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Pictures of Pronouns...and how to learn them



In my [list of basic words to learn](#), I suggest learning subject pronouns (I, you, he, she, it, we, they) using pictures. Instead of *“Ich’ is the German word for ‘I,’”* I suggest memorizing *“Ich’ is the German word for [Guy pointing to himself].”*



“You!”

But this may seem like a trivial point. After all, it’s only a small handful of words, and what’s the harm in memorizing just a few translations?

The Complex World of Pronouns

Pronouns can be tricky to learn, because every language has slightly different ways of grouping people. For instance, most European languages have separate words for Singular-You (you) and Plural-You (y'all). In Tagalog and Cherokee, the English 'we' is broken into **four** handy pronouns: 'you and me', 'someone else and me', 'several other people and me', and 'you, me, and one or more other people'. In these languages, 'We should get dinner' is *much* less vague in all sorts of contexts.

In Navajo, you'll even find a *fourth person*: I (first person) could be talking to you (second person) about our friend Joe (third person), who recently got into a car accident with some guy on a motorcycle. Now if we were speaking in English and I said "he got injured," you might not be sure whether I was speaking about Joe or the motorcyclist. But in Navajo, you wouldn't run into this problem. Navajo splits Joe (a character that we're in the process of discussing – third person) and the motorcyclist (a new character who wasn't really a central part of our discussion – fourth person) apart. This lets you say "Joe got into an accident with a motorcyclist and he (the motorcyclist) got injured." Neat.

Many other languages can also use pronouns to indicate *levels of formality* – a trait that English lost back in the 17th century. Back then, you would use *thou* when talking to family members or friends, and *ye* to speak with strangers or bosses. Now that we've lost this, we can't be quite as passive-aggressive and insulting as we once could. In German, you can say something to a colleague like "Well, naturally ye mayeth take my sandwich from the work fridge. Why *wouldn't* that be alright with me?" And if you smirk in just the right way, your colleague will get intensely offended, but won't be able to say anything, since you treated him with the *utmost* respect. In modern English, all we have is "Why did you take my sandwich, you dick?", which is a little less nuanced.

*Side note #1: What about thee and you? Those were thou and ye in a *different case*, just like her and him are she and he in a different case. So thou might give him some money, and in exchange, he will give thee a loaf of bread. We'll deal with cases in depth in an upcoming article (I'm allllmost done with it)*

Our old *thou* and *ye* did double duty as informal/formal AND singular/plural. This is a [common occurrence in a lot of languages](#), particularly those in Europe. The history of this is kind of neat: basically, languages seem to have a tendency to start with two kinds of second person pronouns – singular (you) and plural (y'all) – probably because this is pretty damn handy in social situations. It doesn't get much clearer than "*Hey, I have to talk to y'all!*"

But then, at least in 4th century Latin, Roman emperors appeared, and people needed to figure out how to distinguish between regular Joes and big mighty Ceasar. So they began to refer to emperors in the plural (and those emperors referred to *themselves* in the plural too, using the royal "we" instead of "I"). In time, people started using the plural form to refer to all *sorts* of people in powerful positions, and that, in turn, resulted in the plural form being used as a mark of respect for anyone who wasn't a close friend or a family member.

Korean, Japanese and the Chinese group of languages have *all sorts* of formality levels, depending upon your social rank, the rank and age of the person you're talking to, and your relationship with them.

Learning Pronouns

Due to all of this complexity, translations can kind of fall flat. Learning that German's *Sie* is the word you use for "Plural or formal you" is not particularly memorable, and leads to a lot of confusion. It would be better to remember that *Sie* is the word you use *When addressing the police, when talking to two strangers or when talking to the customs agent.*



You could try to train yourself *that way*, by creating flash cards with "*Sie*" on one side and "You: for police, strangers and customs agents," but you're likely to remember the *words* ("*For police, strangers and customs agents*"), rather than the *meaning* (*For that uniformed guy who is writing you a traffic ticket right this moment*). The trick to forcing yourself to think about *meaning* is to use pictures (a picture of someone talking to a policeman), or a combination of pictures and words (a picture of someone talking to a policeman with the caption "Polizei, Fremder und Zollagenten" (Police, strangers and customs agents)).

