

### Giving up “You Guys”?

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Saying “you guys” is no longer cool, it appears. Some of the US Colleges, such as the University of Wisconsin – River Falls have advised their students not to use the phrase. Similar is the case with Clark University and some campuses of Rutgers where there is a call for checking ones` language. “You guys” is increasingly considered as a subtle insult termed “micro-aggression”. Several companies have taken this up in their internal workshops and induction programs for hygiene in language, especially when dealing with customers.

“You guys” has become a pervasive catch-phrase even if a simple “you” were to suffice. However, not all are comfortable being addressed as “guys”. First, it is gender-insensitive generalising and equalising all as masculine. So, if you have women in the group you are addressing as “you guys”, you would be crossing the line even if some were to say that it is inclusive enough. It is not. As Gayle McDowell perceptively pointed out in an online debate, you will never say “I talked to a few guys at the mothers` group” or “We need to hire some new guys as nurses” or “I saw this guy driving and she was out of control”.

Second, the phrase poses problems in conversations that are expected to be formal. Linda Bollinger, founder of Boardroom Bound in the US is cited as stating that the issue at stake is respect and when addressed that manner she experiences disrespect to her age and business status. “You guys” is at best considered informal, plebeian and demonstrably egalitarian in relationships. So, it would certainly be unhelpful if someone were to use it in a Boardroom, meetings with investors or customers – even if celebrities like Oprah use it on a TV show! Reportedly, a good proposal for strategic alliance failed when the new-fangled proposer addressed a traditional Board headed by a patriarch “you guys”.

Third, it could be offensive in cultures that continue to have a plural term to address elders and those that deserve respect like in much of Asia. It is amusing to watch children from English medium schools awkwardly using the phrase “you guys” in English sentences along with the respectful terms in their mother tongues during the same conversation. To the hyper-sensitive in these cultures, the expression is not merely a “micro-aggression” but appears closer to swearing.

Going by the history, perhaps it actually is berating. Etymologists would say that “Guy” is an eponym coming from Guy Fawkes` gun plot of 5<sup>th</sup> November 1605 in Great Britain. Guy Fawkes Night or Day is celebrated with effigies representing Guy Fawkes as well as other “bad” people. The effigies are made and dressed grotesquely and later ceremoniously burnt.

These effigies were called “guys” – they perhaps represent grotesque appearance as well as some rebellious spirit.

The popularisation of the phrase reportedly emanated from the North-eastern region of the US spreading through many parts of the country and even replacing much of Southerners’ “y’all” or “you all”. A Harvard dialect survey reveals that about 41% of the respondents in the US used “you guys” to address two or more people while “y’all” was preferred by 17% and “you all” by 12%. The simpler and adequate expression “you” was used by about 23%.

Is there an underlying yearning for a second-person plural pronoun in the usage of “you guys”? Perhaps – bemoaning the loss of *thou*, *thee* and *thine* of earlier centuries of Great Britain which faded away with the rise of the egalitarian “you”. But only that “you guys” is limited to plural contexts and will not signify the respect and formality associated with the old terms. Contrary to the general tide of the plural “you guys”, many in France have noted the slow disappearance of *Vous* in favour of *tu* and there are calls for preserving the respectful *Vous*. Writing in the *Gaurdian*, Agnes Poirier had said he was appalled by Nicolas Sarkozy addressing everyone *tu* – and called for maintaining that distinction. “*Vous* is not only a sign of respect and politeness towards an older person or a stranger; it puts a healthy and adult distance between two individuals...”

Many Spanish speakers are also reportedly struggling with “you guys” though they have an equivalent *vosotros* among five different ways of saying “you”. As pointed out in a Column from Mexico City in the *Economist*, some believe “you guys” will become standard in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But many others hope it will fizzle out soon when the negative connotation is realised especially with the notable push from educational institutions and companies.

In the end, it is an individual choice as demonstrated by Australian Man of the Year 2016, Ex-Army Chief David Morrison, who has given up the phrase and has been actively campaigning against it – essentially a choice between giving up on “you guys” and giving up “you guys”.

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