

Popular Threads on Solosez

Grammar: Scotus'(S) Deep Schism

<http://www.law.com/jsp/article.jsp?id=1161002121409> Gimme an 'S': The High Court's Grammatical Divide Jonathan Starble Legal Times 10-17-2006

As one of its final acts last term, the U.S. Supreme Court issued *Kansas v. Marsh*, a case involving the constitutionality of a state death-penalty statute. The 5-4 decision exposed the deep divide that exists among the nation's intellectual elite regarding one of society's most troubling issues -- namely, whether the possessive form of a singular noun ending with the letter "s" requires an additional s after the apostrophe.

The issue reached a crescendo in *Marsh* primarily because of two circumstances. First, the statute in question originated from a state with a name ending in "s." Second, the majority opinion was written by a justice whose last name ends in "s." Given the confluence of these factors, it was inevitable that the justices' philosophical differences on matters of American usage would be thrust into the spotlight.

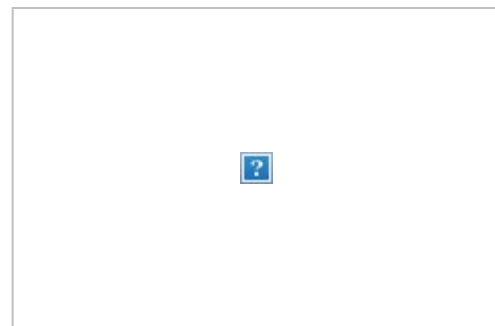
A BITTER DIVIDE

Justice Clarence Thomas, writing for the Court (and joined by Chief Justice John Roberts Jr. and Justices Samuel Alito Jr., Anthony Kennedy, and Antonin Scalia), concluded that the Kansas statute was not unconstitutional. In reaching this conclusion, Thomas repeatedly referred to the relevant law as Kansas' statute.

In response, Justice David Souter wrote a dissent that was joined by Justices Stephen Breyer, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and John Paul Stevens. The dissent revealed Souter's bitter disagreement with both the substantive conclusion of the majority and the grammatical philosophy of the opinion's author. Whereas Thomas apparently believes that whenever a singular noun ends in "s," an additional "s" should never be placed after the apostrophe, Souter has made equally clear his conviction that an s should always be added after the apostrophe when forming a singular possessive, regardless of whether the nonpossessive form already ends in "s." With this acrimonious undercurrent simmering in the background, Souter boldly began his *Marsh* dissent as follows: "Kansas's capital sentencing statute provides ... " This dramatic and gratuitous use of the possessive was an obvious attack on Thomas, who, as one of three s-ending members of the Court, is viewed as a role model for the millions of children who grow up with the stigma of grammatical ambiguity attached to their names.

James S. Tyre, Culver City, California

(1.) Strunk and White, 4th ed. (2000), in the first chapter, first page, first entry reads:



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1. Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding 's.

Follow this rule whatever the final consonant. Thus write,

Charles's friend

Burns's poems

the witch's malice

(2.) [The Apostrophe Protection Society site](#), based in the United Kingdom, is a fun read:

Rob V. Robertson, Austin, Texas

I'll bet an earlier edition of S&W would leave off the second "s."

Arthur B. Macomber, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho

If you mean that to express a possessive, an "s" does not follow an apostrophe if the word already ends in an "s" - I was taught that too and have never thought there was any controversy. Justice Thomas' opinion does not differ.

Question: If a sentence ends in a word or abbreviated word having a period, such as "I like Google, Inc." does it require an additional period? "Inc.."?

Craig McLaughlin, Irvine, California

Is that Smith & Wesson?

Dick O'Connor

Doesn't anyone read Strunk's Elements of Style anymore?

<http://www.bartleby.com/141/strunk.html#1>

Neal A. Kennedy, Marble Falls, Texas

No, but I have a copy of Kernighan and Plauger's Elements of Programming Style.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Elements_of_Programming_Style_\(book\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Elements_of_Programming_Style_(book))

James S. Tyre, Culver City, California

I was taught that one only uses an apostrophe after an "s" at end of the word if the word is plural and ends with an "s." Maybe some members of

the court think they should use the "Royal We.

Marion J. Browning-Baker, Stuttgart, Germany

This will address those heretics, including Craig, Marion & Justice Scalia, who cold bloodedly delete the "s" following the apostrophe, simply because the words end in an s. REPENT. Look to the Book of Strunk & White and the Commandment that we "Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding 's... WHATEVER the final consonant. Thus write, Charles's friend; Burns's Poems...." Rule 1, emphasis added.

