomenon — is this a case of constructionalization, lexicalization, or degrammaticalization, such as the use of “*senões*” (which means reservations or excuses) in the example below, or is it still a phenomenon of a distinct nature?

11) *Chega desses seus senões!*

“Enough of your excuses (these butts of yours)!”

Finally, in the Conclusion, we present our main results and some open issues. For this investigation, we do not assume that punctuation marks have prosodic functions that guide the writer in punctuating their written texts, as grammars in general do. Dahlet (2006, p. 302, our translation) advocates for the autonomy of written text: “[...] the voice as vocal emission has no residence in writing.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, we are not interested in perceiving parallels between orality and writing, as Chacon (1997, 2003), Pacheco (2006), Soncin and Tenani (2015), among others, do. We assume, following Scliar-Cabral and Rodrigues (1994), Crystal (2015), and Cunha and Porto (2020), that there are significant discrepancies between pauses and punctuation marks in the performance of oral reading. When some punctuation marks start to appear in constructions in oral language, we enter (still) uncharted territory.

## A minimal typology of punctuation marks

Punctuation marks emerged in Western writing systems after the alphabetic writing had achieved stability, when words had already gained graphic autonomy, and the *scriptura continua* was no longer used. Therefore, there was space left before and after each word, which allowed punctuation marks within sentences to be gradually introduced, as summarized by Araújo (2008, p. 380, our translation): “Gradually, words began to be separated, and punctuation was introduced.”<sup>3</sup> Rocha (1997) provides a historical overview of punctuation marks in written culture, showing that not all punctuation marks we have today were introduced into writing at the same time or with the same function they currently have. In short, the system we have today is the result of years of graphic experimentation in a process of inclusion, competition, and exclusion.

Despite being added to writing relatively late, punctuation marks are one of the most significant aspects of writing: “Indeed, punctuation is, along with page layout, the most written aspect (remember that it has no phonemic correspondence)”<sup>4</sup> (Dahlet, 2006b,

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<sup>2</sup> In the original: “[...] a voz como emissão vocal não tem residência na escrita” (Dahlet, 2006b, p. 302).

<sup>3</sup> In the original: “Gradualmente passou-se a separar as palavras e introduziu-se a pontuação.” (Araújo, 2008, p. 380).

<sup>4</sup> In the original: “Com efeito, o sinal de pontuação é, com a disposição na página, o que há de mais escrito (lembramos que ele não possui correspondência fonemática).” (Dahlet, 2006b, p. 300).

p. 300, our translation). While letters (or their combinations) are conventions that aim to represent sounds, punctuation marks have no pronunciation (Flusser, 1965); they are non-alphanumeric signs that writers use to structure their text and provide guidance for reading without distracting the reader (Bernardes, 2002). According to Bredel (2020), readers see/read punctuation marks without needing to verbalize them since they provide information to the reader about how the text is structured (in dialogues, for example, or paragraphs) and how each syntactic unit being read should be processed (whether it hasn't ended, has ended, is less important, etc.) in relation to the text as a whole.

With compulsory education and the increasing mass media influence of written communication, there arose a need to standardize spelling and rely on authorities to rationalize punctuation marks in textbooks, normalizing their use and teaching. Grammarians — who typically present punctuation marks at the end of their compendia, sometimes even in appendices — became the reference for teaching punctuation marks. But what are these marks, after all? And how many of them are there? These are the topics of the next subsections.

## What are the punctuation marks?

As grammars, in general, are single authored rather than collective efforts (unlike dictionaries, for example), and since, for the Portuguese language, there is no official language regulatory authority, such as the French Academy of Letters, we are lead into a scenario where the inventory of punctuation marks varies from one grammar to another.

Kleppa (2022) compares five reference grammars of Brazilian Portuguese and identifies a common core of ten punctuation marks in the examined grammars, namely: 1. *ponto* (period), 2. *vírgula* (comma), 3. *dois pontos* (colon), 4. *ponto e vírgula* (semicolon), 5. *reticências* (ellipsis), 6. *exclamação* (exclamation mark), 7. *interrogação* (question mark), 8. *travessão* (dash), 9. *aspas* (quotation marks), and 10. *parênteses* (parentheses). To this set, each grammarian adds other marks at their discretion.

The Brazilian Grammatical Nomenclature (NGB) was created with the aim of unifying the nomenclature of grammatical phenomena observed under different terminologies in existing grammars up until 1959. As seen in the record compiled in Henriques (2009), punctuation was included in the 1959 version of NGB as an appendix, and listed 13 items alphabetically: “*aspas, asterisco, colchetes, dois pontos, parágrafo, parênteses, ponto de exclamação, ponto de interrogação, ponto e vírgula, ponto final, reticências, travessão, vírgula*” (quotation marks, asterisk, brackets, colon, paragraph, parentheses, exclamation point, question mark, semicolon, period, ellipsis, dash, comma) (NGB published in the Official Gazette on May 11, 1959 *apud* Henriques, 2009, p. 165). In 1963, NGB was revised, and 16 items were listed as “punctuation marks and auxiliary writing signs”, including: “*ponto final, ponto de interrogação, ponto de exclamação, reticências, dois pontos, ponto e vírgula, vírgula, travessão, parênteses, colchetes, parágrafo (§), alínea, aspas, vírgulas altas, sigla, asterisco*” (period, question

mark, exclamation point, ellipsis, colon, semicolon, comma, dash, parentheses, brackets, paragraph (§), paragraph marker, quotation marks, high commas, acronym, asterisk) (NGB — Ordinance of April 28, 1967, *apud* Henriques, 2009, p. 179). In 2007, in a new revision, punctuation marks were separated from auxiliary writing signs, and only eight punctuation marks were listed: “*ponto (final); ponto de interrogação; ponto de exclamação; dois pontos; ponto e vírgula; vírgula; reticências; travessão*” (period; question mark; exclamation point; colon; semicolon; comma; ellipsis; dash) (Ordinance 476/2007 *apud* Henriques, 2009, p. 195). As one can see, even attempts to unify the nomenclature have not been definitive. One of the reasons contributing to the fluctuation in this inventory is certainly the absence of a clear definition of punctuation marks.

