

## Teach Thyself Olde Englishe

Why should anyone bother with such an archaic concept? Well, some may just be curious but there are occasions when the switch from 'thou' to 'you' is quite significant.

For example: "And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired *to have you*, that he may sift *you* as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." (Luk 22:31-32 KJV) In this setting the Lord includes Simon in a larger group of those whom Satan had desired, you; but assures him of His personal prayer on his behalf, thou.

Or moving in the opposite direction: "And Moses said unto God, Who *am* I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt? And he said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this *shall be* a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain." (Exo 3:11-12 KJV) In this setting the Lord is speaking personally to Moses with the repeated pronoun thou but His promise is that not only Moses but all the people ye will serve God upon the mountain.

It is not really possible to convey these ideas in modern English, and as the languages that God used to convey His revelation, both Hebrew and Greek, had 'thou and thee' as well as 'ye and you' it is sometimes good to get as close as we can to the original ideas.

This chart should help you to sort it out a little better...

	Subjective (nominative)	Objective (accusative)	Possessive (genitive)	Verb Ending	Irregular Verbs
1st Pers Sing	I	me	my, mine <sup>1</sup>	none	am
2nd Pers Sing	thou	thee	thy, thine <sup>1</sup>	-est	art, hast, dost, shalt, wilt
3rd Pers Sing	he, she, it	him, her, it	his, her/hers, its	-eth	is, hath, doth
1st Pers Pl	we	us	our, ours	none	are
2nd Pers Pl	ye <sup>2</sup>	you	your, yours	none	are
3rd Pers Pl	they	them	their, theirs	none	are

1. My/mine and thy/thine were used similarly to a/an; "my" and "thy" preceded a word beginning with a consonant sound, while "mine" and "thine" preceded a word beginning with a vowel sound.

2. Note that "ye" is the nominative and "you" is the accusative, which is counterintuitive given that thou/thee go the opposite way. When town criers yelled "Hear Ye!", the "ye" in question is the subject, not the object, of the hearing. Also note that using "ye" in place of "the", as in "Ye olde candye shoppe", is incorrect; this derives from a mistaken interpretation of an archaic spelling of "the" using a former runic letter later replaced by "th"; this letter kind of resembled a lowercase "y", and when printing was invented, early printers, lacking the already-obsolete letter in their movable type, sometimes used a "y" for it when transcribing old documents.

## 'Familiar' and 'Formal' Forms of Address

To further complicate the use of pronouns, English in the period in question made a distinction in second-person pronouns depending on whether you were addressing somebody in a familiar or formal mode. This concept is familiar to students of other languages that have such forms of address, like the distinction between *tu* and *usted* in Spanish. Actually, the usage of *vous* in French best parallels the forms of address in medieval English; it's a second-person plural pronoun that's also used in the singular when addressing somebody in a formal way.

The singular pronouns **thou** and **thee** were considered "familiar", meaning that they were appropriate for use among close friends and family. When addressing somebody who was not so close, however, the use of **thou** or **thee** implied that you regarded them as being of lower social class than you were, and hence was definitely inappropriate when addressing your social superiors. People could be punished for contempt of court for addressing a judge in this manner, for instance. To address somebody outside the circle of familiarity in a respectful way, especially when they were of higher social class or in a position of power, **ye** and **you** were used, even though the addressee was singular rather than plural.

This is the opposite of what we often expect. Some people like the sound of **thee** because they think it makes God sound more majestic and dignified. In fact, **thou** is much more intimate than **you** in King James Version English, and **you** would have been much more dignified and majestic. **Thee** brings you 'closer' to God than **you** did. This is one of the reasons that **thou** has survived in romantic poetry. During Sir Walter Raleigh's trial one of his accusers became exasperated with him and tried to humiliate him with the phrase "I, 'thou' thee, sir". It is quite unintelligible to modern ears, but his accuser in refusing to give Raleigh his proper courtesy pronoun of **you**, was relegating him to the position of a servant boy who would have been addressed as **thou**.

The Quaker use of **thee** and **thou** was a refusal to give to ordinary people the status that **you** implied. They regarded the use of **you** to a single person as assisting the single person's pride and aspirations to grandeur, and would not be part of this. They refused to 'doff their hats' for the same reason.

Eventually, with the rise of more egalitarian philosophies in contrast to the rigid hierarchies of feudalism, having two different forms of address was regarded as excess baggage, and **you** reached its modern usage with no distinction of familiar or formal, singular or plural, or nominative or accusative. This was already true by the time that the King James Version was translated, so the translators use of **thee**, **thou**, **ye** was a conscious but already archaic choice.