The Stories of English

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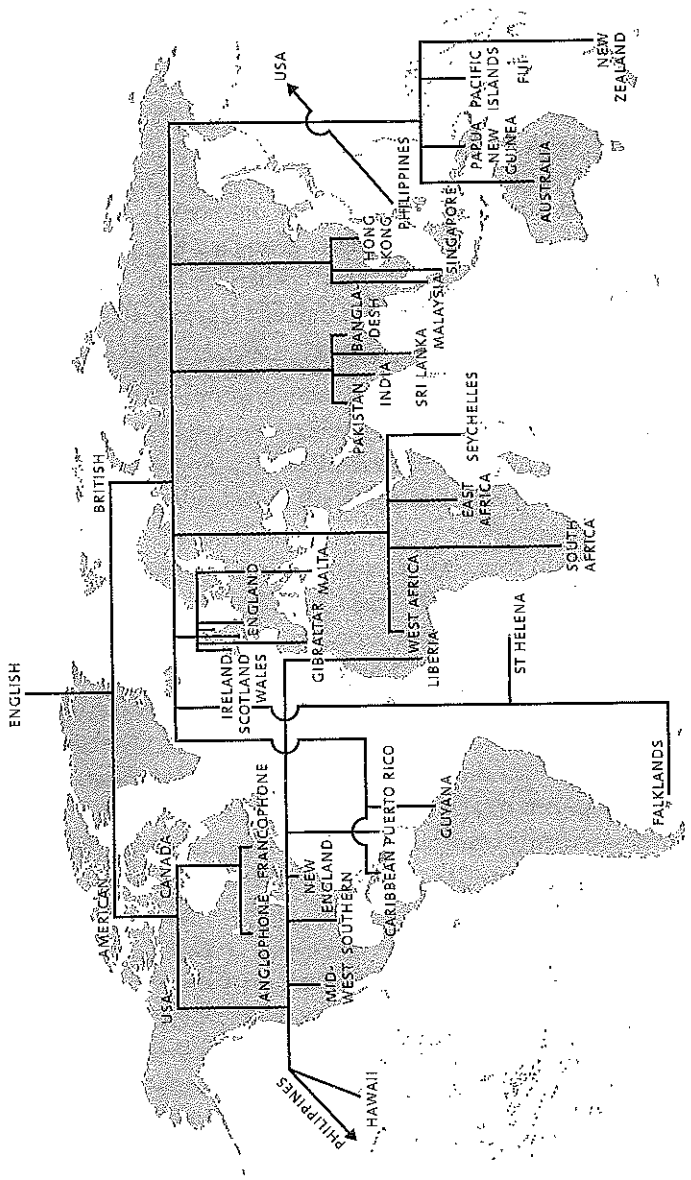
17.7 World English



A family-tree representation (after Peter Strevens) of the way English has spread around the world. It shows the influence of the two main branches of British and American English.

Interlude 17
Tracking a change: the case of *y'all*

It was in 1969, during my first visit to the United States, that I had my earliest face-to-face encounter with *y'all*. I was in Fort Worth, Texas, and went into a store to buy a Stetson hat for my son. The assistant greeted me with a *Howdy y'all* and a *What can I do for y'all*, and it was so unexpected that I actually looked round to see who else he was referring to, thinking that someone must have come into the store behind me. But I was the only one there. As I left, he said, *Y'all take care now*.

Outside I began listening seriously to the use of *y'all*. On the whole it did seem to be used when addressing more than one person, though sometimes the people were being viewed as a single body. And all kinds of people used it. A professor at the university used it when addressing her class of students, *I hope y'all managed to read my paper*. A cab driver addressed two of us in the back with a general *Where y'all going?* Most of the users were African-American; but many were white.

The use of a nonstandard second-person pronoun, as such, was not a new experience for me. I had spent my teenage years in Liverpool, where *youse* was a perfectly normal form. *Youse* also could be used for either singular or plural: *Can I give youse a lift?* might be said by a lorry-driver to either a group of hitch-hikers or a single hitch-hiker. And such forms were common in Ireland and Scotland, too, where both *youse* and *y'all* can be heard alongside *ye*, *yiz*, and others. *Youse* travelled to America that way, probably via Liverpool, and one strand in the history of *y'all* probably has an Irish origin.

Y'all first comes to notice in the southern states of the USA, chiefly among African-Americans around the turn of the nineteenth century, and rapidly established its presence among southern whites of all social classes (some of whom would also have been familiar – through immigration – with the analogous Irish usage). From there it became more widely encountered in American English, especially as black people moved into northern states after the Civil War, and its active use spread. Eventually it found its way, via novels and stories written in Southern dialect, and later through movies and television serials reflecting life in the US south, all over the world. I have

heard *y'all* used in the UK by a number of people, of various ages and ethnic backgrounds.

It is worth noting that dialects which make use of words like *y'all* and *youse* are in fact richer, in their possibilities of expression, than Standard English. This can come as a shock to those who cannot see beyond the standard variety: to realize that regional dialects often allow options that the standard never had or has lost. Early Modern English, of course, did have a more expressive second-person pronoun system (p. 307), using *thou* (for singular) and *ye* (for plural).

There are still fascinating puzzles surrounding American *y'all*. Did it originate exclusively among the southern black population, as many have suggested, or did it have earlier antecedents? Some have looked for its origins in local creoles, especially Gullah. Some think that its origins lie within early Scots or Irish usage in the USA – and indeed, it is interesting to note that those parts of the country where we find the widest range of *y'all* usages do seem to be where black and Celtic immigrant populations have long coexisted.

