**Strand 3/Conventions – Post 6: Apostrophe’s Apostrophes**

Mostly, this little punctuation mark gives us no trouble. It stands in for missing letters (*don’t, should’ve, e’er*), it marks possession (*Charlie’s dog, the woman with the hat’s friend*), and sometimes it marks plurals.

So the missing letter part is rarely problematic (though it should probably just go away – couldn’t we just write *dont*?). The possessive apostrophe, though, does sometimes give us trouble since, well, since English hasn’t marked case for many hundreds of years, except for this little remnant. And the plural-marking apostrophe is tangled up with this possessive one, so let’s look into that first.

From the 17th century on, an apostrophe was used in plurals when the noun ended in a vowel: *toga’s, opera’s, menu’s, fee’s*. Grammarians began to condemn this usage in the mid-19th century, but it continues to appear. And in fact, an apostrophe is strongly recommended by many style guides to mark certain kinds of plurals.

Please bring all the **DVD’s** to the garage sale.

I got five **A’s** and one B on my report card.

You need to go back to dot your **i’s** and cross your **t’s**.

The **1980’s** was a bad decade for fashion.

This practice of using apostrophes to mark plurals in abbreviations, dates, with letters, etc. is beginning to fall out of fashion, but is still quite standard. The *Columbia Guide to Standard American English* says that the “apostrophe is used sometimes to mark plural number and letters (*three 6’s, two A’s)*” (p. 35). *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* says that the use of -*’s* to mark plurals is not as common as it used to be, but can still be found. They recommend *1980s* instead of *1980’s* (p. 10).

So there are a few cases where –’s can mark plural. But some apostrophes slip in in plurals where they are not “supposed” to because some words just look weird without a demarcation of their morpheme boundary, and could even be mispronounced: *menus, skis, fees, pizzas.* And when writers put that apostrophe in, even if it’s just a slip of the pen/finger on the keyboard, it does illustrate an awareness of the distinct morpheme one is adding on. The writers in the 17th and 18th centuries were on to something here.

Ok, so we’re used to seeing apostrophes in words where they do not mark possession, sometimes “rightly” and sometimes “wrongly.” But let’s look more at that possessive/genitive use. As mentioned, this -’s is a remnant of case marking in Old English; English used to put different endings on the nouns, depending on how they were functioning – as subject (nominative case), object (accusative case), indirect object (dative case), or possessive (genitive case). Wikipedia provides a sample chart for the nouns *angel, ship,* and *sorrow*.

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| **Example of the Strong Noun Declension for each Gender** | | | | | | |
| **Case** | **Masculine**  **engel 'angel'** | | **Neuter**  **scip 'ship'** | | **Feminine**  **sorg 'sorrow'** | |
| **Singular** | **Plural** | **Singular** | **Plural** | **Singular** | **Plural** |
| **Nominative** | engel | englas | scip | scipu | sorg | sorga |
| **Accusative** | engel | englas | scip | scipu | sorge | sorga/sorge |
| **Genitive** | engles | engla | scipes | scipa | sorge | sorga |
| **Dative** | engle | englum | scipe | scipum | sorge | sorgum |

Now we don’t have case marking, with the exception of our pronouns (*I* versus *me*, for example), and this genitive (possessive), which mostly just shows up in writing. Or sometimes it does…

The basic convention of the possessive apostrophe is straightforward: insert an apostrophe before an <s> and before another noun when that noun is owned by or “possessed” by the first noun. If the word is a plural already ending in <s>; then, just add an apostrophe.

the girl’s shoes (one girl)

the girls’ shoes (more than one girl)

the traveler’s suitcase (one traveler)

the travelers’ suitcases (more than one traveler)

Well, it’s not always so straightforward.

**Pronunciation and words that end in ssssssss,zzzzzzzzzz**

Consider, for example, the possessive apostrophe with singular nouns that end in <s> like *molasses*, *hippopotamus, walrus, octopus, boss,* or *floss*. Should an <s> be added after the apostrophe when these singular nouns indicate possession? Is it *the walrus’ friend* or *the walrus’s friend?* It actually depends on who (or whom!) you ask. *The Associated Press Stylebook* recommends omitting the *-’s* after the apostrophe in singular words ending in <s>, but, according to *The Chicago Manual of Style*, if the <s> at the end of a singular word is pronounced, the possessive is formed by adding *-’s*. So pronunciation matters too? To some, but not too others, so this leads to confusion about the rule. And what happens, for example, if it’s spelled with <x>, which is of course pronounced “ks”? It should probably be *a fox’s tail*, not *a fox’ tail*, don’t you think? Sometimes we’re faced with dilemmas that don’t have a neat resolution. Here’s another example of that: <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=2800>

