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 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; not 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.

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

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)

16th century: Thou was extensively used by Shakespeare

17th century: Religious Society of Friends’ eschewal of you, said thou to everyone

18th century: Thou was gone from ordinary speech

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

Evolution of thou and ye

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<th>Sing.</th>
<th>Pl.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>thou</td>
<td>thee</td>
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Middle English

Early Modern English

Modern Standard English

Cross-over analogy

Thou [θu:]  thee [θi:] you  [ju:]

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)
- Ionic use of polite (e.g. plural) address
- Marriage pronoun: husband addressing wife with his wife, but uses plural for addressing husband (very frequent during 16th and 17th century due to puritan belief that women are inferior to men)
- 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 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 lothly, and so oold also
And therto comen of so lough a kynde,
That litle wonder is though I wulle and wynde.
So wolde God myn herte wolde brete.

[You’re so luidous, 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 you to show her the respect she deserves:

My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
I put me in your wise governance;
Chesest yourself which may be most plesance
And most honoure to you 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.]

Bibliography:
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