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978-0-521-70374-1 - You Know What I Mean?: Words, Contexts and Communication

Ruth Wajnryb

Excerpt

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# NUTS AND BOLTS

It's usual to think that meaning is contained in words, the way sardines come in tins, or milk in bottles. Words are things you can look up in a dictionary. If you don't know what 'iconoclastic' means, a dictionary will help. But even though I do love dictionaries, I'm the first to admit that they'll only take you so far. Meanings also reside – perhaps even more essentially – in the grammar of the language, what some like to call its nuts and bolts. Here a dictionary is less helpful (try looking up 'it') and a grammar reference is needed, though such books tend to be *über*-unfriendly. This is a pity because grammar embeds meaning in centrally important ways. Take pronouns for instance – 'I', 'you', 'he', 'she', etc. – which furnish one small example of grammatical nuts and bolts. One function of pronouns is to impart a sense of ourselves and our relationship with others, a crucial element of the social function of language, arguably its most important. All the sections in this chapter show how pronouns manage the nexus of grammar and meaning.

## In the kingdom of we

Let's talk about 'we'. I mean the pronoun 'we', as in plural subject: 'you and me'. Not the 'wee' that explains the temperature of the paddling pool. Nor the endearing 'wee' that Scots are wont to add to nouns: 'Come on in for a wee moment and have a wee cup of tea.'

As a pronoun, 'we' stands in for any plural subject (either previously named, or implicit) to give the first person plural perspective. Here's Napoleon to his minders, about himself and Josephine: 'We're staying in tonight so you boys can have the night off.'

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And here's Winston Churchill rallying a nation to war: 'We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.'

And here's George W. Bush immediately after September 11 speaking for 250 million Americans: 'We will not rest until their deaths are avenged.'

So 'we', like any pronoun, is a handy little device, saving one from clumsily having to repeat the subject; and at the same time holding together, into a cohesive whole, a larger text that might otherwise crumble away.

Despite its diminutive stature, 'we' has a range of uses. There is the now-almost-obsolete 'royal we', once used by a single royal person to refer to herself – for instance Queen Victoria's 'We are not interested in the possibilities of defeat.' The sense here is that a royal personage would compromise her dignity by referring to herself in the naked 'I'. Also, as the throne is larger than the singularity of the person currently in office, 'we' conveys the weight of tradition. While young Wills or Harry Windsor are far removed from 'we' behaviour, I suspect Prince Charles, especially when miffed, might not be beyond the old fallback.

Nor is the 'royal we' limited to royalty. Many a school principal has aped it – 'We are not amused' – in punitive contexts. Here too, plurality conveys the force of authority of those who hold the reins of power.

There's the so-called 'editorial we'. This term is reserved for a single speaker or writer who is prompted to eschew the singular 'I' to avoid the charge of egotism. In academe, the use of 'I' is discouraged as part of the more general pursuit of an impersonal tone. Thus a lecturer might say, 'As we [not 'I'] showed a moment ago.' Overused, of course, avoiding 'I' warrants the charge of pomposity. Funnily enough, the term 'editorial we' is not applied to the fully justified use of 'we' which refers to the consensus of a collective body, such as a committee or editorial board – for example, a newspaper editorial that includes 'we deplore the current wave of terrorism'.

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Sometimes ‘we’ seeks to avoid a separation of self and reader/audience. Such a ‘we’ can be very serviceable when there is a desire to identify the speaker/writer and listener/reader in a joint enterprise. Compare ‘We [or ‘Let’s’] now turn to a different problem’ with ‘You now turn to a different problem.’ Counsellors of various persuasions use this ‘we’ to gently manage and steer their discourse. Sometimes ‘we’ (standing for ‘you’) can serve as encouragement: ‘We should soon start thinking about ways in which we might end the marriage.’ At other times, depending on tone, context and power relations, the intention approximates cajolery: ‘We can do better than that, can’t we?’ Or condescension masquerading as forced conviviality – ‘And how are we feeling today?’ – a form much beloved in nursing homes and among those who wait on tables.

In a recent critique of Australian TV, gardening show *Burke’s Backyard* was commended for establishing the genre of ‘we-dom’. This, I infer, is the Kingdom of We, where the backyard, as the great Australian leveller, renders irrelevant all other distinctions – age, gender, social class, suburb, sexual preference. Everything is happily subordinated to the backyard altar.

