

HOW THE PAST AFFECTS THE FUTURE: THE STORY OF THE APOSTROPHE¹

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I. Introduction

The apostrophe, a punctuation mark which “floats above the line, symbolizing something missing in the text” (Battistella, 1999, p. 109), has been called “an unstable feature of written English” (Gasque, 1997, p. 203), “the step-child of English orthography” (Barfoot, 1991, p. 121), and “an entirely insecure orthographic squiggle” (Barfoot, 1991, p. 133). Surely the apostrophe intends no harm; why then the controversy and apparent emotionalism surrounding it? One major motivation for investigating the apostrophe is simply because it is so often misused. A portion of the usage problem can perhaps be attributed to the chasm dividing spoken and written language, as the apostrophe was originally intended to indicate missing letters, which may or may not have actually been enunciated. To understand what has been called “the aberrant apostrophe,” (Crystal, 1995, p. 203) and the uncertainty surrounding its usage, an examination of its history is essential, for it is this “long and confused” (Crystal, 1995, p. 203) history that is partially responsible for the modern-day misuses of the apostrophe.

This paper will trace the history of the apostrophe, examining the purpose(s) for which the apostrophe has been utilized in the past as well as presenting its current use. An overview of contemporary rules of usage is then included, along with specific examples of apostrophe misuse and a recommendation on how to teach apostrophe usage to non-native speakers of English. Finally, an attempt is made to predict the apostrophe’s future.

II. History

It may surprise even well-educated, native speakers of English that the apostrophe has a remarkable and somewhat convoluted history. The word *apostrophe* has been called “a cumbersome name for an awkward object” (Room, 1989, p. 21). The term itself, used to refer to the punctuation mark /’/, has its roots in the Greek word *apostrephein*, which means ‘to turn away’ (American Heritage, 1992, s.v. *apostrophe*). The word was used in Greek to describe a rhetorical device in which a speaker turned away from the audience to address another person, either real or imaginary, and eventually the term came to express the concept of something missing, in this case, the absence of letters or sounds.

According to Crystal (1995), the apostrophe was introduced into English from French in the 16th century (p. 203), but there is some indication that it was first used in an edition of Petrarch’s Italian verse in 1501 (Parkes, 1993, p. 138, n. 75). The use of the apostrophe was evidently later advanced by Geoffroy Tory in *Champfleury* (Paris, 1529), and was used in two other French publications printed in Paris in the late 1530s (Parkes, 1993, p.

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55). In 1559, the apostrophe appeared in England in William Cunningham's *The Cosmographical Glasse* (Parkes, 1993, p. 55). Sixteenth century English printers developed the mark to indicate omissions, but this convention is not as simple as it might sound. Initially, the apostrophe was intended to demonstrate the elision of a vowel, meaning the vowel sound had been omitted, assimilated, or slurred in pronunciation, as in *th' inevitable end*, but the apostrophe was also used to indicate a missing letter when the vowel no longer existed in the spoken form, as in *can't* (Parkes, 1993, p.55). Not surprisingly, there was much confusion concerning its usage until the middle of the 19th century, when printers and grammarians attempted to devise rules to govern the usage of apostrophes (Crystal, 1995, p. 203). Despite their efforts, however, much confusion remains today.

The use of the apostrophe to denote possession has its origins in Old English, which frequently attached the genitive singular ending *-es* to nouns. Hook (1999), points out that 60% of all nouns in Old English formed their genitive cases in this manner (p. 44); it is therefore not surprising that the current genitive ending *-s* has survived in Modern English. The apostrophe could be viewed as a way in which to mark the deleted vowel *-e* of the *-es* possessive ending, "derived from the Old English strong masculine genitive singular inflection" (Blockley, 2001, p. 35). Adrian Room (1989, p. 21) provides support for this view, citing the Old English word for stone, *stān*, whose genitive form was *stānes*.

