



Apostrophes a fraught territory in lens of linguistic landscape



Paul Warren
WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

IF YOU see me wandering down Lambton Quay with my digital camera it is not because I want to outdo Wellington City Council's spy car and snap folk parking illegally, but because I am thinking of embarking – temporarily at least – on a “linguistic landscape” approach to that smallest but perhaps largest of problems, the apostrophe.

Linguistic landscapes are the words and phrases that surround us, most obviously perhaps in graffiti and on notices, posters, shop windows and in shop names. Studying linguistic landscapes can provide some fascinating insights into how people use language in some everyday contexts. But I think I may need the zoom lens to spot any apostrophes.

While I was in the UK recently, I read about the decision made by the bookshop chain Waterstone's to abandon its apostrophe. According to some of the response to this decision, this is tantamount to abandoning all normal and rational behaviour, but in the words of the company itself it is because “Waterstones without an apostrophe is, in a digital world of URLs and email addresses, a more versatile and practical spelling”. My first thought was that waterstone.com might work just as well as a URL as waterstones.com. It doesn't. I've tried it, and the former appears to have been acquired by an American swimming pool construction company,

which might be a factor in the decision to keep the “s” but drop the apostrophe.

Another reason the company gives for the change is that although the chain was founded by one man, Tim Waterstone (educated at St Catherine's College, Cambridge – note the apostrophe), it “is now built on the continued contribution of thousands of individual booksellers”. Lots of Waterstones indeed.

This got me thinking about Wellington bookshops, both present and recently deceased. I was tempted to cast my net wider (Farmers, Dwights, Kimberleys, Hallensteins, Barkers), but the furore in the UK over a seller of books being so cavalier about punctuation suggested that bookshops might make a good starting point. There are many with a final “s”, and I wondered whether any of them have gone the way of Waterstones. So with apologies to Unity Books and Capital Books, which get this passing mention but are out of the frame, what have I discovered?

At least three “s” bookshops definitely should not have an apostrophe before their “s”, on account of the “s” already being in the name. Whitcoulls was formed by the merger of Whitcombe and Tombs with Coulls Somerville Wilkie Limited. The Coulls is a plural, reflecting the fact that there were multiple family members in the original company. Borders was set up by



brothers Tom and Louis Borders in Ann Arbor, Michigan – so again a plural “s”, although the company website cannot decide whether the name is a plural (Borders are proud) or a singular (Borders embraces its role). Parsons was established in Wellington by Roy Parsons just after World War II, so once more the “s” was in the name.

Bennetts is a business bought from John Watt by George Bennett, so should perhaps be Bennett’s. It seems that its website “about us” page desperately wanted an apostrophe, as it starts with “Bennetts’ exists to serve students and the campus communities of which they are a part”.

Dymocks, late of Lambton Quay, but still in Lower Hutt and elsewhere in New Zealand, Australia and Hong Kong, was

set up in Sydney in 1879 by William Dymock, as William Dymock Bookseller (there is an old photograph of the original shopfront on its website). It is unclear whether there was ever an apostrophe, or when the plural arose. It looks though that Dymocks beat Waterstones to this innovation.

Finally, Arty Bees is an interesting case. On its website founder Bob Birch tells us that the name came about from his initials, R.T.B. So the first shop was Arty Bee’s, to which a Bizzy Bee’s bookshop was later added, before the two merged to Arty Bees. That’s a conversion from a possessive to a plural that makes good sense, it seems to me.

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