

Hi, and welcome back to Lounge Ruminator; I'm Martin Feld. For the first episode of the year, I want to give a brief review of a book that I finished reading at the end of last year; and that is Semicolon by Cecelia Watson, who is an American author, historian and philosopher of science. Now, if you're not a fan of language and grammar and all the stuff that goes along with it, you're probably thinking, *Why did I start listening to a podcast episode about a book called Semicolon?*

Now, before you pause or stop or leave the episode entirely, let me sell it to you: this is not just a book about one punctuation mark that tends to make people very uncomfortable—Watson, after all, does call it a misunderstood punctuation mark—it's actually about a much broader set of ideas about how we communicate, how we use language and how we approach rules and flexibility... ideas of prescriptivism versus descriptivism in the way that we use language. And the semicolon is kind of the poster child or the infamous example that shows how we can sometimes get a bit too hung-up on rules in language.

I really loved this book, and some of the key messages in it are messages that I will be taking away and trying to embody in my own communication throughout the year. Whether you want to call it a New Year's resolution or not, I'm going to try to improve some of the things that I say and I write, thinking about some of the ideas that Watson communicates in this book. Talking mainly about the semicolon as a punctuation mark that is misunderstood and that people feel very uncomfortable and uncertain in using, she covers its full history; she talks about its creation in Venice in 1494 through to controversial American liquor laws in the early 1900s, which were influenced very strongly by the use of punctuation and... such as the semicolon, to today's discomfort with and uncertainty about how to use the

Martin Feld (continued)

punctuation mark. And while I could very easily just read you many passages from this book because there's a lot that I'd love to read aloud and share with you, I recommend you go and read it yourself.

Instead, I want to talk about three key points or messages that I took while reading the book. 00:02:00
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First of all, there's the term 'technology'. When you hear 'technology' 00:02:14

these days, you normally think of digital devices, virtual environments, different things that are connected to the Internet or the Web. In this 00:02:26

case, we're talking about a different, broader definition of technology, a definition of technology that links very well to earlier episodes in

which I discussed media ecology; and that is the idea of technology as any kind of tool, tangible or intangible, that a human being may use. In 00:02:43

this case, punctuation marks are tools and they can be used creatively; they don't have to be so rule-bound and so standardised.

And Watson give some great examples in the book Semicolon of how 00:02:50

semicolons have been used beyond the very standard ways that people recommend that you use them these days, namely, things like

separating related independent clauses or creating lists that are separated by semicolons with each bullet point. No, she goes beyond 00:03:11

this, and she talks about, for example, Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous 'Letter from Birmingham Jail', in which he uses semicolons to string

together a great number of ideas that show the challenges and the experience of being a person of colour, particularly at the time that he

was alive. And with the semicolon, beyond that standard idea of how to use it, you get this great build-up of tension, building up to his great 00:03:31

point or crescendo at the end. Another one is how Herman Melville, in his book Moby Dick, threaded together very long, convoluted, 00:03:40

meandering narrative ideas with thousands of semicolons, not

Martin Feld (continued)

necessarily all at once, but he used them to string together sentences that just aren't possible with things like full stops or dashes or commas or any other punctuation mark. The semicolon here is really shown as a versatile punctuation mark that with a creative perspective, with a creative approach, you can use to create sentences that offer different kinds of communication; maybe they can even mirror the idea of speech. 00:04:01

The second point that I appreciated in this book was the idea of ambiguity. Ambiguity in communication (particularly writing) is not something that's really recommended or valued; but what Watson explains is that the punctuation mark of the semicolon can create a sense of rhythm and support vagueness in a useful way. On page 149, she offers a really interesting view on how ambiguity and conversation can be encouraged positively by things like the semicolon. And I quote, 'There is nothing wrong with trying to be as precise as possible in your writing or with trying to be clear; those goals are often productive and have their place. But I don't think it's such a bad thing sometimes to be engaged in the practice of working out things in words, of having a conversation. Ambiguity can be useful and productive and it can make some room for new ideas. It can help the reader create something out of the materials the writer provides'. At this point, you might still not be convinced about what the value of ambiguity actually is; but what I think this quote offers is that key idea of conversation. Right now you are listening to a podcast that while I have fleshed out in some way with some points of what I want to talk about, I'm actually just talking into the microphone; I'm taking those points and ad libbing them; I'm speaking them to you as I think of them and fleshing out the ideas beyond a verbatim script; I have no script 00:04:16
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Martin Feld (continued)