### **Graphic characteristics: form, scope, and inventory**

The ten punctuation marks that make up the common core of normative grammars share an important formal characteristic: they are graphically autonomous. This means they are accompanied by white space. Bredel (2020) considers the dash, which occupies the space of a letter and is surrounded by white spaces (on its left and right), to be a *Filler*, and all the other marks to be *Klitika* (clitics) because they either have white space before the mark (as in parentheses and quotation marks) or white space after the mark (in the case of the other marks). This white space, which individualizes the written word, makes punctuation marks discrete typographic units that rely on the word but do not depend on it (as would be the case with capital letters, bold, italics, or underlining, for example). Therefore, we do not consider marks within words (such as hyphens, slashes, or apostrophes) to be punctuation marks because they are surrounded by letters.

Another factor contributing to the graphic autonomy of punctuation marks is their fixed and atomic form: none of them can be divided into smaller units. Punctuation marks underwent morphological experimentation between the 14th and 17th centuries, but currently they are not easily subject to new combinations (Dahlet, 2006b). In this sense, it is interesting to note that proposals were even made for the inclusion of new marks: the interrobang [?] (which combines the question mark with the exclamation point) was proposed and patented by Martin Spekter in 1962 but was not adopted by keyboard developers, nor embraced by the writing and reading community. Regarding the morphological aspects of punctuation marks, Bredel (2020) also points out that double marks are not composed of the same repeated mark but rather two marks that are symmetrically mirrored, as seen in parentheses [( )] and quotation marks [“ ”].<sup>5</sup>

According to Dahlet (2006b), even though the abbreviation period, which is graphically identical to the regular period, falls within a word, this is not its most established locus of operation. Furthermore, the use of the abbreviatory period does not

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<sup>5</sup> This rule extends to the exclamation and interrogations marks in written Spanish, since they appear with an inverted counterpart at the beginning of the sentence.

result in the following word beginning with a capital letter, as is the case with the regular period. This demonstrates that punctuation marks provide instructions to the reader about the boundaries of textual units. In contrast, apostrophes, hyphens, and slashes, for example, only affect the word and, therefore, could be considered orthographic marks subject to regulations in spelling reforms, for instance.

Finally, we assume that punctuation marks apply to both the sentence and the text as a whole. Although they are presented in grammars and manuals as marks that operate at the sentence level, we do not understand (as Dahlet, 1998, p. 75) that writing a text is simply the sum of spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation. Bredel (2020) believes that punctuation marks enable the reader to perform two actions in the reading process: *parsing* (segmentation of units) and *scanning* (perception of the text's structure).

We consider the graphic autonomy of punctuation marks (immediately recognizable by the eye because they are accompanied by white space) and their scope of operation (sentence and text) to be strong indications of what punctuation marks may be (Kleppa, 2019). In this regard, we add the *alínea* (paragraph indent) to the inventory:

The *alínea* (paragraph), which is morphologically speaking, a blank space, was introduced by the press, and, upon closer examination, this fact is not coincidental. In fact, it involved replacing something full — the symbol [§] — with emptiness, with blankness. Now, as Marc Arabyan (1994) astutely points out, “the blank is what is most written,” in the sense that imbuing meaning into the blank is a complete, absolute reliance on the medium. (Dahlet, 2006b, p. 291–292, our translation).<sup>6</sup>

The blank space (also called indentation or paragraph indent), which separates one paragraph from another, revealing the text's architecture, is not included in traditional grammars as empty space (when *alínea* appears, it is as the symbol [§] used in legal texts to mark paragraph subdivisions). However, some linguists who have examined the punctuation system consider it as it is understood that punctuation marks are linguistic resources for the construction of textuality (Leal; Guimarães, 2002).

In summary, given the considerations above, we reckon the following eleven marks for this study: [ ] *alínea* (paragraph indent), [.] *ponto* (period), [:] *dois pontos* (colon), [;] *ponto e vírgula* (semicolon), [,] *vírgula* (comma), [–] *travessão* (dash), [...] *reticências* (ellipsis), [?] *ponto de interrogação* (question mark), [!] *ponto de exclamação* (exclamation), [( )] *parênteses* (parentheses), and [“ ”] *aspas* (quotation marks).

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<sup>6</sup> In the original: “a *alínea*, que é, morfologicamente falando, um branco, um vazio. A *alínea* foi introduzida pela imprensa e, se pensarmos bem, esse fato não é casual. De fato, tratou-se de substituir algo cheio — o sinal de [§] — pelo vazio, pelo branco. Ora, como nota com perspicácia Marc Arabyan (1994), “o branco é o que é mais escrito”, no sentido de que fazer significar o branco consiste em se apoiar totalmente, de maneira absoluta, ao suporte” (Dahlet, 2006b, p. 291–292).

It is important to note that we are dealing with a punctuation system, and in a system, choices must be made because each mark assumes a value in relation to the others. For example, in standard writing, there are several alternatives for ending a sentence: one can use a period, question mark, exclamation mark, or ellipsis. All of these marks separate one sentence from another, but the period is the only mark that only separates sentences, while the others give an enunciative value to the sentence in writing. This value is related to the act of utterance (asking a question, expressing admiration, adopting a reticent/omissive stance) and the way the written material is presented.

### Syntactic-enunciative characteristics: roles

As a theoretical reference for thinking about the roles of punctuation marks, we will draw upon the ideas of Véronique Dahlet (who has formalized the punctuation system in the Portuguese language to the greatest extent), Nunberg (1990), who takes a more generalized view of the functions of punctuation marks, and Bredel (2020), who analyzes punctuation marks in writing from the reader’s perspective rather than the writer’s.

In Table 1, we present the categorization made by Dahlet (2002) of punctuation marks. The author points to the multifunctionality of punctuation marks and their syntactic and enunciative dimensions.

**Chart 1 – Dahlet’s classification**

Sequencers	Enunciatives			
	Discursive hierarchizers	Enunciative modality markers	Reported speech markers	Expressive markers
[paragraph] [.] [;] [:] [.]	[:] [- -] [( )] [, ,]	[?] [!] [...]	[“ ”] [italics] [dialogue dash]	[capital letter] [underline] [italics] [dash]

**Source:** Adapted from Dahlet (2002, p. 37–38).

Enunciative markers are divided in subcategories and are more numerous than the sequencers (which separate syntactic constituents); as can be observed, some marks are allocated to more than one category in Table 1. Furthermore, the author considers some marks as punctuation marks (expressive markers) that we do not consider to be graphically autonomous.

On the other hand, the classification of punctuation mark roles presented by Nunberg (1990) is more concise; according to the author, punctuation marks can:

- (i) *separate* units (equivalent to the category of sequencers in Table 1);
- (ii) *delimit* units (for this purpose, double marks are used, as is the case with hierarchizers in Table 1 — except for colons);

(iii) *mark* units (equivalent to the categories of markers in Table 1).

