Everyday Magic:
A Linguistic Analysis of Sarah Addison Allen's "Just So You Know"

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Overview

This project diagrams and analyzes Sarah Addison Allen's magical realism essay, "Just So You Know," which informs readers that, just as they fall in love with books, books fall in love with them, too.

I focus on two defining features:

(1) second person point of view
(2) grammatical features from sentence structure and vocabulary

Background

Allen's essay was originally published as a promotional feature for Barnes & Noble. This led me to wonder how the language of the essay functioned as an advertisement.

Research

Authorial Tone
Authorial tone is "the stance or attitude taken by an (implied) author towards his readers" (Leech and Short 225).

Some contributors to authorial tone are:
- "evaluative terms and evaluative inferences"
- "direct appeal to the reader through rhetorical questions"
- "generic statements and other references to a commonality of experience"
(Leech and Short 227).

Second Person Narration
There is debate about readers' ability to identify with a second person subject. Research shows that for readers to see themselves as "you," there must be either past tense (DelConte) or "ubiquitous" present tense (Kitrell).

Methodology

I completed a full diagramming markup of each sentence in the essay. This annotation scheme diagrams:
- words' parts of speech
- phrases and clauses (for both form and function)
- sentence type and overall structure

I also used *Word and Phrase* and *Using English* to find the Fog Index (expected grade level "readability") and frequency ranges of the words (ranges that indicate how often words occur in the English language).

Annotation scheme:
Nouns
Verbs (underlined)
^Subordinator^
+Coordinator+

(Noun phrase)
<adjective phrase>
[Prepositional phrase]
Adverb phrase
%Adverbial clause%

- Subscripts identify function or verb type
- Superscripts identify sentence type
- Tabs identify embedded constituents

$(\text{You})_{Subj}$
$\underline{\text{carried}}_{MT:Past} (\text{it})_{DO}$ *around*
  $\%^{\wedge}\text{until}^{\wedge}$
    $(\text{it})_{Subj}$
    $\underline{\text{was}}_{C:Past} <\text{old +and+ thin}>_{SP}$
  $+\text{and}+$
    $(\text{sparkles})_{Subj}$
      no longer
    $\underline{\text{rose}}_{IT:Past}$ [from (the **pages**)$_{ObjP}$]$_{Avl}$
  $+\text{and}+$
    $\underline{\text{filled}}_{MT:Past}$ (the **air**)$_{DO}$
      $\%^{\wedge}\text{when}^{\wedge}$
        $(\text{you})_{Subj}$
        $\underline{\text{opened}}_{MT:Past} (\text{it})_{DO}\%_{Avl}$
      $\%^{\wedge}\text{like}^{\wedge}$
        $(\text{it})_{Subj}$
        $\underline{\text{did}}_{IT:Past}$
          $\%^{\wedge}\text{when}^{\wedge}$
            $(\text{it})_{Subj}$
            $\underline{\text{was}}_{C:Past} <\text{new}>\%_{Avl}\%_{Avl}{}^{CC}$

Annotation Conclusions:
- Tabbing of the sentence shows how much embedding there actually is
- ^Subordinator markers^ more clearly reveal the compound-complex sentence type
- +Coordinator markers+ show that conversational coordination is present
- Identifying subject and verb type shows how active verbs for "you" are only in past tense

Results: Authorial Tone

Contrasting tone and style
Allen's essay creates a conversational tone:

- Sentences begin with coordinators ("but" & "and")
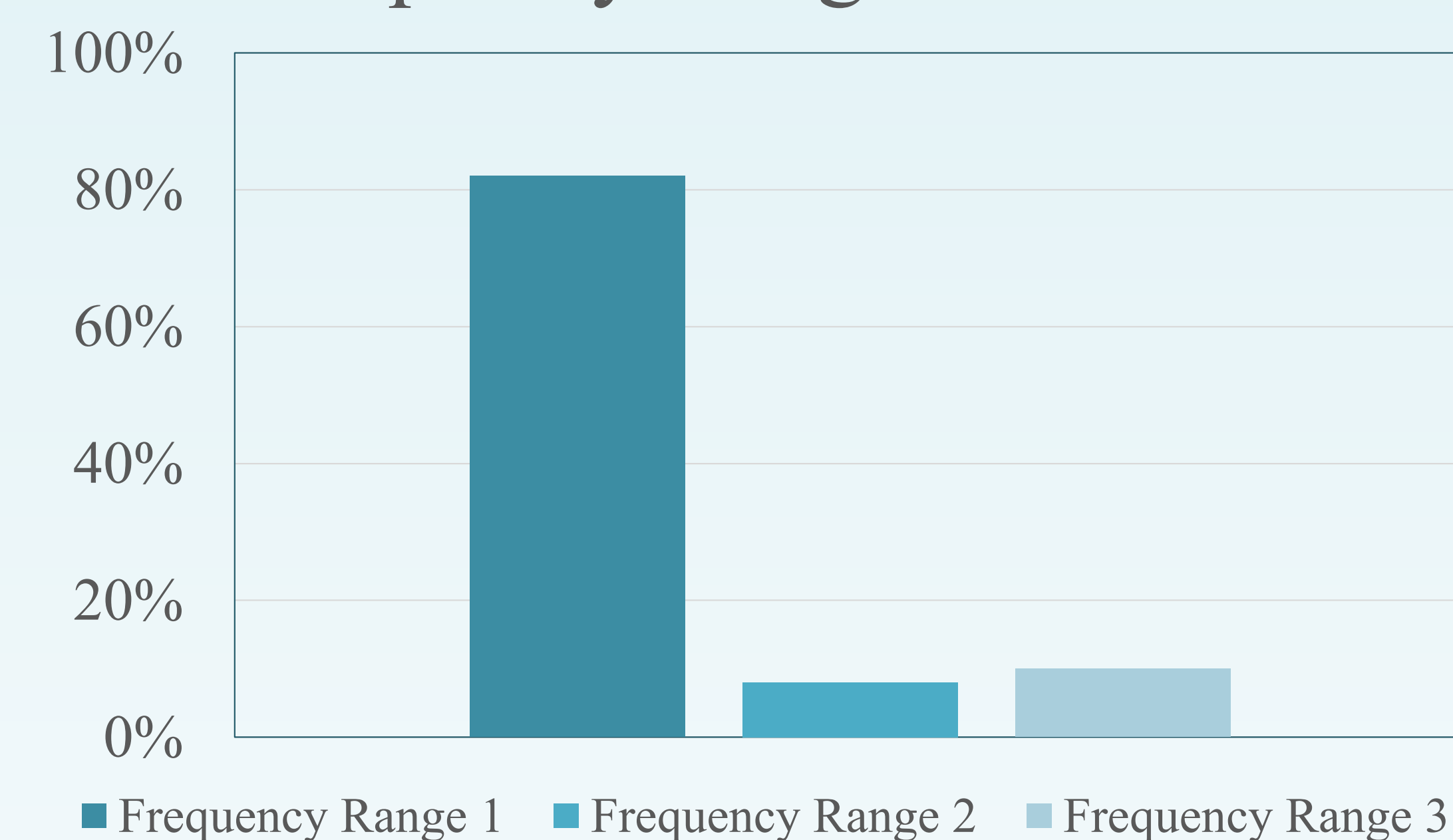- Fog Index (grade level readability) is 5.87
- 82% of words are Range 1 (among 500 most frequently used words in English)
- Dislocation and topic placement in sentences
- Addressing the reader creates sense of discussion

However, the heavy embedding created a complex *style* associated with literature.

Frequency Range of Words

(Bar chart: y-axis 0% to 100%. Frequency Range 1 ≈ 82%, Frequency Range 2 ≈ 8%, Frequency Range 3 ≈ 10%)

■ Frequency Range 1   ■ Frequency Range 2   ■ Frequency Range 3

Results: Second Person

The second person point of view creates a personal connection to the reader. Allen enhances this connection by:
- Acknowledging the reader's thoughts and emotions
- Only using active verbs in past tense for "you" (e.g "you **carried** it around")
- Using present tense verbs for "you" to create a sense of knowledge of what the reader habitually does (e.g. "*you **fall in love** with every book you touch*")

Conclusion

Allen's essay engages readers by tapping into a communal love for literature, allowing them to indulge in their affection for books and imagine a world where their affection is returned. It offers a simple, secret magic to which readers can return time and again.

References

Allen, Sarah Addison. "Just So You Know." *Sarah Addison Allen*. N.p., n.d. Web. 7 Dec. 2016.

Davies, Mark. *Word and Phrase.* 2008-present. Available online at http://www.wordandphrase.info. Web. 5 Dec. 2016.

DelConte, Matt. "The Influence of Narrative Tense in Second Person Narration: A Response to Joshua Parker." *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate* 23.1 (2013): 55-7. Web. 5 Dec. 2016.

Kittrell, Davina. "Who is You? Identifying 'You' in Second-Person Narratives: A Systemic Functional Linguistics Analysis." Marshall University, 2013. Ann Arbor: *ProQuest.* Web. 7 Dec. 2016.

Using English. 2002-Present. Available online at http://www.usingenglish.com. Web. 4 Dec. 2016.

These techniques draw readers in and encourage them to embrace their love of books—and, more importantly to Barnes & Noble, their love of *purchasing* books.