

## INVESTIGATING THE USE OF OLD ENGLISH SECOND PRONOUN “THOU” IN OLD UNTIL MODERN STAGES

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### ABSTRACT

*This research provides a comprehensive investigation into the evolution and usage of the second-person pronoun thou across the history of English, with a particular focus on the pivotal Early Modern period when the pronoun you supplanted it as the dominant form. While previous studies have extensively documented its historical decline, a significant gap remains in understanding its residual presence in contemporary language. This study employs robust corpus linguistics methodologies, analyzing data extracted from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) to map the modern footprint of thou. A detailed examination of 12,385 instances demonstrates that thou has not vanished but persists within highly specific and marked domains. Its usage is predominantly confined to religious liturgy, literary quotations, and deliberate stylistic archaism, where it consistently carries either archaic or profoundly reverential connotations. These findings underscore a crucial linguistic phenomenon: historical forms can retain significant functional and symbolic power long after their grammatical obsolescence. This study ultimately demonstrates how archaic linguistic forms continue to exert a subtle yet persistent influence on modern English, proving that thou maintains an enduring cultural and symbolic value, serving as a marker of solemnity, tradition, and stylistic nuance.*

*Keywords: Corpus, English Development, Historical, Thou.*

### 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. In other words, the semantic range of one colour term depends on the other terms in the system. This mode of thinking is easily extended to grammatical paradigms.

Languages have been constantly changing through time, adapting to the communicative needs of their speakers. Some languages, such as Latin and Sanskrit, have become extinct, while others, like English, have evolved, reflecting their vitality and adaptability. As Faraco (2005) explains, "languages change, but they continue organized and offering to their speakers the necessary resources for the circulation of meanings." These changes are gradual and do not harm the internal structure of the language but rather illustrate its dynamic nature.

Based on this understanding, the focus of this research is the historical development and variation of the second-person singular pronoun *thou* in the English language. The purpose is to describe and explain the linguistic, phonetic, and socio-pragmatic changes that the pronoun has undergone from Old English to Modern English, and to examine how these shifts reflect broader social transformations. The study pays particular attention to the Early Modern English period, when *you* began to replace *thou* as the dominant form of address.

Previous studies, such as Nowinski da Rosa (2011), have traced the evolution of *you* and explained its rise in connection with politeness conventions and French social influence. Ryan (2017) also highlighted how the English pronominal system reflects changes in social identity and communicative norms. In addition to these foundational studies, more recent research has continued to explore the functional and stylistic persistence of *thou*. Oliver (2022), for instance, employs a corpus-based approach to examine (im)politeness metalanguage in Shakespeare's plays, revealing how *thou* operates within a system of social evaluation and pragmatic marking. While these works provide a foundation for understanding the decline of *thou*, little attention has been given to how *thou* persists in contemporary English.

Amrin and Indriani (2021) offer a notable exception, analyzing the use of archaic pronouns in Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. Their findings confirm that *thou* persists in modern media as a deliberate stylistic and affective device. However, a systematic, corpus-based examination of *thou* across a wide range of modern genres remains underexplored. This study aims to fill that gap by utilizing the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) to map the modern footprint of *thou* and analyze its residual functions. The research was conducted using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) via its native online interface. A targeted search for the lemma "thou" was executed to capture all inflectional forms across all available genres and time periods within the corpus. This enables a robust connection between the

diachronic evolution of the pronoun and its nuanced, present-day connotations. Through qualitative analyses particularly Corpus analysis this study explores how *thou* appears, functions, and conveys meaning in modern discourse. This approach allows a connection between the diachronic evolution of the pronoun and its present-day connotations.

Therefore, the central questions guiding this study are: Which is the most recurrent use of the pronoun *thou*? By addressing this questions, the study aims to explore the functional patterns and social implications of *thou* in historical and contemporary settings, revealing how this archaic form served and continues to serve as both a grammatical and social indicator within the English language. This investigation contributes to the fields of historical linguistics, sociolinguistics, and cultural studies by tracing the evolution of social meaning embedded in pronoun usage and demonstrating how linguistic forms reflect broader cultural hierarchies and interpersonal dynamics across time.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a corpus linguistics methodology to investigate the evolution and contemporary usage of the second-person pronoun *thou*. Previous studies on the *thou/you* variation in the Early Modern English period (c. 1500–1800) have generally examined the phenomenon through the dimensions of social status and relational distance, or through grammatical characteristics that explain pronoun variation. Recent scholarship increasingly supports the use of corpus-based approaches in historical linguistic research. For instance, Oliver (2022) demonstrated the effectiveness of corpus methods in historical pragmatics by utilizing the Enhanced Shakespearean Corpus to identify patterns of (im)politeness metalanguage.

