

An Analysis of the Impersonal *You* in Interviews of MLB Players and Managers.

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Abstract

The impersonal *you*, similar to the impersonal pronoun *one*, is used in making generalizations or in situations where a subject is needed for the grammaticality of a sentence. This paper looks at the use of the impersonal *you* in interviews with Major League Baseball (MLB) players and managers. In answering questions about their personal involvement in particular game events, players and managers will at times answer in generalizations using the impersonal *you*. First, possible reasons for this generalization strategy are examined, including to make a case for cultural norms (in the context of baseball), to make sense of their experiences in a broader context, or to distance themselves from the situation. Second, a corpus of MLB interviews was created to explore the extent of this usage, and to compare the usage of personal *you* with impersonal *you*.

1. Introduction

The Oxford Advanced User's Dictionary (Hornby and Deuter) provides three definitions for the pronoun *you*. The first definition, "refer [ring] to the person or people being spoken to or written to: *Can I sit next to you?*" is probably the meaning of the word that comes to mind for most people. It is also the most likely meaning of the word that a student learning English as a foreign language will encounter. The second definition, "used with nouns and adjectives to speak to somebody directly: *You*

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girls: stop talking!” differs from the first in the way that it is used grammatically (as a modifier rather than as a pronoun), yet it maintains the same meaning of “the person being spoken to.” Because of this shared meaning, both usages will be referred to as the “personal *you*” in this paper. Finally, the third definition, while maintaining the same grammatical function of the first definition, differs in meaning from the first two. Oxford defines it as, “referring to people in general: *You learn a language faster if you visit the country where it is spoken.*” In this paper, this usage will be referred to as the “impersonal *you*”, although it is also referred to in the literature as the “generic *you*” (Wales) or the “indefinite *you*” (Ashe).

You has held this function since at least the 16th century (Wales), although English has another impersonal pronoun, *one*, usually referred to as the indefinite pronoun. In the United States, the impersonal *you* is generally preferred in conversation, and *one* is favored in more formal occasions (Greenbaum and Quirk).

The following are examples of the impersonal *you* taken from a variety of reference works:

You can't win them all. (American Heritage Dictionary)

You can never be sure! (Webster's New World College Dictionary)

You learn to accept these things as you get older. (Cambridge Dictionary)

Looking at these dictionary examples, one can see that constructions using the impersonal *you* can be used for generalizations about life and pieces of advice. Research also suggests that the impersonal *you* is used for norms, as in this exchange, given by Orvell et. al:

“What should *you* do with books?”

“*You* read them.” (“Norms”)

2. An Analysis of the Impersonal *You* in MLB Interviews

Let us look next at some examples of the impersonal *you* in interviews with professional Major League Baseball (MLB) players and managers. Here are a few examples:

You put so much pressure on *yourself* to win. If *you* lose 1-0, *you* feel like *you* didn't do *your* job. (Roy Oswalt, pitcher, “NL Division Series: Reds v Phillies”)

I think *you* try and disconnect *yourself*, I think, from the emotions a little bit.

Knowing that *you've* prepared *yourself*, *you're* ready, and *you* try to go out and execute *your* plan. (Roy Halladay, pitcher, "NL Division Series: Reds v Phillies")

It's a good feeling as a manager. And *you're* extremely proud of them that they have that feeling. (Joe Girardi, manager, "AL Championship Series: Angels v Yankees")

The above statements are all given in response to questions asking about the speaker's feelings in a given situation. In each case, the player or manager responds with the impersonal *you*. What is the reason for this generalization? Certainly, they could have answered in the first-person, as in the following example:

Well, you I, you know, *I* was obviously feeling very, very good, and feeling really good the whole second half about the way that *I* was throwing the ball. Within probably, I guess, the last five weeks *I* had to miss that start. *I* got skipped on that one start because of my shoulder. After that *I* really have felt like *I* have struggled each start after the start that *I* skipped. (Andy Pettitte, pitcher, "AL Championship Series: Angels v Yankees")