Finally, there’s the ‘universal we’ – this establishes a lofty solidarity across a shared humanity. Never better illustrated than in these lines of T. S. Eliot’s from ‘Little Gidding’:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

## The Queen’s we

The Queen’s 2001 Christmas Message (QCM) contained thirty instances of first person plural pronouns (‘we’, ‘us’, ‘our’), only five first person singulars (‘I’, ‘my’) and four second person pronouns (‘you’, ‘your’). This makes for a maximum of solidarity (usness) and a minimum of distance (them-and-usness).

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Yes, I confess, I was counting. A closet QCM aficionado, I watch, record, re-watch, analyse and, yes, I count. In uncertain times, the QCM offers great dollops of comfort. There's a predictability in the cadences, sequence, inclusions and exclusions, dress, colours, hats, horses, corgis, medals, photography, palaces, the studied casualness of some shots, the frozen poise of others, and, most particularly, the language.

From Christmas to Christmas not much changes in the QCM. It's a ten-minute broadcast from Buckingham Palace, sandwiched between a bit of pomp, ceremony and anthem at start and end. Indeed, so very distinctive is the text-type of the QCM that if you stumbled across one while blindfolded in the Sudanese desert, you'd still recognise it: 'Ah, the Queen's Xmas Message', you'd say, wiping some sand from your eyes, 'fancy running into it out here!'

Within moments of the opening, you're being lulled into a hypnotically peaceful, fairyland sensibility. Ho hum, here we are, the Queen and me, sharing this day, again. So little separates us. Oceans, accents, belief systems, socioeconomic status. Nothing comes between. For these brief minutes, we can forget that she lives in a palace or three, the richest woman in the world, with the power to choose how much tax to pay. Trifling matters. What really counts is what we share.

Enter the 'we's. 'We' is a marvellous device for accentuating our common humanity. Or for pretending there is some, when there plainly isn't. 'We' is small and inconspicuous and slips in innocuously. It spreads itself around disguised as 'us' or 'our'. It's subliminal. Without knowing why, we feel warm, gooey. It's the pronominal counterpart to 'Kumbaya'.

'We' also serves by being slippery. The Queen's 'we' can mean lots of things, many things at the same time, some things and not others, different things to different people. But precisely because it is slippery, pinning down the meaning is not easy.

The Queen's 'we' sometimes means 'British' ('our farmers and rural communities'). Sometimes 'we Christian Britons' ('we look to

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the Church to bring us together'). Sometimes 'we of any faith' ('so many of us, whatever our religion, need our faith more than ever'). Sometimes it means 'Britons as distinct from (mostly) Americans' ('we in this country have tried to bring comfort to all those who were bereaved'). But mostly it embraces the widest possible agency – 'ordinary common humanity' ('we all have something to learn from one another').

The one thing 'we' does *not* mean in this QCM is 'I' – which rather ironically, and as already mentioned, is a circumstance known as 'the royal we'. Nor does the Queen's 'we' include Prince Philip in any specific way other than as part of the throbbing humanity to which we must presume he belongs. And it doesn't refer to the Windsors per se, that particular group of special folk whose antics the Queen is seasonally at pains to sanitise.

Supporting 'we' in the QCM is the usual collection of anodyne abstract nouns. They too slip in unremarkably, meaning whatever you want them to mean – hardship, anxiety, wanton acts, grief, evil, commemoration, tribute, horror, experience, support, hope, distress, comfort. All motherhood words. Hypnotically, we nod in agreement. Just as we embrace the Queen's themes of community and belonging. No contest. It's inoffensively platitudinous and effectively so.

But be not beguiled. There's a PR dimension at work, disguised under the veneer of humanity and stability. In speaking out against excesses ('wanton acts of...terror') the Queen implicitly offers the strength and decency of the *status quo* as bulwark – a message reinforced by her syntax. She balances 'the storms and droughts' with 'epidemics and famine.' Natural disasters are balanced with man-made ones. There are 'times of tragedy' alongside 'occasions of celebration'. It's almost Ecclesiastical, in the literal sense.

Clichés get in on the balancing act. We 'enjoy moments of great happiness' and 'suffer times of profound sadness'. And just when we're lulled into a compliant state of non-contest, the simple plea is made for 'a fair and ordered society'. In this way, slippery 'we' blurs the boundaries between Queen/throne/monarchy/goodness/truth.

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By the end, we have Queen & Co. lined up on the side of common decency.

The final scene – Queen on doorstep, *mit* corgis, receiving passing carollers' good wishes – clinches the just-like-any-of-us myth. Nice.

## Flexible you

A piece of advice: if you must have a cross-cultural marriage, I suggest you don't blend two languages with different pronoun systems. Believe me when I say that this can capsize even the best of intentions, overturn goodwill, and leave shattered pieces of metaphorical wedding cake all over the floor.

I'm thinking in particular of mixing a T/V (*tu/vous*) language with a non-T/V one. A T/V language (like French, German, Italian, Spanish) allows you the flexibility of differentiating in your choice of 'you' to show friendly familiarity or respectful deference, depending on whether you're patting your dog or your mother-in-law. A non-T/V language (like English) is one where 'you' covers everything from familial and friendly, to formal, from singular to plural. Dogs and mothers-in-law get lumped together, for better or for worse.

Speakers of a T/V language are wont to criticise English for the bluntness of its all-purpose 'you'. Now I can see why they might come to this conclusion. However, what they fail to appreciate is that our little 'you' is an amazingly flexible and context-sensitive creature with subtleties and nuances oft overlooked. Far from being gross, overworked, unrefined, impoverished and under-differentiated, 'you' is subtle, supple, versatile. In short, 'you' sports range, scope and richness. If this little pronoun were a dancer, it would do classical square-toe ballet, the waltz, 'The Pride of Erin', the foxtrot, Latin salsa, funk and the Argentine tango.

Like a traditional Japanese garden, 'you' has the elegance of the minimally bare. It is confident that context will always fill out the semantic corners and render it unambiguous. Look at a person and use 'you' and s/he will know who you mean. Speak to a room of

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'you's and spread your eye contact around the room, they'll all know you mean all of them.

'You' can mean you-and-other-people-in-your-circumstance. This is impersonal but not as distantly snotty as 'one'. Perfect for the commercial relationship calling for pseudo-formality tempered by mock-friendliness. You're at the travel agent's, wanting to know how to get to Laos: 'Well, you could fly to Bangkok and travel a bit around the country. Then you could take a train across the border, or if you wanted to get there faster, you could fly direct from Bangkok.' Here 'you' locates the other as separate from the speaker but not distant or unreachable. Politicians are fond of this 'you', using it to engender and invest a personal touch: 'This election is about security and stability. You want to know that you're safe and your savings are safe.'

There's another 'you' that epitomises 'otherness'. Its range of reference is 'people over there' or People Not Like Us. You're talking about the restaurants that dump huge quantities of uneaten food and over-orders in garbage bins at the end of the night: 'You'd think they could spare a thought for the hungry and homeless.'

And between these poles of friendly people-like-you and distancing people-not-like-you is 'neutral you'. The water board wants to tell me about social responsibility: 'If you want to save water, there are some simple steps you can follow.' This is personal but neutral: 'you' is placed in the subject position, giving it agency and standing.

But when we move 'you' to the object (or Kitchener) position ('Your country needs you'), we have something closer to the 'in-your-face you', also known as 'New York you'. One New Yorker says to another, 'What's the time please?' The other retorts with, 'Do I wear a watch for you?'

But if abrasion is what you seek to avoid, you're likely to insert any number of 'you's through the 'you know' device. This 'you' is massively exploited in social interactions where dialogue is co-constructed and talking turns are shared about equitably. Like the 'eh?' you hear in regional Australia and in the speech of some New Zealanders, there's a lubricating function designed to blur the

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borders between 'I', 'we', 'you' and people-in-general. It's akin to the far more formal 'nostalgic you' that is heard in statements like this: 'We lived in the country when I was growing up. You'd wake with the birds early each morning. The rooster would be your alarm clock.'

'You' can hold its own among the best. So it's quite pointless worrying about whom the bell tolls for. It tolls for thee.

## Avoiding you

It was in the Ladies' in an office block leased mostly to the professional class – doctors, lawyers, pathologists, accountants, financial advisers and other people like that. Spotless premises. Sparkling surfaces. Pristine. Lots of glass and metal. In all, a studied, elegant minimalism. A controlled undecoration. Sometimes less is definitely more.

It was in the cubicle, above the cistern, that I saw the sign. It said: 'There's a toilet brush next to the bowl in case it is needed.'

A masterpiece, I thought; a veritable study in linguistic politeness. I was immediately struck by how much energy had been invested in the avoidance of 'you'.

