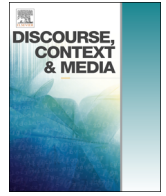




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“Or so the government would have you believe”: Uses of “you” in *Guardian* editorials

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ABSTRACT

Although second person pronouns are relatively unusual in formal written genres, they are frequent in the editorials of some newspapers. This has been associated with ongoing trends towards a more informal style of public discourse, and with the construction of more equal relationships between writers and readers, which may be either ideologically or economically motivated. This analysis of all the instances of “you” in *Guardian* editorials for 2011 brings to light several different ways in which the writer employs the second person. Although the primary motivation appears to be epideictic, in that the writer seeks to forge strong bonds with the readership and thereby strengthen the sense of communion and shared values, some other uses are identified, including dramatisation and irony. This leads on to consideration of the type of reader constructed by these uses of “you”, and the relationships projected between writer/newspaper, reader, and other entities.

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1. Introduction

The use of second person pronouns in written text is an area of particular interest for applied linguists and discourse analysts, since it can serve as an index to the dialogicality of a text or discourse, and shed light on the relationship that writers hope to build with their target readers. By using the first person “I” or “we” and the second person “you”, writers effectively construct the two main participants in the discursive interaction. As personal pronouns often offer “projected roles” which function as the textual personae of the intended writer and the inscribed reader, it is clear that the pronoun system offers a powerful mechanism for persuasion, since through its careful use, potential readers can be coaxed to “converge” with the textual personae offered to them and to align themselves with the value positions open to them (Thompson and Thetela, 1995:108).

One genre that is particularly interesting in this respect is the newspaper editorial. Not only do editorials often contain a high incidence of “we”, which might be expected since they embody the newspaper’s considered, “official”, opinion on issues of topical interest, but in some cases they have also been found to make frequent use of second person pronouns (Westin, 2002; Steen,

2003). The presence of large numbers of second person pronouns in editorials is in itself worthy of some discussion, since “you” is relatively rare elsewhere in formal writing, and tends to be associated with spoken language and informal register (Biber, 1988, Biber et al., 1999, Hyland and Tse, 2004). In academic writing, “you” is extremely unusual in the sciences, but occurs at low frequencies in some social science and humanities disciplines (Hyland, 2004). Regarding media texts, some authors maintain that newspapers rarely address their readers directly, either in the second-person “you”, or through other reader-addressed speech acts (apart from straightforward assertions), except in the case of specific campaigns to muster support among readers for a particular good cause (Van Dijk, 1988:74; Birks, 2010:58). However, this generalisation appears to hold more for news than for opinion genres. Biber (2004) describes an increase over the last 50 years in the use of first and second person pronouns in the print media as one of the ongoing changes to newspaper language. Hundt and Mair (1999) tracked changes in newspaper style between 1960 and 1990, and found a rise in use of both first and second person pronouns, which they interpreted as being part of a rise in orality motivated by a desire to capture a wider readership. A recent corpus study was able to trace an increase in various markers of informality in British newspaper corpora over only 12 years from 1993 to 2005 (Duguid, 2010). Interestingly, the evolution of a more informal style does not appear to be confined to the English-language media. For example, according to Vis (2011), the use of second person pronouns rose sharply in Dutch newspapers in the second half of the 20th century, an increase which was more marked in opinion than in other genres.

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If personal pronouns are indeed increasing in frequency, this would appear to be part of a broader trend towards informality in media language. Talbot (2007) discusses the trend towards more informal, conversational language in both broadcast and print media over the last thirty years, which she links to the emergence of a “public colloquial” style (2007: 25). Other experts have associated the spread of colloquial discourse styles with the rise of digital media, with the popularisation of youth culture, and with trends towards informality spreading from education through to public life as one generation replaces another (Baron, 2011; Thurlow, 2011).

On the other hand, although there appears to be a persistent underlying trend towards using less formal language in the media which may influence pronoun use in opinion writing, the effects of this are not palpable to the same degree in all newspapers, or particularly, in all editorials. While Steen (2003) found an increase from 1950 to 2000 in the use of first and second person pronouns in editorials published in *The Times*, Westin (2002) found that the use of second person pronouns remained stable over the twentieth century in English broadsheet editorials. Moreover, her results also suggest that the presence of what she defines as “involvement features”, including second person pronouns, was consistently greater across the whole time period in the *Guardian* than in the other two newspapers that formed part of her corpus (*The Times* and *Daily Telegraph*) (Westin and Geisler, 2002).

