



Singularization of Plural English Second Person Pronouns

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Abstract: English second person pronouns have undergone notable morphological and semantic changes from Old English to the present. Driven by pragmatic motivations such as the expression of respect, plural forms have to varying degrees developed singular usage and, in some cases, have even replaced the original singular forms. To meet the communicative need to distinguish singular from plural reference, reinforcement strategies have emerged and have become a principal mechanism for renewing plural forms. This paper traces the historical development of English second person pronouns, delineates the specific path of the singularization of plural forms and the subsequent renewal cycle, analyzes the internal linguistic factors and external motivations underlying this change, and brings together cross-linguistic evidence for the singularization of plural second person pronouns from a typological perspective. The study shows that the singularization of English second person plural pronouns is a typologically widespread phenomenon, that the change follows the unidirectionality principle of grammaticalization, and that it exhibits a recurring renewal cycle of “plural-form singularization → emergence of new plural forms → re-singularization of the new forms.”

Keywords: English second person pronouns; singularization; grammaticalization; typology; renewal

1. Introduction

As a core grammatical category, English personal pronouns are morphologically and functionally relatively stable, but they have nonetheless undergone significant changes over time. The second person pronoun is the only personal pronoun in Present-Day English that does not distinguish singular from plural (apart from reflexive forms), with *you* serving as a unified nominative and accusative form for both numbers. In Early Modern English, however, *you* was merely the accusative of the plural; it was only after undergoing singularization² that it came to function as a general-purpose second person pronoun for both singular and plural reference in both cases.

Plural personal pronouns tend to undergo diachronic change [1], with plural forms often recruited for singular reference [2], [3]. In English, the second person pronoun *you* has completed the full replacement of the original singular form by the plural form—a development by no means isolated, since comparable changes are attested in numerous languages of the world. Yet its developmental trajectory still lacks a systematic diachronic account, and relatively few studies have approached this phenomenon from a typological perspective.

This paper provides a literature-based theoretical analysis on the singularization of English second person pronouns, aiming at addressing three key research questions: (1) What are the historical trajectories and ongoing developments in the singularization and renewal of English second person pronouns? (2) What internal and external factors drive its singularization and subsequent plural renewal? (3) To what extent does this change reflect cross-linguistic typological universals? To strengthen its empirical grounding, this theoretical framework is supplemented by illustrative corpus data. Data and examples are drawn from three primary sources: Google Books Ngram Viewer for long-term diachronic frequency trends, the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) for quantitative distribution and contextualized usage examples of dialectal structures (e.g., *y'all both*), and the script corpus of *Desperate Housewives* to illustrate contemporary spoken interactions.

2. The History and Current Status of English Second Person Pronouns

Viewed against the broader history of English, personal pronouns have undergone substantial changes in both the category of number and the category of case. They have shifted from an earlier system distinguishing singular, dual, and plural number to a system in which the singular and the plural are formally identical, and from a system distinguishing dative and accusative case to one in which the accusative form is used uniformly. This protracted development may be roughly divided into three stages: Old English, Middle English, and Early Modern English.

In Old English, the second person pronoun had distinct forms for the singular, the dual, and the plural. The singular paradigm distinguished nominative, genitive, dative, and accusative case, while the dual and plural paradigms likewise had their own case forms. The system thus maintained relatively complete number and case distinctions, allowing precise expression through distinct morphological forms. By Middle English, the dual had disappeared entirely from the second person paradigm, leaving only a singular–plural contrast. The Old English nominative singular evolved into Early Modern

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² In this paper, singularization is defined as the semantic and pragmatic process whereby an originally non-singular (plural) form acquires the capability to refer to a single addressee. Overtime, the plural form might expand from an sporadic singular usage to addressing all singular addressees, ultimately replacing the original singular form and resulting in number syncretism.

English *thou*, while the dative and accusative singular merged into the oblique form *thee*. The nominative plural evolved into *ye*, and the dative and accusative plural merged into *you*. At this stage, the merger of case distinctions was already underway, but the singular–plural contrast was still preserved.

