

Definitely not Shanks' pony

by Alistair Reeves

The proverbial Shanks had the unfortunate problem, as I do, that his name ended in an *s*¹ (it is the same with a *z* or an *s* that sounds like a *z*)—so what do you do to indicate the possessive? Marcel Milcent of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, noticed in a past issue of *TWS* [1] that Karen Shashok referred to *Hames' book* in her book review, and asked whether it should have been *Hames's*.

What you do to form the possessive in such cases depends on many factors:

- A rule you learned sometime but which you often see and hear contravened, so you are unsure.
- How you feel.
- Whether the sibilant ending is preceded by a vowel, whether the vowel is voiced, and whether the vowel is long or not.
- Whether the sibilant ending is followed by a vowel.
- Whether you are speaking or writing.

Most of these influences are exerted subconsciously which makes this a complex business. But then language and the business of language are never simple. This is also the sort of thing that overzealous editors just love to 'correct', so people are sensitized to its controversial nature. We never want it to look as if we 'don't know the rules'. One of the rare occasions when you can actually 'hear' and 'feel' the apostrophe is when one of these editors snootily crushes you into red-facedness by tut-tutting and crossing out with great relish the *'s* you put after Jones when you wrote 'Jones's book' (or the reverse). But what is wrong with Jones's book? And shouldn't the editor be concentrating on more important things?

The cast-iron rule enforced when I was at school in England in the 1960s was: if the name ends in *s*, you add just an apostrophe and say the name as if it did not have an apostrophe (i.e. not rhyming with *sez* or *zez* at the end). So Jeeves' book—and not Jeeves's (*Jeevezez*) book—was correct. Why then did I hear people saying: I hate Tom Jones's (*Jonesez*) songs? Why, whenever my grandmother missed a bus, did she sigh and say: Well, it looks like Shanks's (*Shanksez*) pony again!² (I never dared correct her!) And

why did I read about *King Midas'* (not *Midasez*) daughter in my book of Greek myths, and Laertes' (not *Laertesez*) father in *Hamlet*? I first assumed that this was something to do with living in the North of England (and the funny way we speak 'up North'), but seeing St. James's Park (*Jamesez*) on the tube when visiting London told me that this couldn't be the case.

Every style guide contains rules and recommendations for this, and you can find any rule or recommendation you want in books and on the Internet. I have tried all of them—and I still can't decide.

I quote only the Chicago Manual of Style [2]. First it says that the **general rule** is to add *'s* to monosyllabic names, and goes on to say: *How to form the possessive of polysyllabic personal names ending with the sound of s or z probably occasions more dissension among writers and editors than any other orthographic matter open to disagreement.* This definitely also applies to monosyllabic names, and is one area where the exception does not prove the rule. This sort of statement usually means in plain text: *We are dealing here with a lost cause where no-one will ever agree; we should see to it that we are consistent within our own use and patiently allow ourselves to be 'corrected' occasionally by pedants. But do not waste your time 'correcting' others: it's not worth it!*

They do, however, follow the above with advice worth following because at least it gives you something to go on: *If it (the polysyllabic name) ends with a z sound, treat it like a plural (e.g. Dickens', Hopkins', Williams'); if it ends with an s sound, treat it like a singular (Harris's, Thomas's, Callas's).* If you think about it, this follows the way we speak. I think we are much more likely to say I like *Hopkinz* books than *Hopkinzez* books, for example.

So, according to the Chicago Manual of Style, Karen Shashok should have written *Hames's* (monosyllabic, apply **general rule**), even though *Hames'* looks fine to me, and, I think, to many others; had she been writing about a book by Dickens, Karen should have written *Dickens'*. The Chicago Manual of Style and many other sources wisely

1 Good Writing Practice (GWP?) would be to enclose all the references to 's' and 'z' and 'sez' and 'zez' sounds and all the examples here in inverted commas, but I think you'll agree that this would have made this text just about unreadable. So I have made them all italic instead.

