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Pragmatically Disentangling *You*

Sandrine Sorlin's *Stylistics of "You"*

Sandrine Sorlin: *The Stylistics of "You." Second-Person Pronoun and its Pragmatic Effects*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2022. 233 pp. GBP 85.00. ISBN 978-1-108-83302-8

Overview

Following the emergence of numerous experimental publications from the sixties onwards, Brian Richardson declared in 1991 that second-person narration was "arguably the most technical advance in fictional narration since the introduction of the stream of consciousness" (1991, 327). In 1994, Monika Fludernik edited a landmark special issue of *Style* devoted to the study of *you*-narratives. It featured seminal publications by Richardson, Irene Kacandes, James Phelan, and David Herman. However, second-person narrative studies still hadn't received extended scholarly examination by the time Richardson revisited the topic in his 2006 monograph *Unnatural Voices. Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*.

Sandrine Sorlin's latest monograph *The Stylistics of "You." Second-Person Pronoun and its Pragmatic Effects* (2022) joins a sparse number of book-length explorations of the second-person form alongside Kacandes's *Talk Fiction. Literature and the Talk Explosion* (2001), Joshua Parker's *Écrire son lecteur. L'évolution de la deuxième personne* (2012), and Evegenia Iliopoulou's *Because of You. Understanding Second-Person Storytelling* (2019). *The Stylistics of "You"* takes a more interdisciplinary approach than its predecessors, investigating various pragmatic effects and functions of the second-person pronoun in a range of Anglophone print and digital texts. The book explores the pragmatics of *you*, which considers the effect of context in linguistic utterances using the second-person pronoun. Sorlin's pragma-rhetorical approach takes cues from Joanna Gavins's and Ernestine Lahey's Text World Theory as well as Phelan's and Richard Walsh's rhetorical theory of narrative as communication. While discussions of *you*-narratives necessitate narratological engagement, *The Stylistics of "You"* intervenes with "a theoretical approach that cuts across the fictional/factual divide to help the reader better grasp the diversity of the pragmatic effects the word [*you*] can produce, given the degree of congruence between its form and function" (p. ix).

A Linguistic Model of Second-Person Narration

Sorlin's major contribution is the linguistic model she develops in Chapter 1, which combines Fludernik's (2011) narratological model of *you*- and *we*-narratives with Bettina Kluge's (2016) pragma-linguistic continuum by making two key revisions to Kluge's model. First, Sorlin envisages the linear spectrum moving from a reference to *self* towards reference to *other* as a two-dimensional diagram; second, she adds a sixth reference point to the five delineated by Kluge to denote the narratological prerequisite of a second-person narrative which Gerald Prince (2003, 86) has identified as a *you*-narratee that doubles as the protagonist.

Kluge's original continuum is based on analyses of the second-person singular in the Spanish and French subcorpus of spontaneous speech acts for the main Romance languages developed by Emanuela Cresti and Massimo Moneglia. It plots five reference points along a line that moves from self to other:

> You1: '*you* meaning *I*,'
> You2: '*you* meaning *I* as representative of a larger entity,'
> You3: 'anyone,'
> You4: '*you* in front of me as representative of a larger entity,' and
> You5: '*you* meaning the person in front of me' (p. 12).

But as Fludernik (1994, 462) insists, "*You* is typically ambiguous in its applications to self and other and to a definite or indefinite reading." Sorlin thus revises Kluge's model by adding a vertical axis to measure definiteness as genericity which moves from "personalisation" at the bottom to "generalisation" at the top (p. 14). The horizontal axis moves from "self" on the left (intersecting with "personalisation") to "other" on the right. Sorlin then plots Kluge's five reference points along both axes to form what effectively looks like a triangle with You1 at the left corner (the highest degree of "personalisation" and "self"), You3 at the peak (the highest degree of generalisation and in between "self" and "other"), and You5 at the right corner (at the highest degree of "other" but lowest "generalisation" because it refers to the person directly in front of the speaker). You2 sits in between You1 and You3 while You4 sits between You3 and You5. Additionally, in order for Kluge's model to be applicable to what Fludernik has called "second-person fiction proper," it must also account for the existence of a *you*-protagonist in the diegesis. This is effectively Sorlin's You6, "place[d] [...] on the vertical axis of You3, on the bottom 'personalisation' line" (pp. 16–17).

