

Comma or no comma:

Two case studies on present-day English corpora

Bachelor's Thesis

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Pilkun käyttö englannin kielessä nähdään yleensä yksioikoisena. Tietyt pilkkusäännöt ovat juurtuneet ihmisten käytäntöön ja usein on vaikea nähdä pilkkua niinkin monimutkaisena ja epäselvänä kuin se todellisuudessa on. Tutkin kandidaatin työssäni pilkun käyttöä lauseenalkuisten adverbiaalilausekkeiden <i>According to X</i> ja <i>In + year</i> jälkeen. Tämä on alue, jolla pilkun käyttöä on tutkittu hyvin vähän. Tarkastelin pilkun käyttöä kielenhuolto-oppaiden ja korpusdatan avulla selvittääkseni, mitkä asiat vaikuttavat siihen, käytetäänkö pilkkua vai ei.</p> <p>Hyödynsin tutkielmassani useita kielenhuolto-oppaita. Kiinnitin erityistä huomiota siihen, mitä lauseenalkuisten adverbiaalilausekkeiden jälkeisestä pilkusta (tai pilkuttomuudesta) opastetaan. Ilmeni, että juuri tähän lauseen kohtaan on vain siihen yleisluontoisesti viittaavia ohjeita. Oppaissa kerrottiin, että lyhyttä johdantoa lauseen alussa ei ole tarpeen erottaa päälauseesta pilkulla, jos mahdollisen pilkun kohdalla ei ole luonnollista taukoa.</p> <p>Korpusaineiston tutkiminen laajensi käsitystä pilkun käytöstä tutkittavan lauseenkohdan kanssa. Haut korpuksessa antoivat suuren määrän tutkittavaa materiaalia ja pilkun käyttöä oli täten mahdollista tutkia kielen luonnollisessa ympäristössä. Korpusaineiston rajausta tosin vähensi tutkittavaa materiaalia, mikä oli tarpeen, jotta tutkielma ei laajenisi yli kandidaatintutkielman ohjeellisen laajuuden.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen korpusaineiston pohjalta oli mahdollista tehdä uusia pilkun käyttöön viittaavia ohjeita. Tutkimuksen korpusaineiston rajausta jätti pois tutkinnasta useita esimerkkilauseita, jotka saatiin tekemällä korpushaut. Jatkon kannalta voisi olla hyödyllistä ottaa pois rajatut esimerkit mukaan ja selvittää pilkun käyttöä laajemmassa mittasuhteessa. Myös testejä voisi käyttää hyödyksi tutkiessa lauseenalkuisten adverbiaalilausekkeiden kanssa esiintyviä pilkkuja.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Comma usage is usually thought of as a clear and simple matter. The grammar books used in schools give the most useful comma instructions. These are presented as if there are no other instructions on the comma's usage. Still, this is not the whole case. There are differences on how the comma is seen and on how it should be used. These sometimes subtle differences one can find out only by studying several style guides, as has been done in the present study. Even after doing this kind of research one cannot fully answer the question "Is the comma called for here?"

This thesis examines the use or non-use of the comma after sentence initial time and person adverbials, that is *According to X* and *In + year*. The background information is collected from several style guides. These provided many useful comma tips, but it also became evident that there are no clear rules put forward about this particular comma usage. No style guide consulted for the study included sentence initial adverbial phrases and explained how the comma should be used in relation to them. Although, something quite near to the issue studied here was possible to find.

The analysis itself was done based on material found on the BNCweb corpus. This thesis is trying to answer to the problem of how the comma should be used in the places this research concentrates on. As there is no similar research done on this topic, all the so called instructions were made only based on example sentences found in the corpus.

Before looking into the corpus material collected for this thesis, there was an idea of what might affect the use or non-use of the comma; this was the length of the sentence. This aspect was thought to have an impact on whether the comma would be used after *In + year* or not. It was assumed that if the whole sentence was long, it would be more likely that the comma is used after the year. This idea was based on the fact that the comma is a useful separator and that it helps to clarify the sentence.

There was a similar idea with *According to X* as well. It was thought that the comma would be used if the sentence exceeds approximately ten words. Ten words was considered to be the number of words that separates long sentences from short ones. Then, it would be appropriate to use the comma so as to simplify the sentence and to make it easier for the reader to understand.

