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‘Y’all,’: page 1

“one of the most ridiculous of all the Southernisms.”

That perception has persisted. Like the Southern dialect in general, the use of “y’all” has often been seen as vulgar, low-class, uncultured and uneducated. As someone noted in Urban Dictionary, “Whoever uses [y’all] sounds like a hillbilly redneck.”

In a more recent New York Times essay, writer Maud Newton said that she associated the word with her father, who “defended slavery, demanded the subservience of women and adhered to ‘spare the rod and spoil the child.’” He also demanded that his children say “y’all” rather than “you guys.” She grew up hating the word.

At a time when many Americans are calling for the removal of Confederate monuments and opposing the Lost Cause mythology, “y’all,” with its Southern overtones, might make some people uncomfortable – a misguided reaction, perhaps, but one that has been felt by both those who hear it and those who say it.

Imagine ‘y’all’ with a British accent

The word has not always had such negative connotations.

The etymology of “y’all” is murky. Some linguists trace it back to the Scots-Irish phrase “ye aw”; others suggest an African American origin, perhaps from the Igbo word for “you” brought over by Nigerian-born slaves. According to the “Oxford English Dictionary,” the word first appeared in print in 1856, and all of its examples are sources connected to the American South. Michael Montgomery, a noted linguist, said that early use of the word “is unknown in the British Isles.”

But recently I used some of the new digital literary databases to search for older uses of the word, and I found over a dozen examples. They were all in dramatic or poetic works dating back to the 17th century and published in London. The earliest “y’all” that I uncovered was in William Lisle’s “The Faïre Æthiopian,” published in 1631 – “and this y’all know is true.”

My examples push “y’all” back 225 years before the citation in the “Oxford English Dictionary,” and they show that the word appeared first in England rather than the United States.

I think it’s important to point out that it originated in a more formal context than what’s commonly assumed.

There are none of the class or cultural connotations of the later American examples.

I should also note that there is almost a centurylong gap between the last known usage of this British version of “y’all” and the first known usage of the American version. Scholars may well decide that these versions of “y’all” are essentially two different words.

Still, there it is, in an English poem written in 1631. ‘Y’all means all’

Ironically, at the same time that some people have shied away from using “y’all,” the word seems to have grown in popularity. An article on exactly this topic, published in the Journal of English Linguistics in 2000, was titled “The Nationalization of a Southernism”; based on scientific polling, the authors suggested that “y’all” will soon be seen as an American, rather than Southern, word.

There might be several reasons for this. One is that African American use of the word in music and other forms of popular culture has made it more familiar – and, therefore, acceptable – to those who didn’t grow up with it.

Second, “you guys,” another common alternative for the second-person plural pronoun, is losing support because of its sexist connotations. Are females included in you guys? How about those who identify as nonbinary?

Maud Newton eventually came to embrace “y’all.” When she moved to Tallahassee, Florida, after law school, she found that “in grocery stores and coffee shops, on the street and in the library, everyone – Black and white, queer and straight, working-class and wealthy – used y’all, and soon I did, too.”

“Y’all means all” – that’s a wonderful phrase that seems to be popping up everywhere, from T-shirts and book titles to memes and music. A song written by Miranda Lambert for Netflix’s “Queer Eye” beautifully captures the spirit of the phrase:

You can be born in Tyler, Texas,
Raised with the Bible Belt;
If you’re torn between the Y’s and X’s,
You ain’t gotta play with the hand you’re dealt ...
Honey, y’all means all.
(Source: The CONVERSATION)

COMMENTARY

A man worthy of a second chance



By Almeer Nance

When I learned about the Tennessee Supreme Court decision in the Tyshon Booker case, I felt a range of emotion--joy, hope, optimism and anxiety.

I’ve spent the past 26 years of my life beneath the heavy burden of a 51 year plus prison sentence. This Supreme Court decision could have a huge influence on my life.

Tennessee sentences juveniles convicted of felony murder to the longest mandatory sentence in the country.

I would know, I was 16 years old when I took part in a robbery that ended a young man’s life in Knoxville.

Even though I wasn’t the one who pulled the trigger, I’ve spent a quarter century thinking about the family who lost their loved one.

The Tennessee Supreme Court decided on Friday that sentencing teenagers to a life behind bars violates the 8th Amendment of the US Constitution.

It’s cruel and unusual not to consider age when holding them accountable for taking part in a homicide.

I believe at the core of this issue is the fact that teenagers are very different people than who we are in our 40’s. I know that I am a different person now--focusing on my education, taking trade classes and victims impact counseling.

I’ve spent all of my 20’s and all of my 30’s in prison. I should be eligible to show that I can be a contributing member of society. I can make this world, this state, my community a better place. I can be there for my family members who need me. My mom has been drug free for 20 years now; she is proof that people can change. Hope-