In his book, *The Secret Life of Pronouns*, Pennebaker examined pronoun use in various situations. In looking at the language used in playing or watching sports, he found that there was a high usage of impersonal pronouns and present tense, and a low usage of *I-words* (*I, me, myself, etc.*). He argues that in this case, both participants and spectators, "are immersed in the game and not focused on themselves. They are living in the moment while feeling as though they are part of a group. [Sports] serve as escape from the self." (245)

One possible explanation for the use of the impersonal *you*, then, may be that players are simply focusing on the game itself, and not on their own personal actions. Or, taking from the idea mentioned above that the impersonal *you* is used for stating norms, it may also be that players are stating what they feel *should* be a normal reaction (in a baseball game, for example). When Roy Oswalt says, "you put so much pressure on yourself," he is not only saying that he does so, but that any good baseball player would as well.

Let us look now at a post-game interview by Baltimore Orioles' manager Buck Showalter, when asked about his decision not to bring in his best pitcher, Zach Britton, in a tie game of an elimination contest.

Q. Even with runners on first and third there and Zach's ground ball rate and you guys needing a double play, was there anything that crossed your mind about bringing him in there instead of Ubaldo?

BUCK SHOWALTER: Sure, it crosses your mind from about the sixth inning on. (“AL Wildcard Game: Orioles vs Blue Jays”)

The reporter asks if there was “anything that crossed *your* mind,” in an apparent attempt to understand Showalter’s thinking process. However, Showalter doesn’t respond with “Sure, it crossed *my* mind,” but rather uses the impersonal *you*, stating “Sure, it crosses *your* mind.” In the earlier baseball examples, one could say that the players were using impersonal language to explain to reporters how baseball players feel in certain situations, for example, before a big game, or in having the responsibility of being the start pitcher of a team. However, Showalter’s use of the impersonal *you* here seems to be slightly different. The reporter is asking about a very specific situation.

Therefore, let us examine another possible interpretation which takes into account Showalter’s motives. At the time of the interview, his team has just been eliminated from the playoffs, and his decisions as the manager are coming under question from reporters. He is likely defending his actions. Showalter’s use of the words “*your mind*” here, from his own point of view, takes himself out of the situation. It is no longer Showalter who made the decision, but a generic and impersonal “*you*.” This generalization is furthered by the use of the present tense, commonly used for repeated or habitual actions. In this case, by saying “It crosses your mind...” Showalter may be again distancing himself, by time, from the particular situation in question.

In their book, *Politeness*, Brown and Levinson argue that the use of indefinite pronouns in English has a distancing effect (198). It could be argued that that is the case here. Like the earlier examples, his statement could be paraphrased as “It would cross the mind of anyone in such a situation,” but at the same time, one could claim that Showalter is defending his managerial decisions by inferring that his actions were the normal actions that anyone else in his position would do. This is also noticeable earlier in the interview, in response to a similar question.

Q. Buck, with the season on the line, do you regret not having your best relief pitcher in the game at all and leaving him on the bench?

BUCK SHOWALTER: *You could do afterwards, yeah.* But we went for about four

innings there trying to get to that spot. (“AL Wildcard Game: Orioles vs Blue Jays”)

Here, Showalter seems to be saying that he does feel regret, but again switches to the impersonal *you* and changing the tense, this time opting for the conditional. Again, generalizations of these sort may serve to distance the speaker from the situation, in this case, distancing Showalter from his regret at not using his best pitcher.

In their research on the impersonal *you*, Orvell et al. found that people used the impersonal *you* when asked to derive meaning from unpleasant situations as in the following two examples:

Stand your ground firmly, and don't alter your life if you're not ready for a big change.

Sometimes people don't change, and you have to recognize that you cannot save them. (“Meaning” 1300)

The authors conclude that:

It may seem paradoxical that a means of generalizing to people at large is used when reflecting on one's most personal and idiosyncratic experiences. However, we suspect that it is precisely this capacity to move beyond one's own perspective to create the semblance of a shared, universal experience that allows individuals to derive broader meanings from personal events. (“Meaning” 1301)

Therefore, a third explanation may be that players and managers are trying to understand their individual performances in the greater context of what it means for their team, their fanbase, or baseball culture in general. As a further example, consider this interview with Detroit Tigers manager Brad Ausmus, in 2014 after losing a playoff series to Baltimore.