This study is put together in the following way. The first actual chapter, chapter two, contains instructions and information about commas in general. That chapter also includes some more complex comma usage guidelines and finally material that does not address sentence initial time and person adverbials exactly, but raises points that could be applied to them as well.

Chapter three concentrates on the research questions, how the data was collected, and what methods were used to analyse the corpus material. Chapter four is the place for the actual analysis. First, the instances of *In + year* are looked at and then the thesis will move onto *According to X*. Chapter five contains observations that arose considering this study and in the conclusion the whole thesis is briefly put together and concluded.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Punctuation marks in general

Punctuation marks are a tool that helps one to understand written texts. They segment the text in question into smaller units. Without any punctuation marks it would be more challenging to grasp information from a text. Thus, all the punctuation marks are there to help to guide the reader through different kinds of texts. After all, they only exist to ease the reading experience, not to make life difficult.

Punctuation marks can be said to be credited too little. It can be argued that they are something people do not think of being as important that they are. If, for some reason, a writer was to leave out all the punctuation marks, the significance of them would become evident to the reader. As such, punctuation has been researched very little. That is why this thesis might prove to be an important guideline to the comma usage.

Most of us are very familiar with the most common punctuation marks. These are the point, the exclamation mark and the question mark. Their function is quite clear to all readers and writers. The point is used at the end of a statement, but when the sentence is an interjection, the exclamation mark is used instead. Question mark, on the other hand, is used at the end of a sentence when the sentence is a question. These simple and easy-to-understand rules are something people learn at a very early stage and hence are familiar with them.

Although the comma is used more frequently than any other punctuation mark, the rules of its use can be quite obscure to most language users. What makes the use of the comma challenging is that there is no place in a sentence where a comma is compulsory in English. Still, there are suggestions that have been put forward about comma usage. After all, commas are considered to make texts easier to understand. Still, since people find their use difficult, they are very often neglected and left out due to not knowing how to work with commas.

The suggestions about comma usage that most people are aware of are as follows (Silk, Mäki and Kjisik (2003:158)). There should usually be no comma between a main clause and a subordinate clause. Example (1) illustrates this:

(1) I heard that you had a party yesterday. (Silk, Mäki and Kjisik (2003:158))

However, a subordinate clause that comes before the main clause is separated from it with a comma. Also, a separate addition to the clause is separated from it with a comma. These include relative clause, participial phrase and adverbial. Example (2) clarifies these:

(2) My neighbor, whose name I always forget, went to Florida. On arriving there, he found that his luggage had gone missing, so the holiday wasn't a success. The hotel, however, was nice. (Silk, Mäki and Kjisik (2003:158))

The comma is also used to separate coordinate main clauses from each other. The invented example (3) illustrates this:

(3) My pet dog loves to be scratched but hates to be trimmed.

In addition, it separates the words in a list. The invented example (4) sheds light on this:

(4) I bought apples, oranges, and bananas.

It can be found, as well, separating the greetings in the beginning and end in a letter, as well as separating direct quotation from the main clause. The invented examples (5) and (6) clarify

these:

- (5) Dear Mary, I am sorry to reply to your letter this late.
- (6) "I lost my pen," John said.

The function of the comma is very simple, as stated by Johnson (1991:94): it separates one word, phrase, or clause from another. Its importance becomes apparent especially in longer sentences where it helps the reader to notice the relationships between phrases and items in a list, as Peters (2004:115) points out. Commas, thus, are separators and indicators of where there is a pause, if the text is read aloud. However confusing all the comma rules might be, it is beneficial to be able to use the comma, if not correctly, then at least in a way which makes it possible for readers to decode what one is trying to say.

2.2 Grammatical correctness concerning comma usage

The comma has its origins in the 16th century and Latin. As Burchfield (1996) states, the comma was first used in the 16th century and that is also when the comma was introduced into the English language as a punctuation mark. The word itself derives from the Latin word *comma* which means *piece cut off* and *short clause*.

Many have found the comma as a troublesome addition into texts. There are only some clear rules about comma usage and the rest of the cases are such where one can decide for oneself whether to include the comma, or commas, or not. All the same, Peters (2004:115) plainly states that commas are underused. This could be the result of people avoiding commas altogether in order to not make any embarrassing mistakes that change the meaning of the text they are trying to put forward. The proof for this lies in Johnson (1991:94) where he states that commas are most frequently used in a wrong way.

