

To Alexandra  
Before whom words fail me

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Inquiries should be addressed to Clarkson N. Potter, Inc.,  
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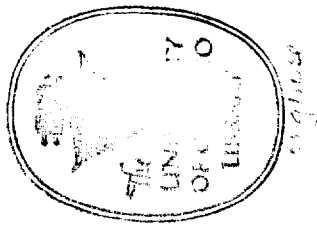
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it could not have been planned. (Sometimes, to be sure, the two can overlap: finding a diamond ring in the street is both fortuitous and fortunate.) Note, however, that whereas people will say *fortuitous* when they mean *fortunate*, the reverse is almost never the case. That is because *fortunate* is the easier word, more common and learned earlier; you might say that it is the older and stronger sibling that beats out the younger and weaker one.

Consider, next, the case of *imply* and *infer*. The former means "to hint" or "to suggest"; the latter, "to deduce" or "to conclude." Both words designate relatively subtle mental activities; therein, more than in their sounds, lies the similarity. But these activities are not merely different: they are, at best, complementary; at worst, antithetical. And still people confuse them, but it is only *infer* that gets misused, not *imply*. Again it is the more familiar word—the older, stronger sibling—that comes out unscathed.

Sometimes, however, two such kindred words seem to be, or ought to be, equally familiar—siblings with a negligible difference in age. Such a pair is *masterful* and *masterly*, and they get steadily confused, even though the first means "powerful," "commanding," or "domineering"; whereas the second means "with the skill (or knowledge) of a master." I regret to say that here even the *American Heritage Dictionary*—the only current American dictionary of any size that I can countenance—is at fault: its third and fourth definitions of *masterful* are inadmissible. "Disregard of [the distinction]" says Fowler, "is so obviously inconvenient that it can only be put down to ignorance." Yet even though *masterly* is encountered by people as early in their lives as *masterful*, it is the latter that keeps wrongly supplanting the former, never the other way round. To some extent, it is the greater number of everyday adjectives ending in *-ful* than in *-ly* that is behind this error; more important, I believe, is the fact that our society admires power more than it does knowledge or skill. Here, most likely, it is popularity or prestige that makes one sibling more *masterful* (not *masterly*) than the other.

Consider a similar pair: *uninterested* and *disinterested*. The former designates lack of intellectual or emotional involvement; the latter, absence of a profit motive or of some other motive involving personal advantage or bias. Yet *disinterested*, which, I assume, enters a person's vocabulary later than *uninterested*, has almost totally usurped the place reserved for the latter. Here I imagine the rea-

son to be laziness. Because we can say both *disinterestedness* and *disinterest* but have no shorter variant of *uninterestedness*, the shorter form wins out across the board and smuggles in its corresponding adjective, *disinterested*. The fact that *dis* and *in* constitute an association pleasing to the ear may add to the greater popularity of the *dis*-forms. That *uninteresting* has not yet been superseded by *disinteresting* is due only to the fact that the latter word does not exist. But such a trifle, I fear, will not keep the illiterates at bay much longer.

Sometimes siblings do not even sound alike: for example, *verbal* and *oral*. The first denotes anything having to do with words, written or spoken; the second refers to spoken words only. Yet *verbal* has well-nigh dislodged *oral* in the sense of a statement or agreement made by word of mouth. This may be so because *oral* also designates nonspeaking functions of the mouth, as in *oral hygiene* or *oral sex*, and so begets the ignorant assumption that the spoken word must be covered by that other adjective, *verbal*.

Finally, there are cases in which, even without the existence of a specific sibling, people are misled by the sound of a word. Thus *fulsome*, merely because its first syllable suggests fullness, a good thing, is taken to mean something positive related to fullness, such as "abundant" or "unstinting." Actually, it means "objectively overdone," or "insincerely excessive" and is bad news indeed.

Keep those unruly siblings in their places! There are others I have overlooked, but if this article has the right effect, it will affect your future dealings with all of them.

