

## “Do **you** understand who I'm talking to?” Second person plural forms in English



Most languages have separate words for singular and plural pronouns. English used to have separate second person pronouns too, but since *thou* fell out of use the *you* pronoun has had to do double duty. So, in the scene depicted here, is the speaker accusing one of his friends, or all of them? How do we deal with this problem?

*you took my biscuit!*

You could investigate how English speakers make clear who they're talking to when there is more than one person around. How do they show that they are speaking to just one person? Or to two people? Or to the whole group?



**How to investigate?**

### ***Listen and note***

One way to find out is to listen to what your teachers say when they are addressing one person, the whole class, or a small group of students. Note this down during the course of a day, so that you end up with a collection of phrases. Perhaps the teacher uses the student's name as well as *you* (but this obviously wouldn't be possible for a group

of students!) You'll probably find that the phrases include *you all* (for example, *will you all now think about this?*) and *the two of you* or *both of you* (for example, *would the two of you do this?*) What other phrases does your teacher use to show who he or she is addressing? Does the teacher sometimes make it clear through eye contact, or pointing?

Some linguists\* have claimed that we have an unconscious rule about how to address two or more people: if it isn't clear from the context, the speaker must make it perfectly clear whether they are referring to one person, to everyone who is there or to a subset of the people who are there. They usually do this by using people's names, or a phrase like *all of you*, *you fellows*, *both of you*, or by gesturing (usually pointing). Once this has been made clear, it is OK to use *you* from then on, but only until the next ambiguous moment in the conversation. If someone joins the group or if someone leaves, the speaker has to make it clear all over again just who they are talking to.

[\* Andrew Pawley and Frances Hodgetts Syder (1983) Natural selection in syntax: notes on adaptive variation and change in vernacular and literary grammar. *Journal of Pragmatics* 7: 551-579.]

### **Watch TV**

Researchers have found that in the *Friends* series, the speakers often use *you guys* when they are addressing more than one person. You could watch an episode of *Friends* and note down all the words and phrases used when people address more than one person. How often do speakers say *you guys*? Are there any other words or phrases that they use to make it clear whether they are talking to one person or more than one person? Is it always clear what *you* means?

Perhaps more interestingly, watch a British TV sitcom where people sometimes address more than one person (such as *Big Brother*). Do people use *you guys* here? If not, how do they make it clear who they are addressing?

### **Do some dialect research**

Many varieties of English have a separate second person plural pronoun, unlike standard English. There are many different forms, including *youse*, *you all*, *yinz* or *you uns* (and more). You could browse the internet or look at some Linguistics textbooks to gather examples. Find as many second plural pronoun forms as you can, and note down in which parts of the world they are heard.

**TIP:**



Try googling "second person pronouns" and national varieties of

English around the world, such as "Irish English", "America", "Australia", "Jamaica" or "South Africa". You could also search for second person pronouns in regional varieties (dialects) of British and American English.

You could also try to find out what has happened to the old singular pronoun *thou*. Is it still used? If so, where?

**In conclusion**

Once you've done your investigation, consider whether *you* in English is really ambiguous. Do people really not know who is being addressed when they hear *you*? Or do they find other ways of showing that they are addressing more than one person?

**Suggested Reading:**

Theresa Heyd (2010) How you guys doin'? Staged orality and emerging plural address in the television series *Friends*. *American Speech* 85 (1): 33-66. (Click [here](#) for a summary of this paper).