What Howard (1993:87) and Bernstein (1965:359) guide people to do is to use only a minimum amount of commas and this idea is clearly the opposite of what Peters (2004:115) states. This can be said to be a guideline which most of us follow. People, very frequently, are not sure if a comma should be inserted into the text they are producing, and that is why most people

punctuate too little. So little that, in effect, their texts become ambiguous and the reader feels confused by what the text is trying to tell them. This is the reason why one should be able to tell the most important instances where a comma should occur. Following the most essential comma rules ensures that what one is trying to let other people know, reaches them, invariably.

A comma rule which has been under heavy debate is the so called Oxford comma. This is the comma which comes before the *and* in an enumeration before the last item. There are two kinds of guidelines that scholars give about this particular comma. Some are of the opinion that it should always be omitted, e.g. Metcalfe and Castle (1995:79). Some, on the other hand, find the Oxford comma useful, especially where there are more than two groupings in a sequence, as Burchfield (1996:162) states. The invented example (7) illustrates the Oxford comma:

(7) There are teachers, parents, and children in the classroom.

Some individual instances where the use of the comma has ceased to exist are the comma after the house number and the month. As Howard (1993:87) explains, using the comma in these sequences used to be the rule but this type of punctuation has now become too heavy for most of us. Some, of course, still find the use of the comma in these examples a good way to go, and will continue using the comma. Another case where the comma has gone missing is in letters after 'Dear Sir' and such, and after expressions such as 'Yours sincerely', as Howard (1993:87) explains.

What most scholars agree on when considering the use of the comma is how restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses appear in relation to the comma. As Burchfield (1996:162) states, a restrictive relative clause has no commas around it but non-restrictive relative clauses are separated from the main clause by having a comma before and after it. The invented examples (8) and (9) make this clearer:

(8) Mrs Mills bought an umbrella that used to belong to me.

(9) My grandmother, who has a very pretty name, is 90 years old.

This is a rule that most people know of and are able to apply to their texts. Also, this is one of the few certain comma rules that exist.

Johnson explains some instances where the comma should not be used. The first is as follows: two predicates should not be separated with a comma (Johnson (1991:96)). Example (10) includes this kind of comma error:

(10) We checked the books, and notified the lawyers. (Johnson (1991:96); my bolding)

The second rule holds that, according to Johnson (1991:99), a subject and a verb, a verb and an object, and a preposition and an object should not be separated with a comma. Examples (11)-(14) have these kinds of comma errors:

(11) The cavalry, artillery, and light infantry, were drawn up in order.

(12) The sun shining through the unshuttered window, woke her early.

(13) The figures do not prove but merely suggest, that trouble is ahead.

(14) He praised and gave recommendations to, Smith, Brown, and Jones.

(Johnson (1991:99,100); my bolding)

In these examples the writer has a heavy punctuation method. It can be said that these commas actually make it harder for the reader to understand the sentences than it would be without the “comma mistakes”.

The third instance, according to Johnson (1991:101), is that there should not be a comma between an adjective or an adverb and a following word. Example (15) has this kind of error:

(15) Day broke on a gray, cold, fretful, sea. (Johnson (1991:101); my bolding)

In this example the writer most likely has simply forgotten when to stop inserting commas to separate a series of adjectives, as Johnson (1991:102) states.

These, it could be said, are a few of the instances where there are clear instructions about not

using the comma. Still, these most likely are instructions that most of us are not fully aware of, since these are not specifically taught at school in any level. How one can become familiar with these rules is going through style guides on one's own.

The following table represents the most common comma usage rules.

Rule	Yes	No
between main clause and subordinate clause		X
between subordinate clause and main clause	X	
around relative clause, participial phrase and adverbial	X	
coordinate main clauses	X	
in lists	X	
after greetings in a letter	X	X
separate direct quotation from the main clause	X	
after house number and month		X
around restrictive relative clause		X
around non-restrictive relative clause	X	
separate two predicates from each other		X
separate subject and verb, verb and object, and preposition and object		X
separate adjective or adverb and a following word		X

2.3 Sentence initial time and person expressions

As such, there are no clear-cut comma rules concerning sentence initial time and person expressions. Naturally this also applies to what comes after *In + year* and *According to X*. There has been no detailed and in depth research done about the use or non-use of commas after these phrases.

