The Use of Personal Pronoun in Political Discourse: A Case Study of the Final 2016 United States Presidential Election Debate

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This study aims to investigate the use of personal pronouns in political speeches made by Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton in the 2016 US Presidential Election Debates. The focus is on uses of the first personal pronouns 'we' and 'I' as strategies to express persuasive messages and political ideologies especially the inclusion and exclusion of the participants' 'self' and 'group' reference. The data were selected from the TV broadcasted American Presidential Debate between Mr. Donald Trump and Mrs. Hillary Clinton on October 19, 2016. Textual and discourse analysis were adopted in order to examine in what context each first personal pronoun was used in the speeches. The findings reveal that the occurrences of the pronouns 'we' and 'I' in the speeches of both participants differ and the uses of each pronoun in certain contexts also differ significantly. The different pronominal choices in different contexts in the debates express differences in the persuasive strategies and political ideologies of the two candidates.

***Keywords** political discourse, pronouns, pronouns in political discourse, presidential election debate*

INTRODUCTION

The US Presidential Election has always gained interest from the public, both inside and outside the country. The 2016 United States Presidential Election was particularly interesting in the eyes of people around the globe since one of the final nominees, Mrs. Hilary Clinton, was the wife of a former US President. Her counterpart was Mr. Donald Trump, the billionaire whose face people have often seen in the hit TV series The Apprentice and tabloids, who had recently decided to convert his career from a businessman into a political figure. Therefore, speeches given by both nominees received a great deal of public and press interest.

Besides continuous campaigns, the final nominees were to give their last speeches to the public right before the grand Election Day in November 2016. Each speech is considered significant to the chance of winning or losing in the election and it is a critical part of the 'US Presidential Election Debates'. According to the history of US politics, there have been two major political parties which are the Democratic and the Republican parties whose candidates have come to the final rounds of the US Presidential elections since 1852. In this 58th US Presidential Election in 2016, the final nominees were also from these two parties with Hilary Clinton from the Democrats and Donald Trump from the Republicans.

The topics discussed in the debate are usually controversial issues or those of public and national interest such as tax, unemployment, and education. The primary aim of the debates is to have the public learn and know more about the candidates and their political ideologies as well as their future policies to improve the country (Ordway & Wihbey, 2016). As a result, the debate has gained interest by both the candidates and the nation as a whole as it can be considered an indicator that a particular person will win the election and become the 45th President of the United States of America.

Making political speeches especially in the Presidential Debates is challenging since the debate speeches are impromptu. There is no script written, even though there might have been teams from both parties who have brainstormed and put ideas together in order to predict the questions and to prepare the answers which can make the candidates win the hearts of the nation. According to the survey by Holz, Akin, and Jamieson (2016), twenty-nine percent of respondents said that presidential debates were more powerful in helping voters decide how to vote than other attempts and campaigns. The findings are in line with those of Benoit and Benoit-Bryan (2014) which reveal that political election debates attract and influence large audiences or voters. Persuasive and argumentative rhetorics are therefore adopted as key linguistic strategies in making such political speeches. Candidates must try to answer questions in the way which expresses their intelligence, political standpoints, and ideologies while trying to design their persuasive messages into all micro structure of their talk in order to motivate and influence the audiences to accept their political policies and to vote for them (Sharndama, 2016).

Previous studies on political discourse focused on the scripted speeches of political figures since those speeches were considered well-structured and organised (Sharndama, 2016). Other previous studies were central to the comparison between political speeches of heads of states from different cultural backgrounds (Håkansson, 2012; Rezaei & Nourali, 2016). In terms of studies on persuasive messages in political speeches, previous researchers focused on rhetorical features (Lopez, 2004; Halmari, 2008) and various persuasive and rhetorical techniques such as hedges and boosters (Al-Rashady, 2012; Amornrattanasirichok, 2016), and pronominal choices (Proctor & Wen Su, 2011; Håkansson, 2012). As can be seen, though there were a number of studies on persuasive strategies in political discourse and others on the pronominal choices in other scripted speeches, there was a lack of study on micro structure such as first personal pronoun in the unscripted and public speeches like those in the debates. Besides, the study of political speech in US election debates can always be of interest since the elections are occasional events with four-year lapses. As a result, the findings of the most recent election debates are always in high demand since the findings manifest the different political ideologies of the candidates in the current society.

