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The Use of Personal Pronouns in Political Speeches

A comparative study of the pronominal choices of two
American presidents

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Abstract

The study investigates the pronominal choices made by George W Bush and Barack Obama in their State of the Union speeches. The main focus of the study is on determining whom the two presidents refer to when they use the pronouns *I*, *you*, *we* and *they*, and to compare the differences in pronominal usage by the two presidents. The results suggest that the pronominal choices of the presidents do not differ significantly. The results also indicate that the pronoun *I* is used when the speaker wants to speak as an individual rather than as a representative of a group. *You* is used both as generic pronoun as well as a way for the President to speak to the Congress, without speaking on their behalf. The pronoun *we* is used to invoke a sense of collectivity and to share responsibility, in most cases it refers to the President and the Congress. *They* is used to separate *self* from *other*; whom the speaker refers to while using they varied greatly between the speakers. The study also showed that the pronominal choices and whom the pronouns refer to vary greatly depending on the context of the speech. Since a great deal of studies on pronominal choices in political interviews and debates already exist, this study can be regarded as significant because it deals with prepared speeches rather than interviews and debates.

Keywords: Personal pronouns, political speeches, pronominal choice, State of the Union Address

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1. Introduction

Political speeches have been regarded a major part of American democracy, and they have been so throughout history (Irimiea 2010:2). The speeches are usually held by leading politicians, who speak either to the nation as a whole or to a specific political group. The politicians who give the speeches usually do it as representatives of political groups such as political parties, governments or nations, rather than as individuals. What they are allowed to say and how is often very limited, because one of the main goals of giving a political speech is to enhance the credibility of the politician in question (Irimiea 2010:4). Political speeches are supposed to increase the population's political participation, help them to understand important issues and how a problem is best solved as well as a way for the politicians to persuade others to have the same opinions as them. The speeches usually rest on the discussion and exposure of an issue and, most importantly, the use of persuasion techniques (Irimiea 2010:3).

Making speeches is the way leading politicians convey information and opinions to the people, and computers and TV have undoubtedly made it easier for the citizens (and other people across the world) to access those speeches. These days, although the audience is a key part of political speeches, the real audience is the millions of people reading the speeches in the newspapers, listening to them on the radio or watching them on TV (Beard 2000:37). The speeches are usually written in advance for the speakers by professional speechwriters. Not very many political speeches are transmitted as wholes. Instead, only highlights of the speeches are broadcasted; the highlights are sometimes referred to as soundbites. Experts always consciously choose the soundbites in advance (Beard, A. 2000:37).

While listening to or reading speeches, we might not reflect on or even notice the use of personal pronouns. Personal pronouns make up a big part of political speeches, because they can give an idea of whom the speaker in question identifies with. The pronominal choices in political speeches are also interesting because they make an important influence to the overall effect (Beard 2000:43). Politicians present themselves as being able to identify with the wants, interests and needs of the audience. They present themselves in that way to be perceived as good politicians i.e. suitable leaders of the nation. The way politicians present themselves in their speeches, by referring to themselves, their audience and also their opposition can successfully be used to persuade the audience to agree with them. When giving speeches, politicians have a tendency to present the positive aspects of themselves and the

negative aspects of their opponents. One way of achieving this is by intentionally using specific personal pronouns, which refer to themselves or others (Allen 2007:2).

1.1 Aim, research questions and scope

The aim of this study is to compare and analyze the use of personal pronouns in speeches held by former American president, George W. Bush, and the current president of the United States, Barack Obama. The personal pronouns that are analyzed in depth are *I*, *you*, *we* and *they*. They were chosen because they are the most interesting ones in political contexts, and the ones that affect the outcome of the speeches. They do this by either including or excluding the audience. In addition, this study also investigates who of the two presidents uses the pronouns *I*, *you*, *we* and *they* most frequently, and why that might be. The research questions for this study are:

1. How are the personal pronouns *I*, *you*, *we* and *they* used in the speeches held by the two presidents?
2. To whom are the personal pronouns *I*, *you*, *we* and *they* referring in the speeches?
3. What differences in the use of the personal pronouns *I*, *you*, *we* and *they* can be found in a comparison between the presidents' speeches?

The study focuses only on specific speeches, and the results can therefore not be applied to Bush's and Obama's use of personal pronouns in their speeches in general. Their use of personal pronouns might be dissimilar in their other speeches, especially due to the fact that they have a degree of assistance in the writing of the speeches.

The study is divided into sections; the first one presents different categories of pronouns and the next presents previous research on personal pronouns in general as well as in politics. The results sections of the study present both a qualitative analysis accompanied by examples from the eight speeches as well as a comparison of the pronominal usages. The qualitative results are given first, and are divided into four different sections. The following section is the comparison of the speeches, which is a quantitative study. Lastly, there is a conclusion with final thoughts and suggestions for further studies within the topic of pronouns in political speeches.

2 Material and method

2.1 Material

The analysis is based on eight speeches, more specifically the annual speeches referred to as the State of the Union Address. Four of these speeches are from Bush's presidency, between the years of 2001 and 2004, i.e. his first time at office, and another four from Obama's presidency, i.e. the four most recent speeches. The reason for choosing these speeches in particular is the fact that they were given under their first presidential terms, perhaps making the study more equal. These two presidents were chosen for analysis because they are the most recent presidents, but also because they are, in many ways, each other's opposites. Because they have such different opinions about many political issues, it is interesting to analyze their speeches, and use of personal pronouns, and see if it differs. Although, what needs to be kept in mind is that because the speeches were not given under the same period of time, they deal with different subjects and issues. One could say that the State of the Unions given by Bush deal more with security and safety, whereas the ones given by Obama deal the economy and the financial crisis. This, of course, has to do with the time in which the speeches were held. In Bush's first presidential term the most vital issue was the war on terror and the Iraq war; during Obama's presidential term, the major problems were about the economic crisis and how to bring the deficit down.

