

COMMAS IN ENGLISH AND SWEDISH A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF THE QUANTITATIVE USE OF COMMAS IN SOME JOURNALISTIC TEXTS¹

Karin Lindqvist, Ph.D.
Stockholm University
karin@carill.se

Abstract

The article discusses the use of commas in a corpus consisting of a number of British English and Swedish newspaper articles. The aim is to describe and to compare the comma use in the two languages, primarily with focus on quantitative aspects. The study is contrastive rather than translational. However, the result of the study is meant to serve as a short presentation of the comma use in the two languages, and could be of interest for a translator, teacher or student, or simply for anyone with an interest in differences between English and Swedish.

The article shows that commas are more frequent in the English texts than in the Swedish ones, and also that the commas often have different functions in the two languages: in the English texts, the commas are often used to delimit different types of elements from each other, whereas the commas in the Swedish texts often are used to separate the same types of elements. These differences reflect divergences in sentence structure: in English, there are more hypotactic relations, where commas tend to be frequently used, whereas in Swedish, there are more paratactic relations, which are less often associated with commas.

The article also tries to outline some cases which could be problematic for the language user: cases where there could be interference between different norms concerning the comma use.

Keywords: English, Swedish, written language, punctuation, comma, translation, contrastive study

Introduction

Background and aim

It is easy to find rules and recommendations on how to use punctuation marks, but difficult to find studies on how these are actually used in real language.² It is even more difficult to find studies comparing the use of punctuation marks between languages.³ Aiming at filling this gap when it comes to English and Swedish, the article has as its potential readers translators, teachers or students, for whom it is important to be aware of language divergences of all kinds, including such small ones as punctuation marks.

¹ This study has been carried out within the frames of *Forskarskolan i romanska språk, FoRom*, at Stockholm university. The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers of TvS, professor Lisa Christensen at Lund University and associate professor Gudrun Rawoens for their valuable comments and advice. All remaining errors are of course due only to the author.

² One exception for English is Meyer's *A linguistic study of American punctuation* (1987).

³ There are some articles discussing punctuation in translation, such as Bystrova-McIntyre (2007), de Ataide Melo (1990), Ghazala (2004), May (1997), Ponge (2011), Rodriguez-Castro (2011), and also Malmkjær (1997), who studies punctuation in a Danish-English literary perspective. There do not seem to be any studies of punctuation in an English-Swedish perspective.

The frequency of commas has been examined in a corpus consisting of British English and Swedish⁴ non-translated journalistic texts. The commas have been counted and divided into different groups depending on which types of elements they separate. The aim of the article is to describe and to contrast the comma use. Focus lies on the quantitative aspect of the problem, but cases where there can be an erroneous influence of one of the languages on the other are also discussed. Differences in comma use can obviously lead to the effect of translationese, which in Newmark (1991, 78) is described as an error due to interference, this being the process which

takes place when, apparently inappropriately, any feature of the source or a third language – notably a syntactic structure, a lexical item, an idiom, a metaphor, or word-order – is carried over or literally translated as the case may be into the target language (TL) text.

Newmark mentions some cases where interference could occur, among them punctuation. So, in describing the comma use in some British English and Swedish journalistic texts, this study wants to make the language user aware of comma deviations: cases where there could be a negative interference (Toury, 1995).

Punctuation in English and Swedish – a description of some "rules"

The answer to the question of why and how we use punctuation varies with the language studied, and also in a historical perspective (cp. Baron, 2001; Parkes, 1992; Schou, 2007). Concerning the English language, various modern descriptions occur. For instance, Nunberg (1990) describes punctuation only in terms of syntax, whereas Chafe (1988) considers it to be related to a prosody of an "inner voice" of the writer. Quirk et al. (1985, 1611) claim that punctuation marks are mainly used to mark grammatical functions, but also semantic or pragmatic functions and "intonation, stress, rhythm, pause, or any other of the prosodic features which convey distinctions in speech".

The function of punctuation in Swedish seems to be a subject which has attracted little attention. In *Svenska Akademiens Grammatik* (Teleman et al., 1999), punctuation is hardly mentioned at all.⁵ In what seems to be the most influential Swedish writing guide, *Svenska skrivregler* (2000), the function of punctuation is said to be to facilitate reading. The main implication of this rule is that commas should be used between elements that are relatively independent ("*förhållandevis fristående*") from each other. An article by Ekerot (1991) describes the development of the comma use during the 20th century, a use which started out as a phenomenon referred to as "*satskommatering*" (viz. clausal use of commas) and then developed into the "*tydlighetskommatering*" (commas used for clarity) used today. Ekerot (1991, 34-35) describes this latter use of commas as a marker of grammatical boundaries, and it is governed by factors related to prosody, semantics, lexis, syntax and pragmatics.

Concerning rules and recommendations on how to use punctuation, there are a lot of handbooks and manuals to be found for the English language (Cappon, 2003; Kirkman, 2006; Todd, 2001, just to name a few). For Swedish, this, again, is a less developed subject (but rules are given for instance in *Skrivregler för svenska och engelska från TNC* (2001), and in *Publikationshandboken* published by the European Union, as well as in Strömquist (2013)). Here, the rules about comma use given in Quirk et al. (1985) (the most detailed grammar of the English language) and in *Svenska skrivregler* (2000)

⁴ No texts written in Finland Swedish have been included in the corpus.

⁵ With one exception, viz. that commas are used in numbers, between the integer and the decimal (1999, vol 2, 492).

(since the greatest grammar of Swedish, Teleman et al. (1999), does not mention punctuation) will be discussed.

