

The Nationalization of a Southernism

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You-all and *yall* may not be the most important features of Southern American English (SAE), but they are surely the two that have provoked the most discussion. Linguists have debated the origins of these forms (e.g., Boock 1933; Long 1943; Shewmake 1938; Smith 1920; Wilson 1960), their possible use as singulars (e.g., Richardson 1984; Tillery and Bailey 1998), and even their relationship to one another (Montgomery 1992). In fact, about the only thing that linguists writing on *you-all* and *yall* have agreed on is that these forms are largely restricted to SAE and related African American varieties.

Our research over the past four years, however, suggests that even this one point of agreement may be open to question. Our surveys of acknowledgments of the use of *you-all* and *yall* in the United States indicate that both of these forms (and especially the latter) are spreading rapidly outside of the South, and our observations of their use in Las Vegas suggest that they are used in other areas of the country in much the same way that they are used in the South. If the spread of *you-all* and *yall* outside the South continues, they will soon simply become Americanisms, and even now, the extent to which they are still just “Southern” is unclear.

The primary data for this study come from responses to questions that we put on the fall 1994 and fall 1996 Southern Focus Polls (SFP). SFP is an omnibus telephone poll conducted twice a year by the Institute for Research in Social Science at the University of North Carolina. It is particularly useful for studying issues related to the American South because it oversamples Southerners: each poll includes interviews with some 800 Southerners (for a confidence interval of $\pm 3.5\%$) and some 400 non-Southerners (for a confidence interval of $\pm 5\%$). SFP uses a proportionate stratified random sample, with the state serving as the stratification variable in se-



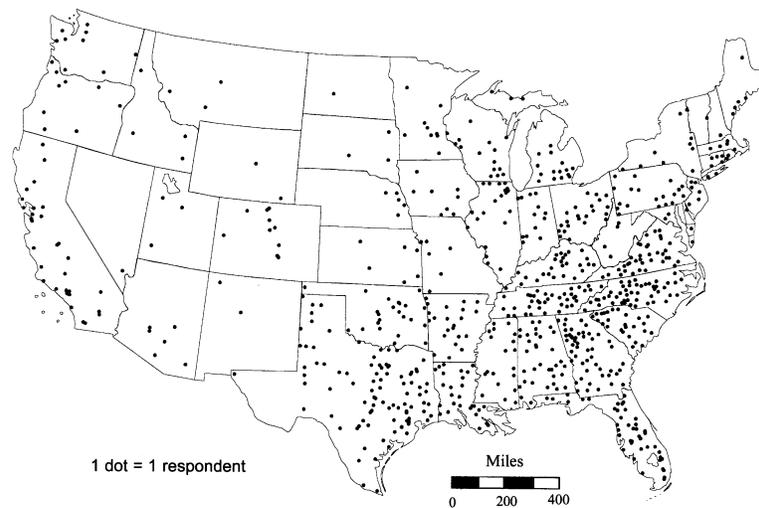


Figure 1: Location of Respondents to the Southern Focus Poll, Fall 1994.

lecting telephone households for interviews. Within each household, SFP interviews the person older than age 18 who will have the next birthday. Figures 1 and 2 show the distribution of the respondents to the fall 1994 and fall 1996 SFPs, respectively.¹

Among the questions we placed on the fall 1994 SFP was one asking respondents how often they would use the Southern expression *yall*: very often, sometimes, only occasionally, or never. On the fall 1996 poll, SFP respondents were asked whether they used *you-all* or *yall* most often. They could reply with (1) *you-all*, (2) *yall*, (3) never use either, or (4) use both about the same.² SFP interviewers wrote down the responses as they occurred; unlike our Survey of Oklahoma Dialects (see Bailey, Tillery, and Wikle 1997), this survey was not tape-recorded.

