Y'all Better Ask Somebody

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Recommended Citation
Bramlett, Frank, "Y'all Better Ask Somebody" (2003). English Faculty Publications. 44.
https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/englishfacpub/44

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Language is through geographical distribution, among many others. In the continental U.S., people readily identify regional dialects. The term "southern dialect" refers to more than one person. The second word is shortened and attached to the first. "Y'all" is different in that the first word "you" is shortened to "y" and is then added to the second word "all," resulting in a combination of the terms. (Y'all would be sufficient, but "y'all" sounds perfectly good in this case.)

In classroom English, plural you would be used in a sentence like this one: "You (plural) should bring pencils for the exam." The equivalent for most southern speakers: "Y'all should bring pencils for the exam."

How to use Y'all

In practice, using "y'all" is more complicated than the table might suggest. In 1996, linguist Natalie Maynor published an article about "y'all" in the Journal of English Linguistics (available in UNO's library) that covers a lot more ground than I can give justice to here. But here are some example sentences that represent common uses of the word:

Are you going on vacation this summer? I'm not going to tell you all again.

In each case, the speaker of the sentence is referring to more than one person. The second sentence I heard a lot when I was a child. It's what my parents said to us kids when they were trying to get us to sit down or be quiet or stop yelling at each other.

"Y'all" can be adapted for different grammatical needs. (My American Heritage Dictionary has an entry for "y'all," but it contains a narrow description of its usage.) For example, "I hope y'all's Thanksgiving is good." Rhyming with "falls," "y'all's" acts as a plural possessive pronoun.

Sometimes, though, when speakers feel the need to be emphatic with their speech, they can add elements that might not ordinarily appear: We're taking all y'all out tonight for birthday cake. (Y'all would be sufficient, but all y'all sounds perfectly good in this case.)

Who actually uses Y'all anyway?

Most southerners use the word "y'all" in their conversations. Some southerners use variants, like "y'uns" (from "you'uns"). Historically, the word "y'all" was used by blacks and whites together, and after emancipation, when many African Americans began leaving the south, they brought it to their new homes in the north and west. Now the word "y'all" is used in many different parts of the country. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to state that tens of millions of English speakers in the United States use the word "y'all" everyday. This includes people in midwestern urban areas: Chicago, Omaha, Kansas City, Indianapolis, and Minneapolis. The word "y'all" has also been adopted into some Latino/Latina communities, Native American communities, and Asian-American communities. At least one television channel uses it in an advertising slogan: UPN y'all.

The Utility of Y'all

One of the clearest advantages of using "y'all" is that it prevents any misunderstanding between singular "you" and plural "you." Academic English distinguishes these forms only with some difficulty, so many people add a word to it for clarity. In conversation, many people from the midwest use the term "you guys" to address more than one person. However, Marsha Kruger, a colleague who teaches in the Women's Studies Program at UNOma, says that the term "you guys" is sexist because the word "guys" refers most specifically to males, women are left out of the equation. Whenever Marsha catches herself using the term "you guys," she tries to compensate and exclude women. Often, she switches to "y'all."

What I hope to see is the use of the word "y'all" in all communities willing to adopt it. Not only is it a clear, unambiguous pronoun for specifying the number of hearers being addressed, but it is also inclusive without being sexist. Furthermore, because it's a contraction, the word "y'all" has a flavor of informality, so it encourages a close-knit social group.

The word "y'all" is welcoming, warm, and comfortable. To me, it just sounds like home.