

The Use of Personal Pronouns in New Year Addresses by Queen Elizabeth II and President Trump

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Abstract

Personal pronoun is used to refer to a person or a thing directly. Different personal pronouns can reflect speakers' desires for establish different interpersonal relationships. New Year addresses are a means for leaders to communicate with their people, thus it is worthwhile to study personal pronouns and the realized interpersonal functions in these discourses to have a better understanding of political discourses. This study respectively selects five New Year addresses by Queen Elizabeth II and President Donald Trump as the data, investigating personal pronouns based on systemic-functional grammar. The following conclusions can be drawn through research: the personal pronoun “we” can create a sense of unity and a harmonious interpersonal relationship; “you” can bring the listeners a “conversational experience”, thereby shortening the psychological distance between two communication parties; “it” can enhance the readability and the formality of the discourses.

Key words: personal pronouns; interpersonal function; New Year addresses

1. Personal Pronouns and Interpersonal Functions

1.1 The Definition of Personal Pronouns

There are three types of personal pronouns: the first person pronouns refer to the speakers or writers; the second person pronouns mean the receivers of the speaking or writing activities; the third person pronouns cover all people except the speakers and the receivers in the current communications. All personal pronouns in English are presented below:

Table 1 English Personal Pronouns

	Singular		Plural	
	Nominative case	Objective case	Nominative case	Objective case
The first person pronoun	I	me	we	us
The second person pronoun	you	you	you	you
The third person pronoun	he	him	they	them
	she	her		
	it	it		

1.2 Definition of Interpersonal Meaning

In Halliday's view, interpersonal function is the most sociological use of language, by which people establish and maintain their status in a society. In a specific context, through language, the speaker not only conveys his idea, but also tries to influence the attitude of the hearer so as to change his attitude about something or even take some actions. In addition, Halliday argues that interpersonal function is realized by mood and modality. Mood shows what role the speaker selects to play in the speech situation and what role he assigns to the addressee. Modality specifies if the speaker is expressing his judgment or making a predication.

1.3 Some Studies of Personal Pronoun's Interpersonal Meaning at Home and Abroad

Brown and Gilman (1960) investigate how various pronouns in Latin perform power and solidarity between people in specific social contexts. They point out that a man's consistent pronoun style gives away his class status and his political views. For example, the nobility, the master of household, and parents say "tu (你)" to their people, slaves, and children, and receive "vous (您)" to show their power over the listeners.

In 1983, Brown and Yule did a study of the use of personal pronouns in actual contexts, which further leads the study of personal pronouns into a pragmatics field. They point out that words do not refer to anything. People do. Reference is an act by which a speaker uses language to enable a listener to identify something.

Li (2002) ever proposed that "personal pronouns have the interpersonal meaning in discourse". She views that if people of equal social status address each other, using plural personal pronouns can indicate the distance and degree of formality; when using singular personal pronouns in conversations for addressing, people can express closeness and intimacy to each other. However, given the speakers being in unequal social status, the plural forms can be used to refer to the person with more power as a sign of authority and respect, while the singular can be used to refer to the less powerful person as a sign of lower status.

Through the study of some literary works, Zhang and Zhu (2008) conclude that Chinese prefers to use the first person pronoun “I” and the third person pronoun plural, while English is prone to use the first person pronoun “we”. The different selections of pronouns can reflect different cultural backgrounds and conventions of language use in two countries.

Zhu (2012) makes analysis on personal pronouns in commercial discourses, and finds that advisers often skillfully select personal pronouns with potential persuasiveness, and through selecting befitting personal pronouns, advisers can shorten the distance between them and the consumers so as to persuade the latter to purchase products.

From these previous studies of Personal pronoun’s interpersonal meaning, we can obviously observe Personal pronouns have power in constructing certain relationship between people, and reflecting what roles the speaker or writer set for the characters in discourse. Nevertheless, by far, the studies of the interpersonal function of personal pronouns are still not enough, and few scholars have set foot in political discourses. For these reasons, this study seeks to investigate the interpersonal function of personal pronouns in political discourses with the purpose of broadening the application of interpersonal function theory.

