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Apostrophe(')s, who needs them?

MORANA LUKAČ

A further invitation to contribute to questions studied by the 'Bridging the Unbridgeable' Project at the Leiden Centre for Linguistics

The improper use of the possessive apostrophe has for a long time been a subject of concern among the authors of usage guides in English. Apostrophes do not represent any sounds, and since nouns in the genitive, and plural nominative and accusative nouns with few exceptions sound the same, their spelling distinctions are purely grammatical (Bryant *et al*., 1997: 93). Because the sign exists only in the written language, its usage has been rather unstable ever since it was first introduced to the English language in the sixteenth century to mark dropped letters (Little, 1986: 15–16), and it was not until the eighteenth century when the possessive apostrophe was first introduced (Crystal, 2003: 68). The usage guide database HUGE (Hyper Usage Guide of English), which is built by Robin Straaijer as part of the 'Bridging the Unbridgeable' project that Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade wrote about in an earlier issue of *English Today*, proves that apostrophe 'misuse' is the most popular topic in the field of language advice when it comes to punctuation. The apostrophe holds its own among numerous disputed items, such as ending sentences with prepositions, using *me* for *I*, *who* for *whom* or splitting infinitives. The first historical reference to the apostrophe in the HUGE database appears in *Reflections on Language Use* by Robert Baker in 1770 and it continues to be discussed to the present day. The discussion of the mark's 'misuse' has been widely popularized by the publication of Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* in 2003.

The apostrophe keeps stirring emotions both from the proponents of the sign's 'correct' usage and from the opposition who are advocating its abolishment. The debate participants are represented online in groups such as the Apostrophe Protection Society or, on the other side, on a website with the resonating name, Kill the Apostrophe. Last year, the Mid-Devon District Council banned the use of apostrophes from their street signs with the purpose of avoiding confusion. The news spread like wildfire. Similar relevance was attributed a year earlier to Waterstones [sic] decision to drop the apostrophe and adapt to the digital world with a more versatile and practical spelling. Companies such as Waterstones, Barclays Bank, Boots, Harrods, Lloyds Bank and Selfridges are not the only ones who decided to abandon the mark. The apostrophe seems to be generally impractical in the world of new media, especially on Twitter, which limits the users' posts to 140 characters. Recent analysis of the language used on Twitter by Brandwatch analytics (www.brandwatch.com) showed that all of the five most frequent grammatical mistakes



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are attributed to apostrophe omission, respectively *im, wont, cant, dont* and *id*. At the same time there seems to be a proliferation of complaints about the 'greengrocer's apostrophe' (cf. Beal, 2010), found used in the penultimate position with plural noun forms such as the following:

> Sir, We do not need to fear the extinction of the apostrophe (report, Aug 21). A local college is advertising 'study opportunities including National Diploma's, Degree's and Master's programmes'. (*Times*, 22 August 2006)

Although there never appears to be a shortage of complaints about the apostrophe which reappear in newspapers on slow news days, language professionals seem not to judge such misuses as particularly serious. Garrett and Austin (1993) studied attitudes towards apostrophe mistakes among British and German students of English. The apostrophe-related mistakes never scored higher than a mid-point on a five-point scale ranging from 'unimportant' to 'very serious'. In certain contexts, such as in the case of computer-mediated communication, the stigma against apostrophe omission has been entirely lifted. Nevertheless, the prophets of the apostrophe's death might still have to hold their breath until we can actually observe changes in all registers of the English language. In formal contexts, such as job applications, the apostrophe and other disputed usage items continue to represent cultural shibboleths which distinguish the educated from the uneducated (Bryant *et al*., 1997: 107). In the scope of our research, 'misused' apostrophes provide exactly the kind of arena for public discussions which allows us to investigate the implications of the in- and out-group dichotomy that separates the inner circle of the standard language users from its less proficient users.

So what do you think of this disputed usage item? Let us know by leaving a comment at the Bridging the Unbridgeable blog at http://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/english-today/.

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