
Loss of number in the Standard English 2nd person

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Historically, English had a number contrast in the 2nd-person pronouns with a distinction between *thou* (subject) and *thee* (object) in the singular and *ye* (subject) and *you* (object) in the plural, with the plural forms also used for polite address. The singular pronouns *thou/thee* were, however, lost from Standard English by the 18th century.

This loss of *thou/thee* has been attributed primarily to pragmatic and sociolinguistic factors (e.g. Jucker & Taavitsainen 2013). Recently though, Aalberse & Stoop (2015) suggested that it might additionally be connected to a morphosyntactic improvement: The loss of the original 2nd-person singular pronoun in English and Dutch, they argue, is motivated by the simplification of verb inflection: The 2nd-person singular ending Du. *-s* / E *-est* (*thou say-est*) was marked compared to the 2nd-person plural one Du. *-t* / E \emptyset (*you say- \emptyset*). Avoiding the 2nd-person singular and using the plural (Du. *-t* / E \emptyset) instead not only disposes of the number opposition in the second person, but also of a person opposition in the singular (Du. *-t* in third, E \emptyset in first singular). Due to larger-scale second language and/or second dialect learning in the course of increased migration to English and Dutch cities in the early modern period, Aalberse & Stoop claim there would have been more pressure on the inflectional system of English and Dutch in comparison to German, where, in principle, loss of *du* would have yielded a similar simplification of the inflectional paradigm.

This hypothesis is tested in Aalberse & Stoop 2015 for Dutch only. In our presentation, this theory is tested for Standard English too, by reviewing the distribution of T and V forms in Middle and Early Modern English as well as the general contact scenario and the relevant L1 grammars of learners of Middle and Early Modern English.

References: • Aalberse, S. and W. Stoop (2015): The Exceptional Loss of the Pronoun T. In: *Journal of Pragmatics* 88, 190–201. • Jucker, A. and I. Taavitsainen (2013): *English Historical Pragmatics*. Edinburgh University Press.