

The Proof Angel Summary of

Language change: March 2014

The apostrophe over time

Apostrophe is an odd word, isn't it? We get it from the ancient Greek word Apostrophein: a rhetorical device in Greek drama meaning to turn away, used when an actor turned away from the audience to address an absent person or thing. So there is a connection with the absent letters marked by an apostrophe in contractions.

At school, we were told the mark was a tear shed over the missing letter. Over time, fewer tears are shed over some missing letters, as we get used to the new snappier form of the word. No one these days would bother with an apostrophe for the following:

- Cello (Violoncello)
- Flu (Influenza)
- Phone (Telephone)
- Bus (Omnibus)
- Pram (Perambulator)
- Gym (Gymnasium)

New words ending in -ize

More and more words seem to be ending in -ize. When I was a child people went to hospital, or were admitted to hospital. Hospitalization was never heard. Many people put this change down to the influence of the USA on the language. Others say this is not the case, because we have had words like this for many centuries. For example bastardized was well established in the 1500s.

I think those two line of thought are linked. American English developed separately, because of the difficulties of communication over such a long distance in the early times. That is why they still use the old fashioned word gotten, which we had dumped by the 19th century. But now technology is bringing the two together more and more.



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Whatever the cause, do we need these words? New words are useful if they:

- Express something new.
- Make things more concise.
- Are more expressive.
- Are more elegant.

Most of these new words do none of the above. Compare:

- I want you to prioritize x.
- X is the priority.
- Mary has been hospitalized.
- Mary is in hospital.
- I want to customize this furniture.
- I want to adapt this furniture.

In each case the sentence with the -ize is longer and more cumbersome. So why do we do it?

About "on tenterhooks"

Some phrases are so good for describing what you mean that there is no natural alternative. Some of these phrases are rooted firmly in the past. There comes a stage when a term is so obscure that people substitute the nearest word they know, assuming it is the one they heard.

Tenterhook is one of these obscure words. People think it is tender hook. I'm never really sure what good a hook does by being tender. Is it somewhere to hang delicate fabrics perhaps?

Unsurprisingly, the real word in the phrase "I was on tenterhooks" is exactly the one we need to describe that feeling. It is just that most of us are no longer familiar with the workings of the old textile industry.

Find out the truth here:

<http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/tenterhooks-or-tenderhooks>

And now you've read that, keep an eye out for place names & street signs that give you a clue to the original industry of the area.

Congratulations to Cambridge City Council...

... who have reversed their decision to abolish the apostrophe. Common sense prevails!

<http://ow.ly/vEl13>

Is this social mobility for words?

Politicians talk about social mobility a lot. Most of us see nothing wrong with bettering ourselves by climbing up the ladder. When words move from one class to another two camps emerge:

- Some people welcome the innovation & think of it as livening up the language.
- Others will see it as an unnecessary change, cluttering or even ruining the language.

I suspect the minority will always find themselves in the same group. After all, even the most pedantic traditionalist must need a new word sometimes.

I certainly won't be using immediate as a verb, as in "I will immediate your request." It doesn't fill a gap in our vocabulary, & my guess is that it will annoy more people than it impresses.

This fascinating post tells us some of the history of words that have grown up to become verbs:

<http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2013/11/whats-wrong-with-this-verb/>

The origins of willy-nilly

Now here is an interesting word history for a phrase that crops up all over the place:

<http://www.macmillandictionaryblog.com/willy-nilly-word-development>