

Using "I" As a Conceit

By Carolyn Howard-Johnson, author of *The Frugal Editor: Put Your Best Book Forward to Avoid Humiliation and Ensure Success*

I don't know when I learned the word "conceited." I was raised in Utah where most of us didn't use "conceit" in the sense of an elaborate or strained metaphor but rather to mean that someone thought they were extra-super *special*. The little girl across the street who snubbed me because I didn't wear long stockings with garters (which was an immediate tipoff that I was not her kind) was "conceited" rather than prejudiced. The kid who was quick to make a point of how bright he was when I made a mistake was "conceited" rather than arrogant (or insecure). Gawd! I loved the word "conceited." I could apply it to so many situations and avoid learning new vocabulary words.

Of course, in a culture where being extra-super *humble* was valued, I soon noticed that our English language is, indeed, "conceited."

I'm speaking of the way we capitalize the pronoun "I." None of the other pronouns are capped. So what about this "I," standing tall no matter where you find it in a sentence?

Recently as I tutored students in accent reduction and American culture I noticed that some languages (like Japanese) seem to do quite well without pronouns of any sort. I did a little research. Some languages like Hebrew and Arabic don't capitalize any of their letters and some, like German, capitalize every darn noun. So, English—a Germanic language at its roots—just carried on the German proclivity for caps.

But the question remained. Why only the "I?" Why not "them" and "you" and all the others. Caroline Winter, a 2008 Fulbright scholar, says "England was where the capital "I" first reared its dotless head . . . Apparently someone back then decided that just "i" after it had been diminished from the original Germanic 'ich' was not substantial enough to stand alone." It had to do with an artistic approach to fonts. The story goes that long ago in the days of handset type or even teletype machines little sticks and dots standing all alone looked like broken bits of lead or scrappy orphan letters.

Then there is the idea that religion played a part in capitalizing the "I." Rastafarians (and some others, too) think in terms of humankind as being one with God and therefore—one has to presume—it would be rather blasphemous not to capitalize "I" just as one does "God." Capitals, after all, are a way to honor a word or concept.

Which, of course, brings us back to the idea that we speakers of English are just plain "conceited."

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