

Indirect Object Pronouns: Part I

The indirect object (IO) tells us where the direct object (DO) is going.

He gives the book to María.

DO=Book

Where is the book going?

To María.

IO=María

He gives María the book.

DO=Book

Where is the book going?

To María.

IO=María

The indirect object answers the question "To whom?" or "For whom?" the action of the verb is performed.

He gives María the book.

To whom does he give the book?

To María.

IO=María

He buys me flowers.

For whom does he buy the flowers?

For me.

IO=me

Sentences that have an indirect object usually also have a direct object. Remember, the IO tells us where the DO is going. Notice how the sentences below just wouldn't work without a direct object.

He gives María . . .

the book, the pen, the diamond, etc.

He buys me . . .

flowers, candy, an ironing board, etc.

Sometimes the direct object is not stated; rather it is implied, or understood.

My mother writes me every week.

DO=letter (understood)

IO=me

(My mother writes me a letter every week.)

She told him.
DO=it (understood)
IO=him
(She told it to him.)

To identify the indirect object use our two guidelines:

1. The IO tells us where the DO is going.
2. The IO answers the question "to whom?" or "for whom" the action of the verb is performed.

When a pronoun takes the place of the name of the indirect object, use the following pronouns:

me (me)
te (you-familiar)
le (him, her, you-formal)

nos (us)
os (you-all-familiar)
les (them, you-all-formal)

In an affirmative statement with one verb, the indirect object pronoun comes immediately before the conjugated verb.

Juan me compra un regalo.

John buys me a gift.
John buys a gift for me.

Juan te compra un regalo.

John buys you a gift.
John buys a gift for you.

Juan le compra un regalo.

John buys her a gift.
John buys a gift for her.

Juan nos compra un regalo.

John buys us a gift.
John buys a gift for us.

Juan os compra un regalo.

John buys you-all (familiar) a gift.
John buys a gift for you-all.

Juan les compra un regalo.

John buys them a gift.
John buys a gift for them.

Now, focus in on one part of each of the previous examples:

Juan **me compra** un regalo.
John buys (for) me a gift.

Juan **te compra** un regalo.
John buys (for) you a gift.

Juan **le compra** un regalo.
John buys (for) her a gift.

Juan **nos compra** un regalo.
John buys (for) us a gift.

Juan **os compra** un regalo.
John buys (for) you-all (familiar) a gift.

Juan **les compra** un regalo.
John buys (for) them a gift.

Let's extract the IO phrase and its English equivalent:

me compra buys (for) me
te compra buys (for) you
le compra..... buys (for) her
nos compra..... buys (for) us
os compra..... buys (for) you-all
les compra buys (for) them

Just like with the direct object, the indirect object presents a problem if one tries to translate word-for-word:

Juan me compra un regalo..... John for me he buys a gift.

The key to learning to use the indirect object pronouns is the same as the key for direct object pronouns. You must learn to think in phrases, not words. The phrases consist of a pronoun and a conjugated verb. In the following examples, note that the IO remains the same, while the subject of the phrase changes.

me compra he buys me
me compran they buy me
me compras you buy me

The IO pronouns **le** and **les** present a special problem because they are ambiguous. That is, they can stand for different things.

le
to (for) him
to (for) her
to (for) you-formal

les
to (for) them
to (for) you-all-formal

The following sentences, while grammatically correct, are ambiguous:

Ella le escribe una carta.

Ella les escribe una carta.

Out of context, there is no way we can know the meaning.

Ella le escribe una carta.

She writes him a letter.

She writes her a letter.

She writes you (formal) a letter.

Ella les escribe una carta.

She writes them a letter.

She writes you-all (formal) a letter.

Since le and les can mean more than one thing, a prepositional phrase is often added to remove the ambiguity.

Ella le escribe a Juan una carta.

Ella le escribe a su hermana una carta.

Ella le escribe a usted una carta.

Ella les escribe a sus padres una carta.

Ella les escribe a ustedes una carta.

Sometimes a prepositional phrase is added not for clarity, but rather for emphasis.

Juan me da a mí el dinero.

John gives **me** the money.

(emphasizing that the money is given to me and not to someone else)

Juan te da a ti el dinero.

John gives **you** the money. (emphasis on you)

There is no ambiguity in the following sentence. It can only mean one thing.

Juan me da el dinero.

John gives me the money.

The addition of a prepositional phrase merely adds emphasis.

Juan me da a mí el dinero.

John gives **me** the money.

Let's sum up the important points of this lesson:

- The IO tells us where the DO is going.
- The IO answers the question "to whom" or "for whom."
- Sentences that have an IO usually also have a DO
- Sometimes the DO is not stated, but rather is implied, or understood.
- The IO pronouns are: me, te, le, nos, os, les.
- Place the pronoun before the conjugated verb.
- Think in phrases, do not translate word-for-word.
- Le and les are ambiguous.
- Prepositional phrases are often used for clarity and for emphasis.