



Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 8

3-28-1980

A Peculiar Language: The Second Person Pronouns in the Doctrine and Covenants

Mark David Davis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Davis, Mark David (1980) "A Peculiar Language: The Second Person Pronouns in the Doctrine and Covenants," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol6/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

A PECULIAR LANGUAGE: THE SECOND PERSON PRONOUNS
IN THE DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS

Mark David Davis
Brigham Young University

The modern scripture of the Latter-day Saints is part of a religious heritage founded not on the philosophies and wisdom of the world, but rather on the inspiration of more or less "unlearned men." While the book of Doctrine and Covenants, for example, reflects the inspiration of those who wrote it, it also reflects, in some degree their unlearnedness. The Doctrine and Covenants is written in a non-standard English which can lead to ambiguity and unclarity. This paper looks at one fact of non-standard usage in Mormon scripture--the use of the second person pronouns in the Doctrine and Covenants, and advocates a reformation in the peculiar language of Mormon scripture.

Most Mormons who have thought about it seem to believe that though the seventeenth-century English dialect of the King James Bible was certainly not commonly spoken in nineteenth-century New England, yet "King James English" had been adopted in the translation of the Book of Mormon and in the revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants. This idea is generally accurate, but a close reading shows that the Doctrine and Covenants either follows the King's style badly, or else follows a non-King James standard of usage. What follows is a result of a search for a consistent pattern of usage in the Doctrine and Covenants.

The dialect or usage standard commonly called the "language of the scriptures" is largely distinguished by the pronoun thou for second person singular and ye for second person plural, in the nominative and subjective case, and thee and you, respectively, in the objective case. In the Doctrine and Covenants only twenty-six sections consistently follow the King's venerable style on this point: In twenty sections ye/you is used with a plural antecedent throughout the section. In parts of six sections the singular thou/thee occurs consistently. Clearly, then, Joseph Smith did not strictly follow King James usage.

What then is the language of the Doctrine and Covenants? The modern English you for both singular and plural, nominative and objective, is used in several sections, nine where it is used in a plural context and eleven where it is singular. In addition, there are eleven sections where you is used only in the objective case and it is impossible to determine whether ye or you would have been used in the nominative. But since these objective you's often refer to singular antecedents, they cannot be said to follow the King James rules. They are used consistently though, and that in itself is significant.

There is only one other section where the same second person pronoun is used consistently for one antecedent. In section 60, vv. 13-15, thou/thee is used to refer to a plural antecedent: "I give unto them a commandment, thus; thou shalt not idle away thy time..." Interestingly, in this same section, another plural antecedent is referred to as you.

The above consistent sections, plus fourteen irrelevant sections in which there is no second person used at all, account for seventy-one of the sections--slightly more than half of the total. The rest are a collection of virtually every possible combination of plural and singular pronouns imaginable. I have classified these "mixed" sections in eight categories of mixed usage. A complete list of the sections in each category is included in the appendix. Here I will explain and illustrate with examples each of the categories.

It is important to note here that while the ye and thou pronouns are used in these "mixed" sections with various singular and plural meanings, the words themselves are used "grammatically" correctly. That is, there occurs no objective ye or nominative thee. Further, the verbs used with these pronouns apparently agree as they should. It is always "thou hast," "ye shall" and so on.

The mixed usage types in the various sections are categorized according to the nominative case of the second person pronouns used in each section for the same antecedent, and according to the number (singular or plural) of the antecedent.

1. Mixed Ye, You Nominative--Plural

This is by far the most common variety of mixed usage--simply because most of the revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants are addressed to more than one person. Typically ye appears for a few verses, then you, then ye again. Some of the sections are basically consistent with just one or two slips, which makes the mixed usage seem to be more likely a matter of correctable mistakes than of any significant nuances of meaning or legitimate archaic usage patterns.

Examples:

Section 17 v. 5: "And ye [O. Cowdery, D. Whitmer, M. Harris] shall testify that you have seen them..."

Section 88, vv. 76-78, 84: "Ye [members of the Church] shall continue in prayer....You shall teach one another....Teach ye diligently... that you may be perfected."

2. Mixed Ye, You Nominative--Singular

There is no section in which a single person is consistently addressed by ye, but the alternating ye/you occurs in three sections in which the recipient of the revelation is clearly designated by name.

Examples:

Section 80, vv. 1,2: "Verily thus saith the Lord unto you my servant Stephen Burnett: Go ye, go ye into the world...And inasmuch as you desire a companion I will give you Eden Smith."

3. Mixed Ye, Thou Nominative--Plural

In addressing the Church the revelations often will first use thou and

then change to ye, and back again.

Examples:

Section 21, vv. 4,5: "Therefore, meaning the Church, thou shalt give heed unto all his words...for his word ye shall receive."

