

# Why did he say it?

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WHY DID who say what? Mr Kinnock, I'm thinking of, the leader of the British Labour Party, on 14 April 1988, in the middle of the afternoon, during Prime Minister's Question Time. The utterance was widely played on the radio that day, and reported the next morning in various newspapers: She could give a better answer than that to I and to my honourable friends.

One political journalist, Simon Heffer, commented in the *Telegraph*: Those Tories whose attention spans in class had lasted as far as instruction about the accusative of the personal pronoun hooted. Hundreds of their colleagues, in whose prior callings as used car salesmen such linguistic practices had been unnecessary, laughed anyway.

Was it a slip? Apparently not, for as Heffer reports:

Mr Kinnock was either without shame or – this not being the sort of joke routinely cracked in the student union bars of post-industrial Wales – failed to see what was funny. For he repeated 'to I and my honourable friends', though, in a first flowering of satire, appended, 'and some of her mates too'.

And he adds an extra dig later in his piece: Some say that, by rationing his appearances at the dispatch, Mr Kinnock is seeking some of the rarity value enjoyed by the Prime Minister. Others, more cruel, say that he leaves at 3.30 p.m. to catch a broadcast of the World Service's 'English by Radio'.

The sensitivity surrounding this particular point in usage is remarkable. As it happened, also in April, I was collating the results of the Radio 4 listeners' usage survey, which I do every few years on the series *English Now*. I ask people to send me in a list of their pet likes and dislikes about English usage, work out a 'top twenty', and have a programme discussing the results. (Hardly anyone sends in their pet likes. Indeed, you'd be forgiven for concluding that there was *nothing* to be

liked about the language.) This year, there was one grammatical issue which was head and shoulders above the rest: the confusion between *me* and *I*, or the corresponding forms in other pronouns. (For the record, when I carried out a similar survey in 1981, published in *The Listener*, it was top of the grammatical pops then too.)

I haven't been able to track down a comparable 'top twenty' from a century ago, but there's no doubt that the *I/me* issue was very much in the forefront of educated people's minds then. Here is the opening of a section in Dean Alford's *The Queen's English* (1869): A correspondent asks me to notice 'a usage now becoming prevalent among persons who ought to know better: viz. that of 'you and I' after prepositions governing the accusative . . .

The correspondent was wrong about prevalence. The pronouns question had been given a thorough airing a century before, in the first grammars that emerged in the age of Johnson.

It isn't a simple question. Several issues have to be disentangled. The pronoun problem emerges in five main ways. [I restrict the topic to the choice between subjective (nominative) and objective (accusative) cases. There are several other areas of divided usage affecting pronouns, such as the problem of which form to use before *-ing* verbs (the 'gerund'): *It's no use my/me asking him*. But that is for another day.] These five ways are:

○ Which to use after a transitive verb? Here, people don't usually (in standard English) have problems when there's just a single pronoun, as in *John saw me*. To find *John saw I* would be decidedly unusual. But if there's a phrase involving *and*, and the pronoun comes second, then you will often encounter such usages as *Mike saw Peter and I at the shops*. And the usage is reinforced when a verb follows, as in *Mike asked Peter and I to go to the shops*.

○ Which to use after a preposition? The same point applies. *He looked at I* is unlikely, but *He looked at John and I*, and other such constructions, will be heard. In this context, the main preposition which has been singled out for attention is *between*, presumably because of the frequency with which *between you and I/me* turns up in everyday discourse.

○ Which to use after forms of the verb *be*? Early grammarians were influenced by the Latin rule that a nominative case should be used rather than an accusative, and recommended *It is I* rather than *It is me*. Here is Dean Alford again. Talking about *it is me*, he says (p. 154):

This is an expression which every one uses. Grammarians (of the smaller order) protest: schoolmasters (of the lower kind) prohibit and chastise; but English men, women, and children go on saying it, and will go on saying it as long as the English language is spoken.

○ Which to use after such words as *than* and *as*? Should it be *He's bigger than I* vs *He's bigger than me*? Here the argument has revolved around whether we see the connecting word as a conjunction or a preposition. Early grammarians saw *than* as the 'translation' of Latin *quam*, a conjunction, which had to be followed by the subjective, preceding an 'understood' verb (. . . *than I am*). On the other hand, the objective case after *than* is well established: the *OED* gives examples of it being used from as early as the 16th century.

○ Which to use within a phrase as subject of a sentence? *John and I went home* vs *John and me went home*? This is very much a question of formal vs colloquial usage, and of the differing expectations of written and spoken language. The *me* usage becomes particularly prominent when the normal order of politeness is reversed, and the pronoun is put first: *Me and John went home*.

With so many variables to consider, the situation is likely to be very fluid. The forces of analogy, where one area of usage influences another to become more like it, are working in several different directions. For instance, some people subconsciously sense that *I* is

frequent *before* the verb, so they think that this is the pronoun to use *after* the verb as well. Others sense that *me* is frequent *after* the verb, so they begin to use it *before*. When an *I*-preferer and a *me*-preferer meet, of course, the result can be the linguistic equivalent of a nuclear reaction.

But analogy affects the whole of the language. Why does this area of usage arouse such enormous sensitivity? Several grammarians have concluded that the main reason is educational. We reap what we sow. And since the rise of prescriptive grammar, generations of teachers have sown in our minds anxiety over pronouns. For instance, because the attacks on *you and me* in subject position date back two centuries, it is hardly surprising that the thought has developed in users' minds that there is something 'dangerous' about the objective case. As the US commentator Dwight Macdonald remarked in the *New Yorker* in 1963: 'the chief result of the long crusade against *It's me* is that most Americans now say *Between you and I*'. There's more to it than this, of course. The *you and I* construction is an ancient one, attested by the *OED* from the 17th century. Shakespeare wrote, long before the grammarians started to pontificate: 'All debts are cleared between you and I' (*Merchant of Venice*). Other issues, to do with style and linguistic change, are implicated. But I'm sure that Macdonald's point is essentially sound.

Poor Mr Kinnock. He opted for a sentence containing two dangerous factors: a preposition and a coordination – with a *than* lurking in the sidelines as well. If he'd said 'to my honourable friends and I', he might have got away with it. If he'd said 'to me and my honourable friends', he might have got away with it. But to put the *I* at the front, and then emphasise it by giving it a stress and a subsequent pause (as you could hear on the radio), and then to isolate it further by putting a *to* before 'honourable friends', was just asking for trouble. Whether he did it accidentally or deliberately, of course, is another matter – for politicians, not linguists. □