These questions, of course, elicit respondents' self-reports about their linguistic behavior rather than the behavior itself. Both dialectologists and sociolinguists have traditionally been reluctant to give much credence to linguistic self-reports, assuming that norms of correctness and the influence of the speech of the interviewer limit their validity. Our research in Texas and Oklahoma, however, demonstrates that for some types of features, self-reports may provide a better indication of regional and social distributions than do observations of behavior. Bailey, Wikle, and Tillery (1997) compared self-reports of *might could* and *fixin to* in a Grammatical Investigation of Texas Speech (GRITS) with observations of their occurrence in

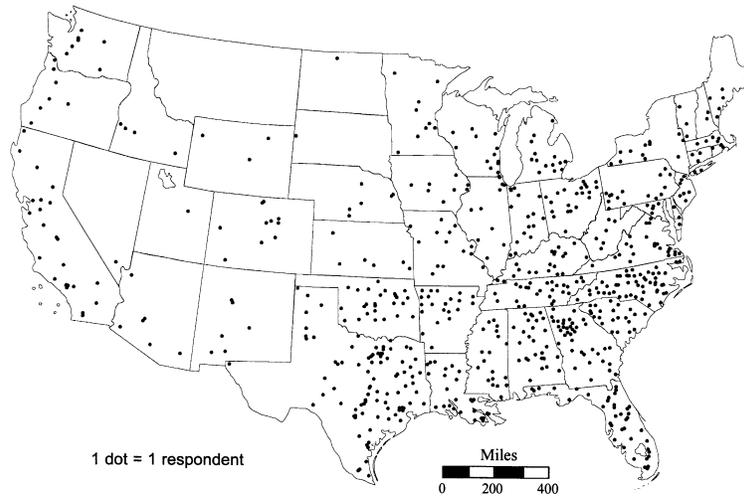


Figure 2: Location of Respondents to the Southern Focus Poll, Fall 1996.

the Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States (LAGS) and found that the percentage of respondents in GRITS who acknowledge using the forms is significantly higher than the percentage who actually use them in their LAGS interviews. In fact, when LAGS results are compared to the results from native Texans in GRITS (the group most comparable to LAGS informants), the rate of acknowledgment in GRITS is more than twice as high as the rate of use in LAGS for *might could* (60.5 to 28.2 percent) and nearly twice as high for *fixin to* (86.1 to 45.6 percent). Based on evidence like this, Bailey, Wikle, and Tillery concluded that for certain kinds of linguistic features (i.e., those that are difficult to elicit and carry only mild social stigma), self-reports are probably better for determining distributions in a population than observations of behavior are.³ We would contend that the self-reports for *you-all* and *yall* fall into this category; the comparisons of SFP data with LAGS data below provide additional support for our contentions.

Table 1 summarizes the data on *you-all* and *yall* in the fall 1994 and fall 1996 SFPs and also provides data from LAGS for comparison.⁴ The fact that eight of ten Southerners acknowledge using (or, in the case of LAGS, actually use) either *you-all* or *yall* in all three samples is not surprising. After all, these two forms are perhaps the most widely recognized features of SAE and have been the object of scholarly debate for a century.⁵ The closeness of the results is somewhat surprising, however, because of the methodological differences among the samples. LAGS and

TABLE 1

Distribution of *You-all/Yall* in Three Surveys (number and percentage of respondents in each survey who acknowledge using [or in LAGS use] *you-all*, *yall*, or both)

Survey Sample	SFP 94, Southern	SFP 94, Non-Southern	SFP 96, Southern	SFP 96, Non-Southern	LAGS
Would use					
Number	738	201	657	206	756
Percentage	78.68	43.51	83.91	48.82	82.71
Would not use					
Number	200	261	126	216	158
Percentage	21.32	56.49	16.09	51.18	17.28
Total	938	461	783	422	914

NOTE: SFP = Southern Focus Poll; LAGS = Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States.

SFP, for instance, do not survey exactly the same populations. LAGS surveys only native Southerners, most of whom have deep roots in their local communities. The survey population in SFP, on the other hand, includes all residents of the South older than 18 years. Even the two SFPs are not identical in their methods because the questions on *you-all/yall* differ. The fall 1994 SFP asks only if respondents use *yall*; the 1996 poll asks respondents whether they use *you-all*, *yall*, both, or neither. The addition of *you-all* to the question in 1996 seems to have affected the results at least to some extent, as the higher rate of acknowledgments in that poll suggests. Furthermore, as pointed out above, LAGS records actual behavior, while SFP records self-reports. In light of the methodological differences among the surveys, the convergence of results from them gives us confidence in the inferences we make based on SFP. The reorganization of the data in Table 1 into Figure 3 illustrates just how similar the results from these surveys are.

