

ON THE SUBJECT OF I AND THE OBJECT OF ME (OR, SUBJECT AND OBJECT)

Unlike Latin, English nouns don't bother much with cases (different endings to show their relationship with other words in the sentence) because we express that sort of thing with prepositions (see p.108) and word order. In Latin a noun would have a different ending depending on whether it was the **subject** or the **object** of the verb, and if you wanted to say *to the noun* or *of the noun*, the endings would be different again.* Then you could put the words in pretty much any order you liked and the endings would sort the meaning out for you. But English sentences such as *the dog chased the cat* and *the cat chased the dog* have exactly the same words in them and it is the order that establishes the meaning.

Pronouns don't follow this no-change rule. They do their own thing. Or their own thing is done to them.

Rule: **I = subject**
 me = object

I is used for the subject of a sentence, that is the person doing the action.

Me is used for the object of the sentence, the person the verb is acting upon.

* Thank goodness we're not Ancient Romans, eh?

- Not *Me telephoned Jim* but *I telephoned Jim.* Because I performed the action.
Not *Jim rang I back* but *Jim rang me back.* Because Jim performed the action.

Similarly: **he/she/it/they = subject**
 him/her/it/them = object

Not *I fancy he* but *I fancy him.* He is the *object* of my affection.*

Not *They were responsible* but *They were responsible.* They *subjected* us to the horror.

This rule applies, but may be less obvious, when you have a **compound subject** or a **compound object** – that is, a subject or object that consists of more than one noun or pronoun.

John and I (compound subject) *went fishing.*

He gave the bait to John (or **him**) *and me* (compound object).

My husband and I (compound subject) *are both going to the wedding.*

The groom has invited my husband (or **him**) *and me* (compound object) *to the wedding.*

Hint: If you are unsure whether to use *I* or *me*, or *he* or *him*, in a compound subject or object, take out the other bit: if you omit your husband from the last two examples you are left with:

I am going to the wedding (OK, you've had to change the verb from

* Get it? (Oh dear – and there's worse to come.)

are to *am* because there's only one person involved now, but that's not the point here).

The groom has invited me to the wedding.

👉 **Smart Alec:** *He's invited the wife and I* is sometimes called the **Toff's Error**, because some people think saying this sort of thing sounds posh. They're wrong. Serves them right for getting above themselves.

What's up with songwriters?

*My buddies and me are gettin' real well known...
Take a good look, you're bound to see that you and me were
meant to be for each other...
Me and Mrs Jones, we've got a thing going on...*

Rule: the rules don't apply to songwriters. But surely they can't get no satisfaction from their writing.

Who goes there? I or Me?

It is I or It is me?

It wasn't I who said it or It wasn't me who said it?

It is I who am at fault or It is me who is at fault?

'Somebody's sharp.' 'Who is?' asked the gentleman, laughing. I looked up quickly, being curious to know. 'Only Brooks of Sheffield,' said Mr Murdstone. I was relieved to find that it was only Brooks of Sheffield; for, at first, I really thought it was I.'

CHARLES DICKENS, *David Copperfield*

Traditionally, *It is I* is correct, because Latin rules state that subject forms are found after the verb *to be*. However, modern thinking is that this sounds rather pretentious and old-fashioned. Most people will not bat an eyelid if you say *It was me*.

If that isn't good enough for you, try avoiding the issue by rephrasing:

He can't run as fast as me (or *I*) becomes *He can't run as fast as I can.*

He's earning more than her (or *she*) becomes *He's earning more than she is.*

Or, if you aren't happy with that, just decide which way you are going to go and stick to it. This sentence – heard on a Radio 4 news bulletin recently – falls between every possible stool: *It was he who fired the gun and it was him who was killed.*

'Heedless of grammar, they all cried, "That's him!"'

REVD. R. H. BARHAM, *A Lay of St Gengulphus*

Between you and I

Here's the **Toff's Error** creeping in again. Lots of people are anxious about using *me*. But – between you and me – it is wrong to say *between you and I*.

Rule: Always use an object pronoun (*me*) after a preposition (*between*).*

They can't take that away from me...

I've been to paradise but I've never been to me...

It's goodnight from me and it's goodnight from him.

'Between you and me and the grand piano, I'm afraid
my father was rather a bad hat.'

The Uninvited (FILM), 1944

My Grammar and I (or should that be 'me'?)

Few of us will have cause to ask (or answer, or give a damn about) this question in real life. However, this book does ask it, so it seems only courteous to have a go:

This book is about (preposition) *my grammar and me* (object pronoun).

My grammar (subject) *and I* (subject pronoun) *are not on good terms.*

In a book title, we think it is safe to assume that *Grammar and I* form a compound subject (see p.127). If it was good enough for Withnail, it's good enough for us.

* See p.109 for a list of prepositions.

Remember your manners

If you are talking about yourself and another person, it is polite to mention the other person first.

Wishing you both great happiness from me and Giles.

Wishing you both great happiness from Giles and me.

I and my wife would like to thank everyone for coming.

My wife and I would like to thank everyone for coming.

But there's no need to be too humble –

With lots of love from the children, the dog and me.

– nor too full of oneself:

James and myself went fishing.

James and I went fishing will do very well.*

On the subject of who and the object of whom

‘What is fame? The advantage of being known by people of whom you yourself know nothing, and for whom you care as little.’

LORD BYRON

*

‘As far as I’m concerned, *whom* is a word that was invented to make everyone sound like a butler.’

CALVIN TRILLIN

* See p.65 on reflexive pronouns for a slightly longer rant on this subject.