2 'To take Shanks's pony' (as far as I am aware, always spoken as *Shanksez*) means to go on foot. I always imagined a poor Mr Shanks who could not afford horses or coaches and had to walk everywhere who immortalized this saying. I had never thought of this before, but now I have looked it up and learned that the 'shanks' here are actually the legs (as in 'lamb shank'), so all it actually means is that you have to 'use your own legs'.

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shrink away from suggesting how you might pronounce these written formulations. Even though Dickens' might be appropriate when written, I can well imagine just *Dickenzez* novels when spoken.

I hesitate to talk about rules, but I will stick my neck out and say that the **general pattern** seems to be:

- Monosyllabic names (James, Reeves, Lars, Katz): add just the apostrophe and say the name as it is said without an apostrophe, or add 's and say the name with *sez* or *zez* on the end, whichever is appropriate and whichever you prefer.
- Polysyllabic names (Anders, Summers, Peters, Dolores): add just the apostrophe and say *sez* or *zez* at the end if you want, but this is unusual (e.g. "Let's go to *Anderz* office" and not "Let's go to *Andersez* office"), unless the *s* is preceded by a long or stressed vowel (e.g. Laertes' [*Laerteez*] sword and not *Laerteezez* sword, but Delius's [*Deliuzez*] music and not just Delius' music).
- People with names ending in *-ce*, *-ze* or *-se* make life easy for us, and they gain an extra syllable in the possessive: Mace's (*Macez*) conclusions, Furze's (*Furzez*) hypothesis, Chase's (*Chasez*) film.

Now I know why my grandmother talked about Shanks's (*Shanksez*) pony (monosyllabic, so she added the 's at the end and transposed this to a spoken *sez* at the end—although I expect she never thought about it).

I do not, however, follow one recommendation of the Chicago Manual of Style to do with possessives and names:

When a proper name is in italic type, its possessive ending is preferably set in roman:

Example: *Boris Godunov's* impact on the audience.

Why make our business any more complicated than it is?

Whatever: this all sounds like yet another good reason to get rid of the apostrophe in English. Try to be consistent with this one (but I bet you won't be!).

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References:

1. Milcent M. Vital signs. *TWS* 2008;17(1):29
2. *Chicago Manual of Style*. 15th Edition (2003). University of Chicago Press. Chicago.

Bleeding nuisance

A quirk of English is that patients can suffer from *bleeding*, *nosebleeding*, *major bleeding* or *secondary bleeding*, but not *bleedings*, *nosebleedings*, *major bleedings* or *secondary bleedings*, or, in fact, any *bleedings* at all. Like *information* and *advice*, *bleeding* is used only as an abstract noun, is therefore uncountable, and cannot be used with the indefinite article (*a*, *an*) or in the plural. *Bleeding can usually be stopped rapidly by applying pressure to the wound* is correct use; *The supplementary items on the AE form must be completed for AEs that involve bleedings* is not.

The pressure of usage sometimes turns abstract nouns into mixed nouns and makes them both countable and uncountable; *medication* is an example of one such noun. But this has not yet happened with *bleeding*. *Bleed* is countable and the correct term to use: *The patient suffered three nosebleeds in the 24 hours after intake of study medication*; or *The gastrointestinal bleeds occurred in the duodenum*.

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Be particular about particularly

Qualitative statements are never easy to write, and a commonly used word in such formulations is *particularly*. It is often used indiscriminately in conversation, but I think you have to be particular about how you use *particularly* when writing—and think about what it really means. For me, it is not appropriate here:

Drug X substance is a quantified extract from green tea leaves of the species Camellia sinensis, containing mainly tea polyphenols, including a family of related flavonoids, particularly catechins.

I suspected that what the author actually wanted to say here was *consisting mainly of catechins* or *of which the majority are catechins*, but after speaking to her, it emerged that she meant *almost all of which are catechins*. This meaning is not captured by *particularly* in the original sentence. 'But I copied it from a paper published by a native speaker ...' was her response. No comment.

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