

What's up with *y'all*?: Sociopragmatic versatility in the “battle of the pronouns”

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1. Introduction

There has been much debate – mostly of a historical or grammatical nature - over the development and use of the second-person plural (2PPL) pronominal form *y'all* in American English. Accurate historical documentation of the form is scant, resulting in a wide range of theories regarding its origin, with some authors proposing that *y'all* is a calque of a creole or African pronoun system (Lipski, 1993) and others arguing that it is an importation from the Scots-Irish dialect (Montgomery 1992). Grammatically, it is generally accepted that *y'all* is an analogous suppletion of the Early Modern English pronoun system (Maynor, 2000; Tillery, Wilke, and Bailey, 2000), though it is certainly not the only form that fills the 2PPL pronoun slot in modern-day American English. While *you* is the accepted singular second-person form, it also and often functions as an implicit plural. Other pronouns in American English comparable to *y'all* include *yinz* (Johnstone, 2001), *you-uns* (Montgomery, 2002; Donahue 2007), and *you guys* (Maynor, 2000). These forms, along with *y'all*, have been shown to index certain aspects of identity such as social class, region, or ethnicity. However, the discourse-pragmatic functions of these forms have not been investigated. In this paper, I show how *y'all* in particular serves distinct sociopragmatic purposes by indexing affective stances among young Texas speakers.

I analyze a corpus of interactional video data in order to determine the state of *y'all* in what has been called the “battle of the pronouns” (Maynor, 2000). In contrast to many other scholarly considerations of *y'all* – which draw mainly on self-report surveys (e.g. Tillery, Wilke, and Bailey, 2000), constructed examples (e.g. Richardson, 1984), and historical texts (e.g. Lipski, 1993) – my analysis draws on interactional data, thus providing evidence of real-time language in use. The data I use come from an archive of video recordings of everyday interaction collected between 2004 and 2007 among undergraduates at a private university in central Texas and represent a small cross-section of young, educated Southern speakers. While most of the speakers are from Texas, other Southern states such as Mississippi and Tennessee are also represented. In the following analysis, I examine two issues: first, the distribution of *y'all* versus the competing forms *you guys* and plural *you*, and second, the sociopragmatic factors that give *y'all* a certain amount of interactional versatility, which may make it a desirable pronominal choice for some speakers.

2. How Does *Y'all* Compare to Plural *You* and *You Guys*?

In the first part of my analysis, I compare the occurrences of *y'all* with the two other most prominent 2PPL pronouns in my corpus of young Texan speakers: *you guys* and implicitly plural *you*. Because of the inherent ambiguity of the number of *you*, the coding of plural *you* was determined on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the surrounding context, including evidence of nonverbal cues. The counts and percentages of these pronouns are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Counts and percentages of *y'all*, *you guys*, and *you (pl)* among young Texas speakers.

(Corpus word count: 53,622)	Y'all	You guys	You (pl)	TOTAL
2PPL tokens (and percentages)	58 (43%)	19 (14%)	58 (43%)	135 (100%)

As Table 1 shows, *y'all* and plural *you* occur with the same frequency in my corpus. Although one might assume that plural *you* is the default and most frequent form of 2PPL pronoun in American English, my data indicate that *y'all* is in very real contention for the 2PPL slot among the speakers in my corpus. Even though neither *y'all* nor plural *you* is the statistically default form, when the discursive use of these forms is examined, it becomes clear that plural *you* is treated by speakers as the interactionally unmarked form, with *y'all* performing additional sociopragmatic work.

In comparison to *y'all* and *you (pl)*, *you guys* occurs at a much lower frequency in my data. This is in contrast to the findings of scholars who report that the form is being increasingly imported from outside the South into the dialect of young Southern speakers (Maynor, 1999, 2000). Moreover, where *you guys* is used, it does not seem to carry any clear gender distributions – either of speaker or addressees – which is also in contrast with recent scholarship on *you guys* (Maynor 2000). Table 2 summarizes the gender distribution of both speaker and addressees for the 19 tokens of *you guys* in my corpus.

Table 2. Gender distribution for speaker and addressees in tokens of *you guys*.

	Female Addressees	Male Addressees	Mixed Gender Group	Row Totals
Female Speaker	6	0	2	8
Male Speaker	3	5	3	11
Column Totals	9	5	5	19

3. Interspeaker Patterns in Pronoun Use

In order to discuss how young Southern speakers in my data use *y'all* in interaction, it is helpful to highlight the patterns of 2PPL pronoun use by several specific speakers. While the overall trends presented in Table 1 show statistical comparability in the frequency of plural *you* and *y'all*, individual speakers tend to have a preferred pronoun. Of the 29 speakers in my corpus, 19 use 2PPL pronouns. Of those 19 people, 3 use only *y'all*, 4 use no *y'all* at all, and 12 use a variety of 2PPL pronouns. These patterns are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of *y'all* among speakers in the corpus.