## Just Between Us

**W**hy does language keep changing? Because it is a living thing, people will tell you. Something that you cannot press forever, like a dead flower, between the pages of a dictionary. Rather, it is a living organism that, like a live plant, sprouts new leaves and flowers. Alas, this lovely albeit trite image is—as I have said before and wish now to say with even greater emphasis—largely

nonsense. Language, for the most part, changes out of ignorance.

Certainly new words can become needed, and a happy invention or slang can sometimes supply useful, though usually perishable, synonyms. But by and large, linguistic changes are caused by the ignorance of speakers and writers, and in the last few centuries—given our schools, dictionaries, and books on grammar—such ignorance could have been, like the live nettle or poison ivy it is, uprooted. It is, or ought to be, possible to stop—or at least considerably delay—unnecessary change, of which one of the most preposterous and nefarious examples is the recently proliferating but still weedable *between you and I*.

To get back, however, to our initial botanical analogy: let us concede that language is indeed a living plant—a rhododendron, say. Well, a rhododendron can be depended on to sprout rhododendron leaves and rhododendron flowers as long as there is life in it. At no point will it start sprouting petunia blooms or *Ficus* leaves. Then why in the name of the living plant, or the living God, should we, after centuries of *between you and me*, switch to *between you and I*?

Let me explain, first of all, what drove home to me the need to devote an entire column to this single heinous error. Several readers sent me Harry Stein's interview with Tennessee Williams from the June 5, 1979, issue of *Esquire* magazine. There was Williams comparing himself to Tom, the hero of *The Glass Menagerie*, but adding: "The principal difference between he and I is stamina." I couldn't believe my eyes, so I immediately asked Stein whether Williams had actually said "between he and I," and Harry solemnly confirmed the melancholy fact. The man who after Eugene O'Neill was our best playwright—I say *was* because his later plays have been pitiful travesties of his beautiful early ones—had committed a grammatical error of *unsurpassable* grossness. I would like to think, in fact, that the author of *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* could not have uttered that abomination, but even from the heartbreaking old square who concocted *Vieux Carré* and *Crêve Cœur*, I would have expected better.

What is this *between you and I*—to take its most frequently heard form—and where does it come from? It is the flouting of a very simple, basic rule; not so long ago, any halfway self-respecting high-school student would sooner have bitten off and swallowed the tip of his pencil than have committed that error. Prepositions

in English take the accusative, also known as the objective, case. The trouble is that not very many college students could even tell you nowadays what a preposition is, what the accusative is, or, for that matter, what English is. A preposition, in grammar, is "a word that indicates the relation of a substantive to a verb, an adjective, or another substantive," according to the worthy *American Heritage Dictionary*, which in this instance, I am afraid, is not very clear. The old *Webster's Second* did it better: "A word generally with some meaning of position, direction, time, or other abstract relation, used to connect a noun or a pronoun, in an adjectival or adverbial sense, with some other word."

But the *Heritage* helpfully provides examples of prepositions: *at, by, in, to, from, with*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is perhaps even more helpful; under *preposition*, it says: "One of the parts of speech; an indeclinable word or particle serving to mark the relation between two notional words, the latter of which is usually a substantive or pronoun; as *sow in hope, good for food*. . . . The following sb. [substantive] or pron. is said to be 'governed' by the preposition. . . ." Which one of these three definitions you find most useful does not matter; by any of them, *between* is a preposition. And what about the accusative, or objective? That, according to the *Heritage*, is "the case of a noun, pronoun, adjective, or participle that is the direct object of a verb or the object of certain prepositions." Note that this definition is not based on the English language, in which, strictly speaking, only pronouns have case endings—luckily or unluckily, as the case (not the case ending) may be. For ours is a language so uninflected (that is, without case endings) that it is, in this respect, much easier than almost any other. But the very ease lulls the mind to the few exceptions. The difficulties some people have with *who* and *whom* are well known; now comes the new problem with *between you and me*.

For, as you must know, *whom, me, him, her, us*, and *them* are the accusatives for what in the nominative is *who, I, he, she, we*, and *they*. And this is practically all there is to declension (case endings) in English. But for many people, even this seems to be too much. Had they studied any classical or foreign tongues, they would consider it a breeze—no, a windfall; they have not, however, and so, to make up for it, English has become Greek to them.