Interesting isn't it -- how we all crave order? This debate has gone on for several days, and I've been reading another post on the issue. I wonder, is anyone like me in not caring which way it is, but only that we have a rule where one is right, and the other wrong?

Michael W. Carroll, Providence, Rhode Island

I'm with James Kilpatrick in making the choice based on how it sounds, if only to the internal voice when reading. Since my name ends in s, I consider the issue regularly. There are structures where "s' " sounds chopped, and those where it doesn't - to my ear if the s is pronounced as a z, it flows into the next word without an additional s after the apostrophe, but if is normally a hard s, it needs 's to get the "sses" syllable and set up a smooth flow. Try "Joe Swiss' law office" versus "Joe Swiss's law office".

Rebecca Wiess, Seattle, Washington

I have also tossed and turned through the years of dealing with this problem. I have determined that just an apostrophe after my name makes for quicker typing. That should be one of the guideposts that we always return to: which is easier?

Robert W. "Robby" Hughes, Jr., Stone Mountain, Georgia

Now there you go complicating the matter. It was all so simple when I was the center of the universe?

Robert W. "Robby" Hughes, Jr., Stone Mountain, Georgia

Robby, Robby, Robby,

You mistate the guidepost of grammar. When confronted with two equally obvious solutions, the proper grammatical solution is the one that is more difficult.

Liberals doing things harder and conservatives doing things easier ---- what is the world coming to?

Ted A. Waggoner, Rochester, Indiana

I agree, but I think the question should be "Which is easier for the READER."

Jo Fray

Well, perhaps. But written grammar should bear some relation to spoken grammar. So, if I am referring to the plains of Texas, and I write: "On Texas' plains..." that would sound exactly the same as "On Texas plains." (This is probably a bad example, because there's little difference in meaning when talking geographically.) However, if one is using the possessive in speech, it would sound like "On Texases plains." Therefore, "On Texas's plains" should be preferred. To compare, if I were referring to the house occupied by the Smiths, and I wrote "The Smiths' house," that would conform to verbal usage, and "The Smiths's house" would not.

We should strive for as much consistency and sensible usage as possible in grammar, and I do not think that treating plurals and unrelated nouns ending in the "s" sound the same for purposes of possessives accomplishes that.

Mike Koenecke, Richardson, Texas

I wasn't aware of that tenet.

Jo Fray

Okay, what happens when written grammar does **not** bear some relation to spoken grammar? Literally nonsense. There may be (and are) stylistic differences between written and spoken English, which is why I did not say written grammar was supposed to be **identical to** spoken grammar.

But language is defined as what is spoken: if it were not, we would all be speaking the same languages used from the date of the invention of writing. We are not all speaking Latin, or Old English, or whatever; therefore, written language **follows** spoken language, and in order to follow and represent spoken language, must conform its grammar to what is spoken. Otherwise it is ineffective and fails in its essential purpose.

Mike Koenecke, Richardson, Texas

This is a variant on the "traditional" v. "linguistics" approaches to grammar. The linguistics approach is difficult, for the reason that if you're writing in Bah-Ston you really don't know how real people talk out here in the Real World. Therefore, some external standard (nobly provided by the traditional approach) is required.

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Mike Riddle

Do yawl mind if I axe yu a kwestion?

Roger Traversa

When I taught high school English, the rule in all of our books was that one ALWAYS formed a singular possessive - no matter how the word ended - by adding apostrophe s.

However, I have a book copyrighted in 1962 that says, "Possessives of Singular Words Ending in -s and -z. There are two ways to form these possessives: (1) by adding an apostrophe and *s*, to indicate pronunciation; and (2) by adding just an apostrophe (as frequently seen in newspaper and magazines).

"If several s's occur together, the apostrophe ALONE is almost always used: e.g. Confucius' sayings, Jesus' words, Des Moines' streets

"Words ending in -x usually take the apostrophe and s: e.g. Knox's products, St. Croix's course, a fox's cunning.

"Possessives of Plurals: It is easy to misplace the apostrophe when forming plural possessions. Form the plural of the word first; then add the possessive. If the pluran ends in =s, all that is needed is an apostrophe. If the plural does not end in -s, an 's is need. e.g. NOT childrens' games, but children's games, NOT omens' votes, but women's votes, NOT boy's and mens' interests, but boys' and men's interests."

There are a number of other rules that are interesting only to those of us who enjoy wallowing in such stuff (like words that are more descriptive than possessive - e.g. United States laws, etc.)

I hope this helps.

Jo Fray

Post of the month!

Daniel x. Nguyen

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