Since there don't seem to be many pictures of people pointing at other people, I had a bunch commissioned by [an awesome artist on Fiverr](#). Here they are, for your viewing pleasure. Add words as needed to help you nail down any particularly tricky pronouns. If your language makes a distinction between "You" for friends and "You" for strangers, then grab one of my pictures of "You," below, and add the word "Friend" or "Stranger" in your target language.

What about all the *other*, non-subject pronouns, like *my*, *mine*, *his*, *her*, *our*, *them*, etc? As long as you've learned the basic subject pronouns in your language, then you can use those to learn every other pronoun you have. What's '*my*'? It's the word that fits into this blank: ___ (*I*) *dog is 14 years old*. What's '*him*'? It's the word that fits into "*I gave it to* ___ (*he*)."

Pictures of Pronouns

These aren't yet comprehensive, but you should be able to cover most of your bases by adding a few clarifying words, as described above. If you could really use a particular picture that isn't here, let me know what it is in the comments. I've tried to make sure that all the figures are as different as possible, so that they aren't easily confused. Ideally, in the future, I'll have these inked in and colored differently, so that they're as distinct as possible.

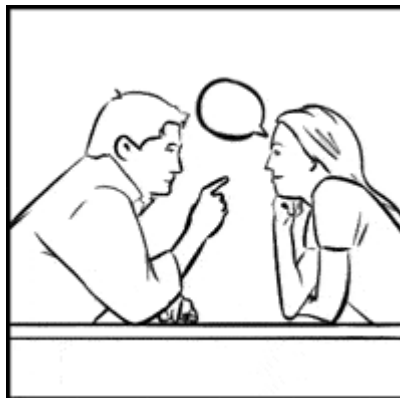
I – First person singular



We – First person plural



You – Second person singular (formal/informal)



You – Second person plural



He – Third person singular masculine



She – Third person singular feminine



It – Third person singular inanimate/neuter



They – Third person plural



Me



You – Formal Plural Male



You – Informal Plural Male



You – Plural Female



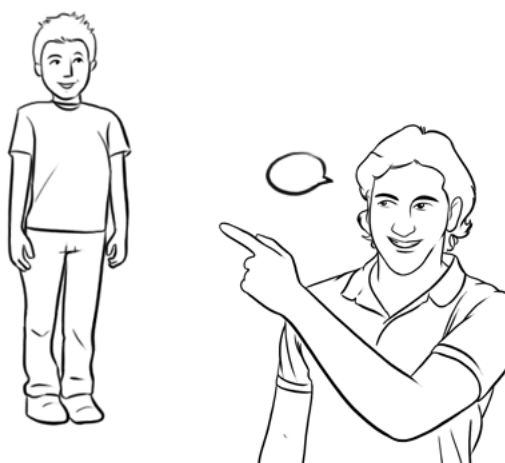
You – Informal Plural Female



It



You – Third person young male



You – Third person young female



He – Third person older male



She – Third person older female



You – Singular Female Formal



You – Couple



You – Plural Female Formal



They – Female Plural



That's it! If you're missing some key picture for a pronoun in your language, figure out what group of people would be involved, who's pointing at whom, and who's saying what, and let me know in the comments. I'll see what I can do. Or even better for my wallet, [get your own done](#) (\$5 for a three image set), send them to me, and I'll post them here along with my thanks.





Gabriel Wyner

I am an author, opera singer and polyglot based in Los Angeles, CA. After reaching fluency in German in 14 weeks with the help of the immersive Middlebury Language Schools, I fell in love with the process of language learning, going on to spend two months in intensive Italian courses in Perugia, Italy. Searching for ways to bring the immersion experience into the home, I began to develop a system that rapidly builds fluency in short, daily sessions. In 2010, my efforts paid off. I learned French to fluency in 5 months, and then Russian in 9 months.