Hook (1999) maintains, however, that the apostrophe is "a mere printer's gimmick, doubtless born of the mistaken notion that the genitive ending was a contraction of *his*" (p. 44). An invention of mortals, the apostrophe has indeed been subject to human error. The *-es* genitive ending,

often spelled and pronounced *-ies* or *-ys* in early Middle English, was confused as early as the thirteenth century with *his*, the possessive of *he*, so that Shakespeare could later write 'the count his gally', and even expressions like 'my sister her watch' appeared (qtd. in Hook, 1999, pp. 44-45).

The unstressed pronunciation of the genitive *-es* seemed to have caused many speakers to believe they were saying *his*. This usage presumably caused pronunciation problems and gender confusion with a noun such as *woman* or *girl*, or a plural noun like *winners*, but nevertheless was quite common (Hook, 1975, p.160). The apostrophe became a sort of "compromise" to indicate either the missing *-e* in the genitive ending *-es*, or the *hi* of the mistaken possessive indicator *his* (Hook, 1999, p. 45).

Agreement concerning exactly when and how to use the apostrophe has been difficult to achieve. Furthermore, this research will indicate that complete adherence to any set of prescriptive rules has proven impossible. Partly due to the apostrophe's tangled history, lack of consistent apostrophe usage is also due to ignorance and, sometimes, insecurity on the part of English speakers and writers. By the middle of the eighteenth century, most grammarians agreed about the use of the apostrophe when forming the genitive

singular, as in *girl's*, and had “more or less willingly extended [use of the apostrophe] to include irregularly formed plurals as well (*women's, children's*)” (Sklar, 1976, p. 177). The issue of how to form the genitive forms of plural nouns ending in *-s*, however, was more complex. But by the final decades of the nineteenth century, most theorists supported the general principle that “the apostrophe forms the possessive case, with an *s* in the singular, and without it in the plural” (Sklar, 1976, p. 179). Despite some eventual agreement among early grammarians concerning the use of the apostrophe, the current confusion regarding purpose and usage of the apostrophe is certainly not a new problem.

III. Purpose(s)

Although the use of the apostrophe to indicate possession has been well-established (if often misused), its uses in other environments remain troubling. The use of the apostrophe apparently extended in two directions from its original purpose of indicating possession. First, the apostrophe was used to indicate *any* missing letter, not only the *-e* in the genitive *-es*. Second, the apostrophe evolved to indicate the plural form of a word of foreign origin, as in *folio's* (Room, 1989, p. 21).

Though these two evolutionary uses seem fairly clear-cut, in contemporary practice, the purposes of the apostrophe remain nebulous. One English handbook [Smalzer (1998, p. 267)] maintains the apostrophe simply has two functions: to replace missing letters in contractions and to indicate possession. Another source [Battistella, (1999, p. 92)] adds to those purposes that the apostrophe is used to separate the plural *s* from letters and numerals, as in *four a's*. Still another source [Gasque, (1997, p. 203)]² asserts that there are actually eight different functions for the genitive case alone, suggesting that the term *possessive* “is not accurate to describe the many functions of the genitive case and hence the apostrophe.” Crystal (1995, p. 283) offers four uses of the apostrophe:

1. to indicate missing letters (as in *he's* for *he is* or as in *o'clock* for *of the clock*)
2. to distinguish the genitive from the plural in nouns (as in *dog's, dogs'*, vs. *dogs*)
3. in some usage variations (as in *cello* vs. *'cello*)
4. to serve arbitrary purposes, unrelated to pronunciation, as when space constraints force omissions in newspapers, (as in *Stock Market Quot'ns*, for *Quotations*)

The disparity among grammarians concerning how apostrophes should be used underscores the difficulty in creating consistent, shared usage rules.

