

Linguistic Lingo for Lawyers – possessive puzzles

The apostrophe
Found on both sides of letters
The right side and wrong.

So complains communications trainer Craig Harrison on the National Punctuation Day website (<http://www.nationalpunctuationday.com/>) – and I'm sure Clarity readers can feel his pain. Possessive apostrophes cause no end of problems: misplaced apostrophe's prevalence is prolific, not to mention peoples tendency to omit necessary marks and to add superfluous ones'. (Don't write in: I jest!) If only everyone could learn and apply the rules! Dreaming of this punctuation-perfect paradise, I'd covered the basics some time ago in 'Tip of the month', a regular slot in *Pikestaff*, the monthly newsletter I write for Plain Language Commission.

But a recent request from a customer rather rocked the boat, highlighting an area made tricky by both the regular plural and the possessive of English nouns being formed by adding 's':

Please settle an argument.

A few years back a man set up an illegal business that basically comprised him maintaining a list of workers from the construction industry who, at some point in their working lives, had taken part in industrial action. He hawked this around to all the major construction companies offering, for a fee, to check whether prospective employees were on his list.

The question is about the line below. Should 'workers' have an apostrophe? It's not their list, they just happen to be on it.

Construction industry workers blacklist

As the customer notes, the blacklist clearly doesn't belong to the workers, so some people may claim that an apostrophe is unnecessary. Not so, as William Sabin points out in *The Gregg Reference Manual* (McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2010):

627a. Possessive forms may express a number of different relationships, only one of which refers literally to possession or ownership:

my boss's approval (meaning the approval *of my boss*)

Belknap's farm (meaning the farm *possessed or owned by Belknap*)

IBM's product line (meaning the product line *made or sold by IBM*)

Faulkner's novels (meaning the novels *written by Faulkner*)

Matisse's paintings (meaning the paintings *created by Matisse*)

Frank's nickname (meaning the nickname *given to or used by Frank*)

A two weeks' vacation (meaning a vacation *for or lasting two weeks*)

627b. To be sure that the possessive form should be used, try substituting an *of* phrase or making a similar substitution as in the examples above. If the substitution works, the possessive form is correct.

Substituting any of the phrases listed in 627a doesn't really work for our 'blacklist' example. And Sabin continues:

628a. Do not mistake a descriptive form ending in [plural] *s* for a possessive form.

sales effort (*sales* describes the kind of effort)

savings account (*savings* describes the kind of account)

news release (*news* describes the type of press release)

earnings record (*earnings* describes the type of record)

So it seems we must interpret meaning, deducing the relationship between the noun head (in our example 'blacklist') and the premodifier ('construction industry workers'). The latter phrase does seem to describe the type of blacklist, so it seems we're sorted: no apostrophe it is.

But the guidance here is quite complex and requires skills in interpreting linguistic subtleties: I wondered, isn't there a simple test we could apply? This could be particularly useful in

explaining the rule to people without expertise or fluency in English (either in the training room or in writing – I could feel another ‘Tip of the month’ coming on). So back to Bill’s bible (that is, the bible belonging to me but written by Bill) I went:

628 b. Some cases can be difficult to distinguish. Is it *the girls basketball team* or *the girls’ basketball team*? Try substituting an irregular plural like *women*. You wouldn’t say *the women basketball team*; you would say *the women’s basketball team*. By analogy, *the girls’ basketball team* is correct.

Based on the dilemma arising only with nouns that have regular plurals (in ‘s’), this sounds such a neat and simple test. But it doesn’t seem to me to work with the irregular plural suggested: *construction industry women blacklist* sounds distinctly wrong. In fact, is there any phrase where ‘women’ (or ‘men’ or ‘children’) can be used as a noun modifier? I couldn’t think of one.

When I went looking in the other usage manuals on my bookshelf for alternative tests, I found none, but I did think one up based on what I read in Greenbaum & Quirk’s *A Student’s Grammar of the English Language* (Longman, 1995):

Plural nouns [that premodify] usually become singular, even those that otherwise have no singular form:

The leg of the trousers ~ The trouser leg

So the test is: if in doubt about whether the premodifier is possessive or descriptive, check if it makes sense in the singular. If it does, it’s descriptive, not possessive. The test seems to work in most cases – for example, ‘construction industry worker blacklist’ sounds fine, while ‘girl basketball team’ doesn’t. But it doesn’t work where the singular of the premodifier has a different meaning. Greenbaum & Quirk give ‘the arms race’ as an example – where ‘arm’ has a completely different meaning – while Sabin’s examples of descriptive premodifiers sound similarly unsuitable in the singular, though more subtly so (sometimes through the removal of the ‘s’ making the premodifier into a different part of speech): ‘sale effort’, ‘saving account’, ‘new release’ and ‘earning record’.

So this may be a useful test for linguists, but it’s not a particularly simple one. In fact, better advice to beginners and non-native English speakers may be to ‘unpack’ the phrase. In any case, multiple noun modifiers aren’t in keeping with plain language, and restructuring (and perhaps simplifying) these types of phrase may remove the whole apostrophe dilemma. For example, why not say ‘blacklist of construction workers’?

If you do decide to be brave and keep a noun with a regular plural as a premodifier, then you’ll need to think carefully about the intended meaning, and apostrophise (or not) accordingly. At least then you’ll have the peace of mind of knowing you can justify your choice if anyone challenges you on it. And remember too that with interpretation of meaning comes subjectivity, which means neither can be unarguably right – or therefore wrong.

The only exception is in names, where we must accept the preference of the organisation, product or publication, however unsatisfactory we may find it. In the idealism of youth, I devoted much energy to the Save Bart’s Apostrophe campaign (a singularly clear-cut case, it may appear): my hair is greying, while Barts Hospital it remains.

Sarah Carr *has a first degree in modern languages and English, and an MBA. She has worked as a general manager in the National Health Service, and as a fellow at the University of Manchester. Sarah is now a plain-English consultant (www.carrconsultancy.co.uk) and freelance associate of Plain Language Commission (www.clearest.co.uk). Sarah’s publications include ‘Tackling NHS Jargon: getting the message across’ (Radcliffe Medical Press, 2002).*

To subscribe to Pikestaff (it’s free), please visit <http://clearest.co.uk/?id=49>. If you’d like to write for this column or its twin, Legal Lingo for Linguists, please contact Julie Clement, Clarity’s editor in chief.