

EVIDENCE FOR MORPHOLOGICAL RESTRUCTURING IN THE
SECOND PERSON PRONOUN IN EARLY ENGLISH CORRESPONDENCE

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this article is morphosyntactic. Its aim is to provide evidence for a particular type of syntactic reanalysis which is likely to have contributed to the establishment of *you* as a universal form of the second person pronoun in both subject and oblique positions.

The issue of the developments in the paradigm of the second person pronoun in Early and Late Modern English has received much coverage in the recent decades. The focus of previous works has been mainly on external, socio-pragmatic factors (Brown and Gilman 1972; Wales 1983; Hope 1993). Among internal factors, phonological ones were emphasised (Graband 1965; Strang 1970; Görlach 1978; Barber 1997). To date, few linguists have paid attention to morpho-syntactic causes of the changes. In particular, impersonal constructions, involving such verbs as LIKE and PLEASE, have been recognised as the environment conducive to the reanalysis of the second person forms (van der Gaaf 1904; Lutz 1998).

This article will discuss structures of a different type, i.e. those containing verbs such as PRAY and BESEECH. My analysis will show that the confusion between the imperative and subjunctive moods, frequent in those constructions, is a plausible explanation for the weakening of the case distinction and the spread of the *you* form to the subject position in the sentence. Such grammatical constructions are particularly common in early English personal correspondence. Therefore, the following analysis is based on a database of epistolary documents, including the letters of Paston, Plumpton, Stonor and Cely families.

1. Introduction

The aim of the present article is to identify what syntactic mechanisms and contexts have contributed to morphological restructuring in the second person paradigm. The study which has led to the conclusions presented here has been based on a corpus of fifteenth-century correspondence. The method applied is both a structural and functional analysis of the corpus, which consists in determining the

properties, exponents and functions of various grammatical categories.

The corpus used as the basis of this study comprises three parts: 1) the Paston letters (1425-95), amounting to over 250,000 words, 2) the Cely letters (1472-88) with nearly 85,000 words, and 3) the Stonor and Plumpton letters (1424-83 and 1461-1499, respectively) with app. 55,000 words (available at the *ICAME CD*).

My approach comprises several assumptions. Firstly, the correspondence used as the basis for this research dates back to the fifteenth century, which is frequently referred to as a transitional period, i.e. a period characterised by significant changes. Indeed, late Middle English witnessed the beginning of important modifications in the paradigm of the second person pronoun. Those changes eventually led to a typologically unusual configuration, the lack of the number and case distinction. Secondly, as previous research on the topic has proved, the changes in question were due to external as well as internal factors. Eventually, I selected letters as the basis for my study because they seem to constitute an excellent source of pronominal forms, especially those in the second person.

2. Results of the analysis

2.1. Middle English second person pronoun forms

Table 1 presents the properties and exponents of the grammatical categories of case and number in the second person pronoun paradigm, found in authoritative historical grammars and monographs, including, for example, Mossé (1952: 54), Mustanoja (1960: 124-125), Weina (1996: 101), Barber (1997: 152), Görlach (1978: 106-107), Franz (1939: 258-60), Carstensen (1959: 190-191), and Kerkhof (1966: 135-139).

Table 1. The second person pronoun paradigm in Middle English

ME	singular	plural
nominative	THOU ¹ <i>þu, thou, tou</i>	YE <i>ȝe(e), ye</i>
oblique	THE <i>þe, thee, te</i>	YOU <i>eu, ou, ȝow, ȝou, you</i>

¹ The exponent in capital letters comprises all the relevant orthographic variants.

It is clear that the properties of the number category, i.e. the subjective and the oblique, are well distinguished through the use of different exponents.² Also the number distinction is preserved.

2.2. The weakening of the number distinction

The subsequent tables (2-4) show the actual incidence of particular exponents and orthographic forms in all the three collections of correspondence constituting the corpus.

Table 2. The second person pronoun variants in the Cely letters³

	singular	plural
nominative	YE (665) ⁴ <i>ȝe(e), ye(e)</i> YOU (60) <i>you, yow</i>	YE (52) <i>ȝe(e), ye(e)</i> YOU (7) <i>you, yow</i>
oblique	YOU (1334) <i>yow(e), you (yew, ȝou, ȝow, gyu)</i> THE (43) <i>the</i> YE (2) <i>ȝe</i>	YOU (125) <i>yow(e), you</i>

From Table 2 it is evident that the number distinction in the Cely letters is considerably weakened. There are as few as 43 instances of the distinctively singular forms and they occur only in the oblique case. Moreover, they occur in very specific contexts. First, they can be found in the letters addressed by RC1 (full names of the authors are provided in the list of abbreviations in the Appendix to this article) to GC, his youngest son, who still is not an adult at the time. We may assume that those instances show parental superiority. The second context is provided by RC2's letter to Joyce Parmenter, his servant, and thus it displays social superiority.

