Commentary

Virginia Woolf extract

A sense of mystery is created in this text partly by the fact that the reader is unsure who is in the story, and this effect results from the range of pronouns used: you, they, we, it, she, he, one, I. At the beginning, it seems that 'you' means 'one' and that 'they' are 'a ghostly couple'. But then it's uncertain who is talking in direct speech in the second paragraph; also, the second use of 'you' (in the final paragraph) appears to mean, not 'one' as before, but 'they' (i.e. the ghosts). Throughout the whole text, it's unclear exactly what 'it' is that everyone seems to be searching for. The language makes the reader behave like the characters, in that it makes the act of reading an act of searching to locate the meaning.

Stevie Smith poem

The poem concerns a tragi-comic misunderstanding—a drowning man was ignored because onlookers thought he was cheerily waving at them, when he was really calling for help. This is taken beyond the literal level of a physical drowning to suggest another reading: that we explain away other people's difficulties in rather simplistic ways because we can't face the implications—our own responsibilities, for example.

The misunderstanding is presented by the use of two sets of voices: the 'I' of the dead man, and the 'they' of the onlookers; these voices are presented by a third voice—that of the narrator, who, unlike the onlookers, can hear the dead man speaking.

In using pronouns rather than individual names, the poem suggests that its message has significance for all of us, whoever we are.

Activity

It should be clear by now that the type of cohesive link involving pronoun reference is an important element in the way many texts work.

Now go back to the texts that you worked on in the 'Make and mend' part of this unit. Find as many examples as you can of grammatical cohesion which uses pronoun reference. Trace how you might have used this system as a supportive strategy in the texts you rearranged and wrote.

The politics of pronouns

Before leaving the personal pronoun system, there are one or two points to note that relate to changes that have occurred through time. Grammar, like other aspects of language, is subject to the processes of language change, and although the personal pronoun system appears to be relatively fixed, there have been important shifts in meaning and use. These shifts will be of particular significance if you are studying older texts, or comparing older texts with modern ones. It's important to realise that grammatical structures are not simply neutral—they are intimately related to power: for example, pronoun reference in a text is all about who is in the picture and how they're

being seen, as well as about helping to construct a particular kind of relationship between writer and reader. These are all issues of power, because written texts are a powerful source of information for us about the nature of our world—not just the physical world, but our social, political and emotional 'realities' too.

One difficulty with the personal pronoun system as it exists in English is that there is no neutral way to refer simply to 'a person', without specifying a sex for them: 'one' can carry suggestions of pretension, and is hardly a term in everyday use; 'it' sounds rude when used of a person (think how insulting parents would find it if their newborn baby was referred to as 'it' by a friend peering into the pram on the street). 'They' has had varied fortunes in terms of its acceptability: while it was seen as correct in Shakespeare's time—for example, in *The Winter's Tale:*

> God grant everyone their heart's desire

by the eighteenth century, prescriptive grammars were ruling this type of sentence as incorrect because singular and plural references were being used together. Eighteenth-century grammars ruled that if pieces of communication were intended to refer to people in general, or a person of unspecified sex, the terms 'man' and 'he' should be used, claiming that these uses were generic—i.e. referring in a general way. In fact, it is clear from research that we actually understand 'he' and 'man' to refer to 'male person' rather than simply 'person'. This means that the words are not capable of generic reference for modern readers.

Nowadays, in order to get round the clumsiness of using 'he or she' every time we want to refer to 'a person of either sex', we use 'they' very often in speech, and increasingly frequently in writing. For example, this sentence occurred earlier in this sub-section:

> The principle of reference within texts is exactly that: it tells the reader that they can only make complete sense of the word or structure they are looking at if they look elsewhere in the text to get a fuller picture.

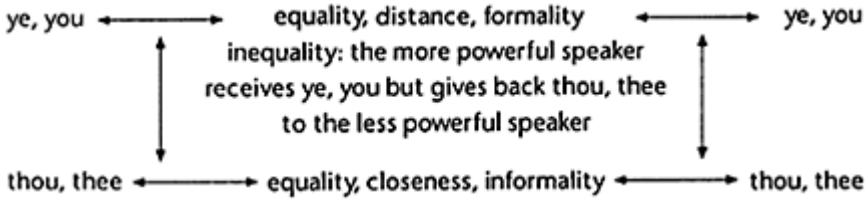
It's important to note, though, that people will disagree about whether the above sentence is correct, since eighteenth-century ideas about grammar were still current up to the 1960s. People's opinions about correctness will have been influenced by their age and the type of education they had.

Another personal pronoun that has had a directly political history is 'you'.

Originally, English had two forms of 'you': 'thou'/'thee' was used to one person, and 'ye'/'you' for group address. 'Thou' was used when the person was the subject of the sentence, and 'thee' for the object; similarly, 'ye' was used for the subject, 'you' for the object. An example of each is given below:

Thou hast my heart (thou=singular=subject of sentence)
I love *thee* (thee=singular=object of sentence)
Ye must go now (ye=plural=subject of sentence)
I will follow *you* (you=plural=object of sentence)

As well as denoting simply singular or plural address, however, these terms also came to mark relationships between people: if people who were social equals were addressing each other, the plural forms could be used between the individuals (i.e. as singular forms) to signal distance and formality, while the singular forms could signal closeness and intimacy when used reciprocally; if the people were not equals, however, the plural forms could be used in addressing the more powerful person, as a mark of respect and authority, while the singular forms could be used in addressing the less powerful person to mark low status. A diagrammatic representation of these possibilities is given below.



