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WE, YOU OR THEY? VARIATION IN THE USE OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN DONALD TRUMP’S INAUGURAL SPEECH

This paper examines the inaugural speech of the 45th president of the USA Donald Trump given on January 20th, 2017.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the personal pronouns Trump uses in his speech and the way they vary in order to present him as a member of the people, of the government and/or to distance him from others.

The current paper will focus on the varying between inclusive and exclusive ‘we’, the opposition ‘we-you’, the dichotomy we-they and the pair you-they.

The theoretical framework builds on the approach of the Critical Discourse Analysis and the interpretation of the text in a particular social context, as well as on previous investigations in the sphere of pronoun variation.

Key Words: *inclusive we, exclusive we, dichotomy we-they, pronoun variation, political discourse, speech.*

Introduction

In defence of the thesis that the use of pronouns is not tied to static and predetermined references, the research aims to illustrate possible variations in the use of pronouns in political speeches as a resource used to move from vulnerable to stable position or to differentiate between positive and negative parties in order to influence the listener's opinion.

By outlining the general theoretical framework and referring to other similar analyzes of political discourse, the report focuses on the change of the speaker's position and his belonging to different social groups. The analysis concentrates on Donald Trump's inaugural speech delivered on January 20th, 2017. The report examines the variation of pronouns in a coherent, consistent context rather than used in an isolated state. The main points are the variations of the 1st person plural ‘we’, on the one hand, in its inclusive, on the other hand, in its exclusive function, respectively ‘we’ as ‘we and the people’, and ‘we’ as ‘we, the government’. The next moment in the report is the transition from ‘they’ to ‘you’ with an identical reference. The pronoun of 3rd person plural ‘they’, on the other hand, is analysed as part of the oppositional dichotomy ‘we-they’, which, however, is contrary to the usual opposition between the good ‘we’ and the bad others. In addition, the subtopic of the report is the use of the pronoun, from 2nd person plural referring to the people, on the one hand, and to the former rulers, on the other. The pronouns ‘you’ and ‘we’ in their function as possessive pronouns of yours and ours varying from pronouns with different to such with identical reference.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Critical Discourse Analysis

As far as the theoretical framework is concerned, the current research paper will use the approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (hereinafter referred to as CDA). As Bello (2013: 85) sees it, CDA is concerned with the contextual conditioning of the text. He claims that texts are determined both socially as well as politically and argues that language elements constructing a certain text are not selected at random, but are being carefully picked so as to represent an event in a way intended by the speaker. In order to support his stance, he in addition quotes Simpson (1993: 6), who asserts that “language is not used in contextless vacuum; rather, it is used in a host of discourse contexts which are impregnated with the ideology of social system and institutions.”

According to Hasan (2013: 8) Fairclough distinguishes three phases of CDA, namely description, interpretation and explanation. While description deals with surface properties of the text, such as vocabulary, syntax structures and text construction, interpretation centres upon the perception of the text as a product and basis for interpretation. The third phase in Fairclough’s analytical framework, explanation, is concentrated upon how social context generally affects the process of text production, on the one hand, and its way of interpretation, on the other (Fairclough: 1989).

1.2. Pronoun variation

It is said that pronouns are words, which can replace nouns, noun phrases or other pronouns in order repetitiveness to be avoided (the Oxford Dictionaries¹).

However, Mühlhäusler and Harrè (1990: 47) provide a different view. They define pronouns as “indicators of complex relationships between selves and the societies these selves live in.” They advocate Lyon’s stance that pronouns are not just syntactical and semantical substituents for nouns (Mühlhäusler 1990: 49). Moreover, they oppose Bloomfield, who claims that substitution is an “independent variable” of pronouns (Mühlhäusler 1990: 51-55).

Although they are often neglected by grammarians, pronouns are no just confined within the framework of their denotational meaning and one could hardly rebut the assertion that the use of first-person plural and second-person plural depends heavily on the speaking situation. Some of them such as *we* and *you*, which Wales (1996: 50) calls inter-personal, can be found in political speeches in the most varied forms, for their use is politically and socially conditioned. Consequently, inter-personal pronouns frequently appear with different rhetorical and social connotations (Wales 1996: 50ff.).