- 1) I grete *the* wyll, and I haue resayuyd from *the* a letter wryte at Caleys the xiiij day of Auguste, the weche letter I haue wyll understand (RC1 1478).
- 2) I pray *the* sende my brothers letter to hym in haste (RC2 1482).

² Orthographic variants of all the exponents are provided in italics.

³ See Rutkowska (2003: 64-7) for further details.

⁴ The number in brackets refers to the number of occurrences in a given collection of correspondence.

Example 1 illustrates the first use discussed above, and example 2 the second. The nominative exponent is missing in the Cely letters. A possible reason for that absence may be, according to Hanham (1985: 14), the avoidance of intentional insult. Thus, apparently, the singular forms of the second person pronoun had already been strongly stigmatised pragmatically.

Table 3. The second person pronoun variants in the Stonor and Plumpton letters

	singular	plural ⁵
nominative	YE (577) <i>ʒe(e), ye(e)</i> YOU (36) <i>you</i>	YE (2) <i>ye</i>
oblique	YOU (1159) <i>you(e), yow(e) (yov(e), ʒow(e), ʒo(u))</i> YE (7) <i>ʒe, ye</i>	YOU (8) <i>yow, you</i>

Table 4. The second person pronoun variants in the Paston letters

	singular	plural
nominative	YE (2448) <i>ʒe, ye(e)</i> THOU (27) <i>thow, thou, þow</i> YOU (2) <i>yow</i>	YE (13) <i>ye</i>
oblique	YOU (3501) <i>yow(e), you (ʒow, ʒou, ʒw, yew, yw, jow, yov)</i> YE (3) <i>ʒe, ye</i>	YOU (11) <i>yow</i> YE (1) <i>ye</i>

Table 3 shows that in the Stonor and Plumpton letters no examples of the originally singular forms were recorded at all. Finally, in Table 4, which presents the variants of the second person pronoun in the Paston letters, the situation is still different – it shows the singular nominative exponent THOU, but not the singular oblique one (THE). Interestingly, those singular subjective forms are found only in particular contexts (excluding direct address). They appear in quotations repeating someone else's (not the sender's) words (as in example 3). Also, they can be found in WP3's memorandum on the French grammar, which does not refer directly to any addressee.

⁵ The Stonor collection contains only two letters with more than one addressee, and the Paston letters include three such documents (compared to thirty-seven letters in the Cely collection).

- 3) the Kyng seyð on-to hym a-yen, 'Brandon, *thow thou* can begyll the Dwk of Norffolk, and bryng hym abowt the thombe as *thow lyst*, i let the wet *thow* shalt not do me so, for i vndyrstand thy fals delyng well j-now (JP3 1469).

On the basis of the evidence available in the corpus one can conclude that the weakening of the number distinction is highly advanced in the fifteenth-century letters, since the occurrences of the singular forms are rarely found in the corpus.

In fact, most occurrences of the second person pronoun are instances of the so-called "plural of politeness", having one person as the addressee (with only a small number of exceptions), and adopted by English under the influence of French. The socio-pragmatic argument advanced by Brown and Gilman (1972) comprises two factors that prompt the choice of form used in a given context, namely power and solidarity (The argument is further developed by Wales 1983 and Hope 1993). In the corpus used for this study the solidarity factor prevails. A possible reason may be the register of the letters, characterized by politeness.

In fact, the question of the weakened number distinction does not raise much controversy. By the fifteenth century the process had already been well advanced, and it has been studied and described in considerable detail. The aspect which seems more interesting at that stage of development is the weakening of the case distinction, and the motivation behind that process. Therefore, the subsequent sections of the present paper will focus on the issue of case, discussing the changes to the properties evident in the corpus selected for this study.

2.3. The weakening of the case distinction

As can be seen in Tables 2, 3 and 4, the case distinction is still quite well preserved in the second person pronoun in the fifteenth century. However, in the Cely, Stonor, and Plumpton letters the YOU forms (i.e. originally oblique ones) start assuming subjective functions. In this respect, the Paston letters seem to be more conservative and this particular difference between the parts of the corpus seems difficult to explain. Possibly, that conservatism can be justified by the high social status of the Paston family.

