Commas and coordinating conjunctions: Too many rules or no rules at all?

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Abstract
Although it is unclear why punctuation should be pushed to the sidelines, it generally continues to be a neglected research area in mainstream contemporary linguistics. Common sense and empirical evidence both suggest that punctuation is so much more than a stylistic device, its presence or absence creating new strata and shades of meaning. Punctuation is also a matter of some controversy, all too often employed as a symbol of confrontation between linguistic conservatives and their more permissive colleagues. An already difficult situation is made even more difficult with different sources (e.g. course and reference books, online blogs and articles, etc.) supplying contradictory information with a rigor that does not tolerate disagreement, obsessing over rules for the sake of rules themselves and disregarding the real stories behind them. Shifting focus from a rule-governed behavior and identifying a relatively limited context of punctuation, the small-scale research addresses the issue of comma usage before the coordinating conjunctions *and, but, or, nor, so, yet* and *for*. In addition to a sketchy overview of this complex relationship illustrative of significant differences of opinion, the paper touches upon regional and generic factors influencing comma usage before coordinating conjunctions, utilizing the massive database of the Contemporary Corpus of American English (COCA). The main idea behind the paper is to observe and account for tendencies and discrepancies by providing critical commentary on authentic examples taken from the corpora rather than seek confirmation for rules and take the prescriptive norm for granted.

Key Words: commas, coordinating conjunctions, rules, tendencies, discrepancies

1. Introduction

When I was thinking about writing an article about comma usage, an inner voice reminded me of Disraeli's famous quote "Little things affect little minds." Although commas are barely perceptible to most regular readers, I am not ashamed to think there must be more meaning attached to them than their size suggests. And I let this thought persist at the cost of being accused of small-mindedness. My spirits lifted when I quite randomly came across the following statements uttered by someone no one could ever call small-minded, the great Oscar Wilde:

> I was working on the proof of one of my poems all the morning, and took out a comma. In the afternoon I put it back again.

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> This morning I took out a comma and this afternoon I put it back again.
>
> I have spent most of the day putting in a comma and the rest of the day taking it out.
>
> The following two paragraphs added more boost to my morale:
>
> Lest you think I'm making much ado about nothing and that your readers don't even see such things, keep in mind that many readers read punctuation as easily as they do words. Each mark means something to them. And they *do* notice extra marks or the absence of punctuation.
> Imagine the problems if I stuck a period in the middle of sentences. where no period was necessary. You'd be confused at first. and maybe a bit irritated. Maybe you'd think. something was wrong with the printer. or that you needed to clean your glasses. But whatever the cause. you'd be repeatedly pulled from the fiction.
>
> (Hill 2011: paragraph 7-8)

One thing should be made clear, though: commas will most likely never be your hobbyhorse unless you are one of those people who are genuinely passionate about language and its mysterious ways, those who are tireless in their never-ending quest for meaning and just the right structure to express it. One more thing should be clarified, too: this is not at all an attempt to glorify the rules of grammar, or to propagate their sanctity and infallibility. But it is my heartfelt desire to look for some inherent logic behind comma usage that will guide us in our choices. Hicks (2007: 63) echoes my own thoughts: 'Ideally, punctuation should be based on sound logical principles.'

Those principles may actually be our last resort, considering the amount of conflicting grammatical and stylistic advice available both online and in high-profile reference books.

2. Controversy surrounding comma usage

Reynolds (2011: 109) remarks that 'it is extremely hard to teach students to be good writers; it is much easier to teach them the myth of FANBOYS.' The acronym, which is actually a mnemonic, stands for the conjunctions *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet* and *so*, and a good part of the myth pertains to the rule that these must be preceded by a comma when conjoining two independent clauses. Offering corpus-based and other evidence that the rule may not be a hard and fast law of grammar at all, Reynolds invites teachers to question the choice of material presented to

students and their reasons for presenting it. Above all, this quote brings back hope that topics such as comma usage are still of interest to literacy experts and writing class teachers.

2.1 Commas should (not) be used with coordinating conjunctions

Rules for Comma Usage instructs the reader to use a comma before a conjunction (*and, but, for, nor, yet, or, so*) to connect two independent clauses. The rule is followed by a simple note in the next paragraph that 'some writers will leave out the comma in a sentence with short, balanced independent clauses.' The final remark, however, puts some more emphasis on the comma: 'If there is ever any doubt, however, use the comma, as it is always correct in this situation' (paragraph 2).