Q. Brad, just given the hopes and the expectations you had from this team, how much of a disappointment is it for the season to end this way, not just in the Division Series, but with a sweep?

BRAD AUSMUS: It's disappointing. *You* feel like *you* let the fans down and *you* feel like *you* let the organization down. *You* feel like *you* let the [owners] down. So it's disappointing, no question. But there is nothing *we* can do about it now. (“AL Division Series: Tigers v Orioles.”)

It seems that indeed Ausmus is first distancing himself from the loss, but also trying to

make sense of what it means – of what anyone can take away from it. His conclusion that there is nothing he can do about it now implies a regret that is never directly stated, as well as a notion to move on.

The extent of the use of the impersonal *you* most certainly differs from person to person, and situation to situation. In many interviews, players and managers will use both personal and impersonal styles of speakers. Consider this 1999 interview of former Yankees manager Joe Torre. Note that Torre had undergone cancer treatment causing him to miss much of the season. He begins using the impersonal *you*, later changing to the first-person pronoun.

Q: With what you've gone through off the field this season, what does this mean to you tonight?

JOE TORRE: Well, when that whole thing started with the prostate cancer in spring training, you know, *you* really didn't care about baseball. *You* go through that. And then when *you're* going through your recovery, *you're* not sure if *you're* going to care when *you* get back. And then once *you* get back, actually, during the time *I* was watching the games, it was like *I* was a fan; *I'm* watching. Then once *I* got back, it was sort of like let *me* study *myself*. Then all of a sudden *my* stomach started hurting and *I* realized the passion was there. In the post-season, it's identical to last year, maybe even a little more so. *I'm* all the way back as far as the emotion of doing what *I'm* doing. ("AL Championship Series: Red Sox v Yankees.")

When talking about his cancer and recovery, Torre uses the impersonal *you*. In fact, he is almost dismissive of his fight with cancer. He states only: "You go through that." Later, when talking about his return to baseball, he uses the pronoun *I*, as well as going into more detail, *my stomach started hurting and I realized the passion was there*.

Similar to the previous cases of Showalter and Ausmus, Torre perhaps didn't want to directly say, "*I* didn't care about baseball," as that might be too strong of a statement. Compare how a direct statement sounds (changing the pronouns to "*I*" and maintaining the past tense):

Well, when that whole thing started with the prostate cancer in spring training, you know, **I** really didn't care about baseball. **I went** through that. And then when **I was** going through **my** recovery, **I wasn't** sure if **I was** going to care when **I**

got back.

To this researcher, at least, the direct statement seems more personal, but at the same time dismissive of baseball, almost as if he was saying, “baseball doesn’t matter to me.” By using the personal *you*, he can establish a norm, saying, “someone in my position wouldn’t care about baseball, and that’s okay.”

The argument could also be made that Torre feels less comfortable discussing his private life regarding his cancer, but more comfortable discussing his career. Or, that he is distancing himself from the traumatic experience of cancer rehabilitation, but embracing his return to baseball. Torre’s negative feelings towards baseball are couched in the impersonal *you*: “you aren’t sure if you are going to care when you get back,” and his positive feelings towards it are couched in the first-person: “I was a fan...I realized the passion was there.”

Pennebaker suggests that avoidance of *I-words* happen after a trauma, such as a death in the family, as in the following excerpt.

Just calling to say that Marguerite died last night. She took a turn for the worse a couple of days ago. Thanks for calling last week. Really appreciate it. There will be a memorial service on Monday. Will try to call you later. (115)

Pennebaker suggests that by avoiding *I-words*, speakers distance themselves from unpleasant situations. In the examples visited thus far, using the impersonal *you* may be a strategy to avoid *I-words* and create emotional distance. However, people create emotional distance not only in unpleasant situations. Consider this example of pitcher Michael Fulmer, who, like the above example from Pennebaker, drops the subject *I*, or constructs his sentences in such a manner as to avoid using *I*, in this 2017 interview. Fulmer is responding to being chosen as lone All-Star from his team.