In most cases, the interpretation of the function assumed by a given form, i.e. subjective (see example 4) or objective (see example 5), does not cause any problems.

- 4) and *ʒe vndyrstonde* what sobstons is at London to shyppe (GC 1480)
5) I recummand me to *yow* and thank *yow* of yowr labowr and besynes with þe vnruly felecþep (JP1 1465).

Even if the form functioning, for example, as the subject of the clause is one originally associated with the objective function, the syntactic context usually disambiguates it.

- 6) I besech *yow* to send me mony by Syre Richard Cotman, brynger of thys letter, ore ellys by the next masenger that *yow* kan have to me (WLP 1479).
- 7) I hope *yow* schall fynde hym goode ande gentyll, etc. (TK 1479).
- 8) And my master your brother Rechard infformyd me that *you* had a hauke in Callys as *you* tolde hym: he sayd that *you* powyntyd ffor me, and that causyd me to com ouer seye (JR 1479).

Thus, in examples 6-8, the traditionally oblique YOU forms take the subject position. Similarly, when the originally subjective form takes the position of the object (as do the forms in bold in examples 9-10), the context makes the appropriate interpretation possible.

- 9) ye vndyrstond [^]be this[^] how whell he has done none thyng but put *3e* to cost, etc. ... I woll nott avysse *3e* to shype in the dede of wynter: ytt ys long lyng, ffowlle whedyr, and jepardes ffor stormys (GC 1480).
- 10) and þe commyssare sayd, yff *3e* dyd so he culd nott blame *3e* (TBN 1482).

It is obvious that *3e* in both examples functions syntactically as the object.

2.3.2. Problems with interpretation

However, the corpus under consideration contains numerous sentences where such syntactic interpretation is problematic. Problems with case identification concern mainly two types of construction, including impersonal ones with the verb PLEASE, and those containing the verb PRAY (or BESEECH, and occasionally WILL) followed by YOU. Because the role of impersonal structures in the process of case weakening in the second person pronoun has been recently discussed in detail (see Lutz 1998), I shall focus on the latter type of constructions.

The second person forms in the following examples (11-19) can be interpreted syntactically in at least two different ways.

- 11) I pray *yow* bey hem feynere cappys and largere þan þo were (MP 1444).
- 12) I pray *yow* sende me word where hit be your will or noo (JF 1462).

- 13) I pray *you* send answerre against the next tearme (GG 1464).
- 14) to the whyche I beseke *yow* gyfe credens (JAN 1470)
- 15) And Syr, beseche *you* hold me excuset that I come not unto your I maister-ship (HU 1479).
- 16) I beseche *yow* let me not be forgotyn when ye rekyn vp all your seruauntys (JP3 1474).
- 17) I pray *you* speke to Thomas Kesten (RC1 1478).
- 18) I pray *yow* remewyr howr bowys (RC2 1482).
- 19) I pray *you* cause the mylner to deliver it to Benson (EP 1490).

The variant YOU suggests the interpretation of the pronoun as the object of the verb PRAY (or BESEECH), which occurs in the indicative mood. The following clause has then to be interpreted as an imperative one, i.e. as a request for some action. Nevertheless, the syntactic context allows for another interpretation, with the verb PRAY followed by a subordinate noun clause, functioning as the verb's object, in which the pronoun has the function of the subject and the following verb is in the subjunctive mood, showing modality (it is optative, i.e. expressing wishes). Such ambiguous structures constitute 26% of all the constructions involving the verb PRAY and the second person pronoun in the Plumpton and Stonor letters, 49% in the Cely letters, and 55% in the Paston letters.

The validity of the latter interpretation is confirmed by the existence of examples such as 20-22, where the originally subjective form YE occurs in the same syntactic position and function as YOU in examples 11-19. Examples 20-22 can also be treated as evidence for some hesitation on the part of the authors, or even some confusion as to the function of the pronoun in that particular construction.

- 20) I besek *3e* gew me l[e]ff[fe] to say for m]yselffe, etc. (GC 1476).
- 21) I wyll *ye* doe youre pert for me to make hym freman (RC1 1477).
- 22) Syr, I pray *3e* remembyr me, for *3e* know my nesseyte (RC2 1478).

