



Positioning and Stance

Dan Clayton looks at the ways in which writers, journalists and advertisers build a relationship with their readers by carefully adopting a particular position and stance in relation to their subject.

You're a clever, dedicated student who has mastered the analytical tools of English Language study at A Level and you now want something a bit more challenging to help you hit those top bands of the mark scheme. You know all about lexis and semantics, feel secure on syntax and get the bigger picture of what textual analysis is all about. Right? Maybe. But frankly, I have no idea who is reading this, how clever or dedicated you are, what you already know, or what you want from an article in emagazine (although the fact that you've picked up emagazine and are reading this now suggests a high degree of good taste and intelligence on your part). So why am I writing at you as if I'm talking to you and - slightly more scarily - as if I know you and share your attitudes and experiences? It's a form of positioning that I'm attempting and one that we'll look at here in relation to a number of different language frameworks.

Down, Among, Against, With

By looking at the methods writers use to position themselves in relation to their readers and the subject matter they're discussing, we can grasp some of the subtleties of persuasion that are at work within even quite simple-looking texts. In visual terms we might see a writer as positioning him/herself:

- above us an expert, talking down to us
- among us, talking at our level
- against us, addressing us as opponents
- with us, addressing us as allies.

But equally, this relationship can be towards the subject matter, too. Is it being discussed as if it has been experienced by the writer, or as if it's held at a distance as something to be studied and picked apart?

Assuming a Position

One fairly simple linguistic device a writer might use is that of pronouns. You will no doubt have looked at these as part of your A Level course, and possibly before that too. But one thing that we have to be careful about is making too many generalised observations about what certain pronouns do, for example, claiming that pronouns make a text 'more personal' or

'address the reader directly'. Some do and some don't. We need to look at them quite specifically and within their contexts.

Particular pronouns can be used to position the writer as within, or distant from, the topic they are talking about. In the case of Jon King writing for The Daily Mirror in 2008 about how young people are viewed by society at large, he begins his piece by stating:

The old hate the young. We don't like their styles or their music. We can't speak their language or understand their problems.

Here the use of the first person plural 'we' helps position King as among the group 'the old' that he referred to in his first sentence. Meanwhile, 'they', the subject of his article, are the young. King has already established a quite polarised position between young and old in his opening line, choosing the verb 'hate', and now seems to align himself with the old against the young. 'They' have 'their styles', 'their music', 'their language' and 'their problems'. 'We' don't understand them.

King goes on:

It was the same with our own parents. They hated our hair, complained about our clothes and tutted at our noisy naiveté.

And to make matters worse, we were having fun, getting off with each other, mucking about. A reminder they were getting on. As it should be.

And we found our mums and dads boring and irritating, always ready to tell us how it used to be, how it should be, when they so clearly didn't have a clue. Bob Dylan spoke to us all when he said 'there's something going on here, but you don't know what it is'.

The assumption here appears to be that the readers will recognise these experiences and references. They are presented to us in the simple past tense ('we found...') and sometimes past progressive ('we were having fun...'), using first person pronouns ('we') and possessive determiners ('our') and a style of elliptical, minor sentences that sounds quite spoken and casual, particularly as the conjunction 'and' is used to start some of them. So far, so good, but then comes 'Bob Dylan', a reference that most people over 50 would appreciate, but not that many younger people. The 'we' is gradually narrowing itself down to help King position himself among a more selective group of his readers.

But as the text goes on, the apparent animosity towards young people seems to shift, and King offers the viewpoint he's been aiming for all along: that just as 'we' (his older audience) were misunderstood kids once, so 'we' should start to understand the situation today's young people find themselves in:

*Let's give our kids something to do, somewhere to go that doesn't cost the earth.
Let's respect their opinions.
Let's remember that - yes - we were dumb and impulsive and experimented with*

stuff we shouldn't have.

Let's get real for once. Let's start believing in our kids.

You might notice that here, by the end of the article, the shift in positioning is complete: no longer are 'we' positioned in opposition to 'them', but 'we' are now encouraged to embrace 'them' as 'our kids'.

Explicit Framing

Another way of positioning yourself is to do it fairly explicitly with a framing device such as the one used by Dr Tanya Byron in her article for The Guardian about fear of young people:

As a mother and a specialist in child and adolescent mental health, I despair for today's young people...

In this prepositional phrase, foregrounded at the start of a sentence and new paragraph, Byron positions herself explicitly as having two identities - mother and specialist - before revealing the insight these dual roles offer her.