The personal pronouns, on their part, serve to differentiate between the speaker from the addressee and the subject spoken of (Håkasson 2012: 5). Halliday and Hasan (1976: 44) make a division of the personal pronouns on a denotational basis in ‘speech roles’ and ‘other roles’, where the former are subdivided by the features ‘number’ and ‘speaker or addressee’ and the latter by ‘+/- animated’ and

¹ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/pronoun>

‘gender’. Yet the aforementioned concept ignores the context personal pronouns are used in. With reference to this Bramley (2001: 218) argues that “sequential context” (Malone 1997: 59) is of utmost importance for the comprehension of pronouns’ referents, for pronouns are investigated in sequence. Moreover, they manifest what identity the politician in question seeks to achieve in the public eye.

Brown and Gilman (1960) claim that power is a “relationship between at least two persons, and it is nonreciprocal...” However, in this paper we are trying to take a different point of view, namely that power is a context-related relationship.

According to Håkasson (2012: 8-9) the pronoun ‘we’ tends to be used in political speeches, when the politician in question is not certain if the audience supports or objects to their position. Therefore the speaker seeks to share responsibility or create a feeling of collectivity by switching from an ‘inclusive we’ that refers to the listener, to an ‘exclusive we’ that does not include the audience (Hasan 2013: 13-14).

The pronoun ‘you’ may appear as referring to the audience or in its general use, where you means anyone (Bramley 2001: 261). This paper will investigate only the former use of the pronoun in Trump’s speech.

The pronoun ‘they’ seems to occur primarily as an opposition of ‘we’ in the ‘we-they dichotomy’. Bramley (2001: 262-263) states that this use of ‘them’ aims to represent *the other* and to divide the people. She suggests that this is a method for politicians to vary in their identity as part of the people or as individuals.

2. Analysis

In almost every democratic society political speeches are deemed to be crucial for how people perceive a political party. They function as “the heart of democracy” (Irimiea 2010: 42). Leading politicians give speeches in order to provide information to the people about current events, communicate certain opinions and hence to maintain or increase their credibility and to raise political participation of the people (Irimiea 2010: 42-43). They tend to adjust the language they use in their political speeches according to the relationships they purpose. In this framework, if we take power to be the end, then language is the means. Moreover, the way language is being used is tied up with the social status of a person and of the person’s role in an interlocution (speaker or addressee) (Hasan 2011: 5).

While investigating the personal plural pronouns Trump uses in his inaugural speech, this study aims to determine how they vary and for what purpose.

2.1. Shifting from exclusive to inclusive ‘we’ and vice versa

While investigating the first-person plural, Mühlhäusler and Harrè (1990) conclude that “we combines a number of quite different meanings.” Other scientists support the view as well. According to Wales (1996: 63) “discourse referents for we are seemingly limitless” and “interpretation is dependent on the particular context of use.” She claims that this applies to the inclusive and exclusive use of ‘we’, when the addressees is a numerous group of people. Nunberg (1993: 7) even redefines ‘we’ as “the group of people instantiated by the speaker or speakers of the utterance.”

In this section ‘we’ is analysed with regard to its *inclusive* and *exclusive* use, where the former refers to the speaker as well as the addressees, and the latter includes the speaker, but excludes the audience (Fairclough 1989: 127).

In his inaugural speech Trump ably switches between both *wes* depending on the aim pursued.

(1) We, the citizens of America, are now joined in a great national effort to rebuild our country and restore its promise for all of our people. Together, we will determine the course of America and the world for many, many years to come. We will face challenges. We will confront hardships. But we will get the job done.

In example (1) Trump uses *we* inclusively. *We* includes in this case the “citizens of America” (the people) as well as Trump himself. As Fairclough (1989: 179) puts it, while analysing the use of ‘we’ in the discourse of Thatcherism, by using *we* in this way, the politician in question places himself as well as the audience “in the same boat”. Trump even strengthens this collective meaning of ‘we’ by using “together”. Thus he reduces the role of the ‘self’ and presents himself as a part of the people. According to Håkasson (2012: 15) this is a strategic move by politicians so as to share responsibility, when discussing problematic decisions.

Similar use of ‘we’ can be seen in the following examples (2) and (3):

(2) There should be no fear – we are protected, and we will always be protected.

(3) Finally, we must think big and dream even bigger.

