

Irvin Hashimoto

PAIN AND SUFFERING: APOSTROPHES AND ACADEMIC LIFE

Editor's Note: One of my favorite journal articles is Irvin Hashimoto's "Toward a Taxonomy of Scholarly Publication" (College English, September 1983) which draws—literally—parallels between the classification system of World War II naval vessels and academic publishing. In the tradition of visual whimsy and wisdom, and as a gentle parting plea from the outgoing editor that we keep alive that tradition, JBW proudly presents its first New Yorker cartoon to accompany an essay.

I doubt that many of us take much time arguing about the rules for using the apostrophe. But anyone who's taught composition very long knows that even simple rules cause us pain. Deep inside, I feel my forehead twinge and my mind begin to bend and whip around itself as time and time again my students abuse apostrophes right before my eyes:

The improvements for today's society are great and of many.

This term means, in general, to respect a person's rights and to act accordingly.

A person's life is not improved by acknowledgement of a chicken's worth.

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Unlike many religions that insist that their's is the only means for salvation . . .

I still feel tweaks of guilt and anger and fear when I read such stuff—guilt that somehow my teaching hasn't taken root; anger that somehow my students still don't know beans about apostrophes, and fear that one day one of the Dean's moles is going to stick his or her head in my door and ask me if i *really* thought I could get away with sending my students apostrophe-less out into the academic community.

But I'm getting better about my guilt and my fear and my frustration, and I'm just about ready to lay the blame somewhere else.

First, I want to lay a large chunk of the blame on a rather strong *handbook tradition* that leads us all to look for simple, clear, rules and conveniently makes the whole notion of "complexity" our students' fault. We tell students that apostrophes are easy, that all they have to do is to use 's to show possession and we say to those who don't understand, "Well, lookit up." Or maybe we give them simple handbook exercises on apostrophes:

John (*Adams*) letters to his wife illuminate his character.

She studied the (*goddesses*) roles in Greek myths.

The (*utilities companies*) recent price increases are unlawful.
(*The Little, Brown Handbook* 354)

And by doing so, we ignore the ugly truth: the rules for apostrophes are much more messy than they appear in typical handbook practice.

Even when our students do go to their handbooks and "lookit up," they learn all kinds of confusing things. They learn, for instance, that even though they're supposed to add 's for possession, they're not supposed to add 's to words that end in s-sounds like "conscience" and "sapience" and "Constance" and "Prudence" and "Hortense."

Students learn that even though teachers often tell them *never* to use apostrophes to make plurals, people use apostrophes all the time to make plurals of numbers or letters or maybe confusing abbrev.'s or words named as words such as *bananas* in the sentence, "I put three *banana's* in my first paragraph." And they learn that there are exceptions to exceptions: even though you're not supposed to use apostrophes to make plurals, you're sometimes allowed to make plurals with apostrophes with numbers or letters or abbrev.'s, unless you spell those numbers out or use them in combinations

like “1980s” or “1920s” or if you happen to use letters in combinations like “PhD” or “MA”—unless those letters are lower-case in sentences like, “There are three b’s in *abbab*” (Turabian 31).

And they learn what to do about people like Jesus, Moses, Xerxes, and Confucius. Turabian tells them, for instance, that it’s more correct to say “Moses’ Laws,” “Jesus’ Ministry” and “Xerxes’ victories” than to say “Confucius’ lessons” because Jesus and Moses are Jesus and Moses and Xerxes is a “hellenized name” of more than one syllable, but “Confucius” is just an old name for an old Chinese dude (31). But Strunk and White suggest that despite what Turabian says, it’s probably *better* to say “the laws of Moses” and “the temple of Isis” than to say “Moses’ Laws” or “Isis’ Temple” (Strunk and White 1).

And they learn that the whole notion of “possession” is rather screwy and ill-defined. What, in fact, does it mean to “possess” something? Certainly, in simple cases, it’s clear who owns or owned what when we say, “John’s dog ate Joan’s cat” or “The students sat in Mr. Hughe’s car.” (Of course, that’s equally clear even if you don’t use any apostrophes at all—“Johns dog ate Joans cat,” but that’s not the point.)

Unfortunately, things are not always that clear. The *Simon and Schuster Handbook for Writers* says that you use “possessive case” to show “ownership” or “close relationship” (457). The *McGraw-Hill College Handbook* tells us that apostrophes can “show that an entity has a particular attribute, quality, value or feature” (449). But *The Little, Brown Handbook* says you can use the apostrophe to “indicate possessive case” in sentences like this, too:

She took two *years’* leave from school.

For *conscience’* sake she confessed her lie. (353)

But for goodness sake, how do those “years” own or “possess” a “leave”? Do years have rights to ownership? If not, how does a “sake” belong to a “conscience”? Is there, in fact, a “close relationship” between those “years” and their “leave”? If so, how would you characterize it? Or would you say that “conscience” is an “entity” and that “sake” is an “attribute, quality, value or feature” of “conscience”?