Sorlin's You6 is in fact more nuanced than simply describing a *you*-protagonist because *you*-narratives may be autodiegetic, homodiegetic, heterodiegetic, or arguably inconclusive. In Sorlin's conception, self-referential (autodiegetic) uses of *you* correspond to You1 because *you* really means *I*. On the opposite end of the spectrum, "when a narrator addresses a delineated narratee in a clearly established situation of communication, the narrator can be said to be speaking *to* the narratee" and this constitutes You5 (p. 17). You6, then, falls between these two poles to describe narrative situations "in which the narrator speaks both about

and to the protagonist", or rather, "*on behalf of* the protagonist" (p. 17) – a distinction that becomes clearer in Chapter 5. As Sorlin explains, You6 occupies "a point of equilibrium" because it "fuses/combines or transcends the referential and addressive functions of the second-person pronoun" (p. 17). This description resonates with Herman's (2004 [2002]) concept of the doubly deictic *you* as

> a mode of pronoun usage that draws attention to and so de-automatizes processes of contextual anchoring. [...] [O]n some occasions *you* functions as a cue for superimposing two or more deictic roles, one internal to the storyworld represented in or through the diegesis and the other(s) external to that storyworld. (342–343)

Sorlin deviates from Herman by viewing double deixis as an "effect [that] cuts across the different uses of 'you' through the continuum" (p. 21) rather than as its own distinct category.

The Pragmatics of *You* across Discursive Genres and Cultural Contexts

The Stylistics of "You" is the culmination of Sorlin's prior work in *The Pragmatics of Personal Pronouns* (2015), co-edited with Laure Gardelle, and *The Pragmatics of Irony and Banter* (2018), bringing together a triumvirate of her longstanding research interests in pragmatics, pronouns, and irony. As the book goes on to argue, the *you* is the perfect specimen of analysis for the ways it involves the general and the specific, addressor and addressee, the personal and the collective, compassion and complicity, distance and proximity. Drawing from linguistics and narratology, Sorlin identifies a kinship between the two fields that "a clear distinction [of narratives] along pronominal lines" would obscure (p. 9). Following Gérard Genette, André Joly, and Gustave Guillaume, Sorlin continues to advance the idea that "'you' is construed both as the person who is talked *to* and the person who is talked *about* (Gardelle / Sorlin 2015, 4)" (p. 9). As such, *The Stylistics of "You"* illustrates precisely how the *you* "hesitate[s] between the first and third person in the pronominal paradigm" (p. 9) and in so doing retains the sense of sliding along the scale from Herman's typology of textual-*you*.

The book opens by illustrating the pervasiveness of *you* across genres such as non-fictional narratives, novels, prefaces, postfaces and digital fiction alongside developing a model tracing its specific stylistic effects. For Sorlin, "[o]ne of the most obvious effects" of the *you* "across discursive genres has been to produce an artificial form of intersubjectivity" (p. 1). Evident in the increasingly personal marketing strategies used today, psychologists and market researchers have argued that the second-person pronoun "enables the business person [...] to enter the prospects' minds, to understand their wishes and expectations and to translate these into a tagline that will be the direct answer to the prospects' needs" (p. 2). These needs relate to consumption and, although it represents a shift from an ego-based perspective to one that is addressee-oriented, the form of intersub-

jectivity this use of *you* produces is ultimately *rhetorical* because it seeks to masquerade profit margins as consumer needs and desires.

After Chapter 1, which introduces Sorlin's model of second-person usage, the remaining chapters are divided into four parts exploring:

1) the dialectics of *you* in singularising and sharing,
2) the role of *you* in trauma narratives,
3) the author-reader communicative channel, and
4) implications of the digital medium.

In Part 1, Chapters 2 and 3 examine the use of *you* in autobiographical writing: George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) and Paul Auster's diptych *Winter Journal* (2012) and *Report from the Interior* (2013) respectively. Sorlin suggests that Orwell's use of the second-person pronoun alternately with the first-person and the indefinite pronoun *one* in recounting his experience of living in poverty has been hitherto unexamined (p. 38). To illustrate how *you* negotiates distance while cultivating immersion, Sorlin maps Orwell's varied uses of *you* onto the model introduced in Chapter 1. Of the 580 appearances of *you* across *Down and Out in Paris and London* (referred to as *Down and Out* below), Sorlin focuses on the 232 occurrences which are not used in direct speech given that usage of the second-person pronoun in face-to-face interaction is fairly unremarkable (p. 38n1). Using linguistic cues to help manually categorise each use of *you* according to her model, she finds that "You1 and You2 [...] make up more than half of all the instances in Orwell's text" (p. 39). Since both You1 and You2 are self-oriented uses of *you*, Sorlin argues that Orwell "anchors his experience in an eminently personal account while making it both a shared experience (lived out by other destitute people) and a shareable experience for readers, involving them in the re-enactment of those remembered moments" (p. 40). With its dual effects of generalising and involving the reader, the *you* precipitates an *effect* of address, which is not to be conflated with the real address in You4 or You5, with the capacity to prompt readers to "reconsider their own prejudice" (p. 56).