² Gasque maintains these eight possessive functions include: 1) Possessive Genitive (as in *John's car*), 2) Subject Genitive (as in *Edgar answered* to mean *Edgar's answer*), 3) Object Genitive (as in *Bob's pursuers* used to denote *someone pursuing Bob*), 4) Genitive of Measure (as in *an hour's delay*), 5) Descriptive Genitive (as in *child's play* or *teacher's college*), 6) Genitive of Origin (as in *the woman's child*), 7) Appositive Genitive (as in *The State of California* for *The State, California...*), 8) Partitive Genitive (as in *a pound of butter*) (1997, p. 202).

IV. Rules of Usage

Because apostrophes are seen and (usually) not heard³, prescriptive rules primarily address how to use the marks in written form. Attempting to dispel the confusion surrounding the use of the apostrophe, many grammarians have published lists of guidelines for writers to follow. Smalzer (1996, p. 278) presents three fairly simple rules, citing examples for each:

- 1) Add 's to singular nouns, indefinite nouns, and plural nouns with irregular plurals (as in *John's car*, *somebody else's sweater*, *the men's room*, and *children's books*).
- 2) Add only an apostrophe to plural nouns ending in *s* (as in *the boys' room*, *the Smiths' summer house*, and *ten dollars' worth of stamps*).
- 3) Add an apostrophe only or 's to singular nouns ending in *s* (as in *the waitress' tips* or *the waitress's tips* and *James' car* or *James's car*).

Smalzer goes on to prescribe that whether or not the second (possessive) *s* appears in print in words like *James'/James's* and *waitress'/waitress's*, it should still be pronounced in speech (p. 267). This seemingly straightforward list of rules nonetheless contains some ambiguity: the third rule offers a choice in how to make a noun possessive that ends in *s*. Hook (1999) sets forth five usage rules, three of which correspond with Smalzer's first and second guidelines. Offering greater specificity, however, Hook recommends adding an apostrophe and an *s* to for the possessive of single-syllable nouns and proper names ending in a sibilant in the singular form, such as *Jones's*, *moose's*, *box's*, and *Oz's* (1999, p. 45). Furthermore, Hook suggests adding only an apostrophe to "words of more than one syllable ending in a sibilant, particularly in the case of familiar names", such as *Jesus'*, *Sophocles'*, *goodness'*, and *conscience'*, though the author admits there are exceptions "occasioned by stylistic or euphonious needs" (Hook, 1999, p. 45). At first, implementing these rules might not seem to be a daunting task. However, Hook goes on to add five or six more rules relating to possession which govern joint or individual possession, official names of organizations or geographical terms, double possessives, gerunds, and a number of idiomatic expressions (p. 267). What is more, Hook continues with "a few incidental, non-possessive rules" regarding the apostrophe which serve to indicate "certain exceptional plural formations," such as *dotting one's i's*, *the three R's*, *no more 9's*, and *no if's, and's, or but's* (1999, p. 267). The rules advocated by Hook (1999) and Smalzer (1996) are summarized in the following table:

³ In some cases, the presence of an apostrophe does affect pronunciation, as in *Ross' shoe*.

Apostrophe Rule*:	Example:
1. Use an apostrophe to replace missing letters in contractions	they're, it's
2. Use an apostrophe to indicate possession <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Add 's to singular nouns, indefinite nouns, and plural nouns with irregular plurals Add only an apostrophe to plural nouns ending in <i>s</i> Add an apostrophe only or 's to singular nouns ending in <i>s</i>). <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Add 's to form the possessive of single-syllable nouns and proper names ending in a sibilant in the singular In multi-syllabic words ending in a sibilant, particularly in the case of familiar names, one usually adds only an apostrophe, though there are exceptions occasioned by stylistic or euphonious needs Unspecified rules exist governing joint or individual possession, official names of organizations or geographical terms, double possessives, gerunds, and a number of idiomatic expressions 	a. John's car, everyone's b. the boys' room c. waitress' tips or waitress's tips 1. moose's, Jones's, box's 2. Jesus', Sophocles', goodness' 3. no examples cited
3. "Incidental, non-possessive" rules exist for using the apostrophe to indicate certain exceptional plural formations (for example, of alphabetical letters, some symbols, some numbers, and with reference to words)	dot one's <i>i's</i> the three <i>R's</i> no more <i>9's</i> no <i>if's</i> and <i>'s</i> or <i>but's</i>

*Rules extrapolated from Hook (1999) pages 44-45 and Smalzer (1996) page 267.