Pronoun Use	<i>Y'all</i> Only	No <i>Y'all</i>	Mixed Usage	Total
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Number of people	3	4	12	19
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An example of a *y'all*-only participant is Ann, an 18-year-old freshman from San Antonio, Texas, who exclusively and extensively uses *y'all* in an hour-long video of her and two friends playing a board game. In fact, in the video recording in which Ann appears, her *y'alls* make up 11 out of 13 – or 85% – of all speakers' 2PPL pronoun uses. Here I present two short examples in which Ann uses *y'all*. In the first example, Ann, who is playing the board game "Life" with her two friends Liz and Joy, explains the monetary benefits of having children within the game.

Example 1. (2004Life, 33:45-33:48)

- 1 Ann: Well,
- 2 Well **y'all**,
- 3 Well **y'all** get money at the end though for kids.

In the second example, Ann asks for clarification regarding the progression of game play.

Example 2. (2004Life, 40:42-40:45)

- 1 Ann: So wait.
- 2 When **y'all** get here,
- 3 I just keep (.) playing 'til I'm done.

As exemplified in these two excerpts, Ann uses *y'all* as her basic (and, in fact, only) 2PPL pronoun.

However, the exclusive use of *y'all* is not as common in the speech of individual speakers in my data as is a mixture of pronouns. In order to illustrate this pattern of use, I present another participant, Peter, a 35-year-old university staff member from San Antonio, Texas. He has, by far, the highest individual use of 2PPL pronoun tokens in my data, a total of 32 of 135 tokens. This fact is likely because the video recording that contains Peter captures a group meeting where he functions as the group leader. In Example 3, Peter is addressing the group and inquiring how they are doing on recruiting sponsors for an upcoming event the group is hosting.

Example 3. (2005Diversity, 47:04-47:06)

- 1 Peter: How are **y'all**,
- 2 on recruitment then.

In a contrasting example, Peter uses implicitly plural *you* to address the members of the group in relation to their various responsibilities regarding the contacting of sponsorship groups.

Example 4. (2005Diversity, 47:04-47:06)

- 1 Peter: How's this for an idea.
- 2 I don't know what **you** were gonna do,
- 3 As far as contacting these different groups.

The plurality of Peter's *you* in line 2 is mainly interpretable from his embodied action, as he uses his hands and his gaze to gesture to several individuals in the group.

Figure 1. Peter's embodied action in indexing the plurality of *you* as seen in Example 4.



Thus, while *y'all* functions unambiguously as plural in most contexts, additional communicate effort may be needed to indicate the plurality of *you*.

4. The Functions of *Y'all*: An Emergent Discourse Marker?

As the previous four examples show, young speakers in Texas use a variety of second-person plural pronouns, displaying a great deal of interspeaker variation. Moreover, for speakers who use *y'all*, there is also variation in the types of discourse functions that this form can serve. McLemore (1991) notes that among Texas sorority women, *y'all* is used as an address term or vocative tag, a function not regularly performed by any other English pronoun. I also found this to be the case in my data: *y'all* is used not only to address a group but also to express certain sociopragmatic information as well. This finding suggests that *y'all* may be emerging as a type of discourse marker.

Other address terms have been investigated with respect to their discourse marker functions, including the American English slang term *dude* (Kiesling, 2004) and the Mexican Spanish slang term *güey* (Bucholtz, 2009). Among the criteria that these studies outline for membership in the discourse marker category are that such forms need not be referential and that they encode a speaker's stance. In my data, *y'all* is expanding beyond the function of a simple pronominal form and is gaining discourse-level functions.

However, *y'all* is different from *dude* or *güey* in several ways. First, it is a pronominal and not a nominal form, making it distinct both among pronominals, which typically do not function as either address terms or discourse markers, as well as among discourse markers, which typically do not grammaticalize from pronouns. Moreover, the type of stance that *y'all* indexes is different from *dude*, which indexes nonchalant cool solidarity and often masculinity, and *güey*, which indexes solidarity and highlights important information. In general, *y'all* tends to index a stance of high affect, such as indignation, frustration, and surprise. It may be possible, however, that *y'all* is used to index positive affective stances as well.

Despite the finds I discuss below, it is difficult to say unequivocally that *y'all* functions as a discourse marker, since it is not clear that it is ever fully nonreferential. All of my data consist of groups of people in which any co-present group or subgroup may be inferred to be the referent of *y'all* when used as an address term. On the other hand, in some instances, *y'all* displays prosodic cues which indicate that it is occurring at intonation breaks and even by itself as an entire intonation unit. The fact that *y'all* is prosodically separable from surrounding utterances indicates that it may be functioning more as a discourse marker.

Again, it is useful to look at several individuals' pronoun use to see the discourse functions of *y'all* in action. In Example 5, Ann is complaining to her gamemates that she has not yet acquired any children in their game of "Life."

Example 5. (2004Life, 33:36-33:39)

1 Ann: **Y'all**,

- 2 I have no babies.
 3 Liz: <falsetto> I'm sorry.

In addition to its function as an address term, *y'all* also seems to be performing sociopragmatic work here. For one thing, it is used as a preface to a complaint and indexes a high amount of affect. Moreover, Liz's response indicates not only that she is sympathizing with Ann's predicament but also that she is mirroring Ann's stance of high affect.

