



The Joy of Errors

by Lynn Truss

When writers or editors decide to focus on the subject of errors, they are basically asking for trouble. I fully remember how, in 2003, when my book on punctuation *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* was published, I braced myself for the inevitable bombardment of quibbles. I was writing for pedants, after all; I could hardly complain if my readers turned out to be pedantic. But my publishers concocted one excellent strategy for defending my honour: with each review copy we sent a letter offering a bottle of champagne to the first person to spot the deliberate error in the text. I urge the editors of this number of *Altre Modernità* to consider adopting this brilliant scheme. Within two days of the review copies going out, the champagne had been claimed – interestingly, by the very nice husband of bestselling novelist Hilary Mantel. I can't remember what the perceived error was; at the time, to be honest, we really didn't pause to examine it, because (of course) there was no deliberate error in the book. We just wanted to announce, "We know you will be looking for errors. Good for you if you find one." If I'd had the nerve, I'd have suggested copying the best erratum slip I ever saw, which said, "This slip has been inserted by mistake."

Luckily for me, there is a distinctly entertaining aspect to errors. I don't exactly make a living from funny errors caused by missing (or mis-used) punctuation, but I do often find myself speaking about them, and the comic appeal seems to be universal. Outside a block of flats someone once found a sign that said (tragically, without a plural possessive apostrophe to set things straight):

RESIDENTS REFUSE TO GO IN THE BINS



– and although I heard this originally about ten years ago, I still find it hilarious. Those residents *refuse* to go in the bins? Well, so would I, if I lived there. Similarly, one might see a road sign that says:

CHILDREN DRIVE SLOWLY

– which, in anyone’s book, is a simple sentence describing the speed at which children drive, coming as a relief, if anything. I mean, if children are determined to drive, slowly is definitely how I would want them to do it. I heard recently of a man who was a member of a sports club, and on every visit for several years he had driven around the area, frantically looking for somewhere to park, because of the sign outside which said,

NO PARKING
FOR SPORTS CLUB MEMBERS

Only this year had he discovered that he’d been reading this sign too literally, and that it meant: “No parking. *These spaces are reserved for sports club members.*” As with all errors in writing, one can’t help but be mystified (and awed) by the person who could write “NO PARKING FOR SPORTS CLUB MEMBERS” and not anticipate the genuine confusion it would cause.

This is the point, really. Mistakes are not entertaining in themselves. It’s the distance between the intended meaning and the unintended that provides the laugh. Some anonymous person prints a sign to put outside a lavatory in an American department store which says:

ATTENTION
TOILET **ONLY** FOR
DISABLED
ELDERLY
PREGNANT
CHILDREN

The logical result of this – given that there are very few disabled elderly pregnant children in the world – is that no one gets to use the lavatory at all. That’s what makes it funny. The writer was hoping to reduce the number of toilet-users; in the event he has ruled out everyone. I personally am always thrown into exquisite semantic confusion by the use of inverted commas (speech marks) in signage, because the convention is evidently changing. Take a sign that says:

“FRESH” ORANGE JUICE

To me, the inverted commas convey serious doubt about the freshness of this orange juice. They put me off. If orange juice is fresh only in inverted commas, one would be better to leave it alone. But clearly, inverted commas are now often used for emphasis, and are not supposed to make you cynical – but how do you stop being



triggered to cynicism by inverted commas once it's in your nature? Somehow I think I will always prefer the cynical reading of inverted commas, especially when I see a sign on a slot machine that says:

PLAY UNTIL YOU "WIN"

We all make mistakes. As writers, we write carelessly sometimes, and forget to consult our internal editor, or ask ourselves the most important question: "Could this be read another way?" For me, part of the joy of spotting errors comes from the realisation that there are many people in the world who don't ask themselves that question because they don't care. They might be designing a poster that will stand 30 metres high; creating words with enormous neon tubes; carving in granite. They will still happily inscribe the words "COLLEGE VIEW STATE SCHOOL FOR THE SEVERELY HANDICAPPED STATE OF MISSOURI" – and the idea that this sign might be taken as a slur on the State of Missouri for ever after will simply not enter their minds.

Mistakes are revelatory, and the joy we get from them is pretty harmless, I would say. And to look on the bright side, when we spot them, at least they are a welcome reminder that our brains are still working. With the function of "corrective text" now resident on our mobile phones, we nowadays spend half our lives spotting our own mistakes and sending jolly follow-up texts to explain and correct the nonsense we've apparently just written to each other. My own phone often changes "so" to "do" (which is very annoying); it also changes "get" to "bet", as a consequence of which I alarmingly wrote the other day that I was going to bet my dog – which is something I would genuinely never do, however drunk I was, and however much I needed the win. But my favourite corrective-text story concerns a woman receiving a text from her teenage daughter. "Mum," it said. "Do you want anything from life?" The woman was taken aback, and a bit hurt. "Does she think I *don't* want anything from life?" she thought. So she wrote back, carefully, "I want many things, darling, but above all I want for you to be happy." She then received a further text. "Sorry, I meant to say, do you want anything from Lidl?"

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