I Spy with My Little i . . .
The Manifestation of Power Dynamics

Mac Scott

In this article, Mac Scott discusses how power dynamics and cultural pressures construct rules about "correct" grammar and punctuation usage. Looking specifically at the capitalization (or lack thereof) of the letter I, he explores ways that "good" writing is actually determined not by one standard set of definitive rules, but by whether a writer effectively navigates the conventions of a specific genre.

Lisa: *You can't drive, Dad. He's got your license.*
Homer: *Well, I'm gonna try anyway.*
Homer turns the ignition and the engine starts up
Homer: *It worked! It's a miracle!*
—The Simpsons

Grammar's Tough. Amirite?

Is there anything more frustrating than grammar? Fewer things make children and adults alike feel insecure and inadequate. Whether it's marked-up essays, poor grades on Language Arts worksheets, a sinking suspicion that you were actually being taught a foreign language in your English classes, or a friend calling you out every time you use *seen* instead of *saw*, we have all had experiences with grammar that have made us feel, or continue to make us feel, well, dumb (Figure 1). Anxiety over grammar is one of the few experiences that can bridge differences and forge friendships. Admitting that you *don't get grammar* is a good way to get on people's good side. It's an experience pretty much everyone can relate to.

Figure 1: Someone sends a text but uses the "incorrect" tense. Hurt feelings ensue.

But even though many of us can't help but roll our eyes when someone reminds us it's *whom* and not *who*, grammar remains a powerful source of self-loathing. And it isn't difficult to see why. Most of us think of grammar as that thing we never knew enough of in school, and even those students who consistently received good grades in their English classes certainly had points taken off here and there. Grammar is just one of those things where you feel you always get *something* wrong. The logical extension of this is that everyone then feels at best a little anxious and at worst like a terrible human being.

This last thing—the part about feeling like a terrible person—isn't necessarily hyperbole. In their book *Grammar Rants*, Patricia A. Dunn and Ken Lindblom discuss our country's history of equating proper grammar with morality. They actually specify Illinois State University's President from 1862 to 1876, Richard Edwards, and his belief that "unskillful and slovenly use of [the English language] is disastrous to any accuracy of thought . . . The Normal University considers it a worthy service to do all that is possible to *remedy this evil*" (qtd. in Dunn et al 2–3). The authors point to a few other examples of ISU faculty from the 19th century purporting the belief that grammar = morality, and that incorrect or "bad" grammar = evilness (3). These ideas were hardly unique to Illinois State University, but the school's role as a prominent education college gives a small glimpse into how improper grammar and the people who employ it are often charged with no less than the downfall of modern civilization.

This is messed up, right? At the very least it's frustrating. For one thing, what we consider grammar often isn't what linguists consider grammar; a lot of times we're talking about punctuation or spelling. And a lot of these rules aren't really necessary. We've just been brought up to think they are. This can be evidenced by our own personal conversations through talking or text messaging. Those who believe (or who have been told repeatedly) that they are terrible at grammar are still able to communicate effectively with others. Linguists would claim this alone proves that a person does, in fact, understand his or her language's

grammatical structure. In a way, it's the same with writing conventions; if you post on Facebook, even if it's written with terrible punctuation and you use *there* when you should have used *their*, your friends will still probably know what you mean. If you break language rules, the world keeps spinning. In fact, many of the rules we break don't cause even minor confusion. If someone sends a text that says, "OK. C U their," I may roll my eyes, but I still know what they're saying. Message received, broken rules and all.

Reading the Rules

In *The Simpsons* scene depicted in this article's epigraph, Lisa reminds Homer of a rule: if the cops suspend your license, you can't drive. But what she really means is *you're not supposed to drive*. Homer, awesome as ever, takes Lisa literally. He thinks he literally won't be able to drive his car without his license. This interchange between Homer and Lisa is analogous to telling someone, "You can't end a sentence with a preposition," and having that person think it's impossible to do so. But just as Homer turns the key and the Simpsons drive off, you can end a sentence with a preposition and people will probably know what you're saying. In other words, you *can* break rules—*you're just not supposed to*.

With this in mind, the issue becomes when you *should* and when you *shouldn't* break these rules. Just because many of these rules don't make a whole lot of sense, that doesn't mean that breaking them doesn't have effects. Going back to *The Simpsons* for a second, Homer *can* drive, but driving on a suspended license is a crime. Similarly, breaking grammar rules can have an effect. Again looking to *Grammar Rants*, Dunn and Lindblom argue that "correctness is often a function of who is writing what for whom: who the reader is, who the writer is, and the power difference between them" (xi). In other words, whether it's a student writing for a teacher or a job applicant writing a resume that will be read by someone in a human resources department, the more powerful people tend to decide what is correct. Similarly, they're the ones who decide on a punishment. A student may get a poor grade. A job applicant may not get an interview with a resume filled with grammatical errors. Homer may get thrown in jail.

A Game Changer

So what? The quick answer is to make sure you're aware of your audience and how he or she (or they) will receive your writing. Be aware that your Facebook friends will interpret your not capitalizing proper nouns differently than, say, the professor you need to email will. Seems simple, right?

Eh, kind of. When we research any writing situation, regardless of the genre, we find it complex and evolving. After all, every writing situation is unique and influenced by countless elements, which in turn are influenced by countless elements, and so on. For this article, I want to look at just one of the influences currently having an effect on the way we write: social media.

It's important to note that social media, in and of itself, isn't bad or good. But how we use it—and how it lends itself to be used—does have an impact. Ask any adult to comment on the state of contemporary writing, and you might hear something about how writing today is *just awful*, and that it's all because of Facebook, Twitter, texting, etc. And that these mediums are bringing about the end, not just of the English language, but of our once-great nation.

But anyone who uses social media understands that the end isn't exactly near. When writing for Facebook, you may feel guilty about writing in a way that your 8th-grade Language Arts teacher would find "incorrect," but that's probably the extent of it. Comma splices on Facebook aren't ushering in the apocalypse; rather, the medium is changing the very idea of what *is* and *isn't* "correct."

Can i Get an Example?

Over the past couple decades, social media—rather, our communal participation in social media—has affected our understanding of writing conventions. This is exemplified through the capitalization (or lack thereof) of the pronoun *I*. From semicolons to split infinitives to paragraph breaks, knowing how to write "correctly" is difficult. But if there exists an easier rule to follow than capitalizing *I*, I don't know what it is. As far as writing conventions go, capitalizing *I* is as easy as they come. You're supposed to do it. Always. End of story.

Not quite. Despite the fact that this should be the easiest rule to follow, a lot of people "nowadays" don't capitalize it. We're left with a couple possible rationales: 1) either people lowercase it on purpose, or 2) something has happened to make it so that writers don't think *i* is as big of a deal as it used to be. I think it's both. But something must have happened for this to occur. Earlier, I mentioned that some writing rules don't make a whole lot of sense and that breaking them doesn't really inhibit understanding. Let's consider if this applies to capital *I*.

A Brief History Lesson

According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, people started capitalizing *i* roughly 750 years ago. In Old English, *I* was actually *ic*. Pretty soon, the c was dropped, and this led to a writing convention revolution of sorts: "Reduced to *i* by

mid-12c. in northern England, it began to be capitalized mid-13c. to mark it as a distinct word and avoid misreading in handwritten manuscripts" (Harper). In other words, capitalizing *I* was a matter of clarity; it was too small to stand alone, too easily misinterpreted. But does this hold up today?

Since most writing occurs via computers or cellphones, it's next to impossible to misread *i*, unless you get wild with fonts. For example, if you text your friend without capitalizing *i*, that friend is still going to know exactly what you mean. If writing a lowercase *i* repeatedly caused your texts to be misunderstood, you'd probably stop writing it as such. And so would everybody else (Figure 2).

