

Apostroplural's: The Contention of Change

by Kevin Dickinson

The apostrophe in the title of this article is a checkpoint for language elites. These are the people who cringe and perhaps go into convulsions when they spot a misplaced punctuation mark. But such overreaction (which they will deny) is not their fault: their brains are equipped with a special area, called the “apocalyptithalamus,” that emits a deluge of distress signals at the first sign of a grammar mistake. This area of the brain is also responsible for a paradoxical combination of attitudes toward urgent preservation of the language and a certain grammatical nihilism. While my goal in writing this article is to stop readers from cringing at nominal mistakes, I realize that changing anyone’s ingrained views on grammar and language is a daunting task. I also must admit that I am a cringer and a corrector myself who, until recently, found pleasure in censuring the mistakes of others (kind of like lexical *schadenfreude*). But what if all those mistakes you’ve been meticulously expunging all these years are not actually mistakes? Brace yourself: they may actually be correct.

The current issue with the apostrophe—that backwards cousin of the comma—is, of course, its surreptitious pervasion into the world of grammatical number. The man who writes the sign that says, “Banana’s .50¢” is surely illiterate, right? Otherwise he wouldn’t make such a grave mistake. Surely it is important to master the apostrophe, as Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* lists as its very first rule,

Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding ’s.¹

If the misuse of the apostrophe weren’t such a salient issue, Will Strunk may not have begun his famous grammar guide that way.

But what constitutes misuse? If millions of people are effectively communicating with “apostroplurals,” why is it such a crisis? It is not an easy question to answer, partly because it involves a reevaluation of traditional correct/incorrect judgments on language—which have been the subject of constant debate for centuries—and partly because the formation of plurals with apostrophes is still a burgeoning new use. But, as Jim Quinn says so aptly in *American Tongue and Cheek*, “language is a system; and because it is used by

¹ Strunk, William, and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 4th ed. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2000. 1.

humans and learned by humans, it can't be chaotic.”² This is the very idea (or ideal) that is the foundation for linguistics. Linguists are *descriptive* grammarians, which means that they treat grammar as a science, not an art. The *prescriptive* grammarians are the *artistes* like William Safire, who calls himself an “excruciating curmudgeon” and makes his living trying to prove two things: (a) that illiterate mistakes, like *ain't* and the use of apostrophes to make nouns plural, will be the end of civilization, and (b) that his personal grammar is the *best* grammar. The Safires are pedantic, the linguists objective. Linguistically, plurals formed with apostrophes are never “wrong,” unless their meaning is unintelligible to native users (in this case, readers) of the language.

The apostrophe is often used to form the plurals of letters, numbers, and abbreviations: *p's* and *q's*, *8's* and *9's*, *ABC's* and *Ph.D.'s*. But there are also ways around it: *is* and *js*, *1000s*, *MBA's* and *FAQ's*. It can also denote the plurals of some small words—*do's*, *no's*, *yes's*—but these are also avoidable: *dos*, *nos*, *yeses*. Because these unorthodox applications are so seldom, it is probably not safe to assume that the apostrophe's appearance in the plurals of regular nouns (*no dog's allowed*, *employee's only*) came by analogy. More plausibly, the confusion created by the identical sounds of the plural *-s* and the possessive *-s* gave rise to the new use. But the reason for this new “misapplication” is almost irrelevant in light of the fact that the apostrophe is itself a mistake. In Old English and even through Middle English, genitives (possessives) were formed with *-s* or *-es*, the same way we form noun plurals today. But in the late sixteenth century, something called the *his genitive* appeared. It was the construction [*noun*] *his* [*noun*] to represent possession: *John his house*, *Mr. Carthage his salary*. But when the *his genitive* started disappearing in favor of the more familiar *Johns house* or *Mr. Carthages salary*, people thought the *-s* ending was a contracted form of *his*. The apostrophe was born to signify what was commonly believed to be elided letters, but what was actually just an older form for possessives convalescing to its former popularity. Thus *Johns house*, which was thought to be *John his house* in contraction, was “corrected” as *John's house*. Erroneous corrections like this are called *hypercorrections*, and are the reason why someone with affected prudence might say “between you and I” when the traditional construction is “between you and me” (*me* is an object, and prepositions like *between* take objects. *I* is a subject).

