# The Peculiar English Pronoun 'I'

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**ABSTRACT**
The personal pronoun 'I' exhibits some uniqueness in English syntax, morphology and to some extent semantics in sociolinguistic usage. Interestingly, in many languages of the world, there is a near universality of its morphological form or its variants in occurrence.  This paper explores this peculiarity as evident in morphological variation and syntactic deviation and shows that it poses pedagogical implications in the teaching and learning of this personal pronoun. It accounts for concord problems in constructions involving this pronoun. Suggestions are made for its handling in the classroom.
**Key words.** The first person pronoun, morphological variation, syntactic deviation, sociolinguistic usage, universality of orthographic shape and pedagogical implication

## 1. Introduction

The personal pronoun 'I' is unique in many respects. The uniqueness accounts for the pronoun's defiance of and deviance from, some grammatical conventions. It is the only one- letter pronoun, having a capital letter as its spelling, unlike others such as 'we', 'you' 'he', 'she', etc.  Interestingly, according to Spagenberg (2003) the use of the capital letter in writing this pronoun is a "manuscript convention that appears in Middle English to differentiate the first person singular from an ordinary lower case letter, otherwise the first person singular often appears to be part of the preceding word." And this became adopted between 1250 AD and 1700s (Mark Israel: The alt.Usage.English borrowing from Wilson's The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology, 1988). The first person singular pronoun defies subject- verb agreement in English without apology. Some restrictions are also unduly placed on it in relation to others, especially in social contexts. We shall return to this later.

Whereas other personal pronouns replace their antecedents in narration or in anaphoric reference, often when the personal pronoun 'I' is used, no antecedent would be necessary in the text because of its obvious reference to the speaker or writer. This obvious reference, however, is always exophoric. An item is said to be exophoric if its referent is recoverable from, or it is "located outside the written text" (Halliday, 1977, p.188). In a written text, the writer assumes that 'I' in a narration without anaphoric reference is recoverable ie the participant (the speaker /writer) is sometimes known, even if it need to be gleaned from the context endophorically.

This first (1st) person pronoun, like the second (2nd) person pronoun, has a referent that is "physically" present in the real world. And both are considered highly accessible because of their recoverability.

Again, when it is used in cataphoric reference as in:
S1 "Fellow countrymen and women, I, Brigadier Sani Abacha of the Nigerian Army, address you this morning on behalf of the Nigerian Armed Forces" (Abacha,1984 in Akinnola, 2000, p.62 ), the cataphor, the name of the person, is necessarily mentioned, more for authentication or for indication of authority than for convention of referential cohesion.

## 2. The personal pronoun 'I' in syntax and discourse

This personal pronoun is the first person, not only in the class of pronouns, but also in grammatical person in narration, others being 'we' in the first person plural, you (both singular and plural) in the second person; and he/she/it'(singular pronoun) and 'they' in the third person (plural). The pronoun 'I' denotes the speaker as a singular referent. It does not consist of a combination, hence the schema {Sp,- Hr, -X},
Where:  Sp→ Speaker; Hr→ Hearer; X→Other (Ingram, 1978, p.227).

This means that there is no context whenever the pronoun 'I' is used, that both the hearer and the third person are included unlike when the plural form of the first person (we) is used.

The pronoun 'they' would consist of more than one, hence the schema:
-SP; -Hr; +X; +X; +X
Transformational Generative Grammar analyses the pronoun 'I' as {+PRO}, {+Singular}, {-plural}, {+1}, {+nominative}, {-accusative} and that at the deep structure, it is the same as a noun, hence it is labelled 'N'. The schema for it is: I  +  N   + PRO +I (ONE) -PLURAL              +NOMINATIVE -ACCUSATIVE
[Adapted from Transformational Generative Grammar analysis of the pronoun 'I' (Jacob and Rosenbaum, 1970, pp.95-96)].

The plural variant of 'I' is 'we'. When used, 'we' can mean in one context, +speaker + hearer' in singular (ie 1st and 2nd person singular) or plural ((ie 1st and 2nd person plural) and can mean in another context, +speaker - hearer and +other(s) (ie 1st and 3rd person plural) and yet in another context can entail +speaker +hearer +others ie an inclusion of the three persons in narration.

The pronoun 'I' takes four morphological variants, in four cases: "I" Subjective form (or Nominative form in Traditional Grammar); "Me" Objective form [or Accusative form in Traditional Grammar]; "My" possessive pronoun form with determiner (or epithetic) function; and "Mine" possessive pronoun form with nominal function (or predicative) function. The epithetic or possessive pronoun with determiner function is also called the genitive case. It also functions as a possessive adjective. Examples:

S2. My book is on the table.