However, some general language usage guidebooks do include commentaries on the use of

commas in this kind of instances. Peters (2004:115) observes that a comma is not called for after a short introduction. It could be said that in most cases this makes sense. Separating a short introduction from the main clause might even cause confusion and cut the text into too little pieces.

Davidson (2001:119) agrees with the above mentioned by stating that there is no need for a comma after a short introduction if there is no natural pause. An example sentence could be as follows: “*Next time* he’ll be more careful.” Still, a comma is called for when the introduction is obviously long: “*Next time will be an entirely different experience*, he was assured.” This could be said to be justifiable since the purpose of the comma is to make pauses so as to make a text clearer and easier to read and understand. Still, Davidson (2001:119) states that if the omission of the comma after a short introduction might cause confusion, it benefits from having one.

Since sentence initial time and person expressions and a comma have not been studied before, closer inspection into the matter is warranted. It could be argued that this area should be looked at with the same detail usually seen with other types of linguistic study. What this thesis is trying to find an answer to is what words or expressions influence the use of the comma and what do not. There must be something that drives people to use the comma. Thus, this thesis might shed more light on the issue.

3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS, DATA AND METHODOLOGY

I am taking a corpus linguistic approach to examine the issue. My methods are both quantitative and qualitative, as I will be observing the frequencies of the uses of commas in different text types, as well as considering the possible underlying reasons for the use or non-use of commas.

A linguistic corpus consists of language as it has been used in real life. The corpus used in this thesis is the British National Corpus which consists of 4,048 texts, or 100 million words as Suonperä (2009:20) explains. Most of the material in the BNC is made up of written examples, constituting 90 percent. The corpus includes texts from the time period of 1960-1993. In my corpus analysis I used the BNCweb interface, developed at the University of Zurich and its website is as follows:

<http://bncweb.lancs.ac.uk/cgi-bin/bncXML/BNCquery.pl?theQuery=search&urlTest=yes>.

Example sentences have been taken from *fiction and verse* and *newspapers*. As the texts in the British National Corpus are grammatically tagged, which means that each word has been assigned a tag indicating the part of speech, a tagged search was performed in order to get a more relevant set of search hits of the pattern *In + year*. The search for sentence initial time adverbials was done using the search word “In _CRD” (the tag “CRD” denoting a cardinal number). This kind of search resulted in examples where the number after *in* was a year and also any other kind of number, for instance “In three books...” All the instances where the number following the preposition did not denote a year were excluded from the analysis. Example (16) is a typical instance of an irrelevant search hit for this study:

- (16) *In eleven miles* Cameron and Menzies had passed three houses – all the fewer people to betray the refugees, they told each other. (BNC, A0N 1534; my italics)

Also in sentence initial person adverbials there were some instances that were considered irrelevant and subsequently excluded from closer analysis. The search resulted in expressions where there were words between *According to* and the name of the person. All the expressions where there was additional information (for example the profession of the person in question) about the person before his or her name were excluded and only the straightforward *According to X* were analysed. Example (17) clarifies excluded examples:

- (17) *According to my cousin* Violet, it is happening more and more in America. (BNC, ANL 1112; my italics)

The before mentioned exclusions were made so as to ensure that the amount of work would not exceed the guidelines created for the Bachelor’s Thesis. If these exclusions had not been made, there would have been a wider variety of examples found in the British National Corpus. That would have meant investigating examples that are not essential for this particular thesis. As mentioned earlier, in the case of sentence initial time expressions the corpus included cases that had some other number after *in* than a year. If all of those examples had been looked into, it would have meant that this thesis would have grown too big to handle. While other kinds of instances might be worth closer study as well, for the purpose of the present thesis the focus of the study was narrowed down to references of years.

It was chosen for this thesis to examine the use or non-use of the comma after sentence initial time and person adverbials by studying each of them separately and also by comparing them in two different kinds of text types. The text types chosen were *fiction and verse* and *newspapers*. These two were chosen because it was beforehand assumed that there would be at least some kind of differences between these two text types. After all, newspaper language is stricter and more controlled than language in *fiction and verse*.