This pattern meant that speakers could signal meanings in a subtle way, simply by using a certain pronoun. While this distinction has been lost in modern usage (although the older forms are sometimes retained in dialect, and much can be expressed via personal names and titles), older texts can present patterns of pronoun reference that say much about social relationships.

The fact that ‘thou’ and ‘thee’ died out within standard English usage remains something of a mystery, although it has been put down to the fact that they became associated with the Quaker movement, who wanted the terms to become the universal address forms as markers of equality for all. As Quaker groups were seen as radical, establishment choice favoured ‘you’ instead.

Although the use of a plural term to denote respect to one individual has died out in the system above, we still have some residue of this idea in the royal ‘we’ to denote one powerful person in particular.

Stepping out of the text

At the beginning of this sub-section on grammatical cohesion, the idea of reference was defined as ‘seeking information from elsewhere’.

Up to now, the focus has been on the reader searching various parts of the text for that information. But reference, particularly involving certain of the personal pronouns, can also involve moving outside the text to find the appropriate locus of information.

For example, the use of ‘you’ in a text as a direct address to the reader tells that reader to use himself/herself as the reference point; the use of ‘I’ in a text tells the reader that the writer (or the narrator) is being self-referential. In both these cases, the pronouns are functioning as signposts leading out of the text and making us focus on the human agents who are producing and receiving the text.

Where a reference item moves us outside a text, so that we can only make full sense of the text by referring to its context, this is called an **exophoric reference;** where we stay within the text, not needing any support from outside, this is called **endophoric reference**.

Activity

Go back to the texts you worked on in the first part of this unit, and find as many examples as you can of exophoric reference. Are there particular types or 'genres' of text that rely heavily on exophoric reference as part of their written conventions?

Commentary

There are certain types of text that are characterised by their use of exophoric references via the personal pronoun system: for example, many advertisements address the reader directly, using 'you', and companies refer to themselves as 'we'. An example of these pronouns can be seen in the 'Portfolio' advert you reassembled (p. 168), and you may well have found further examples of direct address in the texts you wrote yourselves. Also, note the use of 'your' in the hook line of the Yakult advert on p. 155.

Address forms which take us outside the text are also very characteristic of literature, particularly some types of prose fiction. For example, nineteenth-century novelists often addressed the reader directly: at the end of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, the narrator, Jane, talking of her relationship with Mr Rochester, says: 'Reader, I married him'.

The attraction of referring outside a text is that this can leave plenty of room for manoeuvre, as it is unclear who 'you', 'I' and 'we' actually are.

While this could suggest confusion, in fact there is much creative potential in not pinning down exactly who the creators and receivers of a text are, because that then means that readers have to construct their own versions of these figures: for writers of literature and adverts alike (and any other texts that try to work in an interactive way), it means that many possible 'readings' can occur.

Because the type of communication that's described above is potentially very complex, it can be useful to represent diagrammatically how these layers of reference might work.

Look back at the Yakult advert on p. 155.

In this, the copywriters are the real writers of the advert, but there is an implied writer/speaker constructed through the language that's used to address the reader. The real readers are us, but there are some implied readers, too: ideas about what we might think of as important, ideas about how we live, what we know and the attitudes we have are all embedded in the text, constructing 'us' as certain types of people, and not necessarily the people we really are.

All this goes to show how a text can create a particular relationship between the real writer and the real reader by constructing a piece of fictional discourse between implied versions of themselves:

real writer	—Implied writer	—TEXT—	implied reader	—real reader
advertising copywriter	narrator		assumptions made about us in the text	the real person
novelist	ditto		ditto	ditto

etc.

If you have difficulty understanding the difference between the real audience and the implied one, then think about the following analogies: TV adverts for washing powder show women ('implied readers') as people whose lives revolve around the quality of their washing. Is this a true reflection of how women really live their lives (the 'real readers')? TV adverts for aftershave show men ('implied readers') who only have to splash on a little of the product for hordes of women suddenly to appear and look at the men in an admiring and available way. Is this an accurate picture of the everyday lives of men (the 'real readers')?

Demonstrative reference (deictics)

Another type of reference which acts as a cohesive tie is carried by the following terms:

the, this, that, these, those, here, there.

These terms demonstrate where something is; they are **deictic** terms—they are 'verbal pointers'.

As with personal pronouns, demonstrative reference can work backwards (anaphoric) or forwards (cataphoric). Here is an example of each:

I went to *Italy* last year, and I want to go *there* again soon (anaphoric)
But the problem is *this: how can I afford it?* (cataphoric).

The terms above can be categorised according to how they position the writer and reader (or speaker and listener, since the terms are used frequently in speech, too).

'This', 'these' and 'here' all mean 'near the writer/speaker', while 'that', 'those' and 'there' all mean 'away from the writer/speaker'.

While in speech these terms are often used to refer to physical items in the environment, in writing physical proximity can stand metaphorically for attitude as well.

Activity

In Text: Dialogues are some examples of demonstrative reference in speech.

Read through the dialogues and trace how the demonstrative terms work within the conversations to refer to the physical context of the speakers.

(Note: there is no commentary on this activity.)

Text: Dialogues

Context 1: Speaker A is asking Speaker B to help her disentangle her earring from the telephone handset wire: