

WE ARE LANGUAGE

This resource has been produced for About Us as part of UNBOXED: Creativity in the UK.

This interdisciplinary resource brings together creative writing, literature and science: teachers can use it in the classroom to explore literary techniques in scientific contexts, and to explore the creativity behind scientific themes. Older students can use the resource in their own time to further their reading and generate ideas for poems of their own.

CURRICULUM LINKS

England:

English: Writing & Reading
Composition
Key Stages: KS4, KS5

Northern Ireland:

Language & Literacy:
Writing & Reading
Science & Technology:
Earth & Universe
Key Stages: KS4, KS5

Scotland

Languages: Literacy
& English – Writing &
Reading
Sciences: Topical Science
Level: Senior Phase

Wales

Languages, Literacy
& Communication:
Literature
Science & Technology:
Being Curious
Progression Steps:
PS5, A levels

AGES 14–18

Topics

- language
- signs and signifiers
- semiotics

This resource looks at a new poem and related material by poet and educator Dan Simpson. The poem, 'Together we are Distant', explores the idea that language both connects us as humans and individualises us. The resource contains discussion and writing prompts for young people to engage with the text and create their own poem in response.

GETTING STARTED

The poem you are about to read is all about the idea that although language is a network that connects us, it is also a subjective tool that is unique to each person. Can you think of any words that seem especially ambiguous to you i.e. where the meaning might be open to interpretation? Is every word open to interpretation? Which do you think is more objective, concrete nouns like chair, tree, and lightbulb, or abstract nouns like hope, love, or peace?



TOGETHER WE ARE DISTANT

In the universe words create distance
being not the thing itself
but an abstraction of existence.

In this sense
there is no such thing as love or anger or joy
or a cat.

Stretch out into this concept
claw at the threads here
know that we are naming the ineffable
and largely missing the litter tray.

How good are you at simultaneously
holding two conflicting ideas
in your head?

You and I
and the mundane miracle of our being here
now, separated over time and space
and together in this poem:
here I am
and here you are
I feel closer to you already
through the distance of words.

Hello.

Inside you is another universe
orbiting around the gravity-pull of your heart
each beat of your centre a powerful 'yes!'
oxygenating the solar system of your organs.

In the interstellar ballet of your body
the dancers are swirling around one another
their planetary routines and steadily measured steps
grounding you in motion and meaning.

When our elemental bodies suffer it's hard
to remember that we are made from the same stuff
as suns, the starlight burning out
as we diminish into darkness
hoping not to pull the rest of the world in with us.

When we are burning in equilibrium
or close enough
the main sequence of our lives
is manifest brightness from inside to out
matter made energy
expanding ourselves to each other
giving energy to that which matters.

I see the universe you are
recognise myself as such
and so – despite this distance
of language and poetry –
we are two contrasting ideas at once
together, and apart, and
I love you.

ABOUT THE POEM

The poet who created this poem, Dan Simpson, says:

In ‘Together we are Distant’, I wanted to explore the idea that we each experience the universe so individually through our senses and minds. We then try to use language to describe that experience to each other, because words are one of the best tools we have for understanding each other.

That often works really well – I can point at a cat and say “that’s a cat!” (this is something I often do in public) and you’d probably agree with me. But it can get trickier when it comes to emotions and feelings: how does anger or joy feel for you? I can’t possibly know, but still, we try to put a word to a feeling to communicate our experience. That word isn’t the thing itself but a way of designating an abstract concept. Therefore, saying “I feel nervous” is not the state of being nervous, but it conveys the nervousness to others because we collectively agree on certain linguistic parameters.

You probably already know that poets often use metaphor as a way to try to reach a better understanding of the truth through imagery. In a way, though, we can take this further and say that all language is metaphorical because words are not the thing itself, but only ever a representation of it.

So, words separate us from experience in some way by being figurative, whilst connecting us together in a common understanding – and, sometimes, in misunderstanding.

This conflicting nature of language is fascinating: it is both a shared network that connects us, and a deeply individualised tool for expression. Fundamentally, it feels similar to the notion that we are all the same and equal, and yet individual and different from each other. We, and the wider universe, are all made of the same stuff (molecules and atoms and that), and are as much a part of nature as anything else – yet our thinking, conscious brains make us feel separate. I was interested in exploring this contradiction through poetry – and what better way to reflect on the nature of language than through language itself?