Chapter 3 turns to what Sorlin argues are "the last two opuses in a total of five autobiographical works" authored by Auster (p. 57). They reflect on changes to his body and mind "as the writer tries to access his past selves [...] in order to make sense of who he was and who he is" (p. 57). However odd the use of second-person narration in autobiographical writing might at first appear to the reader, Sorlin reminds us that the "tradition of writing about the self in the second person [...] dates back to the Greeks" (p. 57). To describe such uses of *you*, which "fluctuate[] between a concealed 'I' and an 'I' addressed *as* an other" (p. 60), Sorlin introduces the term 'doubly subjective *you*.'

Chapters 4 and 5 in Part 2 investigate the role of *you* for the cultivation of readerly empathy in two trauma narratives: Jim Grimsley's *Winter Birds* (1994) and Nicholas Royle's *Quilt* (2010). In *Winter Birds*, Grimsley's narrator-protagonist, Daniel Crell, recounts appalling experiences of domestic abuse to a younger *you*-narratee self. Kacandes (2001, 97) calls this phenomenon of a char-

acter acting as witness to the self about the character's own experience "intrapsychic witnessing." The second-person form enables the narrating self to distance oneself from the self who experienced the events and, thus, "to address the ungraspable traumatic ordeal of one's childhood" (pp. 84–85). As trauma studies reveal, the victims must externalise the experience to free themselves from trauma's entrapment and one way of doing this is via victim testimony. Sorlin follows the Israeli-American psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Dori Laub's insistence on the paramount necessity of an "other," which may take the form of the reader, that is "explicitly and forcefully embodie[d]" by the *you* in Grimsley's novel (p. 104).

Unlike Grimsley's, Royle's protagonist in *Quilt*, the trauma novel analysed in Chapter 5, is tragically unable to syphon off his trauma. While the novel begins as a straightforward first-person narrative, the narration is taken over by the protagonist's partner who refers to him as *you*. Rather than directly addressing the protagonist, the "events become narrated on his behalf" (p. 105). The protagonist's loss of agency is integral to how *Quilt* "deconstructs [the] anthropocentric worldview inherent in language by subverting the Animacy Hierarchy" (p. 115). In linguistics, the Animacy Hierarchy refers to the way all languages implicitly privilege human agents over inanimate common nouns. In other words, when narration is classified as first person, second person and third person, it is organised in a way that privileges an animate first-person speaker over a less animate second-person addressee and potentially inanimate third-person referent (it). Sorlin argues that narrative form in *Quilt* works against the typical human/non-human hierarchy by referring to characters by common nouns rather than proper names ("the girl," "the bereaved man") and naming rays ("Mallarmé," "Hilary," "Taylor," and "Audrey"). Sorlin's provocation will be particularly productive for readers familiar with Erin James's recent work on *you*-narration in *Narrative in the Anthropocene* (2022).

Part 3 focuses on what Sorlin calls the communicative channel between author and reader in *you*-narratives across time and difference in gender, sex and race. Chapter 6 advances Sorlin's rhetorical conception of literature in examinations of author-reader interactions across time and gender in Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Sorlin draws on Garrett Stewart's work on reader conscription via authorial colloquy in Victorian fiction and Dorothee Birke's later reworking of this idea to think about how the English novel configures the reader. Distinguished not only by period but also by the gender of its authors, Sorlin asserts that the reader address facilitated by the *you*-narration in *Joseph Andrews* and *Jane Eyre* differs in significant ways and turns to Robyn Warhol's theorisation of "distancing" versus "engaging narrators" in heterodiegetic Victorian novels. Where narrative devices which increase the distance between narrator and narratee or narratee and reader were seen as "masculine," engaging narrators achieved the opposite effect and were comparatively under-examined and critically dismissed as "feminine" and "sentimental." In *Joseph Andrews* readers are rhetorically positioned by the narrator's use of imperatives and modality to anticipate and pre-empt their responses,

whereas Brontë's narrator Jane confides in her readers. Sorlin's analysis substantiates these theoretical frameworks through a pragmatic rendering of addresses in both texts, giving her sufficient grounds to suspect that scholarship on the variety of *you*-addresses in *Jane Eyre* is underdeveloped (p. 150).

