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apostrophe's.

A study of the apostrophe in New Zealand today: its use, attitudes towards its use and its place in a historical continuum.

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Abstract

This is the first study to tell the whole story of the apostrophe in one comprehensive work. In a two-part study, the investigation first traces the history of the apostrophe from its origins to the prescriptive rules that govern its use today, before exploring the factors that influence modern attitudes and practices, as well as implications for the future. Part I involves an examination of the relevant literature and original manuscripts and texts to trace the history of the apostrophe from a 2,000 year old Greek papyrus, through French and into English in the sixteenth century, showing that it did not come via Latin as dictionary etymologies suggest. Once in English, the apostrophe was used inconsistently to mark a variety of forms of omission, and while some authors argue that the possessive apostrophe was derived from the form *the king his sons*, the study shows this to be unlikely. Although prescriptivism eventually brought about a period of relative stability, evidence suggests that there has always been a degree of inconsistency in apostrophe use.

In part II, a mixed-methods design was employed to investigate the modern apostrophe in New Zealand English, utilising both quantitative and qualitative elements, the latter adding a whole new perspective to apostrophe research. Examples of apostrophe use were collected from speakers of New Zealand English, while a series of questionnaires and interviews, involving the general public and teachers, captured the complexity that is apostrophe use today. Many participants associate standard apostrophe use with *educatedness*, but since ideological change banished grammar from the classroom in the 1970s, many teachers today are uncertain of its functions. Consequently, young people have developed new strategies for using apostrophes, relying on appearance rather than rules. This not only results in inconsistent apostrophe use, but it also means young people are more susceptible to the influence of the nonstandard use they see around them. Until editing devices on computers become sophisticated enough to make our apostrophe decisions for us, it seems nonstandard apostrophes will become increasingly evident in future.

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Glossary and Terminology used in this study

- Abbreviation:** (in this study) the removal of a letter or letters that do not reflect pronunciation and is used to save space or time, e.g. *gov't*, 'government'.
- Affix:** in English, a prefix or suffix which is added to a word, but cannot stand alone, e.g. Un-help-ful-ness.
- Aphaeresis:** a form of elision in which the initial vowel of the second word that is omitted, e.g. (Greek) μή 'κ for 'μή ἐκ'.
- Bottom up:** in reading: skilled readers focus on individual words first and rely less on contextual cues to decode the meaning (see also top down)
- Clitic:** a morpheme similar to an affix in that it cannot stand alone, but it can be moved. In English, the possessive -'s is a clitic rather than inflection, because it can be moved to the end of a complex possessive phrase.
- Complex possessive phrase:** when the possessor is a complex noun phrase the -'s goes on the end, e.g. *the lady wearing the big hat's husband*
- Contraction:** (in this study) the contraction of two words into one, e.g. *it's*, 'it is'; *we'll*, 'we will'; *don't*, 'do not' (contraction within a single word is referred to as *omission* in this study)
- Cultural capital:** the cultural acquisition of knowledge and skills (see also symbolic capital)
- Deductive learning style:** prefers to learn the rules, then practice them (see also inductive learning style)
- Descriptive grammar:** Rules of grammar based on how language is used rather than how it should be used (see also prescriptive grammar).
- Diacritic:** a symbol other than letters used in writing to representing pronunciation
- Early Modern English:** (eModE) the period of Modern English from 1500 to 1650 (see also Old English, Middle English and Modern English)

Elision: (in this study) used in its narrowest sense - the omission of a final unstressed vowel before another vowel, e.g. *th'image*, 'the image'; *t'order* 'to order'

Garden path sentence: a sentence that initiates an erroneous interpretation which has to be reanalysed when the rest of the sentence is read

Grammar: 1. (*non-count noun*) the structure of language – including morphology and syntax
2. (*count noun*) a book of prescriptive grammar rules, may include instruction and Practice. (See also descriptive grammar and prescriptive grammar)

Hiatus: The coming together of two vowels in separate syllables or words, as in *piano* or *three apples*

Inductive learning style: learners notice patterns and induce the rules for themselves (see also deductive learning style)

Inflection: affixes marking tense, person, number, gender etc.

Linguistic environment: (in this study) includes the linguistic landscape and other publicly accessible language, including the internet and the media.

Linguistic landscape: the language used in public signage

Linguistic whateverists: (in this study) from Baron's (2010) *linguistic whateverism*: those who do not believe in the importance of using apostrophes according to the rules.

Majuscule script: the capital letter script that was used in Greek until the ninth century (see also miniscule script)

Middle English: (ME) the period from 1066 to 1500 (see also Old English, Early Modern English and Modern English)

Miniscule script: a small letter script that was used in Greek after the ninth century and was developed to save valuable parchment (see also majuscule script)

Minus apostrophe: (in this study) the category of words that do not have apostrophes in the standard forms, e.g. *its name*, *three books* (see also *plus apostrophe*)

Modern English: (ModE) the period from 1500 (see also Old English, Middle English and Early Modern English)

Morpheme: the smallest unit of meaning, e.g. *books* is two morphemes, *book* + *s*

Morphology: The structure of words, the study of words and how they are formed

Old English: (OE) the period from 499 to 1066 (see also Middle English, Early Modern English and Modern English)

Omission: (in this study) general omission of a letter reflecting pronunciation within a single word, e.g. *'tis*, 'it is'; *ne'er*, 'never'; *call'd*, 'called'

Phoneme: a single unit of sound

Phonology: the sounds of a language, the study of sounds and how they are put together

Plus-apostrophe: (in this study) the category of words that have apostrophes in their standard forms, e.g. *it's hot*, *the book's reviews* (see also *minus apostrophe*).

Prescriptive grammar: rules of grammar based on how language should be used, such as those set by the eighteenth-century grammarians (see also *descriptive grammar*).

Prevocalic: a sound (vowel or consonant) that occurs immediately before a vowel.

Schwa: a neutral, unstressed vowel represented in the International Phonetic Alphabet by [ə].

Stem: the base morpheme with no affixes attached

Sticklers: (in this study) those who believe in using apostrophe according to the prescriptive rules in most contexts, and who may judge others on their failure to do so.

Style: different varieties of language that are used in different contexts and with different people.

Symbolic capital: the social status gained through the acquisition of cultural capital

Syntax: the structure of sentences

Top down: in reading – relies on context and prior knowledge to help the decoding process
(see also bottom up)

Truncation: the clipping off of the end of a word

Notations and abbreviations

Notations

There are a number of notations that are used throughout the thesis that indicate different aspects of a word, sound or letter. They are as follows:

- e* (italics) denote a phrase, word, or sound/letter under general discussion
- <e> (angle brackets) denotes spelling, referring to the letter or letters
- [e] (square brackets) denotes the sound or pronunciation
- 'word' (single quotation marks) denote meaning
- s (en dash before a letter or letters) denotes a suffix

Acronyms used

- BSB Bavarian State Library, Munich (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek)
- ECCO Eighteenth Century collections online
- EEBO Early English books online
- LLL Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*
- OED Oxford English dictionary
- UCLA University of California, Los Angeles

Abbreviations used in tables

- id. identify/identified
- NR No response (to question)
- NS nonstandard
- Poss. Possessive
- pp per person/participant
- Resp. Respondents
- std standard
- 3PSG third-person-singular (verbs)

