Lesson 7: 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, however, 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, with numbers, 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 - and so are the writers of today who make this "error."

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). You can see some Old English noun declensions here. 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.

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. Here are some reasons why.

Pronunciation and words that end in sssssssss,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. LanguageLog has another example of that.

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.

(And what if there is, say, a reunion of the Jones family, so you have multiple Jones families in attendance. Can you pluralize a proper name and have Joneses? And then if we're talking about the multiple houses of those Joneses, can we write Joneses' houses? Looks weird. Try it with a name that doesn't end in [s] - Yins' houses. That seems fine.)

Important historical people?

And finally, a very strange rule of many style guides with respect to the possessive of proper names states 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 *it's* for *its*. 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 one 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. And another reason is due to an unconscious linguistic savvy; we add in morpheme boundaries and spelling helpers where they seem useful.

Activity. Proper names and apostrophes present some interesting issues of apostrophe usage. Many people tend to add an [s] to store names, for example: JC Penney's or Fred Meyer's. Collect some data and then analyze what you think is happening; explore your neighborhood or town and create a list of stores and other businesses with apostrophes. Also, listen for the way people pronounce such names and how this may or may not differ from the way they are written. Are there any examples where you would put an apostrophe, but there is not one? Or where there is an apostrophe and you think there shouldn't be? Why or why not? Also, consider the pronunciation, and whether that affects the placement, the presence, or the absence of apostrophes. The goal here is to analyze what people are doing with these names, not to judge what you think they should do.

Together, analyze your and your classmates' collections of words and phrases with apostrophes. Is there variation in the apostrophe usage? Is there evidence that the way we use apostrophes in English is changing? Might there be different rules of apostrophe use in, say, 100 years? Do you think the apostrophe will drop out as a marker of possessive? Or might there be an increase in its use with the plural marker? Provide evidence to support your ideas.