

*Lui and Lei*¹

If grammar is not an opinion

a story by

Pier Celeste Marchetti

(English translation by Wendy Piemonte)

E. Xception, who sort of traded in furniture that was more or less authentically antique, was proud of his schooling because it got him an “elementary school certificate”, as it was called in his days, after he had repeated the first grade for three years in a row, the second grade twice and each of the remaining three grades for three years. Perhaps in his case it would be more appropriate to call it an “alimentary certificate” because from a very tender age, he was so voracious or rather, he was so greedy, that his mother’s generous supply of milk was not enough to feed him and had to be immediately supplemented with the daily production of a pair of healthy cows.

E. Xception, the school leaver, used to show off his perfect knowledge of Italian by citing this example: “If I am talking to a woman I use the *Lei* form, whereas if I am talking to a man I use the *Lui* form”, as the grammar rules say. And if he was the one saying this, you could almost take his word for it because of his name.

E. Xception was a real exception to the rule.

The judge supervising his guardianship, who had been appointed simply because he had an uncle who said mass on Sundays in the Basilica of St John Lateran, formed a committee of leading luminaries in medicine and psychology to study and identify the causes. Nobody had the slightest doubt that, given the highest intellectual and scientific value of the experts, they would have reached a final conclusion once and for all.

¹ “Lui” is the Italian personal pronoun equivalent of the English pronouns “he” and “him”. “Lei” is the Italian personal pronoun equivalent of the English pronouns “she” and “her”. However, “Lei” is also the Italian personal pronoun (equivalent of the English pronoun “you”) used when addressing a person, whether man or woman, in the polite form. Hence the ambiguity on which the story is based (translator’s note).

The medical aspect was considered first. Neuro Logist, who was by no mere chance an eminent professor at the La Sapienza I University in Rome, opened the committee's first meeting and addressed his illustrious colleagues:

“Gentlemen, before examining the case in depth, I suggest making an anamnesis of the synthesis of the clinical analysis of the medical referrals in order to avoid considering this in the broadest sense of platonic gnoseology and simply focus on the empirical information.”

This ostentation of philosophical culture didn't impress the other members of the committee the slightest, who were waiting for the right moment to unsheathe the other excellent references that they were holding in store. “We should therefore start by observing that the human brain is divided into two hemispheres, left and right. Let's forget about the cerebellum for the time being.

Well, the problem is that irrationality lies in one hemisphere, and expresses through creativity and arts which are simply exceptions, while the other hemisphere hosts rationality, which is where grammar originates. The latter hemisphere, of grammatical rules, is definitely male and therefore must be called *Lui*. The former, where exceptions originate, is categorically female and therefore must be called *Lei*.

It would seem that the two hemispheres cannot enter into conflict with each other because they are separate, although one prevails over the other at times. Now, my most illustrious colleagues, what we have here is a general remixing, a mutual decanting from one hemisphere to the other, the causes of which are impossible to identify”.

As is often the case of course, you don't need to be Einstein to solve certain problems. In fact, representing the family on the committee was one of E. Xception's old great-aunts, called E. Xperience, who was educated to third grade level only but who had always had a very good memory. After politely raising her hand to speak, as she had been taught by the teacher of her village in those years, she spoke in an extremely kind way as humble people do and with a frail voice.

“Please excuse me, but my wanting to speak is not to convince you. I went to elementary school for three years only and I would never dream of criticizing, playing down or putting your extraordinary scientific knowledge into doubt. However, during those three years, my teacher, who I remember as no longer in the prime of her years, with hunched shoulders and grey hair which I later discovered was a wig and who always used to hold a stick to beat unruly boys, taught me a huge number of poems. Some of the many poems were *San Martino*, *Rio Bo*, *La Notte Santa*, *La*

quercia caduta, Davanti San Guido, La befana, La cavalla storna, Le ciaramelle, La quiete dopo la tempesta, Pianto antico, L'albatro e poi ... "Dolce e chiara è la notte e senza vento, /E queta sopra i tetti e in mezzo agli orti /Posa la luna, e di lontan rivela /Serena ogni montagna...". Do you remember them?" The question was rhetorical of course because the eminent luminaries, who had only developed the rational side in their brain, had never left any space for poetry at all, which was an irrational artistic expression deriving from creativity. "Luckily, thanks to my teacher, I was able to exercise and develop an infallible memory. So, I still remember to this very day after so many decades that, as a child my grand-nephew couldn't stay put for a second, and ended up falling from a cherry tree while he was stealing cherries and hit his head badly. This caused the cerebral-neuronal particles to move from one hemisphere of other – just like in a box, which is what the skull is - in a mix of rationality-irrationality so as to generate a grammar of exceptions where the exception is the rule". Not only was the great-aunt gifted with an exceptional memory, she was also surprisingly apt in assimilating the language of the high-brow doctors she had in front of her. You don't need to study to be intelligent, for goodness sake!