While we’re still on the subject of “possession” or close relationship or entities with attributes, qualities, values or features, what about other cases of “possessive case” like “three days’ rent” or “three weeks’ pay” where days don’t rent anything and weeks certainly don’t pay very much. And what about “Abe’s running for

President upset Mary” or “Tom’s being sick ruined Thanksgiving”? Does Tom actually “own” his “being”? Does he really have a “close relationship” with his being? Is his “being” simply an “attribute” or “feature”? (Surely there’s something metaphysical in all that.)

And there are so many other problems out there to worry about. Certainly, there’s a difference, for instance, between the following pairs of sentences:

1. (a) The evidence points to Jones’ committing the crime.
 (b) The evidence points to Jones committing the crime.
2. (a) Karoll and Black argue that by far the most serious consequence arising from teens holding after-school jobs is poor school performances.
 (b) Karoll and Black argue that by far the most serious consequence arising from teens’ holding after-school jobs is poor school performances.

While the difference here has something to do with “possession,” it also has something to do with some sort of *intention* of the writer and “objects of prepositions” and “participles” and “verbs used as nouns”—and I don’t know how long it would take me to tell my students about such things. I once knew a man who grew old and small and his body degenerated and his brain actually dried up and blew out of the window one day while he was trying one more time to explain something about objects of prepositions and participles to a class that knew full well that they could probably write *all* their papers for the rest of their academic careers without knowing anything about objects of prepositions and special kinds of “intention.”

Lately, I’ve started asking myself other questions that handbooks apparently don’t know anything about, and I’m getting more and more resigned to a rather messy life. If you can say both “the flag of our country” and “our country’s flag,” why can you say “three quarters of the country” but not “three quarters’ of our country”—or “our country’s three quarters”? Why can’t you say, “The class read each others’ books”? Why do people in Indiana make such a point to emphasize the distinction between “Indiana University” (yes) and “The University of Indiana” (no) when “Indiana’s University” or “The University of Indiana’s” may be even better?

That last example is a clear case of what the handbook of Harbrace’s calls a “double possessive”—much like “the garden of Al’s”—where you use that apostrophe along with the preposition “of” to show possession. Unfortunately, like everything else, the rules for using such double possessives are rather vague. Why, for

instance, do people usually say “the garden of Mr. Smith” but not “the garden of Mr. Smith’s”? (Or, in fact, *do* they? At least they do in my family, but I don’t know about the fellow across the street. He doesn’t even kill the dandelions in his lawn.)

Why do we get upset when our students write something like “Whatever happened to childhood, that golden age free from the cares of the fast-paced, crazed adult world’s”? And how do we explain to them that somehow, that just *looks* ugly?

Suppose you happen to own three pairs of blue jeans made by Levi Strauss and Company. And each of those jeans is called a “pair of Levi’s”—or simply “Levi’s.” If each of those three pairs of pants have frayed cuffs, do you say, “My Levi’ses’ cuffs are frayed” or “My Levi’s’s cuffs are frayed” or “My jeans are frayed”?

The other day on television, I happened to see a sign advertising, “CBS Sports Coverage of the National Football League”—but why wasn’t that “CBS’s Sports Coverage of the National Football League”? or “CBS Sports’ Coverage of the National Football League”? or “CBS’ Sports Coverage of the National Football League”? I suppose the difference here has something to do with the functions of modifiers and the distinction between *possession* and *modification*. A similar problem occurs with common holidays such as “Mothers’ Day” (or “Mothers Day”? or “Mother’s Day”? or “Day of Mother’s”?) and “Valentine’s Day” (or “Valentines’ Day”? or “Valentines Day”?). But I don’t exactly know how I learned to fuss over such things, and I don’t really know if anyone else out there besides us English teachers really cares or sees the point at all if I happen to say “Valentines Day” on purpose or “Mothers’ Day” as distinct from “Father’s Day.”

Certainly, nobody worries like English teachers—least of all those students who have other *big* things to learn—like how to keep track of that good idea for Great Works or how to flounder through Sociology without looking too foolish. Or how to use COMMAS. (Somehow, commas are always a lot more important to my students than those apostrophes.)