Quirk et al. (1985, 1615-1620; 1626-1629) describe the comma, which can be used to separate successive or included units, as "the most flexible in the range of its use, and hence the most difficult to categorize" (1985, 1615). Also, this punctuation mark "provides considerable opportunity for personal taste and for implying fine degrees of cohesion and separation" (1985, 1611). Rhetorical considerations often play an important role in the description. For Swedish too, it is pointed out in *Svenska skrivregler* (2000, 145-153) that often, there are no exact rules governing the use of commas. The placement of commas is to a large extent a judgment call of the individual language user. In their descriptions, Quirk et al. often use the word "tendency" and *Svenska skrivregler* talk about "valfrihet" ("optionality"). However, there are also cases where commas seem more or less obligatory, and also where they are prohibited. A presentation is given in Tables 1 and 2:

Table 1: Comma use as presented in Quirk et al. (1985, 1615-1620; 1626-1629)

| Comma type | Rule/description | Example |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| Commas with coordinated units | Commas are used to separate independent clauses, linked by a coordinator, in compound sentences. If the coordinator is <i>but</i> (or <i>and yet</i>), there is even a stronger tendency to use a comma. Commas can also be used in cases where the coordinator is absent. | <i>Schoolchildren have adopted the fund as one of their favourite charities, and their small contributions have enabled the fund to reach its target.</i> <i>We are thinking of buying a short-wave radio, but we haven't made up our minds.</i> <i>I must, I can, I will.</i> |
| | If the clauses are relatively short, commas are frequently omitted. | <i>The work was pleasant and the hours were short.</i> |
| | Normally, commas are not used between other coordinated units than independent clauses (but can occur for rhetorical reasons). | <i>You can sit at my desk and write your letters.</i> <i>You can and must tell us.</i> <i>I enjoy tennis but don't play it often.</i> <i>The movie was long and boring.</i> |
| | Commas are used between elements in a series of three or more units but before the last unit, <i>and</i> is used. | <i>Prices fell, interest rates fell, and employment figures rose.</i> <i>She bought eggs, butter, cheese, bread, rice(,) and coffee.⁶</i> |

⁶ This is called a "serial comma", and the one after the second *fell* is described as obligatory (1985, 1616), but the one after *rice* is described as "optional" (if it is preceded by *and*) (1985, 1619). According to Quirk et al., in the last case, American English prefers the use of a comma, except for in journalistic style. In British English, "usage is divided" (1985, 1619).

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| Commas with included units | Commas are often used with adverbials in initial or medial position if these are clauses or relatively long phrases. However, in initial position, the comma is not obligatory (except if it combines with participle and verbless clauses, see below). In final position, commas are less often needed, but often occur with certain types of subordinate clauses. | <i>In experiments at Stanford University(,) some scientists have succeeded in cloning human cells.</i> <i>After dark(,) I strolled around the square.</i> <i>Some scientists, in experiments at Stanford University, have succeeded in cloning human cells.</i> <i>Some scientists have succeeded in cloning human cells in experiments at Stanford University.</i> <i>You'll succeed if you try hard.</i> <i>Betty will help you, when she has finished her own work.</i> <i>He's at home, because I've just spoken to him.</i> |
| | No commas should be used between "the central clause elements" | <i>I know that you are tired.</i> |
| | With participle and verbless clauses in initial position, commas are obligatory and normally occur with infinitive clauses. | <i>Knowing my views, they refrained from discussing the subject.</i> <i>Out of breath, he slumped down in a chair.</i> <i>To keep the star moving so quickly and in such a small orbit, its invisible travelling companion would have to be at least nine times more massive than the sun.</i> |
| | Commas are used with nonrestrictive relative clauses, nonrestrictive appositions and interpolated coordinate constructions | <i>Susan Fenton, who used to work with me, has moved to New York.</i> <i>The other man, David Johnson, refused to make a statement.</i> <i>He should, or rather must, attend better to his studies.</i> |
| | Commas are used with vocatives and with direct speech. ⁷ | <i>John, I think you would be wiser not to go.</i> <i>'You are just in time,' she said.</i> <i>She said, 'You are just in time.'</i> |

Some factors that can influence comma use discussed by Quirk et al. are the length of the potentially separated element, its relation to the rest of the sentence, whether or not the absence of a comma could mislead the reader into an erroneous interpretation, but also prosody. Commas are prohibited between the "central clause elements" (however, see note 7), but it is noted that commas sometimes erroneously occur with "lengthy subjects". This is thus considered as an error, except in certain cases where there could be confusion:

(1) What his name is, is of no interest to me. (Quirk et al., 1985, 1620)

A presentation of the comma use in *Svenska skrivregler* (2000) is given below:

⁷ This is a case where a comma is allowed between the subject/verb and the object.

Table 2: Comma use as presented in Svenska skrivregler (2000, 145-153)