Doing research into *y'all* is not easy, because the written records cannot always be trusted. As it is a feature of colloquial English, it often would not have been written down: there would have been a tendency to write 'correctly', and substitute *you*. When it *was* written down, it might not have been written accurately – there would have been a tendency to write *you all*, or to omit the (often difficult to hear) final *'s* in *y'all's*. And we cannot even trust the feature when it *was* written down correctly: many writers saw *y'all* as a feature stereotyping black speech, and made their characters use it more than would happen in real life. We always have to be sensitive to the presence of parody and exaggeration in early writing – as we do today.

Y'all seems very straightforward, but there are in fact some quite complex linguistic factors governing its use, and only some of them are well understood. In pronunciation it is a monosyllabic variant of *you all*, rhyming with words like *call*; but in spelling it is quite variable. A 1993 study found it turning up in several spellings over the past 200 years, such as *you all*, *you-all*, *ya'll*, *yawl*, and *yo-all*.[26] And there are some subtle differences in usage. It tends to occur more often with certain verbs – *hope*, *think*, and *want* are notable. It can be used in most parts of the sentence where *you* and *your* can go, but there are some exceptions. Here are some examples taken from a corpus, with the grammatical function noted:

> What kind o' hair yawl want? [subject]
> Ah mean to carry y'all to Palatka. [object]
> How many of y'all wanna live to an old age? [after a preposition]

> I feel pretty good, y'all. [vocative]
> I passed y'all's house. [possessive]

In each of these cases, we could substitute the word *you* or *your*. But the parallel is not complete: *y'all's selves*, the equivalent to *yourselves*, is hardly ever heard.

There are also constraints, not fully understood, governing the way in which multiple instances of *y'all* turn up in a discourse. In Standard English it is perfectly possible to use *you-* forms several times in the same sentence:

> You will need your coat if you are going out.

But 'translating' this into *y'all* forms is not straightforward, as these examples show:

> Y'all are moving y'all's legs too much. [said by a swimming teacher]
> Y'all left your lights on.

Why did the first speaker use *y'all's* and the second use *your*?

One factor must be that *y'all* is much stronger in stress than *you*: it has a greater impact in a sentence. *You* is a word which can be reduced to just the consonant, as when people say *y'know*. We can't make this kind of reduction with *y'all*. For the same sort of reason, *y'all* is generally not heard at the very end of a sentence, as a tag question. We can often hear:

> Y'all come back now, won't you?

but only very rarely

> Y'all come back now, won't y'all?

So maybe the swimming teacher repeats *y'all* because he is wanting his listeners to pay serious attention to using their legs, and (unconsciously, of course) uses the stronger form to make his point. And maybe in the second instance, the speaker is making more of a routine observation. Or maybe it is that 'legs' have a closer notion of possession to a person than 'lights' (which strictly belong to cars) and therefore prompt the stronger form. These are the kind of hypotheses that linguists love to investigate.

There are other factors – pragmatic ones (p. 524). If *you* vs *y'all* doesn't convey a contrast of number (singular vs plural), then what does it convey? Speakers plainly have the choice of both in a sentence: *What can I do for y'all?* or *What can I do for you?* Why use the one and not the other? A plausible suggestion is that *y'all* is 'warmer', a sign of familiarity, friendliness, informality, and rapport, at least among young people. A 1970s study found it being commonly used by younger Virginians to convey this kind of warmth.[27]

However, many older people are still somewhat suspicious of it, and do not use it, perhaps associating it with past ethnic tensions, or finding it patronizing. As for my store assistant, I certainly felt that he was being 'customer-friendly'. I bought the Stetson. I wonder whether his farewell would have been *You take care now*, if I hadn't?

Chapter 18 Linguistic life goes on

Meanwhile, back at the (British) ranch . . . the rest of the language was continuing its development as if nothing had happened. During the nineteenth century, processes of linguistic change continued to operate, in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, and imperceptibly Early Modern English became Modern English. The variation which prescriptive scholars had attempted to eliminate at the end of the eighteenth century continued to manifest itself, and would eventually be reinforced as the new alternatives introduced into American English began to spread beyond the United States. And, as we shall see in the next chapter, regional and social variation continued to poke its head above the literary parapet in the form of an increasingly realistic dialect portrayal of contemporary life, most noticeably at first in the plays of Sheridan and his contemporaries and later in the nineteenth-century novel. The appearance of nonstandard English continued to receive a critical reaction from the Standard English pundits, but it was carrying on regardless. Or rather, people were carrying it on. And by the end of the nineteenth century it had received a fresh lease of life from novelists, Romantic poets, playwrights, Anglo-Saxon enthusiasts, dialectologists, and philologists.

Ongoing change

The ongoing processes of change affected all aspects of English structure. As always (p. 170), the most noticeable sign of change is in vocabulary, which in this period reflected the multiple social, scientific, technological, and economic developments that cumulatively comprised the Industrial Revolution. By 1800, Britain had become the world's leading industrial and trading nation. Its population of 5 million in 1700 had increased to over 9 million (in England and Wales) by the time of the first census in 1801. London was approaching its first million – 948,000 people – and other cities were rapidly expanding. Dublin, for example, had reached nearly 200,000 in 1801. During that century, no