Abstract

This paper argues that most textbooks on the history of English describe the conventional story where the T form of address (\textit{thou}) falls out of general use in the seventeenth century, so that looking at pronouns of address in English is no longer of interest or value. This story is generally based on standard English, however, so that it ignores the active use of \textit{thou}-forms in English regional dialects well into the late twentieth century and their survival up to the present day; and also their continued use in the language of the liturgy and related discourses. The accepted story also ignores the development of new singular and plural oppositions in pronouns and pronominals of address in regional speech, not only within the British Isles, but also, very importantly, beyond them. The second part of the paper will therefore make a general survey of English pronouns of address in a global anglophone context.

1. Introduction

At first glance it might appear that in discussing second person personal pronouns (2PP) in contemporary English there is not much to say. Gramley & Patzold’s \textit{Survey of Modern English} states baldly: ‘To all intents and purposes English has only one second person pronoun, \textit{you}’ (1992: 288). It follows therefore that in comparison with other European languages there is no distinction made formally between singular and plural (but consider the reflexive \textit{yourself}/\textit{yourselves}), and none between ‘polite’ and
‘familiar’/‘impolite’, as there once were in English during the medieval and
renaissance periods (see Wales 1983, 1996). It might be argued that this multivalence
for you is an advantage in certain registers, for example advertising and propaganda,
where a mass consumer readership or audience is simultaneously an individual
singled out. ‘I want you for U.S. Army’ says Uncle Sam on an old recruiting poster,
his index finger pointing outwards. ‘I am telling you’ he says on another, ‘On June
28th I expect you to enlist in the army of war savers’, his hands on his hips. Is he
pointing at one person, or a whole group, or both? Is he being personal and friendly
(T), or polite (V)? Or authoritative, even rude (T)?

There is certainly no thou-forms in the usual tables of personal pronouns in
contemporary grammar-books, for example Biber et al’s most recent Student
Grammar of Spoken and Written English (2002). Most histories of English stop
discussing thou after the seventeenth century, or the eighteenth at the latest, when it is
considered ‘marked’ rather than ‘unmarked’ (you) and characteristically regard it as
‘obsolete’. However, time and again we must be wary about grammarians’ and
linguistic historians’ use of the term ‘English’. What is usually meant is ‘written
English’; and ‘formal written English’; and ‘standard English’; and more specifically
‘standard English English’: hence ‘formal written standard English English’. Even
Gramley & Patzold have to admit that thou has not actually completely disappeared;
although it is clearly ‘marginalised’ from ‘common core’ usage.

2. ‘Thou’ in liturgical discourse

Thou-forms and corresponding verb forms (- (e)st, -(e)dst), surprisingly perhaps,
remain in contemporary standard liturgical discourse, written and chanted, twenty
years after the introduction of the ‘Alternative Service’ book in 1980 for the Church
of England, and the gradual revision of hymns and psalms and the popular use of
modernised versions of the Bible. Even in the ‘Alternative Service’ thou-forms occur in the Eucharist; and The Book of Common Prayer is still widely used for Evensong. Thou in liturgical discourse is very much a powerful symbol, a style marker of something set apart, super-deferential even. I think Joseph (1987) is right when he says ‘we would not term [the] use [of thou] as non-standard. The person praying violated a contemporary ‘norm’ in order to exploit every bit of the authority and status which the standard language enjoys’.¹ Joseph is discussing prayer specifically, and there is probably also the connotation of intimacy at work here. Prayers can be seen as private and intimate monologues addressed to God. Most people, certainly, still prefer to use the traditional version of the Paternoster or ‘Lord’s Prayer’: ‘Our Father, which art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name.’ Thou-forms are also retained in the marriage service, even in civil ceremonies, in all parts of the anglophone world: ‘I, Katie Wales, do take thee, David Bovey, to be my lawful wedded husband’: again, there is the connotation of intimacy and affection to take account of. For Quakers, who still also apparently use thou-forms, the historical association of ‘brotherhood’ must be a factor in its persistence.²

Thou-forms, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, turn up in the British National Spoken Corpus (BNSC), but are unsurprisingly, however, not very common: no more than about 30 in 11 million words. They occur in religious text types such as sermons, and direct quotations from the Authorised Version of the Bible. A productive contemporary formula, however, is thou shalt (not), a parody of the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament, used to suggest an edict:

¹ J. E. Joseph, Eloquence and Power, Pinter, p.73.
(i) ‘…If the development plan said, *Thou shalt not* develop that green field, if it was not allocated in the development plan, then section fifty-four A would er would work very well…’ <f_108301-N-mixed>

The following example taken from a radio phone-in is interesting because the physical context is indeed a church, but the confusion of Old and New Testament adds to the unintentional comedy:

(ii) female caller from Chipping Norton: ‘erm it was the lady that talked earlier, and evidently in church *thou shalt not* smoke. It just amazed me…’

radio presenter: ‘You think that’s wrong?’

caller: ‘Did Jesus Christ ever say *thou shalt not* smoke?’

radio presenter: ‘Well, I don’t know if Marlborough tobacco was around in the time of Jesus Christ….’ <fbheimb-S-mixed>

In the following example the variant of the formula still suggests authority, since it is spoken by a teacher giving a pottery demonstration to the class:

(iii) ‘So can you see the board there? That’s just-er Emma keep *thy* hands to *thyself* otherwise that the eye can induce the old custom of putting them off…’

<i>f_077302-N-mixed>

Another formula, now completely lexicalised, is the phrase *holier than thou*, now having the adjectival meaning of ‘sanctimonious’ and hence used derogatively. It occurs three times in the BNSC, with considerable syntactic flexibility:

(iv) ‘So I don’t want to sit here *holier than thou*, start preaching’; ‘I mean I’m not going to be sort of *holier than thou* about it all I mean’; What could I have done to make Justin *holier than thou*, say anything like that?’

In the following example, again in a religious context like (ii) above, the phrase is parodied: the speaker is describing a funeral:
(v) ‘…and we went in and like the vicar greets you at the door don’t he and she was like <unclear> up to the vicar like, you know, she’s more fucking heavier than thou...’ <f_009701-S-mixed>

3. ‘Thou’ in regional dialects

Leith & Graddol (1996) have a map with a legend that does at least recognise that ‘the pronouns thou and thee are still used in some regional dialects in England’.³ Their map of England, Wales, the Scottish border and the Isle of Man shows thou well away from London, the East Midlands, East Anglia and the South-east: i.e. in the North from the Humber estuary down to the Mersey; the West Midlands and Welsh borderlands, and many parts of the South-west. Frustratingly, the map cannot indicate any patterns of pronominal usage north of the Scottish border. Yet thou-forms have been recognised as a traditional feature of Shetland speech (see, e.g. Melchers 1985). In the following quotation from the BNSC thou-forms are clearly noted as present in the Orkney islands, although there is reference to speech customs of the past, and the phrase which provokes the discussion is a conventional greeting:

(vi) A: The thou and the thee and the thines. You’ve just said thou, ‘hoo’s thou the day’. There are a lot of old folks still use that?

B: ‘Oh yes it’s quite common and common in middle-aged folk even yet among people you’re familiar with. I mean even when I was small you wouldn’t use thee and thou to an older person. It was somehow thought of as being irreverent but to members of your own family and people your own age or somebody younger than you you would use thee and thou. But if it was perhaps even a little one your own age if you didn’t know them very well it would be you. Thee and thou were <unclear> a

term implied intimacy and affection and closeness as far as I always understood it…’

As a result of the monumental survey of regional rural dialects by Harold Orton and his co-workers at the University of Leeds from 1952 onwards, dialectologists know a great deal about the active use of thou-forms (with their rich phonetic variants) in over 300 localities amongst older speakers at least up to the 1970s if not also later. So Upton et al (1994, 1996), albeit based on the Survey of English Dialects (SED) , note thou-forms in the areas designated by Leith & Graddol, but also Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire. There is no doubt that thou-forms, like many other dialect features, were expected to be recessive by Orton and his colleagues, because of the spread of standard English into the educational system, the increased mobility of the population, and the rise of urbanisation, etc: indeed these were factors which lead to the Survey being undertaken. Even Joseph Wright in his thesis on his local Windhill dialect (1892) recognises that thou is not so general then as it had been 20 years before.