In this study, the micro structure of the speeches in the presidential debates was examined. The main focus is on uses of first personal pronouns 'we' and 'I' as strategies to express persuasive messages and political ideologies especially inclusion and exclusion of the participants 'self' and 'group' reference'.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political discourse

This paper focuses on political speech which is a subsidiary of political discourse. Uvehammer (2005) states that the main goal of political speech is to convince listeners by choosing the most powerful linguistic devices. As a result, persuasive and argumentative techniques are mainly adopted when making speeches. Uyehammer's conclusion was in line with findings from previous studies (Teittinen, 2000). That is to say, political speech is aimed to motivate and convince the nation or society and to make them familiarised with the socio-economic policies, plans and actions of the speakers. Previously, in the studies on political discourse, language choices, rhetorical functions, and meanings were focused on. As Jalilifar and Alavi (2011) and Cabrejas-Peñuelas (2015) put it,politicians use language to express their points of view and persuade audiences by shaping people's ideas and opinions in order to achieve political effects with relation to political issues.

Some micro features of the persuasive messages in political speech were previously studied. Al-Rashady (2012) investigated the use of hedging devices in the presidential debates between BarackObama and John McCain during the 2008 US election. The result shows that the hedging devices that were most frequently used were modal auxiliary verbs; subjectivization; quality-emphasizing adjectival/adverbial expressions; and adjectival, adverbial, and nominal phrases. Moreover, the frequent use of the hedging devices "can, will, should" and "I think" greatly enhanced the effectiveness of the speakers' argument.

Halmari (2008) investigates the rhetorical strategies deployed by President Clinton and Senator Dole during the 1996 presidential debates. Clinton resorted to implicit persuasion and audience-oriented rhetorical strategies, while Dole's persuasion was more explicit, and he did not avoid the use of dispreferred strategies, for example, opening his answers with the discourse particle "Well". There were differences in the candidates' use of personal pronouns — Dole used "I, you" and "they" more, whereas Clinton employed the audience-inclusive "we" heavily.

In a more recent study (Amornrattanasirichok, 2016) on hedging and boosting in the American Presidential Debates in 2012 between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, the analytical framework on the integration of the taxonomies done by Crismore et al. (1993), Hyland (2005), and Salager-Meyer (2007) were adopted. The findings in Amornrattanarichok (2016) provide an understanding of hedging and boosting used in the political debate. The result revealed that "(I) think" and "can(not)" were the most frequently used hedging devices by Obama (19%) and Romney (38%) while "make(ing) sure" and "will (not), 'll, won't" were the most frequently used boosters by Obama (15%) and Romney (31%), respectively. In terms of category, the data showed that "modal auxiliary verbs" attained the highest frequency for both hedging (36% for Obama vs. 56% for Romney) and boosting (36% for Obama vs. 50% for Romney), in which the modal auxiliary "can(not)" records the highest frequency for hedging used by both, while the modal auxiliaries "('ve) got to" and "will (not), 'l'll, won't" were the most frequent boosters used by Obama and Romney, respectively.

Pronouns in political discourse

There are eight types of pronouns: personal, reflexive, possessive, indefinite, demonstrative, reciprocal, relative and interrogative. The personal pronouns are used to refer to people or thingsthat the speaker is talking to or talking about. There are two kinds of personal pronouns: subjective pronouns and objective pronouns. The subjective pronouns are used to refer to a subject of a clause, namely *I, we, you, he, she, it* and *they.* Object pronouns are used as either the object, subject complement or prepositional complement of a clause. The objective personal pronouns are *me, us, you, him, her, it and them.*

Håkansson (2012) investigated the pronominal choices used by two American presidents, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, in their State of the Union speeches. The main focus of the study was to determine to whom the two presidents referred when they used the pronouns "I, you, we" and "they," and to compare the differences in pronominal usage by the two presidents. According to Håkansson (2012), in political discourse, the pronominal choices used by the two Presidents did not differ significantly. The pronoun *I* is used when the speaker wants to speak as an individual rather than as a representative of a group while the pronoun *we* is used to invoke a sense of collectivity and to share responsibility, and to avoid referring to himself/herself as an individual. Håkansson also divided the functions of the pronouns *I* and *we* in political speeches. The functions of the pronoun *we* can be divided into two main types which are the inclusive *we* and the exclusive *we.* The inclusive we refers to the speaker and his audiences while the exclusive *we* excludes an audience, but refers to the speaker and other third parties. The functions of *I* can be divided into several types such as to express a speaker's opinion, to describe a speaker in a positive image, to create relationship with audiences, to show personal involvement or commitment, and to show a speaker's authority.

