

Personal Pronouns

WE ARE SOMETIMES CONFUSED

I've been thinking about personal pronouns lately (as you do).

It seems to me that in conversational English, words like "we", "you" and "they" can be used with all sorts of meanings other than the ones in the grammar book. On the other hand, we are pretty careful about allocating the right pronouns for gender when using "he", "she", "it" and correcting our learners when necessary.

Do we have double standards here? How do our learners pick up and respond to the reference in conversations which go like this?

Nurse: Good morning, good morning. How are we today?

Dorothy: Fine, thanks.

Dr Well: Your blood levels are looking good. We're pretty happy about things at the moment, so you can just keep on with the medication and we'll see you next week.

Dorothy: Oh, OK.

WE in the first conversation means "you".

WE in the second conversation means "I"

In a more ordinary conversation, WE is inclusive

"Where shall we go for coffee, Claude?"

"Let's go back to that little place we enjoyed so much last time, Esme."

But just as often, WE is used to mean "you-but-not-necessarily-me":

"We really need to get the newsletter out by Friday."

"Shall we go and wash our hands, Rupert, before we touch those nice biscuits."

THEY often refers to an indeterminate group of others, not us, who should usually be doing something better, or more quickly, for our benefit.

"It's about time they did something about the parking for mobility scooters, don't you reckon, Bessie?"

"Well I've got no idea, Flo. They don't tell you anything round here."

And we use YOU to mean "I"

"You know that restaurant in Victoria St... (this means "I know that restaurant, I'm not sure you do..?")

We use YOU to mean "all of us"

*".....that restaurant in Victoria St where you can all sit on cushions round a big table,"
"....So, what did you think of the movie? I quite liked it....."*

This is a small but common example of the difference between the rules of using language and the practical use of the language. It's also a little reminder of the little things that can help our learners to be included in conversations and therefore to have the chance to respond appropriately. It's all part of belonging.