However, the extent of thou’s recessiveness needs to be thoroughly examined. Orton’s older speakers of the 1960s and even 1970s have been replaced by a new generation of older speakers: the example in (vi) shows thou’s retention. Moreover, it is highly significant that the SED largely ignored non-rural localities, areas which offer potentially rich and highly complex dialect variation for investigation. In semi-industrial areas, in suburbs and town and city centres especially in the North of England and the Midlands, the assumption that all is ‘dialect levelling’ is not proving the case. So in the ‘Black Country’ round Wolverhampton and Dudley near Birmingham thee- subjective and objective forms are still heard amongst the elderly (‘Bist thee a-gooin?’). Shorrocks’ work on the Bolton area of Greater Manchester in
the 1970s and 1980s (published 1996, 1998, 1999) revealed extensive use amongst a wider age group and localised special features such as enclitic interrogatives like/dust ( ). Thou-forms in the North-east pit villages can certainly be traced though the mining songs of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century as collected by Lloyd (1978); but they are also testified (thoo, tha, theesell) in the recent tabulations by Griffiths (1999). I myself can cite recent examples in the last two years of thou-forms in speech -and not only amongst older speakers- in the Leeds (West Yorkshire) and Sheffield (South Yorkshire) town centres. In Sheffield thoo as vocative was part of a farewell formula admittedly, uttered by a bus driver; in Leeds the following dialogue took place on a bus between a young mother in her early twenties and her toddler in a buggy:

(vii) toddler: ‘That man’s looking at me’
mother: ‘That man’s looking at thee? That’s all right’

John Widdowson, formerly of the National Centre for English Cultural Tradition (NATCET) at the University of Sheffield has confirmed (personal communication) that thou-forms are alive and well in the Sheffield area. It is interesting in this connection that when a survey he undertook on local dialect was reported in the local press in 1999, it was头lined: ‘Tha wot? As they say in these parts’ (Sheffield Star 13.01.99); and ‘Watch what tha’rt saying’ (Sheffield Telegraph 15.01.99). However, the testimony of the headlines is ambiguous, although valuably so. On the one hand the headlines suggest the use of thou-forms in formulas as in greetings and partings above (and also (vi)) or discourse tags (tha wot?), as in the many examples of thou knows from Bolton in Shorrocks (1998) (see also footnote 9 below); but on the other, that such formulas are fast fading into cultural memory, and therefore increasingly
stereotypical. This would also be in tune with journalists’ general fondness for stereotyping of regional (especially Northern) speech, even in their own region.

Not only does more research need to be done on the general extent of *thou*’s use in regional speech, its degree of recessiveness, its distribution amongst older or younger speakers, but also on its grammatical, sociolinguistic and pragmatic functions, to judge whether they match the accepted T/V distinction of familiarity/politeness, for example; or whether there are different patterns of usage between men and women. Even at the time of the *Survey of English Dialects*, evidence for such patterns and distinctions was scanty, since phonology and morphology were of prime interest. 4 The example in (vi) above about Orkney usage stresses *thou*’s use ‘among people you’re familiar with’; ‘to members of your own family’; ‘people your own age or somebody younger’ because it ‘implied intimacy and affection and closeness ‘. To people ‘you didn’t know…well’ or to ‘an older person’ the *you* of respect was used. The *thou* of affection amongst family members is evident in my Leeds example in (vii). As in earlier periods of English, *thou* can be ambiguous in its values. In the following example from the BNSC, a man is telling his listener about his life down the coal-mines, probably in South Yorkshire or Derbyshire:

(viii) ‘This particular day [the manager] comes round to me, he says, ‘Take this lamp’, he said.’ Bugger off down there’, he says, ‘and *thou* can <unclear> the coal…’ <f_095702 Mid>

The manager shows both his authority and also his rudeness.

There are probably also variations in the values of *thou*-forms from region to region: for example, one man’s ‘mate’ is another man’s ‘stranger’, according to community. It is a well-known stereotype and belief, certainly, that Northerners are
generally friendlier than Southerners; and that terms of address like love and pet are quite frequently used to complete strangers: so consider the Sheffield bus-driver’s thoo noted above. In The Guardian in August 1983 there was a report on the increasing use of ‘familiar’ tha amongst children to parents and teachers in the Barnsley area, normally reserved for their school-mates. (It is interesting that the newsworthiness consisted in the spread of the familiar forms, not in the fact that it was young people rather than the elderly who were using tha in the first place.)

