



**HAL**  
open science

## ”Sandrine Sorlin, The Stylistics of ‘You’: Second-Person Pronoun and its Pragmatic Effects”

Célia Schneebeli

### ► To cite this version:

Célia Schneebeli. ”Sandrine Sorlin, The Stylistics of ‘You’: Second-Person Pronoun and its Pragmatic Effects”. E-rea - Revue électronique d’études sur le monde anglophone, 2023, 21 (1). <hal-04346413>

**HAL Id: hal-04346413**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04346413v1>**

Submitted on 15 Dec 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC 4.0 - Attribution - Non-commercial use - International License



C. SCHNEEBELI, « Sandrine Sorlin, *The Stylistics of 'You': Second-Person Pronoun and its Pragmatic Effects* ». *E-rea*, 21.1 (2023).

Sandrine Sorlin, *The Stylistics of 'You': Second-Person Pronoun and its Pragmatic Effects*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 255 p. ISBN: 9781108833028.

*The Stylistics of 'You'* invites the reader to explore the use of the second-person pronoun across space and time and in different genres and media, within an interdisciplinary approach typical of stylistics. Indeed, while linguistically-oriented, it borrows from multiple theoretical backgrounds such as discourse analysis, narratology, socio-pragmatics, philosophy of language, or communication studies. It proposes a general model accounting for the different pragmatic functions and effects of “you” both in fiction and non-fiction, that is then explored in different contexts, from autobiographical texts to fiction works and a YouTube video.

In the introductory chapter, “Theorising the ‘You’ Effects”, Sandrine Sorlin introduces the reader to the very rich and complex theoretical framework underlying the following chapters. The chapter opens with an insightful account of you-oriented strategies across genres leading us from marketing, advertising, and political slogans to literary narratives. Sorlin then presents the fundamental concepts her analyses rely on: “you narratives”, the typology of “you” in both interaction and narrative, and the narrative as a communicative event. She begins with “you narratives”, starting with Monika Fludernik’s inaugural inventory and going on with her own slightly broader conception of the latter. She then goes on to present the typology of the different “you” existing in interaction, placing them on a continuum that she will be using throughout the book. This model, which is based on an adaptation of Kluge’s 2016 study of the second singular person in a Spanish and French corpus, places the different “you” on two perpendicular axes, from reference to self to reference to other, and from personalisation to generalisation. This allows her to establish six points of reference, adapted to the analysis of written narratives, from You1, which is self-referential, to You5, which addresses the narratee, adding a You6 to Kluge’s continuum, which denotes “cases where the narrator is speaking *on behalf of* the protagonist” (p.17). In the next section, Sorlin develops another fundamental concept in her reading of the interpersonal relationship at stake in narrative forms, which is her conception of the narrative as a communicative event. This time, her framework is inspired by Phelan 2011 and his five different audiences, based on “the various layers of communication between authors and their audiences” (p.23). Talking about the different degrees of implication of author and reader finally leads her to discuss the relationships between author, narrator, and audience, how the notion of ethics applies to narratives, and the ethics of the second-person pronoun.

In the following chapters, this theoretical framework is put to the test by applying it to texts (in the broader meaning of the word) belonging to different genres, different times, and different media. The parts and chapters follow the continuum presented in the introductory chapter, from You1, self-referential “you”, to You6, which Sorlin calls the “authorial audience ‘you’” (p.30).

Part I, “Singularising and Sharing: The Dialectics of ‘You’”, focuses on “you” in autobiographies. It starts with a study of Orwell’s use of the second-person pronoun, alongside the first and the indefinite “one”, in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). Sorlin very aptly brings to light the constant oscillation between specificity and genericity in “you”’s reference, and how Orwell uses the ability of the second-person pronoun to engage readers in his own experience. She then moves on to the analysis of two autobiographical works by Paul Auster, *Winter Journal* (2012) and *Report from the Interior* (2013), which, contrary to *Down and Out in Paris and London*, are entirely written in the second person. She explains this choice, a rather peculiar choice for autobiographical works, in terms of its being a



C. SCHNEEBELI, « Sandrine Sorlin, *The Stylistics of 'You': Second-Person Pronoun and its Pragmatic Effects* ». *E-rea*, 21.1 (2023).

“pragmatic device inviting the reader to meet [Auster] half way via the ethical vector that the second-person pronoun represents” (p.31).

Part II, “The Role of ‘You’ in the Writing of Traumatic Events”, focuses on two fictional trauma narratives, *Winter Birds* (1984) by Jim Grimsley, and *Quilt* (2010) by Nicholas Royle. In each work, Sorlin lays out the mechanics of trauma writing through the prism of second-person pronoun use. She demonstrates the ability of “you” to implicate the reader in this type of narrative, in the case of Grimsley’s novel, or, in the case of Royle’s, to serve as a sort of go-between in the confrontation between first and third person, to the point of a rather experimental fusion of voices in generic “you”.

Part III, “The Author-Reader Channel across Time, Gender, Sex and Race”, explores how the author-reader relationship is mediated through the use of the second person in different genres and periods, and across sex and race. The first chapter focuses on two classic works of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Henry Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), in which storytelling is envisioned as a pragmatic act. In the next chapter, she develops the notion of empathy and ethics in Neil Bartlett’s use of the second-person pronoun in *Skin Lane* (2007). In the last chapter, she turns to two post-colonial texts, *A Small Place* (1988), an essay by Jamaica Kincaid, and “The Thing Around Your Neck” (2009), a short story by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In the latter, Sorlin explores the use of You6, authorial audience “you”, and its floating addressivity. It is put in perspective with the You4 of Kincaid’s non-fiction piece, which directly and unambiguously addresses the reader, while drawing a parallel between their respective rhetorico-pragmatic strategies.

Part IV, “New Ways of Implicating through the Digital Medium?”, finally turns to the case of digital fiction and narrativity, as opposed to the print fiction (and non-fiction) of the preceding chapters. In this part, Sorlin sets out to test and adapt her model to the specificities of digital discourse, and to put addressivity and reader engagement in digital fiction in perspective with print fiction. This part closes with a chapter analysing the manipulative use of the second person in a Christmas-themed YouTube video posted in 2018 by Kevin Spacey, where the actor speaks to the viewer in the guise of his *House of Cards* character Frank Underwood, while making reference both to his character’s storyline and to the sexual assault charges that had been filed against him in real life.

Sandrine Sorlin’s ability to come up with fresh models for analysing literary texts is to be commended. Starting with an object of study apparently as narrow and precise as the second-person pronoun, she ends up approaching texts in all their dimensions, whether narratological, linguistic, pragmatic or socio-discursive. Therefore, this book is a highly recommended reading for specialists in linguistics, discourse analysis, philosophy of language, pragmatics, and literary analysis alike, given its rich and interdisciplinary theoretical background. *The Stylistics of ‘You’* is indeed an excellent example of the cross-disciplinary nature of stylistics and how the tools of linguistics and pragmatics can be used to arrive at fresh insights on how literary texts work.