



You and Thou: Loss of politeness marking?

Origin of two personal pronouns of address

➤ From Latin: *tu/vos* (4th A.D.)

Major European languages have different pronouns for singular and plural address and at least two pronouns in addressing a single individual -> depends on the social relationship between speaker and listener

Latin of antiquity: use of *tu* for addressing a single person

4th century A.D.: form to address the emperor was developed-> *vos* instead of *tu*; multiple pronouns in familiar European Languages from that time onwards

Two possible explanations of the change to *vos*:

Plural form for the Roman emperor may have developed as a natural reciprocal to the emperor's habit of speaking of himself as *nos* (we) -> plural of majesty, considered himself as superior

4th century: Roman Empire was divided up into the eastern and western divisions -> 2 emperors, Rome one and one in Constantinople, people had to address both emperors and not only one

Use of the plural form *vos* for the emperor, nobility and other social superiors; *tu* just for the lower classes. When the use of the pronoun began to broaden it was more likely to be applied to strangers or mere acquaintances than to intimate associates.

13th century: French vocabulary influence after the Norman conquest-> *thou* replaced by the plural *ye* as formal mode of address to one person (superiors)
Followed the patterns of Latin and French-> *ye* (formal circumstances); *thou* (intimacy, familiarity; disrespect)

17th century: Religious Society of Friends-> eschewal of *you*, said *thou* to everyone

Today: *you* as direct address to many persons or just to one

Old English: *thou* as the second person singular pronoun and *ye* as plural

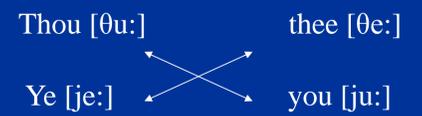
16th century: *Thou* was extensively used by Shakespeare

18th century: *Thou* was gone from ordinary speech

Evolution of *thou* and *ye*

	Sing.	Pl.	
Middle English	thou	ye	Subj.
	thee	you	Obj.
Early Modern English	Thou/ ye/you	Ye/ you	Subj.
	Thee/ you	you	Obj.
Modern Standard English	you		Subj./Obj.

Cross-over analogy



Three stages of reductive development of the singular pronoun in English

1. Use of the 2. person plural pronoun (*ye/you*) for addressing people of higher rank adopted from French into English (at court) in the Late Middle English period when French-speaking ruling class gradually switched to English

2. Usage of plural forms for addressing individuals gradually extended to other social classes during Early Modern English period due to sociolinguistic factors (Middle class gained strength during the 15th century, a big part of the old aristocracy gets destroyed in Wars of the Roses -> new aristocracy emerges out of Middle class, restructuring of society) by the 16th century the plural pronoun had become the common form of address and the singular *thou* the marked form:

- To indicate rank/inferiority (becomes less and less frequent during 17th century)
- Singular of contempt emerges (when trying to insult or getting angry at someone), especially during trials at court (reinforced through political and religious fights and treason trials in the 16th century)
- Ironic use of polite (e.g. plural) address
- Marriage pronoun: husband addressing wife with singular, but wife uses plural for addressing husband (very frequent during 16th and 17th century due to puritan belief that women are inferior to men)

3. Generalization of plural object pronoun *you* as only form of direct address also during Early Modern English period

The extinction of *thou*

During the 16th century the use of the singular *thou* had already been reduced to a few marked contexts: a husband addressing his wife (Puritanism), a superior talking to a person of very low rank, and the use as singular of contempt (especially during trials at court).

According to Finkenstaedt 1963: 223 no formal reasons of the language were responsible for the complete loss of *thou*, but changes in the society of the 17th century:

- Severe conflict with the Quakers about use of *thou* was a contributing factor, people tried not to use *thou* in fear of being mistaken for a Quaker
- Strong influence of the philosopher John Locke who believed in tolerance and the equality of all people -> fundamental respect for the individual forbade use of condescending language (e.g. singular *thou*)
- Position of woman in marriage started changing, puritan ideals lost importance -> loss of *thou* in marriage

Survival

- in English dialects for quite some time: pronoun of marriage in Lancashire in middle of 19th century, *thou* as insult in Somerset and Yorkshire in 20th century (Finkenstaedt 1963: 226)
- in literature e.g. affectionate singular
- still used by the Quakers today

Examples from Chaucer (Canterbury Tales – The Knights Tale)

In this scene the knight (social high position) is in debt to the lady (social lower position). She asks him to marry her and he reacts as following with using the derogatory *thou* as he doesn't want to marry an old woman. Here the form of address varies between the two not because of their social rank, but also changes due to the different context and the social situation.

*Thou art so loothly, and so oold also
And therto comen of so lough a kynde,
That litel wonder is thought I walwe and wynde.
So wolde God myn herte worlde brest.*

[You're so hideous, and low-born besides. It's little wonder if I twist and turn. I wish to God my heart would burst.]

After her speech he acknowledges her wisdom and agrees to her marriage proposal and addresses her with the polite *yow* to show her the respect she deserves:

*My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
I put me in youre wise governance;
Cheseth yourself which may be most plesance
And most honour to yow and me also.*

[My lady and my love, and my dearest wife, I trust myself in your wise guidance; do you yourself choose whichever may be the most pleasing and honourable for both of us.]

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