

FEATURES

Greengrocer not the only one who's confused



Laurie Bauer

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

When I was in school in the 1960s, it was fashionable to write "1960's", but today it is fashionable to miss the apostrophe out.

Why did people write "1960's" with an apostrophe? It was a generalisation of the rule that anything that was not a real word should have an apostrophe before the

plural marker. People wrote "&'s", "if's and but's", and "1960's". We would probably still write, "The teacher only gave seven A's in a class of a hundred". It's the same rule, but it has become more restricted over the last half-century.

At an even earlier period, it was also general to put an apostrophe after a foreign word that ended in a vowel other than "e". People used to write "cello's", "piano's" and "sonata's".

We no longer do that, though whether the people who write "pizza's" and "taxi's" as plurals are continuing the same (now no longer fashionable) usage or are just incompetent is a matter we could no doubt discuss.

There is clearly some incom-

petent usage: notices advertising "apple's", "cabbage's" and even "peach's" are so common that the phenomenon is known as the greengrocer's apostrophe, though it is not only greengrocers who get it wrong (and not all greengrocers do).

Then there's the matter of possession, and in particular the word "its". This will be treated by Janet Holmes in a future column, but it is not all plain sailing.

THEN there's the question of plural possessors. "A girl's books" are owned by one girl, and if two girls own the books, we say, "Two girls' books". Easy.

But what if you want to say "two books that are intended for

young females"; is it "two girl's books", "two girls' books" or "two girls books"? Less easy.

Even within academia, people are unsure whether to write "masters degrees", "master's degrees" or "masters' degrees".

And what if the aforementioned books were not owned by girls but by women? Then a woman's books and two women's books both have the apostrophe before the "s", even though one is singular and one is plural. Similarly if the women were alumnae: the alumnae's books.

Of course, it is relatively easy to tidy up these odds and ends, but it makes the point that you need to be very careful in specifying what the rule is if you will then expect

people to follow the rule and not make errors.

When we get to proper names, all rules break down. It's St John's in Newfoundland, but St Helens in Lancashire and Washington State. The newspaper is *Hawke's Bay Today*, but it is Hawkes Bay Golf Club.

And if you look in the restaurant listings in Wellington's yellow pages, you can find listings for Ford's, Mano's, Maria Pia's and Scorpio's and also for Alfred Coles House, Charltons, Firemans Arms, Uncle Changs and for both Valentines and Valentine's (the same restaurant).

In other words, though we can all agree that the notice advertising Golden Delicieu's apples reported a

few years ago in Britain contained an error, there are plenty of places where it is not easy to get it right.

And as a final example, consider the following: "in three months time" — should there be an apostrophe in "months" or not?

There is an answer here. Given that we would say "in one month's time" where the "s" cannot be plural and so must have an apostrophe, it must also be "in three months' time".

But would you have got that right?

■ Laurie Bauer is a linguist from Victoria University.

■ Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz