

VILLAGE VIEW

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Four-letter words are common in the English language; most of these stem from the people who lived in the British Isles before the Norman Conquest in 1066, almost a thousand years ago. The Normans crossed the English Channel from Normandy, of course, to conquer the Angles and the Saxons.

It was the Angles who gave England its name. They gave us many other words, as well; one we can't blame entirely on the Angles, though, is *like*, a word believed to have come from the Goths, the same Teutonic barbarians that overran the Roman Empire.

I've often wondered how such a little four-letter word can cause so much difficulty. It's frequently missed on the radio, in general speech and in print; whenever it's used incorrectly, it jars my ear or eye. Sometimes I get out my source-books to assure myself my ear or eye is not deceiving me.

That can start an hour-long, sometimes a day-long study. My library includes several books to help determine right from wrong. In addition to dictionaries, there are *Synonyms, Antonyms, and Prepositions; Misunderstood, Misused, Mispronounced Words; The Careful Writer; Modern American Usage;* and *Elements of Style*. Should I absorb all the information in these volumes, doubtless my writing would vastly improve. One of the above-mentioned books, for instance, devotes ten-and-a-half pages to "an, an and the."

Sounds that recently set me researching such material are two radio commercials currently being broadcast locally. One repeats at regular intervals, "If you are like I am..." and another comes over the air even more often, stating, "The need for expert advice and strong support is invaluable..." Both drive me to distraction!

As soon as I hear the opening phrases of either commercial, I switch off the set before the offensive phrases can reach my ears and register on my brain. Why? What does it matter?

Anyone who uses language, as I do, to earn my bread and butter, finds a repetition of wrong usage eventually destroying his capacity to differentiate between correct and incorrect. Whoever prepared the script for those commercials either never learned to speak or write English properly or his "ear" has been ruined.

After delving into the ramifications of our four-letter word, *like*, however, I can sympathize. It can be used correctly in many ways. In some cases it's an adjective; then again, it's an adverb. It can be a noun or a verb, and also a preposition. Frequently it's misused as a conjunction and substituted for "as" or "as if." We've all heard the commercial for the cigarette that "tastes good, like a cigarette should." We've heard it so often, in fact, that it sounds correct. It is not. We should say "as a cigarette should."

In the case of the "If you're like I am" commercial, it's not easy to track down the reason for the error. Although I'm certain of my syntax, in this case, in only one of my resources could I find the applicable rule. It reads: *like* takes an object. The commercial should say "If you're like me..." The first person pronoun *I* is never an object (though it can be a predicate). When speaking of ourselves as an object, we should say *me*.

If it sounds better to say "If you're like I..." try hearing "If you're like they..." or "like he..." or "like we..." Now hear, "If you're like them..." or "like her..." or "like us." Perhaps neither choice seems preferable to you, and this whole discussion seems silly. If that's the case, you've so often heard our language spoken incorrectly, you've lost the difference.

"If you heard "Me am going to the movies," it would sound wrong, wouldn't it? How about "Her is pleasant," or "Give it to he"? Don't those objects used subjectively grate on your sensibilities? "If you're like I" does the same thing to mine. Most English pronouns have two forms: one is called "subjective" and the other "objective." *I*, *she*, *he*, *we* and they are subjective; their objective counterparts are *me*, *her*, *him*, *us* and *them*. Nouns and pronouns are used to identify who and what we are talking about; prepositions introduce phrases modifying other parts of our speech and take objects. Example: This article was written by *me*. Come with *her*. Go to *them*. Speak to *him*. It came from *us*. Few of us would use subjective pronouns (*I*, *she*, *they*, *he*, *we*) in those sentences.

Why then would one say "If you're like I"? It's tricky because the speaker follows the pronoun *I* with the verb correctly used with *I* and say "I am"; this leaves the impression of correctness, but ignores the fact that *like* is being used as a preposition and calls for an object, not a subject.

The other commercial is an example of unfortunate construction in a different way. My objection is easier to understand. If you read the partial sentence quoted earlier, you'll recognize it doesn't even make sense. Try it again: "The need for expert advice and strong support is invaluable..." What does it SAY? Eliminate the prepositional phrase, "for... advice and...support," and you have left, "The need is invaluable." Can a need be invaluable? Isn't it advice and support that are invaluable? There are so many ways to say this correctly, it seems inconceivable anyone could construct such a sentence, let alone use it several times an hour to advertise a service.

If the present subject of the sentence (the need) is dropped entirely, we have a fine, correct, and sensible statement. "Expert advice and strong support (change *is* to *are* because we're now speaking of two things) are invaluable. "Simple?"

The distressing condition, here, is the statement that a "need" is "invaluable." There may possibly be circumstances where it would make sense, but in the context of the commercial the sentence not only fails in what it tries to say, it distorts the meaning and contradicts itself.

Because radio is ubiquitous in our society, because the words and sentence structure used over the air (not only in commercials but also in news broadcasts) are repetitious, and because all of us hear our language used (and misused) again and again... and this extends, of course, to TV where errors are graphically reinforced... our language is under siege.

How can we expect children to learn to speak and write properly when they hear and see it misused repeatedly? How can we retain our own "good ear" for correct English with those authoritative voices dinning in our ears, over and over again, phrases such as "like I" and sentences like "The need is invaluable"?

If one of us makes a grammatical error in speech, it doesn't influence speech patterns of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people; over the air, however, errors not only confuse listeners, they can change how we talk also.

Speech is a gift common to humanity; it doesn't extend to other animals. Speech permits people to exchange ideas; without speech we could communicate only in the limited ways animals like cats, dogs, birds, or whales do.

Does the media have a responsibility to use the language correctly? It's for us to decide...