

## FEATURES

## That redundant punctuational paraphernalia



Janet Holmes

## WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

applications. The shorter forms give an impression of informality and friendliness, and they are used in e-mails and text messages — often without any apostrophe. And without causing any confusion.

The second use of the apostrophe signals possession, as in “the girl’s desk”, “Hilton’s car”, “Elton’s piano”. The general rule is: put the apostrophe after the possessor and add an “s”, but there are many unclear cases, as Bauer illustrated.

There is one even more bewildering usage, namely, the use of “its” without an apostrophe as in “the dog slunk into its kennel” or “the buffalo did its best to fight off its attacker”. All these examples of “its” (did you notice there are three?) are associated with possession, and they are parallels to

“his” and “our” and “your”. But none has an apostrophe.

The rule is that pronouns never have apostrophes. Only nouns have apostrophes to mark them as possessive. But since children rarely learn what pronouns are, it is hard for them to apply this rule.

Are you now thoroughly confused? Our students are certainly flummoxed by all this jabberwockery. They write incorrectly, “Chomsky produced a revolutionary book and it’s reception was suitably enthusiastic”. As good teachers, we delete their apostrophe in “it’s” and explain that you use an apostrophe in the word “it’s” only when it signals that letters have been omitted (“i” or “ha”, from “it is” or “it has”). “But it’s possessive”, they complain. “That only applies to nouns,” we

say patiently. You can see the problem I am sure.

So why not simply abolish apostrophes? Getting rid of them will solve all these problems.

George Bernard Shaw, an astute evaluator of the ways in which people’s attitudes are often influenced by superficialities (such as accent and punctuation), advocated the abolition of the apostrophe, which he described as one example of the “uncouth bacilli” which desecrate our writing system.

So let’s do it and free up attention for more important aspects of language, such as content and meaning.

I am sure those of you who disagree with me are even now working furiously to find words and phrases which (out of context) might be ambiguous without an

apostrophe. Well, note how long it takes you to find examples, and then consider that your distant forebears complained when people stopped using capital letters for nouns (as the Germans still do), and not long ago people protested just as vehemently about deleting the full stops after Mr and Mrs.

The truth is that people who have learned how to use apostrophes have a vested interest in maintaining them. It’s like correct grammar. Learning all those rules has to mean something doesn’t it?

This is basically a way of sorting the wheat from the chaff. It’s a means some employers use to decide who they will employ and who they won’t. Like Lynne Truss, author of *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, they regard accurate

apostrophe usage as a sign of literacy.

As a result they miss out on some brilliant people who don’t see the point of investing brain space in learning silly arbitrary rules, but who are perfectly capable of using apostrophes, or any other hieroglyphics, when they judge them truly crucial to meaning — in computer programs for instance.

And though I could hardly write a whole article about the apostrophe without using some, consider the last few paragraphs and reflect on whether apostrophe omission created confusion — or just prescriptive dyspepsia.

■ Janet Holmes teaches sociolinguistics at Victoria University.

■ Send your questions about language to [words@dompost.co.nz](mailto:words@dompost.co.nz)

**L**AST week Laurie Bauer described the challenges facing those who aspire to the “correct” use of apostrophes. In this column, despite serious opposition from some of my friends, including a number of highly qualified professors (in disciplines other than linguistics, I hasten to add), I intend to pose the question: Do we really need apostrophes?

In my opinion apostrophes are largely redundant punctuational paraphernalia, supported by those who have learned how to use them in order to keep those who haven’t in their subordinate place. It is a challenge to find contexts in which omitting this tiny symbol causes genuine misunderstanding.

There are two main functions of the apostrophe. The first is a signal

that something has been omitted. This something is usually totally predictable. Consider “I’m”, “let’s”, “didn’t”, “you’re”. In every case you know exactly what the missing letter is: a, u, o, a.

The full form is more formal and “correct”, and appropriately used in formal reports and job