What is most remarkable about Table 1 and Figure 3, though, is not the convergence of results but rather the high percentage of non-Southerners who acknowledge using *you-all* and *yall* in the two SFPs. In both SFPs, more than 40 percent of the non-Southerners acknowledge using these forms. The fact that SAE “is clearly a variety with negative prestige” and “Northern speakers are prejudiced against [it] even along affective lines” (Preston 1997, 349) makes these results particularly surprising. It is tempting to view them as spurious or as artifacts of the methods, but the close correlation between the two surveys and the close correlation between the SFP Southern samples and LAGS suggest that the results are reliable; that is, they reflect actual distributions in the target population. The results are probably valid too. If they were not, we would expect them to be the opposite of what they are: the standard objection to self-reports is that they underreport stigmatized usage, not that they overreport it. We can only conclude, then, that *you-all* and *yall* are used extensively outside of the South—in spite of the clearly documented negative prestige

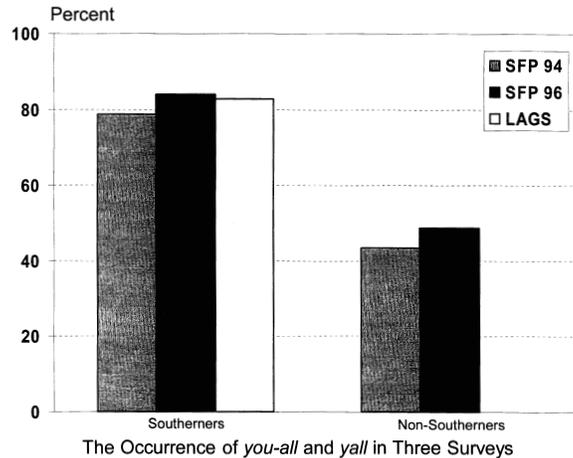


Figure 3: The Occurrence of *you-all* and *yall* in Three Surveys.

NOTE: Percentage of respondents who acknowledge *you-all* and/or *yall* in the fall 1994 and fall 1996 Southern Focus Polls and percentage of Linguistic Atlas of Gulf States (LAGS) informants who use either or both.

that SAE has in other regions of the United States.⁶ A closer look at the distribution of these forms in the non-Southern sample sheds some light on the factors that constrain or motivate their use.

To this point, we have treated *you-all* and *yall* as if they were variants of the same form and as if their social and spatial distributions did not differ in significant ways. In fact, the fall 1994 SFP asked only about *yall*. The results from the fall 1996 SFP, however, suggest that this is not the case, and for this reason we focus on the results of the fall 1996 SFP in the remainder of this article.

Most of the 48.82 percent of the non-Southern respondents in the fall 1996 SFP who acknowledge using one of these forms prefer *you-all* (56.31 percent), but the preference varies greatly by age, as Figure 4 shows (as we point out below, these age differences are statistically significant). *You-all* is by far the preferred form among the oldest respondents (only 6.78 percent prefer *yall*), and it is preferred slightly by the two middle-age groups. Among the youngest group, however, *yall* is clearly the preferred form (42.68 percent acknowledge using it). In fact, the greater rate of *yall* acknowledgments accounts almost entirely for the disparity between the youngest and the other three age groups in *you-all/yall* usage.

The apparent time distributions in Figure 4 suggest that *you-all* and *yall* are expanding outside the South, but it seems clear from the apparent time data that the expansion of the former began much earlier than the latter and that the diffusion of *yall* has gained new momentum over the past quarter century. This expansion of *yall*

