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# Fare Ye Well: On Competition between Ye and You in Early Modern English

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**ABSTRACT** This paper looks at the competition between nominative and oblique forms of the second person formal pronoun in Early Modern English. It explores the major factors which were possibly responsible for the generalization of the oblique form, and the disappearance of the subject form. The influence of both linguistic and extralinguistic factors which resulted in the altered pronoun system will be discussed as it is believed that social circumstances, especially the level of formality, might have played a significant role in ousting the nominative case form.

In order to obtain the necessary language data, a corpus-based approach will be adopted. English historical corpora will be consulted so as to identify the particular period in which the major decrease in usage of the nominative form can be observed. Additionally, the parsed corpora will provide further evidence relating to the usage of the oblique form instead of the subject form.

The paper first briefly outlines the theoretical background of the morphological and syntactic properties of *ye* and *you* in Middle English and Early Modern English. Second, it provides a review of the relevant literature about the topic at hand. Third, it examines the examples from the corpora and literary texts. Fourth, it proceeds to discuss the possible sociolinguistic motivation behind the generalization of the oblique form *you*. The paper concludes with a brief summary of the main points and an outlook for future research.

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**KEYWORDS** Early Modern English, *ye*, *you*, change from below

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Change seems to be one of the major characteristics of language at all levels of linguistic description. Given the fact that the process can be described as a diachronic one, it can be studied only after the particular formal or functional change has been completed, which implies that a certain amount of speculation is inevitably involved in the study of language change. However, contemporary linguistic tools, such as historical corpora, can enable the researchers to trace the initiation and development of changes. Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that language change can be manifested in a multitude of ways and that certain word classes seem to be more susceptible to it than the others.

A distinction between word classes commonly found not only in discussions on historical linguistics, but also in general linguistics handbooks, is the one between content words or open classes and function words or closed classes. Content words are used to describe various elements of the extralinguistic reality, such as "things, actions, and qualities" (Hopper and Closs Traugott 2004, 4). These open classes might seem to be more liable to change than function words as, by definition, they are 'open' and items can be easily added to the class and, if need be, changed. Closed classes demonstrate the relationships between the individual segments of a clause, sentence, or a higher level of linguistic analysis (Hopper and Closs Traugott 2004). The relationships between the pieces of a clause are fairly systematic and fixed, and therefore apparently less susceptible to diachronic changes. However, examples which challenge this claim, one of them being the pronoun system, can be found in the history of English. This phenomenon will be studied more closely in the paper at hand.

Specifically, the present paper will look at the changes which the second person pronoun nominative and oblique forms, namely *ye* and *you*, underwent during the Early Modern English period. The main concern of the paper is to provide a discussion of the competition between these forms and a description of the contexts in which *you*, the oblique case, ousted *ye*, previously the subject case. For this purpose, a corpus-based approach will be adopted, whereby *The Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English* (Kroch, Santorini and Delfs 2004), hereinafter referred to as PPCEME, will be used as the major source of linguistic data.

The paper at hand is organised as follows. First, the literature concerning the topic of the paper will be reviewed. Second, the methodology adopted during the course of the project will be outlined. Third, the results will be discussed and an attempt will be made to describe the contexts in which the change at hand first became evident. Then, the paper will be concluded with the summary of the main points and an outlook for future research.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several factors which contributed to the change under consideration can be found in the relevant literature, the majority of which can be described as language-internal. One of them involves the phonetic nature of the nominative form of the pronoun. *Ye*, as already noted by Jespersen (1942), was phonetically weak and unstressed in numerous positions. Based on his interpretation, it can be concluded that the form under analysis might have been pronounced as /jə/ in unstressed positions. While the perceived phonetic weakness certainly might have contributed to the loss of *ye*, other factors played a role in the process as well.

Another aspect mentioned in the literature on this topic which might have influenced the loss of *ye* is of morphosyntactic nature. More precisely, it is frequently claimed that the “confusion between the subject and the object forms”, particularly in the sentences which contain imperative and subjunctive mood gradually enabled *you* to become the only pronoun used (Rutkowska 2007, 186–187). Rutkowska (2007, 186) proposes that, in the sentences such as the following:

“I pray *you* that *ye* wollressaye them as myn own proper god (WM 1476).”

omitting the subordinator *that* would result in the following construction:

“I pray *you ye* wollressaye them as myn own proper god.”

Such a construction is, of course, not permitted, which implies that only one of the forms needs to be selected in order for the construction to be judged as grammatically acceptable. It seems fairly possible that, for the reason Jespersen (1942) proposes, *you* was selected instead of *ye*.

Rutkowska's (2007) suggestion can be judged reasonable as it is based on a database of letters, which, despite the fact that they represent written evidence, can be seen as relatively similar to spoken language. This is significant because spoken language, as it is generally known, is not attested in the historical corpora which focus on Middle and Early Modern English. However, it is precisely spoken language which is of importance when studying not only forms of address, but also diachronic language development in general. Therefore, studying correspondence can enable the researchers to approach spoken language.