Because of their phonetic similarity, the forms *ye* and *you* also came to substitute for one another: as early as the fourteenth century, *you* (the second person plural accusative/dative) began to replace *ye* (the second person plural nominative), while the substitution of *ye* for *you* is attested from the fifteenth century onward. By the second half of the seventeenth century, *ye* had been abandoned in the standard language and *you* had become the unified second person plural form for both nominative and accusative case [4]. At the same time, the use of the plural form for singular reference had already emerged by the thirteenth century, with the singular reserved for addressing social inferiors and the plural used to address superiors and to express respect [5], [6]; both *ye* and *you* were used with singular reference. *Ye* was progressively squeezed out by *you* and was eventually abandoned, so that *you* came to serve as the general-purpose second person form for both numbers and both cases. Around the seventeenth century, the English second person singular forms were completely replaced by the corresponding plural forms, with the singular nominative, accusative, and genitive all being eventually displaced by the plural forms. In Present-Day English, the second person paradigm (apart from the reflexive forms *yourself*–*yourselves*) is syncretic for number [7].

A search of the Google Books N-gram Viewer (Fig. 1) shows that, between 1600 and 1650, the frequency of the singular forms *thou* and *thee* declined markedly while that of the plural form *you* rose, and that by the 2000s *thou* and *thee* had virtually disappeared while *you* remained highly active. The results of this large-scale corpus query further corroborate that, in the early modern period, the plural form replaced the singular forms in the English second person paradigm. In Present-Day English, the second person pronoun *you* is associated with two number readings, namely singular and plural. After the loss of the singular – plural contrast, plural reference is sometimes expressed by appending to *you* a lexical element that signals plurality, such as *you people*, *you boys*, *you guys*, *you men*, *you fellow* (particularly in American English), and *yinz* (*you* + *ones*, in Pennsylvania, U.S.); many regional varieties also have dedicated new second person plural forms, such as *youse* (in northern U.S. English and in Liverpool and Glasgow in the U.K.) and *you-all* (in southern U.S. English, which has even developed a genitive form *y'all's* in informal usage)[8], [9], [10]. Among forty-six varieties of English surveyed by Kortmann and Szmrecsanyi [11], thirty-four have a dedicated form or phrase for second person plural reference. Among this rich variety of forms and phrases, the most representative include *yous*, *you-uns*, *you-all*, *you guys*, and *y'all*, of which *y'all* and *you guys* have been identified as the forms most likely to take over the plural function of *you* [12].

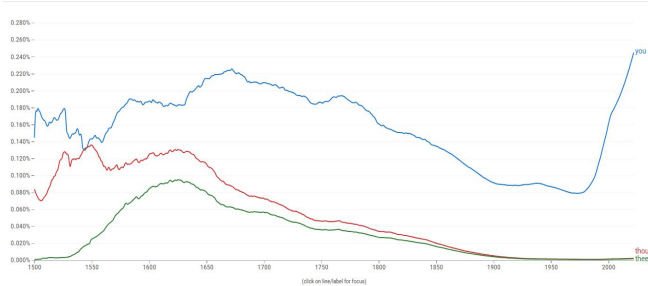


Fig. 1. Google Books Ngram Viewer results for *thou*, *thee*, and *you* (1500–2022)



Fig. 2. Main form replacement in the singular (nominative) function of English second person pronouns

3. The Singularization of Plural Forms and the Renewal Cycle

3.1 The singularization of plural forms

Building upon the historical shift established in Middle English, the functional expansion of *you* from an honorific to a general singular form proceeded through distinct stages of grammaticalization. Initially motivated by pragmatic deference [5], [6], [13], this “plural-for-singular” usage gradually laid the foundation for the total systemic displacement of *thou*.

As the frequency of the plural form *you* in singular contexts increased, the original singular form *thou* gradually waned in competition with the singular use of *you*. When more than one linguistic form expresses the same meaning or function, the relatively weaker form may be eliminated by competition, and *you* ultimately prevailed in competition with *thou*. This replacement was essentially complete by around the seventeenth century: the second person singular nominative, accusative, and genitive were all eventually displaced by the plural form (Fig. 2).