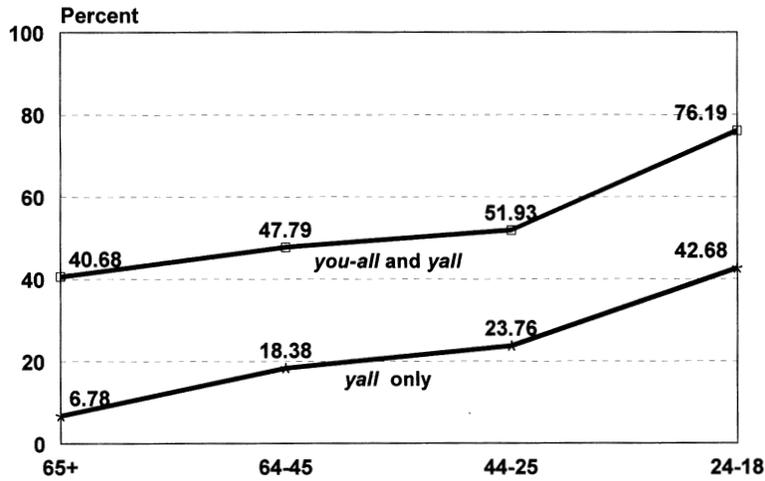


Figure 4: *You-all* and *Yall* outside the South.
 NOTE: Percentage of respondents by age group who acknowledge *you-all* and *yall* in the fall 1996 Southern Focus Poll non-Southern sample.

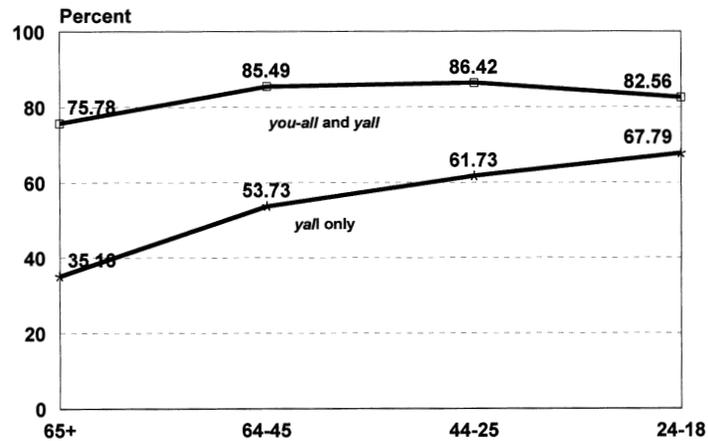


Figure 5: *You-all* and *Yall* in the South.
 NOTE: Percentage of respondents by age group who acknowledge *you-all* and *yall* in the fall 1996 Southern sample.

outside the South follows a similar pattern of expansion in the South, as Figures 5 and 6, which provide apparent time data for the fall 1996 SFP Southern sample and from LAGS, demonstrate. The Southern data differ from the non-Southern sample in that they show an earlier expansion of *yall*, something we should expect since

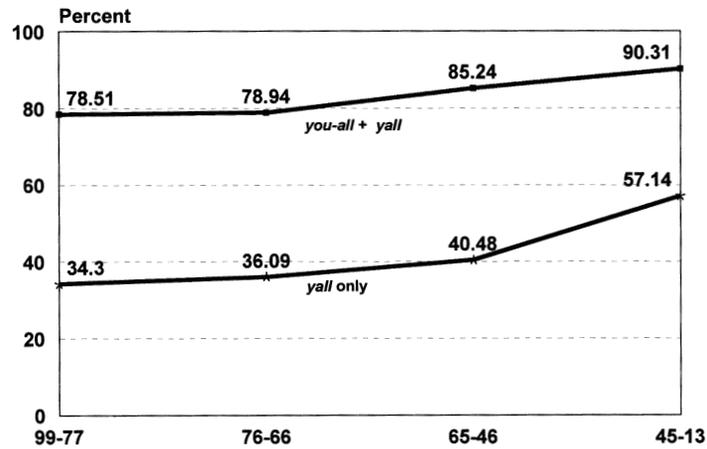


Figure 6: *You-all* and *Yall* in Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States (LAGS).

NOTE: Percentage of informants by age group who use *you-all* and *yall* in their LAGS interviews.

you-all and *yall* originated in the South, but the relationship between *you-all* and *yall* is similar in all three data sets. The results from the fall 1994 and fall 1996 SFPs, then, show that *you-all* and *yall* are expanding outside of the South, and the results from the latter survey suggest that they are diffusing in much the same way that they earlier had spread in the South—with *you-all* emerging first and *yall* then expanding at its expense. The social and spatial distribution of these forms in the fall 1996 SFP suggests some of the factors that promote their diffusion.