The picture is thus somewhat complex, and in order to explore it further, we must bear in mind that various different factors may play a role in determining the number and type of pronouns used. A better understanding of such factors should also shed light on the reasons underlying the rise or fall of second pronoun use over time. Without a detailed study of the uses of “you” in particular genres, there is a risk of overgeneralising, and perhaps even ignoring some important aspects of the use of the second person. The present study aims to address this issue by conducting a qualitative analysis of the way the pronoun “you” is used in a corpus consisting of all the editorials published on the *Guardian* newspaper website during 2011. Since *Guardian* editorials have been identified as having higher pronoun use and greater involvement than some other broadsheet editorials (Westin and Geisler, 2002), this corpus is likely to provide abundant examples of different uses of “you”. The purpose of the present paper is thus chiefly exploratory and explanatory: to map the uses of “you” in this context and interpret them in the light of the relations which the writer aims to establish with readers. Additionally, the picture obtained may provide insights that are relevant to diachronic studies of the type mentioned above, and contribute to ongoing discussions of informalisation processes in media discourse by offering a detailed analysis of the way “you” is used that goes beyond register to look at interactional discourse strategies, but this is not the primary objective of this study.

2. Texts and method

The corpus for this study consists of around 600,000 words, comprising all the editorials from the Internet version of the *Guardian* newspaper published in 2011. The online *Guardian* publishes two or three editorials every day (mean 2.8), and on Sundays it also includes the editorials published by its sister newspaper, the *Observer*, which are published alongside *Guardian* editorials (see list of editorials). The first two editorials usually focus on serious political or social issues. The third editorial, when present, was usually a shorter, lighter piece, often headed “In praise of...” or “Unthinkable?”. The corpus was compiled manually and uploaded to SketchEngine. A brief quantitative analysis showed that “you” occurs 504 times (839.3 per million) in this

corpus, as compared to “we” (1279 per million), “I” (203 per million) and the impersonal pronoun “one” (161.5 per million). The SketchEngine Concordance function was then used to identify all the instances of “you”, and the concordance lines containing “you” were then analysed manually in order to determine their meaning and pragmatic function. In some cases, this required the researcher to return to the original text, but in most cases, it was possible to determine enough information about the meaning and function of “you” from the immediate context provided in the concordance lines. Once each example had been identified and described, a taxonomy was drawn up and the different uses of “you” were mapped out, along with representative examples. In what follows, the main uses of “you” in these texts are described and discussed in the light of the relevant bibliography.

3. Discourse analysis

In what follows, the ways in which “you” is employed in this corpus are analysed under various category headings. It is inevitable that some of these categories overlap, and that features of more than one use of “you” may be present in any given case. For the purposes of analysis, the instances of “you” were first divided into those that were perceived to be principally non-dialogic (for example, those which could easily be substituted by “one”, or were part of a set phrase), those that were clearly intended to involve the reader (that is, in combination with imperatives, or to project voices in a debate), and those cases in which “you” addressed a third party. The relative frequency of these three broad categories were as follows: 101 instances (20%) were interpreted as being intrinsically non-dialogic in that they belonged to set phrases or were quoted as part of direct speech, while a further 104 instances (20.6%) seemed to be examples of a general or impersonal “you” (although it could be objected that the choice of “you” rather than “we”, “one” or “people” might be thought to raise the dialogic tone); 220 instances (43.7%) were perceived to invoke a relationship with the reader, and were thus dialogic in one of the senses described below; and 79 (15.7%) were used to address another person or entity, of which 44 (8.7%) belonged to one editorial which consisted of a set of questions aimed at Rebekah Brooks and James Murdoch in the wake of the *News of the World* telephone hacking scandals, and 35 (6.9%) were directed towards other public figures.

It should be noted that the various roles of “you” identified in the editorials seemed to cut across the different types of editorial. Although the third editorial could be perceived to address the reader directly slightly more often than the heavier editorials, including rather more instances of the kind described in Sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2 below, the weightier editorials also made similar uses of the second person on occasion. On the other hand, the type of direct address explained in 3.2.6 was more frequently encountered in the heavier editorials. In general, however, major differences in authorial tone between the first two editorials and the third were rare, except in the case of the few purely humorous texts.

3.1. Non-dialogic “you”

3.1.1. Non-interactive “you”: formulaic expressions and direct speech

Before analysing the various dialogic uses of “you” in the editorials, it is first necessary to explain that not all the instances of “you” in the corpus actually represented a potential dialogic use. Those which most clearly did not were the uses of you in well-known expressions, in which “you” is obligatory as an integral part of the expression:

But before sinking into a psychological slump to match the economic depression, recall that money can't buy you love – or

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