

***Linguistic Lingo for Lawyers* – ‘person’ and other grammatical terms for personal pronoun forms in English**

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In Clarity 55, I suggested that Clarity could include regular columns called 'Linguistic Lingo for Lawyers' and 'Legal Lingo for Linguists'. Practical and fairly short, they would have advantages for their readers and writers:

- *For readers – the plain-English explanations could improve our knowledge and understanding of technical terms. It would also be interesting to observe others' techniques for explaining technical jargon.*
- *For writers – the process of explaining our jargon in plain English would be interesting and useful, and may even sharpen our own understanding of it.*
- *For both – the columns would provide a building collection of ready-made explanations, which we could use unchanged (subject to Clarity's copyright policy) or as a starting-point in our day-to-day work, for example if we needed to explain linguistic or legal terms to a lay audience.*

I asked what you thought. would you like to see these regular columns? Do you have ideas for topics to fill them? Would you like to write for one? Julie Clement (Clarity's editor in chief and I have received some positive comments, but as yet no ideas for topics or offers to write. Do email us at clementj@cooley.edu or sarahcarr@btconnect.com if you can help.

This is the second 'Linguistic Lingo for Lawyers' article.

The term 'person' distinguishes the speaker or writer ('first person') from the person or thing being addressed ('second person'), and from any people or things not falling into either of these categories ('third person'). So, for example in the sentence I *told you and him*, *I* is in the first person, *you* in the second person and *him* in the third person.

Other terms for personal pronoun forms are:

- 'gender' – which marks words as masculine, feminine and neuter
- 'number' – which classifies words depending on how many people or things are referred to
- 'case' – which shows the relation of a word to others in the sentence.

Person, gender, number and case in English and other languages

The following table shows the categories that standard modern English uses in person, gender, number and case for personal pronouns. Occasionally, the archaic second-person pronouns (singular *thou*, *thee* and *thine*, and, subjective plural *ye*), are still used (sometimes altered) in some regional dialects of England and Scotland. They also survive in religion, in writing about old times, and in a few set phrases such as *holier than thou* and *fare thee well*. Some North Americans colloquially distinguish

between singular and plural you by using *yall* or *yinz* for the plural. In England, some dialects use *youse* in the same way.

Person	Real-life gender referred to	Number	Case		
			Subjective	Objective	Possessive
First	Masculine, feminine and neuter	Singular	<i>I</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>my/mine</i>
		Plural	<i>we</i>	<i>us</i>	<i>our/ours</i>
Second	Masculine, feminine and neuter	Singular	<i>you</i>		<i>your/yours</i>
		Plural			
Third	Masculine	Singular	<i>he</i>	<i>him</i>	<i>his</i>
	Feminine		<i>she</i>	<i>her</i>	<i>her/hers</i>
	Neuter		<i>it</i>		<i>its</i>
	Masculine, feminine and neuter	Plural	<i>they</i>	<i>them</i>	<i>their/theirs</i>

Other languages may have fewer or extra categories. Here are some examples:

- The Algonquian languages use an extra category – fourth person – for third-person people or things that are less topical. Another use of the term 'fourth person' is for indefinite or generic pronouns (like *one* in English phrases such as *one should do one's best*)
- Melanesia has two extra categories of number: dual (*we two* or *you two*) and trial (*we three* and *you three*)
- If you think Latin had a lot of cases (six), then try Finnish: it has 15.
- Many European languages have different pronouns to distinguish levels of formality, for example *tu* and *vous* as second-person singular in French.

Relevance of terms to plain English

Of the terms covered in this article, 'person' probably crops up most frequently among plain-language practitioners, as we often recommend using the first and second persons where possible.

I find that this guideline is one of the hardest to get health service managers to use. They are worried about their own job security, which puts them off using *I* and *we* as they feel it makes them too personally accountable. They are happier talking in the third person about an official body, such as *the trust board* or *the finance committee*. They are also under pressure to ensure there is always a robust audit trail, and are concerned that personal pronouns do not make it absolutely clear who or which body has decided about or done something. Sometimes it works to make the first reference in the document *we on the trust board* or suchlike. But *you* also causes problems as they are often writing for a disparate audience. Wouldn't it be handy if we could sound human and specific both at once, by inflecting nouns too to mark person, showing, for example, that by *the board*, we meant *we* (as opposed to *they*) *on the board*? As far as I know, no languages allow this.

Pronoun gender can also be a hot topic in plain language, since we need to make sure our use of personal pronouns is not sexist. *They*, *them*, *their* and *theirs* seem reasonably well accepted these days as common-sex singular pronouns.

A recent exchange on the Plain Language Association International's email discussion group highlighted that some people get into a muddle with pronoun cases, often in an effort to sound proper and polite. For example, they might say: *Would you like to come with my friend and I?* They were probably told as youngsters not to say *my friend and me* (which is correct advice if the phrase is in the subjective case) and are now misapplying it to the objective case. *Between you and I* is another example.

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