



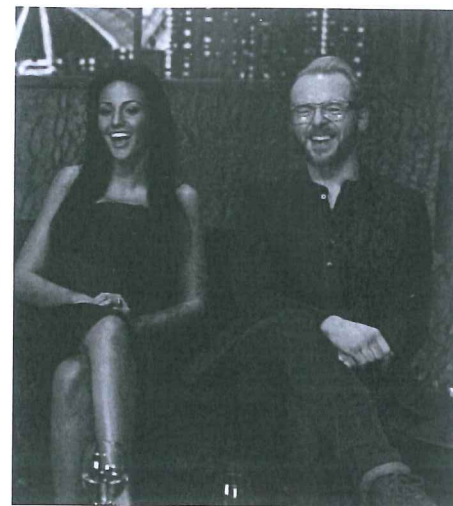
Making the Pegg Fit



How do we Represent Ourselves to the World?

David Kinder takes actor/writer Simon Pegg as a case study of the way we use language to construct ourselves differently depending on the purpose, audience and context we find ourselves in.





Who do you think you are? Or, perhaps more relevant to this article, who do you want your friends to think you are? If you look at your Facebook page, or some recent tweets, what kind of person comes across? Serious? Studious? Fun? A bit of a rebel?

Depending on which specification you are following, you are likely to have already come across **representation** in some form or other. It is often studied in relation to the way our language gives biased perceptions of particular groups of people – men and women, for example. This article, however, is focused on a different aspect of representation: the way we represent *ourselves*, through language, across a range of media.

If you have any kind of presence on social media sites like Facebook or microblogging sites like Tumblr or Twitter, you will be doing just this, accentuating aspects of yourself for your 'friends' or 'followers'. How do you compare, do you think, with others who do the same?

In order to test out this process, whilst thinking about our own profiles, it is helpful to use a particular subject: an individual who is accustomed to representing himself online and on television and radio – like the actor Simon Pegg (*Shaun of the Dead*, *Hot Fuzz*, *The World's End*, *Star Trek*).

With Jonathan Ross and on *Front Row*

Pegg is an interesting figure. He is often labelled as an ordinary person, quite clever, who has stumbled into blockbuster Hollywood films like *Star Trek* and *Mission Impossible*. This means that he appears on chat shows in front of a large peak time audience. He also, however, seems comfortable pitching his language towards a more niche audience. If you compare



him talking on the mainstream *Jonathan Ross Show* with, say, an interview for BBC Radio 4's arts programme *Front Row*, you can see two quite different Simon Peggs emerging. Look at these two utterances, as he talks about the idea of the nerd (his autobiography is called *Nerd Do Well*):

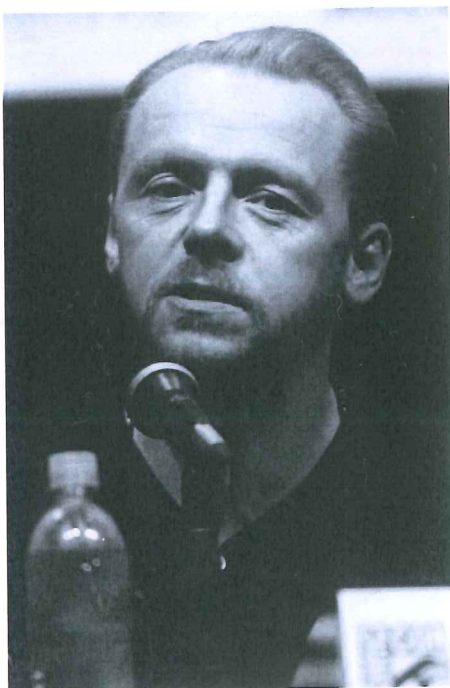
1. 'a nerd is someone who's a little bit more sort of you know just the specy idiot'
Jonathan Ross Show 2007, BBC Television
2. 'a nerd used to be a very negative epithet (.) as did geek'
Front Row, 2010, BBC Radio 4

In the first utterance, the noun phrase 'the specy idiot' is well attuned to Pegg's audience on Ross's show. Neither the adjective nor the noun here would be inaccessible to the mainstream BBC1 audience and the slang word 'specy' has some comedic value when attached to 'idiot', conjuring up a cartoonish stereotype. Moreover, the fillers 'sort of' and 'you know', although mostly designed to allow Pegg time to think, also comply with the informality of the setting, since Ross's show is meant to be all about chat rather than forensic questioning. All in all, Pegg is representing himself here as an easy

conversationalist and comedian, keeping up with Ross who is also trying to get laughs from the audience.

