

On why the Oxford comma doesn't disambiguate

The setting

The Oxford comma has been heralded as resolving ambiguities. The (in)famous sentence: “We invited the strippers, JFK and Stalin” will be used as an example. This can have two meanings. Either we invited the strippers (however many they are) and two other individuals, namely JFK and Stalin, or else we invited the strippers who happen to be JFK and Stalin, thus only two individuals. The latter creates all kinds of funny pictures in the head.

The correct claim

The Oxford comma resolves this ambiguity by removing the possibility that JFK and Stalin are the strippers.

The false claim

The Oxford comma resolves all ambiguities in this sentence. This is false because the sentence: “We invited the strippers, JFK, and Stalin” is also ambiguous. Either we invited the strippers (however many they are) and two other individuals, or we invited the strippers, who call themselves JFK, and Stalin. Thus we invited the stripper troupe called JFK and one individual, namely Stalin. The Oxford comma clearly doesn't disambiguate between these two readings. Compare with: “We invited the strippers, the Chippendales, and Stalin”. Are we inviting the strippers who call themselves the Chippendales and Stalin, or are we inviting two stripper troupes and Stalin?

The real culprit

The problem, as some might have noticed, is that the comma sign itself is ambiguous. It is not clear whether it is used appositionally (I'll exemplify this soon) or serially (to list the elements of a series). In the sentence: “Donald Trump, the president, did this and that”, “the president” is used appositionally. We could read it as: “Donald Trump, who is the president, did this and that”. Another example: “Oscar Pistorius, Blade Runner, runs really fast”, which could be read as: “Oscar Pistorius, who is called Blade Runner, runs really fast”. Thus the appositional comma is short for “who is”, “who is called” and probably several many other varieties.

This ambiguity as to whether any comma should be interpreted appositionally or serially is NEVER disambiguated by the Oxford comma. It is only by context. Therefore, write clearly instead of insisting on rules! The Oxford comma will not disambiguate between whether we invited a stripper troupe called JFK, or whether we invited two strippers called JFK and Stalin (or for that matter whether we invited two stripper troupes calling themselves JFK and Stalin respectively). Our background knowledge tells us however that JFK and Stalin are not likely to be strippers.

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The formalism

A: the strippers; B: JFK; C: Stalin; a: “the strippers” used appositionally; b: “JFK” used appositionally; c: “Stalin” used appositionally. The sentence: “We invited the strippers, JFK and Stalin” can thus be formalized as either: “We invited A&B&C” or “We invited A (who is) b&c”. The other sentence: “We invited the strippers, JFK, and Stalin” can be formalized as: “We invited A&B&C” or “We invited [A (who is) b] & C”. Thus we clearly see that the Oxford comma just substituted one ambiguity for another, i.e. “We invited A (who is) b&c” for “We invited [A (who is) b] & C”. There is thus no unambiguous way to say: “We invited A&B&C”.

Moral

Don’t blame the “missing” serial comma, blame the ambiguity as to whether the comma should be interpreted appositionally or serially. So stay sane and don’t worry about comma prescriptivists (from Oxford or anywhere else).

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