| Comma Type | Rule/description | Example |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| Commas with coordinated units | Commas should be used in enumerations when coordinating conjunctions are missing. | <i>Han kunde bara lova blod, svett och tårar. Hemma är han slarvig, i skolan anpassar han sig efter reglerna. Det beror på den snabba, oförutsägbara utvecklingen på området.</i> |
| | Commas should be used between coordinated clauses in the same sentence. | <i>Man hade kostat på dyra helsidesannonser i dagstidningarna, men försäljningskurvorna pekade fortsatt nedåt. De tyska turisterna har varit flera i Danmark än i Norge, och Sverige har haft det lägsta antalet.</i> |
| | If the clauses are short, the comma can be left out. | <i>Människan spår och Gud rår.</i> |
| | Commas should not be used between clauses having an element in common, including coordinated subordinate clauses. | <i>Peter den store påbörjade och Katarina I fullbordade denna omfattande tillbyggnad. Han meddelade att han var sjuk och att han måste stanna hemma.</i> |
| Commas with included units | Concerning commas with subordinate clauses, the language user has a great deal of optionality. When using a comma, the writer signals the independency of the subordinate clause, and if the subordinate clause is long, commas are more often used. (Also, see examples below, parenthetical insertions and independent elements.) | <i>Var har du varit, eftersom du är så blöt i håret? Om blanketten inte skickas in inom föreskriven tid, påförs ni högsta avgift.</i> |
| | If the subordinate clause is short, the comma can be left out. | <i>Om det blir fel tänds varningslampan.</i> |
| | Commas should not be used when the subordinate clause is necessary for the grammatical completeness of the sentence. | <i>Det var självklart att han skulle bjudas. Jag menar den sortens papper som inte gulnar.</i> |
| | Commas should be used around parenthetical insertions. | <i>Barnomsorgen, denna laddade fråga, vill man ha bort från dagordningen. Efter 1980, då han blev uppsagd från fabriken, har han försörjt sig på diverse ströjobb. Deras enda dotter, som varit bosatt i USA i tio år, har nu återvänt till Sverige. Larmet gick, fick vi veta senare, redan kl. 12 på morgonen.</i> |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | Commas should be used before or after different kinds of independent elements, including such cases where there would be a pause when reading aloud. | <i>Mina damer och herrar, härmed förklarar jag bron invigd.</i> <i>Jaså, är det här den ligger.</i> <i>Nej, det går nog inte.</i> <i>Så enkelt är det inte, tyvärr.</i> <i>Han är mycket duktig, den där Andersson.</i> <i>Hon väntar därinne, viskade kvinnan.</i> <i>De har flera hundar, bl.a. en tax.</i> <i>Förslaget kommer att innebära högre priser på svenska matvaror, som ju redan leder prisligan internationellt sett.</i> |
|--|--|--|

There are certain cases where a comma can be used against the rules. These exceptions are related to the length of the detached element: a comma can sometimes be allowed to facilitate the reading:

(2) En utlänning som är medborgare i ett annat nordiskt land och som kommer till Sverige från ett sådant land, behöver inte ha pass vid inresa eller vistelse i Sverige. (*Svenska skrivregler*, 2000, 152)

As already stated, it is difficult to find any explicit comparisons between the comma use in the two languages.⁸ There is one exception in the grammar by Holmes & Hinchliffe (2003, 220). Here, it is claimed that English and Swedish mostly behave in similar ways when it comes to punctuation. As for the comma, the divergences mentioned concern decimals, beginnings and endings of letters, and adverbs. It is stated that, around adverbs, commas are not used in Swedish, as they are in English.

(3) Detta är emellertid osäkert.

This is, however, uncertain. (Holmes & Hinchliffe, 2003, 221)

To sum up, the two descriptions actually coincide in most cases: for those that *Svenska skrivregler* describe as "parenthetical" and "independent" (eg. appositions, nonrestrictive relative clauses, with vocatives, with direct speech, etc), for coordinated main clauses and other coordinated predications, as well as for the comma in enumerations. Here, comma use is obligatory in both languages.

In the two presentations, there are also some cases where the comma use seems to be up to the individual language user, and these cases are also largely the same in the two languages. For instance, coordinated main clauses in the same sentence do not need to be separated by a comma if they are "short". Also concerning subordinate clauses there seems to be room for individual taste, depending on the meaning and position of the subordinate.

However, it should be added that *Svenska skrivregler* does not particularly mention comma use with sentence initial elements, such as participle and verbless clauses, discussed in Quirk et al. We will see later on that this is a case where comma use is different in the two languages.

⁸ In Svartvik & Sager (1996, 452), the guideline for the Swedish writer of English is that "it is better to use the comma too little than too much" ("det är bättre att kommatera för lite än för mycket"), which might seem like somewhat fuzzy advice.

Method and material

Corpus

The corpus consists of British and Swedish newspaper text: the online versions of *Daily Mail*, *the Guardian*, *the Independent*, *Prospect Magazine*, *the Scotsman* and *Telegraph*; and *Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Fokus*, *OmVärlden*, *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Sydsvenskan*. From these papers, 40 articles from each paper have been randomly chosen. In each article, the punctuation in a sample consisting of the first 200 words has been examined.

The choice to work with a corpus consisting of non-translated texts is obviously motivated by the translationese-effect, previously mentioned, which can occur in translated material (Gellerstam, 1996). The texts in the chosen corpus are independent from each other, i.e. in the corpus, there is no influence from an original text on a translation, nor any influence of translators' personal preferences (Eriksson, 2002, 85-86).⁹ The texts can be said to be comparable since they belong to the same text genre and are published around the same time. Also, they deal with a wide range of different subjects and are written by a great number of different journalists, which means that any subject specific comma uses and individual preferences of the journalists concerning the comma use should be neutralized (cp. Aijmer et al., 1996; Eriksson, 1997).

The reason for the choice of a corpus consisting of newspaper text is that, as Rodriquez-Castro (2011, 43) claims: "Creative use of punctuation is, by and large, a characteristic of literary texts and does not necessarily apply to journalistic style". The choice of newspaper articles thus makes it possible to study texts where the punctuation is used in a rather neutral way, and is less affected by stylistic idiosyncrasies.

Obviously, the results obtained are valid for newspaper texts, and are not necessarily applicable on all varieties of written Swedish and British English.

Counting and analyzing the commas

Firstly, it needs to be made clear that depending on the position of the element the commas serve to detach, one or two commas are needed. If the position of one of the commas coincides with a sentence boundary, the comma is replaced for instance by the full stop. Quirk et al. call this "correlative commas" (1985, 1626). This is illustrated in example (4) below.