It seems that Pegg is making a decision to raise his register for the Radio 4 audience

By contrast, the utterance from the *Front Row* interview contains the low frequency abstract noun 'epithet', which has Greek roots and would be more at home in an English essay. It can be defined as any descriptive term (word or phrase) which stands in the place of a name and which has entered common usage. It would be easy to use a more common word here ('name' or 'term' would do) and thus it seems that Pegg is making a decision to raise his register for the Radio 4 audience: he is representing himself as an educated person in order to fit in with the perceived audience of Radio 4.



Pegg's Tweets

Whilst it might be interesting to speculate on how we would present ourselves if the opportunity arose to appear on national television, for most of us it is unlikely to happen. This is not the case with the new media of online communication, however. Here many of us are most definitely going through this process of self-representation, with some quite large potential audiences. In a recent discussion in an A Level

classroom, I was stunned to discover that one student had no less than 2000 followers on Twitter. She may not quite have the 3.4 million followers boasted by Simon Pegg. However, the process of choosing her language and image carefully, of representing herself, will be the same.

So let's have a look at these four tweets (below), produced by Simon Pegg on the same day in early 2014.



Simon Pegg @simonpegg Jan 8

Late to the party but absolutely loving The Returned. Brilliant and haunting and scored by Mogwai. J'adore!!

Expand



Simon Pegg @simonpegg Jan 8

Wasn't referring to you my darling tweeple You guys rock and you rock hard like granite or a meteor made of some alien shit that's hard

Expand



Simon Pegg @simonpegg Jan 8

I love awards season, it gives you the chance to feel unappreciated by people you don't know and probably wouldn't like if you did.