V. Misuse

Due to the confusion regarding rules of usage, the apostrophe is often misused. One major area of confusion is that words with apostrophes can be confused with their homophones, e.g., *who's* vs. *whose*, *you're* vs. *your*, *there's* vs. *theirs*, and *it's* vs. *its*. Hook (1999) offers several possible reasons for its misuse, which reflect the fact that it is incorrectly being used to represent speech in writing. For example, the presence of allophones of plurals and names that end in *s* give rise to errors such as *the girls'* to represent *girls* plural or *The Roberts' / The Roberts's* to represent *Robertses* plural. Other reasons include overcorrection of possessive pronouns, such as using *it's* instead of *its*. The frequent misuse of apostrophes in print, including in newspapers and magazines, can also lead to confusion.

Hook (1999) gives various examples of apostrophes used incorrectly⁴ in print. For example, he notes that a Re/Max realtor's flyer included the phrase "**Seller's* must keep a log of all potential **buyer's...*", and a store in New Orleans used signs that read "*Men's* Dept.", "*Women's* Dept.", and "**Boy's* Dept." In addition, he remarks on viewing the sentence "*This is not *our's, *its *her's*" on an Internet site, and seeing two signs in front of the same business; one that read "*Brown's* Motel" and the other that read "**Browns* Motel". Clearly, these businesspeople were unsure of how to correctly use the apostrophe, even to the point of using the same phrase with and without an apostrophe.

⁴ An asterisk (*) denotes an ungrammatical form.

VI. Teaching

Frequent instances of misuse by native speakers of English, including errors in signs, flyers, and websites, compound the confusion for non-native speakers learning English. The question is: how can the apostrophe be taught effectively? Allen (1997) argues that a major source of students' errors with apostrophes stems from the organic approach, whose advocates do students a disservice by assuming that "there is something vaguely indecent about providing direct or explicit instruction in the details of mechanics and grammar" (p. 83). Instead, Allen calls for direct, explicit instruction rather than avoiding the issue altogether or providing a generic rule with a never-ending list of exceptions. Allen's strategy for teaching the possessive apostrophe is to convert a phrase such as *the dog's paw* to *the paw of the dog*. To form the possessive, add 's to the end of the word that is the object of the preposition. The result would be *dog's*. If the word already ends in *s*, such as *the clothes of the girls*, the same rule is applied, and the result is *the girls's clothes*. Then drop the second *s* to make it easier to pronounce; the final product is *the girls' clothes*. This simple rule avoids the need to memorize exceptions because it works with irregular plurals, such as *the clothes of the men*, which changes to *the men's clothes*. Even though this explicit method of teaching apostrophes exists, it only covers the use of the apostrophe to form the possessive; it does not address the many other functions of the apostrophe. Furthermore, some teachers may choose not to teach the apostrophe explicitly at all. Unfortunately, it seems that students of English are not learning to correctly use apostrophes by osmosis. Explicit instruction of the apostrophe, using methods such as Allen describes, is necessary if the apostrophe is to survive.

VII. The Future of the Apostrophe

At the same time that new generations of English learners are not learning how to use the apostrophe correctly, there are those who advocate that apostrophes not be used at all. The outlook for the future of the apostrophe is not good—at least for those who would prefer to retain it. Barfoot (1991) laments that "the abnegated apostrophe is a victim of the modern designer's partiality for a clean streamlined look" (p. 134). Current attitudes toward the use of the apostrophe support this idea; Crystal (1995) notes that "[m]any modern sign-writers and typographical designers leave the apostrophe out because they think it looks fussy and old-fashioned" (p. 203). The *New York Times Manual of Style and Usage* (1999) reflects this trend toward omission in general use, noting that apostrophes can often be left out of proper names of organizations, such as *Citizens Union* instead of *Citizens' Union*, and that common abbreviated forms also omit the apostrophe, such as *cello* or *phone*, even though letters have been omitted (Siegal & Connolly, p. 24).