In this study, a corpus-based approach enables the systematic identification and analysis of linguistic patterns across large collections of texts. This methodology is particularly suitable for diachronic linguistic studies because it allows researchers to trace frequency patterns and contextual usage over time. The present research focuses on examining the development and residual use of the pronoun *thou*, especially during the Early Modern English period when *you* gradually replaced *thou* as the dominant form of address. The analysis also considers the morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic aspects associated with the use of *thou*.

The primary data source for this research is the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). COCA is a large, balanced, and genre-diverse corpus of contemporary English containing spoken, fiction, magazine, newspaper, and academic texts from 1990 to the present. Its balanced design makes it particularly suitable for investigating the distribution of specific linguistic forms across

different communicative contexts. Using COCA allows the study to explore how the historically archaic pronoun *thou* continues to appear in modern discourse and to identify the contexts in which it is preserved.

The research procedure consisted of three stages: data acquisition, classification, and data analysis. In the first stage, all available occurrences of the pronoun *thou* were extracted from the COCA database using a targeted search. This process yielded a total of 12,385 tokens. Because COCA is structured across multiple genres, the dataset provides a relatively balanced representation of contemporary language use, reducing the risk of bias from any single genre such as religious texts or historical literature.

In the second stage, the extracted data were classified according to both grammatical function and contextual meaning. The grammatical classification identified whether *thou* functioned as a subject, object, or possessive form within the sentence. The contextual classification focused on the pragmatic meaning associated with each occurrence. Three major categories were used in this analysis. The first category, formality, refers to contexts in which *thou* appears in fixed or archaic expressions, particularly in religious, ceremonial, or highly formal discourse such as liturgical texts. The second category, intimacy or familiarity, includes instances where *thou* signals a close interpersonal relationship, emotional closeness, or solidarity between the speaker and the addressee. The third category, hierarchy or social asymmetry, refers to contexts where *thou* reflects differences in social status, such as when a speaker of higher status addresses a subordinate, or when the pronoun is used to express contempt or disrespect.

The final stage involved analyzing the classified data to identify patterns of persistence and functional usage in contemporary English. The analysis examined how the pronoun *thou* survives within restricted stylistic and cultural domains despite its grammatical obsolescence in modern standard English. Particular attention was given to the relationship between linguistic form and social context, including the historical development of politeness conventions and the standardization of *you* as the neutral second-person pronoun. Although this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the evolution and contemporary presence of *thou*, several limitations should be acknowledged. The primary dataset is derived from COCA, which focuses on American English and may therefore underrepresent the continued use of *thou* in certain regional or religious contexts in other English-speaking areas, such as the United Kingdom. In addition, the qualitative interpretation of contextual meanings inevitably involves a degree of subjective judgment during the classification process.

## Theoretical Framework

To comprehensively analyze the linguistic, social, and affective dimensions of the pronoun *thou* across history, this study is guided by one theoretical frameworks. This theories were selected because they collectively address the core research questions: one explains the structural linguistic shift (Markedness) provide a multi-faceted lens through which the evolution of *thou* can be fully understood:

- **Markedness and Markedness Reversal**

**Roman Jakobson** and **Nikolai Trubetzkoy** from the Prague School of Linguistics first proposed the **markedness theory**, which describes the structural and semantic relationship between linguistic forms that are categorised as "marked" (less common, more specific, or socially restricted) and "unmarked" (more common, neutral, or default). Unmarked forms are essentially the normative or prevailing option in communication, but marked forms convey extra meaning like social differentiation, emotional depth, or emphasis.

When it comes to pronouns, markedness aids in explaining why some forms endure or vanish throughout time. While an unmarked form becomes generalised for ordinary contact, a marked form is typically limited to certain situations, such as religious, lyrical, or antique usage. Therefore, linguistic development frequently entails a change from a marked to an unmarked form as cultures strive for neutrality, simplification, or greater communication accessibility.

## FINDINGS

### The Most Recurrent Use of “Thou”

The data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) reveals a distinct trajectory for the archaic pronoun *thou*. With an absolute frequency of 12,385 instances across the corpus, its normalized rate is 12.47 occurrences per million words. A breakdown of this usage by time period, however, shows a pronounced and consistent decline over the last quarter-century.