Because they are broad (*separating*, *delimiting*, and *marking*) and not very specific, the roles of punctuation marks can be interpreted in different ways: the exclamation point marks the enunciator’s attitude but also *separates* one sentence from another. It is worth noting that the functions postulated by Nunberg (1990) are cumulative. The basic issue is that, however discrete points and dashes may be, they *do* something in the text; they are performative because they act metalinguistically, guiding the intended meaning of the text/sentence (Bernardes, 2002).

Assuming that the *separating* and *delimiting* roles postulated by Nunberg (1990) are both syntactic functions, and that the *marking* function corresponds, according to Dahlet, to a gesture or enunciative act, we systematize the punctuation marks according to their functions in Table 2 below:

**Chart 2 – Punctuation marks’ roles**

	SEPARATING	DELIMITING	MARKING
[.]	sentences		
[,]	comment topic, topicalized adjunct, inverted subordinate clause, coordinated, correlated or juxtaposed clauses, items in a list	appositive, vocative, embedded structures	ellipse, word order
[?]	sentences		question
![ ]	sentences		exaltation
[...]	various units		absence
[( )]		various units, what can be removed	non-linear reading
[“ ”]		quotation, expression or word	distancing, double voice/double meaning
Role	Syntactic		Enunciative

**Source:** Authors’ elaboration.

We believe that the cross-referencing of theoretical frameworks is feasible because we consider the proposed categorizations to be compatible with each other. In short, all punctuation marks perform some kind of syntactic function, whether separating, delimiting, or marking syntactic units or sequences. In addition to the function of demarcating syntactic boundaries, some marks perform enunciative roles — which other authors refer to as pragmatic (Crystal, 2015) or rhetorical (Gumbrecht, 2009) roles. This means that there are dimensions beyond the prosodic and logical-grammatical aspects (assumed by grammars) involved in the use of punctuation marks: some marks



even transcend their functions (Brody, 2008; Watson, 2019) and encapsulate stories, ideas, etc.<sup>7</sup>

After this brief overview and description of the punctuation system, let's move on to the analysis of the possibilities of these marks being used in expressions in spoken language. How and why do graphic resources that originated in writing gain a presence in spoken language?

### **Punctuation marks in speech: which ones, how, and with what interpretation?**

As numerous researchers have already noted, writing needs to be understood as an autonomous system (Nunberg, 1990; Dahlet, 2006b; Bredel, 2020) and not as the transcription of orality. According to Dahlet (2006b, p. 126, our translation), the notion of a sentence, for example, doesn't apply to orality:

Now, the sentence doesn't exist in the actual language. It refers to a concept developed to meet the needs of grammatical and linguistic description [...]. This means that in studies of spoken language, the concept of a sentence is operationally null, while in studies of writing, it can only refer to actual realizations, but all of them can be reduced to a single operation: segmenting discourse into graphic units called sentences.<sup>8</sup>

Bakhtin (2000, p. 297, our translation), who takes dialogue as a basis, postulates that the real unit of language is the utterance – while the boundaries of utterances always encompass the speech of others:

People don't exchange sentences, just as they don't exchange words (in a strictly linguistic sense) or combinations of words; they exchange utterances constructed with the help of language units – words, combinations of words, sentences. Nevertheless, nothing prevents an utterance from being constituted of a single sentence, or a single word, so to speak, a single unit of speech (which happens especially in the

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<sup>7</sup> If one searches for punctuation mark tattoos (in Brazilian Portuguese) on the internet, one will easily find semicolons. On social media, there is the story of a woman who, after losing her father, tattooed a semicolon on her body to symbolize that her life didn't stop, but continues; variations of this include tattoos such as "CONT;NUE" or a line representing interrupted heartbeats with a semicolon.

<sup>8</sup> In the original: "*Ora, a frase no real da língua não existe. Remete a um conceito elaborado para atender as necessidades da descrição gramatical e linguística [...]. Isso significa que, nos estudos sobre o oral, a noção de frase é, do ponto de vista operacional, nula, ao passo que nos estudos sobre o escrito ela só pode remeter a realizações efetivas, mas todas elas podem ser resumidas a uma só operação: segmentar o discurso em unidades gráficas, denominadas frases.*" (Dahlet, 2006b, p. 126).

reply in dialogue), but that does not turn a language unit into a unit of verbal communication.<sup>9</sup>

When analyzing the use of punctuation marks in structures that appear in oral language, and considering the intrinsic differences between speech and writing, we do not expect, in principle, that the punctuation marks used in speech will have exactly the same roles and uses as those in writing: the units of writing and orality are different (unless it's a dictation). To arrive at our analyses, we first need to go through some points of the methodology of this research, which we will do in the section below.

## Theoretical-methodological issues

As previously mentioned in footnote 1, we are constructing our object of analysis. We did not attest all the expressions (in 1) to 10)) in the same corpus because it is unlikely that they will all be uttered in a same, manageable discourse/corpus. However, we know that they are used in the Brazilian Portuguese (with some variation: *pôr/botar um ponto final* (put/place an end point/period)) in conventionalized constructions. The punctuation marks used in orality do not appear just as names but are integrated into complex constructions. These constructions do not seem to be comparable to idiomatic expressions because in expressions like “*enfiar o pé na jaca*”<sup>10</sup> or “*bater as botas*”,<sup>11</sup> for example, it is not expected that people literally do what the words refer to, as the compositionality of the expression is relatively low. In contrast, saying that something is positive “*entre aspas*”<sup>12</sup> recovers one of the possible meanings of quotation marks in writing.

This characteristic of the expressions we are analyzing leads us to understand them as a case of lexical constructionalization, that is, the entry of a new complex lexical item into the language. According to Traugott and Trousdale (2021, p. 57): “[...] we preliminarily define constructionalization as the creation of a form<sub>new</sub>-meaning<sub>new</sub> pairing.” Researchers from functional and cognitive background use the metaphor of language as a network: “The result of constructionalization is a new node in the network of language [...]” (Traugott; Trousdale, 2021, p. 261). According to Booij (2010 *apud* Traugott; Trousdale, 2021, p. 266), “Each node inherits properties from its dominant

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<sup>9</sup> In the original: “*As pessoas não trocam orações, assim como não trocam palavras (numa acepção rigorosamente linguística), ou combinações de palavras, trocam enunciados constituídos com a ajuda de unidades da língua — palavras, combinações de palavras, orações; mesmo assim, nada impede que o enunciado seja constituído de uma única oração, ou de uma única palavra, por assim dizer, de uma única unidade de fala (o que acontece sobretudo na réplica do diálogo), mas não é isso que converterá uma unidade da língua numa unidade da comunicação verbal.*” (Bakhtin, 2000, p. 297).