In the three examples above the originally nominative form YE appears, but it is interpretable syntactically in the same two ways as mentioned with regard to examples 11-19.

2.3.3. Existing explanations

Several hypotheses have been put forward to justify the apparent confusion between the subject and object forms and the eventual takeover of the nominative function by the oblique forms of the second person pronoun. The most prominent and influential explanations include:

- a) a confusion between YE and YOU – both forms had the same weak form [jə] (Graband 1965: 236-46; Strang 1970: 140; Barber 1997: 204-205; Görlach 1978: 83; Raumolin-Brunberg and Nevalainen 1997: 499); Hope (1993: 98) mentions also the possibility of orthographic confusion between the forms *þe* (an oblique singular variant) and *ye* (a subjective plural variant), but himself considers it as improbable.
- b) a cross-over analogy between subject and object forms of the singular and plural of the second person, i.e. THOU ~ YOU, THE ~ YE, reinforced by frequent alteration between polite and intimate address of individuals in French-influenced courtly speech (Franz 1939: 257-258; Graband 1965: 243; Lutz 1998: 193, 201)
- c) the personalisation of frequently used impersonal constructions in connection with the fixing of SVO-order – it made the object form of the old construction the subject form of the new one (van der Gaaf 1904: ch. 3-4; Lutz 1998: 201)

The first explanation above is phonological in nature, the second morphological (socially and pragmatically conditioned), and the third one morphosyntactic. However, it would be unwise to claim that any of those potential causes could motivate the change on its own. The weakening of the case distinction most likely results from the combined influences of a variety of factors, including those mentioned above.

2.3.4. Attempt at a new explanation

My research shows that yet another construction, not mentioned by any previous researcher, could have contributed to the process under consideration. Namely, the structural confusion between the subject and the object forms could have resulted from a syntactic ellipsis.

In order to illustrate the problem, the ambiguous clauses (examples 11-22) will be compared with those showing no ambiguity with regard to the grammatical case of the pronoun. In the letters analysed, the ambiguity can be avoided in several ways through the use of related constructions, including the following ones:

- a) finite verb + oblique pronoun (the object to the first verb) + infinitival clause
 - 23) And also I pray *yow* to take hede above (JF 1462).
 - 24) I pray *you* to sende me aunswer by the brynger herof (WP1 1479).
 - 25) I pray *yow* to come hoom at thys Kyrstemes (RC2 1479).
 - 26) desire and pray *you* to forbere and contynue to do anything in that behalfe (HP 1488).
- b) finite verb + oblique pronoun + adverbial + imperative clause
 - 27) I pray *you*, against the next terme, send me word how I shall be demened in rewards giveing (GG 1469).
 - 28) I pray *yow* at hys comyng whate apon hym and thanke hym for ws, for he has beyn howr spessyall good master in thys mater (RC2 1481).
 - 29) I pray *yow* harttely sped yow into Ynglonde, for many thyngys abydyys yow cwmyng (RC2 1482).
- c) reversed word order: imperative clause + finite verb + oblique pronoun
 - 30) Send tydyngys in hast, I pray *yow* (JP3 1470).
 - 31) Ther ys x sarplers goode Cottys bers nombyr abowe xxvij. Sell them and ye con, I pray *yow* (WLC 1480).
 - 32) Send me a byll of yowr mynd, I pray *yow* (RC2 1487).
- d) finite verb + oblique pronoun + noun clause: *THAT* + nominative pronoun + finite verb (in the subjunctive mood)
 - 33) I pray *yow* that *ye* soo see þerto that my ryth be saved (TS 1424).
 - 34) here we praye *yow* that *ye* make some redy apoyntement with the Eschetor (TH 1462).
 - 35) I pray *you* that *ye* woll ressayue them as myn own proper good (WM 1476).
 - 36) thay pray *yow* that *þe* wyll by them wyth flowyrs and no sylke (RC2 1479).
 - 37) he prayth *yow* that *þe* wyll kepe hit bye yow tyll he comme (WLC 1482).

In all the constructions illustrated by the examples above (23-37), the second person pronoun must be interpreted as occurring in the oblique case, because it functions as the direct object of the preceding finite verb (PRAY). Each structure analysed contains a disambiguating element, which disallows any alternative interpretation of the case taken by the pronoun. In the first construction type (examples 23-6), it is the infinitival clause, in the second the adverbial

(examples 27-9), and in the third one a reverse word order (the clause expressing the requested action is moved to the initial position in the sentence, examples 30-2). Finally, in the fourth structure, both the oblique and the nominative pronoun forms are used. The former follows the verb PRAY directly, and the latter acts as the subject of the noun clause introduced by THAT and constituting the object of the preceding finite verb (examples 33-7).