2. Data and Procedure

2.1 Data

This study is based on two sets of data. One is made up of 5 Christmas addresses, from 2015 to 2019, of Queen Elizabeth II; the other consists of three Christmas addresses, from 2017 to 2019, and two pieces of New Year addresses, 2019 and 2020, of President Trump (we can not find earlier Christmas addresses as he took office in January, 2017). All these data are collected from BBC and VOA, which can ensure the authenticity of the data.

2.2 Research Procedure

This study will undertake the following four steps.

Firstly, after selecting 5 New Year addresses of Queen Elizabeth II and President Trump respectively as its research data, this study will calculate the frequencies of personal pronouns and make some comparison. Then, the roles that the speakers set in terms of themselves and the hearers, or the extent to which the speakers are certain of what he or she is saying will be analyzed. Last, this study will draw some conclusions about what interpersonal functions would the two speakers establish respectively according to their preference for personal pronouns.

3. Research Findings

3.1 Frequency of Personal Pronouns in Two Data

The data are shown in the following tables:

Table 2 Frequency of Personal Pronouns in the Speeches of Queen Elizabeth II

Personal Pronoun	Frequency	Percentage
I (/me)	30	19.35%
We (/us)	45	29.03%
You (/you)	12	7.74%
They (/them)	23	14.84%
She/he (/her/him)	15	9.68%
It (/it)	30	19.35%
Total	155	100%

Table 3 Frequency of Personal Pronouns in the Speeches of President Trump

Personal Pronoun	Frequency	Percentage
I (/me)	25	25.25%
We (/us)	46	46.46%
You (/you)	16	16.16%
They (/them)	2	2.02%
She/he (/her/him)	0	0%
It (/it)	10	10.10%
Total	99	100%

In comparison, firstly, both in the two sets of data, the first person plural “we” and the first person singular “I” occur more frequently than other personal pronouns. Secondly, Trump uses the second person “you” more than twice as much as the Queen. Thirdly, Trump seldom uses the third person pronouns, “they”, “he”, “she”, and “it”, while on the contrary, they are more frequently occurring in the Queen’s addresses.

3.2 The Meanings of Personal Pronouns and Their Interpersonal Functions

For convenience, we propose to use “(Q, 2020)” to signal the sentence is extracted from the 2020 New Year address delivered by Queen Elizabeth II, and “(T, 2019)” to indicate the sentence is excerpted from the 2019 New Year address delivered by President Trump.

3.2.1 The Use of “I”

(1) I wish you all a very happy Christmas. (Q, 2015--2019)

(2) And so tonight, I thank the millions of Americans who light our lives and brighten our wonderful communities. I thank those who are serving the needy during this season and throughout the year. I thank our military men and women who are stationed around the world keeping us safe. (T, 2017)

In sentence (1), the Queen establishes interpersonal relationship between the speaker “I” and the listeners “you” in this utterance. According to J. L. Austin, this sentence is a performative sentence, and the speaker “I” is the actor, while the listeners “you” are the receivers. Thus in this relationship, “I” have more power than “you” as the Queen put herself in a higher status to “bless” all her people.

In sentence (2), Trump repeats “I thank” three times to give strong thanks to tens of thousands of people who

work hard to prosper America and improve the living standards of American people. When hearing these thanks from the perspective of the president, the people could receive a sense of respect from him, and take pride in what they have done.

3.2.2 The Use of “we”

In the context of New Year addresses of these two leaders, the meanings of “we” can be classified into two types: one excluding the hearers refers to the speaker together with his or her family or the government; the other including the hearers refers to the speaker and the people. The four examples will be shown below:

(3) “Yet this year **we** marked the 50th anniversary of the famous Apollo 11 mission” (Q, 2019)

(4) “**We** give thanks for the millions of Americans who come together to care for others with compassion and bring the warmth and bliss of this holy seasons to our families, our friends, our neighbors and to those in need.” (T, 2019)

In sentence (3) and (4), “we” refers to the speakers and their governments, as the action in sentence (3) is “marked the 50th anniversary of the famous Apollo 11 mission”, and the receivers in sentence (4) are “millions of Americans”. In these two utterances, the speakers put themselves in a relatively high position, and show a powerful and grateful image of government in front of the public.