Like most similar polls, SFP elicits a wide range of sociodemographic information about respondents, including age, gender, ethnicity, education, income, size of hometown, residence in a metropolitan area, and state of residence. Furthermore, SFP asks respondents where they lived at age sixteen and if they consider themselves to be Southerners. Finally, at the end of each telephone call, SFP interviewers indicate whether, in their judgment, the respondent has a strong Southern accent, a detectable but not a strong Southern accent, or no Southern accent at all.⁷ Thus, in addition to the standard demographic information used in most sociolinguistic studies, SFP provides some indication of respondents' identity with the South and of interviewers' perceptions of their speech.

To explore the possible effects of these social factors on the distribution of *you-all* and *yall* in the fall 1996 SFP, we did a multivariate analysis (using the GLM procedure in SAS) of the correlations between these forms and the eleven social variables listed above. As Bailey and Dyer (1992) suggest, multivariate analysis is a particularly useful tool for examining the effects of social variables since it allows investigators to determine whether the effects of those variables are independent of

TABLE 2

The Effects of Social Variables on the Use of *You-all* and *Yall* (summary of the multivariate analysis of acknowledgments of either form)

Variable	Non-Southern Sample	Southern Sample
Age	.01	.05
Gender	***	***
Education	***	***
Income	***	***
Ethnicity	***	.01
Rurality	***	***
Metropolitan residence	***	***
State/region	***	***
Residence at age sixteen	.05	.01
Considers self Southern	***	.01
Southern accent	.05	.05

NOTE: Asterisks indicate variables that are not significant at least at the .05 level.

TABLE 3

The Effects of Social Variables on the Use of *Yall* (summary of multivariate analysis of acknowledgments of *yall* only)

Variable	Non-Southern Sample	Southern Sample
Age	.01	.05
Gender	***	***
Education	***	***
Income	***	***
Ethnicity	***	.01
Rurality	***	***
Metropolitan residence	***	***
State/region	***	***
Residence at age sixteen	***	.01
Considers self Southern	***	.01
Southern accent	***	***

NOTE: Asterisks indicate variables that are not significant at least at the .05 level.

one another. Table 2, which combines the responses for *you-all* and *yall*, and Table 3, which examines only the data for *yall*, summarize the results of the multivariate analysis.⁸

As Table 2 indicates, three variables in the non-Southern sample and five in the Southern sample significantly affect acknowledgments of *you-all* and *yall* when the data from the two features are combined. Age, residence in the South at age sixteen, and a Southern accent affect the forms in both samples. The first of these simply suggests that the forms are expanding, while the positive effects of the second and third suggest that "Southernness" strongly influences the occurrence of the forms, something that the positive effect of "considers himself/herself Southern" on the

use of *you-all* and *yall* in the Southern sample also indicates. The relatively small but growing Hispanic and Asian population in the South accounts for most of the effect of ethnicity on acknowledgments of these forms in the Southern sample, but African Americans also acknowledge them less frequently than do white non-Hispanics.⁹

None of these factors is surprising, and to a large extent, they probably just reflect the linguistic consequences of the geographic mobility of the American population: both residence in the South at age sixteen and a Southern accent in the North (or the lack of it in the South) suggest movement away from or into the South. The results of the multivariate analysis of acknowledgments of *yall* only in the non-Southern sample are quite surprising, though, as Table 3 shows. In the Southern sample, four of the five social variables that have significant effects on the combined data for *you-all* and *yall* also significantly affect the data for *yall* alone; only Southern accent is not significant for the latter (see Table 3). For the non-Southern sample, however, age is the only social variable that is statistically significant; the other social factors that constrain the distribution of *you-all* and *yall* constrain only the former. What this suggests, of course, is that as *yall* has begun to spread outside the South, it has also begun to lose its association with Southernness. The data from the non-Southern sample also suggest that the expansion of *yall* is more than simply a matter of Northerners adopting the form when they move to the South or of Southerners maintaining the form as they move to the North: *yall* is rapidly spreading to Americans who live outside the South and who have no obvious roots in that area. Although region does not have an independent effect in the multivariate analysis, a look at the spatial distribution of *yall* is instructive here nevertheless. As Figure 7 indicates, acknowledgments of *yall* outside the South are most common in those states that border on the region (e.g., Kansas and New Mexico) and in the Rocky Mountain region, an area that has much in common with the South culturally. The areas most resistant to *yall* and *you-all* are New England, California/Nevada, and the Great Lakes States and Upper Midwest, areas that are both geographically and culturally far removed from the South (see Figure 8). While the lack of an independent effect for region prohibits us from reaching definitive conclusions, the distributions in Figures 7 and 8 look more like a case of spatial diffusion than the reflex of geographic mobility.