I would like to contend this sweeping generalization with 'and' used as a paratactic device for expressing purpose in imperative clauses, e.g. *Go and get me some ice*. A comma would most certainly get in the way here, obscuring the intended meaning of purpose.

If a parenthetical element follows a coordinating conjunction, *Rules for Comma Usage* advises the reader not to place a comma before the parenthetical element, as in the following example:

> *(a) The Yankees didn't do so well in the early going, but frankly, everyone expects them to win the season.* (paragraph 4)

This divergence from a general rule is evidently spurred by a fear of comma overuse, which in itself is a legitimate concern, but I am not convinced that this was the right way to deal with it. The trouble with the example above is that the parenthetical element seems to be *but frankly* rather than *frankly* alone. Here come two counterexamples where the parenthetical item is either consistently set off by commas or fully integrated into the rest of the clause:

> *(b) There was no moon that night and, as a result, they took the wrong turning.* (Downing and Locke 2002: 280)
> *(c) It's an extremely simple device, but actually it's very effective.* (287)

2.1.1 (No) comma before an elliptical clause

Another online source, *Get It Write*, teaches that no comma is needed before a conjunction separating two clauses with two co-referential subjects, the second of which is omitted:

> *(d) Sigfried wanted to go back to school to earn a college degree but could not afford to quit his job and lose his health care benefits*. (bullet 3)

The following sentence constitutes a case of multiple ellipsis, where both the subject and auxiliary are omitted, yet the conjunction is preceded by a comma:

> *(e) The students have not only read Bentham and Mill, but written essays on both*.
> (Young 1980: 236)

Ellipsis or no ellipsis, the comma certainly does a good job here reinforcing the emphasis created by the correlative coordinators *not only/but also*.

Hill (2011) makes it very clear that a coordinating conjunction connecting independent clauses requires a comma; however, the comma becomes superfluous, even *incorrect*, if there is a co-referential subject omitted in the second clause.

It was easy to find a number of sources teeming with illustrations that show complete disregard for both of these rules. The following sentences feature the most frequent of coordinators, the ubiquitous 'and':

> *(f) John plays the piano and his sister plays the guitar*. (Leech and Svartvik 1975: 223)
> *(g) Do you live here, and travel all that way?* (Young 1980: 230)

I honestly cannot see a fault with either of these: the first sentence contains two closely related clauses merely added one to the other (thus no comma); the second, on the other hand, seems to invoke a slight disagreement in the propositions of the two clauses (hence the comma).

Kolln (1991: 160) also readily rejects the comma when what follows is a clause with subject ellipsis, which explains why the sentence below was marked with an asterisk:

> *(h) Scientists believe that the Amazon basin plays a major role in the global climate, and are worried that the destruction of its forests could lead to climatic chaos*.

I cannot help noticing the comma is actually there for a reason, marking a boundary and consequently assisting in an easier transition between a lengthy that-clause acting as object in the first clause and the onset of the second clause, all the more so because the verbs in the two clauses are different (i.e. 'believe' and 'are').

As for sentences with ellipsis at predication level, Quirk and Greenbaum (1990) offer examples both with and without the comma, depending on whether the propositions expressed in the clauses are considered to be on a par with each other or not, e.g.

> *(i) John should clean the shed and Peter mow the lawn.*
> *(j) His suggestions made John happy, but Mary angry*. (262)

However, when ellipsis affects the first clause, which is less common but nevertheless possible, there are no illustrations attesting to the possibility of comma omission, e.g.

> *(k) George will, and Bob might, take the course*. (263)

Indeed, I agree with Cayley (2011) that the comma-before-a-coordinating-conjunction-in-a-compound-sentence rule is more than welcome if there is the slightest possibility that the writer's intentions will be misunderstood or misread. In the following sentence the reader may easily be led down the garden path in assuming that 'scientific discovery and experience' form a coordinated noun phrase:

> *(l) The simulation of physical systems is a crucial part of scientific discovery* ***and*** *experience shows that conducting this simulation precisely and efficiently is essential*. (Cayley 2011: paragraph 6)

2.2 Comma usage expectations (do not) change in different registers

An already troublesome relationship between commas and conjunctions is made even messier by different usage expectations for different varieties of English, both generic and regional:

> The current trend in American style is toward minimal punctuation. In other words, commas are seen as speedbumps, and we don't want unnecessary obstacles to slow down our readers. Many permissible commas can be left out of sentences where they once might have been required, or at least strongly preferred.
>
> (Blue 2002: paragraph 5)

Just when I was beginning to think that I was finally getting to grips with the issue, so I would know what to tell my students, I came across the following statement: 'American English uses commas before *and, but* and *or* more frequently than British English' (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 842).

