

Activity 42.

Look at the following letter, written by the English poet John Keats to his younger sister, Fanny. Consider the clauses in bold, and decide which speech act labels you would give them. (If you need help you might use the following labels: *command, compliment, sympathising, condolence/commiseration, promise, undertaking, advice, apology, excuse.*) What do the results of this analysis suggest about the relationship between John Keats and his sister? How could you sum up the subject positions that he is setting up for himself and for her?

*To Fanny Keats
Miss Keats, Miss Tuckey's, Walthamstow*

*Tuesday 19th August 1818
Hampstead August 18th*

My dear Fanny,

(1) **I am afraid you will think me very negligent in not having answered your letter – I see it is dated June 12 – I did not arrive at Inverness till the 8th of this month** so (2) **I am very much concerned at your being disappointed so long a time.** I did not intend to have returned to London so soon but have a bad sore throat from a cold I caught in the island of Mull: therefore I thought it best to get home as soon as possible and went on board the smack from Cromarty. We had a nine days passage and landed at London Bridge yesterday. I shall have a good deal to tell you about Scotland – I would begin here but I have a confounded tooth-ache. Tom has not been getting any better since I left London and for the last fortnight has been worse than ever – he has been getting a little better for these two or three days. (3) **I shall ask Mr Abbey to let me bring you to Hampstead.** If Mr A. should see this letter (4) **tell him that he still must, if he pleases, forward the post bill to Perth** as I have empowered my fellow-traveller to receive it. I have a few Scotch pebbles for you from the Island of Icomkill – (5) **I am afraid they are rather shabby** – I did not go near the mountain of Cairn Gorm. I do not know the name of George's ship – the name of the port he has gone to is Philadelphia whence he will travel to the settlement across country – (6) **I will tell you all about this when I see you** – the title of my last book is *Endymion*; (7) **you shall have one soon.** (8) **I would not advise you to play on the flageolet,** however I will get you one if you please. (9) **I will speak to Mr Abbey on what you say concerning school.** (10) **I am sorry for your poor canary.** (11) **You shall have another volume of my first book.** My tooth-ache keeps on so that I cannot write with any pleasure – all I can say now is that (12) **your letter is a very nice one without any fault** and that (13) **you will hear from or see in a few days,** if his throat will let him,

Your affectionate brother
John

(Letters of John Keats, ed. Stanley Gardner. London: University of London Press, pp. 115–116)

Comment 42.

Possible answers are as follows:

- (1) apology [and excuse]?
- (2) sympathising, or words to that effect
- (3) promise, or at least an undertaking
- (4) command or request
- (5) apology
- (6), (7) promise or undertaking
- (8) advice (against)
- (9) promise or undertaking
- (10) condolence or commiseration
- (11) promise or undertaking
- (12) compliment
- (13) promise or undertaking

Keats seems to be constructing a subject position for his younger sister in which she is very dependent upon him. The high number of promises and undertakings suggest this, but so do the apologies – he assumes that his behaviour is a focus of her attention and any slight imperfection therefore demands apology. Fanny comes over as rather passive – one directive simply demands verbal behaviour from her (and the actual action demanded will be by someone else); the other directive is negative, advice against. In this he constructs himself as rather paternalistic. But he is also warm in the concern and sympathy and condolences that he expresses.

Activity 43.

Rank the following in increasing order of politeness. What criteria did you use for this ranking?

1. Keep the umbrella I left behind last weekend for your own use.
2. Tell Mr A that I'll see him on Thursday.
3. Look after yourself in this cold weather.
4. Send me a cheque for \$1,250 by return of post.
5. By all means use my car for the week of 20–27th March.

Comment 43.

The degree of politeness has nothing to do with the grammatical form of these sentences, as they are all commands in the imperative mood. Rather, the politeness depends on the costs and benefits to the writer and reader.

The action demanded in (4) is very costly to the reader and benefits the writer.

(2) involving simply speaking, is of little cost to the reader, and is of some benefit to the writer.

The act in (3) would be of some benefit to the reader, but no cost to the writer.

(1) would be of some benefit to the reader and a little cost to the writer.

(5) is the politest, because giving up the use of a car for a week is probably of considerable cost to the writer, and of great benefit to the reader.

Activity 44.

Find a text whose reading position you resist. Annotate it. Tell the rest of the group why you resist the position the writer assumes you will take.

Explain what you are resisting:

- the ideological categorisations and the representation of reality?
- the authority, dogmatism or level of formality?
- presuppositions, inferences or implications?
- propositional attitudes?
- anything else?

Activity 45.

Look at the Luma credit card ad at www.luma.co.uk, and analyse it in terms of speech acts, politeness and the way the reader is positioned. You might also look at presuppositions and inference.

Questions to ask yourself include:

1. How do adverts as a genre position the writer and reader of the advert? What words could you give to label their subject positions? (e.g. adviser/advisee, confider/confidant)
2. From the linguistic evidence, what kind of target reader do you think the advertiser had in mind?
3. What kinds of speech acts does the writer perform in this advert? Does the pattern change in the different sections? Are different registers employed?
4. Is the imperative mood used for directives? Is this polite? Why or why not? In using these is the writer making a request or an offer?
5. Are there indirect directives?
6. Is the writer suitably modest about her product? What presuppositions are there about the product?
7. How visually informative is this advert? What is the significance of the variation in font size?

Comment 45.

1. Of course the subject positions are those of writer/composer and reader, but more particularly they are of advertiser/marketer and potential buyer/customer/client.
2. The ideal reader is someone who needs a credit card, but who also needs to build their creditworthiness because they have poor credit ratings, and therefore have experienced other credit card issuers as less than friendly towards them. They have a mobile phone, or access to the internet, and they lack confidence that credit cards can be secure from fraud. They are British, because they recognise the newspapers and magazine listed: *The Sun*, *The Independent*, *The Telegraph* and *MoneySavingExpert*. They have some faith in these publications as endorsers of products.
3. The main body of the ad is an invitation, listing all the benefits that applying for the card will bring. These benefits can also be taken as undertakings or promises: no annual fee, 60-second response and so on. The quotations from the two satisfied customers are recommendations, which employ the register features of conversation/internet chat such as minor sentences without subjects, lack of capitalisation, and thereby position the reader as a fellow conversationalist/member of a chat room. The last two paragraphs are legal details and requirements, informing the reader of the company details and warning about the cost of phone calls, and belong more to a legal register, with registration numbers and addresses, etc., and where modals of possibility like ‘may’ cover the company against charges of misrepresentation.
4. Because it is constructed as an invitation or offer (of more benefit to the client than the company) we assume the imperative commands ‘apply’, ‘find out’, ‘see’ ‘learn’ and, perhaps, ‘manage’ are polite.

5. 'It's important to understand things like your credit rating and how to use your card responsibly' looks like an indirect directive.
6. Ads are not well-known for their modesty. Mobile ease, peace of mind and other benefits listed under the hyperlinks all break the modesty maxim. Indeed, 'Luma Card Benefits' presupposes that the Luma card has benefits such as 'Luma's security features (like fraud alerts and free fraud protection)'. And 'find out more about what Luma card can do for you' presupposes Luma card can do something for you.
7. Like most ads, it is very visually informative, in obvious ways. What is interesting is that visual prominence is denied to the small print. It's the headline itself, the picture of the card being offered, the bulleted selling points, the interest rate, and the photos of satisfied customers that have prominence, along with the button for application. The other hyperlinks are highlighted by the colour blue and underlining, in a traditional way.