

## Seminar 4. Pragmatic change

Comment on the use of terms and pronouns of address in the following Early Modern English texts.

### Text 1. *Hamlet* ( I, ii)

Queen: Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet, I pray thee stay with us, go not to Wittenberg.  
Hamlet: I shall in all my best obey you, madam.  
King: Why, 'tis a loving and a fair reply.

Non reciprocal use of pronouns. The queen uses *thou* with Hamlet, her son (+ first name). She gets *you* and *madam* in exchange. The use of *thou* could be interpreted as indicating differences in power (*thou* queen to subject; *you* subject to queen), but this is not likely, as members of royalty would be expected to exchange reciprocal *you*. The most likely explanation here is to attribute the use of *thou* to intimacy (mother/son). The term of address selected (*Hamlet*, first name) is in line with this. The queen's tone is affectionate (*thou* of intimacy). The use of *you* by Hamlet denotes coldness and distance. This is not missed by the king, who ironically says Hamlet's reply is "loving and fair".

### Text 2. Henry Oxinden, Letter to his wife (1662)

I read thy Letters over and over and over, for in them I see thee as well as I can. I am thine as much as possibly. I hope our Children are well. My service to all you think fitting to speak it to.

Personal letter husband to wife. The tone is one of tenderness and affection, the pronoun selected is the *thou* of intimacy. The last sentence shows a shift to *you*. The effect is to change the mood of the letter to an objective, matter of fact tone. This seems to be a formula. Pronominal shifts can be used for textual effects (change of topic, or change of mood, as is the case here).

### Text 3. *Hamlet* (V,i)

HAMLET : Whose grave's this, sirrah?  
First Clown: Mine, sir.

[...]

HAMLET: I think it be thine, indeed; for thou liest in't.  
First Clown: You lie out on't, sir, and therefore it is not yours: for my part, I do not lie in't, and yet it is mine.  
HAMLET: 'Thou dost lie in't, to be in't and say it is thine: 'tis for the dead, not for the quick; therefore thou liest.

Non reciprocal use of the pronouns depending on social status: Hamlet addresses the clown as *thou* and *sirrah*; he is addressed as *you* and *sir*. *Sirrah* is a term of address used for boys or for people of the lower classes. *Sir* was used in EModE only for the upper classes. Both of them derive from French *Sire*. Harmony between pronouns and terms of address.

Nowadays *sir* is used as a polite address to anyone irrespective of his status.

#### Text 4. *Macbeth* (V, iii)

*Enter a Servant*

**Macbeth:** The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon! Where got'st thou that goose look?

*Thou* would be the expected pronoun from Macbeth to the servant (according to social status), but here it is clearly associated with the tone of abuse; there is a curse ('may the devil turn you black'), insults (*cream-faced loon*; *goose*).

#### Further examples of semantic change

- What does *quick* mean in Text 3? Which type of semantic change has affected this word? It means 'alive'. Semantic shift (addition of a new meaning); the new meaning may have arisen through inference. The old meaning of the adjective is still seen in *quicksilver* 'mercury' or *quicken* (when a pregnant woman starts feeling the baby in her womb).
- *smirk*: 'to smile' > 'to smile in a silly way' Pejoration (evaluation is involved)
- *nice*: 'foolish, ignorant' (cf. Latin *nescius*) > 'kind, considerate' Amelioration
- *fowl*: 'bird' > 'barnyard fowl' Specialization
- *pig*: 'piglet' > 'pig' Generalization
- *pig* > 'an unpleasant person, especially one who is greedy or dirty' Semantic shift through metaphor; pejoration. Animal terms are common sources of insults.