here; it's purely points. Now, in this sense, you're accepting the fact that I might be a bit ambiguous or the ideas might develop as I'm talking to you. We're having a conversation; it might be one-sided; I might just be talking to you but your feedback can come in other forms through social media or an email, for example. You can express feedback here. But if I were to write this to you in a letter or in an essay and I were to meander or have different punctuation marks that didn't seem quite right, you would be used to a more standardised way of communication. You would step back and go, *This isn't what writing should be all about*. So we accept different standards or norms between spoken conversation and recordings (or just live conversation with another person) versus what we want to read in a magazine, online, newspaper or whatever. So what Watson is suggesting here is: exploring other ways of representing conversation in the way that we can be creative and embrace different ideas; and the semicolon offers that sort of thing. You're going to hear me pausing in different ways when I speak, either due to editing or the way that I've spoken as I've recorded, and to represent all of those pauses with simply a full stop wouldn't be sufficient in written language; a semicolon or an em dash or a comma, they will represent different ways of representing those pauses or how the ideas are threaded together. And so having a creative approach is really, really important.

The third point that I want to share that I really loved about this book was the argument that we need to slow down, and that also connects to the idea of technology broadly as something that's speeding things up a lot. But the semicolon as a form of technology can help us slow things down. And what I liked here in the book on page 155—I'm going

Martin Feld (continued)

to share a quote with you in a second—it really connects well to the ideas of McLuhan and Postman (media ecologists I've talked about on previous episodes), who discuss extensions and amputations or pros and cons of new and old technologies and the Faustian Bargain and the idea that when we take on a new technology, it can also take something away. And this quote from page 155 is as follows: 'Still, technology takes even while it gives, and it's not unreasonable to feel that one of the things that it is taking is our ability to stop occasionally, or at least to slow down. We bob along feeling helpless on a frantic current of light and noise, always on the move, our predicament best described in the linear leap forwards of the dash. The semicolon represents a way to slow down, to stop and to think; it measures time more meditatively than the catchall dash, and it can't be chucked effortlessly into just any sentence in place of just any other mark'. And it's true if you look at a punctuation mark, like the semicolon, traditionally, it's seen as having more of a pause than a comma, but less of a pause than a full stop. It encourages you to stop and think about what you've just read, but without putting a stamp or a stop sign at the end of that thought; you can continue it; you can continue your thought into the next sentence; and like I said about the part on conversation that Watson shares, that's how we actually speak to each other. When you speak to another person, if everything had full stops, it would sound very stilted, very cold. It wouldn't go anywhere. We actually really speak with things like semicolons between our sentences, as we thread together ideas that we think up as we go along. We engage in speech repair; we interrupt each other. Really, we need to think about how we can improve our writing to each other and the recording of our own thoughts in a way that more closely mirrors speech. And that's what I've taken away from this particular message.

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So to sum things up and without ruining too much of the book	00:09:24
(because I haven't gone into a lot of the detail of the text), we only really think of slowing down with things like books and print and so on.	
How can we actually slow down in the way that we write and	00:09:35
communicate with each other on a grammatical level or by using	
punctuation? How can we be more varied and creative in what we use?	00:09:42
If you're a prescriptivist rather than a descriptivist, how can you ease	00:09:45
things a little bit and maybe be a little less connected to rules—explore	
new possibilities? Because I know throughout my life I've generally	00:09:54
liked the idea of being fluid and flexible and creative and living in the	
grey, but a lot of my behaviour actually tends towards prescriptivism. I	00:10:05
like consistency and clarity and knowing that those rules will make	
things clear for people when they read them. But does it always work	00:10:12
that well? Do people always find clarity or 100 per cent understand	00:10:14
what you're saying just because you think you've written it well and	
consistently in a grammatical sense? Not necessarily... So, step aside	00:10:22
from rules for a second; see them as guidelines and understand that	
you can be a little bit more personal or varied in what you do.	
And as a final point about the book, when I started reading it, I really	00:10:32
thought, *Hmm, is there going to be a lot of interesting or over-the-top	
semicolon use in this book?* I was pleasantly surprised; there is not.	00:10:41
Watson does a fantastic job of not only discussing the semicolon, but	00:10:43
using it sparingly and in a considered way throughout her own book,	
where it really has impact. So, I'd like to commend Cecilia Watson on a	00:10:52
fantastic book that has altered the way that I look at communication,	
particularly in a written the sense, and how we can bring it closer to	
representing the colour and flexibility and interest that our spoken	

Martin Feld (continued)

communication can so often create.

And that's it for this episode of Lounge Ruminator; I hope you've
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enjoyed it. If you'd like to get in touch, don't hesitate to contact me on
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Twitter @martinfeld (also the same username on Micro.blog) or head
to the website loungeruminator.net. Thanks so much for your time, and
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I'll see you for the next one.