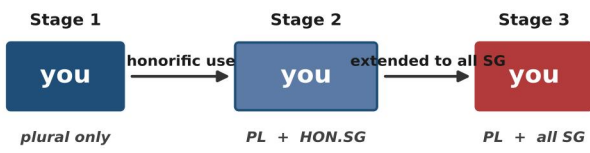


Fig. 3. Semantic change of *you* in the category of number

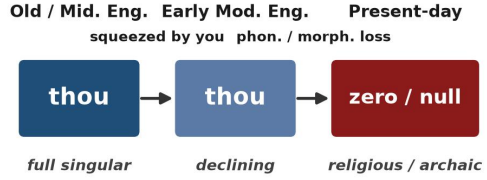


Fig. 4. Historical change path of *thou*

Originally a plural form, *you* eventually retained its original plural meaning while also acquiring a singular meaning, so that it came to be used in certain contexts with singular reference (initially as a honorific, and subsequently extended to all

second person singular addressees). A stage thus emerged in which both singular and plural meanings coexisted in a layered fashion, and *you* underwent an extension of context. This semantic evolution exemplifies the typical profile of grammaticalization: meaning changes precede changes in form, and the generalization of meaning precedes the reduction of morphological substance (Fig. 3).

Thou, squeezed by *you*, has now fallen into disuse except for occasional appearances in domains such as religion, and has reached the highest stage of grammaticalization in phonological and morphological terms, namely that of a zero or empty form. The replacement of *thou* by *you* in the functional slot of the second person singular nominative is the most direct outcome of the singularization of the English second person plural pronoun (Fig. 4).

3.2 The renewal and renewal cycle of plural forms following singularization

Once *you* had acquired a singular meaning and become a general-purpose form for both numbers, the resulting functional ambiguity (*you* denoting both single and multiple addressees) created systemic pressure for disambiguation. To restore the explicit functional contrast without reviving the obsolete *thou*, English speakers developed new, reinforced plural forms, as introduced in Section 2.

These innovative plural markers have entered the system through periphrastic reinforcement, phonological contraction, or morphological analogy (Fig. 6). Crucially, these new forms are not static; upon entering frequent usage, they undergo secondary grammaticalization at varying rates. Among them, *you guys* and *y'all* exhibit the highest degree of grammaticalization and competitive strength.

The periphrastic expression *you guys* originally contained the gendered noun *guys* (males), but through continuous semantic bleaching, it had lost its gender specificity by the late twentieth century. It now functions as a generic, ungendered second person plural marker applicable even to all-female groups, as illustrated in Example 1.

Example 1. *You guys*, check out Mary Alice’s clothes. (Desperate Housewives, Season 1, Episode 1, 2004)

Meanwhile, *y'all* (contracted from *you all*) represents a more advanced stage of structural erosion and semantic generalization. Originally an emphatic plural construction, *y'all* has lost its emphatic force and become a tightly bound formal unit. Empirical evidence from COHA demonstrates that *y'all* readily accepts external quantitative modifiers such as both (Table 1). This syntactic behavior (*y'all both*) confirms that *y'all* is processed mentally as a single, indivisible pronominal head rather than a loose syntagmatic phrase, allowing secondary quantifiers to be layered externally. Moreover, while still a matter of ongoing debate and limited to sporadic dialectal occurrences, some scholars note that *y'all* may occasionally exhibit tendencies toward singular reference in specific informal contexts [14], [15].