The next example also involves Ann complaining about her lack of substantive acquisitions in the board game. Once again, her complaint is prefaced by *y'all*, marking both a comment addressed to the whole group as well as a high-affect stance.

Example 6. (2004Life, 29:43-29:46)

- 1 Ann: **Y'all**,
 2 I have no kids,
 3 and I got my little sport coupe,
 4 with my house.

It is important to note that these episodes could very well have occurred without the use of *y'all*. Thus, Ann's decision to use the pronoun indicates that it is interactionally versatile both in getting the attention of the group and taking a stance toward her upcoming remarks.

Since Ann is an exclusive *y'all* user, it is hard to determine whether she uses *y'all* in a contrastive way to differentially mark stances. Clearer evidence of the sociopragmatic functions comes from comparing speakers who use both plural *you* and *y'all*, but for markedly different purposes in interaction. I examine the speech of two other participants in my data, Lisa and Kay. Lisa is a 20-year-old junior from Hurst, Texas, and Kay is a 21-year-old junior from Montgomery, Texas.

In the following examples, plural *you* is used as the unmarked 2PPL form, while *y'all* is often used to express high affect and stance-taking. In Example 7, Lisa is introducing a story about a detail she remembers from the children's television show "Sesame Street." In her opening statement, she addresses the whole group both by engaging multiple participants with her gaze (see Figure 2) and by using the implicitly plural form of *you*.

Example 7. (2006Dinner, 30:48-30:54)

- 1 Lisa: Did **you** ever see that Sesame Street thing,
 2 where the—
 3 the um,
 4 the drop of water would come from the faucet,

Figure 2. Lisa's use of gaze with encoding the plurality of *you*.



Again, as with Peter in Example 4, Lisa's *you* in line 1 is interpretable as plural through her use of gesture and gaze (see Figure 2). As she introduces the topic, she scans the table to check reciprocity from multiple members of the group.

Example 7 contrasts with Example 8, where the same group is engaged in an extended round of laughter after discussing a topic that they deem inappropriate to be captured on camera. At the end of the laughing episode, Lisa admonishes the group to make their conversation more appropriate for a "PG" audience (i.e. suitable for children under 13), and then expresses her concern that the researchers collecting the data will have to edit the preceding segment of video. In a preface to her final admonishment, she uses *y'all* both to draw attention to what she has to say and to mark a high degree of affect.

Example 8. (2006Dinner, 36:47-36:57)

- 1 Lisa: Let's PG it up people,
- 2 PG it up.
- 3 (group laughter)
- 4 They're gonna cut this whole thing.
- 5 **Y'all.**
- 6 Back to maturity.

Lisa uses *y'all* in this example as its own intonation unit with final intonation. Moreover, she has already addressed the group as "people" in line 1, which indicates that *y'all* is functioning less referentially and more as a discourse marker. However, the fact that *y'all* is tied to the imperative in line 6 also suggests that it is still functioning as a more pronoun-like address term as well.

Y'all may also be used to demonstrate high affect in subject and object positions, not just as address terms or discourse markers. In the next example, Kay, who uses both plural *you* and *y'all* in the corpus, employs *y'all* in the subject position to indicate surprise and perhaps a bit of disappointment that none of her friends have ever attended a game of their university's basketball team.

Example 9. (2005Dinner, 9:32-9:38)

- 1 Kim: [He was in the Lariat* today.]
- 2 Kay: [Do **y'all** not go to basketball games?]
- 3 Kim: I haven't been to one yet.
- 4 Kay: Oh my Go:d.

*the school newspaper

Figure 3. Kay's use of facial expression to display affective stance.



Kay uses *y'all*, along with her facial expression (see Figure 3) and intonation, in her affective stance display of surprise and disappointment that her friends have not attended a basketball game at their school. This example shows that not only is *y'all* emerging as a discourse marker in order to index affective sociopragmatic information, but that this aspect of affectual intensification may also be present when *y'all* is used as the subject or object of an utterance. Thus, the high-affect stance that is indexed when *y'all* is used as a discourse marker may also be present when it is used in other more prototypical pronominal positions.

As the examples presented here illustrate, *y'all* functions in a variety of ways in discourse. Its canonical function as an address term or pronominal form is being extended, and *y'all* is functioning as a discourse marker to index high-affect stances such as indignation, frustration, and surprise.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have demonstrated how uses of *y'all* in interaction show a change in progress among young Texas speakers. *Y'all* is an emergent discourse marker that indexes not only addressees but speaker affect as well. Moreover, I have shown that the distribution of both *y'all* and plural *you* is very similar in their overall patterning in my corpus, but that the distribution of pronoun use on an individual level shows a great deal of individual variation. Many individual speakers have a preferred pronoun, and those that use both pronouns tend to use them differently in interaction.

Thus, *y'all* is an interactional resource for indexing speakers' affective stance. Through the analysis of interactional data, we can see the variety of ways that people use the form and the various functions that it serves. While this study is preliminary, it draws attention to the fact that the discourse-pragmatic functions of pronouns need to be investigated more fully.

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