Pragmaticalisation of plural second person forms in World Englishes: a corpus-based study

As many languages still do, English used to distinguish between singular and plural second person pronouns. This distinction was lost during its transition into Modern English which saw the establishment of the single form *you* for both singular and plural reference.

Yet, many dialects of English have always continued to explicitly mark number on second person pronouns by resorting to different linguistic strategies, both morphological and analytic. Among the morphological strategies, suffixation of the second person pronoun *you* with the regular pluralising mark *-s*, i.e. *yous*, represents the most common form alongside a host of different spelling variants such as *youse*, *yiz*, *yez*, etc. As far as the analytic strategies are concerned, pluralisation of *you* is mainly carried out by making it follow by other linguistic elements (quantifiers, plural nouns etc.) as happens for *you guys*, but also *you all*, *you lot*, *y'uns*, and so on.

The proposed research is a synchronic and diachronic corpus-based investigation of second-person plural forms in twenty world varieties of English. The synchronic analysis is based on GloWbe: a 1.9-billion-word web-based corpus developed by Mark Davies at Brigham Young University and released in 2013. The size of the corpus and its interface (http://corpus.byu.edu/) allow to look at the frequencies, functions, collocates and patterns of features that are both spoken and dialectal (non-standard). Moreover, the geographical coverage (20 varieties of English) made it possible to compare the trends displayed by the features across varieties and spot similarities and/or specificities. The diachronic analysis is based on COHA, ECCO TCP and OED which cover the period between 1700s and 1900s.

The analysis of corpus data has uncovered features of plural second person pronouns that are not accounted for in the literature: first, plural second person forms do not work exclusively as markers of plurality, but also as pragmatic markers of emphasis and empathy (pragmaticalisation), and possessive determiners and pronouns (in place of standard *your* and *yours*). Second, the forms were found in all the twenty varieties considered, independently of English being a first or second official language. Third, the pragmatic profile of plural second person forms is complex and consistent across varieties: their emphatic function, on the one hand, is linked with the identification of a social category and their negative connotation (e.g. *youse Anglo bastards*); the empathic function is linked with the expression of positive and negative politeness (e.g. *I love youse all*; *see yous later*). In both cases, plural second person forms signal salient communicative acts, therefore working as pragmatic markers of prominence.

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