However, ‘we’ is used here rather to encourage the people and convince them that they “are protected” and “always will be protected” by the new government. Yet, in this utterance ‘we’ is preferred to ‘they’ as an attempt to create oneness and avoid distancing the speaker from the audience (the people).

(4) What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people.

(5) At the bedrock of our politics will be a total allegiance to the United States of America, and through our loyalty to our country, we will rediscover our loyalty to each other.

In example (4) Trump uses ‘our’ interestingly as a possessive adjective modifying “government”, meaning that the government belongs to the people (speaker + audience). Nevertheless he finishes his sentence with “the people” instead of *us*, which distances him from the audience. In this case he perhaps seeks to present himself as part of the people and of the government at the same time. ‘Our’ in example (5) is used in a similar way. At the beginning it refers to the government and its “politics” but then it alludes to the people. Trump once again appears to belong to the people and the government concurrently.

(6) *We will bring back our jobs. We will bring back our borders. We will bring back our wealth. And we will bring back our dreams.*

(7) *We will build new roads, and highways, and bridges, and airports, and tunnels, and railways all across our wonderful nation.*

We will get our people off of welfare and back to work – rebuilding our country with American hands and American labor.

We will follow two simple rules: buy American and hire American.

Examples (6) and (7) demonstrate how Trump varies between inclusive and exclusive use of ‘we’. In the first example (6) ‘we’ includes Trump and the audience. Interestingly he uses the same sentence structure three times in a row so as to convince the people that he is a part of ‘we’ and everything that he mentions belongs to ‘we’. Immediately afterwards in example (7) he uses ‘we’ exclusively. In this case the use of ‘we’ can be interpreted as an inclusive one, since the people virtually participate in the building process. However, such an interpretation remains in the shadow in this utterance. According to Lakoff (1973: 299) the exclusive ‘we’ is a way for the speaker to distance from the audience. In this case Trump talks about the government and himself as its member. He uses the exclusive ‘we’ in order to make promises his government is going to complete and to take responsibility. This appears to be a strategic move with a view to win supporters. Håkasson (2012: 14) considers such approach as an attempt to create an institutional identity.

Such attempt for creating an institutional identity can be also seen in the following examples:

(8) *We will reinforce old alliances and form new ones – and unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate from the face of the Earth.*

(9) *We will not fail. Our country will thrive and prosper again.*

Example (8) has the same function as (7), whereas in (9) Trump once again shifts from the exclusive ‘we’ in *We will not fail*. This sentence immediately appears after Trump has talked about the future plans of his government. However, in the next sentence ‘we’ seems to be used inclusively. Consequently, the impression is created in the audience that they also have power and will not fail.

(10) *We will no longer accept politicians who are all talk and no action – constantly complaining but never doing anything about it.*

Example (10) demonstrates an ambiguous use of ‘we’. It is not entirely clear if ‘we’ in this case refers to the government or the people. On the one hand, it represents the government as a strong, responsible and serious institution. On the other hand, if referring to the people, ‘we’ represents the people as having the power to choose who will govern them. The expression *no longer* assumes that there were already bad ‘choices’ before the current government.

(11) For many decades, we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry; subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military; we've defended other nations' borders while refusing to defend our own; and spent trillions and trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay.

We've made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has dissipated over the horizon.

One by one, the factories shuttered and left our shores, with not even a thought about the millions and millions of American workers that were left behind.

Håkasson (2012: 16) claims, while analysing one of Obama's speeches, that the inclusive 'we' may be used by politicians in order to distance from governments before them. Thus the speaker can criticise former governments without publicly accusing it, because open criticism poses peril of offending some people and losing support. In (11) refers to the people and the government, yet not Trump's government, but Obama's and perhaps Bush's.

(12) But for too many of our citizens, a different reality exists: mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system, flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge; and the crime and the gangs and the drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.

In (12) 'our' is used instead of 'the'. Håkasson (2012: 17) considers such use as a technique for creating group membership. Since 'the' is definite article and does not express any personal attitude of the speaker to what he has said, the politician in question uses 'our' in order to elicit a sense of togetherness.

