

## **Please Contact Myself**

by Theodore Plantinga

We walk on eggshells nowadays, rhetorically speaking. We are all fearful that we may have women's lib or the PC police or some aggrieved minority pouncing on us for some ill-chosen turn of phrase. Maybe that's why people have slowed down a bit in their speech. They seem to pick their words one by one, like a wader in a creek probing with his foot for solid ground before he takes his next step.

Take this business about "myself." At the place where I work, it is not uncommon to hear a younger member of the employee brigade make a tentative presentation at a meeting, pause, and then say, "In case you'd like a copy of the report, feel free to contact myself." Perhaps I'll get used to this locution in time. It's not likely that "myself" will go away.

Recently a younger colleague of mine showed up on the pulpit of the church I attend. He announced hymn "three hundred *and* thirty-seven" or some such thing. When my wife shook his hand at the door after the service, she corrected him: "That should be three hundred thirty-seven" (leave out the "and"). I've given up on that one by now. A couple of decades back, when I was the male equivalent of a schoolmarm cracking the grammatical whip in grades 5 and 6, I labored mightily to bring that errant pattern of locution under control, but to no avail.

It appears that "me" is one of the hardest words in the language to learn. Do you recall the days when some of the kids in school insisted on saying, "Me and Jeff played baseball last night" -- or something of that sort? I never had any trouble with that one, perhaps because I was made to study Latin when I was a mere lad. Some of my friends, who also studied Latin, persisted in it on occasion, probably out of sheer cussedness. They felt a stronger impulse to torment their teachers than I did.

More recent graduates of our schools, not being able to fall back on Latin grammatical categories, have trouble with all the fuss over "I" and "me." Since they have been reproved so often for using "me" rather than "I," they have gotten it into their heads that "me" is to be avoided. When one of them is

thanked for his presentation, he may well say, "The credit should really be shared" -- a fine Christian sentiment -- "between George and [detectable pause] I." The rule seems to be: when in doubt, use "I."

If you enjoy such hesitation and stumbles as much as I do, you probably will also enjoy Anita Loos, an amusing writer of yesteryear: see especially her book *A Girl Like I*; she is also the author of an amusing novel called *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. If you aspire to be a dumb blond not easily suspected of having studied Latin, take some lessons from Loos.

Now, if you are that person who thinks that the credit should be shared "between George and I," and you want to give opportunity for the people who have heard your little talk to continue the discussion, you can't very well say, "In case you'd like a copy of the report, feel free to contact I." It just doesn't sound right. And so you flip through your supply of first-person pronouns and come up with "myself."

Time does not stand still, and neither do language habits. Another patch of thin linguistic ice is this business of "his" vs. "their." Back in the days when I was made to study Latin, "he" and "him" and so forth could stand for a person about whom nothing was known. When the teacher said, "Each student will clean out his desk on Friday afternoon," the girls knew what was expected of them. Nowadays, linguistic contortions are expected when sentiments of this sort need to be uttered. Many of the weary have succumbed to the temptation to fudge the difference between the singular and the plural: "Each student will clean out *their* desk on Friday afternoon." In fact, I know lots of folks who would like to make such clumsy usage mandatory.

I've been called an individualist from time to time. (For that matter, I've been called lots of other things as well.) And so I hate giving up the singular and going over to the plural simply to satisfy the PC police. Yet there is an argument from the grandiose that some would wish to make. Think of the queen: "We are not amused." Speaking of oneself in the plural is a way of blowing up one's own importance. We heartily recommend it.

Perhaps we could combine it with "myself." Instead of saying, "In case you'd like a copy of the report, feel free to contact myself," you could say, "In case you'd like a copy of the report, feel free to contact *ourselves*." It is worth noting here that when it comes to the second person pronoun the distinction between singular and plural has already disappeared.

I didn't write this article simply to poke fun of some people who forgot to study Latin. Neither do I imagine that people with schoolmarm tendencies (such as the undersigned) will manage to reverse the tide. Language changes and develops. Sometimes it gets better, sometimes worse. But I will make this observation: the linguistic divide that used to run between the guys down at the feed mill and the more genteel folk employed at the local college or university is starting to creep onto the campus. The shadows cast by the PC police confuse the issue in the minds of many. Some might argue that we are the richer for it -- the same folk who would encourage African-American students to bring their "black English" (lately dubbed "Ebonics") with them into Ivy League classrooms.

As for me, I don't believe that clothes make the man -- although the ties I wear do tell my students quite a bit about "myself." But I will defend the proposition that speech makes the man and the woman. Therefore I encourage you, dear reader, to make a careful study of English grammar (perhaps Latin grammar as well) if you have trouble choosing between "I" and "me" and "myself." And if you have some amusing examples of pronoun stumbles that you're willing to share, please contact myself. *[END]*