



## *Let me tell ye how 'yous' became the use of the plural 'you'*



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**WATCH YOUR  
LANGUAGE**

**H**OW are yous? While some people find the "yous" in that first sentence really annoying, others find it extremely useful.

Standard English is peculiar among its related languages in not distinguishing between just one you and a whole lot of you. The question "Are you there?" might be addressed to one or several people. Danish, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish all distinguish between one person and more than one.

So did English at one time. Thou/thee was used for a single person, and ye/you was used for several. Some northern English dialects still use the "thou" form, and some of the Quakers also retain it.

By Shakespeare's time, this system was already well in decline. "You" had come to be the polite form, like the French "vous", which started life as a plural form, and then became the polite form for addressing a single person. The result was that unless you were talking to a close friend, "thou" sounded more and more insulting. You used it to speak to those to whom it wasn't worth being polite. So Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet* calls Mercutio "you" when he is being polite, but "thou"

when he is insulting him. But as good friends, Romeo and Mercutio could call each other "thou", and Romeo addresses Juliet as "thou", not being insulting, but showing a high degree of familiarity.

In later years, "thou" all but vanished, except in the church, and only "you" was left.

But clearly this was not satisfactory for many speakers. Perhaps strangely, "you", originally a plural form, was clearly perceived to be inherently singular, because no new singular form was created.

Instead, a whole new range of plural forms were introduced: you all, you lot, you 'uns, you guys, you fellows and, of course, yous.

The form "yous" probably came to Australia and New Zealand from Ireland, although it is also used in parts of Scotland, but it makes perfectly good sense, adding "s" for the plural of "you".

Some of the other forms of "you" seem relatively restricted in terms of the area we would expect to find them in: "you all" is almost a shibboleth of the southern states of the United States. Yet all these forms repair the gap in the system that the loss of "thou" brought about. That loss is now so complete that most young people do not know what form of the verb

to put after "thou". Neither do they know how to use "thou" and "thee" appropriately ("thou" where you could use "he" or "she", "thee" where you would need "him" or "her").

In New Zealand, we now hear not only "yous", but also "you guys" and "you fellows", but not all in the same proportions and not in the same contexts. And we rarely find these forms in writing except in representations of speech. In writing, we are pretty much stuck with "you".

In speech there is some choice. The implication is that we have not really agreed on a new pronoun yet to fill the gap of the missing plural form. Perhaps eventually we will get a proper plural "you" pronoun, but it's still some time away.

Some other languages, like Maori, have a special "you" form for just two people: a you-two pronoun "koorua", contrasting with singular-you "koe" and plural-you "koutou".

While it is possible that we could develop such a form, it is a lot less likely than reinstating the difference between you-one and you-many.

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