And as the group of scientists was busy reflecting over the experience described by E. Xperience – an important tautology – and even more so over whether or not they should read the poems cited by E. Xperience, "I wonder" E. Xception said to himself, as if he wished to be overheard "if there are also any grammar rules that tell you which personal pronoun to use when addressing somebody as *Signoria Vostra* or *Vostro Onore*² since the *Voi*³ form became obsolete some time ago. So, in the first case I would suggest using *Ella* and, in the second *Ello*⁴". I think this is a logical solution."

At this point, G. Rammar, an eminent professor of Linguistics at Sapienza II University and a member of board of experts spoke. "At a first examination, E. Xception, despite his name, appears to be following the principles and teachings of the Port-Royal Grammar and Logic which, as you Gentlemen very well know, is considered the Bible of Modern Linguistics applied to the so-called Western languages. I say *so-called*, because the fact that I am the greatest living expert in linguistics doesn't mean that I am a dunce in Geography according to which there is always something more

² "Signoria Vostra" is a very formal Italian expression used in administrative correspondence and invitations (equivalent to the English "Your Lordship/Ladyship"), where "Signoria" is of feminine gender. "Vostro Onore" is a very formal Italian expression used when addressing a judge (equivalent of the English "Your Honour"), where "Onore" is of masculine gender.

³ "Voi" is the Italian second-person plural pronoun equivalent of the English pronoun "you". "Voi" is also the old-fashioned singular personal pronoun used when addressing a person, whether man or woman, in the polite form

⁴ "Ella" and "Ello" are old-fashion Italian pronouns meaning "she" and "he" respectively.

west to the West which, as one moves further towards the West, little by little becomes the East; henceforth, if we are the West for the Middle East, the Middle East is the West for the Far East or, should this concept not be clear to everyone, if the Far East is the East of the Middle East, this means that the Middle East is the East of the West which in turn becomes the East if you are living in the West that is, America, which for better or for worse, plays the ungrateful role of being the West for Europe, and the East for Asia. Therefore Africa and Oceania can consider themselves two lucky continents because they do not need to dispute their position at all, since both are situated south of all the Wests and Easts and that's it.

But let's move on from geography to grammar. Raffaele Simone, professor of General Linguistics of the University of Palermo in the 1960's, would say – and the fact that he was from Palermo was a point in favor of his objective interpretation, since Sicily is in the South of course, and therefore is not compromised by either East or West – that the Port-Royal Grammar is *an effort to find a “rational” explanation for all language matters whereas Logic is an orderly and powerful attempt to lead language back into all its more correct and relevant uses*. Well then, we should be asking ourselves if our patient is off track. Therefore, we should establish whether his use of *Lui, Lei, Ella* and *Ello* is grammatically and logically correct, in which case it would be useless determining why. So let's read the pages of linguists' Bible that refer to personal pronouns and forget about finding out who these Port-Royal people were because, even if they were to blame, they are no longer punishable; and if they were the causes of the problem that we are dealing with here, we couldn't eliminate them anyway to avoid the consequences. Yes Gentlemen, these other Gentlemen lived in the 17th century, and therefore passed away some time ago and, in keeping with the principles of logic, we cannot certainly bring them back to life to sentence them to death should they be found guilty. But what do I see here? Here, we have *Ego, moy, je, toy, tu, vous, ille, illa, illud, il, elle, luy, sui, sibi, se, sé, nous, vous, mei, moi!* How come I don't see *Lui, Lei, Ella* and *Ello*? Were the latter such an exceptional exception that they did not come to the attention of grammar experts, or had the experts banged their head against something that was a really hard nut to crack? Also, how important are their assertions after all, now that they are dead and cannot be brought back to life for an explanation?

“There's a problem however”, said E. Xception thinking aloud at this point. “In the ever more frequent cases of homosexuality, should the *Lei* form be used for “him” and the *Lui* form for “her”? This question definitely needs to be answered. And something else is bothering me as well”,

said E. Xception. “Although these cases occur sporadically and as such are exceptional, which form should you use for a bisexual, *Lui* or *Lei*? And how do we know if and when to use one or the other form?”

“This is the very exception that confirms the rule”, G. Rammar delivered his verdict, “The only logical and possible solution is to resort to the Anglo-Saxon idiom where the neutral pronoun *it* is used for things and objects, which are well-known as being gender-neutral, and animals, which do have a gender that is distinguishable but cannot be compared to persons; yet, if you stop and think for a moment, I once read about an old spinster across the Channel who left a human being to die without any qualms just to save her beloved pet. One must therefore deduct that this, instead, is an exception that does not confirm the rule”.

It didn't take the judge long, when he picked up the case again to re-examine the proceedings of the Commission, to establish that the experts were the only ones who needed guardianship. With their disquisitions they had managed to demonstrate what cannot be demonstrated, i.e., contrary to what the title says, grammar is an opinion, and therefore derives from the hemisphere where creativity is located, in complete disregard of Port-Royal.