

English throughout the Centuries. Teaching Archaic Possessive Structures to Upper-intermediate Level Students

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Abstract: Facilitating access to knowledge of possessive structures and their accurate use in context can widen students' linguistic horizon, improve their listening and reading comprehension, as well as their writing and speaking skills, thus leading to reliability and efficiency in English language communication. Possession is undoubtedly related to our existence in a most relevant way. Everybody owns principles, ideas, personal belongings, different kinds of properties, responsibilities concerning others' lives. Thus, the matter of expressing possession is highly significant to foreign language learners, being at the same time engaging and easy to connect with real world situations. It is generally agreed that nowadays students are no more interested in reading. There are many old language forms that seem even more discouraging for intermediate level students who may be willing to approach literary texts. That is why we have tried to break down some cultural barriers and help students decode Shakespearean conversations. The current article focuses on the evolution of the English language in time and on efficient methods of teaching archaic forms of possessive pronouns to students.

Keywords: possession, language changes, archaic pronouns, Shakespearean conversations

An insight into the evolution of the English language

In any language there are changes occurring throughout the centuries. The linguistic phenomenon of the evolution of English possessives still resounds in people's minds, especially when they approach old literary texts or utter the Lord's prayer:

Our Father, Who art in heaven,

Hallowed be **Thy** name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors,
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For **Thine** is the kingdom
and the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.

One cannot refrain from wondering “How did the possessive <thy> get to turn into <your> and <thine> into <yours>?” The history of possessives is therefore an interesting issue to look into.

In “The Language Instinct”, Steven Pinker explains how language works, how children learn it, how it changes and how the brain computes it. He approaches the issue of time impact upon language and, in his attempt to trace the language of his book, he states that “English has changed on both sides of the Atlantic, and had been changing well before the voyage of the *Mayflower*. What grew into standard contemporary English was simply the dialect spoken around London, the political and economic centre of England, in the seventeenth century”. (Pinker 1994: 248)

In order to illustrate the major changes English had undergone by the 17th century, the author presents these versions of the Lord’s prayer:

CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH: Our Father, who is in heaven, may your name be kept holy. May your kingdom come into being. May your will be followed on earth, just as it is in heaven. Give us this day our food for the day. And forgive us our offenses, just as we forgive those who have offended us. And do not bring us to the test. But free us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours forever. Amen.

EARLY MODERN ENGLISH (C. 1600): Our Father which are in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever, amen.

MIDDLE ENGLISH (C. 1400): Oure fadir that art in heuenes halowid be thi name, thi kingdom come to, be thi wille don in erthe es in heuene, yeue to us this day oure bread ouir other substance, & lede us not in to temptacion: but delyuer us from yuel, amen.

OLD ENGLISH (C. 1000): Faeder ure thu the eart on heofonum, si thin nama gehalgod. Tobecume thin rice. Gewurthe in willa on eorþan swa swa on heofonum. Urne gedaeghwamlican half syle us to daeg. And forgyf us ure gyltas, swa swa we forgyfath urum gyltedum. And ne gelaed thu us on contnungen ac alys us of yfele. Sothlice. (Pinker 1994: 248)

In the 17th chapter of “*The Study of Language*”, entitled “*Language history and change*”, George Yule states that ‘the reconstruction of proto-forms is an attempt to determine what a language must have been like before any written records. However, even when we have written records from an older period of a language such as English, they may not bear any resemblance to the written form of the language found in today’s newspapers². Further on, he proposes taking a brief look at the history of English, which is traditionally divided into four periods:

Old English: before 1100

Middle English: 1100 to 1500

Early Modern English: 1500 to 1700

Modern English: after 1700

Both Steven Pinker and George Yule argue that English finds its roots in northern Germany, near Denmark, where the pagan tribes of the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes lived in the first millennium. In one early account, the tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes were described as “God’s wrath toward Britain”. In the fifth century, these tribes invaded Angle-land (the future England), displacing the Celts there into Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Cornwall. This defeat was resented linguistically as well, the English language having no traces of Celtic.

