

*2nd Person Pronoun Use in Southern American and NYC English*

In general, Modern English has lost the distinction between singular and plural agreement in second person pronouns. However, regional dialects worldwide have given rise to various forms that attempt to make the difference more clear. In the southern region of the United States, the terms *yall* and *you-all* have arisen to fill this need. In the New York City region, the terms *youse*, *you-guys*, and *youse-guys* have done the same.

The term used in the South is often represented orthographically with an apostrophe to indicate contraction, as in *y'all* (or, inexplicably, *ya'll*). However, Tillery, Wikle, and Bailey (2000) follow the lead of Michael Montgomery, who pointed out that *yall* (ostensibly from *you all*) “does not follow the normal rules of English contraction, with the second element contracted to the first”. Instead, “*yall* is best understood [...] as a consequence of fusion”. (Tillery et al., 2000, pg. 290) For that reason, *yall* (without any apostrophe) is the form that will be used in the remainder of this paper.

Tillery et al. have gathered information from numerous studies and surveys (Tillery and Bailey, 1998; Tillery et al., 2000) to determine how *yall* and *you-all* are used in the United States, and by whom. First and foremost, there is a notable difference between the two forms: in the South, *you-all* is used mostly by older and middle-aged people, while *yall* is much more favored by those under 25. (Tillery et al., 2000, pgs. 284–285) In fact, outside the South, the same relationship holds true, albeit in a lesser proportion—although the usage of either form by under-25ers outside the South is higher than the usage of either form by over-65ers within the South. (Tillery et al., 2000, pg. 285)

This statistically significant age difference also gives way to another conclusion: the usage of *yall* as a second person plural pronoun, as distinct from *you*, is beginning to spread among the youth outside of the southern United States. Given that the non-South states that have the most usage of *yall* (such as the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain states) do,

in fact, border the region, it is arguable that the spread of *yall* could simply be the result of geographical diffusion. However, it is becoming clear that the use of *yall* is no longer specific to the South, which indicates that the stigma attached to its usage is decreasing nationwide. (Tillery et al., 2000, pg. 288)

Tillery et al. (2000, pg. 291) cite Montgomery's list of six distinct functions of *yall* and attest that examples of all six of them have been heard spoken in Las Vegas by non-Southerners. The six functions are: unambiguous plural; associative plural (addressing a singular individual, but referring to others, as well); institutional plural (addressing a singular individual, but referring to the institution they represent); group address with only one potential referent (speaking to a group, but only referring to one individual within that group); direct address (as in "*Yall* pay attention" or "Bye *yall*"); and group greeting (to create a sense of familiarity and informality). Aside from the first one, these functions indicate that, in many contexts, it could be difficult to determine whether an instance of *yall* should be considered singular or plural.

In another article, Tillery and Bailey address this dilemma, at least with regard to *yall* usage in Oklahoma. (Tillery and Bailey, 1998) As they indicate in the opening paragraphs of their article, the debate about the existence of singular *yall* has been going on for about a hundred years. However, most of the articles written on the subject have been based on what Tillery and Bailey (1998, pg. 257) refer to as "the personal testimony of true believers"—that is, data collected without using any reliable method of collection. They cite only one study that appears to have been conducted in a systematic fashion, but it doesn't address the social or spatial distribution of *yall* usage. (Tillery and Bailey, 1998, pg. 258)

Tillery and Bailey conducted multiple independent studies and used data from multiple surveys to determine that, of the Oklahomans who would use *yall* in any form (between 78 and 90 percent of those surveyed), upwards of one third of them would use *yall* in a singular context. (Tillery and Bailey, 1998, pg. 265–267) Additionally, multivariate analysis determined that those in more populated areas, such as Oklahoma City and Tulsa, were more

likely to acknowledge the use of singular *yall*. (Tillery and Bailey, 1998, pg. 270) However, this does not appear to be a result of increased non-native usage, as native Oklahomans claim greater usage of singular *yall* than non-natives. (Tillery and Bailey, 1998, pg. 270) On the other hand, it is possible that the native Oklahomans use singular *yall* as a marker of solidarity in order to separate themselves from non-natives. (Tillery and Bailey, 1998, pg. 272)

Despite the systematic evidence provided by Tillery et al., Ronald R. Butters (2001) seemingly concludes, based on one mistaken personal interaction, that all supposed instances of singular *yall* have in fact been misunderstood instances of the plural form. His citation of the stereotypical “Y’all come back, hear?” as an example of “a mistaken understanding of the pragmatics of the reported utterance” (Butters, 2001, pg. 335) seems to indicate his ignorance on the matter. He also claims that “salespersons are not reported as greeting their solitary customers with \*‘Can I help y’all?’”. (Butters, 2001, pg. 335) However, commenters on Mark Liberman’s post on *Language Log* about singular *yall* seem to argue otherwise, citing instances where they were the only customer in line at a coffee shop, but were addressed by the barista using *yall*. (Liberman, 2009)

In addition to noting the areas of the United States where *yall* is most readily used, Tillery et al. (2000, pg. 288–289) note in which areas *yall* is used the least. One of the areas most resistant to the spread of *yall* is New York. Either as a cause or a consequence of that fact, English speakers in the New York City area and elsewhere have developed their own forms of a second person plural pronoun.

When in New York, it is possible to hear *youse*, *you-guys*, and *youse-guys* within the course of a few hours, or even a few minutes! Anecdotally, whether one uses one form over another will depend on age, family background, and possibly even gender. However, it is likely that, in a similar fashion to *yall* within the southern and western United States, the *you-guys* form is becoming the most popular among the youth in the northeast, and possibly even around the world.

But when it comes to the United States, in the next fifty to one hundred years, there is likely to be an increase in the usage of *yall* across the country. In places where *you-all* and *yall* co-exist, the former will decrease and the latter will increase. In places where other forms are used, it is possible that those forms will battle each other over the issue of national versus local solidarity. Whatever the outcome, it is most likely that the stigma attached to the usage of *yall* will become nonexistent. The only other problem to watch out for is the convergence of the singular and plural forms of the second person person pronouns—it's happened before, and it may already be happening again.

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