<sup>10</sup> Literally “stick one’s own foot in the jackfruit”, meaning “to hit the bottle”, “to mess up”.

<sup>11</sup> Literally “hit the boots”, meaning “to die”.

<sup>12</sup> Literally “between quotation marks”, meaning lack of agreement or uncertainty.

node.” This means that in examples 1) to 10), we are dealing with microconstructions<sup>13</sup> that can be schematized in more abstract terms (Traugott; Trousdale, 2021).

To verify their ubiquity, we turn to two lexical organization tools: the dictionary (both printed and digital) and the Google word search.

In the printed Houaiss dictionary (2001), the entry ‘*ponto*’ (point, period) presents 57 meanings (the meaning of punctuation mark is listed in meaning 34), and ‘*ponto final*’ (period) is one of several expressions listed in alphabetical order after the meanings. In the digital Houaiss, there are 49 meanings, with meaning 9 referring to punctuation marks (exclamation point, question mark, and period), and meaning 14 provides the following example: ‘*queria pôr um p. naquela teimosia*’ (I wish I could put a period to that stubbornness).

‘*Ponto de exclamação*’ (exclamation mark) and ‘*ponto de interrogação*’ (question mark) are listed within the entry for ‘*ponto*’ (point, mark) in both the printed and digital versions of Houaiss and are given a grammatical definition. ‘*Aspas*’ (quotation marks) appear in the printed dictionary under the sixth definition of ‘*aspa*’ (quotation mark). At the end of the entry, there is an idiomatic expression: “*finçar as a. no inferno RS infrm. morrer (falando de pessoa pouco querida)*.”<sup>14</sup> The digital dictionary presents, in the entry ‘*aspas*’, contents from Wikipedia (such as the Portuguese band called *Entre Aspas*; and the gesture of making quotation marks with one’s fingers). In the entry ‘*aspa*’, the digital dictionary presents it as a feminine plural noun, and in its second meaning, as the punctuation mark and its rules of use.

More in line with our search are the second definition of ‘*vírgula*’ (comma) in the printed Houaiss (corresponding to the third definition in the digital Houaiss, as transcribed in 12); the third definition of ‘*parêntese*’ (parenthesis) in both versions of Houaiss, as transcribed in 13; and the example provided in the third definition of ‘*reticência*’ (ellipsis) in both versions of the dictionary, as transcribed in 14:

12) *infrm. expressão de negação ou restrição a algo que foi dito <ela é bonita, vírgula!>*

Informal. Expression of negation or restriction to something that was said <*ela é bonita, vírgula!*> (she is pretty, comma!; meaning that the speaker does not find her really pretty)

13) *fig. desvio momentâneo do assunto; digressão*

Figurative. Momentary diversion from the subject; digression.

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<sup>13</sup> The underlying issue is that changes should be gradual, which is why the terms “nano steps” or “microconstructions” are used to represent linguistic arrangements at each time frame. From a diachronic perspective, the analyst expects to observe, with each microconstruction, a decrease in compositionality, greater productivity, and an increase in semantic-pragmatic abstraction, for example.

<sup>14</sup> Informal for the death of an unwanted person, “to plant/stick the quotation marks in hell”. We are not familiar with this expression.

14) atitude de quem hesita em dizer expressamente o seu pensamento, em dar um parecer etc. <um indivíduo cheio de r., dissimulado>

Attitude of someone who hesitates to express their thoughts explicitly, to give an opinion, etc. <um indivíduo cheio de r., dissimulado> (a person full of ellipses, dissimulated).

While in the dictionary, the reference for the search were the punctuation marks themselves, in the Google word search, we need to change our strategy and look for the microconstructions in which punctuation marks appear in spoken language. The quantity of search results in the Portuguese language is shown in Table 3 next to each microconstruction:

**Table 1 – Google Search**

Punctuation mark	Microconstruction	Number of results
.	“colocar um ponto final” put an end point	185.000
	“pôr um ponto final” put an end point	48.300
	“botar um ponto final” put an end point	24.200
()	“entre parênteses” between parentheses	1.170.000
	“fazer um parêntese” make a parenthesis	91.000
	“abrir um parêntese” open a parenthesis	48.000
!	“cara de exclamação” exclamation (mark) face	14.300
?	“cara de interrogação” interrogation (mark) face	79.000
...	“cheio de reticências” full <sub>masc.</sub> of ellipsis	15.700
	“cheia de reticências” full <sub>fem.</sub> of ellipsis	15.100
	“minhas reticências” my ellipsis	10.200
	“suas reticências” your ellipsis	9.820

Punctuation mark	Microconstruction	Number of results
“ ”	“ <i>entre aspas</i> ” between quotation marks	2.500.000
	“ <i>muitas aspas</i> ” many quotation marks	25.300
	“ <i>aspas bem grandes</i> ” huge quotation marks	882

Source: Author’s elaboration. Search made on July 5 2022, via Google.

In abstract terms, we searched using schemes such as:

- (i) V + [.] > *colocar/pôr/botar* (put) *um ponto final* (a period);
- (ii) V + [( )] > *fazer/abrir* (make/open) *um parêntese* (parenthesis);
- (iii) N + [?], [!] > *cara de X* (X [! or ?] face);
- (iv) N/det + [...] > *cheio de/pron poss reticências* (full of/ poss pron ellipsis); and
- (v) Prep + [( )], [“ ”] > *entre X* (between X [parentheses or quotation marks]).

The comma, as in example 3), does not form a construction that includes a verb, noun, determiner, or preposition, so it escapes this type of searching. For the comma, just consulting the Houaiss dictionary already provided an example of the lexicalized construction we were trying to find. Similarly, we were unable to search for the expression “*e ponto (final)*” (and period) using Google because the search results go beyond the microconstruction.