The author-reader channel is central to Neil Barlett's *Skin Lane* (2007) in Chapter 7. Framed as a bedtime story, *Skin Lane* is addressed to the *you*-reader while the fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast* is worked into its plot. Set in 1967, the central character Mr F is a 47-year-old furrier grappling with the realisation of his homosexual desires. Although the novel is written in the third person, Sorlin includes *Skin Lane* in her corpus because of the heterodiegetic narrator's frequent addresses to the reader, often in the form of overt pleas in the exhortative mode. The *you*-address and Barlett's use of the plural determiner in "our Mr F" and "our protagonist" foregrounds the shared context between reader and narrator for narrative sensemaking and both are instrumental in its cultivation of reader empathy despite Mr F's alterity and downward spiral.

Chapter 8 explores the ethical and political uses of *you* in two examples of postcolonial writing: Jamaica Kincaid's book-length essay, *A Small Place* (1988), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story, "The Thing Around Your Neck" (2009). Sorlin notes how the second-person pronoun in *A Small Place*, written in the guise of a travel book, acquires "the deictic force of a You4, referring to the 'authorial audience'" without "reach[ing] the universality of a You3" (p. 175). Numerous deictic shifts occur throughout Kincaid's text as it employs what Warhol has called a "rhetoric of contrast" for the purposes of othering. Like polemic essays, *A Small Place* also "construct[s] an authorial audience as belonging to another class and having a different historical background" (p. 180). In Adichie's short story, there is a *you*-protagonist but what remains inconclusive is whether *you*-narration is a way of implementing distance in self-address (a mode explored in Chapters 3 and 4) or if there is a heterodiegetic narrator addressing Akunna as protagonist and narratee (p. 184). What Sorlin discovers is that although "[t]here are no linguistic markers of address," there is what she calls an "'effect of address', a diluted mode that consists in telling the protagonist what she thinks and does" (pp. 184–185).

Part 4 turns to the new ways in which digital media implicate readers-cum-users. In Chapter 9 Sorlin examines paratexts and hypertexts while reflecting on the proliferation of *you*-narratives in the twenty-first century as a return of the interventionist mode of address to the reader in paratexts like prefaces. She draws on Paul Dawson's (2012, 93) reading of the form as an assertion of literary omniscience as well as Magdalena Rembowska-Płuciennik's (2018) reading of the upsurge of such *you*-narratives as a response to new networked and digital environments of immediacy. As Rembowska-Płuciennik remarks, "new generations of readers more accustomed not only to this mode in literature, but also to interactive cultural experiences more generally" (2018, 168–169; p. 201). Sorlin then evaluates reader agency in the context of "interactional metalepsis" in what Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin have called digital fiction (pp. 205–206). She perceives readers' ability to directly impact narrative progressions in digital fiction

as a "double presence [that] engenders a 'double-situatedness' of the reader in the dual ontology inherent to digital fiction" as "an extension of Herman's 'double deixis' in print fiction" (p. 206). Recalling that Herman's doubly deictic *you* refers to the superimposition of two or more deictic roles (with at least one situated inside the diegesis and the other outside), textual *you* can be both fictionalised reference to a *you*-protagonist and apostrophic address to the reader without conclusive restriction to one or the other (2004, 342–343). Chapter 10 analyses *you*-address as key to reader manipulation in a 2018 YouTube video uploaded by the American actor Kevin Spacey in the persona of his *House of Cards* character, Frank Underwood, appealing to his fans amidst charges of sexual assault against a young man (p. 221).

Conclusion

As Sorlin declares at the outset, her study of the pragmatic effects of *you* revisits its critical discursive roots to evidence this narrative form's capacity "to make four dynamic shifts between: (1) definiteness and indefiniteness; (2) determinacy and indeterminacy; (3) distance and proximity; (4) inclusion or exclusion of the speaker and/or reader" (p. 38). Each case study in *The Stylistics of "You"* effectively illustrates the second-person pronoun's interpersonal nature and the reflexive mode of reading instigated by its simultaneously involving and alienating effects. Sorlin's rigorous mapping of uses of *you* in a wide-ranging corpus not only demonstrates the utility of her proposed model and its relevance for existing narratological frameworks and theories, but also for future interventions in diverse fields from autotheory, econarratology, trauma narratives to the recent turn against empathy in narrative studies.

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