The apostrophe is a weak particle. It can almost always be avoided in formal writing. And it has never enjoyed the definite stability of the period, for example, which always comes after the last word in a declarative sentence to make a full stop. No one questions the placement of the question mark in an

² Quinn, Jim. *American Tongue and Cheek*. New York: Pantheon, 1980. 148.

interrogative sentence. And there is little debate over the use of the phonemes [s], [z], or [ɪz] (boats, oars, houses) to form the plurals of nouns in English. But the problem of apostrophe placement often involves unwelcome levels of ambivalence. If you were a retailer selling cards for collectors, how would you sign your merchandise? You could write *collectors' cards*, which in its use of the plural possessive apostrophe (s') means, "cards for collectors." You could also write *collector's cards*, which uses a singular possessive and means, "cards for the collector." Both are correct and perfectly intelligible—the only difference is that one treats potential customers as a group, and the other as an abstract ideal called "the collector." But if apostrophes are used for possession, and possession implies the *of* construction (*John's house* means *the house of John*), what's the preposition *for* doing here? Collectors' cards, no matter how you punctuate them, are cards designed *for* collectors. We encounter a similar situation on the second Sunday of May each year: should it be *Mothers' Day* ("a day for mothers") or *Mother's Day* ("a day for Mother")? Again, the difference is not one of correctness, but one of preference. And again, no real possession takes place: mothers (or Mother, if you wish to address just your own) cannot "own" a day (an intangible, abstract concept), just as you and I cannot "own" gravity, happiness, or warmth.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) entry for *Mother's Day* bills it as a singular possessive, but defines it as "a day on which mothers are particularly honoured."³ The *American Heritage Dictionary* follows the same pattern. Evidently, the placement of the apostrophe in the title of the holiday has little to do with grammatical number, else there would be no disagreement in the amount of mothers implied by the word and its definition. The apostrophe, therefore, is weak in this use because it does not seem to follow a set pattern or convey consistent information. Because the dictionaries refer to *mothers* in the plural, it is logical to assume that the use of *Mother's* as the headword is also a plural form. As demonstrated above, *Mother's* may masquerade as a possessive, but it shows no characteristics of the possessive when combined with *Day*. Could the OED have made an illiterate mistake?

More than likely, the OED entry in question simply reflects current usage. And current usage demands that the apostrophe be used to form quasi-plural constructions in special cases. Occasionally we may come across neutral forms like *Mothers Day* or *editors choice*, which eschew the apostrophe entirely—perhaps in ignorance of the rules, or perhaps to avoid confusion. There is, however, a definite instability about the apostrophe, and such weakness almost certainly contributes to the pervasive changes we observe as it emigrates from

³ "Mother's Day, *n.*" [OED Online](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00316426). December 2002. Oxford University Press. 15 May 2008. <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00316426>>.

possessives to plurals (though not always “correctly” in the eyes of the elite), and attempts to locate its niche in the world of grammar.

What about a list of things you should and should not do (or should I say ought and ought not to do)? June Casagrande presents us with three equally plausible solutions, culled from respectable sources, none of which seem overtly “correct”:

The best-selling punctuation book *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* tells you that a total of three apostrophes are needed in the expression “do’s and don’t’s.” *Webster’s New World College Dictionary* recommends the inconsistent but cleaner “do’s and don’ts.” The *Chicago Manual of Style* will tell you, however, to lose yet another apostrophe: “dos and don’ts.”⁴

If two out of three sources always disagree with you, it is difficult to determine which to heed. A bias for one of the sources, the way you may have been taught, or the balance between clunky correctness and prosaic elegance weigh in to the decision—which ultimately boils down to personal preference. Suppose there were a fourth book listed above, which gave its rendition as “dos and donts.” While I am not advocating this unorthodox use, I would like to point out that it is consistent (the plurals are formed the same way) and the *donts* looks more like an ordinary plural English noun than any of the suggestions offered above. And—here’s the clincher—you had no trouble understanding *donts* without its earring. Not only is the apostrophe awkward (would you really consider Truss’s *don’t’s?*), but, more importantly, it truly does not matter how this phrase is rendered. In other words, there cannot be a list of dos and don’ts for writing the phrase “do’s and don’t’s”: none of these ways are incorrect because they are perfectly intelligible to the reader—and to any native (literate) English speaker.