The data in this study, the State of the Union Addresses are transcribed and available in textual form on the Internet for everyone to read. The United States constitution states that the president "shall from time to time give to the Congress Information on the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient" (Kolakowski & Neale 2006:1f). Nowadays, the State of the Union has multiple functions; it is a report from the president to the United States Congress, a platform to announce support for the legislative agenda made by the president for the coming year, and also a way for the president to convey his vision to both the Congress and the American people. The State of the Union Address is held in the second, third or fourth week of January, and it is usually broadcasted live on most networks on prime time and interferes with scheduled programs. (Kolakowski & Neale 2006:1f). The address was aired on the radio for the first time in 1923, on TV in 1947 and live on the web from the White House website in 2002. These changes have made the State of the Union not only available nationwide, but worldwide (Kolakowski & Neale 2006:1f).

The total amount of data for this study contains 45,981 words; Bush's speeches contain 18,739 words and Obama's contain 27,242 words.

2.2 Method

This study was conducted in two stages. The first was textual analysis, to see in what context the pronouns *I*, *you*, *we* and *they* were used in the speeches. The search function in Microsoft Word was used to search for the pronouns in the speeches. The representative examples of pronominal choices in context provided a sense of how the pronouns *I*, *you*, *we* and *they* were used. The examples are presented in the results section of this study, as well as in a short discussion of why the pronoun used in that specific sentence might have been used, and whom the pronoun is referring to. The first part of the study is therefore a qualitative study.

The second part involved a search in the data to see how many occurrences of each pronoun were found in the speeches. However, since there was a significant difference in the number of words in the speeches, the data was balanced. Of the 45,981 in total, 15,000 words from each president were used for the second part of the study, making the entire corpus for the search 30,000 words. The data was balanced by taking the first 15,000 words from each of the president's speeches. The second part also involves the pronouns *I*, *you*, *we* and *they* and to some extent what words could be used in place of pronouns.

These pronouns were chosen in particular because they are the most interesting ones from a political perspective, because they are the ones who indicate who the speaker identifies with. They are also interesting because they have the power to include and exclude the audience, as well as separate *self* from *other*. They are rather small words that can have the ability to change the effect the speech has on the audience.

2.3 Problems and limitations

As mentioned in the introduction, it is a well-known fact that leading politicians do receive help with the writing of their speeches. We can therefore assume that both of the two presidents had help from professional speechwriters. However, we cannot know how much the politicians actually write for themselves and how much they are helped with, and how much the amount of help varies between the speakers (Beard 2000:36). The professional speechwriters probably pay a great deal of attention into making sure that all details of the speeches are written 'correctly' to evoke the proper attention from the audience. As mentioned in 2.2, pronominal choices are key parts of the speeches because they have the ability to change the effect the speech has on the audience. The personal pronouns also have the ability to include and exclude people, and it is therefore of vital importance that they are used correctly. This is a problem because it leaves us uncertain if the pronominal choices in the speeches are the presidents' choices or the speechwriters' choices.

Another problem with this study is the fact that there is such a difference in the length of the speeches, which made the quantitative analysis unequal. Therefore, as mentioned in the method section, the data had to be balanced. Balancing the data was a limitation in the sense that some significant findings might have been left out in this study, by being excluded from the comparison.

It is at times difficult to decide which of the personal pronouns *you*, *we* and *they* are generic (indefinite), and they had to be viewed closely in their context. There were instances where one could perhaps say that the pronoun is not generic, but it was classified as a generic pronoun in this study, and was therefore left out. Also, the pronoun *they* does in many of its occurrences in the data not refer to people. Instead, *they* is used to talk about other banks, schools, words etc. This is a problem because the personal pronouns in this study are supposed to refer to people and not things.

Another problem while conducting this study was that at times words were included that are not part of the speeches. Sometimes words such as *applause* or *laughter* were added in brackets. These words had to be sorted out.

3 Theoretical background

3.1 The grammatical category of pronouns

Pronouns are groups of words that are able to appear in the place of other words, most often nouns, other pronouns or noun phrases. They are used first and foremost as a way for the speaker or writer to avoid being repetitive, by not having to repeat the same words again and again (the Oxford Dictionaries [www]). There are several types of pronouns: personal, reflexive, possessive, indefinite, demonstrative, reciprocal, relative and interrogative (Collins 1990:28)

The personal pronouns are used to refer to people or things that the speaker is talking to, or talking about and they can be used as a way for him to refer to himself. There are two kinds of personal pronouns: subjective personal pronouns and objective personal pronouns. The subjective personal pronouns are used to refer to a subject complement or subject of a clause; they include *I*, *we*, *you*, *he*, *she*, *it* and *they*. Objective personal pronouns refer to the same people or things as the equivalent subject pronouns (Collins 1990:29). Object pronouns are used as either the object, subject complement or prepositional complement of a clause (Quirk et al. 1972:208). The objective personal pronouns are: *me*, *us*, *you*, *him*, *her*, *it* and *them* (Collins 1990:29).

Table 1. Table showing the subjective personal pronouns and the objective personal pronouns.