Worse still, in the same paragraph the reader has been casually informed—and quite contrary to the comma axiom instilled in us over and over again—that '[m]ain clauses separated by *and* or *or* or *but* are not normally separated by commas' (ibid).

When Hicks writes about the instability of rules and conventions and their susceptibility to change, he makes sure the change is reflected in his own writing: 'Punctuation practice is constantly changing. For example, sentences are shorter than they used to be so there are more full stops in text. But in general there is less punctuation' (2007: 63).

But is it possible that academic writing may differ in this respect from newspaper prose or fiction? Intuitively, fiction would appear to be the most relaxed or the least normative in its punctuation choices and allow more individual freedom to its writers.

3. Research summary

I decided to give these intuitive notions a reality check and run a small-scale corpus-based search to investigate how consistently coordinators and commas appeared together in the three aforementioned registers of American English. The results were representative of a sample collected from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (Davies, 2008-).

Entering the symbolic structure *and * [v*]* in the search box was the first procedural step, 'and' standing for the conjunction being probed, followed by a wildcard (i.e. indicating an unrestricted choice of words) and any verb, keeping the search within the realms of clausal coordination. The same procedure was repeated for every other conjunction in the list, one register at a time.

In order not to feel positively overwhelmed by scores of concordance lines, I only analyzed one hundred contexts in the entry that came out first in the frequency-based search results.[1]

A summary of the results is presented in the table below hosting a rearranged list of FANBOYS (i.e. starting with the three most prominent members) and percentages for their comma-reinforced distribution in the three registers.

Table 1. Distribution of clausal coordinators preceded by the comma in three registers of American English

Comma + coordinator	Fiction/100	Newspaper prose/100	Academic writing/100
AND	85	87	72
BUT	98	98	96
OR	70	82	88
NOR	94	96	95
YET	97	96	98
SO	21	97	85
FOR	95	N/A[2]	86

3.1 AND

To better illustrate and discuss divergence from what emerged as a general pattern, I copied a set of four examples from the corpora for each conjunction and each register in turn, starting with 'and' in fiction.

The following sentences extracted from the sub-corpus of fiction strengthen my conviction that short clauses are more likely to be separated by commas if the writer wishes to lengthen the pause and add another layer of meaning to what is being said, i.e. use the comma for

[1] However, the first concordance line did not always yield the right match for the probe, in which case I was forced to look for what I needed down the list. For example, in the case of *or * [v*]* contexts for the first line revealed only the pattern 'he or she is', so I had to disregard this kind of phrasal coordination and search for the first line displaying contexts for clausal coordination. A similar problem occurred with the entry *nor * [v*]*, which resulted in a *neither/nor* phrase, and so had to be changed to *nor [v*]* to make sure the context displayed results for clausal coordination.

[2] There were too few concordance lines pertinent to the probe (i.e. only 12 out of 100 displayed results for 'for' as a clausal coordinator).

emphatic purposes (see the last two of the lot). On the other hand, commas are more likely to disappear when there is a danger of cluttering text with excessive punctuation marks, as the first two illustrations suggest.

(1) After her mother died, her aunt had shipped a bunch of crap from the old home and it was all over the floor and the bed.
(2) We had traveled far enough that we no longer encountered pieces of the wreckage, or perhaps we had kept our place and it was the debris that had moved.
(3) I'd been there, and it wasn't easy.
(4) But this was no alien invasion story, and it was no Halloween prank.

Selected examples from newspaper prose suggest that two closely related clauses may easily drop the comma before 'and'. I am also under the impression that the factor of relatedness between clauses played a greater role than that of length in sentences (5), (6) and (7). The last one illustrates a cluster of coordinated *dependent* clauses not requiring commas.

(5) These guys have played well and it's a good team to coach.
(6) This is going to be fun and it's going to be good.
(7) It's always good to have local currency and it's good to have a few hundred dollars[.]
(8) If Chinese people like to eat yellow eels and it's part of their traditional diets—just like Russian people like to eat fish eggs—and those eels are farm-raised and are not an endangered species, why not?

Contrary to all my expectations, the clausal coordinator 'and' was preceded by the comma more sparsely in academic writing than in the other two registers. It could be that general conventions which define the style of academic writing are more concerned with citation practices and presentation of ideas than they are with comma usage. Another reason for this unexpected deviation might be a diversity of publications in the sub-corpus—not everybody is as obsessed with such 'minutiae' and not everybody is a scholar working in the field of literacy and related disciplines, as will become apparent upon reading the sentences below.