These developments run counter to what has been suggested elsewhere (e.g., Montgomery 1996), but the SFP data on them are unambiguous. Furthermore, both the convergence of that data with evidence from the fall 1994 SFP and LAGS and the evidence on the validity and reliability of our methods that we have presented elsewhere (see Bailey, Tillery, and Wikle 1997) lend credence to the SFP data.¹⁰ The question, then, is not so much whether or not *yall* is spreading outside the South (it clearly is) but rather why this hallmark of SAE, the most stigmatized regional dia-

Spatial Distribution of Yall in the United States

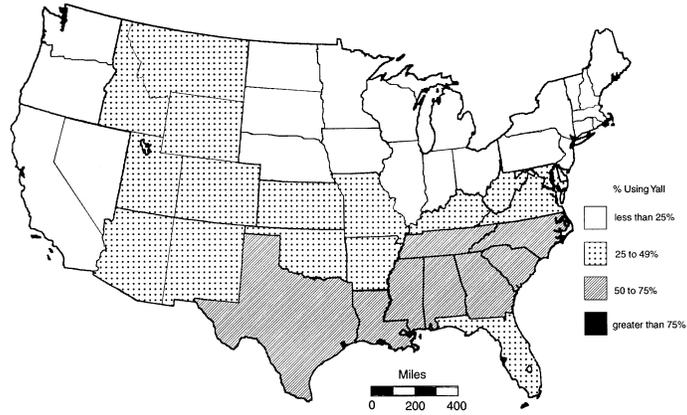


Figure 7: Percentage of Respondents Who Acknowledge Using *Yall* in the Fall 1996 Southern Focus Poll.

Resistance to You-all and Yall in the United States

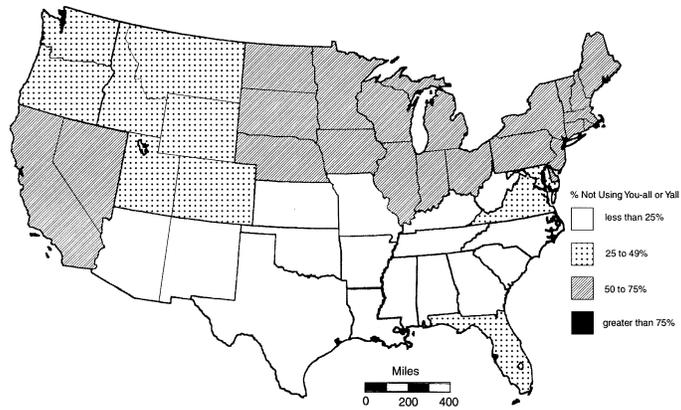


Figure 8: Percentage of Respondents Who Use neither *yall* nor *You-all* in the Fall 1996 Southern Focus Poll.

lect in the United States, is apparently losing its status as a Southernism and diffusing to other parts of the country.

Since the data from SFP suggest that the spread of *yall* outside the South is not socially motivated (age is the only significant factor in its diffusion), we can only

