Having Problems with Prayer Language?

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Having Problems with Prayer Language?

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Have you ever been called on to pray in a class or a meeting and found yourself stumbling over archaic pronouns or verb conjugations no longer used in everyday English? Is it "Thy approval" or "Thine approval"? Is it okay to say "Thou might"? When do I say "Thou dost," and when do I say "Thou doest"?

Most languages do not present this problem. German speakers, for instance, address Heavenly Father as they would address a family member or close friend. Interestingly, because English is a Germanic language, many of the familiar forms in German are very similar to the archaic English forms we use in prayer. But in German these forms are still used every day in conversation, whereas in English they have almost completely vanished from common usage.

As Latter-day Saints, we often receive reminders from our leaders to use "prayer language." Most members desire to follow this counsel, but they struggle. Why? Because in spite of all the reminders to use prayer language, no one teaches them *how*. Actually, it's not that difficult, and a few shortcuts even make it possible to avoid the most common stumbling block: tricky verb conjugations. Let's take a brief look at some of the forms we use in prayer.

Thou and *Thee*

Instead of addressing Heavenly Father as *You*, we are taught to use the pronouns *Thou* and *Thee*. *Thou* is used as the subject of a sentence.

Thee is used as an object—a direct object, an indirect object, and an object of a preposition. Thus, we say:

　　"**Thou** art kind and gracious." (subject)
　　"Wilt **Thou** bless us with safety as we travel." (subject)
　　"We love **Thee** and Thy Son." (direct object)
　　"We give **Thee** thanks for our blessings." (indirect object)
　　"We have faith in **Thee**." (object of the preposition *in*)

Thy and *Thine*

　　Likewise, we should use the possessive pronouns *Thy* and *Thine* in prayer rather than *Your*. The difference between the two forms is identical to the difference between the indefinite articles *a* and *an*. If the word following the possessive pronoun begins with a consonant (or a vowel that behaves as a consonant, such as in *universe* or *usual*), use *Thy*. If the word begins with a vowel sound (*abundance*, *authority*, *unsurpassed*), we use *Thine*.

　　"Thou hast restored **Thy** Church and **Thine** authority in these latter days."

　　"Watch over us with **Thy** loving care."

Verb Conjugations

　　This is where most people struggle, because the archaic forms in English, just as the modern forms, do not always follow the rules. The rule is that you add an ending to any verb following the pronoun *Thou*. The ending is *–st* or *–est* for most verbs. Thus, we would say:

　　"Thou **givest** us bountiful blessings."
　　"Thou **helpest** the needy."
　　"Thou **restorest** our peace."
　　"Thou **speakest** the truth."
　　"Thou **takest** from us our sorrows."

　　Of course, English always presents exceptions. In verb conjugations using the pronoun *Thou*, these exceptions involve *to be* and *to have* as well as several auxiliary verbs (verbs such as *may, can,* or *shall* that modify the main verb). Since there is no consistency here, we must simply memorize the correct forms. For instance, we say:

　　"Thou **art** kind and generous."
　　"Thou **hast** given us great blessings."
　　 "**Wilt** Thou bless our home with Thy Spirit."
　　". . . that Thou **shalt** never turn Thy heart from us."
　　But we also say:

"Thou **canst** not lie."

"We ask Thee that Thou **mightest** bring peace to our souls."

"We have gathered to worship Thee today that Thou **mayest** know of our love for Thee."

Less common auxiliary verbs include *couldst*, *shouldst*, and *wouldst*. The last of these three might be used now and then in our prayers, but rather than pleading, "**Wouldst** Thou grant unto us Thy Spirit," we would probably more often say, "**Wilt** thou grant unto us Thy Spirit."

Common Verb Conjugations with *Thou*

Thou art	Thou hast
Thou dost (auxiliary form)	Thou doest (main verb)
Thou wilt	Thou shalt
Thou canst	Thou mayest
Thou wouldst	Thou couldst
Thou shouldst	Thou mightest
Thou givest	Thou blessest
Thou protectest	Thou rewardest
Thou commandest	Thou desirest
Thou helpest	Thou speakest

Dost and *Doest*

What is the difference between *dost* (pronounced like *dust*) and *doest* (two syllables, the first pronounced like *do*)? From reading the scriptures, most Latter-day Saints probably have a fairly accurate (and perhaps intuitive) sense for this. The former is an auxiliary verb and always accompanies the main verb in the clause. Examples are:

"When thou **dost lend** thy brother any thing" (Deuteronomy 24:10).