The reason for restricting the research to written materials is the fact that commas cannot be very reliably examined in spoken texts. In speech, commas are used whenever there is a pause. This may not be the case if the same text was written down. Quite arguably in spoken texts there could be pauses where there would be no comma if the text was written down, and the other way around.

Searching the British National Corpus with the query “In _CRD” restricting it to written texts and case-sensitive and choosing *fiction and verse* resulted in 324 hits, of which 81 suited this thesis. When choosing *newspapers* the number of hits was 982, of which a hundred relevant instances were chosen in random order.

The search for *According to* was also first set to written texts and case-sensitive, and separate searches were conducted on the sections representing *fiction and verse*, on the one hand and *newspapers*, on the other. The section of *fiction and verse* included 207 hits, of which 73 suited this thesis. The same search was done again with the same restrictions and only changing *fiction and verse* into *newspapers*. This search resulted in 511 hits, of which a hundred relevant hits were again chosen in random order.

4 CORPUS ANALYSIS

4.1 The use of commas after adverbial phrases *In + year*

As there are no existing rules about how the comma should be used after adverbial phrases *In + year*, one cannot say that one style is on principle preferable to the other. It is the aim of this thesis to examine the degrees of usage and non-usage of the comma, and to observe the factors

possibly influencing the choices.

The corpus material used for this thesis revealed how little the comma is actually used after sentence initial adverbial phrases *In + year*. When the search was conducted using *fiction and verse* corpus material, the outcome was eighty-one example sentences of which thirty had a comma. That means that most of the sentence initial time adverbial phrases go on without a comma and a percentage of 37 have the comma inserted after the adverbial phrase.

The comma percentage in newspapers was slightly higher. These randomly chosen example sentences showed a comma percentage of 43. Later in this thesis it will be examined what makes the difference between *fiction and verse* and *newspapers* so big.

4.2 Factors influencing the use of commas after *In + year*

As seen from the corpus material, a comma is typically called for after sentence initial time adverbials if there is an appositive clause after the year, as in example (18):

- (18) In 1972, *when people from outside the region thought of the North-East*, Lindisfarne sprang to mind. (BNC, K4P 2101; my italics)

This is one of the few instances where it can be said that the comma is almost mandatory. If the comma in the example sentence would be left out, the reader might be confused about what the text is trying to put forward. Still, there is a way to put an appositive clause in a sentence and not use the comma. Example (19) sheds more light on the issue:

- (19) In 1970 – *if you were eighteen and could lay your hands on a little ready money* – it was almost de rigueur to travel overland to Greece where, in an idyllic island setting, you could hang out in the coolest way imaginable with amiable drug-dealers and liberated chicks. (BNC, CKB 1314; my italics)

Here, dashes are used to replace the called for comma.

In the example sentences collected from the corpus, there was an instance where it could be argued that the comma should be used, but the example did not have it in it. This is example (20):

- (20) In 1867 *forty-three* gypsies pitched camp in the Cours la Reine and aroused much hatred among the Rouennais. (BNC, G1A 1794; my italics)

It can be said that since there is another number after the year, it would be useful to have the comma after the year so as to not make the reader confused about how to interpret the sentence. One could argue that the sentence would be easier to understand if the comma was used, and there would then be no reason to go back and check what the numbers are referring to.

As mentioned earlier in my thesis, it was assumed that if the entire sentence was long, the writer would most likely use the comma to help the reader to understand the text. Of this it was not possible to find any evidence. The material collected does not seem to have any proof for the fact that longer sentences would more likely have a comma after the year than short ones. This is illustrated by examples (21)-(24):

- (21) In 1884 he had gone out to the Sudan with the rank of captain, and had been wounded at the battle of Abu Kru the following January. (BNC, ANL 3174)
- (22) In 1943, practically the entire team relegated during 39/40 got back together during 'Buy a Spitfire' week to play a fund-raising match against a local Wome's Land Army XI. (BNC, FR9 274)
- (23) In 1892 this Greek had tragic news. (BNC, G13 1435)
- (24) In 1916, conscription was introduced in Britain. (BNC, ATE 3184)

One peculiar thing was found about the corpus material collected for this thesis. There were several examples from the same writer and still, the writer used commas inconsistently. In the chosen example sentences the same writer at first used the comma after time adverbials and in other cases did not. Examples (25) and (26) illustrate this:

- (25) In 1964 he had been prepared to back his hunches. (BNC, CKB 2579)
- (26) In 1970, the last thing he wanted was to be reminded of Richard and the silly game they used to play. (BNC, CKB 1717)

The different outcomes with *fiction and verse* and *newspapers* could be explained in the following way. In newspapers it is more important to use correct language by paying attention to even comma usage. In fiction and verse, on the other hand, the writer is freer to express himself or herself in a way that serves the text's function. In other words, commas can be used to put

forward an idea, and not only as an obligatory mark that always has to come after certain expressions.

