

## The Stylistics of 'You'

This book takes 'you', the reader, on board an interdisciplinary journey across genre, time and medium with the second-person pronoun. It offers a model of the various pragmatic functions and effects of 'you' according to different variables and linguistic parameters, cutting across a wide range of genres (ads, political slogans, tweets, literary genres etc.), and bringing together print and digital texts under the same theoretical banner. Drawing on recent research into intersubjectivity in neuropsychology and socio-cognition, it delves into the relational and ethical processing at work in the reading of a second-person pronoun narrative. When 'you' takes on its more traditional deictic function of address, the author-reader channel can be opened in different ways, which is explored in examples taken from Fielding, Brontë, Orwell, Kincaid, Grimsley, Royle, Adichie, Bartlett, Auster and even Spacey's 'creepy' 2018 YouTube video, ultimately foregrounding continuities and contrasts in the positioning of the audience.

SANDRINE SORLIN is Professor of English Linguistics at Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 (France), specialising in stylistics and pragmatics. Her latest book *Language and Manipulation in House of Cards* (2016) received an award from the European Society for the Study of English. She co-edited *The Pragmatics of Personal Pronouns* (2015) and edited *Stylistic Manipulation of the Reader in Contemporary Fiction* (2020). She is also Assistant Editor of *Language and Literature*.

# The Stylistics of 'You'

## *Second-Person Pronoun and Its Pragmatic Effects*

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Sandrine Sorlin

*Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3*



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## Preface

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When a colleague and friend asked me what my next book was going to be about, I answered, 'On the second-person pronoun in English'. He reacted with an astonished 'A whole book?' And when I told my partner, 'I have at last begun my book on you', he immediately replied 'On ME?'

In this book, I aim to provide a response to both these reactions, for there is undoubtedly a stylistics of 'you' that easily justifies a whole book on the topic – a stylistics that varies with each new genre, each new period, with authorial intent and, last but not least, the disposition of the reader. And in response to the second reaction, I will give illustrations of our ingrained tendency to identify with the addressee whenever we hear the word 'you', which shows that, like all personal pronouns, 'you' is at the heart of a strategy of both positioning and focalisation.

I therefore wish to take my reader on a journey with 'you' across genre, time and medium. My main interest is written fictional and non-fictional texts, hypertexts and paratexts. The first chapter will show how pervasive 'you' has become across genres. It will also attempt to account for effects specific to 'you'. Going beyond the usual narratological study of 'you narratives', where for example, as in Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*, the protagonist is addressed as 'you', or as 'vous' in Michel Butor's *La Modification*, my goal is to offer a theoretical approach that cuts across the fictional/factual divide to help the reader better grasp the diversity of the pragmatic effects the word can produce, given the degree of congruence between its form and function.

The book also intends to investigate how in a wide array of eighteenth- to twenty-first-century British and American texts including 'postcolonial' essays, autobiographies, short stories, classical novels, trauma narratives, digital fictions and even a 'creepy' YouTube video, readers are likely to negotiate their ethical relation to 'you'. As the argument unfolds, we will discover how the pronoun of address *par excellence*, with Lord Kitchener's 1914 poster 'Your Country Needs YOU', or again Uncle Sam's 1917 'I Want

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You for US Army' as prime examples, can also be exploited to call forth a strong commitment to the plight of another, often vulnerable human being.

Ranging across the full scope of possible addresses and effects of address, the various chapters will analyse specific stylistic configurations, each putting to the test a different part of the model that the first chapter progressively constructs for 'you'.



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The idea of this book could be said to have emerged with the conference I co-organised on personal pronouns in linguistics and stylistics at the École Normale Supérieure of Lyon with Laure Gardelle in 2015 and has been nourished by another conference on 'Addressing Readers' I organised in Montpellier with my colleague Virginie Iché in 2019. But I need to thank other persons that have helped me substantiate this work. As far as the corpus is concerned, I am grateful to Sophie Vallas – as the eminent specialist of Paul Auster she is – for our passionate exchanges on the writer's work, when I was still at Aix-Marseille University. Many thanks must be addressed to two literary scholars in Montpellier, where I moved to in 2018, for their suggestions of reading. One is Monica Michlin, Professor in Contemporary American Studies, who suggested *Winter Birds* by Jim Grimsley (thank you Monica for making me cry at *each* re-reading of the book), and the other is Jean-Michel Ganteau, a specialist of trauma studies in British contemporary literature whose work introduced me to the relationality of ethics. He generously recommended to me the reading of *Quilt* by Nicholas Royle and *Skin Lane* by Neil Bartlett, catering to my curiosity for pronominal play and addresses to readers.

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