Function	Subjective case	Objective case
Subject	<i>She</i> was there	
Subject complement	It was <i>she</i>	It was <i>her</i>
Object		I saw <i>her</i> in church
Prepositional complement		We cannot make it without <i>her</i>

(Quirk et al. 1972:210)

Reflexive pronouns can be used when the speaker wants to show that the subject of a verb is the same thing or person as the object of a verb. The reflexive pronouns are: *myself*, *ourselves*, *yourself*, *yourselves*, *himself*, *herself*, *itself*, and *themselves*. Unlike the personal and possessive pronouns, there are two forms of reflexive pronouns to use for the second person; *yourself* when the speaker is talking about one person, and *yourselves* when he is talking to more than one person (Collins 1990:33). Examples of how reflexive pronouns are used are: “I was feeling good about *myself* that day” and “We all introduced *ourselves* to the new people in the group”. Reflexive pronouns are also used to stress that the object of a verb refers to the same thing or person as the subject of a verb; “*she* forced *herself* to go to the gym.” (Collins 1990:33).

The possessive pronouns are: *mine*, *my*, *our(s)*, *your(s)*, *his*, *hers* and *their(s)*. They are used to talk about how things or people are connected to other things or people. By using a possessive pronoun, the speaker indicates that something is associated with or belongs to something or someone. Examples of how to indicate that something or someone belongs to something or someone are: “This is *my* car”, “Where is *your* house?” and “She is *his* daughter”. Possessive pronouns are often used when the speaker wants to show contrast. An example of this can be: “*your* pie tastes better than *mine*”. Possessive pronouns are also used in prepositional phrases that begin with *of*, to qualify a noun group. An example of this is: “she is a very good friend *of mine*” (Collins 1990:32).

Indefinite pronouns are used when the speaker wants to refer to things or people but you do not know exactly what or who they are, or their identity is not of importance. An indefinite pronoun indicates only whether you are talking about people or things, rather than referring to a specific person or thing. The indefinite pronouns are: *anybody*, *anyone*, *anything*, *everybody*, *everyone*, *everything*, *nobody*, *no one*, *nothing*, *somebody*, *someone* and

something. Indefinite pronouns are used in several different ways. For example, it can be used as a way to refer to people: “what is *everybody* doing here?” and used with singular verbs: “*Everything* is here” (Collins 1990:35).

“*That, this, those* and *these* are all demonstrative pronouns. They can be used as subjects of the objects in a clause, or the object of a preposition. Demonstrative pronouns can be used as a way to refer to people and things, usually things” (Collins 1990: 35) Examples of how to use demonstrative pronouns are: “*This* is a really good book, but I don’t like *that* one” and “I got *these* magazines at the store” (Collins 1990:35).

Each other and *one another* are examples of reciprocal pronouns. They are used to suggest that people feel the same way, do the same thing or have the same relationship. Reciprocal pronouns are used as indirect objects or objects of verbs. Examples of how reciprocal pronouns are used are: “They cannot stand *each other*” and “two people moving away from *one another*” (Collins 1990:38).

Who, whom, which or *that* are known as relative pronouns; they are used by the speaker when a sentence includes a main clause followed by a relative clause. Relative pronouns have two functions. They refer to something or someone that has already been mentioned, and they are conjunctions, because they join clauses together. *Who* and *whom* always refer to people. Examples of how *who* and *whom* are used are: “Guess *who* I met yesterday?” and “The boys *whom* we cannot talk to”. *That* can refer to both people and things: “The girl *that* plays tennis”, “it was the first movie *that* he had ever seen”. *Which* always refers to things, it can be used as the subject or object of a relative clause, as well as the object of a preposition. *Which* can be used as a relative pronoun in the following way: “The building in *which* I went to school” (Collins 1990:39f).

Who, whose, whom, that which are interrogative pronouns; meaning that they can be used as objects or subjects of a clause, or objects of a preposition. Interrogative pronouns refer to the information the speaker is asking for. Examples of how to use interrogative pronouns are: “That is a nice painting, *whose* is it?” and “*What* is he doing?” (Collins 1990:40).

3.2 Previous studies on personal pronouns in politics

Brown and Gilman’s pioneering study (1960) showed that the choice of pronouns is affected by the relationship between the speaker and the listener. Addressing someone in the same way as they would address you shows solidarity and equality. Addressing someone with a ‘higher status’ in a different way than that person would address you shows inequality and social

distance. Both power and solidarity are relationships between at least two people, and differences of power can be found in all societies (Brown & Gilman 1960:1ff).

A person's status can be determined by a number of variables, such as age, wealth, sex, physical strength, role in family, state, church etc. The way in which the person of 'higher status' addresses the one of 'lower status' is referred to as the T-form, and is considered to be the more informal one. The other form is called the V-form, which refers to how people of 'lower status' address people of 'higher status', and is considered the more formal one. The origin of T-forms and V-forms comes from Latin, but can still be found in numerous languages. An example is the French language, where *vous* is formal and *tu* is less formal. Brown and Gilman (1960) claimed that the choice of form is controlled by the relationships of either power or solidarity between the speaker and the hearer, depending on the culture of the speakers (Brown & Gilman 1960:1f).

The traditional view on pronouns in political speeches is that there is a clear separation between *us* and *them*, which are related to the forms *we* and *they* of the same pronouns. In political contexts, *us* and *we* are usually used to highlight the good qualities of the speaker. *They* and *them* on the other hand, are often used in a negative context, as a way to make the opposition seem less suitable leaders than the person who makes the utterance. Political speeches tend to be delivered in a somewhat formal style, more so than ordinary conversation, although that is not always the case. (Proctor & I-Wen Su 2011:2).

