Letters

I, We, One, and Presently

The instructions to contributors that you have lately published (26 July, p. 305) please me so much that I offer the following remarks in order to amplify and emphasize some of them.

The discriminating use of language for communication of ideas is an art that scientists should not disdain; even if we have not taste or time for erecting monuments of literature, at least we need not live in a slaughter house of syntax and rhetoric.

Among the most abused words in the scientific literature of the United States during the past few decades are *I, we, one,* and *presently.*

Occasions for the use of *one* in its indefinite pronominal sense, as in "One never knows, does one?" and "One should respect authority" arise but seldom, and are always easily avoided. Therefore those who are unwilling to take the trouble to use it properly would better not use it at all. Those who habitually use it improperly seem to fall into two classes:

1) Those who mistakenly think the French *on* and the German *man* are synonyms for *one.* "On dit" and "man sagt" mean "it is said," or more colloquially "they say" or "people say" or "we say" and not "one says." I do not know any precise French or German equivalent for the impersonal *one,* and perhaps none exists. But the meaning of *one* is very close to *anyone* or *everyone,* according to the context, which in French is *aucun* or *chacun* or *quelqu'un,* never *on.*

2) Those who, having been wisely taught to avoid the editorial *we,* can think of no other suitable locution. It is good usage to write "When the equation is multiplied by x, the result is . . ." or even "After multiplying the equation by x, we obtain . . .", if by *we* is meant the author and the reader, and not the author alone. On the other hand, a single author should not write "We wish to find the roots" because the reader may have no such wish, and it is presumptuous for the author to impute motives to the reader. Likewise he should not write "I wish to find the roots" because it is redundant; his wish is obvious, else he would not do it. It is always possible to say "The roots are needed for . . ." or "In order to find the roots . . ." or a dozen other things.

The word *I* has been forbidden to appear in scientific papers by instructors who, shuddering at the juvenile practice of beginning every sentence with it, are either too obtuse to learn its proper use, or too lazy to teach it. But there is nothing more conducive to felicitous writing than a judicious use of *I* and *we.*

We should be used whenever the author and the reader jointly is intended. It may also be used when there are two or more authors, and the authors only are meant, but only if *I* would have been appropriate for a single author.

I should be used whenever the opinion, hope, or judgment of the author is involved, that is, when the author becomes important to the reader as a person, but to use it elsewhere is immodest and tiresome. It is poor taste, silly, and wasteful of space to write "the author is indebted . . ." instead of "I am indebted . . . " It is poor taste, silly, and inaccurate to say "It is thought . . ." if what is meant is "I think. . . ." And it is poor taste, wasteful, and grudging to write "Thanks are due to . . ." instead of "I thank . . .".

One should eschew words that may be understood in two contradictory senses. Such a word is *presently.* Before the 17th century it meant *now* or *at present.* Then it came to mean *at once* or *immediately.* By the end of the 17th century it had acquired its present meaning of *soon, shortly,* or *before long.* But lately a number of persons who evidently prefer long words to short ones have begun to use *presently* in its archaic sense of *now.* In consequence the word has been spoilt, and probably it should no longer be used.

Some may try to defend it on the ground that the meaning is clear from the context. But they are right only in cases where the present and future tenses of the verb have different forms, as in the sentence "I shall sit down presently; you are sitting presently." But in the sentence "He is going down town presently" it is impossible to know which is meant, and it may be important, if I want to see him before he goes.

Therefore let us say *now* and *soon* or *shortly* instead of *presently* and we shall gain precision as well as conciseness.

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Retirementitis

Elinor Langer did a commendable service by directing attention to the victimization of America's older citizens by medical quacks, land swindlers, and "quick sell" operators [*Science* **140**, 470 (3 May 1963)]. Her concern for the future of the senate committee on aging under the leadership of a chairman who is "less of a crusader and more adverse to federal participation in remedial efforts" is a fitting alert to those of us who would keep corrective agencies in action.

However, in this pleading for those of the 17½ million who are "living wretched lives" there is carried the impression that none of that segment of our population are: not ill, not poorly housed, and not the victims of the charlatans. Her perfectly laudable account of incidents that would call for public concern, unintentionally, shares with many other activities and proposals in generating a growing unsavory characterization of *all* post-retirement citizens as chronically ill, becoming increasingly senile, and highly probable candidates for mental therapy.

Do "statistics corroborated by daily impressions [dependably] suggest that in America the 'last of life' is not the best of times but the worst"? Not the least objection to such an unsupported caricature is its contribution to an affliction (unmentioned) "retirementitis" which is brought about by the aged's loss of social privilege and responsi-