In a totally different context - a message board post about perceived anti-white racism in a college - one poster positions himself explicitly with the final line 'BTW I am not white, I am mixed'. While it's harder to validate the credentials of an anonymous online identity than it is to check whether Tanya Byron is a specialist and mother, this framing move is important in attempting to help the writer justify some of his views in what he has just written.

Elsewhere, in an article for The Daily Mail on Americanisms entering English, the columnist Matthew Engel seems to humbly and self-mockingly position himself as out of touch by saying,

Old buffers like me have always complained about the process, and we have always been defeated.

Should we take such a move at face value? Perhaps not. Engel goes on in the article to stridently berate the UK for adopting what he calls 'ugly Americanisms':

Nowadays, people have no idea where American ends and English begins. And that's a disaster for our national self-esteem. We are in danger of subordinating our language to someone else's - and with it large aspects of British life.

That doesn't sound too much like the stance of a man who's labelled himself an 'old buffer', but the words of a man who feels he's still got battles to fight and wars to win (if not homeruns to hit). His self-effacing positioning earlier on helps him appeal to his reader as a gentle, even rather defeated and pessimistic, sort of character, which his subsequent warnings and call to arms belie.

Synthetic Personalisation

The ways in which text producers strike up a friendly or even intimate rapport with a reader who they cannot possibly genuinely know is what the linguist Norman Fairclough refers to as synthetic personalisation. Advertisers use this technique so often that it's become their standard mode of address. When L'Oreal use their slogan 'Because You're Worth It', they haven't got a clue who you are or how much money, self-esteem (or even hair) the potential audience might have. Interestingly, their slogan didn't always use the second person pronoun, but began life as 'Because I'm Worth It', perhaps suggesting that there's been a shift in their focus from promoting a privileged individual like a supermodel or actor as their mouthpiece to addressing us all. In some of their more recent ads, they've also switched to the first person plural 'we', which helps to create a shared address, perhaps... However you read it, it's a synthetic relationship.

Recent technological advances also mean that we're addressed in similarly chummy tones by our own email software, Facebook accounts and pop-up advertising. The worrying thing about some of this is that our own computers and smartphones probably know a lot more about us than we realise or would like. Maybe not so much synthetic personalisation as personalised synthetics!

Up and Down the Registers

Another approach that we could look at here is the way in which quite a simple shift in lexical style - basically, the choice of words someone makes - can help position a writer. In some texts, it pays to present yourself as an expert, or as an intelligent, educated authority on a particular topic. In these situations, a higher level of formality or technical lexis might be required, so it's no great surprise to find words from quite specific fields coming into play. Just listen to any expert judge on a panel show talking about their field - dancing, ice skating, singing, diving - to get a glimpse of the different positions adopted.

But while that approach is effective for creating distance and presenting the writer as somehow above the intended audience, it also pays to use lexis of a lower level if you're hoping to come across as on the same level as your ideal reader, speaking common sense to like-minded readers.

When Jon King (in The Daily Mirror article mentioned above) starts to talk about how society deals with young people, he makes some calculated choices about his lexis and opts for more colloquial terms, so where he could have said 'They may enjoy a cannabis joint ...and risk being arrested...what are we going to do? Imprison them all?' he instead opts for

They may enjoy a spliff ... and risk being nicked...what are we going to do? Bang them all up?

With just a simple shift down the registers - switching one noun or noun phrase (cannabis joint) for another more colloquial choice ('spliff'), or a Latinate verb (imprison) for a simpler phrasal verb ('bang up') - he starts to sound less like a detached, distant expert and more like his Daily Mirror audience, more like you and me. But wait a minute; who are his Daily Mirror readers? He doesn't know exactly who they'll be. And more to the point, how does he know what you and me sound like? He doesn't. This is where the Norman Fairclough's concept of

the ideal reader comes into play.

The Ideal Reader

In his highly influential work *Language and Power*, Fairclough makes the point that when writers position themselves through language, they create an 'ideal reader'. In the case of some ideal readers, the writers may draw upon range of experiences and attitudes which they expect them to share: perhaps, like the reference to Bob Dylan earlier, it's something that the author assumes a certain part of his audience will recognise and respond to. But even for those of us who don't quite get the reference, we are getting a sense of who he might like us to be.

Online - a More Complex Relationship

With the advent of online media and articles which readers can respond to almost instantly, the relationship between the writer and ideal reader becomes slightly more complex. If a writer can see exactly what his or her readers think, from reading their responses, then the calibration of the next piece of writing can be more precise. The online comments that followed Matthew Engel's Daily Mail piece were so positive that a campaign was launched by the newspaper encouraging readers to send in their pet-hate Americanisms in order to 'save' the English language. In future articles, Engel could whistle and his readers would follow, so astutely had he positioned himself in relation to them.

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