According to Karapetjana (2011:43f), the way politicians speak and present themselves is a part of their personality and a way to show themselves as individuals, and so are pronominal choices. The use of personal pronouns can create an image of the politician in question, both negative and positive. Karapetjana's study suggested that the pronoun *I* implies a personal level, and makes it possible for the speaker to show authority and personal responsibility as well as commitment and involvement. Her research also showed that the personal pronoun *we* can be used by the politician if he or she wishes to share the responsibility, and also to create involvement with the audience (Karapetjana 2011:43f). Karapetjana also states that the plural form of the pronoun *we* is used when the decisions are controversial, to give a sense of collectivity and sharing responsibility. She continues by claiming that *I* is mostly used to make general statements, and that politicians sometimes avoid using *I*, because of its distancing effect (Karapetjana 2011:43f).

Politicians use the pronoun *I* to present themselves as individuals and speak from their own perspective, preferably highlighting one's good qualities and accomplishments (Bramley 2001:259). The pronoun *you* is used by the speaker to address parts of, or the entire audience.

However, *you* is more complicated, because it is also a generic pronoun that can be used in a very general way, where *you* is referring to anyone (Bramley 2001:261f). *We* can be used to invoke a group membership or a collective identity, and create a separation between *us* and *them* (Bramley 2001:260f). *They* is used in political speeches to create an image of *other* and to divide people in groups (Bramley 2001:262). Bramley suggests that a politician's pronominal choice indicates his or her varied identity, more specifically his or her individual or collective identity (Bramley 2001:263). Furthermore, Bramley states that the primary concern of a politician is to create an image of the reality according to them, and pronouns are of major importance in doing so (Bramley 2001:266)

De Fina (1995) presented a study that showed how uncertainty or consistency might have different effects on how the speaker's self-presentation. Her findings showed that the pronouns selected for usage in a speech reflect other choices, such as identification and involvement with the audience, as well as different purposes in political speeches. The use of the pronoun *we* as a way for the speaker to refer to himself indicates that he is speaking as a representative of a group or organization, rather than speaking as an individual (De Fina 1995:24f) The pronoun *I* helps the speaker express more of a commitment to the audience, by using *I* in his speech. This means that politicians have a tendency to emphasize the importance of their authority as the most relevant features of their speeches. De Fina claims that there is a lack of second-person pronouns in political speeches, which indicates that there is no clear appeal to specific groups as addressees. De Fina's analysis also shows how the pronouns in a speech must be considered in their context, i.e. in the speech as a whole, to find a pattern in how the pronouns are used and what meanings they are supposed to convey to the listeners (De Fina 1995:24f).

Pronominal choices in political speeches differ depending on if the politician who makes the utterance wants to share the responsibility with other people or colleagues or not. Pronominal choices can also vary depending on how confident the speaker is that others will share his views and opinions (Beard 2000:46).

4 Results

The results are divided into five sections; the four first sections give definitions and examples of the pronouns *I*, *you*, *we* and *they*. The examples are chosen as representatives of the data, without any consideration to who of the two president's made the statement. The next section of the results is a comparison and a further discussion of the findings in the speeches. The last section illustrates how many occurrences of personal pronouns were found in the two

president's speeches, excluding the generic pronouns.

4.1 The use of *I* and its variants

The pronoun *I* is not used as a substitute for the speaker's name; it is the way for him to refer to himself. In political speeches, *I* can be used by the speaker to convey his opinion, it makes the speech more subjective, it shows the authority of the speaker and it can be a way to show compassion with the audience and to narrate a story (Bramley 2001:27). The issue of subjectivity is what might make some politicians avoid using *I* (Pennycook 1993:3). Another function of the first person singular pronoun of *I* in political speeches includes giving a sense of *here and now*, suggesting that *I* captures the moment. *I* can also be used to create a 'relationship' with the audience, because using *I* makes the speech seem as if it is on a more personal level. *I* might also be used to show commitment to the audience and personal involvement in issues; *I* gives the speaker a personal voice that distances him from others. This means that it cannot always be expected that the other members of his party agree with the speaker's opinions when the pronoun *I* is used (Bramley 2001:27). The advantage of using *I* is that it shows personal involvement, which is especially useful when positive news is delivered. The disadvantage is that it is obvious whom to put the blame on when something goes wrong. It can also be seen as an attempt of the individual speaker to place himself above or outside the shared responsibility of his colleagues (Beard 2000:45).

The most motivating reasons for a politician to use the pronoun *I* in his speech is to come across as good and responsible, to describe himself in a positive way and highlight personal qualities. Examples of personal qualities that politicians want to express include being someone with principles, moral, power and who is not afraid to take action when necessary (Bramley 2001:28). The following examples show how *I* is used in the two presidents' speeches, and the effect it has.

- (1) "***I*** oppose amnesty, because it would encourage further illegal immigration and unfairly reward those who break our laws" (Bush 2004).
- (2) "Now, ***I***'m proud that we passed a recovery plan free of earmarks, and ***I*** want to pass a budget next year that ensures that each dollar we spend reflects only on our most important national priorities" (Obama 2009).

Example (1) shows how the use of *I* conveys Bush's personal opinion about immigration. By using the singular personal pronoun *I*, he clearly states that this is his opinion, without the suggestion that another person agrees with him on the matter. Even if the other members of his administration do agree with his statement, Bush does not include them in the statement,

and avoids ‘putting words in their mouths’. Example (2) is somewhat similar, although it shows more of a personal feeling and a personal wish, making the speech more intimate, by sharing his personal opinions. Just as in (1), Obama excludes the other members of his administration by only expressing that he wants the budget to be passed.

- (3) “Whatever action is required, whenever action is necessary, *I* will defend the freedom and security of the American people” (Bush 2003).
- (4) “*I* will go anywhere in the world to open new markets for American products” (Obama 2012).

Example (3) shows how Bush uses *I* to show his passion as president, in a way suggesting that he is the one who defends The United States’ freedom. Obviously, he plays a key part in the nation’s security, but by saying “*I* will defend the freedom and security”, he almost expresses that he will personally fight against the terrorists that put the country in danger, and clearly that is not the case; the American troops are the ones that physically defend the country’s security. This is a way for Bush to convey the message of being a strong and powerful president. Example (4) shows a way for Obama to express his compassion for the people as president, by expressing his desire to travel wherever to help the American economy recover from the economic crisis. Using *I* in this context, helps him to be considered as a responsible president, i.e. it puts him in a positive light (Bramley 2001:259).

- (5) “*I* believe in local control of schools” (Bush 2001).
- (6) “To recover the rest, *I*’ve proposed a fee on the biggest banks” (Obama 2010).

Both (5) and (6) are examples of how the two Presidents use *I* to set their opinions apart from the other members of their administrations. They are examples of how to separate *self* from *other* without conveying positive or negative meaning. Instead, they simply state their beliefs. Using the pronoun *I* does not only set Bush and Obama apart from their administrations, it gives them individual voices and an opportunity to share their personal opinions. (5) also shows how *I* can be used to make a personal statement (Karapetjana 2011: 3).

- (7) “*I* like teachers so much, *I* married one” (Bush 2001).

Example (7) shows how Bush uses the pronoun *I* to give information about his personal life. This is a way for him to let the audience get a glimpse of him as an individual. Giving information about oneself can be regarded as a way to let people know you as a person, not only as a politician. This might lead to receiving more approval from the people who listened

to the speech, because it might be easier to approve of someone if you feel as if you knew him better.

(8) “If a bill comes to my desk with earmarks inside, *I* will veto it. *I* will veto it” (Obama 2011).

(9) “*I* urge the Congress to pass medical liability reform” (Bush 2003).

This way showing off power separates the Presidents from the rest of the members of their administrations, and reminds the audience that the President is the one with the highest authority and most power. It distinguishes *self* from *other* and puts *self* in a mostly positive light. However, it can be considered as negative to highlight that one has higher authority than others, creating a sense of inequality, and suggesting that the speaker thinks of others as inferior to himself (Beard 2000:45). Example (10) shows how the possessive form of *I* can be used as a way to show authority, as well as take credit for the work.

(10) “*My* budget dedicated \$238 billion to Medicare next year alone, enough to fund all current programs and to begin a prescription drug benefit for low-income seniors” (Bush 2001).

In (10), Bush clearly states that he is the person responsible for the budget by referring to it as *my* budget instead of *our* budget. Of course, this refers to the fact that he is the one in charge of the budget, but it also makes Bush himself come across as a good president, by making good and independent decisions. This is also a way for Bush to take credit for work, by not mentioning help from others while making the budget. However, the disadvantage of using *I* in this manner is that Bush would be viewed as the only one responsible if problems were to arise, by not having shared the responsibility with others (Beard 2000:46).

4.2 The use of *you* and its variants

The pronoun *you* usually refers to the person(s) the speaker is talking to. Although, *you* has multiple functions, one of which is to serve as an indefinite (generic) pronoun. The indefinite *you* can be a replacement for *I* and refer to the speaker, and also be used by the speaker to include himself as a member of a category. It has also been suggested that indefinite *you* is not used to discuss actual experience; instead it is used to discuss ‘conventional wisdom’. In this sense, *you* is used to convey common sense or generally admitted truth, with the hope of receiving the agreement of the audience (Allen 2006:13f)

When using the indefinite version of the pronoun *you*, it can be unclear whom the speaker is referring to. It can be used to refer to anyone and/or everyone. The indefinite

version of *you* includes the speaker among the referents, even if this is not always the case. If the speaker uses the pronoun *you*, it is up to the audience to decide if they view themselves as part of that group or not. The generic *you* can be used by politicians to criticize the opposition by including or excluding them from generalizations (Allen 2006:13f). The following examples of the pronoun *you* show how it can be used to speak to different groups of people as well as a generic pronoun.

- (11) “Many of **you** have talked about the need to pay down our national debt. I listened, and I agree” (Bush 2001).
- (12) “I will send **you** a budget that increases discretionary spending by 4 percent next year, about as much as the average family’s income is expected to grow” (Bush 2004).

The State of the Union Address is a speech that first and foremost is directed to the Congress, so a large number of the occurrences of *you* in the data refers to it. Even if both of the examples show how *you* refers to the Congress, (11) is somewhat harder to categorize, because it could also refer to people who are not members of Congress, but who probably are politically involved.

- (13) “**Your** enemy is not surrounding **your** country; **your** enemy is ruling **your** country” (Bush 2003).
- (14) “America is proud of **you**, and my administration and this Congress will give **you** the resources **you** need to fight and win the war on terror” (Bush 2004).

In (13), *your* is used to refer to the people of Iraq, who at the time were considered to live in tyranny. In (14), *you* refers to the American troops which, at the time, were fighting in Iraq. Both (13) and (14) are examples of the pronoun *you* being directed towards people who probably do not have a chance to listen to the speech, at least not at the exact moment it was given.

- (15) “**You** don’t need to hear another list of statistics to know that our economy is in crisis, because **you** live it every day” (Obama 2009).
- (16) “**You** should also know that the money **you**’ve deposited in banks across the country is safe, **your** insurance is secure, **you** can rely on the continued operation of our financial system” (Obama 2009).

(15) and (16) both show examples of *you* being used to speak to both the member of the United States Congress and the nation as a whole. In (15), the use of *you* can also be considered as fairly general, because even if it is probably directed towards the people of

America, it could, at the time, be applied to people in other nations as well.

- (17) “But while the cost of action will be great, I can assure **you** that the cost of inaction will be far greater, for it could result in an economy that sputters along for not months or years, but perhaps a decade. That would be worse for our deficit, worse for business, worse for **you**, and worse for the next generation” (Obama 2009).

Example (17) is similar to (15) and (16), although it is difficult to decide if Obama refers to *you* the people, or *you* the United States Congress. Many of the occurrences of *you* in the data, seem to be directed towards both the Congress and the people, and at times it is almost impossible to set them apart, and since the Congress represents the people, it might not be necessary to do so. The confusing aspect of deciding whom the Presidents refer to is that the speech is given to the Congress, but is also viewed by millions of Americans. The American people are both referred to as *you* and they, and sometimes even we.

- (18) “In a global economy where the most valuable skill **you** can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity, it is a prerequisite” (Obama 2009).
(19) “**You**’re required to write out a “living will” that details exactly how **you**’ll pay the bills if **you** fail” (Obama 2012).

(18) is an example of how *you* is used as a generic pronoun, meaning that it does not refer to anyone in particular. Bush could just as well state that *the most valuable skill one can sell is knowledge*. In example (19), Obama refers to the banks in the US that went bankrupt, and how they cannot expect the same help again. In both (18) and (19), *you* is used to state facts, rather than referring to a person.

4.3 The use of *we* and its variants

We is an important pronoun in political speeches in the sense that it expresses ‘institutional identity’, i.e. when one person speaks as a representative of or on behalf of an institution. *We* is also used to separate *us* from *them*, for example between two political groups, such as political parties. By establishing an *us* and *them* separation the speaker can create an image of the group he belongs to in a positive way and the other group in a negative way. The intention of the *us* and *them* separation is to set one group apart from the other group and their actions, and to include or exclude hearers from group membership (Bramley 2001:76ff).

We is sometimes used to convey the image of one political party as a team, and therefore a shared responsibility. The use of the pronoun *we* can be divided into two categories: the inclusive *we*, which can be used to refer to the speaker and the listener/viewer

and the inclusive *we*, that refers to both the speaker and the listener or listeners (Karapetjana 2011:3). *We* is also used sometimes by politicians to avoid speaking about themselves as individuals, and instead suggest that others are involved, perhaps to lead negative attention away from the speaker in question. By using the pronoun *we*, the speaker includes others in the utterance, creating a group with a clear identity, making others responsible for potential issues as well (Bramley 2001: 76ff). The advantage of using the pronoun *we* in political speeches is that it helps share responsibility (Beard 2000:45).

However, the *others* that are included or drawn into the issue to share the responsibility might not benefit from it or agree with it. This use of *we* makes the *self* smaller, by making it a part of a collective. When *we* is used in political speeches, its main function is to create a group where multiple people are involved, instead of referring to one particular individual (Bramley 2001:76ff). The following examples show whom *we* refers to and who it excludes in the two presidents' speeches.

- (20) “**We** have increased our budget at a responsible 4 percent” (Bush 2001).
- (21) “**We** also hear doubts that democracy is a realistic goal for the greater Middle East, where freedom is rare” (Bush 2004).
- (22) “Members of Congress, **we** must work together to help control those costs and extent the benefits of modern medicine throughout our country” (Bush 2004).

In (20), *we* is used as a way to describe the fact that the decision to increase the budget was made by the Congress, and not by the President alone. The statement reminds the Congress that it has played a part in increasing the budget with 4 percent, and the President gives them credit for making good decisions that have benefitted the nation. Using *we* in this manner is also a way for Bush to share responsibility, a precaution that is sometimes taken when decisions are tricky and the speaker does not want to be the only one responsible (Beard 2000:45) In (21), *we* is used in a more general sense; *we* could have been replaced by the second person pronoun *you*, although that would exclude the speaker himself in a sense. Therefore, in (21), *we* can be referred to as a generic *we*. Example (22) also shows how *we* can be used to create unity and cohesiveness by saying “*we* must work together” and “throughout *our* country”. By saying *we*, the President creates unity within the Congress.

- (23) “At the end of those 10 years, **we** will have paid down all the debt that is available to retire” (Bush 2003).
- (24) “Beyond all differences of race and creed, **we** are one country, mourning together and facing danger together” (Bush 2002).
- (25) “**We**’re tracking Al Qaida around the world, and nearly two-thirds of their known

leaders have now been captured or killed” (Bush 2004).

