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Meaning in a changing paradigm: the semantics of *you* and the pragmatics of *thou*

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ABSTRACT

Many European languages have two pronouns for singular address. For such languages, Brown and Gilman (1960) propose a model that can explain pronominal choice, arguing that the pronouns allow speakers to construe the speaker-hearer relation with respect to two major social dimensions—power and solidarity. Pronominal choice then functions as a major resource for realizing social deixis in dialogic interaction. However, discussions of the Modern English *thou/you* contrast have criticized the power-and-solidarity model by emphasizing the language-specific peculiarities of the Modern English system. *Thou* and *you* appear to deviate in meaning from the second person pronouns in other languages. *You* can be used to address virtually anyone and in many contexts seems to be a neutral form, rather than a form signalling speaker deference or social distance. *Thou* is associated with emotional language and seems to express speaker agitation. However, in this paper we argue that the peculiarities of the Modern English system may have been overstated. Using evidence from dialogic interactions in Modern English comedies, it is shown that as long as *thou* is available as a systemic option, *you* retains its value of signalling deference or social distance, even in contexts where *thou* could not appear. As for *thou*, it is argued that the association with speaker agitation can be interpreted as a pragmatic side effect of the form's dwindling frequency. Both arguments bring the Modern English *thou/you* contrast back closer in line with the general power-and-solidarity model.

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1. Introduction

According to a long tradition in linguistics, the meaning of a sign derives from the system of which it is part. The characterization of language as ‘un système où tout se tient’, which is commonly attributed to de Saussure, can be taken to mean, among other things, that the meaning of any sign is kept in check by the meanings of other signs. For example, Old English *read* ‘red’ was commonly used to describe the colour of gold. One reason for this is that Old English *geolo* ‘yellow’ was associated with the colours of vegetation and probably had a focal point closer to present-day *green* (Anderson, 2000: 10). In other words, the semantic range of one colour term depends on the other terms in the system. This mode of thinking is easily

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extended to grammatical paradigms. For example, Old English *se* approximately covered the functions of both definite article and demonstrative. Only later did the semantic distinction become marked by separate forms. As Traugott (1992: 172) apologetically remarks, this makes it impossible to do justice to the meaning of Old English *se* in Present-day English glosses, as one is always forced to choose between either the definite article *the*, which is never a demonstrative, or the demonstrative *that*, which is never a definite article.

When also taking into account the role of frequency in language, the relational nature of meaning picks up an additional dimension. In usage, the choice of one sign over another comes with a certain probability. It is now commonly accepted that language users are sensitive to such probabilities. In fact, probabilities have been argued to affect the symbolic relation in both directions. On the one hand, predictable content tends to receive less structural coding than unpredictable content (e.g. Greenberg, 1966; Croft, 2002; Haspelmath, 2008). On the other hand, unlikely formal choices, when they occur, are believed to come with increased pragmatic salience. This effect has specifically been linked to cyclical change in grammaticalization (Haspelmath, 1999; Dahl, 2004): speakers may choose unusual forms of expression because they are more salient and, as a result, more effective at conveying a given meaning. But as more speakers adopt a communicatively successful form its initial advantage is lost again, leading to the recruitment of new forms. On this view, the meaning of a sign is shaped not only by its position in the abstract linguistic system, but also by its probability of occurrence compared to other signs in usage.

In this paper, we want to argue that both effects can be seen at work in the development of the Modern English second person pronouns *thou* and *you*.¹ The *thou/you* contrast developed in Late Middle English as *you* came to function alongside *thou* as pronoun for singular address. The contrast continued to be available throughout the Early Modern English (EModE) period. However, the system never really stabilized, as *thou* soon began to fall out of use. The decline of *thou* progressed throughout the EModE period, so that by the beginning of the Late Modern English (LModE) period, outside isolated lectal variants, *you* had essentially become the only option available.² No-one will dispute that as long as the linguistic system afforded a choice between *thou* and *you*, the pronouns stood in a functional relation, each occupying a specific functional niche—this general point has already been very well documented (see Lass, 1999; Busse, 2002, 2006; Nevala, 2004; Walker, 2007; Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2003, to name only the major recent contributions). Still, we would like to add two observations. First, because *you* had become a default choice by the end of the EModE period, there is a tendency in the literature to regard *you* as meaningful only in those usage contexts where *thou* was also still an option (see below). This may underestimate the semantic import of *you*. The very existence of a systemic relation between *thou* and *you* continued to impart some meaning on *you*, even in usage contexts where *thou* was very unlikely to occur. Second, in the literature it is sometimes observed that *thou* is associated with speaker agitation (see below). We believe this effect may be linked to the dwindling frequency of *thou*. As *thou* drops in frequency, its occurrence in usage gains in pragmatic salience. As a result, *thou* grows more expressive over time. These two points illustrate the relational nature of meaning. In the former case, systemic relations imbue a linguistic sign (*you*) with meaning. In the latter, probabilistic relations influence the value of a sign (*thou*) in usage. Taken together, the two observations indicate that the EModE *thou/you* contrast is better in line with Brown and Gilman's (1960) power-and-solidarity model than has been argued in the more recent literature.

In what follows, we develop our argument, based on an analysis of *thou* and *you* usage in a small corpus of EModE and LModE comedies. Section 2 below gives some necessary background on the functional division of labour between second person pronouns in general, and English *thou* and *you* in particular. Section 3 briefly describes the corpus data for our own study. Using this data, we have conducted two case studies, one presenting evidence of the semantic import of *you* in contexts that do not normally allow *thou*, and one demonstrating the increasing association of *thou* with speaker agitation. The two case studies, including methodology and results, are described in detail in Sections 4 and 5. Concluding remarks are offered in Section 6.

2. Second person pronouns

Pronouns can be used to refer to the addressee in conversation. When a language offers a choice between more than one pronoun for addressee reference, the pronouns may be used to realize social deixis, marking the relation between speaker and addressee. For European languages, Brown and Gilman (1960) have argued that speaker-addressee relations can be defined along two major dimensions, which they label 'power' and 'solidarity'. Pronominal choice serves to position the speaker-addressee relation with respect to those two dimensions. Typically, the choice is between two pronouns. One, the T pronoun (after Latin *tu*), construes the addressee as socially inferior to the speaker (power), or as intimate with the speaker (solidarity). The other, the V pronoun (after Latin *vos*), construes the addressee as socially superior to the speaker (power), or

¹ Throughout this paper we use *thou* and *you* as shorthands for the respective paradigms *thou–thee–thy–thine* and *yee–you–your–yours*. By *you* we refer only to the use of the pronoun with singular reference. Instances of *prithie* have been regarded as univerted and are excluded from our discussion.

² A note on periodization is in order here. By 'Early Modern English' (EModE) we understand roughly the period 1500–1700; by 'Late Modern English' (LModE) we understand the period 1700–1900. We use 'Modern English' to refer to the whole period 1500–1900. In the case study presented below, our focus is on the transition from EModE to LModE, in practice comparing data from the late 17th century and the late 18th century.

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