



Many commentators have described the evolution of the present-day English second-person personal pronoun system. The following description paraphrases that to be found in Baugh and Cable, *History of the English Language* (para. 183), with extra information from Joseph and Elizabeth Wright's *New English Grammar* (para. 317).

In very early English there was a simple distinction between *THOU* for the singular and *YE* for the plural subject pronouns, while *THEE* and *YOU* were respectively used for the singular and plural object pronouns. In the thirteenth century the French *Tu/V* system came to be copied in English, singular *th*-forms being applied to familiars, children, and inferiors, while plural *y*-forms were used to show respect. By the sixteenth century the singular subject and object pronouns *THOU* and *THEE* had become interchangeable for many speakers. They also became increasingly unpopular, probably because of their connotations of disrespect, and gradually disappeared from standard speech, although they survived in the non-standard dialects and in the speech of egalitarian Quakers. *YE* and *you* were left as the standard pronouns applying to everyone, singular and plural, high and low, and they were of course used by some non-standard speakers also. These two surviving standard pronouns were frequently pronounced *yuh*, and like non-standard *THOU* and *THEE* they too came increasingly to be used interchangeably. Since the sixteenth century, therefore, it has been quite possible to encounter *THOU*, *THEE*, *YE*, or *YOU* as subject pronouns as in this map, although given this complicated history it is remarkable that there remain such definite preferences for particular pronouns in different areas of England.