The findings of Hakansson (2012) were in line with those of Brown and Gilman (1960), the pioneer study of critical discourse analysis and pronouns. Brown and Gilman (1960) revealed the asymmetrical power relations through the choices of pronouns in political discourse. For example, addressing someone in the same way as they would address you shows solidarity and equality. On the contrary, addressing someone with a 'higher status' in a different way than that person would address you shows inequality and social distance. In addition, the different ideologies between the subjective pronouns *we* and *they* and the objective pronouns *us* and *them* were found in the way in which *we* was usually used to highlight the good relationship of the speaker and the listeners while *they* was used to separate the self and others.

Proctor and Wen Su (2011) studied self-identifications that American politicians developed throughpronominal choices employed in their speeches. They compared how the first person plural pronoun was used during the interviews and during the debates in the 2008 elections in the US. The findings revealed that the way personal pronouns are utilized creates decisive turning points for a politician, especially one on the electoral road. American politicians used personalpronouns to evoke nationalistic emotions and to achieve their career goals differently.

As can be seen, most previous studies on political discourse focused on the rhetorical functions

of various linguistic features both in macro and micro levels. Also, some studies focused on effects of various rhetorical devices and the audiences' behavior. In this study, the use of the first personal subject pronouns *we* and *I* in the speeches of the most recent US nominees for US President was investigated and the discourse functions of *we* and *I* in political debates were examined.

RESEARCH PURPOSE

The current study aims to shed light on the following research questions:
1. How are the first personal pronouns *we* and *I* used in the debate speeches delivered by the two nominees in the 2016 US Presidential Election?
2. What are the discourse functions of the first personal pronouns *we* and *I* used in the speeches given by the two nominees?

METHODOLOGY

Research method

This study adopted textual and discourse analysis as the main research methods. Firstly, textual analysis was adopted to identify in which context of the debates the first personal pronouns *we* and *I* were used by the two participants. As Mooney and Evans (2015) put it, in persuasive speeches, the use of pronouns, especially the first person pronouns *I* and *we* and the second personal pronoun *you*, is commonly present. Taking the study of Mooney and Evans (2015) into consideration, this study adopted discourse analysis to investigate the discourse functions of the first personal pronouns we and I used by the two participants in the 2016 US Presidential Election.

The data

The analysis was based on the speeches made by the two final nominees of the 2016 US Presidential Debates, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, on October 19, 2016. The debate was held at University of Nevada in Las Vegas and the moderator was Chris Wallace from Fox News Sunday on the Fox News Channel. According to Nielsen Media Research (October 20, 2016) approximately 71.6 million people watched the third presidential debate on television across 13 national and international networks. The audiences were various, including the rich, the poor, blacks, whites, and so on. The debates were broadcasted nationwide and the recordings were rerun by several international news and media agencies. The video and video scripts used for this study were derived from the website of New York Times (https://www.nytimes.com/section/magazine). The whole debate took 92 minutes and the total word count is 16,415 words.

The topics of the debates were usually of public interests and current issues. In the debates being studied, there were six segments of 15 minutes with the moderator beginning each segment with a question and giving each candidate two minutes to answer. Then, the moderator facilitated the

discussions between the two candidates who received approximately equal time. The six topical segments were 1) Supreme Court, 2) Immigration, 3) Economy, 4) Fitness to be president, 5) Foreign hot spots, and 6) Debt and entitlements.

Data analysis

The data of this study were the first two minutes of the six segments when each candidate answered the questions being asked by the moderator. The AntConc concordance tool was used to search for the first personal pronouns *we* and *I* in the speeches. Titles, website address, date, time, the moderator's turn and open-discussion section were deleted so that the AntConc software word count would present the exact number of the words uttered by each participant. Of 16,415 words in total, the selected data from the two-minute answers of six segments include 5,022 words (2,895 words by Hillary Clinton, and 2,127 words by Donald Trump). After that, a manual analysis was conducted to locate the pronouns *we* and *I* used by both participants as well as to see how many occurrences of each pronoun were found in the six different segments. Finally, the discourse functions of the first personal pronouns *we* and *I* used in the speeches given by the two nominees were analysed using the functions of *we* and *I* in Håkansson (2012) as the analytical framework.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are divided into two sections. The first section illustrates how many occurrences of the first personal pronouns *we* and *I* were used in the speeches given by the two participants as a whole and in each of the six sections of the Presidential Debates. The second section gives examples of the first personal pronouns *we* and *I* used by the two participants and discusses the discourse functions of *we* and *I* according to Håkansson (2012).