(9) This assumption has been found by this author to be extremely common and it is an assumption that has direct consequences for students.
(10) It was something that he found as a given and it is probably the only method by which France can be ruled for a long time to come.

(11) Sometimes manuscripts cannot be or are not improved so that they meet the criteria and they are not published.
(12) Communicative skills are not acquired through textbooks but in a natural activity and it is better taught and learned in that context.

3.2 BUT

The contrastive 'but' was unwaveringly set off by commas in fiction, and factors such as the length of clauses or their semantic relatedness did not play a decisive role in this case. That said, the clauses were indeed very short in sentence (16), one of the two in which the comma was omitted.

(13) I looked round for her, but it was futile.
(14) Her condo wasn't broiling like her grand-parents', but it was a close second.
(15) In a small town like Rose Petal, I saw him once in a while, but it was always in passing and we didn't speak.
(16) I turned to listen again but it was too late.

The usage of 'but' in newspaper prose in American English proved no different, so not much additional commentary was called for. It did, though, cross my mind that at least some of the sentences below would do perfectly well without the comma preceding the contrastive coordinator.

(17) It's serene and pleasant, but it's literally a dead-end town, an hour and a half from the nearest interstate highway, and eight decades removed from the last steamer service to Baltimore.
(18) It pains me to say it, but it's got to go.
(19) It may be a big idea, but it's not a good idea.
(20) This documentary is essential to see but it's also frustrating to watch, because while the stories included here are moving, they're not told in the most artful way.

Academic writing once again—and still somewhat unexpectedly—demonstrates a slightly more relaxed attitude to comma usage. Except sentence (21), where the length of the clauses guided the writer towards the safety of comma insertion, all the others were comma-free, the last one most justifiably so since 'but' was embedded in the subject noun phrase.

(21) Stoddard's promising clue to the nature of Lincoln's experience with Shakespeare on the Washington stage has not gone unnoticed by scholars, but it is one of many dots on this subject still waiting to be connected.

(22) A horizon is limited but it is open.
(23) To me, the memories of those tours—often tedious, sometimes violent and always exhausting—seem like yesterday but it is 30 years since I started my first tour.
(24) One possible reason that Hie has a lower incidence but it is more fatal than Hif could be that this serotype is less pathogenic and infects persons who are older and/or in much poorer health and who, therefore, are more likely to die.

3.3 OR

Fiction scored surprisingly high when it came to the omission of commas preceding the alternative coordinator 'or'. However, the result is much less surprising if some of the choices made are examined from a pragmatic point of view, when it becomes clear that most comma-free sentences share a context of urgency leaving no place for a hesitation-induced pause. Commas reappear in circumstances which allow more time for the speaker to plan the next course of action.

(25) Don't move or I'll blow your face right off.
(26) Hit him or I'll hit him for you, his father said.
(27) Get out now, or I'll have you arrested.
(28) Open the door, or I'll knock it down!

Since newspaper prose normally entails fewer life-and-death contexts and spur-of-the-moment decisions, the alternative conjunction was more often affiliated with the comma. Here the dilemma was whether to focus on each alternative in turn, or let them all (most usually two) merge in a less emphatic flow.

(29) Martin replied, "You can have me now, or you can have me later."
(30) You can have a genuine reformation, or you can have a street smart kid who's capable of manipulating the system.
(31) You can try to do it on your own by racing around the island in an attempt to absorb as much of the atmosphere as possible in the eight or so hours you have at each port, or you can hook up with a tour through an independent company.
(32) At many companies people say you can have this or you can have that, and you know it's never going to happen.

This time academic writing was more prone than the other two registers to use a comma-reinforced conjunction. Such propensity may be due to a lengthen-the-pause effect, which is highly compatible with both

the alternative meaning of the coordinator 'or' and the argumentative nature of scholarly publications.

(33) This, too, may be a fairly informal process stemming from enforcement, or it may be more proactive and planned.
(34) The content course may be one of the student's own selection, or it may be tied to a specific lower division course requirement.
(35) The bound statue may mark a fantasy of power, or it may merely analogize the conditions of the artwork and the lover.
(36) It may be insignificant or it may be that he was reluctant to assign the term to these synods because of John's use of the title.

3.4 NOR

Owing much to the process of inversion it started in the host clause, the negative conjunction 'nor' exhibited a strong preference for the comma across all three registers. Very short sentences as well as those sharing the same subject closely followed this trend, which made comma-free sentences stand out all the more. Compare and contrast the following illustrations selected from the fiction sub-corpus.

(37) Chambers never corrected the impression, nor did he encourage it.
(38) So he didn't notice the way Tamia's hands clenched in her lap as they passed another car on the narrow street, nor did he hear the small sigh of relief that seeped past her lips.
(39) Proper ladies did not discuss matters of a profitable nature nor did they discuss finances with anyone other than their husbands.
(40) Professor Oglethorpe did not reply nor did he move.

Similar reservations hold for sentence (44) below extracted from the news reporting sub-corpus, which stands in stark contrast to the remaining examples.

(41) None of these clients were improperly induced to retire early, nor is there any evidence that they were guaranteed a specific rate of return.
(42) The thrust of the FBI action is not clear, nor is the nature of the agency's interest in those named in the subpoenas.
(43) But the process is not automatic, nor is it necessarily required under the law.
(44) Fads and disappointments are not new to the field of psychology nor is the need for people to get beyond them.

In order not to sound too repetitive at this point, I will merely suggest that the comma-free 'nor' in example (45) borrowed from the academic sub-corpus might raise a few eyebrows.

(45) This work, however, is not about beef nor is it a case study on postcolonial food choices in Cape Verde.
(46) We humans are not forever, nor is the time in which we find ourselves.
(47) But this is not the only approach, nor is it the best one.
(48) It is impossible to determine what Edna McMichael had done—if anything—to provoke this murderous desire in Warren, nor is it known how Ailey reacted to his declaration.

3.5 YET

In complete sync with the other two registers, fiction was consistent in comma separations preceding the concessive coordinator 'yet', and it did not matter whether or not the coordinator was reinforced with 'and'. However, the brevity of the parenthesized coordinated clauses in sentence (51) made such discrepancies possible. The format of example (52), on the other hand, was so rare that it came to be viewed as a clear divergence from the norm.

(49) Whatever happened brought with it a reason, yet it was not for them to judge.
(50) There was a slyness to his voice, a conspiratorial tone, and yet it was also eruptive.
(51) It didn't matter, he told himself—it was all real and yet it was not—but the question was always there as he fell asleep and woke.
(52) He'd been having a nightmare yet it was like him to wish not to be wakened from sleep.

Sentence (56) was one of the very few examples of the concessive coordinator not accompanied by a comma in newspaper prose. Even when assisted by 'and', comma-deprived sentences could not retain that easy flow of their counterparts.

(53) It's very difficult, yet it's challenging, and that's what I like.
(54) A dumb action movie in a summer full of dumb movies, and yet it's always entertaining.
(55) How can California be so anti-business and yet it's the sixth-largest economy in the world and has an unemployment rate that's below the national rate.
(56) Ingrid won't let me tell Ella yet it's not always happily ever after.

Academic writers also felt a need to set off the concessive coordinator either with the comma or another punctuation mark, such as the dash in (59). If sentence (60) seemed to take more effort to process, it was in part due to less clearly marked boundaries between its two coordinate clauses.

(57) It is a community, yet it is also a place of personal growth and development.
(58) For example, diabetes seems neatly confined to biology, yet it is disproportionately high among the poorest of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans[.]
(59) That shouldn't be a necessary assurance—and yet it is.
(60) This allows a kind of understanding and insight that is neither irrational nonsense nor rationally defensible and evidenced and yet it is a category of knowing that is a distinguishable feature of being human[.]

3.6 SO

A notably small percentage of commas preceding the coordinator 'so' in fiction may have come as a surprise, but a closer look revealed that many instances of 'so' were not coordinators at all. A common pattern emerged consisting of 'so' followed by a subject followed by a modal verb, which was closely associated with subordinate clauses of purpose dominating the sub-corpus. Clauses of purpose are not normally divided by commas, and as such are to be differentiated from the occasional clause of result appearing in the sub-corpus. Compare and contrast the first two and the last two illustrations below.

(61) He longed to have her open her eyes so he could look into their amber depths.
(62) I couldn't shake the feeling that he'd gone back to Barb so he could help her raise their daughter.
(63) Her position offered Ash a view of her profile, so he could see that her delicate jaw was set while her hands were tightly clenched.
(64) He still had a few alcohol credits left for the month, so he could enjoy a couple of beers without it impacting his health insurance premium.