“It’s a blessing, it truly is,” Fulmer told reporters today at Comerica Park. “Didn’t think much into it until Brad told me earlier today. Just to have the respect and votes from my peers and coaches, analysts and whoever else voted, it’s an honor to be able to represent the Tigers.”

...Fulmer, 24, said he was “in shock” by the news.

“Just don’t think about stuff like that,” said Fulmer, a right-handed pitcher who was voted the 2016 American League rookie of the year. “Think about winning games. Think about my next start, which I still have two more before the break.

Gotta think about those first. I just never saw myself in this situation.” (Sipple)

What is interesting about these quotes, is that Fulmer is not in an unpleasant situation. In fact, he is being praised for being the best player on his team. Still, he clearly avoids “*I*-words,” and the argument can be made that in fact, Fulmer *is* in an uncomfortable situation: that of being praised. A lot of attention has been thrown on him, and by avoiding “*I*-words,” he is attempting to push that attention away from himself. In other words, Fulmer avoids using “*I*-words” out of humility. To support this idea, the following example shows a player, J.D. Drew, using the impersonal *you* after a question centering on the fans’ admiration for him.

Q. I want to go back to the fans because not only with your grand slam, but it seems like the cheers were louder with every put-out you had in the outfield, and there were a lot of spontaneous shouts of “J.D. Drew, J.D. Drew.” How in the zone are you and does it affect you during the game?

J.D. DREW: I think *you* hear it. The effect is uplifting but I think minimal from the standpoint if *you* get too high, *you’re* going to find *yourself* in a bad situation out there listening to the fans versus catching fly balls. First priority is to play defense, and it does kind of put an inward smile on *you*, I guess. (“AL Championship Series: Indians v Red Sox.”)

To sum up, the impersonal *you* may be used in the following situations:

1. to state or create rules, cultural norms, or expectations
2. to make sense of personal experiences in a broader cultural context
3. to distance oneself from a situation because it is unpleasant
4. to distance oneself from a situation out of humility

In addition, the impersonal *you* is often used in the context of the present tense, and may be also be used in connection with other *I*-word avoidance strategies, such as dropping the grammatical subject.

In language teaching, the impersonal *you* can be a difficult concept to convey, and is often glossed over or wholly ignored in textbooks and reference works. It is the hope of this researcher that the above insights into its usage may be helpful in guiding the language teacher.

3. An Analysis of the Impersonal *You* in a Baseball Interview Corpus

Now that we have examined this phenomenon, we may next wish to know how often this technique is used in interviews of professional athletes. To determine the extent of usage, the author of this paper created a corpus of baseball interviews from transcripts found on the ASAP website. The corpus was built from interviews selected at random of 56 different MLB players and managers, all native English speakers, over the 17-year span between the years 2000 and 2016. All of the interviews were conducted either pre-game or post-game during the MLB playoffs. The corpus contains 61,333 word tokens, and was for purposes of analysis divided into two corpora: a corpus containing only the interview questions (13,842 word tokens), and a corpus containing only the interview answers (47,491 word tokens).

After the corpora were constructed, each instance of the words *you* (as well as the words *your*, *yours*, and *yourself*) was examined and labeled as belonging to one of the three following kinds of usage:

Usage 1. *You* referring to the person being addressed, whether as a pronoun or as a modifier of a noun (the personal *you*)

Example a: “Did *you* have any particular pitcher *you* admired growing up?”

Example b: “Kris, this will be the third time *you* guys see Kluber.”

Usage 2. *You* referring to a person in general (the impersonal *you*)

Example: “Usually if *you* just put *your* swing on it and it’s hanging up there, there’s a good chance it’s going to go pretty far.”