The languages of the Angles and the Saxons evolved from Proto-Germanic, the language of a tribe that occupied much of northern Europe in the first millennium B.C. The similarities in vocabulary and grammar (e.g. the past tense ending *-ed*) among Anglo-Saxon, German, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian and Icelandic are due to the fact that the above mentioned tribe split into groups and left a special mark on the European territory they occupied. (Pinker 1994:251)

It is from the name of the Angles' tribe that we get the word for their language *Englisc*, now called Old English, the spring of the most basic terms in the language: *mann* ("man"), *wīf* ("woman"), *cild* (child), *hūs* (house), *mete* (food), *etan* (eat), *drincan* (drink) and *feohtan* (fight). These pagan settlers also left some weekday names, commemorating their gods *Woden* and *Thor*. However, between the sixth and the eighth century, they were converted to Christianity and a number of terms from Latin (the language of the religion) came into English at that time, such as the origins of the contemporary words *angel*, *bishop*, *candle*, *church*, *martyr*, *priest* and *school*.

Old Norse, the language of the Vikings, who settled in some parts of the coastal regions of Britain from the eighth to the ninth and tenth century, is where the original forms of *give*, *law*, *leg*, *skin*, *take* and *they* were adopted. It is also the origin of the word *Yule* which designates the Christmas season. Due to the fact that Old Norse was similar enough to Anglo-Saxon, Old English did not suffer major changes.

With William the Conqueror's invasion in 1066, the Norman dialect of French became the language of the ruling classes. It is the source of words like *army*, *court*, *defense*, *faith*, *prison* and *tax*. Yet, the language spoken by the peasants remained English. They worked on the land and reared *sheep*, *cows* and *swine*, while the upper classes talked about *mouton*, *beef* and *pork*. It was only shortly after 1200 that English reestablished itself as the exclusive language of England, though with a Latinate vocabulary that has lasted to present day (*donate*, *vibrate*, *desist* are some examples of it).

A noticeable change occurred in the Middle English period (1100-1450): the final syllables became reduced to the generic schwa like *a* in *allow* or completely disappeared, overt case began to vanish, and the word order became fixed to eliminate the resulting ambiguity. Prepositions and auxiliaries were bled to their original meanings and given important grammatical duties.

The period of Early Modern English (1450-1700) began with the Great Vowel Shift, a revolution in the pronunciation of long vowels. After this revolution in the Shakespearean and King James Bible language, the old “oo” turned into a diphthong, the gap being filled by raising what used to be an “oh” sound (what we pronounce as *goose* had been pronounced “goce”); the “ee” vowel also turned into a diphthong (*like* had been pronounced “leek”), the vowel “eh” coming to replace it (*geese* was originally pronounced “gace”). That gap, on its turn, was filled when the long version of *ah* was raised, “nahma” turning into *name*.

The effects of the general raising of long vowel sounds made the pronunciation of Early Modern English significantly different from earlier periods. The introduction of printing in 1476 brought about significant changes, but because the printers tended to standardize existing pronunciation in the spelling of words (e.g. *knee*, *gnaw*), later pronunciation changes are often not reflected in the way Modern English is written.

At the syntactic level, some noticeable differences between the structure of sentences in Old and Modern English involve word order. In Old English texts, we find the Subject-Verb-Object which is most common in Modern English, but we can also find a number of different orders that are no longer used. For example, the subject could follow the verb, as in *ferde he* (‘he travelled’), and the object could be placed before the verb, as in *he hine geseah* (‘he saw him’), or at the beginning of the sentence, as in *him man ne seald* (‘no man gave [any] to him’). A double negation was also possible. (Yule 2013:232)

The most sweeping change in the form of English sentences, Yule argues, was the loss of a large number of inflectional suffixes from many parts of speech. The forms *seald* (‘he gave’) and *sealde* (‘you gave’) are differentiated by inflectional suffixes (-e, -est) that are no longer used in Modern English. Nouns, adjectives, articles and pronouns all had different inflectional forms according to their grammatical function in the sentence.