speculate that the usefulness of *yall* as a second-person plural is the motivating factor. The loss of *thou*, *thee*, and *thine* as distinctive second-person singular pronouns in Early Modern English created a “hole” in the personal pronoun paradigm; the parallel extension of *you* and *your* into the singular still leaves the paradigm defective. A number of dialects of English have filled this hole by developing periphrastic constructions to serve as second-person plurals (e.g., *you-uns*, *youse guys*, *you guys*, and *you-all*), leaving *you* free to function as a singular. Unlike the other personal pronouns, though, all of these are compounds, and none of them includes a generalized plural morpheme as part of the compound (see Hopper and Traugott 1993). The development of *yall*, however, provides a nonperiphrastic form, a single lexeme that parallels the other personal pronouns and can serve as a second-person plural. Although at first glance, *yall* looks like a simple contraction of *you-all*, Montgomery (1992) points out that it does not follow the normal rules of English contraction, with the second element contracted to the first. In fact, *yall* is best understood not as a product of contraction but rather as a consequence of fusion.¹¹ According to Hopper and Traugott (1993), fusion is “the merger of two or more forms across word or morphological boundaries” (40) and “involves changes in the assignment of boundaries (i.e., rebracketing)” (41). Hopper and Traugott indicate that fusion is frequently found in grammaticalization (one of two diachronic tendencies in grammaticalization is for periphrastic constructions to fuse over time into morphological structures), and they cite *gonna* as an example of a form that became fused as it underwent grammaticalization (Hopper and Traugott 1993, 2-3, 8, 41). We believe that like *gonna*, *yall* is a fused form rather than a contracted one, and just as the fused form *gonna* has spread widely as a future, the fused form *yall* has begun to diffuse as a second-person plural throughout the United States. As a fused form, *yall* has at least two advantages over the various periphrastic constructions that have been used as second-person plural pronouns: it parallels other pronouns in the paradigm in that it is a single lexeme, and it parallels *gonna*, *useta*, and other fused forms that developed from periphrastic structures as they became grammaticalized.

It seems clear from the SFP data, then, that *yall* is losing its status as a uniquely Southern form and is spreading throughout the United States. What is not clear from the SFP data, though, is whether *yall* is being used outside the South in the same way that it is used within the region. The residence of Tillery and Bailey in Las Vegas for a period of more than two years enabled them to observe the use of *yall* and *you-all* outside the South for an extended period of time. While such unsystematic observation tells us little about the distributions of linguistic features in a population, it can be useful in simply documenting their presence or absence. Montgomery (1996) has identified six distinct functions of *yall*. As indicated below, we noted all six of these used by non-Southerners in Las Vegas.¹² The home state/region of the user is given in parentheses.

- A. Unambiguous plural
 1. I've been saving them up since I knew *yall* [the three people addressed] would come back. (NE)
 2. That's why I asked *yall* [the seven committee members] to come here today. (AZ)
- B. Associative plural
 3. When are *yall* leaving for Texas? [addressing only Bailey but referring also to Tillery and her mother] (WA)
 4. What hours are *yall* working this summer? [addressing only Bailey but referring to the office staff as well] (SD)
- C. Institutional plural
 5. I've just been waiting for *yall* to ask me to teach by distance learning. [addressing only Bailey but referring to UNLV] (NV)
 6. I'd also have *yall* look at an interdisciplinary core curriculum. [official of an accrediting agency addressing only Bailey but referring to UNLV] (PA)
- D. Addressed to a group, only one of whom is the potential referent
 7. I knew *yall* would be back to get these. [waitress addressing a group of people but referring only to the one who left the sunglasses on the table] (IL)
 8. I'll get back to *yall* with some numbers by the end of the week. [budget officer addressing a group of faculty and administrators but referring only to Bailey] (MD)
- E. Direct address
 9. *Yall* pay attention. (NY)
 10. Bye *yall*. (WA)
- F. Greeting to a group (to create a sense of familiarity and informality)
 11. Nice to see all of *yall* here today. [administrator addressing a group of faculty] (NY)
 12. How are *yall* today? [opening statement in an administrative meeting] (AZ)

These citations do not tell us how frequently the different functions of *yall* appear in Las Vegas, nor what proportion of the population there uses or can use each function. They do suggest, however, that *yall* can have the same range of functions outside the South that it has within that region.

In spite of the fact that *you-all* and *yall* have long been regarded as hallmarks of SAE, the data from SFP show clearly that both are used by significant numbers of people outside of the South. In fact, apparent time distributions of the acknowledgments in SFP suggest that the use of these forms has increased dramatically over the past half century. However, *you-all* and *yall* are not expanding equally; much of the