Finally, we noticed that in the microconstructions, there may be variation in the first part that makes up the structure (verb, noun, determiner), but the terms that code for the punctuation marks appear in a fixed form, not allowing morphological inflection marks in Brazilian Portuguese — diminutives in 1b), 3b), 7b), 8b), and 9b), augmentatives in 5b), and plural 6b)<sup>15</sup>:

- 1b) \* *Preciso pôr três **pontinhos finais** nessa discussão.*  
\*I need to put three little dots to this discussion.
- 3b) \* *João é legal, **virgulinha**.*  
\*John is nice, little comma.
- 5b) \* *Vou fazer um **parentesão**.*  
\*I am going to make a big parenthesis.
- 6b) \* *Ela fez uma cara de cinco **interrogações**.*  
\*She made a five interrogations face.

<sup>15</sup> We thank one of our reviewers for noting that in some cases an interpretation involving emphasis or irony may be acceptable. Besides the fact that we did not find anything like these constructions in our search, grammaticality judgements here represent the authors’ intuitions.

- 7b) \* *Ele me olhou com uma cara de **exclamaçõezinhas**.*  
 \*He looked at me with a small exclamative face.
- 8b) \* *Não aguento mais essa sua **reticenciázinha**.*  
 \*I can't stand your little ellipses anymore.
- 9b) \* *Ele é simpático entre **aspinhas**.*  
 \*He is nice between small quotation marks.

The fixed form of the punctuation marks' names indicates the low productivity of the construction in Brazilian Portuguese and the absence of microconstructions prior to these (in 1 to 10) on a temporal scale. Next, we analyze each of the microconstructions (in 1) to 10), in the following way: first, an analysis of each punctuation mark in writing, and subsequently, we analyze how some of these characteristics are carried over to the microconstructions observed in orality.

1) *Preciso pôr um ponto final na discussão*

The function of the period is to end, finalize, terminate, conclude sentences — which, as we have seen, are not units of orality but of writing. We observe a metonymic projection of the concluding function of the period: when used in orality, the period marks (not exactly the function itself but) the possibility of ending, finalizing, terminating, conclusively concluding a subject, conversation, or even interaction. In speech, both in the scheme with the verbs “*pôr/botar/colocar um ponto final*” (put/set/place an end point) and in the scheme with the conjunction “*e ponto (final)*” (and period), the period not only marks a limit but also implies that such a limit is an absolute ending. Note the difference between:

- 15) *Essa conversa acaba aqui.*  
 This conversation ends here.
- 2) *Essa conversa acaba aqui e ponto final.*

Examples 15) and 2) are not synonymous, and 2) is not redundant. The difference between them, to put it simply, is the emphasis given by the speaker in 2) that they are not willing to continue the conversation at all — a possibility not so strongly ruled out in 15). In other words, the microconstruction ‘ponto final’ in spoken language conveys an idea of absolute finality.

Rodrigues and Cidade (2021), who study “*orações desgarradas*” (subordinate clauses that, because they are separated by a period from the main clause, gain the status of a sentence), refer to Dahlet (2006b) to explain that the separation of a non-segmentable unit creates an argumentative effect. When discussing the *point of argumentation*, Dahlet justifies:

The period can therefore intervene not only in internuclear places but also in intranuclear ones, that is, at lower levels, known to be non-segmentable by punctuation. [...] Segmenting at the lowest levels constitutes an even more remarkable phenomenon, which contradicts not only expected practices but also cognitive operations [...]. Thus, the very act of segmenting in the heart of the syntactic-semantic unit [...] graphically isolates and highlights that segment: the weight of the information is focused on the segment in question, which is then highlighted. (Dahlet, 2006b, p. 254, our translation)<sup>16</sup>

Metaphorically, the period provides the statement with the autonomy of a sentence (both in the legal sense of ‘sentence’: *I have spoken, and it shall be done*, and in the argumentative sense: *spoke briefly and bluntly*). This sentence, however, seems to be less a syntactic unit and more of a textual or communicative unit (Bredel, 2020). In the microconstructions in 1) and 2), the period ends the text, the communication. While the period signals the end of the sentence to the reader, the microconstruction ‘*vírgula*’ signals that the syntagmatic unit within the sentence has not yet ended (Bredel, 2020).

### 3) *João é legal vírgula...*

In expressions like 3), ‘*vírgula*’ is not strictly used in the grammatical sense as it is employed in writing, separating similar units, delimiting subsidiary or moved information, and marking word order, in addition to marking elided verbs. In this microconstruction, the comma merely signals an idea of opposition: it appears to indicate, through ellipsis, a coordinating adversative clause. It is interesting to note that the comma, in this context, concludes the expression — which does not happen in writing. In summary, the most syntactic of punctuation marks in writing is attributed only a specific function in spoken language. Furthermore, this function is metalinguistic, providing instructions on how to interpret what was said; in other words, it is an operation on the preceding content, suggesting that the speaker does not unconditionally agree with this content.

- 4) *Ele abria parênteses dentro de parênteses e não chegava ao fim da história.*
- 5) *Vou fazer um parêntese aqui.*

According to Robinson (1980), parentheses are equivalent to footnotes because they subvert the linearity of writing. In spoken language, linearity is subverted in another

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<sup>16</sup> In the original: “O ponto pode, portanto, intervir em lugares não somente internucleares, mas também intranucleares, ou seja, nos níveis mais baixos, conhecidos por serem não segmentáveis pela pontuação. [...] A segmentação nos mais baixos níveis constitui um fenômeno ainda mais notável, que contraria não só as práticas esperadas, como também as operações cognitivas [...]. Assim, o próprio fato de segmentar no coração da unidade sintático-semântica [...] isola graficamente e põe em relevo esse segmento: o peso da informação está focalizado no segmento em questão, que fica, então, rematizado.” (Dahlet, 2006b, p. 254).

way: parentheses are not opened and then closed, but expressions that encompass both parentheses and their content are used.

Digressions, parallel thoughts, secondary comments, excursions outside the argumentative line are placed within parentheses. According to Wirth (2017), parentheses (in writing) form a frame around what transits between inside and outside the text. Furthermore, what is written within parentheses can generally be removed from the text — such is its status in relation to the flow of the text. The linguistic material to be delimited varies because within parentheses, a paragraph, a sentence, a clause, a phrase, a word, or even parts of words fit — and even a punctuation mark (!). The delimiting signs regulate the flow of information by adding and individualizing informational content that typically complements the main informational content (at-issue, Potts, 2005).

