

The Well Bred Sentence

Chapter 10: The Apostrophe

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Basic fact

The apostrophe is a single raised comma ['] rather like the figure '9'. It performs two quite different functions in English:

- indicates a genitive relationship;
- indicates that a word is contracted or abbreviated.

The genitive apostrophe

The genitive apostrophe indicates that certain relationships exist between a noun and another noun. (See the discussion in Chapter 2, The Parts of Speech, 'genitive-case nouns'.)

Placing the genitive apostrophe

The apostrophe after the plural form of a noun indicates that the noun names several participants, and that those participants are in genitive relationship with another named participant:

the girls' problem: A problem is described as the problem of several girls.

the women's decision: A decision is described as the decision of several women.

a teachers' college: There is a category 'college' that is for teachers;

the three teams' captains: Several collective participants: three teams, have captains.

The apostrophe after the singular form of the noun indicates that one participant is in genitive relationship with another participant:

the girl's problems: One participant, the girl, has problems;

the group's problems: One collective participant, the group, has problems.

The genitive *its*

We are used to the idea that the apostrophe expresses genitive relationships, so it comes as a surprise that *its*, the neuter pronoun that expresses a genitive relationship with a noun, does not contain an apostrophe:

Its coat is the shiniest I have seen on a dog.
[GENITIVE ITS]

The other genitive pronouns

The other pronouns that express genitive relationships are the personal pronouns. **They are not marked by the apostrophe:**

YOURS This dog is yours.
OURS Ours are the cleanest shoes in the room.
THEIRS Theirs are not well-made shoes.
HIS/HERS The house is his/hers.
WHOSE We spoke to the girl whose dog is lost.
MINE The error was mine.

The odd *one*

The only word that stands for a name, can express a genitive relationship and does so with an apostrophe is *one's*:

One's home is one's castle.
These ones' prices are acceptable.

Noting that *one* behaves just like any noun, some say it is not a pronoun at all: It is a noun.

'It is' contracted to it's

One must simply remember that there is an apostrophe in the word spelt i-t-s only to contract 'it is' to 'it's':

It's a long time since we've seen you.
'IT IS' CONTRACTED

Genitive pronouns and their homophones

There are words that sound like genitives but are in fact not genitives. They must be carefully distinguished from genitives because their meanings and their spellings are completely different from their genitive homophones:

their GENITIVE PRONOUN
Their eyes are blue.

they're (they are) CONTRACTION
I love apples. They're good to eat.

there LOCATIVE PRONOUN AND ADVERB
Canterbury is lovely. We live there. [*locative pronoun*]
There it is! [*adverb*]

theirs GENITIVE PRONOUN
Theirs is a happy marriage.

there's (there is) CONTRACTION

There's Mary!

your GENITIVE PRONOUN

Your hair is pretty.

you're (you are) CONTRACTION

You're coming with us!

whose GENITIVE PRONOUN

Whose friend are you?

The man whose dog was lost is here.

who's (who is) CONTRACTION

Who's that at the door?

one's GENITIVE PRONOUN

One's privileges are one's due.

one's (one is) CONTRACTION

One's free to do as one likes.

This one's in my hand, the other one's on the table.

ones PRONOUN

The ones who worked hard prospered.

The apostrophe as an eccentric genitive

Genitive relationships are marked as usual in surnames:

the Smith's dog.

Oddly enough, this practice is sometimes suspended when a surname ends in *s*. The relationship between people called 'Jones' and the dog they own is often expressed thus:

the Jones' dog.

This is hardly fair: Why make light of someone's surname just because it happens to end with an *s*? Surely this is the Jones's due:

the Jones's dog .

On the other hand, convention does requires that we place only an apostrophe after the *s* of antique names that end in *s*:

Euripides' beard; Hercules' strength.

Another eccentric usage is in expressions that seem to mark a genitive relationship twice, that is, once by the apostrophe and *s*, and by the 'of + noun' construction of the genitive.

A friend of my daughter's is a lawyer.

In the foregoing sentence, the genitive relationship *my daughter* is embedded into the genitive relationship ‘friend of daughter’.

It is perfectly in order to do without the genitive case-form, and thus rely on ‘of’ as the sole genitive marker, when the genitive relationship into which a second genitive relationship is embedded (in this instance, ‘my daughter’) is between nouns:

A **friend of my daughter** is a lawyer.

A **friend of my daughters** is a lawyer.

But we cannot avoid the double marking (‘of’ + genitive pronoun’) when that genitive relationship is between a noun and a pronoun:

A **friend of mine** is a lawyer

A **poem of his** was published recently.

It is noteworthy that:

- (i) no second genitive relationship is embedded into the above structure, and
- (ii) the double marking of the sole genitive relationship is obligatory.

Why is the double-marking obligatory in this structure but not in the foregoing one? Simply, there is neither a syntactic nor a semantic reason; we have a genitive behaving eccentrically here.

When choosing to use the structure that double-marks the genitive relation of nouns embedded by a separate genitive relationship, the writer must be careful to place the apostrophe where meaning requires that it be placed. Note the difference in meaning when the apostrophe of the previous sentence is placed after the *s*:

A friend of my daughter’s is a lawyer.

A lawyer is the friend of my only daughter, or of one on my daughters.

A friend of my daughters’ is a lawyer.

A lawyer is the friend of several or all of my daughters

The apostrophe and dates

It is wide-spread malpractice to place an apostrophe before or after the *s* in a numerical noun that is not in a genitive relationship. This misplaced apostrophe is as offensive there as it is a word where it has no role.

It is easy to distinguish numerical nouns in genitive relationships from those not in that relationship:

GENITIVE RELATIONSHIP

Much of the **1960s'** style of clothing is in evidence today.

Much of the **nineteen-sixties'** style of clothing is in evidence today.

NO GENITIVE RELATIONSHIP

Universities are more conservative since the 1980s, according to him.

Universities are more conservative since the nineteen-eighties, according to him.

The apostrophe and initials

The condition that applies to the correct use of the apostrophe with initials is the same as the condition that applies to its use with numerical nouns: Use the apostrophe only when the initials express a genitive relationship with another noun. If not, not.

Again, it is easy to distinguish an initial that is in a genitive relationship with another noun from one that is not:

GENITIVE RELATIONSHIP

This AGM's agenda includes a debate on pre-selection procedures.

This Annual General Meeting's agenda includes a debate on pre-selection procedures.

NO GENITIVE RELATIONSHIP

A career politician should attend all the AGMs of his party.

A career politician should attend all the Annual General Meetings of his party.

(See also the discussion in Chapter 3: 'The Simple Sentence' of genitive nouns, pronouns and -ing nouns.)

Abbreviations and contractions

The apostrophe marks the fact that a word has been shortened:

'midst (*amidst*); 'phone (*telephone*); 'tween (*between*); o'er (*over*); 'eighties (1980s, 1680s),

or that two words have been conjoined, or contracted for brevity:

couldn't (*could not*); won't (*will not*); could've (*could have*); we'll (*we shall*); let's (*let us*).

Not all abbreviations are contractions

There is a worrying practice – greengrocers are particularly guilty of it– of abbreviating words and marking the abbreviation with an apostrophe: *cauli's* (cauliflowers). It is as well to remember that an abbreviation is not necessarily a contraction. An abbreviation is sometimes a diminutive, or pet name. The *s* that attaches to them simply marks the plural forms of such pet names: *boyos*, *ciggies*, *caulies*. The apostrophe is quite as wrong in the plural forms of pet names as it is in the plural form of any noun that does not have a genitive relationship with another.

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