Allen (1997) postulates that if teachers "preserve the apostrophe in [their] own writing, but assiduously decline to teach it to [their] students, it quickly becomes a shibboleth⁵ for

⁵ The term *shibboleth*, which today refers to a word or pronunciation that distinguishes people from one group or another, arises from the following Biblical story: "Jephthah then called together the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. The Gileadites struck them down because the Ephraimites had said, 'You Gileadites are renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh.' The Gileadites captured the fords of the

sorting classes of knowers according to their various levels of initiation” (p.84). While Allen notes the social stratification that the apostrophe could someday reflect, others take a more descriptivist perspective on what is currently happening in the language. For example, certain forms are now being used to replace apostrophes, such as *student union* for *students’ union*, because language users are untrained in the use of the apostrophe and thus avoid it altogether (Allerton, 1993, p. 567). Furthermore, the apostrophe tends to be dropped from company names, a development that started at the turn of the twentieth century (Crystal, 1995, p. 203). Examples include *Harrods* (which prescriptively should be *Harrod’s*), which used the apostrophe up until around 1920, but then dropped it. Another example is *Lloyds* (technically *Lloyds’*), which used the apostrophe until 1889, at which time it was dropped (Barfoot, 1991, p. 133). As Battistella (1997, pp. 98-99) observes, misuse of the apostrophe by well-known companies serves to further confuse language users, who assume that apostrophes would be used correctly by corporate authorities.

Place names are also dropping the apostrophe, such as changing *Henry’s Fork* to *Henrys Fork*. The United States Board on Geographic Names is responsible for such changes. The Board determines how place names appear on federal maps and in other documents, and their policy states:

[a]postrophes suggesting possession or association are not to be used within the body of a proper geographic name (Henrys Fork: not Henry’s Fork)Apostrophes may be used within the body of a geographic name to denote a missing letter (Lake O’ the Woods) or when they normally exist in a surname used as part of a geographic name (O’Malley Hollow) (Gasque, 1997, p. 196).

The Board’s reasoning for deleting the possessive apostrophes is that it is not necessary to show possession. Moreover, standardizing place names saves time and money, since editors do not have to look up whether a name has an apostrophe or not (Gasque, 1997, p. 199). Only four U.S. place names have been able to keep their apostrophes officially, either by political pressure (in the case of *Martha’s Vineyard*), or by proving that the omission caused confusion, such as *John E’s Pond* instead of *John Es Pond*, RI and *Ike’s Point* instead of *Ikes Point*, NJ, whereby the version without the apostrophe could be misconstrued as another name. Finally, *Carlos Elmer’s Joshua View* was able to keep the apostrophe instead of becoming *Carlos Elmers Joshua View*, AZ, because without the apostrophe, the reference to a cliff overlooking Joshua trees could be confused with a name. (Gasque, 1997, p. 198). The overwhelming trend, however, is to reduce the use of apostrophes in place names.

Still others advocate dropping the apostrophe more widely. For example, Room (1989) considered the pros and cons of “axing” the apostrophe, and argues that apostrophes are

Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, ‘Let me cross over,’ the men of Gilead asked him, ‘Are you an Ephraimite?’ If he replied, ‘No,’ they said, ‘Alright, say ‘Shibboleth.’ If he said, ‘Sibboleth,’ because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed at that time.” (Judges 12: 4-6.)

