

# FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

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*Special  
Feature*

**IT'S ME,  
O LORD**

by  
Alma  
Hill

*Science fiction writers like to dream up new languages. Fine. But you have to understand some of the pitfalls in the language we use, first.*

**P**RONOUNS are very queer things, and here's an example. If you announce yourself by saying, "It's me," you sound childish, because so many rule books call this combination ungrammatical. Yet, who but a bald-faced purist would say, "It's I."? *That SOUNDS* wrong.

There used to be a good old knock-knock story about St. Peter at the Gate. The soul comes knocking and St. Peter says, "Who's there?"

"It is I," says the new voice.

"You can't come in," replies the Guardian, "We have too many schoolteachers here now."

So who loves the Predicate Nominative anyhow? In practice, you hear *neither* "It's me," *nor* "It is I," but, instead, some kind of cowardly compromise, such as naming yourself to your own kin who know your voice, or writing some roundabout thing. You know.

You may say that every common citizen has a right of pocket-veto over the lordly-sounding rule book. It is a kind

of revision by evasion.

It is quite a demonstration of the futility of passing unwanted rules. In this particular example, the rule books are leaning their weight against the drift of English, rather than with it as they should be doing; and, behold, at once they become ineffective.

The truth is that Predicate Nominatives don't fit naturally in English, and therefore cannot survive outside of ivory towers. So strong is the tendency against it, that the rule books have all they can do to hold the fort with a few pronoun forms, letting all else go with the tide.

What galls me is that, although no respectable grammarian since Jespersen—who died fifteen years ago—has had a kind word for the Predicate Nominative, it is very hard to find an elementary or highschool textbook which does not include it. Teachers all over the country are placed under professional obligation to puzzle the students' heads with something that the students quite validly feel to be all wrong and therefore incomprehensible within the system.

**T**HE ACTUAL grammatical system in English is very simple. Most children have it by the age of three. They may not be able to explain it to you, of course, but they always use it. Subject, verb, object, in that order; that is the basis of English syntax.

*Other* languages may have different systems, but right here we are talking about *this* language. There has been, for instance, some confusion with Latin, but almost any comparison will show you the difference right away.

There are three kinds of syntactic systems in Terran language: agglutinative, synthetic, and analytic.

Comparing the synthetic system in Latin with the analytic system in English, you could find examples like the following:

In old Rome they say speak of a tourist, "*Rosa videt Romam.*" We would say, "Rose is seeing Rome," and mean the same thing; but in order to mean the same thing, we would have to keep it in that order, because an analytic language makes use of separable pieces which will not work

unless you place them right.

In any synthetic language, arrangement can change nothing but emphasis—the meaning stays the same, because the endings show what is being done, by whom to what, and there you are. You could just as well say, “*Roman videt Rosa*,” or “*Videt Rosa Romam*,” or any other of the six possible combinations, and it would be still the same, so far as the facts went.

**N**OW YOU can't do that in English. If you said, “Is Rose seeing Rome,” the change of arrangement would turn it into a question so thoroughly that, by not writing the question mark, or indicating it by raising the tone on the end word, you would lead people to suppose that you must mean something unusual: Rose must be having a high old time over there. And yet all you did was swap the position of the first two words. In fact, so strongly do we feel this subject-verb-object habit, that we still don't put the whole verb first. Nobody would do that. “Sees Rose Rome?” sounds so archaic that

hardly anyone but de Camp would even think of it. Furthermore, if you say, “Rome is seeing Rose,” you have completely changed the facts, and people just hope that Rose is beautiful enough to get away with making people stare that way.

It hasn't been done that way forever. Old English, and all the other tongues in the Indo-European complex, including Old Roman—and for all I would know, Old Mu—were inflected, or synthetic languages. Setting up a regular order came gradually to Modern English. But as soon as that was solid, the endings ceased to matter and went out of use. For centuries now there has been no such thing in English as a Nominative or Accusative (when I was a kid we called them Subjective and Objective) case ending, except in those few pronouns—and maybe those would have long gone if a few diehards weren't sitting on them.

A few inflections are still used, but they seem to be going, too. For instance, we spell a word with an “s” on the end if it's plural, and “'s” for

what we used to call Possessive. Yet we are coming to say "ten fish" in preference to "ten fishes" and "fish eyes" rather than "fishes' eyes". Perhaps in another century all those esses will be as old hat as the "thee" and "thou" business which has gone out—and despite bitter protests by some grammarians, too.

In our day we are having some apparent trouble with "whom", a form which is actually very little used. Generally it comes before a verb where an objective ending sounds wrong, just as a subjective form sounds wrong after a verb. Very few people say anything but "who"; having a good college educa-

tion just makes it surer. All the authorities back it now.

Could you say, "Whom do you see?" in any company anywhere today without expecting a long, cold, thoughtful stare?

And here we are expected to teach all these false constructions to little folks who knew better before they went to school; and if they can't do it, we must write the bad news on their report cards. It just makes me simmer.

Does it make the small fry simmer too? Do they grow up bothered, bewildered, and bewitched? Did you? If anybody says "grammar" to you, do you hear the music of sweet reason or does a fog roll up?

So then what?