And out there in the big world, other folk don’t seem to worry much, either. Take a Number 21 bus up Wilshire Avenue sometime and you’ll see a nice sign for Temptations Ladies Wear right next door to Venus Ladies Wear for Junior Missey. And Breuners Renting Furniture. And Ogdens One-Hour Cleaners. And Carl’s Jr. Restaurant. Take a trip down Isaacs Avenue and you’ll find that Joe Albertson’s supermarket is called “Albertsons.” And down at the Bonanza 88, they’re advertising “toy’s” for twenty percent off. And down in Milton-Freewater, the roadside stands are advertising “tomato’s” for ten cents a pound. And down at the end of Figueroa,

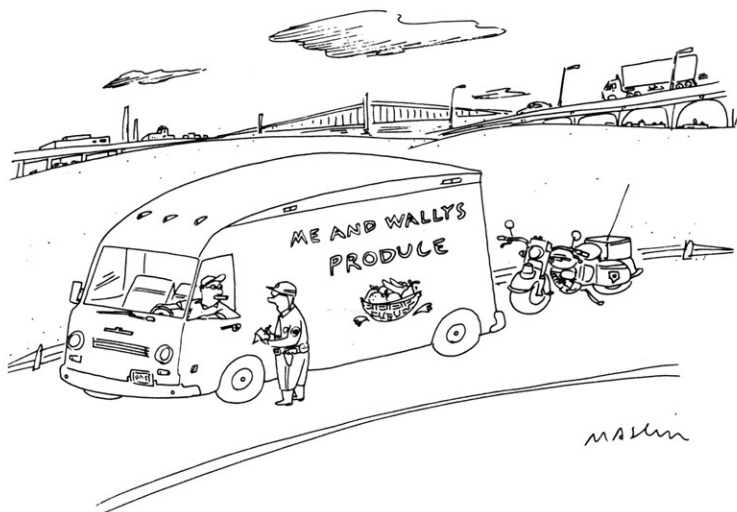
the Joneses have a sign all carved out with some kind of woodburning tool that reads, "The Jones's."

A couple of years ago, you could go anyplace in the U.S.A. and find a department store called Montgomery Ward and Company—or "Wards"—an apostrophe-free nickname perhaps analogous to "Sears"—a name that more legitimately comes from "Sears Roebuck and Company." (Recently, "Wards" seems to have suffered economic setbacks—but I don't think apostrophes have had anything to do with it.)¹

The problem is simple. We've got oversimple rules and oversimple explanations of those oversimple rules and oversimple examples of those oversimple explanations and even an oversimple public that doesn't seem to want to worry much about oversimple explanations or oversimple examples or even the oversimple sweat that comes off our foreheads as we wade into the wonderful sea of arbitrary punctuation. And while we exhort our beginning writers to follow oversimple rules and read oversimple explanations and while we predict bad things for lazy bums and lackluster punctuators, they act as if they have lot's more to worry about—bigger games to play, tickets to tomorrow, appointments with some Giver of Great Ideas.

And while we continue to exhort them to follow our oversimple rules and try to talk to them about "possession" and entities with qualities, values, and features and our hair starts coming out in clumps and we lose weight and become small—and as we try to explain the mysteries of apostrophes used with words that end in *s* and why "it's" is related to "yours" and not "your's" and why we don't use (unless we're supposed to) apostrophes for plurals, our students quietly ignore us and our rules and make up their own, perhaps more friendly and forgiving rules—"Never use 's to form a plural unless it looks better (as in *lot's* and *Jones'*) or if you've seen it that way down at the Bonanza 88." "Never use 's an apostrophe with a gerund." "Never use 'Levi's' in the possessive." "Always use *it's* both for possession and for *it is*—unless you want to risk two rules instead of one." "When in doubt, leave those apostrophes out unless the word ends in *s* in it's original form or is plural or is one syllable or less or is in a place where no one will notice. Then make your decision based on euphony, common sense, and/or analogy."

Lately, I've been trying to be a lot more calm about apostrophes. I still mark a fair number of them in the margin and try to help students to learn how to write "it's" for "it is" and how to recognize simple problems like the "dogs bone" and "Hashimotos brain." But



"Sorry, but I'm going to have to issue you a summons for reckless grammar and driving without an apostrophe."

Drawing by Maslin; © 1987 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

I'm slowly learning how difficult such ideas are for some students in a world where apostrophes are not so important, where life goes on with or without punctuation, where confusion rustles quietly around students' ankles or makes only small whining noises in the margins of their papers. And with my new vision of the world and the state of the apostrophe, my blood pressure's going down and right now I'm beginning to understand the sycamore tree outside my office window.

Given the state of the world and everything beginning writers have to learn in composition class, at some point, we all probably need to think about priorities and sycamore trees. How much time and sweat and exercising do we really want to spend on pesky little, almost meaningless punctuation marks? How much blame should we accept for our students' poor showing in the use of such marks? How much credit should we claim for our good teaching when our students suddenly or miraculously begin to punctuate better and annoy us less with their apparent willful ignorance? (I suspect we should accept as little blame as possible and with apostrophes at least, we should probably accept only a little credit—the credit we deserve for keeping our expectations reasonable and ignoring all the fluff that often distracts us from other, more important things.)

Note

¹ For a more formal discussion of the history of apostrophes and even more strange examples of current usage (or nonusage) of apostrophes, see Sklar.

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