

# Hey, I'm talking to YOU!

Ryan Davidson demonstrates how newspapers and magazines use language to engage and interact with their audiences.

Yes, that's right this article is talking to you. It also aims to talk to anybody else that reads it. And so do many other types of newspapers and magazines.

They aim to grab your attention, make you feel involved and keep you reading. Part of their success and appeal is that they make you feel like you are having a conversation with them. Reading certain newspaper and magazine articles can feel like an interactive experience, even though you are literally just reading from an inanimate sheet of paper.

Writers use particular language features to achieve this interactive effect, such as personal pronouns, possessive determiners, prosodic features, interrogative sentences and imperative sentences. They are sometimes used as part of an informal, conversational style of a particular magazine or they might be used to achieve a purpose, such as to entertain, persuade, debate or instruct.

Newspapers and magazines vary widely in terms of their intended audiences. Who they are written for determines the register used and the degree to which the writing style is like a spoken conversation.

## Celebrity Magazines

Magazines focussed on gossip and celebrities, such as heat magazine, typically have an informal register and a very conversational style. The way they address their target audience of young women and use aspects of language associated with spoken language mimics chat between friends. The following example from the article 'Jen-An's Hair Divides the Nation' in the March 5-11 edition of heat magazine includes several features that demonstrate this style. This extract is from an article about the controversy surrounding Jennifer Anniston's new hairstyle and this passage follows quotes from several high profile hairdressers' giving their opinions on it:

*Who to believe? It's just all so confusing, isn't it? But one thing's for sure - when Jen-An meddles with her hair, it's Big News. Expect to see a queue of ladies down at your local salon this weekend. Or maybe not.*

This extract starts with two interrogatives - the sentence function that poses questions - used to ask the readers what they think about how different opinions. When the writer uses capital letters in the statement, 'it's Big News', this could be equivalent to the prosodic feature of stressing the word in spoken

conversation because the capital letters highlight the importance of words that would normally be written in lower case. The writer directly addresses the readers with the verbs 'Expect to see...' and the possessive determiner 'your', making the writing seem very personal. The use of the minor sentence, 'Or maybe not', does not contain a main verb and is uncommon in standard written English. It is used to provide some sarcastic humour to the article.

## Broadsheet Newspapers

In contrast to this celebrity magazine style, a more formal register is used in broadsheet newspapers, such as The Telegraph and The Guardian. These are typically aimed at educated adults, with the large vocabulary used and longer articles reflecting this. They normally have a more serious style than celebrity magazines and do not have as many informal spoken language features within the articles. They also contain language features that interact with the audience. Take, for example, the article 'Do you feel the Government is on your side?' from The Telegraph published on 6 March:

*Assuming that you count yourself as one of Mr Cameron's virtuous army of those who are trying to do their best, do you feel that the Government is actively supporting you in your efforts? Or that it is, as often as not, regarding you as a symbolic sacrificial victim in aid of its oddly contradictory drive to prove that you - and your loved ones - are not the people it represents?*

This addresses the reader directly with the personal pronoun 'you' and several interrogatives to make the audience think about the issue being discussed: whether the Government is making the best decisions for the reader. It relates to the readers by asking them about a topic that is personal to them and that they would likely have an opinion on. The sentence lengths are much longer than those in the celebrity magazine and longer, polysyllabic lexis is used, such as 'contradictory', whereas heat magazine mainly used words of one or two syllables. The sentences have standard grammar and there are no minor sentences, unlike the celebrity magazine.

As well as the distinction of the different writing styles in celebrity magazines and broadsheet newspapers, there are many other genres that have different degrees of spoken language influence. For example, tabloid newspapers, such as The Sun or The Mirror, are likely to be more informal and conversational than finance magazines, such as The Banker or Forbes. Even within individual newspapers and magazines there is variety in the amount of conversational features among the different types of articles, for example comment articles or features are often more conversational than hard news articles.

## Influence of New Electronic Media

The writing style used in newspapers and magazines evolves with change in society over time. They originally started out being just printed black words on sheets of paper and they now have many sections with colours and pictures. In the past few decades the rise of the internet has meant that newspapers and magazines are published in both printed and various electronic versions simultaneously, such as for PCs and mobile phones. The popularity of electronic genres, such as blogs and streaming videos, has impacted on the interactive language used by newspapers and magazines. Many newspapers, such as The Telegraph, now have the opportunity to leave comments on articles posted on their websites, in the

same way that blogs encourage this on their posts. Robin Hamman, former head of blogging at the BBC, noted in his 15 November 2006 blog entry the benefits to be brought through newspaper and media organisation blogs:

- joining in the conversation
- becoming a part of the culture of participation
- bringing journalists closer to their audience, as the BBC's Political Editor Nick Robinson does in the comments
- letting the audience to, as Dan Gillmor suggests in his influential book *We The Media*, help investigate the story and better inform our reporting
- making controversial editorial decisions more transparent as Helen Boaden did on BBC News The Editors blog

In the January 29 edition of *New Musical Express* the writers regularly tell the readers to take actions to make reading the magazine more of a two-way interaction. Towards the end of its feature on the band Glasvegas' frontman James Allan the writer says:

*Listen to Glasvegas' comeback track 'The World Is Yours' at NME.COM/blogs and let us know what you think. Then tune into NME TV on January 26 at 9.30 pm for a Glasvegas Vs White Lies video special.*

As well as the magazine providing information about bands and giving its opinion on music, *New Musical Express* uses imperative sentences, the sentence function that gives commands or instructions, to tell its readers where to get even more information and to contribute their own opinions through the website. This example also includes the personal pronouns 'you' and 'us' to refer to the reader and the magazine's writers respectively, which has the effect of a group of friends talking to you rather than an organisation that does not know you as an individual.

The language features discussed in this emag article demonstrate the broad range of different ways newspapers and magazines interact with their audiences. Other articles in this edition of emag will probably use language features that try to interact with you - why don't you see if you can spot them?

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