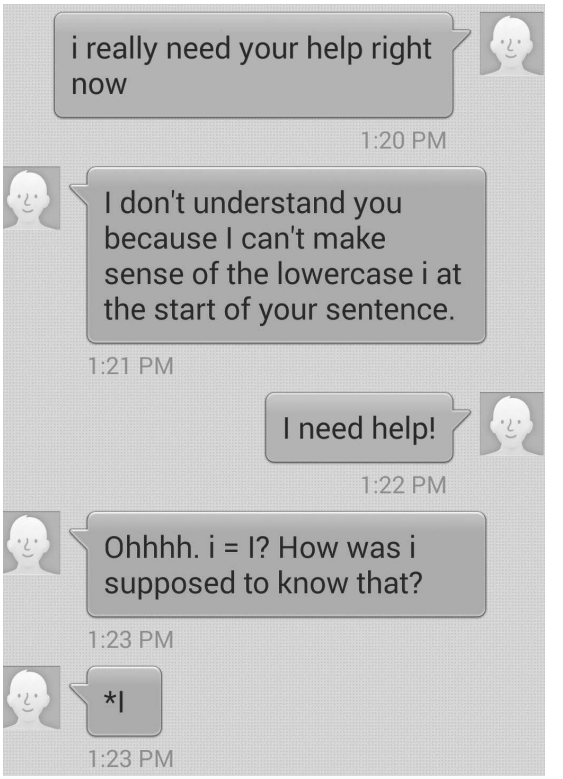

Figure 2: A fictitious text message, where, if this type of confusion were actually possible, people would likely remember to capitalize *I*.

There's another theory for capitalizing *I*. In *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, Otto Jespersen discusses how some associate our capitalizing *I* with an English-speaking, Western cultural emphasis on individualism. *I* represents an affirmation of self. In other words, we capitalize *I* because *I am super important*. Jespersen dismisses this, though, pointing instead to the historical development previously noted (223).

In my mind, the historical reason for capitalizing *I* doesn't hold water anymore, but the belief that you *should* capitalize it has been kept alive. Most of us have been taught from a very young age that you have to capitalize *I*, and this is powerful. Check out the lyrics to the song "I in the Sky," which was written by Steve Zuckerman and originally aired on a 1972 episode of *Sesame Street*:

> We all live in a capital I in the middle of the desert in the center of the sky.
>
> And all day long we polish on the I to keep it clean and shiny so it brightens up the sky.
>
> Rubbing it here and scrubbing it there. Polishing the I so high in the air.

> As we work we sing a lively tune. It is great to be so happy on a busy afternoon.
>
> And when we're through with the day's only chore, we go into the I and we close the door.
>
> Capital I. Capital I. Capital I. Capital I.

These are the actual lyrics. It's honestly a pretty cool, trippy, melodious song, and I can't help but like it. And while Zuckerman is probably not commenting on the socialization of American citizens—at least those who live on Sesame Street—the lyrics do show how subtly this power spreads.

In 2015 we may find these lyrics kind of bizarre, but in 1972 they probably didn't seem all that indoctrination-y. In 1972, people capitalized *I*. Always. Pretty much always, anyway. I'm sure some people decided to buck the system and write without capitalization, but the vast majority of writing was done with *I*. Why? Because people in 1972 were socialized differently. In particular, this song was written before the social media "revolution."

A Game Changer (Again)

In the late-'90s, AOL Instant Messenger was the rage. I was in junior high, and I—along with all my friends—spent hours online every night typing to each other. It was the first time that a technology that allowed people to talk back and forth in real-time was so readily available to adolescents and teenagers (provided your family could afford a computer and Internet). All of a sudden, the ability to respond quickly was essential. Only we didn't know how to type as fast as we do now (because we were just starting to use social media). I think I even used the CAPS LOCK button to start every sentence. So it's not a surprise that one of the first things to go was capitalization. Our conversations carried on without capitalizing proper nouns or the first words in sentences (including all instances of *I*), and no one died.

