

Q. Recently I've been seeing the phrase *willy nilly*. What does it mean and is it slang or acceptable English?

A. The phrase *willy-nilly*, usually hyphenated, is not slang; on the contrary, it has a 1,000-year history. It came from the Old English phrase *willan-nyllan* ("will you or will you not"), a contraction of *willan or willan ne*, which meant "whether you, he, or anyone wills ('wishes') it or not."

The phrase has the un-funny name of "rhyming reduplication," but its ancient past indicates that English speakers have always enjoyed having fun with language. We start reduplicating when we are little children at our mother's knee, with *ma-ma* and *da-da*; we continue with *pee-pee*, *choo-choo*, and *tick-tock*; we move on to *banky-panky* and *bocus-pocus*, and we end up as old *fuddy-duddies*. Rhyming reduplication will always be with us. *Boob tube* is recent and *chick flick* is current.

Many phrases we use throughout our lives are the result of rhymed reduplication. Some of them are semantically related. For example, the phrases *pell-mell*, *belter-skelter*, and *harum-scarum* have somewhat similar meanings. The first pair, *pell-mell*, means "in a disorderly rush." That is also one meaning of *belter-skelter*, which also means "haphazard." *Harum-scarum*, which means "reckless and irresponsible," can also mean "disorderly."

Harum-scarum has an interesting etymology. Some linguists believe it evolved from Old English *baren* ("frighten") plus "scarum," combined as a contraction of "frighten them and scare them." If that etymology is correct, only one word of the phrase is meaningful, the second word being added for emphasis and word-play. Our love for playing with words has enriched our language, and some phrases are so familiar we forget how they were created. For example, *razzle-dazzle*, *beebie-jeebies*, *whim-whams*, *hubbub*, and *whiz-kid*.

Reduplication does not always have rhyme; often the second word of the phrase contains a different vowel. Non-rhyming repetition occurred early in

Middle English (in the 14th and 15th centuries) and is ongoing today. The phrase *riffraff* dates from Middle English, about 1350; *mishmash* came into English about 1450, and *bip-bop* and *flimflam* are Modern English creations. The first vowel of non-rhyming reduplicated phrases is usually a short *i* sound, as in "it," and the second is either an *a* sound, as in "fat" or an *ab* sound, as in "shop."

The phrase *bara-kiri* (a Japanese term that means "suicide by disembowelment") combines *bara* ("belly") and *kiri* ("cutting"). When it became part of the English word stock, however, it was changed in popular usage to *hari-kari*, in conformance with our habit of rhyming reduplication.

Q. In an advertisement announcing a summit on environmental law and policy, there is a question, "Are the Supreme's Green?" Assuming that the "Supreme's" are the Supreme Court justices, shouldn't the ad be "Are the Supremes Green?" Or if "Supreme" is singular, shouldn't the ad be "Is the Supreme's (attitude, caseload, or philosophy) Green?"

A. The answers to the questions sent by Portland, Ore., attorney Pam Stendal are "Yes and yes." She is correct that (1) the plural of nouns should not include an apostrophe and (2) only the possessive case of a noun contains an apostrophe. Thus, the phrases "ifs, ands, and buts"; "pros and cons"; and "whys and wherefores" are all correct.

Capital letters and abbreviations that end with capital letters are also pluralized by adding *s* alone: CEOs, Ph.Ds, the three Rs. Apostrophes are added to some plurals only for clarity, notably lowercase letters and lowercase abbreviations: "dot your i's," "watch your p's and q's," "wear your pj's."

This subject was recently discussed in an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, entitled, "Apostrophes Reach the End of the Road." Journalist Meera

Selva wrote that the city council of Birmingham (England's second largest city) has dropped all apostrophes from street signs because they are "confusing and old-fashioned." City Councilor Martin Mullaney said that the ban on apostrophes was to avoid time-wasting debates: "We keep debating apostrophes in meetings," he said, "and we have other things to do."

That apostrophe-dropping process began in England in the 1950s, despite a spirited effort by some residents to restore the original apostrophes to street signs like "St. Pauls Square" or "Acocks Green." Without the apostrophe, they argued, no one would realize that the Birmingham suburb "Kings Heath" used to be owned by the monarchy. English grammarians agree that apostrophes denoting possession should be restored to street signs. They are also unhappy about store signs that ungrammatically advertise the sale of "apple's and pear's" or pubs that offer suppers of "chip's and pea's."

From the Mailbag

My thanks to Attorney James P. Garland, who writes from Baltimore, Md., (responding to the May "Language for Lawyers" column) that he regrets the loss of the distinction between *well* and *good* in the answer to the question, "How ya doin'?" As he says, the answer should be "well," not the predominant "good."

He is more troubled, however, by the loss of the distinction between *further* and *farther*, the "degree/distance" distinction: The adverb *further* properly refers to "degree, quantity, or time"; *farther* properly refers only to physical distance. However, the *American Heritage Dictionary* (1985 edition) notes (sadly?) that, at least since Shakespeare, respectable writers have largely ignored that distinction, a loss due to the leveling of the English language. **TFL**

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