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The use of thou in George Bernard Shaw's plays

This study aims to investigate the use of *thou* in Late-Modern-English plays. The meaning of *thou* has changed from familiar, marked to archaic in Modern English (Wales 1996). Although *thou* was almost extinct in Standard Late Modern English, it is still attested in plays and novels (Nonomiya 2017, Nakayama 2018, etc.). To study its use and meanings, I compiled an electronic corpus of George Bernard Shaw's plays and analysed the occurrences of *thou* and its variants. *You* and its variants were also searched for the comparison's sake. Shaw was chosen for the following three reasons: he wrote a sufficient number of plays to perform a quantitative analysis; he wrote plays in different genres in various settings (e.g. contemporary comedies, ancient tragedies), which allows one for genre and stylistic analysis; his profound knowledge in his predecessors' works, especially Shakespeare's (Wilson 1961), makes it possible to analyse his usage in terms of speech chain (Agha 2003). The electronic text was retrieved from Project Gutenberg and compared with the Bodley Head edition.

Overall, *thou* is used very sparingly; it is never attested in the majority of the plays. Of the twelve plays containing *thou*, seven has only a handful of *thou*, most of which are in quotations from older sources especially the Bible. *Thou* is occasionally used for characterisation in a few plays, for example in foreigners' speeches in *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* (1900). It is also used to add solemnness to plays set in older times, such as *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898). Unlike in Elizabethan and Georgian plays, *thou* was never used to express strong emotions or intimacy. These findings could suggest that the transition of meanings of *thou* – from intimacy to limited context – might have completed in the nineteenth century.

References

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