**Proper Nouns**

Proper nouns seem to cause a host of other problems. Consider, for example, names such as *Jones* or *Thomas* or even one that doesn’t end in *-s*, such as *Yin*. You may see a sign on someone’s house that reads

*the Jones* or *the Yins*

Or it could read

*the Jones’, the Jones’s* or *the Yin’s*

Why the multiple possibilities? Well, the meaning is actually ambiguous. It could mean the group of people named *Yin* – so it would be the plural. Or it could be possessive, meaning the Yin’s house*.* So there is not necessarily an error here, but two possible meanings, as indicated by the possessive apostrophe or lack thereof.

And pronunciation factors in here too. *Fowler’s Modern English Usage*, first published in 1892, recommends omitting the <s> after the apostrophe only for names ending in an “*iz”* sound, as in *Bridges’*. Do they mean just “an *iz* sound”? What about just “z” as in *Jones*? Is it *the Jones’ house* or *the Jones’s house*? And this example is especially interesting because there is more than one way to pronounce it, with one syllable or two. And we seem to want to make the spelling with an additional <s> correspond to the additional syllable. So if you say “jownziz,” you might feel better spelling it *Jones’s*, but if you say “jownz”, you might want to spell it *Jones’*. And the style guides – some of them – will agree. Some of them try to simplify the rules, giving a single rule (like maybe your fourth grade teacher did), but then you end up with words that just don’t seem to fit.

**Important historical people?**

And finally, a very strange rule of many style guides with respect to the possessive of proper names is that ancient names or important, historical, or classical names that end in <s> should end with an apostrophe alone; so, *Moses’* sandals, *Jesus’* friend, *Venus’* name*.* But *The Chicago Manual of Style*, for instance, doesn’t follow this rule, offering *Aristophanes’s plays* and *Zeus’s* wife*.* Such a rule is, of course, subjective too, raising the question of how old is ancient or who should be considered important enough.

**Of course there’s its/it’s**

The most common issue I see in student writing with the use of apostrophes is *its*, which is often written as *it’s*. None of the possessive pronouns or possessive determiners use apostrophes: *mine, yours, his, hers, its, ours, theirs*. So most of us would have no problem with this rule if it weren’t for the contraction of *it* and *is* to *it’s*; therefore, we’re used to seeing the word *it’s*, and we know that apostrophes indicate possession*,* so it’s an easy slip to make – and actually illustrates the knowledge that apostrophes in general do indicate possession. Somewhat less common, but also prevalent is *who’s* instead of *whose*: *Who’s hat is that*? might not look so wrong, but the standard version would be *Whose book*, using the possessive determiner.

So part of the reason there are so many “errors” of apostrophe usage is because there is a great deal of variation, even among writers of edited academic English.

**Why pick on just apostrophes?**

And now really finally, sometimes there are practical considerations that lead to an apostrophe being left off where it might otherwise appear. For example, many people have picked on the errors of apostrophe usage on signs. Lynne Truss writes about wanting to protest the movie *Two Weeks Notice* because it had no apostrophe in its title – and should, she claimed.

But we don’t seem to get similarly bothered by the lack of punctuation on signs in general. We do not expect fully-punctuated sentences on signs.

SLOW not PLEASE GO SLOWLY.

or even **Please drive slowly.**

We could have a book-length – which this almost is – discussion on apostrophe usage alone. One thing I mean to emphasize here is that there are some reasons for the variation and reasons for the “errors” that go beyond people simply being “ignorant” or “lazy.” Remember, language change is ongoing, and quite often the variety used by a minority of people – and thus the stigmatized form – eventually becomes the form adopted by the majority and then becomes standard.

But apostrophe usage that differs from standard expectations really bugs a lot of people. The Apostrophe Protection Society <http://www.apostrophe.org.uk/> has an impressive collection of apostrophe errors found out in the world. You too can send in your own. Spotting these errors gives people a “gotcha” moment, where they can proudly point out how someone misused the apostrophe. And no one wants to not conform to expectations for fear of being judged. But what I think is more interesting is to think about why people make apostrophe errors and in what particular cases they do.

OK, this has gotten way too long. Oh, but in other punctuation news, it would be so fun to talk about the use of so-called “scare quotes”. If you’re still with me, you can just check this out: <http://www.unnecessaryquotes.com/> It’s actually a useful exercise to figure out why these are funny. It demonstrates that, just like spoken language, punctuation is evolving and these marks “” have more than one use and meaning, just like apostrophes.