4.3 The use of commas after adverbial phrases *According to X*

As with *In + year*, there are no clear-cut rules that have been put forward of how one should use the comma with sentence initial person adverbial phrases, that is *According to X*. The aim here is likewise to look closer at what affects the comma usage and what are these things that affect the use of the comma. What is pursued is reasons for choosing to leave the comma or keep the comma.

With these kinds of adverbial phrases, the X is a name. I chose to leave out all the examples where there were words before the actual name. That is, the profession of the person in question, or other kinds of expressions that define the person. The invented example (27) clarifies this:

(27) *According to the professional football player John Smith, the football fields are in poor condition.*

When comparing the results for *According to X* in *fiction and verse* and in *newspapers*, one could easily remark the same kind of outcome as with *In + year*. There were significantly less commas in *fiction and verse* than in *newspapers*. With *fiction and verse* it was possible to find seventy-three example sentences where there was a sentence initial person adverbial of which fifty-eight had a comma. This means that the percentage for commas in *fiction and verse* was seventy-nine. Thus, in the case of *According to X*, the use of the comma is way more frequent than with *In + year*.

4.4 Factors influencing the use of commas after *According to X*

The comma is usually used if a named entity immediately follows the phrase *According to X*, and X is a named entity as well. This is illustrated by example (28):

(28) *According to Mossop, Heather had been tight-lipped during the drive back to Weymouth. (BNC, H8T 327)*

This is a justifiable use of the comma since it clarifies the sentence and separates the two names from each other. Without the comma, there would be a chance that the reader misreads the sentence and assumes that the two names go together. Still, it was possible to find an example where there is no comma in this kind of environment. Example (29) clarifies this:

- (29) According to *Wainfleet Ruby* had asked him for a photograph of the escaped prisoner from the newspaper's files, passed her hands over it and discovered that Sniffy was in Epping Forest. (BNC, GWG1549; my italics)

The comma is also often used when there is an appositive clause after the name. Example (30) illustrates this:

- (30) According to Rupert Sutcliffe, *the most senior member of the Department*, and its most pertinacious gossip, there was a time not so long ago when Philip Swallow was forever swanning around the globe on some conference jaunt or other. (BNC, ANY 925; my italics)

This kind of comma usage is based on the fact that appositive clauses can be likened to non-restrictive relative clauses, which are always separated from the main clause with a pair of commas. Hence, to use the comma in these kinds of sentences is an obligation rather than a choice. However, I found one example where commas are not used, but parentheses replace the called for commas instead. Example (31) illustrates this:

- (31) According to Mr S Raisbeck of Selby Crescent (*assistant manager at the replacement Regal Cinema 1948-51*) the whole of the north wall of the Regal is the original wall of The Theatre Royal and so must date back to the 1880s. (BNC, K52 314; my italics)

One instance where it is more difficult to say why the comma is used is with direct quotations. Example (32) clarifies this:

- (32) '*According to Dredge*,' Derek replied, 'things certainly look promising.' (BNC, G0N 3636; my italics)

It can be so that the comma is only used because it is called for with direct quotations or then, it is possible that the comma had been used regardless of the occurrence of the direct quote. In other words, if that sentence would be changed into a basic sentence, it is uncertain if a comma would still be used.

Having studied the corpus material thoroughly it could be argued that if the name after *According to* is a man's name and the following word is a woman's name, the comma could be left out, and the same other way round. The invented examples (33) and (34) illustrate this:

(33) According to John Mary is a beautiful name.

(34) According to Amy Ken has a lovely dog.

Unfortunately it was not possible to find any evidence that this principle holds. Still, it could be argued, as there is no risk of confusion, that the comma could be omitted. There is no danger that the reader gets confused about the two names in the sentence. Hence, the comma is not essential.