2.2. Opposition We-You

The use of the pronoun 'you' is quite ambiguous, for it has multiple functions. In its generic form it "can be used to refer to anyone and/or everyone" (Håkansson 2012: 12). However, it may refer to people that are present at a particular event and also to those who are not. Furthermore it could refer to one person or many people (Bello 2013: 91).

In his inaugural speech Trump varies in the use of 'you' very ably so as to reassure or convince the audience.

(13) Today's ceremony, however, has very special meaning. Because today we are not merely transferring power from one Administration to another, or from one party to another – but we are transferring power from Washington DC and giving it back to you, the people.

The use of 'you' in (13) is really interesting, as here 'we' seems to be equal with 'you'. Here Trump uses 'we' ambiguously. It is not clear who is actually "transferring power" – he and his party or the people. The first 'we' seems to be referring to the people of the USA, while the second refers more or less to the Republican Party. In the last sentence of this paragraph he uses 'you' referring to the

people. In this case ‘you’ actually includes the speaker. Håkansson also advocates the stance that ‘you’ may also include the person talking. However, his party is actually the one that takes the power. Consequently, in this utterance Trump’s purpose is to draw himself and his party closer to the people.

*(14) This is your day. This is your celebration.
And this, the United States of America, is your country.*

(15) Everyone is listening to you now.

Bello (2013: 91) analyses the Declaration speech of the Nigerian president and suggests that he tends to transfer his interests to the people in order to convince them in his ideas by varying in the use of the pronoun ‘you’. Examples (14) and (15) from Trump’s speech demonstrate the same strategy. In (14) “your day” and “your celebration” actually refer to the day of Trump and his celebration, because on this day he commences his presidency and one could say that he celebrates his victory over Clinton. The third use of “your” in (14) has a similar function. It modifies “country” and suggests that the people are now in charge. However, the actual power holder is Trump together with his party. In (15) ‘you’ appears seemingly to the people, but the speaker everybody is listening to is virtually Trump.

*(16) You came by the tens of millions to become part of a historic movement
the likes of which the world has never seen before.*

In (16) Trump addresses the people present at his speech in their role as witnesses of a great event that “the world has never seen before”. He distances from the audience and puts a spotlight on it in order to make those present feel special. As Bello (2013: 91) clearly puts it “you has the potential to give the notion of the addressee being in bond with the addresser”. Fairclough (1989: 52), on his turn, describes this phenomenon as “synthetic personalization” and defines it as “a compensatory tendency to give the impression of treating each of the people ‘handled’ en masse as an individual.”

(17) When you open your heart to patriotism, there is no room for prejudice.

In (17) ‘you’ is used as a generic pronoun. It can be easily substituted with ‘one’. Politicians seem to prefer ‘you’ before ‘one’, for it implies a bond of solidarity between them and the people in general. ‘One’ appears to be a middle-class pronoun and therefore makes it difficult for the speaker to the ‘ordinary people’ (Fairclough 1989: 128).

*(18) You will never be ignored again.
Your voice, your hopes, and your dreams, will define our American destiny.
And your courage and goodness and love will forever guide us along the way.
Together, we will make America strong again...
And, yes, together, we will make America great again. Thank you, God bless
you, and God bless America.*

At the end of his speech, as shown in (18), Trump addresses the people of the USA and distances them from ‘us’ referring to his Republican Party. Such approach aims to show respect and dedication to the people. However, in the last three of the aforementioned sentences, ‘we’ is used inclusively referring to all the people of the USA and the Republican Party and creates a sense of oneness, whereas ‘you’ is used by Trump to conclude his speech and thank the people for electing him.

2.3. We-They Dichotomy

According to Wales (1996: 60) ‘we’ and ‘they’ can be regarded as being antonyms. People often use these pronouns to create a separation between ‘we’ as positive and ‘they’ as negative. Wales (1996: 60) claims that ‘they’ can be easily blamed for things, ‘we’ are not willing to take responsibility for, because ‘they’ are not present and hence cannot retort or confront the speaker in some way. Politicians frequently use the ‘we’ and ‘they’ distinction in order to separate two political parties, show ideological differences, distance ‘us’ from ‘them’ or show ‘us’ as superior over ‘them’ (Håkansson 2012: 14-17).

Trump uses ‘we’ – ‘they’ dichotomy, when talking about the former president, certain minorities in the USA as well as other nations.