Despite the existing literature on the topic, there is one aspect of the change under analysis which does not seem to have received the attention it could merit for the implications it might have for the sociolinguistic aspects of the change under consideration. This aspect is reflected in the sociolinguistic context in which the increase in the use of *you* in the subject form throughout the time is evident. A deeper knowledge of this factor could contribute to the better understanding of the sociolinguistic nature of the change. In order to enhance the current knowledge on this matter, this paper will focus on the sociolinguistics of the pronoun change in Early Modern English.

In the following section, the methodology adopted during the course of the project will be outlined.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This section focuses on the methodological tools and conventions which were followed in order to obtain the linguistic data needed for the analysis. The project consisted of two main stages, the first of which involved reviewing the relevant literature on the topic at hand. The results of the review are summarised in Section 2 above. The second stage can be described as more empirical as it involved corpus research.

This stage of the research was conducted in several phases. First, the

author needed to decide which historical corpus to use. Having analysed the available options, it was decided to use the PPCEME corpus as it can be deemed fairly representative of the period under consideration. Of course, the question of representativeness is not as straightforward as it might seem at first as the extent to which a corpus adequately represents the language of which it aims to be representative is debatable. However, this discussion will not be taken up in the paper as it clearly exceeds its scope.

Having decided on the source of data, the empirical phase of the project was divided into two stages, namely a qualitative and quantitative one. Within the former stage, the main aim was to classify the pronouns into different categories. The categories which were established for the purposes of the research are *ye as the subject* and *you as the subject*. After the collection of all the examples which seemed pertinent to the study, the quantitative stage commenced. This stage largely involved basic statistical description in terms of raw frequency of the pronoun forms. It was assumed that the decrease and increase in one specific form would indicate the change under analysis.

During both of the stages, the primary source of data was personal correspondence in the form of letters as it is believed that, being somewhat less formal than, for instance, drama, they are more similar to the spoken language used in less formal contexts. In addition, the letters were classified into two categories, namely private and non-private. The members of the latter class include letters which were exchanged by family members or friends. The individuals involved in the correspondence were relatively easy to identify as the letters always include address, and, in certain cases, multiple mentions of the addressee. The rest of the letters, including the communication between, for example, two public personalities, was labelled non-private. This distinction was perceived to be relevant for the study at hand, as the former category is deemed highly representative of spoken language because family members and close friends are likely to adhere to less formal conventions when addressing each other.

Therefore, for the purposes of the present paper, the private letters under consideration will be defined as being representative of a relatively informal context. Changes which originate in this and similar contexts are sometimes termed "changes from below" (Mesthrie 2009, 112). Moreover, for the purposes of this paper, it is assumed that the context in which an ambiguous use of *you* in the subject form first increased is possibly also the context in which the change at hand was initiated.

As described above, after analysing each of the items obtained and classifying them into the categories, an attempt was made to conduct a quantitative analysis and see which items increase and decrease in numbers during the relevant period. At first, it was believed that a sample would have to be drawn from the entire population of data. Nevertheless, after conducting the qualitative analysis and calculating the raw numbers, this step was deemed unnecessary as the sample was relatively small and it was possible to take all the examples into account when performing the quantitative analysis. Taking the entire population from the genre under analysis, namely all private and non-private letters, enhances the reliability of the data. This was also one of the reasons why inferential statistical analyses were not conducted, as the results are true for the entire population and there was no need to verify their generalisability in this sense.

In the next section, the results obtained by following the above outlined methodology will be reported.

#### **4. FINDINGS**

This section of the paper provides the results of the study before they are discussed more thoroughly in Section 5. Before demonstrating the quantitative results and briefly reviewing them, the time frame under consideration will be explained.

As mentioned in various sections of this paper, the present study is concerned with the Early Modern English period. Nonetheless, as this

**Table 1.** Periodisation data taken over from the PPCEME

Period Abbreviation	Years*
E1	1500–1569
E2	1570–1639
E3	1640–1710

\* A more detailed explanation of the periodisation system can be found at:  
<https://www.ling.upenn.edu/hist-corpora/PPCEME-RELEASE-3/index.html>.

**Table 2.** Distribution of *you* as subject case in private and non-private letters

Period	Private	Non-private
E1 (1500–1569)	62	35
E2 (1570–1639)	245	77
E3 (1640–1710)	134	81

period is fairly large and encompasses approximately two hundred years, it was necessary to divide it into several shorter subperiods so as to be able to study the phenomenon at hand. This was done by taking over the system already devised in the PPCEME, which contains three subperiods of Early Modern English – E1, E2, E3 – each of which spans either 69 or 70 years. The relevant periods are shown in Table 1.

The main step in the analysis involved calculating raw instances of the forms under consideration found in private and non-private letters separately. The results obtained by adopting this method are demonstrated in Table 2.

As Table 2 indicates, in E1 period, the number of instances of *you* used in the subject case in private letters is larger than the number of the same forms found in non-private letters. Furthermore, the number of the forms under consideration significantly increased in E2 period, which seems to be a likely development if the fact that *you* is virtually the only pronoun form used nowadays is considered. However, the number then considerably decreases in E3 period, which can be understood as a fairly surprising further step and might be attributed to the low representativeness of the corpus. Therefore, the data should be treated with caution.