S3. I receive my mails daily.

Although at the deep structure, the personal pronoun "I" has the same status as noun, at the surface structure, to treat it as such will result in unacceptable construction e.gs:

S4. Dr Ushie is an academic staff.

S5. *I is an academic staff.

This contrasts with the third person pronoun in which both the noun and pronoun are the same at both the surface and the deep levels in terms of subject- verb and agreement in sentences (6) and (7) below.

S6. Mrs. Ushie is not an academic staff.

S7. She is not an academic staff.

It is clear, therefore, that the personal pronoun 'I' defies the subject –verb concord. This concord constrains a subject that indicates singularity in a present simple construction, usually with third person, to choose a verb in its base form which always goes with a subject with plurality, e gs:

S8. I have got some money in my account.

S9. I pay my tax regularly.

S10. I am a Nigerian citizen, aren't I?

If the pronoun "I" is treated as a plural pronoun (and hence like a plural subject such as "we" and "they", it is unfortunate that it cannot be treated as a plural subject that can select intransitive verbs like "disperse" and "gather", Egs:

S11. *I dispersed.

S12.* I was dispersed.

S13. * I gathered at the bus station.

Sentence (11) above is acceptable only as an incomplete one with a transitive verb usage in which case the verb requires an object to complete its meaning. Sentence (12) and (13) are unacceptable because the passive verb "was dispersed" and the transitive verb "gather" do not co-occur with a subject with singular referent, which the pronoun "I" is .

## 3. Universality of the first person singular pronoun

Another peculiarity of the pronoun "I" is that it satisfies the characteristic of the approximate universality: the pronoun assumes almost the same form, or at least contains more or less common factors in it spelling in the languages of the word the "m" element. Although in English the subjective case assumes 'I' the objective case is "me". See the approximants in other languages in Fig. 2 below.

## 4. Sociolinguistic Usage

The difference, however, is in sociolinguistic usage of the pronoun. English and French position the pronoun "1" last when in combination like "Jack, Jane and I" and "You and I" in common usage for modesty. See examples below:

S14. Jack, Jane and I completed it in one week.

S15. Between you and me, it's a deal.

But the word order is reversed in a situation that demands acceptance of blame as in Sentence 16 below:

S16. I and Gorge are at fault.

French also has the equivalent thus:

S17a] 'Yu-etmoi -You and I.

Nigerian languages, on the other hand, reverse the order thus:

S17b. Mu na gi – I and you –Igbo

S17c. Emi ati iwo – I and you -Yoruba

S17d. Nide k'eye – I and you -Hausa, e t c.

Opata (1992) links this ordering of words in self-inclusive sentences in Nigerian languages with prioritising "the self in discourse [and that] this has far reaching implication for the individual Nigerian perception of himself and of the construal of his role and identity within the larger Nigerian frame work" (p.34). He believes that this consciousness of the Nigerian affects his perception of his relationship with the nation, hence the Nigerian thinks along ethnic lines rather than along national ones. It is ironic that the African who is more communalistic in orientation than the European who is more individualistic cannot extend this communalistic orientation to nationalism whereas the individualistic latter emphasises the national identity more than he emphasizes his race.

Head (1978) asserts that "a shift in number, variation from a singular to plural, to show different degrees of respect or social distance is also found in first person reference"(pp.163-167). The use of plurality of majesty is found at one time or another in the history of most languages of Western Europe. Therefore, the king makes himself symbolically plural when he says "we". "Especially in ceremonies, reigning kings are fond of saying 'we' when they are in fact referring to the first person singular. Example:
S18.  "We will establish our estate upon
    Our eldest Malcolm, whom we name hereafter."
    *Macbeth* Act 1, Scene 1, (p. 861).
Here, King Duncan is pronouncing his eldest son heir –apparent using the "plural of majesty" giving the illusion of inclusion of the audience and achieving social distance between him and the audience. But in another context a short moment after, he says:
S19. "1 am fed/it is banquet to me." (p. 861). Here, he personalises it. By so doing, he creates a distance between himself and the audience, obviously demanding for unalloyed respect and loyalty.

Head believes that the Pope uses *we* "as the plural of modesty" when he in fact refers to himself. Whether this is the case when God says:
  S20.  "Let us form man in our own image, after our likeness and after our likeness .… (Gen 1: 26), and, "…let us go down, and therefore confound their language" (Gen11:7) is contestable. Orthodox theology rather asserts that this plurality in the two instances mentioned above (Gen1:26 and Gen 11:7) are instances of the Trinity rising in their council with the decisions to create man and disperse humanity respectively, to fulfill their eternal purpose on earth. And so Gen1:2 mentions the third person in the Trinity (Spirit) while John 1:1−4, 10−14 mentions the second person as the Son. "Let us" therefore refers to these three, not a case of "plural of Majesty". There is a preponderance of other instances in the Bible when even though God addresses man, and especially when He demands respect, obedience and loyalty, He uses the singular 'I AM'.