In this metonymic projection, not all uses of the symbol that can be explored in writing (for example, the delimitation of morphemes as in “(Des)Confiança no trabalho” ((Dis)Trust at work)) are carried over to spoken language; only those that refer to framing complete macro units are used: stories, anecdotes, examples, etc. Bredel (2020) deals with two types of parentheses: *Kommentierungsklammer* that contain comments (the author’s voice is present in the act of commenting/explaining something through a discourse that supports what was previously said), and *Konstruktionsklammer* that show a parallel, coexistent construction, as in the example with (dis) above. We note that it is the parentheses of commentary (explanation, digression, anecdote) that appear in the microconstructions used in spoken language.

6) *Ela fez uma cara de interrogação.*

Crystal (2015) presents Gertrude Stein’s statement regarding certain punctuation marks, recorded in 1932 for “Lectures in America”: “A question is a question, anybody can know that a question is a question and so why add to it the question mark when it is already there when the question is already in the writing. Therefore I never could bring myself to use a question mark [...]” Not even for the English language, which adopts specific strategies to form questions (starting with *wh*-elements or auxiliary/modal verbs), would this logic apply. The act of asking — which is different from the act of asserting because it opens the possibility of a response from the interlocutor — is signaled by the question mark: “John was late again!” *versus* “Was John late again?”. When asking a question, the speaker/writer takes the position of not knowing and transfers the responsibility of seeking the answer to the interlocutor/reader (Bredel, 2020).

The doubt/uncertainty displayed on one’s face is transformed into a “questioning expression/face” in spoken language. The “questioning face” is that of someone who doesn’t know the answer. The “exclamatory expression/face”, on the other hand, marks the subject’s overreaction:

7) *Ele me olhou com uma cara de exclamação.*



According to Bredel (2020), both the question mark and the exclamation mark indicate the speaker's epistemic processes: when using the question mark, the speaker shows that they don't know something; when using the exclamation mark, the speaker shows that they assess what the interlocutor knows and emphasizes their statement (as if underlining or highlighting it). The exclamation mark points to different intentions (exclamation, imperative, indignation, etc.) of the author but, first and foremost, instantiates the speaker in the text — and along with it, the reader (Cavalcante; Silva, 2016).

Marking presence through a vertical sign that acts as a dam in the flow of text (Maiolino, 2009), the exclamation mark can be understood as the counterpart to marking absence through ellipsis. The comparison is possible because both signs serve a pragmatic function: while exclamations inflate emotions, ellipses extend credit — the author leaves something out for now and trusts that the gap will be filled by the reader later (Gregory, 2017).

8) *Não aguento mais suas reticências.*

In writing, the placement of ellipses is relatively free (they can begin, interrupt, or conclude sentences). No specific grammatical context demands the use of ellipses precisely because they mark suspension, suppression, what cannot be revealed, doubt, uncertainty. Ellipses signify the presence of absence during reading; thus, their location is not predetermined, nor is their value: they mark something inaccessible (filling a gap) or unexpressed (when the ellipsis assumes the same value as 'etc.,' for example). If juxtaposed with the idea of the completeness of a "sentence" (from Latin: the opinion formed by the judge who delivers their judgment), ellipses take away the author's sovereignty over their assertion and transfer to the reader the possibilities of interpreting the sign. The idea of absence, vagueness, evasion, or infinity is concentrated (reified) in a symbol: three consecutive dots that the author deliberately uses to fill a void or invite the reader to think ahead (Abbt, 2009). In spoken language, someone's reticent attitude is now expressed through a tangible thing, "my/your ellipses."

9) *Ele é simpático entre aspas, né!*

10) *Bota muitas aspas aí.*

In writing, quotation marks apply to all kinds of syntactic entities: when reporting quoted speech, they can enclose a text, paragraph, sentence, clause, phrase, or word. However, except in the context of dictation or television news (where the journalist reads the teleprompter), this is not the usage observed in spoken language. Besides marking quoted speech, quotation marks assume — only in writing — an autonymic function: in Linguistics, it is common to enclose words or expressions in quotation marks when they are taken as objects of study. Schlechtweg and Härtl (2020) conducted an experiment to determine if these autonymic quotation marks are pronounced in oral

readings and noted a noticeable pause that characterizes the quotation marks. However, this does not equate to examples 9) or 10).

In general, in writing, quotation marks indicate distancing (from the conventional meaning or from the author's intent) and a dual voice (quoted author/author) (Caduff, 2009): what is expressed in quotation marks differs from the political, ideological, moral, and aesthetic stance of the author and from the interpretive expectation of the interlocutor. To use quotation marks is an authorial act in the sense that quotation marks signal authorship and the author's point of view. By preserving their face, the author takes a position and invites the reader to perceive and adhere to their position — against the other one expressed in quotation marks. In summary, quotation marks signal the author's distancing and mark a dual voice/double meaning in the text.

Quotation marks that indicate irony or subvert the meaning of the word or expression enclosed in quotes are the most common in spoken language. Unlike their linear use in writing (where you open quotes, write the word or expression to be highlighted graphically, and then close quotes), spoken language has adopted the expression “*entre aspas*” (between quotes/quotation marks), followed by the word or expression to be signaled. Ironic quotation marks operate on the level of meaning in a way that they can be emphasized (as in 10) to grade levels of irony. Note that in writing, the repetition of quotation marks is not common — but the repetition of exclamation and question marks is: the enunciative posture takes the spotlight. Once again, the various functions of quotation marks in writing are restricted to a specific use in spoken language — tied to a constructionalized expression.

Bredel (2020) argues that the use of quotation marks that signalizes quoted speech involves syntactic strategies to integrate what is enclosed in quotes into the textual unit. On the other hand, quotation marks that indicate irony operate only on the level of meaning: if the quotes are removed, the meaning changes, but the syntactic form remains the same. That's why the author considers that quotation marks indicating irony are more grammaticalized than quotation marks indicating quoted speech. And it is precisely the more grammaticalized quotation marks in writing that gain expression in constructions in spoken language.

It is also observed that expressions like 9) or 10) can be accompanied by the gesture of “air quotes” (according to Cirillo, 2019: typically performed by two fingers — index and middle — of both hands raised at the level between the eyes and below the shoulders, contracting twice). This gesture, because it is repeated, does not exactly correspond to the gesture of drawing quotation marks — so we wouldn't be dealing with an icon. Furthermore, the same gesture is adopted by speakers who write quotation marks in various ways: English quotation marks [“ ”], German quotation marks [, “], French quotation marks [« »], or straight quotation marks [“ ”], for single or double quotation marks. According to Cirillo (2019), it is therefore a conventionalized gesture<sup>17</sup> that, in

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<sup>17</sup> In an episode of *Friends*, one of the characters, Joey, does not understand the gesture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CgRglfwSy00>. Viewed on: jan 5th, 2022.

gestural categorization, would correspond to an ‘emblem’ (as is the sign of OK) but that does not have a referent (it does not function as a substitute for the word).

