

Literary theory and the phenomenology of the comma

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Abstract. Jacques Derrida's "Signature Event Context" is one of the most famous papers in literary theory, but there are aspects of it which, in my experience, are not commented on. Why are there no commas in the title? I present a puzzle, but there is a solution which I presume many will quickly go for.

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"The comma is never heard

But it's certainly inferred"

I anticipate a philosopher saying that Jacques Derrida's paper "Signature Event Context" is more influential in literature departments than philosophy departments. But what is it famous for? Its title is famous, but to my knowledge no one comments on an aspect of it: the absence of commas. Probably someone somewhere does comment though.

My translation tells me that the paper was first read at a conference (1977: 172). I imagine people hearing it and writing down the title like so: "Signature, Event, Context." My guess is that the puzzle the commaless title is intended to prompt is this:

- (a) The comma is never heard.
- (b) Everyone who heard the paper and wrote down its title included commas.
- (c) There are no commas in the title in writing.

But I also anticipate that various philosophers will just say that the puzzle is easily solved: the commas were indeed not heard; conventions led to the presence of commas being inferred when inscribing the title.

Reference

Derrida, J. 1977 (translated by S. Weber and J. Mehlman). Signature Event Context. *Glyph* 1: 172-197.

(Apologies for the various occasions on which I have omitted the translators.)