

Why English has a 'we' problem: when we say 'we', who do 'we' mean?

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In his Redfern speech, Paul Keating said we need to open our hearts, but who are 'we'? If the speech was given in Mandarin, Tok Pisin or Warlpiri, we'd know



'Why isn't it clear which group "we" refers to? The fault lies not with Paul Keating. The fault lies with the word "we" itself.' Photograph: The Sydney Morning Herald/Fairfax Media via Getty Images

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"We committed the murders."

That was the line that jolted the crowd during Paul Keating's Redfern speech, delivered on 10 December 1992. By "we" Keating of course meant "we non-Indigenous Australians". The crowd understood and gave an immediate, heartfelt response for a sentiment seldom heard from a non-Indigenous Australian leader. Keating's uncompromising language contributed to the Redfern speech rightly being celebrated as a pivotal moment for reconciliation.

But not long after Keating delivered that line, he followed it up with this:

I think what we need to do is open our hearts a bit. All of us.

In the context of the speech, "we" again means "we non-Indigenous Australians", but it's not clear because of the all-inclusive way he finishes the thought. Perhaps he meant "all of us Australians, Indigenous or not – we should *all* open our hearts a bit"?

Would the Indigenous response to the speech have been less positive if Keating had been seen to be including Indigenous people in his call to open hearts, asking them to accept the reconciliation efforts of the non-Indigenous? Conversely, would the Indigenous response to the speech have been more unconditionally positive if Keating had been crystal clear that he was calling on only the non-Indigenous to open their hearts?

Why isn't it clear which group "we" refers to? The fault lies not with [Paul Keating](#) (or Don Watson, but we're not going there). The fault lies with the word "we" itself. For any other word, this would represent an interesting linguistic side-note, but the central role played by

the word “we” in our national reconciliation discussion means that there are serious ramifications.

What’s wrong with “we”?

English is often celebrated (by English speakers) as the most expressive language, allowing users to deploy fine nuance and precision. However, English is also deficient in many ways, including in this case the limited clarity afforded by our first person plural pronoun: “we”. The word is simply too vague. It might refer to “my people but *not* you and your people” or it might refer to “my people *and* you and your people.”

Other languages have multiple forms of “we” to distinguish between groups. Linguists call this feature “clusivity”.

Many of Australia’s Indigenous languages have four or more words covering “we”, for example:

- We two (including you)
- We more-than-two (including you)
- We two (excluding you)
- We more-than-two (excluding you)

Another such language is Chinese. Mandarin Chinese has two words for “we”: “wo-men” and “zan-men”. “Wo-men” is the general word for “we”. “Zan-men” also means “we”; the difference is that it specifically includes those being addressed.

Tok Pisin, the creole spoken in Papua New Guinea, solves it neatly:

yupela (you and your group)
+
mipela (me and my group)
=
yumipela (we all, including my group and your group)

Fixing the problem

We English speakers congratulate ourselves on the adaptability of our language, so perhaps we can fix this problem. Adapting the Tok Pisin solution, we could use “you-we”, or perhaps “you-me-we”.

Some might argue that this type of clarity would serve only to draw the lines of division more starkly, with no room left for comfortable ambiguity: “*We* did this and *you* did that.” The counterargument is that the discussion is better served by clearer words, even if that means pointed debate.

Why are we missing an inclusive “we”? Perhaps it is a quirk of linguistic history or perhaps it is just a reflection of the “us and them” tradition of public debate in the Anglosphere, where such unanimity can’t be contemplated and unanimity is suspect.

If there's a chance that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia feel excluded by the other group's use of "we", then it's worth thinking about how the English language has shaped this situation, and how "we" might be able to change.

	'We two (including you)'	'We more than two (including you)'	'We two (excluding you)'	'We more than two (excluding you)'
English	we	we	we	we
Chinese	咱们 zan-men	咱们 zan-men	我们 wo-men	我们 wo-men
Tok Pisin	yumi	yumi pela	mi pela	mi pela
Warlpiri (Indigenous language from north west of Alice Springs)	ngali (-jarra)	(-riipa) / ngalipa	ngajarra (-rijarra)	(-mala) / nganimpa

How do 'we' compare? Photograph: Gavin Davis/Supplied