Examples (23), (24) and (25) also illustrate the Presidents’ attempts to create unity, both in the Congress and among the people, by making them feel involved. In (23), *we* refers to America as a country, and how America will be free from debt in ten years’ time. (24) is also an example of how *we* is used to create a unity, both in the Congress and among all Americans. Example (25) also refers to the nation as a whole, and not to the people who actually are tracking down Al Qaida members around the world. Using *we* in this way might refer to the fact that everybody is helping, if not by physically tracking the Al Qaida members, but by financing it and therefore making it possible.

(26) “For 7 years, we have been a nation at war. No longer will *we* hide its price” (Obama 2009).

(27) “And though all these changes went unsolved, *we* still managed to spend more money and pile up more debt, both as individuals and through our government, than ever before” (Obama 2009).

(26) and (27) are both interesting examples of how Obama uses the pronoun *we*, to refer more to *other* than *self*. In (26), *we* refers to the United States Congress and the nation, but not the Congress under Obama’s presidency, but under Bush’s. Therefore, what Obama actually is doing here is criticizing Bush and how he handled the Iraq war, but referring to him and his administration as *we*. He does this to avoid openly accusing the previous administration, which could be a risk of offending people. Example (27) is somewhat similar, because it also rather straightforwardly criticizes Bush, but it also includes parts of the population and other members of the Congress.

(28) “*We* love you, and *we* don’t want to lose you” (Bush 2004).

(29) “*We* will soon lay down thousands of miles of power lines that can carry new energy to cities and towns in this country” (Obama 2009).

In example (28), *we* refers to the parents in America, and how they are afraid that their children will get into contact with drugs while they are in school. When Bush uses *we*, instead of *they*, he reminds the audience that he too is a parent, and the he can relate to the fears of other parents. This creates a togetherness, and a feeling of sharing problems. Using *we* in this context makes him seem like a good politician, because it is a way to express that he cares about the people in the nation and that he is involved (Karapetjana 2011:3). Example (29) refers to the Congress, which has made a decision to lay down new power lines. *We* does not refer to the ones who are actually going to lay down the new power lines. This is an example

of how *we* can be used to create a sense of togetherness.

- (30) “Now, ***our*** administration has had some political setbacks this year, and some of them were deserved” (Obama 2010).
- (31) “In the end, every child in a bad situation must be given a better choice because, when it comes to ***our*** children, failure simply is not an option” (Bush 2001).
- (32) “Because of this plan, there are teachers who can now keep their jobs and educate our kids, health care professionals can continue caring for ***our*** sick” (Obama 2009).

By saying *our* administration, instead of *my* administration in (30), Obama creates a group membership, instead of reminding the administration of his authority. (31) and (32) show how *our* can be a more suitable substitute for *the*. Obama uses the pronoun *our* deliberately to make the people feel obliged to help the sick people in America. If he had said *the sick*, he would not have created a sense of institutional identity and togetherness and the wish to work together to help fellow citizens.

4.4 The use of *they* and its variants

Politicians use third person plural *they* to separate themselves or their ‘group’ from *others*, i.e. *they* excludes *I*. *They* points to those who are not we, and is used to form an oppositional relationship between him or her and others, often with negativity towards the others. *They* is, just like *we*, used to create an *us* and *them* separation. It can be used to make the speaker seem less responsible for his or her actions and show ideological difference among people and positive presentation of self of the speaker (Bramley 2001:182f). *They* can be used to distance *self* from *other* both consciously and subconsciously. By separating *us* from *them*, the speaker sometimes creates an image of *them* being inferior to *us* (Karapetjana 2011:4).

They can also be used in a neutral context, where the speaker does not speak of the *others* in a negative or positive way, even if they are still not part of the same group as him or her. Studies of political pronoun usage have illustrated that *they* can be used for distancing the speaker from the people spoken of (Bramley 2001:182f). The following examples illustrate how *they* are used in the speeches and to whom it refer, as well as examples of the indefinite version.

- (33) “***They*** talk about teaching to the best. But let’s put that logic to the test” (Bush 2001).
- (34) “And that’s why I’ve asked Vice President Biden to lead a tough, unprecedented oversight effort; because nobody messes with Joe. I—am I right? ***They*** don’t mess with him” (Obama 2009).

Examples (33) and (34) show how *they* is used as an indefinite pronoun, meaning that it refers to people in general, i.e. not specific persons. In (33), it is not specified who Bush refers to when he uses *they*; he talks about people in general. In (34), *they* refers to *nobody*, and is used in a repetitive way, because Obama had already stated that nobody messes with Joe Biden, and just wanted to highlight it in a way that can be regarded as humorous.

(35) “And tonight, thanks to **them**, we are winning the war on terror” (Bush 2002).

(36) “Let us serve **them** as well as **they**’ve served us, by giving them the equipment **they** need, by providing **them** with the care and benefits that they have earned, and by enlisting our veterans in the great tasks of building our own Nation” (Obama 2011).

In (35) and (36), the pronouns *they* and *them* are used in very positive ways, by saying that they have the American troops to thank for winning the war on terrorism. In this case it is not clear that *they* is a pronoun that divides *self* from *other*, because in political context *they* is often used in a negative way directed towards the opposition.

(37) “**They** embrace tyranny and death and as a cause and a creed” (Bush 2002).

(38) “And we’re asking **them** to join us, and many doing so. Yet the course of this Nation does not depend on the decisions of others” (Bush 2003).

Example (37) shows how *they* can be used to refer to something the speaker perceives as very negative. In this case, *they* refers to the leaders of Iraq, and describes *them* in a negative way. Example (38) refers to other nations that are helping the United States both in the fight against terrorism, and in their operation to free the Iraqi people from suppression. In (39), *they* refers to the American people, and their feelings towards the economy.

