

Pronoun Choice as Self-Expression in Late Middle English

While the address pronouns of many languages involve variation only on linguistic criteria, such as grammatical number, in other languages they vary based on social factors as well: French *vous* vs. *tu*, or German *du* vs. *Sie*. While modern standard English uses just *you* for all numbers, older periods included variation between *you* (Y) and *thou* (T), as a number distinction, then as a social distinction. Many scholars have set out to establish the criteria influencing choice of pronoun in older stages of English, particularly in Chaucer and Shakespeare. In spite of considerable attention, however, many problematic cases resist easy explanation.

Previous attempts to explain pronoun choice have mostly taken one of two approaches. Brown and Gilman (1960) view pronoun choice as fixed, based on the relative social standing of the speaker and hearer. This falls short for describing a language such as English where use was much more variable. Brown and Levinson (1987) use politeness theory to explain the choice, and treat pronoun selection as a means of mitigating threats to face. This approach fails to account for pronoun choice in the absence of a face threat.

Bowen (2011) analyzed Malory's *Morte Darthur* with a combination of the two approaches, accounting for more than 90% of pronoun choices. However, this leaves a number of tokens which do not fit the predictions, such as when a knight, Sir Tor, addresses his servant using Y instead of the expected T, or when a commoner named Aries addresses King Arthur, employing numerous politeness strategies, yet still using T.

Various attempts to explain such problematic cases have been proposed (e.g. Knappe & Schumann 2006), but fall short. Drawing on work in variationist sociolinguistics (e.g. Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985 and others), I analyze pronoun choice in the *Morte* as a means of crafting speaker identity. For example, the Lady Lynet treats a disgraced knight with contempt, using T to establish herself as the dominant one in the relationship. The wicked and cowardly knight Malagant uses Y exclusively as part of crafting his devious identity, speaking as a principled knight but acting as a monster.

Malory uses pronoun choice as a literary device to differentiate his characters, but this usage may reflect the crafting of identity in the real world as well. Nevala (2003) shows that address formulae and politeness strategies in Early Modern English correspondence depend on the identity of the writer. I argue the same holds for pronoun choice. Incorporating an identity-based approach allows new insights—and explanatory power—into the thorny problem of pronoun choice.

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