Writing is an unnatural method of communication—a silent imitator of speech, which is native to all cultures. Most punctuation is designed to represent in writing the natural cadence and intonation of speech. The comma denotes a short pause, the period a full stop with a slight downward inflection, and the question mark an upward intonation. But unlike the period, the semicolon, the exclamation mark, and others, the apostrophe has absolutely nothing to do with speech. It began as a purely graphical indicator of dropped letters. However, in words like *won’t*, *don’t*, or *ain’t*, nothing has actually been “dropped.” The word *don’t*, for example, is technically *do not* with an omitted second *o*. This is true in the general (dictionary) sense—but what about the speaker who uses *don’t* in everyday conversations? Surely he utters *don’t* without consciously dropping the second *o* from *do not* to form the contraction. In formal grammar, *don’t* is indeed the abridged, glued-together form of two words. But in speech, it is a single

⁴ June Casagrande. *Grammar Snobs are Great Big Meanies*. New York: Penguin, 2006. 34.

word—a cluster of four sounds that means “do not.” The human brain is an incredibly efficient machine, which is the reason that streamlined forms like *don't* exist in the first place. Like the *p* in *receipt* and the *b* in *debt*, the apostrophe in *don't* is only an etymological sticky note to remind us of its origins.

Because debates over the apostrophe are thus confined to the sphere of writing, they mainly take place between scholars and other language elites. In any language, whenever there is a “standard dialect,” or a variety of speech in a community that is legitimized as the obligatory norm for social interaction, there is usually also a “standard language ideology,” or a bias in favor of the speech of the dominant classes. In other words, there is always a correlation between power and speech, although all dialects of any language are arbitrary, and therefore grammatically and logically equivalent. By these means, scholars, clergymen, and politicians have had the last word on language for centuries. Because such language authorities are among the wealthy elite minority, we have been following the rules of the few for as long as English has been a self-conscious language. If logic determined the rules, we would listen to the vast majority—the speakers.

It is immensely important to understand that wealth and political power do not equal grammatical divinity. It is also important to realize that dictionaries and style guides are not stone tablets from God: they disagree with one another, which is why there are so many of them. But we continue to listen to the elite, to abide by their rules (which are almost always preferential), and to scorn the words that they scorn (which are the words they dislike). We do this to climb the social ladder, using proper grammar as a tool for the exclusion of those who use *ain't* and advertise “Banana's .50¢” at a fruit stand. The better our language, the better *we* are, or so the common belief seems to be. We expend vast amounts of energy pointing out and correcting grammar mistakes for the same reason we watch soap operas. To see someone with wealth or power make a trivial mistake is to see ourselves as socially and morally superior. If the president substitutes *it's* for *its*—a horrible grammatical blasphemy *we* would never commit—he is suddenly our illiterate inferior.

The problem is that card-carrying members of the Grammar Elitists Club are disinclined to admit anyone else into their society on the pretense of ignorance. They use *whom* colloquially as an ostentatious display of their intelligence, and are quick to jeer at people who say, “Who did you go with?” They will offer, as an authoritarian alternative, the extremely pompous “With whom did you go?”, and rattle off grammar rules verbatim from the style guide. They fail to recognize the gulf between pedantic textbook ideals and how the language is actually being used. Because of this they are adamantly opposed to the liberal ideas of linguists. But grammar is not art—it's science—and if millions

of people are forming plurals with apostrophes, maybe it's time to reconsider the facts.

Here they are: All languages change. Change is ongoing and inevitable, and it's what keeps a language alive (there's a reason no one speaks Latin anymore). The scholars may dictate the rules, but the hoi polloi is responsible for current usage. The apostrophe—an innocent little tick mark of ignoble birth—has endured a life of abuse because it has been caught in the contention between rules and reality.

Humans are a highly adaptable species. But if there is one thing they hate, it's change. Most arguments for “language preservation” and lamentations for the loss of the “golden age of language” are just sophisticated ways of saying that change is frightening. As Quinn points out, today's “golden age” is always yesterday's age of language degeneration. Just as we revere the nineteenth century for its literature and grammar, spurning our own as the hopeless ruination of the English language, twenty-second-century critics will wonder what ever happened to the perfect grammar of 2008.