Section 42, vv. 30, 31, 45, 58: "Thou [members of the Church] wilt remember the poor....And inasmuch as ye impart of your substance unto the poor, ye will do it unto me....Thou shalt live together in love....Then shall ye teach...all men..."

4. Mixed Ye, Thou Nominative--Singular

Again in this category the recipient of the revelations is clearly identified as one person.

Examples:

Section 112, vv. 16-19: "Verily I say unto you, my servant Thomas, thou art the man whom I have chosen....whithersoever they shall send you, go ye."

5. Mixed You, Thou Nominative--Plural

This form does not exist. Whenever a plural subject is referred to as thou in mixed sections, it alternates with the pronoun ye.

6. Mixed You, Thou Nominative--Singular

This is the second most common mixed pronoun category. It is very common in commandments given to specific persons.

Examples:

Section 19, vv. 13, 25, 32: "I command you [M. Harris] to repent and keep the commandments which you have received....and I command thee [M. Harris] that thou shalt not covet thine own property.... This is a last and great commandment which I shall give unto you concerning the matter; for this shall suffice for thy daily walk, even until the end of thy life."

Section 90, v. 3. "The keys of this Kingdom shall never be taken from you [Joseph], while thou art in the world."

7. Mixed You, Ye, Thou Nominative--Plural

The triple mixes are especially interesting. There is only one example with a plural antecedent.

Example:

Section 98, vv. 3,8,39: "All things wherewith you [my friends] have been afflicted shall work together for your good....Therefore ye are free indeed....And again verily I say unto you, if after thine enemy has come upon thee the first time, he repent...thou shalt forgive him."

8. Mixed You, Ye, Thou Nominative--Singular

This occurs in five sections, and is often the cause of ambiguity.

Examples:

Section 6, vv. 20,23,30: "Thou art Oliver....Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God?...And if they do unto you as they have done unto me, blessed are ye, for you shall dwell with me in glory."

Section 132, vv. 40, 46: "I gave unto thee, my servant Joseph, a commandment to restore all things. Ask what ye will, and it shall be given unto you....and whatsoever you shall seal on earth shall be sealed in heaven."

These categories account for all the second person pronoun usage in the Doctrine and Covenants. There appears to be no pattern or consistency in the mixed usage. Revelations addressed to Joseph Smith and those given through him to others are all written with the same usage quirks. Further, Brigham Young's Section 136 follows the example of the others, so it is not just Joseph Smith's personal style. Nor is it the style of the times, since contemporary edited writing does not reflect the same abandon.

Since few English-speaking Mormons can distinguish ye from thou at all, this peculiar language probably causes most Latter-day Saints little confusion. But to a careful reader it can cause ambiguity and disguise meaning. In some sections, the significance of a passage might vary depending on the assumed antecedent of an ambiguous pronoun.

For example, in Section 3, after addressing Joseph Smith variously, as You and Thou, the revelation continues in verse 10: "Repent of that which thou hast done which is contrary to the commandment which I gave you, and thou art still chosen." In normal usage that you might imply a plural antecedent, but by analogy with verses 5 through 8 of the same section, you could be Joseph himself. The passage is not clear.

Section 7, verse 1, reads: "John my beloved, what desirest thou? For if you shall ask what you will, it shall be granted unto you." It is not clear whether the "for if you shall ask what you will" phrase refers only to John, or whether all the apostles had the same gift. This passage is especially perplexing since the ambiguous you-phrase was not part of the original Book of Commandments. It was added in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, though the phrase was then written "if ye shall ask" rather than "if you shall ask." The present edition has you in verse 1, but later on in verse 8, when clearly referring to two people, it uses ye.

It cannot always be assumed that in such a case thou is the specific person addressed, while a ye or you indicates a more general principle or commandment. In section 55, W.W. Phelps is told in verse 2: "Thou shalt be ordained by the hand of my servant." Verse 3 uses you, and is

perhaps a general principle: "And on whomsoever you shall lay your hands... you shall have power to give the Holy Spirit." But verse 4 is clearly addressed specifically to Brother Phelps, and also uses you: "And again, you shall be ordained to assist my servant Oliver Cowdery to do the work of printing and of selecting and writing books for schools..."

This brings up another cause for dismay at the peculiar language--that of translation. The translator must transform the ambiguous English into clear Italian or Russian, for example, where the ye/thou distinction is vital. The translator must decide what was really meant in passages like those just considered, since to translate them directly in their traditional meaning would make the passage incomprehensible. This adds the responsibility of doctrinal judgment to the job of linguistic translation.

What is needed is, at least, an approved guide or official opinion clarifying the intention of the ambiguous phrases. This would provide a clear, consistent standard for translation of the Doctrine and Covenants into foreign languages.