Teaching archaic forms of possessives to upper-intermediate level students

Why teach archaic pronouns to students?

One might wonder: *Why is it important for students to know archaic forms of language?* Several reasons can be found: in order to be able to approach old literary texts (Shakespearean works, Christmas carols and other traditional songs, etc.); because, supposedly, almost every English book reader approaches at least one Shakespearean work in his or her life and Shakespeare uses a form of archaic English that can be at times confusing. Definitely, being able to identify and understand archaisms enriches students' cultural horizon and facilitates comprehensive access to literary texts.

Common archaic pronouns encountered in Shakespearean works

Among the potentially confusing words Shakespeare uses in his works there are the archaic forms of "you": *thou, thee, thy, thine* and *ye*. Because using the word "you" is very common, it is not surprising that Shakespeare also used it quite a bit in his works. To add to the confusion, sentences in Shakespearean English are often switched around, so readers need some tools in order to understand the texts.

O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?

Deny thy father and refuse thy name;

Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love.

Early Modern English Pronouns

To help decode the lines above, here is a table of the Early Modern English second-person pronouns and their correspondents in Contemporary English:

Word	Translation	When to use
Thou	You	When "you" is the subject of the sentence.
Thee	You	When "you" is the object of the sentence.

Thy	Your	Possessive form of 'you', commonly used before a noun that begins with a consonant sound (like the article 'a').
Thine	Your Yours	Possessive form of 'you', commonly used before a noun that begins with a vowel sound (like the article 'an'). Used independently, without being followed by a noun.
Ye	You (plural)	Plural form of "you" when addressing a group of people.

Thou originates from [Old English](#) *pū*, and ultimately via [Grimm's law](#) from the [Proto-Indo-European](#) **tu*, with the expected [Germanic vowel](#) lengthening in accented monosyllabic words with an open syllable. *Thou* is therefore cognate with Icelandic and Old Norse *pú*, German and Continental Scandinavian *du*, Latin and all major Romance languages, Irish, Kurdish, Lithuanian and Latvian *tu* or *tú*, Greek *σύ* (*sy*), Slavic *ты* / *ty* or *ти* / *ti*, [Armenian](#) *դու* (*dow/du*) and [Sanskrit](#) *त्वम्* (*tvam*). A cognate form of this pronoun exists in almost every other Indo-European language.

Originally, *thou* was simply the singular counterpart to the plural pronoun [ye](#). Following a process found in other Indo-European languages, *thou* was later used to express intimacy, familiarity or even disrespect, while another pronoun, *you*, the oblique/objective form of *ye*, was used in formal circumstances. After the [Norman Conquest](#), which marked the beginning of the [French](#) vocabulary influence that characterized the [Middle English](#) period, *thou* was gradually replaced by the plural *ye* as the form of address for a superior person and later for an equal. In the 17th century, *thou* fell into disuse in the standard language but persisted, sometimes in altered form, in [regional dialects](#) of [England](#) and [Scotland](#). Early English translations of the [Bible](#) used *thou* and never *you* as the singular second-person pronoun, with the double effect

of maintaining *thou* in usage and also imbuing it with an air of religious solemnity that is antithetical to its former sense of familiarity or disrespect. The use of the pronoun is also still present in poetry.

The practice of matching singular and plural forms with informal and formal connotations is called *the T-V distinction* and in English is largely due to the influence of French. This began with the practice of addressing [kings](#) and other [aristocrats](#) in the [plural](#). Eventually, this was generalized, following the French model, to address any social superior or stranger with a plural pronoun, which was felt to be more polite.