Currently learning Hungarian, I am looking forward to Japanese next year. My book, *Fluent Forever: How to learn any language fast and never forget it*, was released on August 5, 2014 by Harmony Books (Penguin Random House). My blog, Fluent-Forever.com, details my methods and provides resources for learners of all languages.

Comments



Kurt says

JULY 1, 2013 AT 9:48 PM

Fantastic stuff. Thanks!

Reply



Saqib Hussain (@ArabicStudio) says

JULY 4, 2013 AT 1:04 AM

I was just thinking about pronouns and good ways to revise them – thank so much! In Arabic, pronouns are split between masculine and feminine, and then singular, dual and plural for the 3rd and 2nd person. In the 1st person, they're just split into singular and plural.

For verb conjugation revision, I was thinking it might be neat to have a pronoun flashcard pile, and another verb flashcard pile, and then then randomly select from the two piles and see if you're able to conjugate the verb into the correct part of the table. For the system to really work well, you'd need some way of practicing the different tenses too.

Thanks for the post.

Reply



Joseph Bayot says

SEPTEMBER 27, 2013 AT 8:04 AM

These are great! I'm gonna add them to my Dutch Anki deck riiight now =)

Reply



Rich says

MAY 11, 2014 AT 7:20 AM

Gabriel,

Since you're also learning Hungarian, maybe you've already gotten a pic for formal 2nd person plural (önök ... eg, when talking to 2+ police). If you have it handy, could you add it to the

collection above?

Kösz.

[Reply](#)



Tariq says

AUGUST 14, 2014 AT 9:32 AM

Hello everyone!

Can anyone tell me how I can upload this to my Anki account?

Tariq

[Reply](#)



MikeNolan says

AUGUST 29, 2014 AT 12:55 PM

Seriously? Since when has learning pronouns been a big deal? It is one of the easiest things to learn when learning a language.

[Reply](#)



Veronika says

OCTOBER 19, 2015 AT 12:35 PM

Seriously? How about learning 9×8 cases of them? Sooo quick and easy...

[Reply](#)



Serge says

SEPTEMBER 10, 2014 AT 10:54 AM

"Third person plural inanimate/neuter" seems to be missing here. Cool pics for the rest!

[Reply](#)



Lettie says

NOVEMBER 13, 2014 AT 1:54 PM

I have a question about the You – plural female picture.

I'm a little confused because in the picture the women are talking but are using the you plural female form to talk to the two male police officers?

Should the two police officers be female and the other two people can be either male or female so then they can use the you plural form?

[Reply](#)



Shari says

JUNE 16, 2015 AT 4:28 AM

Hi Lettie,

Good question. I'm learning Hindi and in Hindi it matters if the person doing the speaking is male or female as it tells what ending to add to the verb conjugation. So it's not important as far as the pronoun, but it is important as far as the verb (and maybe in some languages it does make a difference as far as what pronoun to use as well). So these women are using the a neuter pronoun "we" but when talking they always use the plural feminine form for the verb ending not the masculine plural form so you know it's women speaking,. The verb agrees with the gender and number of the subject, and the policemen will just be a noun in it's plural form inside the sentence. Hope that helps. So some languages need this distinction.

Reply



daddylangl says

JANUARY 12, 2016 AT 5:47 PM

I'm assuming the two "They – Third person plural" pictures are for they (near) and they (far), like ये / वे in Hindi. So maybe there should be similar near/far pictures for singular (यह/वह) as well?

Reply



Gabriel Wyner says

JANUARY 20, 2016 AT 1:44 PM

Hi, daddylangl~

Thank you for your comment! I've made a note of your suggestion, and, once we've gathered a few more, we will hire an artist to do those pictures. Thanks again!

~Lauren, Gabe's assistant

Reply



Daniel says

MARCH 16, 2016 AT 3:35 AM

A single woman speaking to a single cop is missing. (For languages where the speaker's gender matters and which distinguish between formal and informal)

Reply



Gabriel Wyner says

MARCH 22, 2016 AT 1:50 PM

Thanks very much for the suggestion, Daniel!

[Reply](#)

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