

Lesson 3.5 Language Change: Exploring Pronouns

key words: language change, pronouns, history of English

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.1a Explain the function of nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in general and their functions in particular sentences. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/1/a>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.3b Recognize and observe differences between the conventions of spoken and written standard English. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/3/b>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.3c Differentiate between contexts that call for formal English (e.g., presenting ideas) and situations where informal discourse is appropriate (e.g., small-group discussion).

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/3/c>

Do thou ever use the words *thou*, *thee*, or *ye*? Whyever not?

Thou used to be used as the subject pronoun, so you would say something like this:

Thou should go now.

But *thee* was used as the object pronoun, so you would say:

I told thee already.

Even earlier in the history of English, *thou* was the singular form of *ye*, so you would say:

Thou should go now.

if you were talking to one person, but:

Ye should go now.

if you were talking about more than one person.

And similarly, *you* was the plural form of *thee*, so

I told thee already

meant that you told one person something already, while

I told you already.

Meant that you told more than one person something already.

Later, *thou* was used as the pronoun that you would use with family or close friends, to signal familiarity or intimacy. (Other languages like Spanish, French, and German still make this distinction with pronouns.) A bit confusing? We're not sure why all these pronouns disappeared, but about 400 years ago, they started to. It left us with a gap in the language, however, that speakers fix in various ways; that is, sometimes it can be confusing because we don't know whether someone means *you* for a single person or *you* for a group.

What are some ways that you clarify whether you mean more than one person when you say *you*? In speech, these forms (like *y'all*, *you guys*) are really useful, but they are generally considered to be informal, so are not typically used in formal writing.

Create some sentences using *thou*, *thee*, *you*, and *ye* as they would have been used during Shakespeare's time in the 1600s.

[See the chart in Lesson 1.7 to see the set of Modern English pronouns.]