

Changing pronouns: How to express 'plural you' in current English?

Pronouns are often considered to be a relatively straightforward word class because it is believed that they do not undergo much change. However, this is not entirely true. When we look at how pronouns are used by British English speakers in their communication today, we can see some interesting patterns and changes developing over time. This worksheet is based on the research which used five million words from the conversations recorded in the British National Corpus 2014 (BNC2014). The activities draw on the findings and examples from the BNC2014 to demonstrate the current patterns in the use of pronouns; in particular, the worksheet focuses on how English speakers in the UK express plural *you* in their informal conversations.

Task 1

In today's English, 'you' refers to second person singular in both formal and informal contexts, as well as to second person plural. In order to avoid confusion, there are some strategies for speakers to signal who they mean when using 'you'. We are going to explore one of such forms: 'you guys'.

Type this phrase in BNClab and look at the first 15 concordance lines that you find. Now consider the following questions:

- Can you describe the purpose of the expression?
- What would happen if we replaced the expression in these sentences by 'you'?
- After you've looked at the concordance lines, can you think of other expressions that work in a similar way?

Task 2

Read the following concordance lines taken from current British English in the British National Corpus 2014 and then decide in each example whether 'you' is used as second person:

A. singular

B. plural

C. impossible to know

1.	so S: what sort of form did it take? did	you	go there? S: well there were fifteen from around	
2.	to S: I don't have anything to print what are	you	printing? S: I've got reports and cases to read	
3.	turns S: wasn't it? like I stay here tonight	you	go home S: yeah go home mind you home 's	
4.	the okay and I'm going S: anyway I'll see	you	soon S: right thank you very much for	
5.	didn't learn nothing really S: what did you? did	you	just sit round a table and just play around on	
6.	Itunes S: file sharing but I'd be able to show	you	that S: I think you would S: further down the line	
7.	remember have a look when we go to the tip	you	keep talking I'll just go upstairs S: when	
8.	S: nice...that is nice wine as well. thank	you	very much it's quite nice isn't it? S: mm	
9.	worried about their boiler not working so and they said oh yeah	you	can have a bath if you want because they've got this	

For the sentences you marked as 'plural' or 'impossible to know', can you suggest a strategy or a phrase which would signal more clearly that 'you' was intended as a plural pronoun. You can use the expressions you listed in the previous task or think of some new ones.

Example:

S: what sort of form did it take? did you  go there? S: well there were fifteen from around

Task 3

Now practice using the expressions you've listed. In small groups read the following role play situation and choose one person to be the waiter / waitress and the other members of the group will play the role of the diners.



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Imagine you are a waiter / waitress in a restaurant. A group of diners enter the restaurant. Greet the customers as they arrive, show them to their table, explain the daily specials, take their food and drinks order and answer any questions they may have. Make sure to use all the appropriate expressions for plural 'you' that we've practiced in the previous exercises when addressing the diners together.

Task 4

We will explore the expression 'you guys' a little bit more and look at i) how its use changed over the course of last twenty years and ii) who uses it in current British English.

In BNCLab, type in 'you guys' and click on the Change button. Have a look at whether speakers used this phrase more often in the 1990s or today.

- Looking at the results, what trends can you see?
- What, in your opinion, is the reason for this change in language?
- Do you think the phrase will still be used in 20 years' time? To help you answer this question, look at the Age button to see whether the phrase is used mostly by younger or older speakers. You can also check the Social class and Gender buttons to see whether the phrase is preferred by any of these social groups.