DISCUSSION POINTS

- In which contexts is spoken or written language an effective tool of communication?
- What other forms of communication do we use? How are they different, better, or worse?
- How do you think language connects us to the rest of the world?
- Where do you feel most part of nature or the universe – and where do you feel most separate?
- The main metaphor here links astronomical imagery to the body. Is this effective? Why / why not?
- Look at the layout of the piece, especially the use of white space. Why is the poem presented in this way? How does this relate to the title?
- Can you find examples of enjambment in the poem, where a thought or phrase runs over from one line into the next? What effect do you think this has?
- How is punctuation important in this poem? Does the sentence structure surprise you?
- The poem explores the idea that there is a gap between words and the things they represent. What does the gap between words and meaning mean for the way we interact socially? What does it mean for artists? Can they capitalise on it? In what way is it a space for potential?
- Do you feel you have understood this poem? Do you think it is possible to understand this poem? Do you think it is possible to understand this question? Is the word 'understand' understandable?

Extension Activity for Older Students

The study of signs is called 'semiotics', which examines the way sign processes create meaning. A key question is how the vehicle of communication, often referred to as the 'signifier', relates to the thing being conveyed, the 'signified'. In other words, what is the relationship between words or other systems of signs and the things they refer to?

Take a look at this [video](#) by YouTuber Tom Nicholas, who gives an introduction to this topic.

A playful take on this is *La Trahison des images* (The Treachery of Images), a famous [painting](#) by the Belgian artist René Magritte. This painting asks the viewer to reflect on whether the image of a pipe could be said to be a pipe. Below his painting of a pipe, Magritte writes 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' (This is not a pipe). But if it is not a pipe, what is it? What do you think?

WRITING YOUR OWN POEM

Imagine you are something other than a human. It could be naturally occurring (like a star, or a microbe, or a tree, or a butterfly) or human-made (like a house, or a phone, or a car, or a candle). What if this thing had senses like ours, and could think? Make a list of what it can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. What does it think about those things?

Think about its personality and make notes on this. If you are working with a partner, you could try interviewing each other in the role of the thing you have chosen. How might it respond to questions?

How does it feel different from and similar to the rest of the Universe? What makes it unique? What connects it to the rest of the world?

Write a poem from the perspective of this thing in the first-person. What would it say to humanity – or to your class – if it could speak to us? Really lean into using the ‘I’ voice! Can you play with the idea that a non-verbal thing is using words to express itself?

OR

Write a poem about how language connects us. Think about how languages travel and evolve, the networks of languages across borders, the power of language to influence us. Think about the relationship between language and power, language and play, language and identity. How is our world shaped by language? What is the role of non-verbal forms of communication, like facial expressions or gestures?

This resource and the poem contained within it ‘Together we are Distant’ were written by poet Dan Simpson. Dan Simpson is a writer, performer, producer, and educator. He makes highly engaging and contemporary work that is entertaining, intelligent, and thought-provoking. His subjects include science and technology; history and place; art and culture; people and poetry. A former Canterbury Laureate, Dan has been Poet-in-Residence at Glastonbury Festival, Waterloo Station, National Trust Stowe, Imperial College London, and St Albans Cathedral.

Poem ‘Together we are Distant’ © Dan Simpson

NEXT STEPS

For more poetry opportunities, check out Young Poets Network, The Poetry Society’s free online platform for poets worldwide up to the age of 25. You’ll find features, challenges and competitions to inspire your own writing, as well as new writing from young poets, and advice from the rising and established stars of the poetry scene. youngpoetsnetwork.org.uk

About this project

About Us is one of ten commissions for UNBOXED: Creativity in the UK. The project explores the infinite ways we are connected to the universe, the natural world and one another. A major live show toured the UK in spring 2022.

59 Productions is an award-winning design studio and production company who created the breath-taking video design for the London 2012 Olympic Opening Ceremony. Stemettes is an award-winning social enterprise working to bring young women and non-binary young people into Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) careers. The Poetry Society is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation and is one of the UK’s most dynamic arts organisations, championing poetry for all ages.