And no wonder. Consider any one of a multitude of nasty inferences that would flow from wording like this: 'If you dirty the bowl, you should/could/must use the brush.' Unpacking these inferences is not a nice business, but here we go. You're the type to dirty bowls. You're the type to fail to clean up after yourself. At the very least, you're the type to need reminding. We suspect you might also have dirty inside-collars, old socks, belly button fluff, and ragged toenails. We don't like your type in this building, but if you must be here, try to play by the rules.

The way to circumvent these nasty inferences is to lose the 'you'. Enter a construction known in some circles as 'the existential "there"' (as in 'there's a toilet brush next to the bowl'). It is sometimes called 'the dummy subject', but I for one find this a

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disparaging label for what can be an extremely useful device. In our current example, the existential ‘there’ serves the larger goal of you-avoidance by effectively enabling a shift of focus from nastily constructed ‘you’ to calm, impassive, inert, waiting-on-the-sidelines toilet brush.

And isn’t there something innocuous and unblaming about the fact that the toilet brush is mentioned only insofar as its proximity to the toilet is concerned? This controlled casualness – ‘next to the toilet’ – is disingenuous. It’s there to provoke an assurance of anonymity. Just between me and you and the goalpost, or me and you and the toilet brush ... Shhh! No one will know. Our brush is the very soul of discretion.

The feat of you-avoidance is achieved through an amalgam of grammatical collusion. ‘There’, for instance, is far from being on its ownsome. It has some valuable help. Take the cleverly loaded conjunctive device ‘in case’. This construction is nothing if not indeterminate. ‘When’ would have been a matter of surety, so too ‘whenever’, while ‘if’ would have offered a theoretical provision of condition. But ‘in case’ bespeaks the off-chance. There’s nothing definite or inevitable or even likely about ‘in case’. No logical sequence of events, no predetermined segues. Just a vague possibility, a circumstance that might happen to anyone. It’s a ‘with impunity’ kind of thing.

And notice the passive ‘in case it is needed’. If ‘in case’ serves to distance the possibility of a nasty occurrence to some remote, unlikely eventuality, the passive is even more effective in depersonalising the circumstance. It allows the sign not to say ‘in case you need it’, which, in the context of this painstaking crafting of you-avoidance, would be awfully in-your-face.

Indeed, in the toolkit of strategies for avoiding ‘you’, the passive construction must rank at or near the top. This is because, unlike the active form (‘you need the toilet brush’), where the subject/agent of the verb is one of the obligatory elements in the sentence, in a passive construction the subject/agent can be conveniently sidestepped – even deleted.

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The passive works largely through inference. We know that ‘is needed’ assumes the existence of a phrase of agency (‘by you’), but it doesn’t need spelling out. Indeed, from a stylistic point of view, the ‘by you’ is much more elegant as an omitted-but-understood component, rather than a cumbersome and unnecessary tack-on. In our case of oopsy toilet occurrences, the passive serves the goal of you-avoidance supremely well. Exit ‘you’, and all its nasty accoutrements.

There’s no doubt that sometimes the effort of avoiding ‘you’ is an exercise in walking on eggshells – a kind of grammatical callisthenics. Fortunately for all of us ‘you’s out there, the language scores high in flexibility and fitness.

## Youse

Language serves two masters – Identity and Intelligibility. Sometimes we use it to highlight who we want the world to think we are. Sometimes it’s more about reaching out to someone else. Mostly, Identity and Intelligibility are compatible. But occasionally there’s a collision of goals.

The case of the second person pronoun ‘youse’ (or ‘yous’) is just such an instance where, often, the advantage of functionality is sacrificed to protect our image of ourselves. In other words, we’d rather risk momentary ambiguity than tamper with our public face.

‘Youse’ is a word that the self-appointed custodians of English love to hate. And not only literary types. Apparently, research into small businesses uncovered the fact that many people would withdraw their custom if staff with the ‘youse’ habit spoke to them. It just ‘clangs’, they said. So too does ‘hi guys’, ‘yep’, ‘nah’, ‘like’, ‘ain’t’ and ‘we haven’t got none’.

I’ve sat across a desk from a refined, dictionary marketing man as he shuddered in horror while recounting his nephew’s occasional use of ‘youse’. He looked visibly pained at the thought of this young boy’s bringing such disgrace to the family. I tried to tease out the