While newspaper prose claimed more than a humble share of subordinate clauses, it nevertheless abounded in the good old relationship of coordination with a matching score of comma separations. Of 100 entries only two were not accompanied by a comma before the coordinator 'so', and one of them was (67) below. Unlike the two,

sentence (68) featured a subordinate clause aiming for the meaning of purpose, albeit expressed without the assistance of a modal verb.

(65) Events are subject to change, so it's a good idea to call the venue.
(66) But I can't pay my bills on the part-time hours, so it's a Catch-22.
(67) But it should be like a raffle thing so it's unexpected.
(68) Dermatologic surgeons can lighten the tattoo so it's less visible[.]

Even though it did not embrace the comma just as eagerly as newspaper prose, academic writing generally followed the trend. The initial 100 concordance lines in the academic sub-corpus constituted a mixture of the coordinating conjunction 'so', sometimes reinforced by 'and', and the subordinating conjunction 'so' in clauses of purpose. The comma may have been dropped in shorter sentences for fear of overuse and consequent text cluttering, as in (71). The loss of the comma was also found to be a matter of the writer's idiosyncrasy, e.g. (72) was one of several comma-free sentences produced by the same author.

(69) Shipping may perhaps be the most efficient method of transportation, so it is vital that we address its impact on our environment.
(70) Despite such efforts to expand production, Saudi Arabia remains worried about oversupplying the market and thus depressing prices, and so it is likely to aim low in its planning for spare capacity.
(71) In the painting, he shifted the viewer's position so it is almost perpendicular to the rows of seats.
(72) Neuropathic pain is also very uncomfortable so it is worth screening Joan for any underlying depressive illness as this will inevitably increase her perception of pain.

3.7 FOR

The causal coordinator 'for' was assigned a percentage in only two registers, fiction and academic writing, as newspaper prose contained an insufficient number of entries to put it on an equal footing with the other two.

Fiction writers were mostly in agreement using this literary conjunction accompanied by the comma, and the brevity of clauses was not considered a good enough reason not to introduce a comma separation. Lacking the comma, sentence (75) may have caused many a reader to backtrack—even if only for a split second—giving precedence to the chunk 'to use it for' over the conjunction itself due to the former's

high collocability rate. I dare say example (76) came very close to a stream-of-consciousness piece of prose—obviously a testament to the writer's preferences—considering the text was completely cleared of commas.

(73) Whoever had put it into this hole had had to work very hard, for it was a tight fit.
(74) He left the torch behind, for it was no longer needed.
(75) Papa himself would not have wished to use it for it was a crude firearm by modern standards.
(76) In any case her devotion and dedication proved pivotal to the poet for it was said that Mosca's connections got him noticed.

Scholars were again slightly more reluctant than fiction writers to insert a comma before the conjunction 'for'. Pondering on the choices made, I cannot help but wonder whether (79) and (80), the two comma-free sentences below, are truly ambiguous (e.g. 'pegs for' and 'possibilities for') or whether we have become conditioned through greater exposure and explicit teaching to regard some choices as more appealing than others. However, when there is something 'wrong' with a text, punctuation is seldom the only culprit; it is more often a lead to more substantial inadequacies and a tell-tale sign that other segments of writing need to be revisited, too.

(77) The above concepts are not reducible one to the other, for they are all indispensable in order to account for the complex reality of nationalism.
(78) Intellectuals and students thus receive a near monopoly on speaking out, for they are thought to have no special interests beyond their prime responsibility of defending the moral order.
(79) I have also shown that names are more than just labels or pegs for they are active, context-reflecting as well as context-generating.
(80) You must be alert to all the pictorial possibilities for they are many and varied.

4. Conclusion

There are obviously so many questions in want of an answer, and many more lurking behind and waiting to be asked. Is there anything that can be said with a reasonable amount of certainty? Perhaps the one thing I have learnt is that there are no actual hard and fast rules and laws governing the use of commas before coordinators in English, even though there are rules of thumb and tendencies propped on logic and

common sense. More importantly, I have learnt to give each comma (or the lack thereof) the benefit of the doubt, to approach each sentence with an open mind, to pause and ponder on its context and the writer's intentions. Finally, I have learnt to embrace the reality of not always having a ready-made answer to whether something is right or wrong, the reality of 'probably right' and 'maybe not' weighed against each other over and over again. So much hard work and thinking invested in a tiny punctuation mark? There is no doubt some will say it is not worth the effort, but hopefully many others will disagree.

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