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Our national shame. Period.

Tims (sic) be warned: It's Punctuation Day

By Robert Fulford, National Post
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There's no question that Canada urgently needs a federal Punctuation Improvement
Program. The evidence can be found at the heart of our national life, in the logo of the only fast-food chain ever described as a Canadian icon by people who like to call things icons, the so-called Tim "Hortons." We should face this issue as we celebrate the fifth annual National Punctuation Day, a holiday invented by Jeff ("Punctuation Man") Rubin of Pinole, Calif., a journalist so appalled by published punctuation errors that he launched a campaign against them.

The chief symbol of our shameful failure as punctuators is the doughnut chain celebrated by the late Pierre Berton as the essential Canadian story, a tale of "success and tragedy, of big dreams and small towns, of old-fashioned values and tough-fisted business, of hard work and of hockey." And, we might add, of incompetent punctuation.

In a better world it would of course be called "Tim Horton's," with an apostrophe where an apostrophe absolutely demands to be. If there were several people named Tim Horton, then "Tim Hortons," clearly a plural, would make sense. But there was only one Tim, the hockey player who founded the chain in 1964 in Hamilton.

Early on, his coffee shops used an apostrophe in their name; dedicated punctuation fans claim that even now, in Hamilton, you can find original Horton's with the apostrophe

still proudly in place. These deserve designation as national heritage sites, remnants of a finer, more thoughtful and better punctuated Canada.

Like many traditions, the Horton apostrophe was a victim (so goes the accepted story) of Quebec nationalism. When Quebec decided that commercial signs should eliminate their possessive apostrophes, in the French manner, most companies hurried to comply.

In Quebec, Eaton's became Eaton, until both Eaton and Eaton's went out of business. The Tim people went farther. For the sake of efficiency and consistency they decided to have all their outlets carry precisely the same logo, the one required in Quebec. Sea to sea, most Tim outlets meekly surrendered their apostrophes. The tragic result is that young English-speaking Canadians eat their Timbits and sip their double-double beneath signage that defies ancient tradition.

Long ago, this language crime was committed mainly by Americans. Now it's widely accepted Canadian practice as well. For decades the apostrophe-deprived Caesars Palace, on the Las Vegas strip, attracted the disdain of punctuation-conscious visitors, Canadians included. But since the mid-1990s we have had to acknowledge that our own Caesars Windsor (Ontario) casino exhibits precisely the same insensitivity. And, sad to say, it's owned by the government of Ontario.

"Hortons" and "Caesars" are only the most public proofs of a widespread breakdown of punctuation skills. Young people, following the unfortunate example of their elders, now fill cyberspace with sentences that are poorly punctuated or, worse, not punctuated at all. This is a defeat for clear expression. The purpose of punctuation is to clarify the written word. Without it, we are less able to understand each other.

Consider the fate of the semicolon, that infinitely useful divider of thoughts. Today, on the Internet, it has been largely supplanted by its inelegant and unsubtle cousin, the brutal dash. A writer in Verbatim, an English magazine, recently noted that the dash has been "colonizing sentences and paragraphs in every conceivable context." It is "taking over and has virtually imprisoned the semicolon in a faraway island known as Pedantry." In the hands of some novice writers the dash even supplants brackets, commas, occasionally periods.

Rising to popularity alongside the dash is the exclamation mark, the crutch of every writer who cannot devise language forceful enough to make its own point. "An exclamation mark is like laughing at your own jokes," F. Scott Fitzgerald said. It should be used, at most, once a year. Instead it's become an everyday tool in the hands of the marginally literate.

Once punctuation was a part of everyone's heritage, even a part of entertainment. Victor Borge, a born educator as well as a comedian and pianist, turned commas, colons, semicolons, periods and question marks into a TV and night club act he called Phonetic Punctuation. He created a different squawk, squeal or hoot for every punctuation mark and demonstrated their shapes by hand gestures; his elegant wave of a question mark was a small masterpiece. Mr. Borge died in 2000 but his routine lives a glorious afterlife on YouTube and his daughter, Frederikke Borge, maintains the family tradition by teaching Phonetic Punctuation to children, currently applying it to Hans Christian

Andersen stories at the Andersen statue in New York's Central Park. We need to recover the sense of punctuation as a vital part of life.

Ottawa should act immediately by establishing a Punctuation Board that will deal with this issue as effectively as the Wheat Board has marketed grain, the CRTC has solved the problems of broadcasting and the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages has settled the French-English question. And when a new authority is set in place it should undertake a national apostrophe-recovery program, starting at Tim's.