TABLE 1. Examples of “*y'all both*” in COHA

No.	Year	Type	Example
1	2017	MOV	What’d you do? <i>Y’all both</i> working’ that horror tour this evening, aren’t you?
2	2015	TV	really think Dre and I would react any differently if your situation? Nah, <i>y’all both</i> punks. Go on.
3	2011	TV	Man, I feel like <i>y’all both</i> -- <i>You’ll both</i> turned around at the same time, Which made it...
4	2010	MOV	You hungry? - Starved. <i>Y’all both</i> step over there and when I finish we’ll go do something.
6	2009	MOV	Soon as he gets himself kissed and <i>y’all both</i> turn human, he’s going to find a job, get you that...
7	2005	TV	not attracted to her, how could you think she was me? Because, <i>y’all both</i> fine, baby. What’s...
8	2003	MOV	! - Yeah, no problem. What the fuck was that for? Now <i>y’all both</i> have somethin’ in common.
9	2002	MOV	All right now, shit birds, <i>y’all both</i> know the rules. I want a nice, clean fight, nothing below...
10	2001	MOV	Lord knows he’s got his problems. <i>Y’all both</i> want to mess things up before the other one does.
11	2000	MOV	, like: “ If I got hit, what would I do? “ <i>Y’all both</i> crazy. Sometimes I think it would be okay...
12	2000	MOV	<i>Y’all both</i> little kids. What else <i>y’all</i> supposed to act like?
13	1996	TV	had no problem turning that con in. and as far as them kids, <i>y’all both</i> know that was all rickie’s doing.

As shown by the normalized diachronic frequency trends (Fig. 5), *you guys* has experienced a steep upward trajectory since the mid-twentieth century, rapidly expanding in standard and informal registers to become the dominant innovation. Concurrently, *y'all* exhibits a steady, sustained presence, while non-standard dialectal variants formed by morphological analogy—such as attaching the plural suffix *-s* to produce *yous(e)* [16]—remain at low relative frequencies across broad historical corpora.

From a diachronic perspective, this progression reveals a complete renewal cycle: once the original plural form (*you*) singularizes and displaces the old singular (*thou*), new reinforced forms (*you guys*, *y'all*) emerge to fill the plural functional void. Through high-frequency use, these newly innovated forms themselves undergo grammaticalization and may eventually initiate a new round of re-singularization (as seen in the emerging singular *y'all*). This cycle exemplifies the unidirectionality principle of grammaticalization, wherein lexical items continuously enter the system to compensate for functional gaps created by ongoing structural change (Fig. 6).

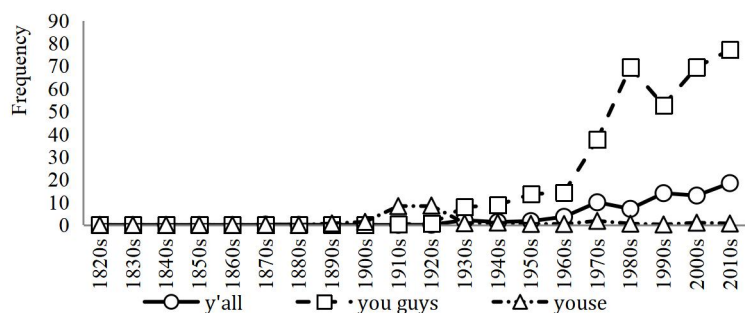


Fig. 5. Diachronic Normalized Frequencies of *y'all*, *you guys* and *youse*

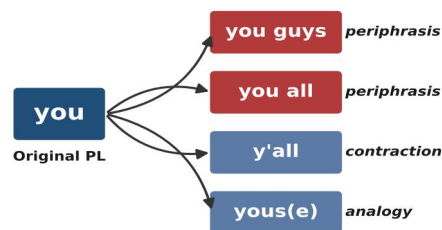


Fig. 6. Main form renewal in the plural (nominative) function of English second person pronouns

4. Factors Influencing the Singularization of Plural English second person Pronouns

The singularization of the plural forms of English second person pronouns is a complex process in which multiple factors converge. This section analyzes the principal factors influencing the change under four headings: linguistic, pragmatic, contact, and cognitive motivations.

4.1 Internal basis: the complexity of plural reference

The complexity of the referential range of plural personal pronouns provides the internal linguistic basis for the use of the English second person plural form with singular reference. The referential range of the second person plural pronoun is not limited to multiple addressees (2+2), but may also extend to the addressee together with a third party (2+3) [13]. In both of these configurations, the “addressee” is an obligatory component: the referential target of a second person plural pronoun must include at least one addressee. This can be abstracted as “2+X,” in which “2” occupies a more salient position, whereas “X,” especially when X is a third party not present in the speech situation, is less prominent and more readily backgrounded.

