



18 Does punctuation matter?

Languages like French and Arabic are regulated by famous academies. These can tell you the correct rules of grammar and the right way to spell words. English, however, has no official rules for grammar, spelling or punctuation. As a result, many British children never study grammar at school and you do not lose marks in most UK exams if you make a mistake in spelling or grammar.

1 Before you read, discuss the following.

- a Would you lose marks in your exams if you made such mistakes?
- b Do we need punctuation in an age of text messaging and e-mails? If we do need these rules, who should

- c decide what is right and wrong?
- c The market trader in the article is from the East End of London and speaks a famous dialect of English called cockney. Cockneys often drop the first or last letter of a word so *here* is pronounced 'ere and *of* becomes a short o'. What do you think the cockney sentence 'As 'e go' a big 'ouse? means?

Glossary

- 1 to yearn for something (a literary word): to want something very much
- 2 let me be: leave me alone

Never mind the punctuation, look at our low price's



The misplaced apostrophe is a sign of the times but there are few complaints in the East End, writes Pav Akhtar

"ERE, have a pound o' these," said Alan Old, a greengrocer more concerned with selling things than grammar, in a charming attempt to sell me some marrows I did not need.

"People round here don't care much for spelling and the like. All they're interested in is getting the price. The best price."

Misuse of the apostrophe is so commonplace, according to research by the Oxford Dictionary of English, that it may become "acceptable".

Mr Old, 49, was standing behind rows of green beans at his stall on the Roman Road Market, east London. His goods were advertised on signs littered with misused apostrophes.

"So what if I've spelt something incorrectly? No one notices. Just as long as the carrots are carrots and corn is corn, they're happy."

Danny Wilson, 16, from Dagenham, east London agreed: "Grammar is not that important. Nobody really takes any notice. For example, when you are sending a text message on your phone, you just abbreviate everything and, when you're doing that, the rules for spelling go out of the window and grammar is not even a consideration."

Not all shoppers in the market were so indifferent. Caroline Willson, 24, from Hornchurch, east London, is about to start a teacher training course at Canterbury Christ Church University College.

"It is very important that you are able to write a sentence properly. If you can't, it reflects badly on you. It's a shame that people have little idea of how to use English grammar properly."

Her mother, Gill, 48, offered parental support. "I come from the traditionalist viewpoint that punctuation and grammar are important to our day-to-day lives. It's relevant because it helps us to speak our language properly. It worries me that so many children do not know how to write using the correct grammar."



Tony Hassan, 41, a clothing trader from north London, was unapologetic about several improper uses of the apostrophe on his stall.

"Does a customer want to know about the price, or does she want to know whether I've spelt 'its' in the grammatically correct way?"

Petra Hayes, 30, from Hackney, east London, a fellow stall-holder, disagreed. "Even if it's lingerie, like my stall, you won't find a word misspelt or a point of grammar overlooked."

There was indeed nothing – grammatically – at fault on her stall.

Paul Oakley, 35, a greengrocer on the market, is also a staunch defender of correct grammar usage. "It makes a good impression if people can see you have spelt things correctly, and have the grammar right. If you make mistakes, people notice and some of them even point it out. I take the time to write things out properly."

Paul Dashford, 37, a fellow greengrocer, was more acerbic. "People around here don't even know what an apostrophe is. So what do they care?"

Brenda Humphries, 55, from Camden, north London, has been teaching English for 30 years. "Grammar is extremely important," she insisted. "Too many children now depend on the spell and grammar check facility computers offer. It's a losing battle, I'm afraid."