Expand



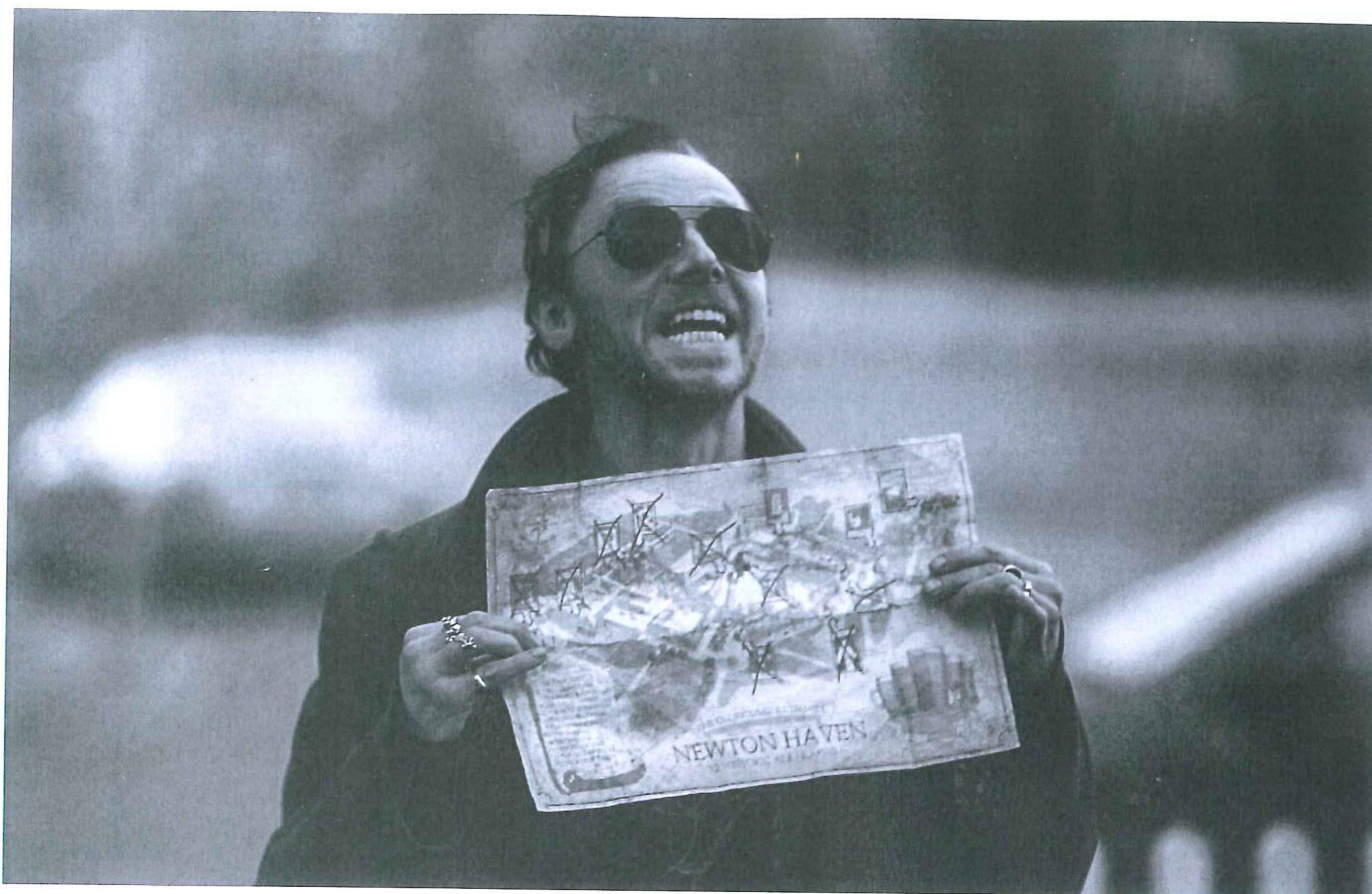
Simon Pegg @simonpegg Jan 8

Mmmmm lunch. pic twitter.com/3fGwSkI0WL



What Pegg is doing here, quite markedly I think, is to manage his public persona

What picture of Pegg do we get from them? Several aspects spring to mind. From this particular day, he seems to be using the microblogging site to bring his followers closer to his tastes and lifestyle (do you do this too?). He watches a French supernatural crime thriller and likes the soundtrack by a Scottish indie rock band, suggesting that he likes popular culture, but not the obvious forms of it. He doesn't like the awards season, quietly referring to his position as a now celebrated actor. He has a smoothie for lunch, in what looks like a workout room or a rehearsal room, so we are meant to assume that he looks after his physique.

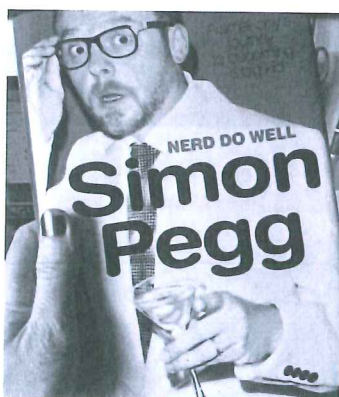


What Linguistic Image?

Equally interesting, though, is the linguistic image he is portraying. The same kind of balance between mainstream and intellectual personas that we have seen in other media comes across. Pegg's first tweet, for example, is colloquial and elliptical missing out the subject and verb 'I am' and beginning with 'Late to the party.' Having done this he completes the clause with 'loving', as in 'I am loving x'. This way of using the normally stative verb 'love' in the present progressive ('-ing') is non-standard (at the moment!). It thus cannot fail to make a point: Pegg is prepared to break grammatical rules, can be easy with language. Is this done to his 3.4 million followers to build up a genuine friendship? Or is it there to create a suggestion of a rapport and, above all, to convey to them the kind of guy he is.

Interestingly, though, this tweet also has some touches of Pegg's more intellectual persona. He uses 'haunting' to describe a soundtrack which is 'scored'. This is arguably quite a sophisticated way to talk about music on a TV show. So Pegg wants the world to know he understands the relevant terminology.

This mix of traits generally associated with the spoken and written word is maintained through the other tweets. Conversational



touches are numerous: contractions like 'wasn't' and 'wouldn't'; the mimicked sound 'mmmmm' to sarcastically point up the fact that he's having a smoothie for lunch; some mild swearing. The Simon Pegg of the *Jonathan Ross Show* routine. But these touches are matched by polysyllabic words like 'unappreciated' (what's wrong with the two syllable 'ignored?'). Moreover, he is playful with language, which suggests intellectual alacrity. He uses the blend word 'tweeple', for example, a neologism coined to define people who use Twitter, showing that his knowledge of technology is current. And he develops the rather staid idiom 'you rock' into a fresh simile 'like granite or meteors' and then, of course, to undercut this ostentatious wordplay, brings the register back down with 'alien shit that's hard'.

What Pegg is doing here, quite markedly I think, is to manage his public persona. He is saying to the world that he is an ordinary person, a bit of a nerd, unafraid to use his mind, who finds himself in a world of fame and ceremonies. This is his persona, his represented image. Look at your own output, if you use Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr or Blogger, for example. How are you using images and language to represent yourself? Who do you want the world to think you are? Someone might want to study it...

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Follow it up

For a good overview of Representation as a study of the inherent bias in language, try reading Alison Ross's essay 'Language and Representation' in *Language – Topics and Theories* (EMC, 2012).

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