Except perhaps for parentheses (parallel hands, palms facing inward describing a half-moon in parallel, from top to bottom), the other punctuation marks are not gestured<sup>18</sup>. If, in writing, quotation marks signal to the reader that what is said needs to be interpreted differently from the conventional meaning, in spoken language, the finger gesture can serve as the visual function of quotation marks. As long as the quotation mark gesture is executed simultaneously with the word or expression that would be written in quotes (according to Cirillo, 2019, predominantly nouns and adjectives, i.e., lexical items), it is not necessary to verbalize the quotation marks (“*entre aspas*”). Parentheses, on the other hand, need to be verbalized (“*só um parêntese*” (just a parenthesis), “*vou abrir parênteses*” (I’ll open parentheses) so that the iconic gesture of parentheses accompanies the speech.

Next, we move on to a proposal about the mechanisms behind the emergence of such constructions and their interpretations in Brazilian Portuguese.

### A case of instantaneous constructionalization

The processes known as “lexicalization” or “degrammaticalization” refer to cases where, roughly speaking, a grammatical element (a word) is taken and reinterpreted as a lexical element, as in the Brazilian Portuguese examples highlighted below:

11) *Chega desses seus senões!*

16) *Não me interessam os seus porquês.*

“I’m not interested in your reasons (becauses).”

In these examples, ‘*senões*’ (buts) and ‘*porquês*’ (because) refer, respectively, to something like “complaints” and “reasons.” In other words, the adversative grammatical function of ‘*senão*’ (but) and the explanatory function of ‘*porque*’ (because) are identified and lexicalized, changing from conjunctions to nouns that display inflectional morphology.

Regarding punctuation marks, we argue that we have a different process since punctuation marks are not words (in writing) but typographic symbols. The fixed form that the names of punctuation marks take both in writing and in the microconstructions analyzed here is a clue that the process of constructionalization is not gradual (in terms of a time scale, involving discernible earlier constructional changes) but instantaneous.

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<sup>18</sup> Humorists, though, have developed a grammar of gestures and punctuation marks: Victor Borge has a famous sketch named *Phonetic punctuation*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJiHlt8NRqk>. Viewed on: jan 5th. 2022. Another sketch where punctuation marks are gestured is performed by Gregório Duvivier, called *The punctuation man (O homem pontuação)*, available on *Porta dos Fundos' Youtube Channel*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OX3f\\_rmlz20](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OX3f_rmlz20). Viewed on jun 10th, 2023.

Traugott and Trousdale (2021) list some processes of instantaneous constructionalization of complex constructions: (i) loanwords (foreign words that, over time, are integrated into the receiving language and assume phonetic-phonological and orthographic features of that language); (ii) composition (including agglutination, juxtaposition, and lexical overlap); (iii) conversion (zero derivation, as is the case with ‘*senões*’, ‘*porquês*’, ‘*prós*’, (pros), and ‘*contras*’ (cons)); (iv) acronyms and abbreviations (where the endpoint is writing).

Because punctuation marks in writing (the starting point) are not morphemic items, we are unable to identify the observed phenomenon discussed here with any of the processes proposed in the specialized literature. The endpoint is not writing but orality, meaning it is the reverse path of acronyms, for example, where the items undergoing the constructionalization process are morphological words (e.g., ‘*muito*’ (very, much, many) > mt).

We start from the assumption that linguistic changes result from metaphorical and metonymic projections (Lakoff; Johnson, 1980), and we consider that punctuation marks originated in writing and are not to be taken as words or having phonological counterparts (they are not pronounced themselves when used in written text). By transferring punctuation marks to conventionalized constructions in oral language, our hypothesis is that the speaker creates a cognitive mapping of specific functions of punctuation marks in the domain of writing and projects them onto the domain of speech (metaphor). Within the same conceptual domain (e.g., comma usage), through contiguity, the speaker selects a prominent function (metonymy) and incorporates it into the constructionalized expression. Since the units of writing and speech are different, these marks in oral language take on less grammatical and more semantic-enunciative-discursive functions.

As we have seen, it is not the entire set of punctuation marks that comes into play in spoken language:<sup>19</sup> the *alínea* (paragraph indent) is not even included in grammar textbooks, the semicolon has a low distribution (it shows a very low frequency in the *corpora* examined by Androutsopoulos, 2020, for example) and, like the dash, is more dependent on textual genre than the other marks. Furthermore, we argue that the fact that not all punctuation marks undergo the constructionalization process is likely related to (i) how frequently they occur (or are salient) in writing, and (ii) the accumulation of functions for a given mark. We will investigate these hypotheses further.

The period and the comma are the most frequent punctuation marks in writing (Crystal, 2015; Kleppa, 2021), which justifies their use in oral language: “A typical finding is to see that 90 per cent of all punctuation marks are either periods or commas [...]” (Crystal, 2015). The constructionalization of the period results in two constructional schemas: one involving performative verbs (*colocar/botar/pôr um ponto final* (put/insert a period/end point)) and another involving a conjunction (*e ponto (final)* (and period/

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<sup>19</sup> This probably varies from one language to another: in English, for example, we can think only of “period” and “air quotes” in constructionalized expressions.

endpoint)). The constructionalization of the comma results in an expression where it does not fit into a microconstruction like the others but represents itself and its function of indicating the non-end of a textual unit, contradicting what was said (*tranquilo vírgula!* (calm comma!, meaning “not calm at all”)).

Another factor that contributes to the occurrence of lexical expressions with constructions (and applies to the other constructionalized marks) is its functional accumulation: the more layers beyond syntax an item assumes in writing, the more likely it is to be constructionalized and to appear as a lexical expression in oral language. As we saw in Table 2, only the period assumes a single function, whereas the other punctuation marks all accumulate functions.