It is also possible for thou to be used in an ‘impersonal’ or ‘generic’ sense, like you most commonly, but I have never seen this commented upon (nor indeed in connection with late medieval or Elizabethan English usage). In the following examples from the incidental material of the earlier Survey of English Dialects the informants are obviously describing a process that habitually takes place: ‘thou greases it’; ‘thou ties it up’. There is a connotation of vividness, and perhaps even the semiotic reflex of self-reference. This is clearer in the following more recent examples from the Bolton area, as recorded by and to Shorrocks. He has played back a recording to his informant:

(ix) ‘Thou doesn’t /dunt/ realise thou art/d t/talking broad like that. I know I talk broad, but thou- thou thinks/d d 0inks/ everything’s coming out all right, thou knows, /d no:z/ and it’s not- well, it’s not when thou hears /de (r)z / it come back on thee/di/….6

4. ‘New’ pronouns of address in regional and colloquial English

6 See further G. Shorrocks, A Grammar of the Dialect of the Bolton Area, pt. I, Peter Lang, pp.93-5. Note that his informants use thou knows frequently, equivalent to the common discourse tag you know
Thou’s apparent strong resistance to obsolescence might be seen as surprising, were it not for the fact also that the ‘death’ of dialect has been predicted for well over a hundred years, as indicated in section 3. above. Indeed, because of the significant growth of urban areas each with their own local linguistic characteristics, as also indicated above, so-called ‘non-standard’ linguistic features are flourishing, with new forms emerging in every-day informal speech. As far as 2PPs are concerned, it would seem that speakers across regions clearly do feel the need to fill the ‘gap’, so to speak, left in the history of ‘standard’ English with the loss of a singular/plural distinction.

One possible choice is you plus a singular rather than plural verb (e.g. you is/was). This is found in colloquial speech from Tees-side to the East-end of London, and was quite widespread in the eighteenth century, as letters, epistolary and other fairly informal types of poetry reveal.

There are well over a dozen possibilities of distinctive plural forms, each with varying degrees of pronominalization and also of localization. There is heard yous(e) in Dublin and Northern Ireland, and in Northern English (Liverpool, Glasgow, the North-east): in these latter urban areas possibly under the influence of immigrant Irish workers. The presence of the plural morpheme in Hiberno-English may itself be due to Gaelic influence, which apparently had a singular plural distinction in the equivalent pronoun.7 A similar variant yiz occurs in general Hiberno-English (dubbed a low prestige form by Quirk et al 1985); and ye’s in Tyneside and Durham. However, on the evidence of the BNSC yous(e) appears to be even more widespread, since many of the 70 examples I found are from southern England discourses. In the

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following example, the speaker is not consistent. He is clearly emotive; it is a public union meeting:

(x) ‘We’re doing *yous* a favour, our lads speaks plain to *you*, we’re doing *yous* a favour. We are asking *you*, withdraw the motion…*Some of yous people* must remember that…’ <f_100908-S-mixed>

Other examples occur in informal conversations among friends or family; and interestingly combine, as in (x), with other lexical items to form noun phrases: *two of yous; any of yous; yous two; yous lot; bugger yous; all of yous;* ‘about yous and Billy’; and even formulaic expressions, e.g. in farewells: ‘So I will love and leave *yous folks* then’. It is interesting to note that in Hiberno-English *yous* (as a determiner) plus another word has become lexicalised in the compound *yousuns*, comparable to the Glaswegian *yins* ‘you ones’. I return to *you* as a determiner below, and also some of the noun phrases above.

As the ‘about *yous* and Billy’ example possibly reveals, although the context is ambiguous, there might be a singular sense here. This is hardly an emerging ‘polite’ usage, however, by analogy with *you’s* history (and see *y’all* below in section 5). It rather suggests that for some people *youse* is simply becoming the norm in everyday conversation, especially to family and close friends.