To continue. Prepositions like the aforementioned *at, by, in, to, from, with*—to which we might add such popular favorites as *be-*

*tween, for, over, under, beside, before, without, about, above, below, behind*—require the accusative in the pronouns they govern. So we say “for him,” “without us,” “beside them,” “under whom,” and so on. And in the old days, most people managed to say correctly “between you and me.” Yet this, as you can doubtless see, is somewhat trickier—if anything so simple can be said to be tricky at all.

The problem here is that *you* is the only personal pronoun that does not have an accusative separate and different from the nominative, the case in which the subject of a sentence appears. Thus *she* becomes *her* in “I love her,” but *you* remains *you* in “I love you.” And that is how the confusion began: if something was between you and someone else and the *you* remained pristine, as if it were still in the nominative, why, asked our growing army of functional illiterates, shouldn’t the other pronoun (or, more likely, “word” or “thing”) remain equally unfiddled with: *between you and I*?

Of course, if it were the other way around, more people would get it right: *between I and you* would bother even some untrained ears. But out of politeness (or, more probably, habituation—for if we still had politeness, we would also have grammar, which is one of its forms), we mention the other person first, and so the unchanging first term precipitates inertia in the second—if inertia can be precipitated; perhaps *induces, continues, perpetuates* would be better.

There is, however, another, rather more odious cause for this error, which is known as a genteelism. People vaguely recollect that *It is me* is a vulgar, inferior form of *It is I*; that the correct, refined answer to *Who is it?* is *I*, not *me*. So, by a kind of dreadful linguistic social climbing, they decide that *I* is always a finer, classier, more educated word than *me* and attests invariably to refinement, learnedness, breeding; whereupon *between you and me, for you and me*, and all the rest get *I*’s sprinkled all over them like cheap perfume. What ignorance began, snobbery finished off, and *between you and I* is sweeping the country. As for poor Tennessee Williams, with his *between he and I* for *between him and me*, he is so far gone that he cannot even claim the inertia of the first pronoun as an extenuating circumstance.

But what is really wrong with *between you and I*? you may ask if you are an innocent, an ignoramus, or a false prophet like Wayne

O’Neil, a professor of linguistics at MIT and an associate professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education; people, after all, will still understand what you mean.

Well, yes, in that particular instance they will still understand you. However, the trouble with grammatical errors—and in this respect they *are* like living organisms—is that they beget others, that they multiply and proliferate until all is error and confusion. Suppose, for example, that your *between you and I* practitioner graduates to something like “He is not crazy about you and she—about anybody.” This might easily be heard as “He is not crazy about you, and she about anybody”—a very different kettle of fish and capable of eliciting a dangerous misconception.

You should see, then, that to avoid adding to the already raging chaos in English usage and communication, we must urgently stop *between you and I*. Otherwise, it will lead us to every kind of deleterious misunderstanding.

Let me give you a further example. When someone asks “Would you rather that I take you or she?” no one will know whether the choice is between who is to take him, say, to the movies or who is to be taken to them; it could mean that the invitation is either from a man or from his wife; it could also mean that the person invited is either you or your sister. Multiply this kind of obscurity, as committed by future millions, by an infinity, and you have a fairly accurate vision of hell: sentences and paragraphs will have to be resaid and personal and business letters rewritten and resent through the mail at who knows what cost in time, money, energy, and serious blunders.

What, then, are we to do about it? Simple: we fight. Whenever, wherever we hear someone say “between you and I” or one of the related horrors, and whoever the offender may be, we go into action. To strangers in the street, we may have to be polite; to superiors (in position, evidently, not in knowledge), we may even have to be somewhat humble. But correct them we must. To all others we may be as sharp, forceful, tonitruous as the circumstances permit or demand: let family, friends, and neighbors hear us correct them loudly and clearly—let *between you and me* resound across the land. Otherwise there will soon be no more communication between you and me.