The ideal solution to the ambiguities in the language of the Doctrine and Covenants would be a newly edited version of the text. The traditional distinction should be made and used consistently throughout the book. The fact that some (though few) of the sections follow the King James standard suggests that there is nothing inherently sacred in the inconsistencies themselves. It might be argued that "correcting" the word of the Lord is inappropriate, but the Doctrine and Covenants and other Mormon scripture have already been blessed with some grammatical improvements, though, clearly, more can be made. (Incidentally, I recently noticed that a slight change was made in the filmed script of the temple ceremony, in which the words you and your which were inconsistent in a certain context, were replaced by thee and thy.)

A new edition following the traditional King James style (or even a modified but consistent style) would add to the clarity of the Doctrine and Covenants and improve its literary value. I do not feel that an edition abolishing the King James style (a so-called "New English D & C") would be appropriate or helpful. By long association the Early Modern English dialect of King James has acquired a sacred flavor, which is certainly appropriate for Latter-day Saint scripture. Further, a version with all the second person pronouns leveled to the present day you would lose an important key to determining the intent and relevance of certain passages.

The Doctrine and Covenants as it now stands is a beautiful and powerful book, but the odd mechanics of its writing detract somewhat from its meaning and readability. What I am advocating is perhaps impractical. The present edition, with its peculiar style, may be so tradition-bound that a re-edited version would not be approved by the brethren nor accepted by the membership. But unless there is a "higher" consistency in the seemingly arbitrary and ambiguous mixed usage of the Doctrine and Covenants, I feel that a new corrected and consistent edition would be valuable.

APPENDIX

Consistent Sections

1. Nominative YE plural (total 20)

Sections 1, 2, 4, 37, 41, 44, 45, 46, 48, 52, 64, 65, 68, 72, 76,
87, 92 (v.1), 94, 96, 100 (vv. 1-8, 15-17).

2. Nominative THOU singular (total 6)

Sections 24 (v. 1-12, 17-19), 20 (v. 77), 109, 121, 122, 130 (v.15).

3. Nominative YOU plural (total 9)

Sections 18 (v. 9-47), 26, 47, 60 (v. 1-5, 16), 71, 105, 117, 123,
129.

4. Nominative YOU singular (total 11)

Sections 9, 10, 12, 21 (vv. 10-12), 30, 31, 34, 92 (v. 2), 93 (v. 41-53)
108, 126.

5. Nominative YE singular (total 0)

6. Nominative THOU plural (total 1)

Section 60 (vv. 13-15)

7. No nominative Second Person (total 11)

Sections 13, 73, 79, 89, 91, 97, 105, 106, 107, 119, 125.

8. No Second Person (total 14)

Sections 32, 74, 77, 83, 85, 102, 113, 114, 116, 118, 120, 131,
134, 135.

Mixed Usage Sections

In these sections various pronouns are used for the same antecedent. There are eight broad categories of pronoun mixtures listed. The verses after the section numbers are typical examples. The sign "=" means "compare."

1. Mixed YE, YOU Nominative Plural

Sections 17 (v. 5), 22 (v.2,4), 27 (v.2=4), 29 (4=33), 33 (v.8=13),
38 (v. 19,29), 43(v. 5=6), 49 (v.1), 50 (v. 1=25, 31, 33),
51 (9=20), 54 (8=4), 56 (14=15), 57 (v. 3), 58 (3=5), 61(v.8)
62 (3=5), 63 (v. 1), 67 (5=6), 70 (1=14), 75 (2=3, 21),
78 (4=5), 82 (1=4, 15=17), 84 (42=44), 88 (76=77=78=84),
90 (24=27), 93 (20=23), 95 (3=7), 101 (38=43), 103 (v.17),

104 (8=9), 110 (5=16), 111 (2=12), 124 (34, 48, 144=145),
127 (v.2), 133 (1=66), 136 (11=17=25=37).

2. Mixed YE, YOU Nominative Singular (total 3).

Sections 53 (1=7), 80 (1=2), 124 (1=7).

3. Mixed YE, THOU Nominative Plural (total 3)

Sections 21 (v. 4), 42 (30=31=40), 59 (9=10).

4. Mixed YE, THOU Nominative Singular (total 2).

Sections 24 (16=18), 112 (16=19).

5. Mixed YOU, THOU Nominative Plural (total 0)

6. Mixed YOU, THOU Nominative Singular (total 17)

Sections 3 (7=9), 5 (29=30), 6 (20=22), 7 (v. 1) 8 (2=4=5=6), 15(3=4),
16 (3=4), 18 (1=7), 19 (15=25,32), 21 (v. 1), 23 (1,3,4,5),
25 (v.2), 39 (7,8=9=10=11), 55 (v. 1), 81 (1=3), 88 (v.133),
90 (v. 3).

7. Mixed YOU, YE, THOU Nominative Plural (total 1)

Section 98 (3=8=39).

8. Mixed YOU, YE, THOU Nominative Singular (total 5)

Sections 6 (20=22=29), 11(9=10=14), 14 (7=11), 66 (1=9=11),
132 (40=41=46).