Usage 3. *You* used in a set phrase or idiomatic expression

Example: “*You* know, the last four or five starts have been pretty much playoff starts, *you* know.”

This method of labeling was chosen to specifically compare the usage of the personal *you* with the impersonal *you*. Idiomatic expressions such as *you know* play the role of conversation fillers, and as such, do not really have the quality of being personal or impersonal. In some instances, it was unclear to which category an occurrence of *you* belonged; in such cases, it was labeled as *undetermined*. Examples of Usage 1 (Figure 1) and Usage 2 (Figure 2) are given below.

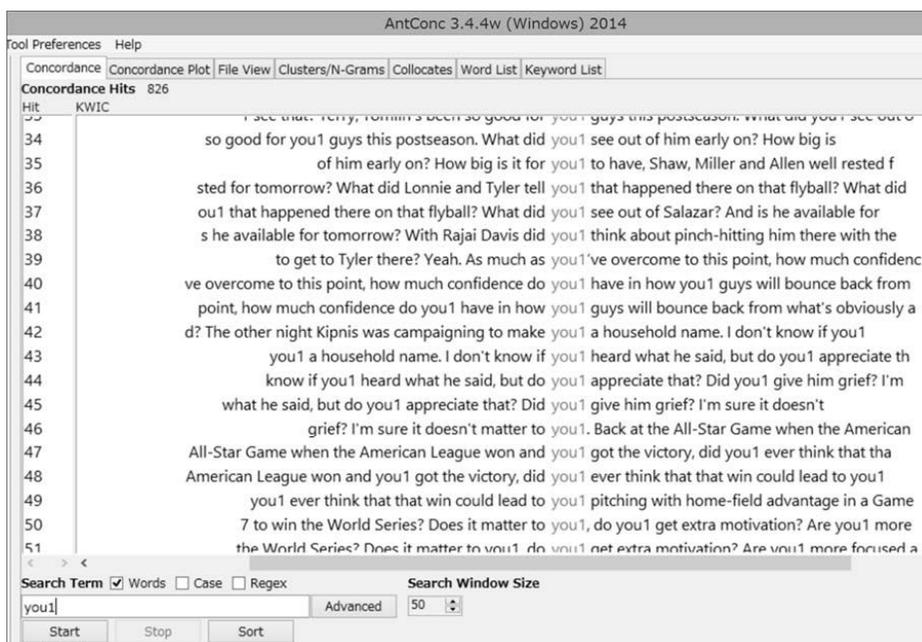


Figure 1. Examples of Usage 1: the personal you (you1).

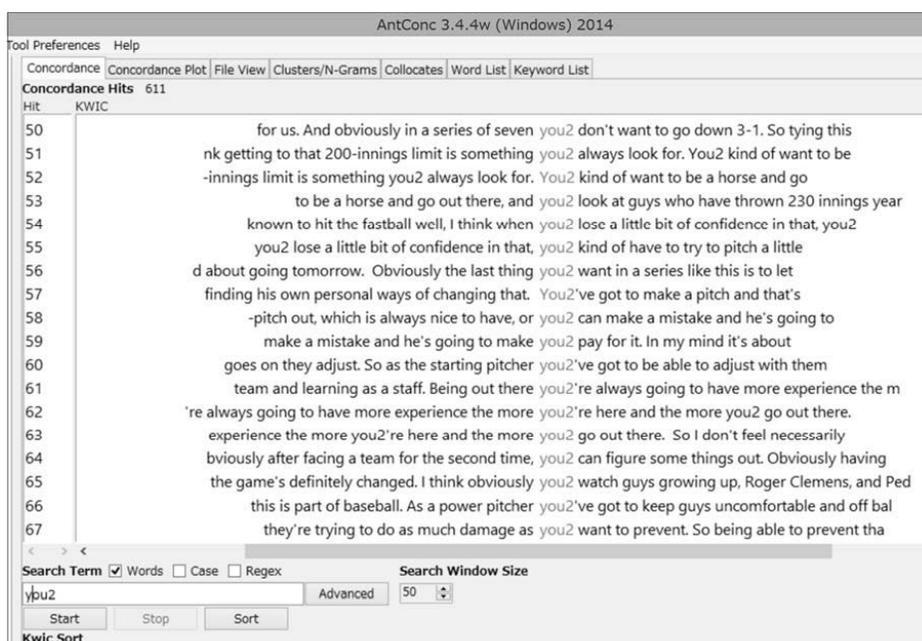


Figure 2. Examples of the Usage 2: the impersonal you (you2).