Certainly, some "incorrect" writing came from people not knowing the rules. There/Their/They're, who/whom, comma splices, sentence fragments, ending fragments with prepositions, etc., were as complicated then as they are now, and that contributed to a lot of the "bad" grammar, spelling, and punctuation. But *I* is a different animal. All of a sudden, once capitalization took a back seat, it was no longer appropriate to capitalize *I*. And it's not as if we were breaking a rule that we didn't understand. Rather, using *I* in that genre—an instant message to a friend—was inappropriate. Capitalizing *I* became "incorrect," in a manner of speaking. What had been considered correct in more or less all genres for hundreds of years became incorrect in *this* genre. Earlier, I mentioned how power dynamics influence notions of correctness. Here, away from authority figures

and student/teacher power dynamics, using the writing conventions taught in school was weird. It came off as pompous. Perhaps rejecting capitalization was a way of subverting some hypothetical classroom authority. "Who do you think you are using correct punctuation?" I imagine someone saying. Either way, the use of *I* became nuanced, and therefore complicated.

Again, I'm focusing on capital *I* because, in theory, it's such an easy rule to follow. The way my friends and I used social media and the confusion of other writing conventions made it so that not following the rules became the norm. And *I* went along for the ride.

Applying CHAT to Online Chatting

It may be difficult to see the connection between the letter *I* and my experience writing online when I was in junior high, so I'll try to break it down with cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). To help make sense of the complexity of a writing situation, CHAT looks at it through seven different lenses: production, distribution, representation, ecology, socialization, reception, and activity. In Figure 3, I use CHAT to retroactively analyze various factors that influenced why my thirteen-year-old self would have broken from (or adhered to, depending on how you look at it) certain writing conventions when sending an instant message.

Production	This focuses on the tools I used to create a text (in this case, an instant message), e.g. my home computer, a keyboard, as well as Internet access.
Distribution	My text was delivered through AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), via the Internet, to my friends in real-time. This, in turn, made quick response times important.
Representation	I cut out all capitalization (including *I*) and practically all editing because it took too long, deciding traditional "correctness" wasn't as important as responding quickly. This wasn't a big deal, though, because *i* and *I* represent the same exact thing—me, which means using *i* doesn't cause any confusion. Eventually, avoiding certain writing conventions helped establish that I belonged to the same social group as my peers.
Ecology	No authority figures were around to pressure me to write "correctly." From computer and Internet access to the safety of my home, I grew up in an environment where I was able to focus a lot of my attention on socializing with my friends, which is something not every teenager can say.
Socialization	Because "correct" grammar reminded my friends and me of school (and you don't want your friends to think of you as a teacher), writing *too* correctly was considered, well, annoying. "Correct" writing, then, became inappropriate in certain circumstances. As such, my friends and I began to see lowercase *i* as normal.
Reception	Improper grammar and punctuation (including *i)* weren't a big deal because they were expected. My friend was more focused on getting a quick reply, and he would likely have called me out had I capitalized *I*, put commas in all the "right" places, etc.
Activity	The activity that went into creating my instant messages varied: my dad had to allow me into his office to use his computer, my friends and I would need to all be online at a certain time, we'd actually have to chat with one another, etc.

Figure 3: A CHAT analysis of my teenage Instant Messenger use.

What Are the Effects?

Between roughly the mid-thirteenth century and the advent of social media, you capitalized *I*. It had a good uninterrupted run that lasted the better part of a millennium. But after social media, for some of us our relationship status with *I* became complicated. I often felt that I *should* be capitalizing it, but I also felt that doing so in certain genres seemed wrong. Even though this started in junior high, I remember graduating from college and feeling anxious about whether or not I should follow proper capitalization conventions when I wrote emails to friends. I (and *I*) had a minor identity crisis. I had been trained to capitalize it, but I had been "corrupted" as a teenager. Even now, I often don't know whether or not I'll capitalize *I* on Facebook until the moment I post, and even then I kind of obsess over it.

Contrast my experience to that of previous generations. They grew up capitalizing *I*. Even though they may write in lowercase on Facebook or in a text message, in their heart of hearts, they think *I* should be capitalized. Not capitalizing it is fun and a sign of the times, so why not? But their default setting is still *I*. In other words, they break from capital *I* to write lowercase *i*.