- (4a) Christopher Snowdon [,1] the report's author [,2] said government departments should be banned from using public money... (*Daily Mail*, 10 June 2012)
(b) "Government departments should be banned from using public money", said Christopher Snowdon [,1] the report's author.

If (4a) is re-written into (4b), i.e. if the detached element is put at the end of the sentence, the second comma ([2]) is replaced by the full stop.

In the counting of the commas, it is necessary to account for the total number of commas, as well as the number of elements they serve to detach. This has been done for the commas in Table 5 below.

⁹ The present study will eventually be complemented with translated material of the same size: 40 samples consisting of 200 words, taken from six different British crime novels and the corresponding Swedish translations. This is work in progress, but it is safe to say that the Swedish translations contain considerably less commas than the originals. As for the full stops, these are to a large extent "kept" in the translations.

Secondly, it occurs quite frequently that one and the same comma can be interpreted as having more than one function, and in some cases, a choice needs to be made as to what function the comma should be assigned, as in (5):

(5a) According to his solicitor [,1] Gareth Peirce [,2] he was stuck in central London traffic... (*Guardian*, 30 May 2012)

(b) According to his solicitor [,] he was stuck in central London traffic...

In (5a) both commas can be regarded as detaching the apposition, but as shown in (5b), the first comma can also be regarded as detaching the first element of the sentence, *according to his solicitor*. The question asked for all such examples with two commas in a row is whether or not there would still be a comma if one of the detached elements had been removed. In this case, if the apposition had been removed, there would still very likely be a comma after "solicitor". So in (5a), instead of associating the two commas with the apposition, the first one is associated with the sentence-initial element, and only the second one with the apposition. Only one function has been assigned to each comma.

Commas are normally divided into two big groups, as in Quirk et al. (1985), and also in Nunberg (1990, 36-44). Nunberg calls the first type "separator comma", and the second "delimiter comma". The first one separates elements of the same type, and the second is placed around an element to mark it off from the elements surrounding it. In the first case, the comma could, at least theoretically, be replaced by *and*. Nunberg claims that there could be a third type of comma, used to avoid ambiguities. In the present study too, three types of commas have been distinguished.¹⁰ In the third group, referred to as "other", commas used for instance between subject and predicate have been counted, along with other commas which simply seem to be erroneous. These three groups, the separator comma, the delimiter comma and the "other" comma are illustrated in example (6). It should be added that the separator comma can be used to separate different types of elements, ranging from full clauses to enumerated elements in a list (for other examples, see (7) and (18) below). As for the delimiter comma, this type of comma too can be used to detach different types of elements from the rest of the sentence. This will be discussed in greater detail below.

(6a) *Separator comma*: Twitter has complied with the law[,] and been open about it. (*Independent*, 18 October 2012)

(b) *Delimiter comma*: Despite the warm reception and kind words[,] the Queen will no doubt be missing her husband... (*Telegraph*, 13 June 2012)

(c) *Other comma*: Former top whistler Stuart Dougal told today how the loss of the Old Firm derby due to Rangers' relegation to the Third Division[,] means the mouthwatering game at Easter Road has become the biggest in the country. (*Scotsman*, 6 November 2012)

Results and analysis

Commas, full stops and sentence structure in English and Swedish

As a first step, the frequency of the commas in the corpus has been compared to the frequency of the full stops in the same text samples. This examination has been carried out in order to see if any

¹⁰ A fourth type consists of commas used in numbers.

divergences in the comma use could be explained by corresponding divergences in the use of full stops. Indeed, it may be possible that sentence structures favoring the use of commas are more frequent in one of the languages, and that sentence structures favoring the use of full stops are more frequent in the other.¹¹ Table 3 shows the frequencies of the commas and the full stops in the text samples.

Table 3: The frequency of the commas and the full stops in the English and Swedish text samples .

| Punctuation mark | English | Swedish |
|-----------------------------|---------|---------|
| Comma ¹² [,] | 2424 | 1858 |
| Full stop ¹³ [.] | 1883 | 2816 |

The table indeed shows that commas are used more frequently in the English texts than in the Swedish ones, and also that the frequency of the full stop is higher in the Swedish ones. Since the text samples contain the same number of words in the two languages, the difference in the use of full stops implies that the Swedish sentences in general are shorter than the English ones. The conclusion to draw from Table 3 is thus that the English sentences in the corpus contain more commas and are longer than the Swedish ones. So, in the corpus, there are quite important structural differences between the English and the Swedish sentence.

Table 4 then shows a division of the commas in the corpus into the three groups discussed earlier:

Table 4: Analysis of the commas in the corpus.

| | English | Swedish |
|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
| Separator comma | 543 (22,4%) | 712 (38,3%) |
| Delimiter comma | 1870 (77,1%) | 1132 (60,9%) |
| Other commas | 11 (0,5%) | 14 (0,8%) |
| Total | 2423 | 1857 |

The "other" commas will not be discussed further.¹⁴ As for the "separator" commas and the "delimiter" commas, the table shows that the first type is more frequent in the Swedish texts, and that the second type is more frequent in the English texts.

¹¹ Of course, there is also a possibility that the use of other punctuation marks has a correlation with differences in comma use. Thus, the frequencies of some other punctuation marks have also been examined. These results will not be presented in detail here. Suffice it to say that the examination showed that the divergence in the use of commas cannot be explained by the more extensive use of another (i.e. other than the full stop) punctuation mark in the Swedish texts (i.e. there could have been a theoretical possibility that, for instance, dashes had a very high frequency in the Swedish texts in comparison with the English ones, but this was not the case).

However, the "other" punctuation marks perhaps deserve a study of their own, in a larger corpus. For instance, the semicolon was somewhat more frequent in the English texts (35 vs. 14 occ.).

