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It's the tiniest things that can cause the biggest upsets



JUDGING from readers' responses to some of our earlier columns that considered the fate of the English apostrophe, especially responses to a column in which its abolition was suggested, it would seem that it is some of the smallest features of language that cause the most distress.

They can also cause system failures.

Apparently, a public library's membership management system came to a sudden halt a few months ago when software handling fines for overdue items failed to handle a name that contained a cedilla. The cedilla is the squiggle under the <c> letter in some French words. (Note that I will follow the linguists' convention of using <> to show letters, and / / to show sounds).

The cedilla indicates when a <c> before an <a>, <o> or <u> should be pronounced "soft", as an /s/ sound. With no cedilla a <c> has a /k/ sound. So the town in the French province of Burgundy is called Mâcon, with a /k/, while the French word for mason is maçon with /s/. <C> is always soft before the other vowels <e>, <i> and <y>, so the cedilla is never used on <c> before those letters.

The cedilla is one of four diacritics or accent symbols in French. The others are all found on vowel letters. The acute accent is found on <e>, as in café (cafe), the grave on <a>, <e> and <u>, as in là (there), mère (mother) and où (where).

The circumflex occurs on <a>, <e>, <i>, <o> or <u>, as in fête (fair), hôtel (hotel). Some of these persist in English "borrowings" of

French words, and indeed the spell-checker on my computer insists that I spell café with the acute accent. The use of these accents on <e> in French is frequently linked to differences in the pronunciation of the vowel.

The fact that this is not consistent can cause some frustration for learners.

The grave and circumflex accents on other letters only rarely indicate a difference in pronunciation. So for instance the <â> in Mâcon and the <a> in maçon are pronounced the same. Instead, these other uses of accents help to distinguish in spelling two words that sound the same (are homophones) and which would otherwise be spelled the same (i.e. would be homographs), such as là (there) and la (female form of "the"), où (where) and ou (or), sûr (sure) and sur (on).

The circumflex can sometimes also be a relic of an earlier form with <s> (e.g. feste for fête, related to feast in English, île for isle, etc).

SO WHY did the library's system crash? A staff member who registered a new library user entered the name as spelled by the user, including a <ç>. However, it seems that the membership database uses letter characters from what is known as the ASCII system.

ASCII stands for American Standard Code for Information Interchange, which uses seven digital "bits" of information, allowing 128 (i.e. 2 to the power of 7) different characters to be defined. As <ç> is not one of these characters, François

has to become Francois.

Luckily, there seem to be no pairs of words in French that are distinguished solely by the absence or presence of a cedilla, so dropping the cedilla here would not cause confusion.

Digital codes that superseded ASCII allow a far greater range of letters by using more than seven bits of information.

The computer terminal the library staff member was using presumably therefore allowed him to enter <ç>, unaware of the difficulties this would cause.

But more on apostrophes. I recently received some clothing from the firm Lands' End, and got to wondering about the placement of the apostrophe. Lands' End has made a fortune despite what it acknowledges is a misplaced apostrophe. Interestingly, there have been many attempts – not by the company – to justify the position of the apostrophe, but in its documentation the company admits: "It was a typo in our first printed piece, and we couldn't afford to reprint and correct it", before concluding that "while it has prompted some raised eyebrows among English teachers, it also sets us apart as a company whose continuing concern for what's best for the customer is unmistakably human".

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