completely unnecessary. For Room, the advantages of eliminating apostrophes are that confusion with spelling and punctuation would disappear, and writing would be streamlined. Addressing opponents who might argue there would be confusion with homographs such as if *we're* were spelled *were* and *we'll* were spelled *well*, he argues that this is not truly a drawback because “the context should soon show which word is meant, and grammatical parameters would make ambiguity unlikely” (Room, 1989, p. 23). The only place he predicts apostrophes might remain is in family names, such as *O'Shea*. Otherwise, he argues in favor of sending the apostrophe into oblivion. Others have expressed similar sentiments. For example, Crystal (1995) notes that “in most cases [the apostrophe's] omission causes no ambiguity, as the context makes it clear whether the *-s* ending refers to number or case, and whether it expresses a singular or a plural genitive meaning” (p. 203). Qualifying his remark, Crystal goes on to say that there are instances in which an apostrophe could provide a clear distinction in meaning; moreover, while its omission may not be entirely problematic, there is still pressure to continue to teach its prescriptive uses in American elementary schools (p. 203).

George Bernard Shaw acted upon his belief in the inefficacy of apostrophes by deliberately leaving apostrophes out of his plays (Crystal, 1995, p. 277). While most people are not actively campaigning to abandon apostrophes altogether, Shaw completely ignored the social pressure to maintain the correct usage of the apostrophe. If Room and Crystal's arguments hold true, perhaps others will follow Shaw's example in the future.

Certain forms (e.g., *teachers union*) are already being used without apostrophes as a coping mechanism to avoid the problem of figuring out when and where to use the apostrophe. Uncertainty regarding the future of the apostrophe leads to an interesting analysis by Larson (1998) who writes, “The apostrophe is dead because reading is dead” (p.736). He remarks on observing incorrect apostrophe usage in newspapers, magazines, op-ed articles, and even museum plaques and book titles. Unfortunately, however, even those who are still reading are likely to encounter the apostrophe used incorrectly.

Larson also notes that writing today is ephemeral, such as in e-mails, where accuracy often does not seem to matter because the message is gone so quickly. He laments that his college writing students, and perhaps more importantly, major publications, do not seem concerned about the rampant misuse of apostrophes. Arguing that people are resorting to either incorrectly using apostrophes or rewording sentences to avoid possessives and contractions, he predicts that in the near future, “no one will be certain about grammatical usage anyway. Computers will come without an apostrophe key” (Larson, 1998, p. 736).

It is easy to see the connection between Larson's concerns and what Baron (2002) terms today's “Whatever” generation of language users, who seem unconcerned about grammatical accuracy. Many high school and college-age students use writing as a direct representation of speech, and see little need for accuracy in mechanics such as apostrophes. Baron argues that these language users have been shaped by a combination of factors (p. 4). First of all, as education has become more student-centered and focused on students' self-expression, emphasis on accuracy has been lost. Secondly, this

generation of speakers is immersed in a culture of acceptance whereby questioning and analyzing are not exploited; it is easier to simply say, “Whatever.” As Larson (1998) puts it, his college students, (who are, in Baron’s terms, members of the “Whatever” generation), would argue, “What’s the big deal, anyway? Who cares whether it’s *its* or *it’s*?” (p. 734). He and Baron agree that computer use, such as e-mailing and instant messaging, has a lax approach to writing, where accuracy is not important, but speed of communication is. Thus, the “Whatever” generation’s writing shows the effect of the desire for speed in writing, because accuracy in mechanics is sacrificed in the rush to communicate as quickly as possible. Once again, the apostrophe’s future seems dismal; it will most likely be sacrificed in the quest for speed.

VIII. Conclusion

The apostrophe originated from a confused past, and that confusion has yet to subside. Its early use to indicate missing letters or sounds created many dilemmas for writers attempting to capture speech in writing. The expansion of the functions of the apostrophe has served to further complicate its use. Even professional editors and writers are often unsure of how to use “the aberrant apostrophe.” The apostrophe’s troubled past points to a bleak future, as its functions are becoming less and less clear for many writers today. If younger generations continue to use writing as a medium for representing fleeting speech, the apostrophe might eventually be lost forever.

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