To determine the extent of usage, the number of occurrences of each kind of usage was counted. Table 1 shows the number of each kind of usage in the corpus, and Figures 3 through 5 show the percentages of each type overall, in questions only, and in answers only.

Table 1. The number of occurrences of *you* in the corpus.

	Overall	In questions	In answers
Personal	995	936	59
Impersonal	682	12	670
Idiomatic	219	0	219
Undetermined	12	0	12

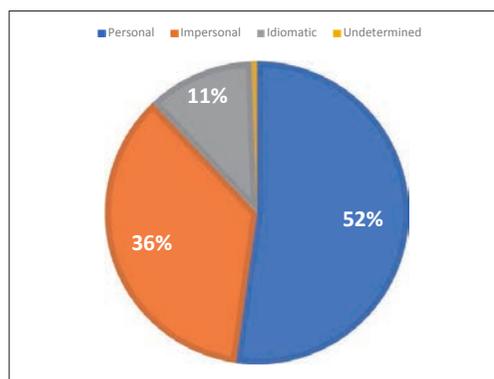


Figure 3. Percentage of each usage of *you* in questions and answers

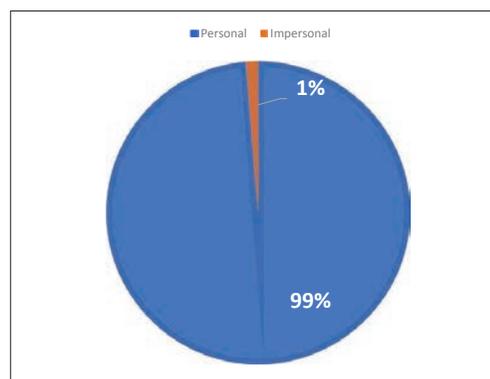


Figure 4. Percentage of each usage of *you* in questions only

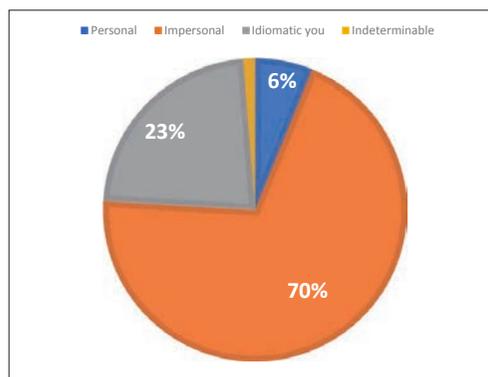


Figure 5. Percentage of each usage of *you* in answers only

Table 1 and the accompanying graphs show that reporters in these interviews use the personal *you* almost exclusively, as should be expected. However, in answering questions, the players and managers are over eleven times as likely to use the impersonal *you* over the personal *you*.

As discussed in Section 2 above, the impersonal *you* is often used to replace the first-person pronoun. To understand how often this occurs, the usage of other pronouns was also examined, looking only at the answer corpus. The following table shows a comparison of the first-person singular pronouns (*I, me, my, mine, and myself*) and the first-person plural pronouns (*We, us, our, ours, and ourselves*) with the impersonal *you* (including *your, yours, and yourself*) as they occurred in the answer corpus.

Table 2. A comparison between pronoun types.