With several phrases which mark plural address it becomes increasingly difficult to see where pronouns end and the lexicalization of NPs into pronominals begins (see also section 5 below). It is also difficult to see where non-standard or dialectal usage ends and informal, colloquial everyday common core English begins. There are many *you +NP* phrases, for example, with *you* as an apparent determiner. Take *you guys*, for example. As the BNSC reveals, the phrase as a whole has varied grammatical roles: as a subject:
(xi) ‘Having said that, I’ve been on some of the deliveries that you guys have to do, and some of the places where you have to go and er I fully appreciate it’s not easy…’

<f_084601-N-M>

or as separate vocative:

(xii) ‘… And you’re going, you asked for it, you guys, you asked for it’ <f_139201-S-mixed>

We can note the common collocation here with right or look, to attract or focus people’s attention, and often in the context of re-enacting previous speech, as if to add vividness or drama:

(xiii) ‘But as of nineteen forty-eight, forty-nine, if you’d said—you’d gone into a village, right you guys we’re going into socialism, we are gonna create- collective family…’ <f_113901-S>

(xiv) A: ‘We said look we’ll bring out a price guide

B: Mm

A: but we ain’t gonna pay for it

B oh no no

A: so you guys

B: get it sponsored by the-

A: Yeah. You guys are gonna sponsor this… <f_117701-N-M>

Although you guys is commonly used with male reference only, amongst younger generations in particular it usefully serves for both sexes (you people is certainly not common, but see 5., below); and this is undoubtedly due to American influence (see also section 5). The BNSC has only 200 examples of guys in 11 million words, but the popularity of phrases like wise guys is increasing. The contexts for you guys (17 examples in the BNSC) are often ‘blokey’ and obviously informal (cf. the use of
gonna and aint in (xiii) and (xiv) above). The ‘chumminess’ often disguises authority in examples where a speaker wishes to change the direction of a conversation from generality to direct involvement, as in (xi) above.

The older generation’s equivalent of you guys must be you chaps, with male reference only. I found only 2 examples in the BNSC, one from an older speaker reminiscing about the Second World War: ‘Quite a lot of you chaps did attend [church]’. Other gender-marking phrases would include you boys, you fellows, and you girls.

You lot has another set of connotations: rather familiar like you guys, but possibly slightly disparaging or retorting. In the following example, it is also exhortatory:
(xv) [studio discussion]: ‘Get Bert on the phone I want a word with him now. Come on you lot you know where he is get him on the phone I want to talk to him…’<f_008001-S>

In the following quotations, there is clearly a recognition that you lot may be impolite:
(xvi) [panel game]: A. ‘Are we ready?’
B: Sorry
A: Nobody’s answering
C: yes yes
A: Well let’s have this team for answering then. I like polite terms. Oi you lot
B: Sorry yes. They’re not polite, deduct a point…” <f_117101-Mid-mixed>
(xvii) [meeting in an educational establishment:] A: ‘Do you want me to come round there so you can read -this sheet as well?
B: No it doesn’t matter you lot can keep me right
A: Okay
B: You lot that sounds awful You lot-…” <f_078002-N-mixed>
However, over-familiarity may be permitted from someone with authority, a teacher for example:

(xvii) ‘…In that case take the first paragraph erm-take this first paragraph you lot over here. The second paragraph you you three, the third paragraph you three and do me an idiomatic version in -five minutes’

Lot is itself a very common word in colloquial English (over 11500 examples in the BNSC), and many of the you lot phrases (about 60 of them altogether) occur in contexts where a lot was being used anyway: as in

(xviii) ‘They’ve got to make some money out of that, haven’t they? Otherwise it’s costing you lot over at Southwold a lot of money…’

Formally speaking, you lot, unlike you guys, belongs to a recognisable set of phrases with lot: (a) with objective case pronouns as in us lot; them lot (b) with demonstratives as in this lot; that lot and (c) equivalent to the partitive or quantifier phrase a lot of you, although the semantic range of the latter is partial, not inclusive. However, you lot’s own semantic range has its own ambiguity: what is the least number that you lot can refer to? It is not clear from (xvii) above; but in (xix) it is varied by you two, in obvious hyperbole however. Three girls are walking to school:

(xix) A: ‘Wait up. I can’t walk as fast as you two, I’m not s healthy as you two
B: Healthy, me healthy—
A: Yeah well at least you lot eat up more healthy foods…’

You + numeral is also a common NP of address: from you two up to-what? You three as in (xvii) above, you four? You five? Beyond that we must be in a teaching or military planning situation most probably. You two is certainly a common collocation according to Biber et al (1999), occurring about 40 times per million words in the whole of the British corpus they used. Again, it has phrasal equivalents: them two, us
two in the objective case as with you lot; but also we two in the subjective case.  