¹² In the corpus, there are also examples of commas used in numbers: 50 English occurrences and 25 Swedish occurrences.

¹³ This number obviously does not include other dots, such as in internet addresses and in abbreviations.

¹⁴ One of these Swedish examples comes from a text written in the 1920s, quoted in the newspaper article, and exemplifies the "clausal use of commas" used earlier in Swedish: "*Kapten Görings hustru, som var närvarande, anhöll på det bestämdaste[,] att han skulle få det han begärde.*" (*Svenska Dagbladet*, 24 September 2011).

The two Tables 3 and 4 taken together show that the Swedish texts tend to contain more paratactic relations than the English ones. Clauses which have paratactic relations to each other are more often separated by full stops, or by separator commas. The English texts tend to contain more subordinated constructions, where delimiter commas are used. A conclusion to be drawn here is that the sentence structure in the English texts is quite different from that in the Swedish ones. Also, anyone who wants to study comma use in the two languages needs to take into account divergences in sentence structure since these two factors are closely linked.

Concerning the separator commas, they can, as stated earlier, be used to separate different types of elements. The "serial" comma in enumerations is likely to be used in the same way in English and Swedish (except for the comma which sometimes occurs before *and*, see **Error! Reference source not found.**). It is the cases such as the ones in (7) that are more common in the Swedish texts: commas used to separate full clauses.

- (7a) Skandalerna ska ha delvis ha skett under Brooks tid vid rodret[,] och många på tidningen ifrågasätter att hon får behålla jobbet medan minst 200 anställda tvingas gå. (*Aftonbladet*, 29 September 2011)
- (b) Zeinab hyr två små mörka rum på en bakgata[,] hon är 54 år, änka och fembarnsmamma[,] försörjer sig som städerska på sjukhus. (*Aftonbladet*, 1 December 2010)

Table 4 has shown that the main difference in comma use between the English and the Swedish texts is accounted for by the delimiter commas. These have been further divided into seven groups, as shown in Table 5:

Table 5: Different types of elements detached by delimiter commas.

| English | | Swedish | |
|---|--------------------|---|-------------------|
| Type of detached element | Occ. | Type of detached element | Occ. |
| Adverbial expression ¹⁵ | 465 (520) | Apposition / example, etc | 263 (363) |
| Apposition / example, etc ¹⁶ | 354 (510) | Reported speech / source of information | 263 (275) |
| Relative clause | 197 (273) | Relative clause | 151 (203) |
| Participle clause, etc | 191 (224) | Adverbial expression | 111 (126) |
| Subordinate clause | 172 (185) | Subordinate clause | 75 (79) |
| Reported speech / source of information | 126 (133) | Participle clause, etc | 42 (56) |
| Other | 21 (25) | Other | 29 (30) |
| Total | 1526 (1870) | Total | 934 (1132) |

¹⁵ This group contains a wide variety of different types of elements which could also be further divided into other sub groups.

¹⁶ This group contains appositions, but also cases like the following: "Birmingham is one of 11 cities[,] including Manchester, Newcastle and Leeds [,] which will hold polls on 3rd May..." (*Prospect Magazine*, 19 March 2012)

In the table, the first number indicates the number of different occasions each function occurs in the corpus, whereas the number in parentheses indicates the total number of commas associated with each function. In the English texts, for instance, 520 commas are used to detach 465 different adverbial expressions.

As is shown in the table, the only type of delimiter comma more frequent in the Swedish texts is the reported speech-comma¹⁷, except for the "other"-group, which for instance contains cases where *yes* or *no* are delimited from the rest of the sentence. All the five other types of commas occur more frequently in the English texts. There could be two main reasons for this. Either there is a lack, or at least a less frequent use, of the type of detached element in the Swedish texts, or the element exists but is less often detached. To get the full picture of the comma use in the texts one would have to compare constructions with commas and similar constructions without commas for each language. However, within the frames of the present article, this examination has not been possible to carry out. Below, we will first present some situations where the comma differences seem to be due to language specific properties of English and Swedish, and then we will discuss some cases where the comma use can be said to be individual, but potentially also linked to language-specific norms.

Sentence initial elements and participle clauses – two language-specific uses of commas

One of the main differences between the English and Swedish texts concerns commas used with different elements positioned sentence-initially, often adverbial expressions:

(8a) In an interview on America's Fox News Radio[,] the former New York Times magazine editor said ... (*Daily Mail*, 7 June 2012)

(b) Indeed[,] her entire outfit for the wedding had been recycled. (*Daily Mail*, 11 June 2012)

(c) On a clear day[,] apparently[,]¹⁸ you can see 60 miles from the top. (*Guardian*, 13 June 2012)

The examples show three different types of adverbial expressions occurring sentence-initially, all detached from the rest of the sentence. In Swedish, it is quite rare to find a sentence-initial adverbial expression with a comma. In a few of the examples found (as in (9a)), the adverbial element can be classified as relatively long, which is a factor that favors comma use. In some other cases (represented by (9b)), another method of analysis than the chosen one would give another classification.¹⁹ However, even with the classification used, the fact is that there are very few examples of sentence initial detached adverbial elements in the Swedish texts, compared to the English ones.

¹⁷ This difference could also be examined further: do Swedish newspaper articles in general contain more reported speech?

¹⁸ In this example, both commas could be regarded as detaching the adverb *apparently*, but according to the method of analysis, they have been counted as detaching two different adverbials.