expansion reflects the rapid spread of *yall* to non-Southerners. As *yall* has begun to spread, it has also begun to lose its status as a distinctively Southern form. Although acknowledgments of *you-all* in both the Southern and non-Southern samples are significantly affected by social variables that suggest either roots in or a connection to the South (e.g., residence in the South at age sixteen and a Southern accent), acknowledgments of *yall* in the non-Southern sample are significantly affected only by age, a factor that simply confirms its expansion. Furthermore, as it has diffused, *yall* seems to have developed the same range of uses outside the South that it has within the region. The spread of *yall* outside the South seems to be a consequence of the usefulness of the form. Unlike periphrastic structures such as *you-all* and *you-uns* that have developed to fill a hole in the personal pronoun paradigm, the fused form *yall* is a single lexeme, grammaticalized to provide an unambiguous second-person plural, that parallels other pronouns in the paradigm. It also parallels other fused forms such as *gonna* and *useta* that have developed from periphrastic structures as they have become grammaticalized. Finally, as this fused form spreads outward from its cultural hearth in the South, it demonstrates how regional markers, even markers of a highly stigmatized variety such as SAE, can develop into features of a national vernacular. Such are the consequences of the nationalization of a Southernism.

Notes

1. For further information on the Southern Focus Poll (SFP) and on our uses of it, see Bailey, Wikle, and Tillery (1997). Like other university-based survey organizations, SFP trains its interviewers carefully, has a poll manager on site at all times, and carefully pretests and revises questions. The surveys require about two months to complete. We wish to thank Dr. Beverly Wiggins, director of the Southern Focus Poll, for her help with this project and Oklahoma State University, the University of Memphis, and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, for their financial support of the project.

2. Half of the respondents on the fall 1996 SFP were asked the question with *you-all* as the first member of the pair, while half were asked the question with *yall* as the first member. The order of the items had no significant effect on the results. On the fall 1994 poll, we also included questions on *fixin to*, *might could*, and the use of *yall* as a singular. For results on those questions, see Bailey, Wikle, and Tillery (1997).

3. This should not be seen as a blanket endorsement of self-reports. Bailey, Wikle, and Tillery (1997) discuss their limitations as well. Furthermore, as we point out in note 9, it may be that various ethnic groups differ in their willingness to acknowledge forms that they use.

4. The Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States (LAGS) data are taken from Pederson et al. (1991).

5. One might expect an even larger percentage of Southerners to use or acknowledge using *you-all* or *yall*. However, the Southerners in SFP include respondents who are recent arrivals in the South as well as long-term residents; many of the former, of course, would not have features of Southern American English (SAE) in their speech. Although LAGS respondents are all native Southerners, a number of them are also native speakers of Spanish, French, or German and have few of the stereotypical features of SAE in their speech.

6. In fact, Preston (1997) shows that SAE is viewed more negatively than any other regional variety of American English, with New York City its only serious competitor.

7. SFP elicits a number of other sociodemographic variables as well. Most of these (e.g., religious affiliation) have not been shown to have an effect on language use, and they have no effect on the distributions in our data. Therefore, we ignore them here.

8. In the non-Southern sample, state of residence was recoded into six regional categories to eliminate categories with only a few respondents (see Figure 9).

9. The figures for African Americans are surprising, especially in light of the LAGS data on *you-all* and *yall*. In LAGS, the percentage of African Americans who use these forms (87.30) is greater than the percentage of whites who use them (81.45). In SFP, only 72.33 percent of the African Americans acknowledge them. Whether these discrepancies are the consequence of the relatively small number of African Americans in each sample (197 in LAGS and 112 in the SFP Southern sample), a greater reluctance of African Americans to acknowledge the forms they use, or something else is unclear, but possible cultural differences in self-reports deserve further investigation.

10. One might, of course, question the use of apparent time distributions for making inferences about language change and linguistic diffusion, but our research in Texas and Oklahoma shows clearly that when random samples are used, the apparent time construct is a valid and reliable tool for making inferences about both language change and linguistic diffusion (see Bailey et al. 1991, 1993).

11. Note, though, that Montgomery (1992) offers a different explanation for the development of *yall*. He suggests that *yall* is actually a contraction of Hiberno English *ye all*. However, we believe that the lack of citations of *ye all* (citations of *you-all* date from 1824), the apparent time distributions that suggest a relationship between *you-all* and *yall*, and the intuitions of native speakers argue against this explanation.

12. We have limited our citations here to those used by people whose home states we can identify. Our corpus of citations is much larger than what we use here.

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