The seven punctuation marks that appear most frequently in spoken constructions, namely: [.] , [,] , [?] , [!] , [...] , [( )] , and [“ ”] , can be divided into two categories when constructionalized:

- *referential marks*: [.] , [?] , [!] , [...] : These are finalizing punctuation marks that, when used in speech, refer to an ending, doubt, emphasis, or suspension. They do not operate on the content that has been said, meaning they do not perform any linguistic operation, but they have a contribution that can be paraphrased by a verb or noun (e.g., “*e ponto final*” = “and it’s over”; “*cara de interrogação*” = “doubtful expression”; “*cara de exclamação*” = “astonished expression”; “*suas reticências*” = “your hesitation”).
- *metalinguistic marks*: [,] , [( )] , [“ ”] : These are punctuation marks that relativize the content to something different from what is literal/conventional/expected. For example, saying something “*entre aspas*” (or gesturing) or using “*vírgula*” (comma) to express doubt (“*trabalha muito vírgula!*” = “s/he works a lot, comma!”, meaning “it is not true that s/he works a lot”) denies what was said before without using explicit negation. In the case of “*fazer/abrir um parêntese*” (“to make/open a parenthesis”), it changes the quality of the information (hierarchically subordinate) enclosed within the parentheses. In this sense, metalinguistic marks perform operations on the content that has been said.

According to Traugott and Trousdale (2021, p. 328–329), “[...] many lexical constructions are referential: nominal constructions, in particular, are more subject to the influence of social factors [...]”. In the case analyzed in this paper, what we can highlight is the influence of writing practices on oral practices. Coulmas (2014, p. 25) states that “speech and writing, although related because they are governed by rules, are autonomous systems that, once writing is created, develop and mutually influence each other.”<sup>20</sup>

Returning to the schemas of the constructions analyzed here, we note that verbs are invoked in expressions containing [.] , and [( )] : the speaker *does* something when they

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<sup>20</sup> It seems reasonable to think that a language that has no writing system also has no punctuation marks in speech.

put a period and when they *open* parentheses (end the topic/tell a parallel story). The double marks [“ ”] and [( )] allow the spatial preposition “*entre*” (between) to frame units. Lastly, the subject (the face) appears related to the enunciative marks [!] and [?].

## Conclusion

In this paper, our main question was to understand how and why punctuation marks can emerge in crystallized expressions in speech and what they mean. After defining the formal and functional criteria for punctuation marks, we agree with Chittolina (2020, p. 310, our translation): “Punctuating is part of the author’s choices when they engage in writing, and therefore, punctuation also speaks about the unique insertion of each one into language.”<sup>21</sup> If we understand that punctuating is an authorial gesture, we comprehend why speakers feel the need to resort to punctuation marks to express themselves in oral language as well.

We started from microconstructions in which there is (expressively) a punctuation mark and contrasted their functions with those the same mark assumes in writing. We did not examine constructions in which more than one mark appears, such as the combination of the period and the comma: *escrever sem ponto nem vírgula*<sup>22</sup> (writing without a period or comma).

We noticed that the phonological function is non-existent (pauses in speech do not correspond to grammatical divisions); that the syntactic dimension (common to all punctuation marks in writing) becomes diffuse in conventionalized constructions (the period ends the topic or even conversation, not just the sentence); that semantic, pragmatic, enunciative, and discursive functions become prominent (marks like parentheses receive expressions like “*fazer um parêntese*” (to make a parenthesis) in which both the parentheses and the linguistic material contained within them are referenced); and that the enunciative-discursive (or pragmatic) function becomes salient (marks are called upon to *do* something). We call this process instantaneous constructionalization because we are not dealing with atomic units but complex ones (the microconstructions) and because we do not perceive gradience in the process of constructionalization (from a diachronic perspective). Since we do not perceive the possibility of morphological inflection in the names of punctuation marks integrated into constructions, we wonder if the punctuation marks in the microconstructions analyzed here have the status of morphological words.

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<sup>21</sup> In the original: “*Pontuar faz parte das escolhas do autor quando o mesmo se insere na escrita e, por isso, pontuar diz também sobre a inserção singular de cada um na linguagem*” (Chittolina, 2020, p. 310).

<sup>22</sup> A quick Google search (in 01/01/22) for the expression “sem ponto nem vírgula” returned the following contexts: “*Amor sem ponto nem vírgula*” (Love without periods or commas), “*falar sem ponto nem vírgula*” (speaking without periods or commas), “*ler sem ponto nem vírgula*” (reading without periods or commas), “*pensar sem ponto nem vírgula*” (thinking without periods or commas), and “*escrever sem ponto nem vírgula*” (writing without periods or commas). In all these microconstructions, the idea of fluidity, unrestricted flow, in a continuous, uncontrolled, and limitless manner is present. It would be interesting, in future research, to examine these constructions and their properties.

In writing, all punctuation marks are used metalinguistically. When employed in crystallized constructions in speech, finalizing marks (all of them) assume a referential value, whereas comma, quotation marks, and parentheses continue to perform a metalinguistic function. Finally, double metalinguistic marks (quotation marks and parentheses) can be gestured and used simultaneously with speech. These results indicate the different degrees of constructionalization (from a synchronic perspective) that punctuation marks have achieved in spoken language.

We hope that this first study on the topic of punctuation marks in conventionalized expressions in spoken language, in addition to serving as an example of a peculiar case of constructionalization, can support further research on this topic.

KLEPPA, L.; BASSO, R. Sinais de pontuação na fala: construcionalizações. *Alfa*, São Paulo, v. 67, 2023.

- *RESUMO: Nesse texto, discutimos algumas expressões da oralidade relativamente estáveis em língua portuguesa que apresentam sinais de pontuação em sua construção. Como os sinais de pontuação são sinais gráficos (visuais) típicos da escrita, analisamos as funções que os sinais de pontuação assumem tanto na escrita como nas construções em que são usados na oralidade. Como referencial teórico, recorreremos principalmente a Nunberg (1990), Dahlet (1995, 1998, 2002, 2006b, 2006a) e Bredel (2020) que oferecem sistematizações compatíveis entre si dos sinais de pontuação, e recorreremos a Traugott e Trousdale (2021) para entender o processo de construcionalização em que os sinais se envolvem na oralidade. Diferentemente dos processos de construcionalização geralmente encontrados na literatura, nosso objeto de análise é de natureza tipográfica e não morfológica. Percebemos que apenas sete (dos onze) sinais de pontuação ganham expressão na oralidade e que esses sinais se distribuem em diferentes gradiências de lexicalização: os sinais finalizadores (ponto, interrogação, exclamação e reticências) recebem valor referencial na oralidade, ao passo que vírgula, aspas e parênteses permanecem com valor metalinguístico – sendo que os sinais duplos podem ser gestualizados.*
- *PALAVRAS-CHAVE: sinais de pontuação; função; lexicalização; oralidade.*

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