When looking at the numbers of *you* found in non-private letters, it can be discerned that they seem to provide more reliable findings. In particular, although the number of the forms is considerably smaller than in non-private letters for all three subperiods, the gradual increase in the use of *you* in the subject case seems to be more realistic given the use of the pronoun in the Present Day English.

In the following section, the results will be discussed in more depth.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This section will focus on the sociolinguistic dimension of the change under consideration, which, as explained in Section 2, has remained underexplored. First, the possibility that the change in the pronoun system of Early Modern English could be considered a 'change from below' will be considered. Then, the notion of covert prestige will be discussed in relation to the change in the pronoun system.

### 5.1. THE GENERALISATION OF *YOU* TO ALL CASE FORMS – A 'CHANGE FROM BELOW'?

The tendency of the pronoun *you* used in subject case to appear in higher numbers in informal than in formal letters can lead to the tentative conclusion that the change was initiated in contexts which can be



described as informal. These contexts can be linked to the distinction found in numerous variationist approaches to language change, namely the distinction between the so called ‘change from above’ and ‘change from below’. As most of these models were primarily concerned with phonetics in the past, they define these types of change in phonetic terms. Nevertheless, it should be noted that general characteristics of these changes can be fairly easily transferred to other levels of linguistic description as well.

The terms ‘above’ and ‘below’, as Mesthrie (2009, 118) explains, refer to both “levels of conscious awareness as well as position in the social hierarchy”. For the purposes of the present paper, the latter is more relevant as it is believed that studying the levels of awareness of users of Early Modern English by means of a corpus might be rather challenging. Therefore, in this paper, a ‘change from above’ in relation to data at hand is primarily understood as a change initiated in higher social strata of a particular society (Mesthrie 2009). This definition can also be extended to include another sociolinguistic criterion, namely the level of formality. The justification for such an extension can be found if two aspects are considered.

First, lower social strata were considerably more likely to engage in informal conversations with their family, friends and co-workers. They were rarely in a situation in which formal language was explicitly required. Therefore, in their everyday interactions they probably developed forms which, if they spread to higher social strata, can be described as initiating ‘changes from below’. Second, the different dimensions of formality are important variables in variationist sociolinguistics and have been used in the experiments in the field since its beginnings (see for example Trudgill 1974). If the informal contexts would need to be placed along the ‘below’ – ‘above’ continuum, they would most likely be located towards the former. Hence, including language changes which originate in informal contexts under the term ‘below’ seems to be reasonable.

As already mentioned in the methodology section of this paper, the different levels of formality are of high significance for the present study.

Particularly, non-private letters are believed to be representative of informal contexts, whereas the private letters exchanged between family members and friends are seen as informal contexts. The tendency of the pronoun *you* to be more numerous in private than in non-private letters, especially in the earliest period of Early Modern English marked as E1, seems to indicate that the change under consideration was initiated in informal contexts, or 'below'. This conclusion is, of course, based merely on the data from the PPCEME and data from other corpora, such as the *Corpus of Early Modern English Correspondence*, should also be studied in order to derive a more plausible conclusion.

Furthermore, it might have been the case that *you* acted as a marker of covert prestige in the informal contexts. Covert prestige is associated with the tendency "to be more favourably disposed towards other linguistic forms, which are not precisely standard, [...] hidden values associated with non-standard speech [which are] not normally overtly expressed" (Hernández-Campoy 2008, 20). This type of prestige might be an important factor in the instances of language change which are described as coming from 'below'. Specifically, the use of *you* in the subject slot might have been perceived as a marker of membership to a particular community and closeness, which might have been one of the reasons for its frequent use in the informal letters discussed in the present paper.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The present paper focused on the competition between two forms of the second person pronoun in Early Modern English, namely its subject case *ye* and its oblique case *you*. The discussion was primarily based on the evidence obtained from the PPCEME. Letters were used as the main source of data, as they are believed to be highly representative of personal correspondence. The letters were subdivided into private and non-private letters. Private letters were, for the purposes of this paper, taken to represent informal contexts, whereas the non-private ones are believed to be reflective of language practices found in formal contexts of the period.

The study, as explained in the section on methodology, can be qualified as a piece of mixed methods research, because it involved both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. The latter indicated that the use of *you* in the subject form is more numerous in private than in non-private letters of the period. This fact suggests that the change under consideration could be described as a change from 'below', as it was apparently initiated in informal contexts. *You* might have been perceived as a marker of covert prestige, which would corroborate this theory. The sociolinguistic factors, together with the language-internal factors, such as phonological weakness and morphosyntactic restructuring, most likely caused the generalisation of the oblique form *you* to all case forms.

Of course, the account of the pronoun change in Early Modern English presented in this paper is not to be seen as the ultimate solution to the research question at hand. Rather, it should be understood as a possible explanation which would be rendered more plausible within a larger research project which would involve a comparative analysis of the pronoun usage as attested in different diachronic corpora.

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