In the 18th century, [Samuel Johnson](#), in *A Grammar of the English Tongue*, wrote: "in the language of ceremony ... the second person plural is used for the second person singular", implying that the second person singular was still in everyday use. By contrast, [The Merriam Webster Dictionary of English Usage](#) says that for most speakers of [southern British English](#), *thou* had fallen out of everyday use, even in familiar speech, by sometime around 1650. *Thou* persisted in a number of religious, literary and regional contexts, and those pockets of continued use of the pronoun tended to undermine the obsolescence of the *T-V* distinction. (Samuel Johnson himself was born and raised not in the south of England, but in [Lichfield](#), Staffordshire, where the usage of *thou* persists until the present day, so it is not surprising that he would consider it entirely ordinary and describe it as such, as he indeed does in his grammar. This would seem to resolve the apparent contradiction above.)

One notable consequence of the decline in use of the second person singular pronouns *thou*, *thy* and *thee* is the obfuscation of certain socio-cultural elements of [Early Modern English](#) texts, such as many character interactions in [Shakespeare's](#) plays. In [Richard III](#), for instance, the conversation between the Duke of Clarence and the two murderers takes on a very different tone if it is read in light of the social connotations of the pronouns used by the characters.

Like his contemporaries, [William Shakespeare](#) uses *thou* both in the intimate, French style sense, and also to emphasize differences of rank, but he is by no means consistent in using the word, and friends and lovers sometimes call each other *ye* or *you* as often as they call each other *thou*, sometimes in ways that can be analysed for meaning, but often apparently at

random. An example is this excerpt from *Henry IV*, where Shakespeare has Falstaff use both forms with Henry:

PRINCE: Thou art so fat-witted with drinking of old sack, and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon benches after noon, that thou hast forgotten to demand that truly which thou wouldest truly know. [...]

FALSTAFF: Indeed, you come near me now, Hal ... And, I [pri thee](#), sweet wag, when thou art a king, as God save thy Grace – Majesty, I should say; for grace thou wilt have none –

Yet, in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare uses discordant second person pronouns to express Hamlet's antagonism towards his mother.

QUEEN GERTRUDE: Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended..

HAMLET: Mother, you have my father much offended.

Making Shakespearean conversations accessible to students

‘William Shakespeare's influence exceeds that of many historical figures. Four hundred years after his death, contemporary writers, actors and filmmakers continue to find inspiration in his work. Yet, for many educators, motivating student interest in Shakespeare remains a challenge.’

Technology is an ideal tool to support performance of Shakespeare. (Christopher Shamburg)

In what follows, I will provide some activities meant to make Shakespearian conversations accessible to upper-intermediate students.

STAGES OF THE LESSON

Lead-in

Picture differences-Shakespeare cartoon

Teacher shows students a picture of Shakespeare, eliciting them to say who the character is. In pairs, students find differences between the two states in the picture. Teacher talks with the class about the famous English writer of the Elizabethan era, getting them to mention some of his best-known works.

Activity 1

Introductory exercises

Teacher has students work in pairs and write a silent conversation. With a partner, they record a conversation on paper (at least five exchanges). The process is that one student writes the first line of a dialogue and passes the paper to the partner who continues the conversation. So it might be something like this:

What do you want to do after school?

I don't know. Do you want to come to my house?

OK. Can we play with your PlayStation?

Sure, what game do you want to play?

Teacher lets them all continue this without speaking until each has at least five exchanges. Then they can put these away for later use.

Activity 2

Revising archaic forms of pronouns

1 Teacher shows students a picture of a wedding and talks to them about the content of the wedding vow. She recites a typical example and writes it on the board:

"I, Martin take thee, Jane, as my lawful wife."

"I, Jane, take thee, Martin, as my lawful husband."

2 Teacher underlines the word *thee*, eliciting students to say its function (object of a verb) and then asking students to complete the following sentences with the appropriate pronoun, choosing from *thou*, *thee*, *thy*, *thine*, *ye*:

"What is name?"

".... art my brother."

"To own self be true."