(39) “**They** don’t understand why it seems like bad behavior on Wall Street is rewarded, but hard work on Main Street isn’t, or why Washington has been unable or unwilling to solve any of our problems” (Obama 2010).

What is interesting about (39) is the fact that by using *they*, Obama excludes the people. Obviously, the speech is directed towards the Congress, not the people, but still this does create a *self* and *other* dichotomy, and it might be unusual for politicians to separate themselves from the people in this manner (Bramley 2001:182). Also, Obama does refer to the people in a somewhat negative way by implying that they might be inferior, since Obama assumes that they do not understand how the economic crisis is solved.

4.5 Comparison of the usage of pronouns in the two presidents’ speeches

Table 2. The occurrences of personal pronouns in the speeches.

Pronoun	Bush	Obama
<i>I</i>	116	193
<i>You</i>	60	54
<i>We</i>	302	352
<i>They</i>	47	89
Total	525	688

Table 2. shows how many occurrences of the pronouns chosen for analysis were found in the speeches in total. The generic (indefinite) pronouns of *you*, *we* and *they* were sorted out in this comparison, because they are not of importance.

At first glance, the results of the search speak for themselves; Obama uses significantly more pronouns in general in his State of the Union Addresses than Bush. As seen in Table 2., Obama uses the pronouns *I*, *we* and *they* more frequently than Bush. The only personal pronoun that Bush uses more frequently than Obama according to this study is *you*, and it is difficult to figure out why that is. Perhaps Bush is less comfortable expressing opinions as an individual, and rather uses *you* to speak to and on behalf of other people. This suggests that Obama expresses himself as an individual more often than Bush, and also that he tries more to create togetherness in the Congress and the nation by a more frequent use of *we*. Obama’s more frequent use of *they* can perhaps be explained by the fact that Obama more often than Bush use *they* to refer to things rather people.

What needs to be kept in mind while analyzing the speeches is the fact that the contexts are very different. Major parts of Bush’s speeches are about safety and security. The reason for this is, of course, the happenings on 9/11 and the Iraq war. The contexts of Obama’s speeches however, mostly deal with the bad economy and how to make it better. Also, this study not show the forms of the personal pronouns; if that were the case, the results would perhaps have been different. For example, Obama’s more frequent use of *I* might be because Obama has a tendency to say “*I* propose a budget that...”, whereas Bush more frequently says “*My* budget will increase...”. A search in the balanced data showed that Bush uses the pronoun *my* 67 times, and Obama uses *my* 59 times. This strengthens the theory that Bush is more likely to use *my*, whereas Obama is more likely to use *I*.

Another interesting aspect of the choices of pronouns in the speeches can be found in the word *America*, which Bush sometimes uses as a substitute for *we*. *America* is used 172

times in the balanced data in Bush's speeches and 143 times in Obama's. The difference is not that significant, but Bush uses *America* as a substitute for a pronoun more frequently than Obama. Example (40) illustrates how Bush at times uses the noun *America* instead of a pronoun.

(40) "And all nations should know: *America* will do what is necessary to ensure our Nation's security" (Bush 2002).

5 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to analyze the use of personal pronouns in the State of the Union speeches held by America's two most recent presidents. Looking back to the research questions, the first one was: *how are the personal pronouns I, you, we and they used in the speeches held by the two presidents?*. The first research question can be regarded as answered in the many examples showing how the pronouns were used in sections 4.1 to 4.4.

The second research question was: *to whom are the personal pronouns I, you, we and they referring in the speeches?*. The results of this study indicate that whom the pronoun refers to in political speeches varies depending on the contexts of the speeches. Referring back to the *self* and *other* separation, *self* always refers to the speaker, and sometimes others as well, for example the administration, the members of Congress, the American people and/or the western countries. The *other* can vary even more, *other* might refer to the previous administration, the people of America, the people in the army, the Iraqi citizens, the terrorists etc. The findings on whom the pronouns referred to were interesting since they varied so much, both between their own speeches and each others. This, of course, had to do with the differences in the contexts of the speeches, and what they were focused on. In conclusion, it is safe to claim that the use of *you* and *we* most often referred to the Congress and/or the American citizens. *I* was used as a way for the two presidents' to refer to themselves. *They* was used in multiple ways, to refer to anyone other than the two presidents.

The last research question: *What differences in the use of the personal pronouns I, you, we and they can be found in a comparison between the presidents' speeches?* can be considered as answered in section 4.5. It showed that Obama uses more pronouns than Bush, but that Bush use the pronoun *you* more frequently. It also showed that Bush has a tendency to use the noun *America* as a substitute for the pronoun *we*. The results showed that Bush is more likely to use the possessive variant *my* than Obama.

Another finding in this study is that the number of personal pronouns a politician uses is not very relevant information, if you do not study them in depth. If only the occurrences are studied, you cannot see in what context the pronouns are used, or even if they are used as pronouns. This makes a quantitative study less interesting than a qualitative one.

Since there are quite a lot of research made on pronominal choices in politics of politicians working in the same country, it might be interesting to compare and analyze pronouns in politics used by politicians from different countries in future studies, to see if there is a difference. There should also be more studies on how much of their speeches the leading politicians write for themselves. As previously mentioned, there already is quite a lot of research on the topic of personal pronouns in political interviews and debates. That lack of previous research on personal pronouns in speeches that were prepared in advance makes this study more interesting.

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