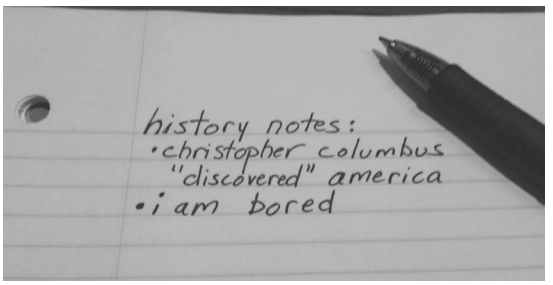

Figure 4: A fictitious example of how "kids today" often don't capitalize handwritten notes.

Now, contrast this experience with that of the generation of writers who grew up (or are growing up) with social media. For most of these students, the majority of writing is social media based, and therefore outside the watchful eye of authority figures. Before coming to school for my Master's degree, I spent a lot of time substitute teaching in elementary schools. From what I noticed, it's not uncommon for "kids today" to write lowercase *i* even when they're taking notes, which blows my mind (Figure 4). What started, at least for me, as a way to save time when typing to my friends on AOL Instant Messenger now occurs independent of the genre from whence it was forged. In other words, for some people today, their default setting is *i*; writing a capital *I* requires them to break from the lowercase.

Where Does This Leave Us?

Writing is complicated. It always has been and always will be. Every writing situation—every genre—is complex. Think back to the role that power

dynamics play in determining what constitutes our notions of correct and incorrect grammar and writing conventions. Most people in positions of power—the teachers, bosses, journalists, professors, parents, etc.—grew up with an uncomplicated view of *I*. They're no doubt aware that younger people, and even themselves on occasion, avoid capitalization in certain situations. They know firsthand that many people write *i* in places where it's still often considered improper (e.g. an email to a professor or an academic essay), and they probably know that writers do this because they have a different default setting. But the people in power still enforce the rules. Whether it's giving a bad grade or not giving someone a job or simply making a judgment about a person's intelligence or attention to detail, their allegiance probably lies with tradition.

Similarly, young people aren't dumb (at least not all of them). Even those people who stick to lowercase letters—including *i*—likely know that capitalization is "correct" in certain contexts. They probably know that it's not a good idea to write a paper (or a *Grassroots* article) in all lowercase letters, just like they shouldn't email a professor with *i*.

Despite all this—despite younger writers having some awareness of when to use *I*—the rule is sometimes broken in places where it *shouldn't* be. Maybe it's an accident. Maybe the software they're using doesn't autocorrect *i* to *I* and they didn't copyedit their text. Or maybe because after using i in the vast majority of their writing, they've been socialized so that they don't consider *i* to be indicative of lacking intelligence or some moral failure.

Either way, personal, contemporary writing will likely continue to whittle away at what Steve Zuckerman lyrically referred to as, the "I in the sky." Because today we don't all live in a capital I, and the idea that we do will likely become more and more tenuous. Rules are held together by power dynamics, which should be contested. And eventually the people on both sides of those power dynamics will have grown up in a world where *i* isn't that big of a deal. And at that point, what will happen? I don't know, but i'm excited to see how it evolves.

Works Cited

Dunn, Patricia, A. and Ken Lindblom. *Grammar Rants: How a Backstage Tour of Writing Complaints Can Help Make Informed, Savvy Choices About Their Writing*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2011. Print.

Harper, Douglas. "I (pron.)." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. etymonline.com. Web. 4 March 2015.

Jespersen, Otto. *Growth and Structure of the English Language*. 1938. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982. Print.

"Kill the Alligator and Run." *The Simpsons*. FOX. 30 Apr. 2000. Television.

Walker, Joyce. "Just CHATting." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*. Vol 1. (2010). 71–80. Web. 1 Oct. 2014.

Zuckerman, Steve. "I in the Sky." Episode 0427. *Sesame Street*. PBS. 26 Dec. 1972. Television.

Mac Scott received a B.A. in English Education from ISU, where he's now enrolled as a Master's student. He's on the English Studies track and is in the process of figuring out what that actually means for him . . . but he's got some good leads.