¹⁹ To clarify: (9b) has been analyzed in the following way: If "*Samma eftermiddag*" had been removed, there is a possibility that there would still be a comma after "*Linköping*". If "*i Melstad några mil söder om Linköping*" had been removed, there is also a possibility, perhaps a small one, but still a possibility, that there would still be a comma after "*eftermiddag*". Therefore, this example has been analyzed as containing two different sentence-initial adverbial expressions. However, both commas can also be regarded as separating "*i Melstad ...*" from "*Samma eftermiddag*", i.e. it would also be possible, and probably also more plausible, to think that if "*i Melstad ...*" had been removed, there would not be a comma after "*eftermiddag*". The chosen method of analysis is perhaps more easily applied on the English texts, but has been consistently used for both languages.

- (9a) Tre dagar efter att familjens nära vän ringde socialen för att larma[,] hittades bröderna Tevin, 8, och Elias ... (*Aftonbladet*, 27 November 2011)
- (b) Samma eftermiddag[,] i Melstad några mil söder om Linköping[,] slog sig Lars Vikingener i sin Ikea-fåtölj hemma i vinterträdgården och tog upp programgruppens förslag i sin dator. (*Fokus*, 18 January 2013)

The reason for this scarcity of sentence-initial adverbial expressions with a comma in Swedish is probably the so called "V2-rule" of the Swedish language: in a declarative sentence, the finite verb should always come after the initial element, in the second position (cp. Teleman et al, 1999, vol 4, 7-8). In English, the subject occupies this position. This probably means that the Swedish language user regards the initial adverbial as more closely linked to the rest of the sentence: had the initial element been removed, the sentence would no longer be correct. In English in contrast, the absence or presence of a sentence initial adverbial has no effect on the rest of the sentence structure. The same reasoning could be applied to other sentence initial elements, such as subordinate clauses, participle clauses and speech-reporting elements. These are normally detached in English, but rarely in Swedish, occasionally with the exception of subordinate clauses. It can be assumed that in Swedish the use or non-use of commas with sentence-initial subordinate clauses is subject to individual taste, whereas the use of commas is the rule in English in these situations. This is illustrated in (10), where (b) and (c) show two Swedish temporal subordinate clauses with and without commas.

- (10a) When I wrote a pamphlet advocating legalisation of cannabis in 2001[,] I was congratulated by friend and foe alike for my "courage". (*Prospect Magazine*, 17 October 2012)
- (b) När det finns mer plats för bagerier[,] finns det också plats för mer variation. (*Fokus*, 7 February 2013)
- (c) När vår svenska kung uttalat sig i politiska frågor har också förtroende dalat. (*Fokus*, 5 February 2013)

Another explanation of the comma difference between the languages is that in English, participle clauses are used much more often than in Swedish, where these are often less idiomatic, and sometimes even impossible. In the examples in (11), direct translations into Swedish would not be possible. Other solutions, perhaps not involving commas, would likely be preferred.

- (11a) Compiled by the Official Charts Company to mark the 60th anniversary of the singles chart[,] the list features a total of 123 records that have sold more than one million copies since the chart began in 1952. (*Guardian*, 4 November 2012)
- (b) The four-year-old company[,] until recently widely described as the next internet darling[,] admitted its latest results should have ... (*Guardian*, 2 April 2012)
- (c) David Cameron is freezing women out of senior positions[,] preferring to surround himself with an "Old Etonian clique" ... (*Independent*, 1 November 2012)

In (11a), it would be possible, but unusual, to say "*Sammanställd av Official Charts Company* ...", and the same description goes for (11b). Concerning (11c), the Swedish participle corresponding to "preferring" would be "*föredragande*", which would not be idiomatic. So, these are cases where a translator would have to render the participle clauses by another structure in Swedish, and then decide

how to deal with the punctuation.

Also in cases such as those represented by (12), direct translation into Swedish would be odd, and this too is an example where the translator encounters a double problem: how to translate the *with*-phrase, and what to do with the comma.

(12) Met Office forecasters said the strong winds and heavy rain will continue today[,] with sunshine breaking through by tomorrow ... (*Daily Mail*, 14 June 2012)

Individual differences or language-specific norms in comma use?

In this section, a few other cases where there could be differences between the two languages will be outlined. Here, tendencies occurring in the corpus are discussed, as well as some other cases where there could possibly be differences between the two languages. This, however, needs further examination in a larger corpus.

In the English texts in the studied material, there is a tendency to use certain kinds of loose appositions, i.e. appositions with commas, to a greater extent than in Swedish, where the close apposition seems to be more frequent (for appositions, see Acuña-Fariña, 2009). Example (13) shows some appositions, loose appositions in English and close appositions in Swedish:

- (13a) Liberia's former president, Charles Taylor (*Guardian*, 30 May 2012)
- (b) the city's new chief prosecutor, Giovanni Colangelo (*Independent*, 1 November 2012)
- (c) landets första kvinnliga premiärminister Édith Cresson (*Fokus*, 19 May 2011)
- (d) Manchester Uniteds tränare Sir Alex Ferguson (*Aftonbladet*, 26 September 2011)

The example shows combinations of NPs denoting professions which can be associated with a unique referent, and proper nouns. Such combinations can occur with or without commas, and it seems as if there is a preference for the detached version in English.

As for relative clauses and subordinate clauses which do not occur sentence-initially, it can be assumed that the use or non-use of commas is to a large extent linked to individual taste, in both languages. However, the comma use is probably also an important means of organizing the text: a way of creating cohesion and a way of clarifying which parts go together (Ekerot, 1991, 37). In (14), some examples of subordinate clauses with and without commas are given. The subordinate clauses are of the same type, and it can thus be assumed that the comma use is linked to the journalist's personal preferences rather than the form of the subordinate clause.