(5) “**We** think of our homes as places of warmth, familiarity and love - of shared stories and memories - which is perhaps why, at this time of year, so many return to where they grew up.” (Q, 2017)

(6) “Today is a day that I’ve been looking very much forward to all year long. It’s one that **we** have heard, and **we** speak about, and **we** dream about.”(T, 2017)

While in examples of (5) and (6), “we” refers to the speakers and the people. Here, the Queen puts down her status to see herself as a normal person who also need the support from family, which can resonate with the public well. In sentence (6), Trump repeats “we” three times, to express the idea that the “American Dream” is shared by every American, thus creating a united atmosphere that all Americans are the builders of today’s America, and bringing listeners a sense of belonging.

3.2.3 The Use of “you”

(7) “A very happy Christmas to **you** all.” (Q, 2019--2015)

(8) “Whatever your own experience is this year, wherever and however **you** are watching, I wish **you** a peaceful and very happy Christmas.” (Q, 2017)

From the addresses we can find that the Queen seldom uses the second-person pronoun, except in the end of discourses to give wishes to her people, such as example (7) and (8). Besides, trying to avoid using the second person pronoun can formalize the speech, as it does not seem that the speaker aims to change the idea or attitude of the hearers obviously.

(9) “While I am at the white house working, **you** are out there partying tonight. But I don’t blame **you**, enjoy yourselves.” (T,2020)

(10) “But **you** can never do it perfectly unless **you** have a wall. So we have to have a wall as part of border security and we're working on it.”(T,2018)

While in the speeches of Trump, the frequency of “you” is higher than that of the Queen. Thus in his speeches, the hearers can perceive a more easy-going, even funnier speaking atmosphere. For instance, in

sentence (9), president sends his wishes to his people in a humor style, which can greatly impress the receivers and create a relaxing ambience. Under the background that Trump wanted to build a wall between America and Mexico to prevent the immigrants and illegal transactions from the latter, via using the second person pronoun “you”, the speaker regards the audiences as his potential supporters in the sentence (10). He seeks to change their attitudes and gain their supports by creating a “conversational experience” which can shorten the psychological distance between two parties of communication.

3.2.4 The Use of “it”

(11) **It** takes patience and time to rebuild trust, and progress often comes through small steps. (Q, 2019)

(13) We moved our embassy to Jerusalem in Isael. I promised it and I did it. (T, 2017)

If we adapt sentence (11) into “Rebuilding trust need patience and time, and progress often comes through small steps”, which is grammatically correct, but straightforward and pale. However, when putting “it” at the beginning of the sentence, the speaker can perform a function of emphasis, and draw people’s attention on what “it” refers to (“patience and time”). This is a formal speaking style, as a means for the Queen to establish a decent personal image in front of her people.

Compared with the Queen, Trump seldom uses “it” in his speeches, thus seldom can we see complicate sentence patterns in his discourses. In sentence (13), president does not say “it is what I promised and did that we moved our embassy to Jerusalem in Israel”, which needs listeners to figure out what “it” refers to. While forthright saying “We moved our embassy to Jerusalem in Israel. I promised it and I did it”, the speaker can establish an easy-going and relaxing atmosphere, as people are more used to such speaking pattern in their daily conversations.

4. Conclusion

Grounded on New Year addresses delivered by Queen Elizabeth II and President Trump as data, and systemic-functional grammar as theory, this study analyzes the interpersonal functions that personal pronouns perform. From the above analyses, we can draw some conclusions overall.

The atmosphere created in New Year addresses of Queen Elizabeth II is more serious and formal. Via the preference for personal pronouns “we”, “I” and “it”, the Queen creates a mutual-trust and united interpersonal function, succeeds in appealing the public to keep peaceful and kind, and establishes a humanitarian and decent image of herself in front the people. While the atmosphere realized in New Year addresses of President Trump is more relaxing and informal. Through the partiality for personal pronouns “I” and “you”, Trump achieves a positive interaction between himself and the listeners, shortens the distance in between, and propagates his political views to the public by the way. Through research, this study hopes to help people improve their discourse analytical skills, and to be helpful for their later political discourse readings.

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