"..... shall know me." (plural)

"Come, let me clutch"

Students are then asked to turn the italicised words in the following sentences into archaic forms of pronouns:

I love *you*.

Your sister is here.

If *your* enemy wrongs *you*, buy each of his children a drum.

You must wait here.

Activity 3

Getting students familiar with particular features of Shakespearean language

1 Teacher explains that Elizabethan language, though considered Early Modern English, still retained some verb inflections, which usually simply add an *-est* or *-st* to a word. These were often used with the 2nd person familiar pronouns:

"What didst thou see?"

"Why canst thou not see the difference?"

2 Teacher uses some excerpts from "Romeo & Juliet" to illustrate particularities of Elizabethan English.

"I tell thee what; get thee to church o' Thursday,

Or never after look me in the face."

"O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?"

She explains that *art* is a form of the word "be" (*are*) and *wherefore* means "what is the purpose of."

O Romeo, Romeo, what is the purpose of you being Romeo?

3 Teacher asks students to look at a sentence structure, helping them to work out its meaning:

"Thy shape invisible retain thou still." (The Tempest)

They will, of course, notice that the word order is different from contemporary English.

4 Teacher divides the class into three groups. She takes three sentences, one for each group: "A glooming peace this morning with it brings." (Romeo and Juliet), "I take thee at thy word." (Romeo and Juliet) and "That handkerchief did an Egyptian to my mother give." (Othello). She puts each word of the sentence on a separate index card. She mixes the cards and gives a set of them to the three groups, letting them sort out the cards and try to figure out Shakespeare's sentences. She asks each group to read their sentence out loud. She continues rearranging until the groups get it close to Shakespeare's.

Activity 4

Introducing Shakespearean conversations

1 Teacher asks students to rewrite the conversations produced at the beginning of the class, by using archaic forms of language. She has two pairs play the dialogue in front of the class.

2 Students are then asked to transform these excerpts from Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" into contemporary English sentences:

Puck: 'Thou speak'st aright'.

Titania: 'Then I must be thy lady'.

Oberon: 'How can'st thou, thus, for shame, Titania,

Glance at my credit with Hippolyta,

Knowing I know thy love to Theseus?'

Oberon: 'Well, go thy way: thou shalt not from this grove

Till I torment thee from this injury'.

3 Arguing that all over the world, Romeo and Juliet are synonymous with romantic love, teacher writes two definitions of love taken from the very play:

Love is:

‘a smoke made with the fume of sighs.’

‘a madness most discreet, a choking gall and a preserving sweet.’

T asks students to write their own definition of love.

4Teacher plays Romeo and Juliet, act 2, scene 2 by accessing the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwPhiaA7jDo>. After students have watched the first part, teacher asks them where the characters are and talks to them about the scene and the play for a short while, highlighting the impassionate cry in favour of love over hate and peace over war. Then, she gives them the written version of the continuing dialogue between Romeo and Juliet having the original version on the left and the contemporary English version on the right. She asks students to read it and highlight words they find special or strange.

Activity 5

Getting a deeper insight into Romeo and Juliet’s conversations

Teacher asks students to work in pairs in order to accomplish these tasks and answer the questions that follow:

1. In the lines:

‘O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?

Deny thy father and refuse thy name.

Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,

And I'll no longer be a Capulet.' ,

Juliet suggests how she and Romeo can solve their problem. Explain her proposal in your own words.

2. What gives Romeo the confidence to reveal himself?

3. How does Juliet recognize Romeo?

4. Romeo's love for Juliet is almost religious in its intensity. Find two religious terms which Romeo uses when speaking to Juliet.

Activity 6

Role-playing Shakespearean conversations

Students choose some characters and do role-play.

Conclusion

To sum up, throughout this article, I have tried to follow the traces of the English language (Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English, Modern English). Further on, I have drawn your attention to archaic forms of personal pronouns, focusing on Early Modern English language. By means of Shakespearean conversations, I have meant to provide students with an opportunity to practice archaic pronouns.

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