Pronoun type	Number of occurrences	Percentage among the three types	Percentage of total corpus
First-person singular	1834	47.3%	3.9%
First-person plural	1374	35.4%	2.9%
Impersonal you	670	17.3%	1.4%

As the above table shows, the use of impersonal *you*, while not as common as either the first-person singular or the first-person plural, is used quite frequently in the corpus. It should be made clear that the corpus built for this research represents one specific mode of conversation, namely interviews of professional baseball players, and the results cannot be extrapolated to all English conversations. To determine the scope of the impersonal *you* in the spoken language as a whole would be a daunting undertaking, as nearly each instance of *you* would need to be examined individually in order to mark it as personal or impersonal. The corpus can, however provide us with some data that may allow us to mark instances of *you* without the need of human judgement.

Table 3 lists the top eight N-clusters including the personal *you* which either do not occur with impersonal *you*, or if so, in very few instances. The column labeled “Ratio” shows the number of occurrences for personal *you* divided by the number of occurrences of impersonal *you*. That number is set to 0.5 in the case of zero occurrences, to avoid division by zero. The final column, labeled “Adjusted Ratio” is an adjustment to the previous column’s ratio, taking into account the fact that the personal *you* occurs in

Table 3. Most frequent N-clusters including the personal *you* but not the impersonal *you*

N-clusters	Including personal <i>you</i> (frequency)	Including impersonal <i>you</i> (frequency)	Ratio	Adjusted Ratio
you guys	52	0	104	71.3
did you	52	0	104	71.3
do you	102	1	102	69.9
do you think	33	0	66	45.2
can you talk	28	0	56	38.4
would you	19	0	38	26.0
what do you	19	0	38	26.0
could you	13	0	26	17.8

Table 4. Most frequent N-clusters including the impersonal *you* but not the personal *you*

N-cluster	Including impersonal <i>you</i> (frequency)	Including personal <i>you</i> (frequency)	Ratio	Adjusted Ratio
[i]s something you	7	0	14	20.4
you always	4	0	8	11.7
you look	11	2	5.5	8.0
you don't	31	8	3.88	5.7

the corpus with greater frequency than the impersonal *you*.

The data in Table 3 tells us that, firstly, the expression *you guys* acts as a plural of the personal *you* (similar to *y'all*) and never has an impersonal meaning. Secondly, questions are more likely to contain the personal *you* than the impersonal *you*. Since generalizations using the impersonal *you* are more likely to be stated in the present tense, this should be particularly true of questions phrased in other tenses, such as *did you*, or *would you*.

Conversely, looking at words that correlate with impersonal *you* but not personal *you*, there are few N-clusters which could be of any use. The top four N-clusters by adjusted ratio are given in Table 4 above.

One problem that becomes apparent in these N-cluster comparisons is that the pronoun *you* collocates with similar words regardless of whether it is personal or impersonal. In fact, looking at the most common words which immediately follow the two pronouns, we can see that many of the words are the same. The top ten such collocations are shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Top 10 collocations with *you* (words immediately following *you*)

Rank	Frequency	Personal <i>you</i>	Rank	Frequency	Impersonal <i>you</i>
1	52	guys	1	96	're
2	43	think	2	56	can
3	43	're	3	51	have
4	39	've	4	31	get
5	38	talk	5	31	don't
6	36	have	6	18	go
7	20	just	7	14	want
8	19	were	8	11	look
9	16	can	9	10	just
10	14	had	10	9	had

Clearly, there is a limit in the extent to which N-clusters can aid us in distinguishing the two usages of *you*. An additional strategy, which was not undertaken in this study, may be to examine only occurrences of *you* before verbs in their base form. Because the impersonal *you* is most likely to occur in before such verbs, one could restrict one's search to those cases. As such, this strategy would likely return a smaller number of occurrences than actually exist, but would at least provide a ballpark figure.

4. Conclusion

Within the context of MLB interviews, the use of the impersonal *you* is widespread. The motivating factors for its use are various, yet the result of its use is a focus away from the individual player or manager, and toward a perspective of individual events existing as a part of the cultural norms of baseball. Future research could provide an insight into what extent this use is reflected in interviews in other sports (comparing individual sports and team sports, for example), or in political or cultural interviews, as well as its use in other conversational settings.

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