Because the addressee occupies the central position in the second person plural pronoun’s referential target—with the other component (the third party) peripheral—the plural form can be interpreted as referring to the addressee alone, that is, as carrying a singular meaning. This referential ambiguity provides the structural precondition for the plural form to acquire a singular meaning and constitutes an essential prerequisite for the singularization of the plural.

4.2 Socio-pragmatic motivation: power and solidarity

Communicative goals and pragmatic factors provide the driving force for the substitution of a plural personal pronoun form for a singular one. In the course of communication, speakers often deploy particular linguistic devices intuitively in order to attain a given communicative goal. The use of a second person plural pronoun to address a single addressee can serve to express respect for that addressee [17], a dynamic well-captured by the classic power–solidarity theory [18]. The use of the second person plural in a singular context allows the addressee to understand that the reference is to himself or herself, while avoiding the abruptness of a direct singular form. On the other hand, particularly in kin-based societies, addressing an individual with a plural form takes into account the group standing behind the individual, rather than treating that individual as a powerless person in isolation.

Compared with singular usage, non-singular usage is more readily associated with higher social status and greater social distance, and accordingly carries a stronger connotation of respect [13]. As societal structures modernized, the symmetrical solidarity dimension gradually expanded across social strata. This process was further catalyzed by sociolinguistic identity dynamics: when groups such as the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) intentionally retained *thou* as an ideological marker of social equality, mainstream speakers increasingly avoided *thou* to disassociate from unwanted religious or lower-status connotations. Consequently, this pragmatic function made it possible for the plural form to fully acquire a singular use across communicative contexts, becoming deeply entrenched as its frequency of use increased [16].

4.3 Language contact: the influence of French

The adoption of the second person plural form as a singular honorific in English was fundamentally accelerated by language contact following the Norman Conquest of 1066. In Old French, the second person singular *tu* marked familiarity, whereas the plural *vous* served as a polite singular address [13]. As French functioned as the prestigious language of the Anglo-Norman court and elite strata, this continental pragmatic rule was systematically borrowed into English, propelling *you* into polite singular domains.

4.4 Cognitive motivation: the avoidance of homonymy

After *you* acquired a singular meaning and replaced *thou*, *you* simultaneously carried both a singular and a plural meaning. When a single word form and a single phonological shape correspond to more than one meaning or function, the principle of “avoiding homonymy” (i.e. “one form, one meaning” or “avoiding ambiguity,” cf. [19]) tends to favor the retention of only one of those meanings or functions, with the others being “taken over” by alternative forms. This principle motivates new plural forms (*you guys*, *you all*, etc.) for distinguishing singular from plural reference.

Naturally, this phenomenon is primarily attested with lexical items. One of the defining properties of highly grammaticalized elements is polysemy: for example, the English inflectional suffix *-s* can mark either nominal plural or third-person singular present-tense on the verb. Although personal pronouns are, in principle, highly grammaticalized items and can in theory remain polysemous, once a new form enters the cycle of renewal, personal pronouns continue to

change under the competitive pressure exerted by the new form. Empirical typological data assembled by Bisang and colleagues [20] demonstrate that meaning and form do not evolve in step: it is far more common for meaning to change ahead of form. With respect to English second person pronouns, *you guys* and *you all* have not only undergone semantic bleaching but have also become more compact in form as their frequency of use has increased, indicating that they have grammaticalized to a considerable degree.

5. A Typological Perspective on the Singularization of Plural second person Pronouns

The use of the second person plural form with singular reference is a widespread phenomenon [13]. Typological observation of a large number of the world's languages has identified two hierarchies governing the extension and the shift of categories in personal pronouns. The first hierarchy, viewed from the perspective of number, captures the fact that the number meaning of personal pronouns always narrows from plural toward non-plural. The second hierarchy, viewed from the perspective of person, captures the fact that extension and shift in the person category always proceed against the person hierarchy, in the sense that a third person may shift toward a first or a second person but not vice versa [21].

