

## Chapter 3

### Who says what's right?

It is widely believed that one shouldn't:

- start a sentence with *And* or *But*, or finish one with a preposition;
- say *me and John are ...*, or *between you and I*;
- use *agenda* or *they* as if they were singular rather than plural; or
- split an infinitive (for example, *to run*) by writing *to quickly run*.

But where do these rules come from, if they are rules at all? Should we be bound by them and, if so, why? Who made them, and with what mandate?

All languages constantly evolve, even supposedly dead ones while they remain in use (as Latin does) (Mattila, 2013). Their grammar and pronunciation change; new words are added; existing words adopt new meanings; other words become archaic and eventually obsolete. This can happen rapidly, particularly in the modern world, and considerable change occurs even within a normal lifetime. Some mid-20th century English already sounds dated, especially to the young; as you travel back through time, the versions used by Shakespeare, Chaucer, and the Anglo-Saxons become increasingly like a different language (which it certainly is when you reach the Germanic dialects brought over by invaders in the first millennium). No version is 'right', any more than an ice-age wolf was the correct version of a dog.

In this constant flux, useful distinctions are sometimes lost and each generation nostalgically regrets the passing of its own familiar forms. But language is free and democratic so, overall, over time, useful changes tend to last, sooner or later becoming familiar enough to be accepted as part of the standard language (or of the local dialect). If innovations don't work, people are less likely to adopt them. But nothing is perfect, even people, so change is not always for the better. Our tendency to copy each other – as essential for language as it is for other forms of development – can be misapplied to copy the follies of those with whom we identify. It can also produce changes which are for neither better nor worse.

For example, most of us over 50 were taught to use *I* when we were the subject of the sentence and *me* when we were the object, or following a preposition. So *Me and Daphne wrote this* jars on us in the same way that *Me wrote this* would on most English-speakers, and neither Daphne nor I would

## PART B: WHAT IS GOOD WRITING?

use it even in the most informal speech. But whether we say *I wrote* or *me wrote*, the meaning is clear from the word order, so this distinction between subject and object might well dwindle until one day it disappears. If it does, those whose teachers grew up without it will accept *Me and Daphne wrote this* as natural and correct. The rule might become 'Use *I* when you are the only subject of the sentence; otherwise use *me*'. This seems to be the rule applied by many speakers today, although it will probably be some time before it becomes acceptable in formal writing, if it ever does. (*Me and Daphne* seems wrong to us for another reason. In our youth courtesy required us to put *you* first (*You and John will go*) and ourselves last (*John and I went*.)

Meanwhile, we wince when we hear *between you and I*, although that too is now both harmless and common and might in time become universally acceptable.

The same distinction between *who* and *whom* is further along the path towards obsolescence. *Whom are you looking for?* sounds archaic (that is, somewhere between formal and obsolete), while *For whom are you looking?* and *To whom it may concern* sound right to us (if formal). *For who the bell tolls* and *To who it may concern* still sound wrong, presumably because *whom* is so familiar in these phrases. Familiarity dictates the rule.

The all-purpose pronoun *you* has completed this journey. It is now correct as the subject or object, and as singular or plural, even in the most formal documents. The *thee*, *thou*, and *ye* forms are obsolete except in certain special circumstances.

One person's rule can seem arbitrary and pointless to others. A consultant with many years' experience as drafting counsel to the US Senate disapproved (in a 2014 LinkedIn discussion) of the possessive apostrophe-s in statutes. His view that this was unacceptably informal didn't change even when he was shown the introductory words of the Administration of Estates Act 1925 (as a random example of long-accepted British formality):

Be it enacted by the King's most Excellent Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons, in this present Parliament assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:—

He and his colleagues, he said, would have replaced *the King's most Excellent Majesty* with *the most Excellent Majesty of the King*. He wasn't joking. None of the other legislative drafters in the discussion, from around the Commonwealth, agreed with him. But it is easier to laugh at this view than to realise that we all have strong opinions about the correctness of arbitrary rules that seem absurd to others.

The prohibition against splitting infinitives is widely attributed to the fact that infinitives were never split in classical Latin (although this couldn't