**Table 3.1 Word Frequency**

CLICK TO SEE CONTEXT (CLICK COLUMN HEADER FOR SECTIONS) Use AI to analyze

SECTION	ALL	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD	1990-94	1995-99	2000-04	2005-09	2010-14	2015-19
FREQ	12385	1179	5415	2977	304	1355	428	275	452	1196	1357	827	829	937	645
WORDS (M)	993	128.6	124.3	128.1	126.1	118.3	126.1	121.7	119.8	121.1	125.2	124.6	123.1	123.3	122.8
PER MIL	12.47	9.17	43.58	23.24	2.41	11.45	3.39	2.26	3.77	9.88	10.84	6.64	6.74	7.60	5.25
SEE ALL SUB-SECTIONS AT ONCE															

As detailed in Table 3.1, the use of *thou* peaked in the corpus between 2000 and 2004, with a frequency of 10.84 per million words. Following this peak, its usage has steadily decreased with each subsequent five-year period: 6.64 (2005-09), 6.74 (2010-14), and 5.25 (2015-19). This pattern indicates that while *thou* persists in the modern lexicon, its active use is becoming increasingly rare and specialized.

This temporal decline can be interpreted through the lens of Markedness Reversal Theory. The shift from *thou* to *you* as the unmarked, neutral pronoun was largely complete by the end of the Early Modern English period. The data from COCA, which captures late 20th- and 21st-century usage, shows the final stage of this process: the steady erosion of the marked form's residual foothold. The peak around the turn of the millennium may reflect a concentration of religious, literary, or historical references in the corpus materials from that era, but the subsequent, unambiguous drop confirms the form's ongoing progression from a marked stylistic choice to a genuinely recessive linguistic relic.

## DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that *thou* persists in 21st-century American English not as a productive pronoun, but as a specialized linguistic artifact whose use is declining. Its sustained, if diminishing, presence is almost entirely confined to marked contexts where it serves specific socio-pragmatic functions. The quantitative decline evidenced in the data directly illustrates the final stages of obsolescence, as predicted by Markedness Reversal Theory.

The peak in frequency observed between 2000-2004 and the subsequent steady decline suggest that the domains which traditionally preserved *thou*—namely religious liturgy, historical fiction, poetic archaism, and deliberate stylistic quotation—are themselves employing the form less frequently over time. This supports the interpretation that *thou* is transitioning from a viable, if marked, stylistic option within certain genres to a truly recessive form, understood primarily as a historical or ceremonial relic.

The theories of Deixis and Social Indexicality explain this residual usage. *Thou* no longer functions primarily as a simple second-person referent. Instead, its deployment is overwhelmingly deictic to specialized social or textual contexts—evoking a connection to the divine in prayer, signaling a historical setting in narrative, or indexing poetic tradition. In these roles, it carries potent affective meaning, conveying reverence, antiquity, or heightened emotion, as explained by frameworks like Determination of Affect.

Ultimately, this study aligns with McEnery and Brookes' (2024) call for integrating corpus linguistics with social scientific inquiry. The trajectory of *thou* is not merely a grammatical footnote but a record of cultural practice. Its patterned

decline shows how linguistic forms fade, while its continued, strategic use in narrow domains exemplifies how communities preserve symbolic artifacts to maintain links with spiritual, literary, and historical identity. Thus, *thou* endures not as a tool for everyday reference, but as a socio-pragmatic fossil, its diminishing frequency underscoring its status as a vessel for cultural memory rather than a living element of the pronoun system.

## CONCLUSION

This study illustrates that the second-person pronoun "thou" has not vanished from Modern English but persists in a highly limited and specialised context. Corpus data from COCA indicates that "thou" is no longer a functional component of daily communication; rather, its modern application is confined to certain contexts like as religious speech, literary citation, and deliberate stylistic archaism. The quantitative results demonstrate a distinct and persistent decrease in frequency over recent decades, suggesting that its occurrence in contemporary English is becoming increasingly peripheral.

The results indicate that *thou* serves mostly as a symbolic and cultural signifier rather than a grammatical requirement. Its use denotes reverence, seriousness, historical context, or an elevated emotional tone, indicating a conscious artistic decision rather than a focus on communication efficiency. Consequently, whereas *you* has entirely adopted the function of the neutral second-person pronoun, *thou* remains a grammatical relic imbued with cultural, emotional, and ideological importance.

This research affirms that linguistic forms may preserve social and symbolic significance even after they have ceased to serve a structural function within the language system. The persistent, if declining, presence of "thou" in contemporary English exemplifies how language retains aspects of cultural memory, sustaining a connection between present usage and past identity rather than fulfilling everyday communication requirements.

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