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Y'all Better Ask Somebody

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FRANKLY SPEAKING

A DISCUSSION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

BY FRANK BRAMLETT, PH.D.



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ans would call it a contraction, and, in that respect, it's similar to other contractions: will + not = won't; could + not + have = couldn't've. The pattern for most English contractions is that 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 *y'all*. (There are other, more exotic explanations for its origins, but restrictions on length prevent me from going into those.)

Grammatically, *y'all* fits into the regular set of pronouns and, for most people, distinguishes singular you from plural you, which doesn't happen in academic English. The following table shows pronouns as they are used as the grammatical subject, e.g., "We went to the baseball game yesterday." We is first person plural, subject case.

person	singular	plural
1st	I	we
2nd	you	you (<i>y'all</i>)
3rd	he, she, it	they

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

birthday cake. (*Y'all* would be sufficient, but *all y'all* sounds perfectly good in this case.) A variant of the plural possessive *y'all's* would be *When are y'all's parents coming to visit?* In this sentence, the speaker refers to two or more people's parents. The word *y'all's* is pretty rare, and its pronunciation might take some practice. Consider the following sentence: *The owner of the malls is buying even more land next month.* When the two words "malls is" are pronounced rapidly, with no break in between, that's roughly what the word *y'all's* sounds like.

Who actually uses Y'all anyway?

Most southerners use the word *y'all* in their everyday conversations. Some southerners use variants, like *y'uns* (from "you-ones"). 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 *y'all* 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 finagling, 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 of mine who teaches in the Women's Studies Program at UNOmaha, 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 not 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.

Y'all Better Ask Somebody

One of the ways that linguists think about language is through geographical distribution, commonly known as *dialects*. It's very easy to think about geography because of the wide range of locales in which English is spoken. Due to conquest and colonization, English is now a world language. There's British English, Australian English, and Nigerian English, among many others. In the continental U.S., most people readily identify a number of regional dialects: "Midwestern," "New England," "Southern." While some people might call them *accents*, linguists distinguish between dialect and accent. The term *accent* refers solely to the way words are pronounced while *dialect* includes pronunciation, word forms, vocabulary, and sentence structures.

I grew up near Birmingham, Alabama, and as a speaker of a southern dialect, I use a word that is not found widely in the midwest — *y'all*. While no one I've ever met has trouble understanding me when I use the word *y'all*, I think it might be a little vague for people who don't use it as part of their native dialect.

In simplest terms, *y'all* is a combination of two words: *you* and *all*. Traditional grammari-

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 y'all going on vacation this summer?
I'm not going to tell y'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*