(19) Every four years, we gather on these steps to carry out the orderly and peaceful transfer of power; and we are grateful to President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama for their gracious aid throughout this transition. They have been magnificent. Thank you.

In (19) Trump seems to create the ‘we’ – ‘they’ opposition in order to separate the people to whom he belongs from the former President Obama and his wife. This is both an act of showing respect and gratefulness as well as an assertion that ‘they’ are not ‘us’, therefore they do not have the power anymore. ‘They’ are in the past.

(20) Americans want great schools for their children, safe neighborhoods for their families, and good jobs for themselves.

In (20) Trump strangely refers to the Americans with ‘their’ and ‘themselves’. In the ‘regular’ ‘we’ – ‘they’ dichotomy ‘we’ is the group to which the speaker belongs and it is presented in a positive way, whereas ‘they’ refers to another group, whose image is negative (Håkansson 2012: 14). His approach is not common in the political discourse, for it represents ‘them’ in a positive way.

(21) We are one nation – and their pain is our pain. Their dreams are our dreams; and their success will be our success. We share one heart, one home, and one glorious destiny.

(22) And whether a child is born in the urban sprawl of Detroit or the windswept plains of Nebraska, they look up at the same night sky, they fill their heart with the same dreams, and they are infused with the breath of life by the same almighty Creator.

In (21) and (22) ‘they’ refers to certain parts of society. Both utterances attempt to create an image of ‘us’ superior to ‘them. The people absent, to whom ‘they’ refers, are people in need and ‘we’ – those present – are the ones who can make their lives better. In this case Trump seems to once again create a sense of oneness and solidarity.

(23) We will seek friendship and goodwill with the nations of the world – but we do so with the understanding that it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first.

In example (23) Trump appears to use ‘we’ – ‘they’ dichotomy to separate the American nation from all others. Yet, he does not create a negative image of the ‘others’. What he does is trying to convince the American people that his priority is the American nation.

In some cases, as pointed out in section 2.1., example (11), a ‘we’ – ‘they’ dichotomy can be created by using only the pronoun ‘we’, when it refers not to the current administration, but to former ones.

2.4. You-They Pair

This section is concerned with the unusual similar reference meanings of ‘you’ and ‘they’ in Trump’s inaugural speech. Firstly, I would like to go back to example (19) and the last two sentences in particular: *They have been magnificent. Thank you.* In this utterance both ‘they’ and ‘you’ have identical referents: Barack and Michelle Obama. What makes this utterance notable is that Trump talks about the former president and his wife as ‘the others’, as if they are not present, but at the end he addresses them directly, as if they are in the audience.

(24) Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs; and while they celebrated in our nation’s capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land.

In (24) ‘they’ refers to the politicians and establishment who prospered, while ‘you’ are the people in their role as victims. Such a division between ‘you’ and ‘they’ demonstrates Trump’s affiliation with the people and distances him from the former politicians and establishment.

Bramley (2001: 254-255) describes a similar case, in which ‘you’ refers to “those being victimised” and ‘they’ to those “not affected by the proposal” of the Government. Bramley claims that the use of the pronouns for “talking about” and “talking to” aim to pay special attention to ‘you’ and, unlike our example, to present ‘they’ as normal.

Conclusion

Generally, the aim of this paper was to analyse the different pronoun variations used by President Trump in his inaugural speech. We found that he frequently switches between inclusive and exclusive ‘we’ in order to show affiliation with both

the people and the government. Another approach Trump uses is the dichotomy ‘we’ – ‘they’, which he uses to separate between ‘self’ and ‘others’. In section 2.2 we saw that in order to receive support by the people Trump varies between ‘we’ and ‘they’ and thereby creates bond with the audience. Furthermore Trump uses an uncommon shifting from ‘they’ to ‘you’ in order to distance from and to address the people in question directly.

Having examined pronouns and their ability to vary in political discourse, we can notice that power is a context-dependent relationship, contrary to the assertion of Brown and Gilman (1960). Pronoun variations, e.g. shifting between inclusive and exclusive “we” or using “we” and “they” with an identical referent, create the impression that power changes hands, albeit only seemingly so.

In conclusion we would like to quote Mühlhäusler and Harrè (1990: 133), who boldly declare that “any pronoun can be used for any person” and this stance we would give the benefit of the doubt.

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