The last construction mentioned above is of greatest importance to my argument. In fact, the omission of THAT in a construction of type *d*) would lead to the unsightly consecutive occurrences of the second person pronoun in the same phrase. That repetition is avoided by the employment of a syntactic ellipsis. However, one cannot be certain which of the two pronoun forms is actually omitted, the nominative or the oblique. That confusion could have also been experienced by the fifteenth-century users of English. The result of such confusion could have led to the lack of differentiation in form, i.e. both the nominative and the oblique case expressed by the same exponent (YOU). The universal exponent could then have spread to other types of constructions. The following examples show YOU both in the subject and object position in various types of constructions:

- 38) I can not telle *yow* for very certeyn ... but *yow* may know by inqueryng (WP3 1479).
 39) I trust *you* will praye ffor me: ffor I shall praye ffor *you* (TBS 1476).
 40) Alsoy I pray *you* yff *you* may not by them that *you* wyll dysyr Raff Lemington to do it for me, for it schal be for my Laydy Skot (JD 1479).
 41) Allso syr, yf yt ples *you* to haue ony woll or ffell to your hone behoffe yf *you* wyll haue my ssaruys *you* schall haue yt before hony man (JR 1479).
 42) Syr yff yt plesse *yow* that *yow* will lett hit owt, I pray *yow* that I may haue ij of the romes off the stabull (JD 1482).

There remains one question to be answered. Why the originally oblique YOU variant, not the subjective YE, should be assumed as the universal exponent of the second person pronoun? In section 2.3.3 several factors which contributed to the growing popularity of YOU variants (to the detriment of YE forms) have been mentioned. However, we can add to them the fact that the easily interpretable structures (mentioned in this section, examples 23-32), related semantically and pragmatically to the ambiguous ones (11-19), employed the oblique pronoun. Thus, they could have also prompted the choice of the originally oblique forms by the language users.

3. Conclusions

The data presented in this paper show that the weakening of the number distinction in the second person pronoun was well advanced in the fifteenth century, as evidenced by the letters from that period. Moreover, that process has been discussed in considerable detail.

The situation is different regarding the case distinction weakening. According to Allen (1995: 210), "*you* does not commonly begin to invade the territory of the subjective (*ye*) until the late fifteenth century". Indeed, the effects of that invasion can be seen in the corpus under consideration. Obviously, the account of this "invasion" cannot be one and simple, but it rather combines the impacts of phonological, structural, and pragmatic factors. In my paper, I am offering a new structural explanation, claiming that ambiguous syntactic structures, which contain verbs such as PRAY or BESEECH, and involving ellipsis, could have facilitated the process. Admittedly though, syntactic ellipsis is one of numerous factors likely to have promoted the lack of differentiation between the subjective and objective properties in the grammatical category of case in the second person pronoun.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that early English correspondence, characterised by heavy use of personal pronouns and a high frequency of elliptical constructions, provides a context conducive to structural change, and hence offers a valuable source of material for the analysis of the developments that took place in the second person paradigm.

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APPENDIX

Abbreviations
Names of the authors

	Full name	Collection
EP	Edward Plumpton	Plumpton
GC	George Cely	Cely
GG	Godfrey Greene	Plumpton
HP	Henry Percy	Plumpton
HU	Hugh Unton	Stonor
JAN	John, abbot of Norton	Stonor
JD	John Dalton	Cely
JF	John Frende	Stonor
JP1	John Paston I	Paston
JP3	John Paston III	Paston
JPM	Joyce Parmenter	Cely
JR	John Roose	Cely
MP	Margaret Paston	Paston
RC1	Richard Cely senior	Cely
RC2	Richard Cely junior	Cely
RR	Robert Radclyff	Cely
TBN	Thomas Banke	Stonor
TBS	Thomas Betson	Stonor
TH	Thomas Hampton	Stonor
TK	Thomas Kesten	Cely
TS	Thomas Stonor	Stonor
WA	William Adam	Cely
WD	William Dalton	Cely
WLC	William Cely	Cely
WLP	Walter Paston	Paston
WM	William Maryon	Cely
WP1	William Paston I	Paston
WP3	William Paston III	Paston

Symbols used in examples

- () enclose emendations
 ^ ^ enclose interlineations