Here, as with *In + year*, the same factors apply as mentioned earlier. As *fiction and verse* is freer to include special types of comma usage, for example some personal comma tendencies, the comma is less often found in texts of that type. *Newspapers*, on the other hand, are much stricter even with such a small thing as the comma. Hence, the amount of commas found in *newspapers* is significantly bigger than that in *fiction and verse*.

5 DISCUSSION

The comma can be said to be a tool using which one can make everyone else's reading experience easier. Missing commas force people to go back to the beginning of the sentence and read the whole sentence over again. This non-use of the comma complicates reading in a degree that makes the whole reading experience tiresome. Thus, the comma is something everyone should be thoughtful to use so as to not make others' reading experiences needlessly complicated.

Going through this thesis can be argued to make people change their opinion about commas. Usually, commas are only used when they are obligatory. That is partly due to the fact that the comma is not investigated thoroughly at any stage of school. Thus, people's knowledge about the comma is based on what they learned in High School. The rules taught there are basically these: when in doubt, leave it out. So, by going through this research it is possible to go deeper into the

world of commas; and the results might be drastic. People might start using commas in a way they never before had thought of so as to ease the reading experience.

When starting to explore adverbial time and person expressions as concerns the comma, it can be argued that people are either of the opinion that the comma should always be used, or that it never needs to be used. This is understandable since there does not seem to be any previous research done on this topic and thus people easily go one way or the other without considering any special cases. Looking more closely at the issue of this thesis, one can find aspects of comma usage after sentence initial time and person adverbials that they had not previously thought of. This is actually the purpose of this thesis; to make people think about an issue as important as this, more profoundly.

Overall, this thesis is trying to cover an area not before thought about, at least not as thoroughly as it is here. Trying to find reasons for the use or non-use of the comma in the places this thesis concentrates on is an ambitious goal to reach, but some have definitely been found. It is sure that there still are aspects that need closer examination, but in order to not make this thesis too extensive, there had to be areas left out; areas that could be studied if this research is done again in more detail.

6 CONCLUSION

This thesis revealed clear factors that affect the use or non-use of the comma after sentence initial time and person adverbials. After all, there is always something that makes one choose to use or not use the comma, it is never accidental. Still, it was not always possible to fully understand what affects the use or non-use of the commas. In this respect, there are areas that need closer examination, which was not considered essential for this kind of research.

Looking into the corpus material revealed one very clear aspect that affects the use of the comma; that is an appositive clause. This was one of the results in relation to both *According to X* and *In + year*. Another important result was the fact that if the *X* in *According to X* is a named entity and the following word is a named entity as well; the comma should be used to make the sentence easier to read. These two can be said to be the most important results found using the

BNC.

What the results of this thesis revealed was that there are actually many more reasons for comma usage than is explained in any style guide or grammar book. Finding these reasons might prove to be a tiresome journey since all the comma “rules” have not been collected to a single book or article. If one wishes to be able to use the comma in the best possible way, one needs to go through many books and articles. Thus, it can be argued that this thesis will prove to be helpful in this way.

As this thesis has not covered all the areas of comma usage, there are ways to expand this research. One way how this thesis could be expanded is by using the whole material that the corpus offers when searching example sentences by using the sentence initial time and person adverbials. As some of these examples had been excluded from this thesis, it might prove to be interesting to see everything that affects comma usage in these kinds of situations. These example sentences expand the corpus material significantly, and make it possible to do research on this topic in a more profound way.

Also, what might make this research fruitful when considering how it could be expanded is using tests. A simple test could be conducted where the participants are asked to fill in the commas. It would, of course, be made sure that the commas that are missing are the ones after sentence initial time and person adverbials. It could be argued that it is essential that the purpose of the test is not made known to the participants. It might be just enough to simply ask the participants to fill in the commas as they see correct. This kind of test could shed light on the matter if people overall know how to use the comma in these kinds of instances. This test could reveal factors that make people choose to use or not use the comma.

Despite the fact that in this thesis it was quite impossible to include all the instances found on the BNC, it can be said that this thesis has revealed at least something underlying the use and non-use of the comma after sentence initial time and person adverbials. In further studies, expanding the corpus material and including tests of some kind, might make this research even more profound and factors not previously mentioned might be found. This research can be said to be a good starting point in the direction of knowing how the commas should be used in everyday written language.

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