8 D. Biber et al The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English, Longman, 2001, p.329 see this construction as pronoun + apposition, not determiner + numeral. A related regional appositive construction not so far noted is the East Anglian you together.

5. Pronouns of address in English around the world

Some of the pronouns and NPs noted above are also found in many varieties of English around the world. Surprisingly, however, English grammar-books are relatively ‘silent’ about pronouns generally around the world, even those text-books recently entering the market on International English(es), e.g. Bauer (2002). Many pronouns of address are due to patterns of colonial settlement. Yiz in Newfoundland English was probably brought by Irish immigrants, as indeed yous/yuz in Australian English and in American English from the mid-West eastwards to Pittsburg.9 Similarly you’uns and yinz are heard in ‘Pittsburgese’, brought from Ulster or Scotland; and even your-uns, yourerunses in Tennessee. You guys I have noted above in section 4, popular amongst middle-class white Americans; youse guys is also heard. Interesting analagous NPs are found in Tok Pisin (yupela ‘you fellow’) and Fiji English (you gang).

It seems surprising that Bauer (2002) again does not refer at all to the most salient and even stigmatised pronoun of address in American English, you-all/ y’all (ya’ll), characteristic of the Southern United States in particular. This form has been much commented on since the 1920s (see Axley 1926-7, Hills 1926-7), but there is still no general agreement as to its origins or its semantic values. It seems to be an interesting case of de-nominalization or encliticization, like yinz: you (as head) + all (in

9 L. Bauer, op.cit., p.27 does refer briefly to youse, stating it is derived from Scottish and Irish, but is vague on its distribution outside the UK.
apposition) with equal stress (as in British English ‘you all know the answer’) now pronounced as an unstressed monosyllable rhyming with wall. In British English all seems to function as an emphaser, as well as making explicit not only that you is plural, but also the inclusiveness of the group addressed: cf ‘all of you’. It is unlikely, therefore, in British English to refer to two people, unlike y’all. However, a recent article on -all compounds by Hantson et al (2002) notes forms like sure-all, damn-all, naff-all, what-all (as in ‘with what-all they’re doing to this planet’, i.e. ‘everything’), where they appear to be emphatic, and all would be the head. It is certainly noteworthy that in y’all the pronoun has been ‘elided’ into all, and not the other way round (*you’ll), although the latter would be homophonous with the abbreviated you will. In present-day American English y’all has clearly filled a gap: analogous forms with other pronouns (we-all, they-all, who-all) are noted in dictionaries of American English (e.g. Wentworth 1944, Matthews 1951) in only sporadic contexts, particularly associated with Black American speech from the 1880s onwards (also why-all, where-all). It is interesting that the earliest reference to y’all, dating from 1824, suggests an association with slave discourse. For Samoan plantation pidgin has yu ol, Montserrat creole has ayu (‘all you’), and many African and Jamaican English varieties, Atlantic creoles and South Carolinian English have umu (oono, hunu, yunnah, wunu), a plural form of address which may be derived from Igbo, but here a calque for y’all. 10

The extent of the lexicalization of y’all is confirmed by the remarkable possessive clitic <‘s>, of long standing, which I heard myself in Baton Rouge in 2001 on a group guided tour: ‘Come on in and put y’all’s coats in the cloakroom’. Historically, of course, other pronouns have acquired such a suffix: notably one’s (cf. also
somebody’s/ someone’, etc). Y’all also occurs in formulaic or phatic phrases such as ‘thank y’all ’; ‘y’all have a nice day’; ‘how are y’all?’. These phrases may well be examples of what Montgomery intriguingly calls ‘plurality by association’, although this is not explained. 11Butters, however, in the same volume has an interesting explanation of these ‘service encounter’ formulas. He gives the example of ‘Y’all come back, hear?’ to a lone customer in closing a sale: the intention is to invite the return of the addressee, and friends and family. This might solve the question as to whether y’all is used in the singular, and hence possibly following the historical path of you as a ‘polite’ form. Present-day opinion thinks it doubtful, although earlier dictionaries (e.g. Wentworth 1944) have quotations, again from Black American speech, that seem clear.12