- (14a) It includes a section 30 order which transfers the legal power from Westminster to Holyrood to stage a referendum[,] because the control over the constitution currently lies within the powers of the UK Government. (*Scotsman*, 7 November 2012)
- (b) "I thought long and hard before putting my head up and saying I would get involved[] because you are sticking your head above the parapet," he said. (*Scotsman*, 14 October 2012)
- (c) Och att det kommer publik från resten av landet är livsviktigt[,] eftersom den lokala publiken är för liten, säger Julius Malmström ... (*Sydsvenskan*, 28 September 2011)
- (d) Kampanjen för frivilliginsatser är den största i amerikanska Röda korsets historia. Degnan förklarar att den är nödvändig[] eftersom det är fråga om den svåraste katastrofen i USA. (*Dagens Nyheter*, 11 September, 2005)

Different types of subordinate clauses could be compared in the two languages, in order to see how they are punctuated and if there could be a language difference.

The relative subordinate clauses are usually described (cp. Quirk et al., 1985, 1628) as used with commas if the relative is nonrestrictive, whereas restrictive relatives are used without commas. In reality, however, the situations when the use or the non-use of commas differentiates between two readings of a sentence are probably rare. Examples like those in (15), translated from a Swedish example in *Svenska skrivregler* (2000, 152), are likely to be uncommon:

- (15a) Politicians, who are well paid, shouldn't complain about their wages. (= all politicians are well paid)
 (b) Politicians who are well paid shouldn't complain about their wages. (=only those politicians who are well paid...)

In other words, in reality commas can probably be used or not used according to the personal taste of the writer, as shown in (16):

- (16a) Marie-Thérèse[,]who was only 17 when they met[,] is also heavily featured posing mostly in the nude. (*Daily Mail*, 29 November 2011)
 (b) The Girl Gone Wild singer[] who last performed in Turkey almost 20 years ago[] then quickly turned from the audience, unzipped her trousers and stood with her hand in her pants. (*Daily Mail*, 10 June 2012)
 (c) Även fastighetsbolaget Brinova och byggjätten Peab[,] som båda kontrolleras av bröderna Erik och Mats Paulsson[,] går in i projektet. (*Sydsvenskan*, 8 July 2011)
 (d) Det är inte lätt att göra onlinerollspel. Fråga bara Square Enix. Deras "Final fantasy XIV"[] som släpptes i höstas förra året[] sågades sönder och samman av en enig kritikerkår. (*Aftonbladet*, 28 September 2011)

As stated before, in order to examine if there are also language-specific norms at play here, one would have to compare relative clauses with and without commas in the two languages. It could perhaps be hypothesized that, since commas are used less in the Swedish corpus texts, there could also be a general tendency to drop commas when these are not necessary: perhaps the comma use in English could be described as more "thorough", whereas in Swedish, there could be a greater tendency to suppress the comma in cases where it is not needed for a specific interpretation of the sentence. However, this hypothesis would have to be examined elsewhere and in more extensive material.

Two final examples will be given. The first one shows an adverb surrounded by commas. Here, a direct translation into Swedish could be a solution (*Användare i andra länder, däremot, ...*), but it would perhaps be more idiomatic not to keep the adverbial in the same position, and avoid the use of commas altogether (cp. *Användare i andra länder får däremot...*). This example could represent another systematic difference in comma use between the languages.

- (17) Users in other countries[,] however[,] are still free to read it. (*Independent*, 18 October, 2012)

In the last example, two instances of separator commas are given:

(18a) A senior Conservative minister has insisted the government is still committed to legislating for gay marriage[,] and hit back at colleagues who have criticised the idea. (*Guardian*, 31 May 2012)

(b) De åkte till södra Mexiko[,] och fick bevittna ursprungsfolkens verklighet i Chiapas berg. (*OmVärlden*, 26 May 2011)

In cases like these, *Svenska skrivregler* proclaims not to use commas, and Quirk et al. claim that commas are "generally" not used, but admit their usage "for rhetorical reasons" (1985, 1617-1618). However, the commas represented in the examples do not seem particularly rare, in neither language, and could also be examined further, from a rhetorical point of view and from a language-specific punctuation norm point of view.

Conclusion and some suggestions for future research

To sum up this presentation of comma differences between English and Swedish, it can be said that there is a clear difference of frequency of commas in the corpus, in that they are used more often in the English texts. There is a clear tendency in the English material to use more constructions normally associated with comma use: the commas occur in hypotactic relations, where they delimit different types of subordinated elements from the rest of the sentence. In the Swedish material, such constructions occur less frequently: there are more paratactic relations, where commas are used less often, or where they are used to delimit the same type of elements from each other. The corpus material also showed that the English sentences in general are longer than the Swedish ones. These findings suggest differences in sentence structure between the languages: longer sentences with subordinated detached elements in English and shorter sentences with a less frequent use of such elements in Swedish.

There are also cases in the two languages where the comma can be described as optional and used according to the personal preferences or style of the individual language user. Such cases, for instance concerning commas with relative clauses and subordinate clauses, and with complete coordinated clauses, or other coordinated elements, could be examined further, in more extensive material. The hypothesis suggested here is that such optional commas are used more often in English, and thus that there is a norm to use commas more often in English than in Swedish, in cases which are comparable in other ways. However, this is merely a hypothesis.

This article has focused on the comma (and to a certain extent on the full stop). Other punctuation marks should of course be examined further to get the full picture of the punctuation differences between English and Swedish. Also, the material studied here has been limited to one specific genre: journalistic texts. Other text types could indeed show very different results. Another logical step would of course be to look at translations, in order to see how the findings of this study match the comma treatment of translators, in situations where there is direct correspondence between texts in the two languages. In other words, a lot remains to be done.

Anyhow, we hope to have shown, with this contrastive study, that there are important quantitative differences in the comma use between the British English and Swedish journalistic texts studied here. We also hope that this presentation can be useful for anyone interested in differences between English and Swedish.