Again, the writer, the hearer, the researcher, etc may use the "editorial *we"* when he is referring to himself to indicate a social distance, to depersonalise the issue. In some other context it is "I". If a researcher wants to depersonalise the researcher's point of view, it is more proper he use the third person singular "this researcher" instead of using the editorial *we*.in formal writing when one wishes to establish a formal relationship with one's audience, one avoids the first-person and the second-person pronouns or he may even need to state it in a passive voice. In contrast, Rice (1993) asserts that:

> The first-person pronoun is not appropriate for all levels of writing. It usually does not have a place in technical manuals or business reports which are often understood to issue from organizations rather than from individuals. In such cases, the writer is trying to play an impersonal role; individual opinion might even weaken one's authority. In other cases, though [i.e in informal writings], *I* can mean that the writer is a witness or even has a personal stake in the issue, a commitment that many readers appreciate…. Formal writing is 'serious' writing. It assumes that one is in an earnest nonsense, get−down−to−business mood and addressing an audience in the same mood (p.246).

The use of the impersonal '*one'* is apt in such a situation. Its use enables the writer to appeal to the ''audience logically, remaining aloof from any emotional connection and relying principally on the authority of one's role and expertise'' (p.246). But when the writer's aim is to achieve persuasion, 'the attempt to gain the consent and cooperation of others, there may be no more important word than *we* (p.248).

### 5. Pedagogical implication of the personal pronoun 'I'.

The teacher of English in a second language situation should be aware of the peculiarity of the pronoun "I", its deviance from, and defiance of English grammar. He should devise a means of teaching the learner. He should point out that although the personal pronoun 'I' when used majestically, modestly or editorially as **we**, it is deceptively plural .That although in the subject position it is singular, it selects the base form of verb in the present simple tense just as a plural subject. Examples:
S20. I advise that he should be treated with much care.
S21. I attend a church regularly.

S22. I am an African, aren't I (British English).

S23. Mother and I took tea.

In the object position, 'I' becomes '*me*'.

S24. The barman served mother and me cold drinks.

But this pronoun may take the form "*me*" or "*I*" depending on whether the situation is formal or informal in a response to the question as in:

S25a A: Who broke the bottle?

S25b B: It's me (Accepted in colloquial English. But in a formal situation the correct form is       S26 "It's I". But it cannot co-occur with a verb that clearly indicates plurality of the subject e.g. dispersed, gather, and scattered.

Unfortunately, it is common, though hardly usual now, especially in a second language situation, to hear an expression like:

*S27 "Jesus shed his blood for you and I". This is a case of the confusion of the case of the first person, ie substituting the nominative for the accusative. The teacher of English in a second language situation should explain that the first person pronoun 'I' is used rather in the nominative (or in the subject position), not in the accusative (or in the object position).

## 6. Conclusion

The first person singular pronoun is conclusively a peculiar one. Even its historical evolution in English writing attests so. Its use in discourse and in sociolinguistic contexts is intriguingly peculiar and interesting. This peculiarity in many respects− variations in morphological shapes, breaking of syntactic convention, sociolinguistic usage and semantic import− all contribute to the pedagogical problems faced by both the teacher and the learner in the classroom. The onus, therefore, is on the teacher to be aware of this peculiarity and make conscious efforts in handling it appropriately in the second language situation.

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| Language | Subjective case | Objective case |
|---|---|---|
| English | I | me |
| French | Mo, M | m |
| Spanish | Yo | me |
| German | Ich | mir,mich |
| Italian | So | me, io mi |
| Igbo (Nigeria) | Mu, M | m |
| Yoruba '' | Emi | mi |
| Tiv (Benue, Nigeria) | Mo | m |
| Idoma ` | Ame | amii |
| Igede | M | m |
| Bekwarra (Cross River Nig) | Ami, Ma | m |
| Boki (Cross River Nig) | Me | m |
| Utugwang (Cross River Nig) | M, Emi | emi |
| Bette (Cross River Nig) | Mi | m |
| Lokaa (Cross River Nig) | Ami | m |
| Ibibio (Nigeria) | Ami | mi |
| Hausa (Nigeria) | Ni | mung |

FIG.2 Universally identical forms of the pronoun "I"

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