

Damn you and the apostrophe you rode in on



By Leigh Cymbble

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A few weeks back I had a slight altercation with a colleague. We work in publishing together and write content for our clients on a daily basis. The gripe was over (and when is it not?) a missing apostrophe that I was adamant needed to be there. A confusing one, I'd concede. One that forms part of what's known as the genitive case in English and is needed to signal a relationship between two nouns where one acts as a modifier of the other. "Seven to eight hours' sleep" was the sentence in question, by the way. But, blah blah. By now I've probably lost your interest, except for maybe fellow linguini (not the pasta) and Bizcommunity contributor, [Tiffany Markman](#).

My colleague's argument was that "language evolves", a fact that I acknowledge and, in the past, have embraced. Our 'words war' drove home the following point: that there are two sides to any grammar debate and you're either happily camped in Team Prescriptivism or Team Descriptivism.

Team Prescriptivism looks in horror at "your" when the writer (or more often, tweeter) means "you're" while Team Descriptivism logs the anomaly into their corpus linguistic database and watches gleefully as English is moulded by new generations. Is Team D the Steve Jobs of language with their innovative ways of economising English? Shortening and simplifying communication to the point that even the Oxford English Dictionary is getting on-board? Apologies, I mean onboard, because as part of its sixth edition, the OED removed hyphens from around 16,000 words. Why? "It has happened because we are changing the way we communicate with each other," explained OED editor Angus Stevenson, "we no longer have time to reach for the hyphen key."

Death of a hyphen

We "no longer have time to reach for the hyphen key"?! I felt I needed to repeat that for some poetic emphasis. Don't get me wrong: this post is not my soapbox to preach all things grammar because I choose to make language 'mistakes' too. I love to cheekily split infinitives. And I don't believe you can't start a sentence with a conjunction. Some things are just wrong though. Plain wrong. Using "it's" when you mean "its" and popping in an apostrophe to signal a plural; "Please no photo's". Shall we be letting these errors creep into our language and taint its honour? Just as we aren't able to decipher Old English unless we've studied it (*ƿæ̆t wæ̆s god cyning*), perhaps Post-Modern English will be just as incomprehensible (btw jsyk irl i dnt tlk lyk thz eva).

Here is where we're at in our language evolution: Team Prescriptivism is anxious; Team Descriptivism, euphoric.

Linguistic superheroes

I don't believe that grammar should be a full reflection of your linguistic powers or your overall writing ability but the truth is, it very often is. You can't help but judge copy that looks like it missed the (subbing) boat. As writers, we are held to a higher grammar standard by our peers because, if we don't 'get' it, how on earth are others meant to?

I was recently shamed for saying, "I feel nauseous." Up until that point, I had lived my 27 years not knowing that "to be nauseous" doesn't mean you feel ill: it actually means you produce the feeling of nausea in others. Am I alone here? Did you all know this while I sat on the sideline embarrassing myself?

What I've come to (begrudgingly) accept is that there are a multitude of (mis)used words and expressions that, in time *may* become the norm. Sure, it's a *mute* point that language is changing but it's now time to get the *just* of it all. And after this post, I sure need a few *hours* sleep.

ABOUT LEIGH CRYMBLE

Leigh Crymble is a behavioural linguist and language practitioner and founded BreadCrumbs in 2019 - South Africa's first Behavioural Linguistics firm that is rooted in behavioural theory and combines sociolinguistics, psychology and marketing principles to create personalised and persuasive communication.

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