Bibliography

Corpus

English articles

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk>

<http://www.independent.co.uk>

<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk>

<http://www.scotsman.com>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk>

Swedish articles

<http://www.aftonbladet.se>

<http://www.dn.se>

<http://www.fokus.se>

<http://www.sida.se/OmVarlden>

<http://www.svd.se>

<http://www.sydsvenskan.se>

References

Acuña-Fariña, J. C. (2009). Aspects of the grammar of close apposition and the structure of the noun phrase. *English Language and Linguistics*, 13 : 3, 453–481.

Aijmer, K., Altenberg, B. & Johansson, M. (1996). Text-based contrastive studies in English: presentation of a project. In : K. Aijmer, B. Altenberg & M. Johansson (Eds.), *Languages in Contrast. Papers from a Symposium on Text-based Cross-linguistic Studies, Lund 4-5 March 1994*. (pp. 73-85). Lund : Lund University Press.

Baron, N. S. (2001). Commas and canaries: the role of punctuation in speech and writing. *Language Sciences*, 23, 15–67.

Bystrova-McIntyre, T. (2007). Looking at the Overlooked: a Corpora Study of Punctuation Use in Russian and English. *Translation and Interpreting Studies*, 2.1, 137–162.

Cappon, R. J. (2003). *The Associated Press guide to punctuation*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Pub.

Chafe, W. (1988). Punctuation and the Prosody of Written Language. *Written Communication* 5, no. 4, 395–426.

de Ataíde Melo, C. L. (1990). Punctuation in English & Portuguese Translations: When Every Point Counts. *Meta*, vol 35, 4, 720–731.

Ekerot, L.-J. (1991). Satskommatering och tydlighetskommatering. Ett bidrag till den svenska kommateringens 1900-talshistoria. In S.-G Malmgren & B. Ralph (Eds.), *Studier i svensk*

språkhistoria 2. (pp. 31–56). Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.

Eriksson, O. (1997). *Språk i kontrast. En jämförande studie av svensk och fransk meningsstruktur*. Göteborg : Akademiförlaget.

Eriksson, O. (2002). *Stil och översättning. Pär Lagerkvists prosastil ur franskt översättningsperspektiv*. Växjö : Växjö University Press.

Gellerstam, M. (1996). Translation as a source for cross-linguistic studies. In K. Aijmer, B. Altenberg & M. Johansson, M. (Eds.), *Languages in Contrast. Papers from a Symposium on Text-based Cross-linguistic Studies, Lund 4-5 March 1994*. (pp. 53-62). Lund : Lund University Press.

Ghazala, H. (2004). Stylistic-semantic and Grammatical Functions of Punctuation in English-Arabic Translation. *Babel*, 50.3, 230–245.

Holmes, P. & Hinchliffe, I. (2003). *A comprehensive grammar of Swedish*. London: Routledge.

Kirkman, J. (2006). *Punctuation matters: advice on punctuation for scientific and technical writing*. London: Routledge.

Malmkjær, K. (1997). Punctuation in Hans Christian Andersen's Stories and in their Translations into English. In F. Poyatos (Ed.), *Nonverbal Communication and Translation: New Perspectives and Challenges in Literature, Interpretation and the Media*. (pp. 151–162). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

May, R. (1997). Sensible Elocution: How Translation Works in & upon Punctuation. *The Translator* 3.1, 1–20.

Meyer, C. F. (1987). *A linguistic study of American punctuation*. New York: P. Lang.

Newmark, P. (1991). *About Translation*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

Nunberg, G. (1990). *The Linguistics of Punctuation*. Stanford, Calif.: CSLI.

Parkes, M. B. (1992). *Pause and effect: an introduction to the history of punctuation in the West*. Aldershot: Scolar Press

Ponge, M. (2011). Pertinence linguistique de la ponctuation en traduction (français-espagnol). *La linguistique*, vol 47, fascicule II, Colloque de Corfou II, 121–136.

Publikationshandboken (<http://publications.europa.eu/code/sv/sv-4100400sv.htm>)

Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London and New York: Longman.

Rodríguez-Castro, M. (2011). Translationese and punctuation. An empirical study of translated and nontranslated international newspaper articles (English and Spanish). *Translation and Interpreting Studies*, 6:1, 40–61.

Schou, K. (2007). The Syntactic Status of English Punctuation. *English Studies*, Vol. 88. No. 2, 195–216.

Skrivregler för svenska och engelska från TNC. (2001). Solna: Terminologicentrum (TNC).

Strömquist, S. (1992). Våra skiljetecken i ett historiskt perspektiv. *Språk och stil*, 77–112.

Strömquist, S. (2013). *Skiljeteckensboken : skiljetecken, skrivtecken och typografiska grepp*. Morfem.

Svartvik, J. & Sager, O. (1996). *Engelsk universitetsgrammatik*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.

Svenska skrivregler utgivna av Svenska språknämnden. (2000). Stockholm: Liber.

Teleman, U., Hellberg, S. & Andersson, E. (1999). *Svenska Akademiens grammatik*. Stockholm : Norstedts Ordbok.

Todd, L. (2001). *Cassell's guide to punctuation*. London: Cassell.

Toury, G. (1995). *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Biographical note

Karin Lindqvist has been a post doc researcher in French at the department of French, Italian and Classical languages at Stockholm University for the past couple of years. Her thesis, published in 2009, dealt with differences between written French and Swedish, more specifically with differences in the use of so called free predicatives and appositions. In her work as a post doc researcher, she has continued within the contrastive field, now focusing on close and loose appositions, but also examining differences in punctuation between French, Swedish and English.