Edward Sapir (of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) postulated about something called “invariable forms” in language. What this essentially boils down to is the gradual elimination of variants of morphemes and words. It's why we're fighting a losing battle for *whom*: *who* can do the job just as well in almost all scenarios, so it's usurping *whom*'s place. The only time we really ever need to use *whom* anymore is in that hackneyed letter opener “to whom it may concern.” *Whom* is the objective variant of the subjective *who*—and the tendency in drift (the linguistic term for language change) is to expunge variants for the sake of efficiency.

With the rise of greengrocers' apostrophes we see the emergence of a new rule: the plural and possessive [s] suffix is to be spelled -'s. If you consider it objectively, this single rule is more efficient (and easier to remember) than the two traditional rules, which are that plurals end in -s and possessives in -'s. We gain the etymological upper hand because the apostrophe separates the root from the suffix in noun plurals. Singular nouns that end in -s (*bus*, *pass*, *summons*, *thesis*) lose their irregular plural spellings and become regular (*buses* or *busses* becomes *bus's*). Perhaps the only factor that is impeding this change is the confusion created by the lack of a distinction between plurals and possessives. Does “John's” mean “toilets” or “something that belongs to John”?

However, because language change is unavoidable, there may eventually be a time when a radical style guide tells its readers to use apostrophes for plurals. And, just as *Webster's Third* (1961) generated controversy by including *ain't* (and not dismissing it as “vulgar”), the first book to prescribe what we have been doing for years with apostrophes will be ridiculed. Even a style guide that

describes the use (“the apostrophe is commonly used for plurals, but this is not generally accepted in formal contexts”) may come under fire. The William Safires of the future will regurgitate their classic disgust: “With the *So and So Style Guide*’s nauseous inclusion of ‘apostroplurals,’ the destruction of our once precious language has reached its nadir. People, prepare for the apocalypse.” But the time may also come, several centuries hence, when forming a noun plural *without* an apostrophe will be looked down upon as a sign of illiteracy. Confusion and anarchy will ensue, or so the English teachers believe. But context will provide the basis for our understanding. The sign that says “Banana’s .50¢” is not the least bit confusing. We easily interpret it as “bananas for fifty cents,” not “point five cents belonging to a banana.”

Jonathan Swift—now a literary legend—was a famous language authority and critic. I found this hilarious quote from Swift in *American Tongue and Cheek*, in which Swift vituperates against the pronunciation of past-tense verbs like *drudged* and *disturbed* as *drudg’d* and *disturb’d*:

“Where by leaving out a vowel to save a syllable, we form so jarring a sound and so difficult to utter that I have often wondered how it could ever obtain.”⁵

Swift’s complaints, like the complaints of any language authority about his own time, are not only useless, but ridiculous. By promulgating the “correct” use of the apostrophe, today’s critics and pundits are in effect accepting that what was once a horrendous mistake is now a shining example of grammatical correctness—and by extension, that today’s mistaken use of apostroplurals can become tomorrow’s gleaming standard.

I leave you with a story. As a student at Rutgers-Camden, I walk past the back entrance to some sort of cafeteria twice each weekday, once when I go to class and once as I head back to the parking lot. On the door there is big red sign with several paragraphs of text set in white, the first line of which is “Cafeteria Employee’s Only.” The first time I noticed it, I suppose I stared extra-hard at it so someone else would notice that I noticed. I don’t think anyone was around. I felt a certain satisfaction at picking out a misplaced apostrophe on a sign that at least one person must have proofread before it was printed. I also felt that familiar twinge of apocalypse-flavored depression about our disintegrating English. I wanted suddenly to live in the nineteenth century, where everyone formed perfect sentences. Every day, twice a day, I walked past that sign. And every time, I had to stare at the apostrophe—the tiny white mark that was wreaking havoc on the universe. After several semesters of stare-downs, I seriously considered taking action against my enemy. A red marker would do the trick. Or I could use a

⁵ Quinn, 82.

sticker from Lynn Truss's book, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*. In the beginning of the book there are several pages of sticky punctuation marks, of various sizes, for use on ungrammatical signs. There are also a couple of stickers that say, "The Panda says NO!" (read the book to find out about the Panda). I was going to slap a Panda sticker right above the rogue apostrophe, if only to relieve my own nausea. I never had a chance to put the sticker up, though, before my better judgment kicked in. If this sounds ridiculous, stupid, or out of proportion, that's because it is. At least some of the people who read this, however, will consider going to Camden, NJ, to locate that sign so they can smash it with a baseball bat.

But why make such a big deal over a tiny punctuation mark?