"**Dost** thou now **govern** the kingdom of Israel?" (1 Kings 21:7).

"Thou **dost bless** us when we obey Thy word."

The latter form is the second-person, present-tense conjugation of the active verb *to do*. It is used when no other verb is present in the clause. Examples of its usage are:

"If thou **doest** not well, sin lieth at the door" (Genesis 4:7).

"God is with thee in all that thou **doest**" (Genesis 21:22).

"If Thou **doest** this in our behalf, we thank Thee."

Some may also wonder about the form *doth* that appears often in scripture. *Doth* is the archaic third-person conjugation of *do*. Thus, we read in scripture, "Ye know not what hour your Lord **doth** come"

(Matthew 24:42). *Doth*, just like *dost*, is only used as an auxiliary or helping verb. When used as the main verb, the correct third-person form would be *doeth*, as in "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand **doeth**" (Matthew 6:3).

Avoiding Verb Conjugations

Some people might still be uncomfortable with adding the *–st* or *–est* endings to verbs, or perhaps they can't ever seem to remember that the correct conjugation of *will* is irregular (*wilt*). If this is so, they can avoid this dilemma altogether by using the command form. For example:

"**Give** us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11).

"And **forgive** us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12).

"**Bless** us with Thy Spirit."

Using the primary verb in its infinitive form (*to* + *verb*) is also a method some people use to avoid the confusing verb endings. Examples of such phrases are:

"We ask Thee **to bless** us with Thy Spirit."

"We ask Thee **to protect** us from evil."

Some people also select an auxiliary verb (usually *wilt*) and use it almost exclusively.

"**Wilt** Thou **grant** us Thy love."

"**Wilt** Thou **bless** this class."

"**Wilt** Thou **forgive** us our sins."

Although these sentences look like questions, they are actually command forms with an auxiliary verb added to soften the effect.

Consistency

Some Church members might wonder why we use the archaic forms when addressing our Heavenly Father but are not consistent in using similar forms when referring in prayer to other people or things. For example, why don't we say, "Father, wilt Thou bless Brother Wilkins. He hath lost his job and needeth employment"? Probably because it sounds unnatural, even humorous, in our day and would draw attention to the language itself and away from that for which we are praying.

Of course, the question might also be asked, Why don't we just do away with the archaic forms and use *You* and *Your*, our modern familiar forms? To this question I have no reasonable answer, since

members of the Church who speak other languages generally address their Heavenly Father in an intimate, personal manner just as they would address a family member or close friend. It can even be argued that the archaic forms we use in English actually place a barrier of artificial and awkward formality between the supplicant and his or her Father. We often hear that these forms show proper respect for Deity, but does that mean it is impossible for German- or French-speaking members to show appropriate respect in their prayers? Of course not. Respect is more a function of attitude, posture, and tone of voice than of grammar. I suppose the only answer to this difficult question is that as long as our leaders counsel us to use the archaic forms, we ought to comply and learn how to use them correctly.

Using the Scriptures as a Pattern

We can become familar with the langue of prayer and its correct forms by reading the scriptures, particularly the King James version of the Bible. The King James Bible is also widely considered a masterpiece of English literature because of its beautiful prose. The Book of Mormon, by contrast, is somewhat inconsistent grammatically but can still serve as a pattern for prayer language in most instances.

By paying closer attention to the language itself as we read, we can become more familiar with the forms and usage of this now archaic English and expand our vocabulary of appropriate words and expressions we might use in prayer.

Reverence and Respect

As mentioned above, other languages, such as French and German, have no archaic form that might by its rare usage connote respect or reverence. God is addressed with the familiar pronouns used among family members and close friends. In such languages, individuals show respect and reverence through tone of voice, sincerity of heart, and humble posture.

These signs of reverence are more important, of course, than correct grammar or even the use of "prayer language." The honest but ungrammatical prayer of a humble son or daughter is certainly more pleasing to our Heavenly Father than the eloquent but pretentious prayer of the learned. If we can learn, however, to express ourselves effectively and correctly and still remain sincere and humble, we will be more able in our public prayers to speak appropriately for the class or congregation. RE