5.1 Cross-linguistic evidence for the singularization of second person plural pronouns

The use of the second person plural form with singular reference is attested across the Indo-European family: Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Persian, Welsh, Greek, Modern Eastern Armenian, Latvian, most Slavic languages (e.g. Russian, Czech), and some Romance languages (e.g. Romanian) all exhibit the development of a second person plural form into a singular honorific [13], [22], [23]. This use is closely connected with cultural diffusion; for English, the singular honorific use of *you* can be traced to the influence of French following the Norman Conquest. Turkish (Turkic) provides a representative example: the plural form *siz*, used as a polite singular form of address, was adopted as a singular honorific through contact with European languages.

Beyond Indo-European languages, Yoruba (Niger-Congo), Nama (Khoisan), Kannada (Dravidian), Fijian (Austronesian), Basque, Finnish, and several Australian languages (e.g. Yolŋu, Jabugay) all use a second person plural form as a singular honorific [23], [24]. The Chinese honorific *nin* likewise derives from a contraction of the plural form *nimen* ("you-plural"), and in the Beijing dialect it has become colloquial enough to be used even by an elder to a junior [25], [26].

5.2 Typological regularities in the renewal of plural personal pronouns

From the diachronic change in the singular and plural forms of English personal pronouns, it is apparent that all three persons exhibit the use of the plural for singular reference. From a typological perspective, the number meaning of personal pronouns always narrows from plural toward non-plural, the overall direction of this change being from the less specific to the more specific, and from the less individualized to the more individualized [21]; the singularization of the second person plural pronoun instantiates precisely this typological regularity. The second person plural *you* long ago replaced the singular *thou* and has become a general-purpose form for both numbers, and the second person has also developed a substantial inventory of new forms expressing plural reference.

Cross-linguistically, the means by which plural personal pronouns are renewed are diverse: a new plural pronoun may be innovated outright, or it may be constructed by adding a plural marker to an existing pronoun—a strategy that is typologically widespread. In Jabugay, after the second person singular was replaced by the plural *nyurra*, a new second person pronoun *nyurraba* was constructed by adding the plural marker *-ba* [24]; in spoken Turkish, where *biz* is commonly used with singular reference, *biz* is re-pluralized by attaching the regular suffix *-ler*, yielding *bizler* [27]. In Old Chinese, after the first-person pronouns *wo* and *wu* developed singular-dominant uses, new plural forms were constructed by adding a locative noun or a word expressing plural meaning (e.g. *wu-chai*, *wo-men*) [28]. When an original plural pronoun is weakened in its plural meaning, the attachment of a plural marker to it becomes an important strategy for filling the gaps that have arisen in the paradigm; the reinforced new forms will continue to grammaticalize as their frequency of use increases.

6. Conclusion

This paper has traced the singularization of English second person plural forms and analyzed its internal, external, and typological motivations. Addressing the core research questions, the diachronic development of English demonstrates a complete functional renewal cycle: propelled by pragmatic politeness and socio-political shifts toward solidarity, *you* acquired singular reference and ousted *thou*, creating total number syncretism, which was subsequently followed by the emergence of reinforced forms (*you guys*, *y'all*) to disambiguate plural reference. Internally, this evolution is propelled by referential ambiguity ("2+X") and cognitive homonymy avoidance; externally, it is shaped by Norman French language contact and socio-pragmatic identity shifts.

However, several limitations should be noted. Methodologically, this paper relies primarily on qualitative discussions. Theoretically, emerging plural forms are still in flux, with their singular usage remaining sporadic and open to debate. Furthermore, from a typological perspective, counter-examples exist: while English singularizes by extending its own second person plural form, other languages generate honorific second person singular address by recruiting third-person pronouns for direct address, as in German (*sie*) and Italian (*lei*), or grammaticalizing nominal honorific titles in Spanish (*usted*). Future research utilizing contextualized historical spoken corpora will further clarify whether modern regional plurals will complete a full second iteration of this diachronic cycle.

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