6. Conclusion(s)

I have tried to illustrate very generally how pronouns of address, in the widest sense, must continue to be of interest to English language scholars despite the apparent ‘normalization’ of you as an unmarked form since the seventeenth century. In the flux of everyday speech new forms have emerged, and lexical processes undergone. The plethora of apparent plural phrases, however, ostensibly filling the ‘gap’ left by the demise of the thou/you opposition in standard English at least, are acquiring other semantic values in addition. ‘Familiarity’ is the main value (youse, you guys); also ‘impoliteness’ or ‘condescension’ (you lot), values traditionally associated with T forms; but also ‘gender’ (you chaps, you boys, you girls, you guys (British English)); and possibly ‘indefiniteness’ (youse, y’all). Given the expressiveness of informal

11 M. Montgomery, op.cit. p.149.
discourse, and in some cases the ‘non-standardness’ of the forms (you, yins, y’all) in
defiance of written ‘norms’, it should not be too surprising, perhaps, that the
expressive singular thou has not entirely died out yet in regional English at the
beginning of this new millennium.

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12 See also Richardson 1984. On ‘service encounter’ forms, see Butters, op.cit. p.332f. Quirk et al,


op.cit. p.344 note [b] think y’all is ‘misunderstood as a singular by outlanders’.


Second Person Pronouns in Contemporary English: The End of a Story or Just the Beginning? Katie Wales, University of Leeds, UK.

This story is generally based on standard English, however, so that it ignores the active use of thou-forms in English regional dialects well into the late twentieth century and their survival up to the present day; and also their continued use in the language of the liturgy and related discourses.

1. Introduction

At first glance it might appear that in discussing second person personal pronouns (2PP) in contemporary English there is not much to say. Gramley & Patzold’s Survey of Modern English states baldly: “To all intents and purposes English has only one second person pronoun, you.” (1992: 288). In contemporary standard English, these are the second-person pronouns: you (singular and plural personal pronoun), yours (singular and plural possessive pronoun). As you usage increased over the fifteenth century, ye and you began to lose their function of marking plurality, and by the end of the period they were used for both singular and plural referents, in both subject and object position. Thou and You. Henry Hitchings: Thou had in Old English been used when addressing only one person, and you when addressing more. By the sixteenth century, this had changed; the difference was social, with thou expressing intimacy or possibly condescension, while you was chillier or more respectful. And these are just the first-person pronouns that are still relatively common among modern Japanese. Previous generations used even more, including: Chin (ژین): Basically obsolete since the end of World War II, it was used exclusively by the emperor. It comes from the Chinese pronoun zhen , which was used by Chinese emperors dating back to the Qin Dynasty. The English language, and probably most languages, are decidedly ill-equipped to navigate such terrain. Even under the influence of psilocybin or LSD, in the midst of feeling total ego-free communion with friends or even plants or wildlife, we’re still stuck with the pronoun “I” to describe ourselves. It’s a linguistic shortcoming that blinks our senses and truncates our spiritual epiphanies. The answer? 2004. “Second person pronouns in contemporary English: The end of a story or just the beginning?”, Franco-British Studies 33: 172-185. (http://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/coloquio_paris/ponencias/pdf/cvc_wales.pdf) (date of access: 13 Jul 2011).

I can't help it, I just adore these words. And, I can't believe we don't have an acceptable word in English for this commonly needed pronoun. What are your thoughts? Edit: Sorry, I dropped the "s" on "thous", was pointed out in replies. Thank you, Rocketman0739. Edit 2: For clarity, I'm not just considering the possessive form of the second person plural pronoun in modern English. That makes so little sense it shrieks of pedantry. Why would anyone want to have "y'alls" become part of proper English without also including "y'all"? For those who have made it clear that my example didn't deal with the possessive second person plural pronoun issue, please reread my post. It includes y'all. 37 comments.