1. The use of *We* and *I* in the two nominees' speeches

Table 1

Occurrences of personal pronouns " I, We" in the final US presidential election debate

	Trump		Clinton		Both	
Pronoun	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
I	62	38%	79	53%	141	45%
WE	103	62%	71	47%	174	55%
Total	**165**	**100%**	**150**	**100%**	**315**	**100%**

Table 1 shows how many occurrences of the first personal pronoun *We* and *I* were found in the speeches of Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton in the 2016 US Presidential Debates.

At first glance, there are 315 occurrences of the first personal pronouns *we* and *I* found in the speeches of the two participants. Trump uses significantly more first personal pronouns in general in his speeches than Clinton. In detail, Trump used the pronoun *we* more frequently

than Clinton (103 and 71, respectively). On the contrary, Clinton used the pronoun *I* more frequently than Trump (79 and 62, respectively). The findings suggest that Trump displayed more attempts to create togetherness with the audiences by a more frequent use of *we* which is in line with Hakansson (2012) which states that *we* was used to highlight the closeness and solidarity between the speaker and the listeners. Therefore, that Clinton used the pronoun *I* more often than Trump can be interpreted that she tried to express herself as an individual.

As an attempt to identify in which context the first personal pronouns *we* and *I* were used by the two participants, Table 2 illustrates the occurrences of the first personal pronoun *we* and *I* in different contexts. The differences in occurrences of the pronoun *we* and *I* suggest that Trump and Clinton gave different emphasis on how to express themselves to the public in different contexts. At first glance, when discussing economy, debt and entitlements, foreign hot spots, and immigration, Trump used the pronoun *we* more often than *I*. The only two topics where Trump used the pronoun *I* more often than *we* were those related to his fitness to be the President and the Supreme Court.

On the other hand, when discussing the similar topics of economy, debt and entitlements, and foreign hot spots (except immigration), Clinton's use of first personal pronoun was different from that of Trump. That is to say, she used the pronoun *I* more often than *we* in those contexts. In addition, she used the pronoun *I* more often than *we* when discussing her fitness for the presidency,

Table 2
Occurrences of the personal pronouns "I, We" from Trump's and Clinton's speech

Topic	Trump		Clinton	
	Frequency		Frequency	
	I	We	I	We
Economy	13	33	20	14
National debt	6	25	13	8
Foreign hotspots	4	17	17	16
Immigration	4	21	4	12
Fitness to be president	24	2	17	12
The Supreme Court	11	5	8	9
Total	**62**	**103**	**79**	**71**

which is similar to Trump's use. The only two contexts in which Clinton used the pronoun we more often than I are on immigration issues and the Supreme Court.

2. The use of *We* and its functions

As can be seen in Table 2, Trump used the pronoun we more than Clinton, 103 and 71 occurrences, respectively. Trump's more frequent use of *we* might be because he showed more attempts to create togetherness with the audiences when talking about economy, debts, and

immigration issues as he had a tendency to say *"we're going to…"*. For example, when discussing the economy, he said, *"So my plan — **we**'re going to renegotiate trade deals. **We**'re going to have a lot of free trade. **We**'re going to have free trade, more free trade than **we** have right now. But **we** have horrible deals."*

As can be seen from the above example, the context of Trump's speech mostly deals with bad situations of the country's economy, which has been run by the then President Barack Obama who is from the same Democratic party as Clinton, his counterpart. Therefore, it can be interpreted that the discourse function of Trump's *we* is an *inclusive we* the way in which he connects himself or aligns himself as a team with the public audiences or other American citizens.

Likewise, when discussing jobs and employment, Trump also uses the pronoun *we* more than *I*. For example, *"**We** will have created a tremendous economic machine once again. To do that, **we**'re taking back jobs. **We**'re not going to let our companies be raided by other countries where **we** lose all our jobs, **we** don't make our product anymore. It's very sad."* The above example illustrates Trump's policy to create more jobs for American people. The function of *we* in this context can be identified as the *exclusive we* the way in which he refers to himself and his team, probably the Republicans, as a persuasive strategy in order to have the audiences vote for him and his party.

Also, when Trump discusses foreign issues such those of Iraq, he uses we more often than *I* (17 and 4 occurrences, respectively). As can be seen in this example, *"Iran is taking over Iraq. **We** don't gain anything",* the function of *we* in this anti-Iraqi war context can be identified as the *inclusive we* the way in which he creates togetherness with the audiences or American population as a whole to show that the war in Iraq gives American people nothing.

Similarly, when Trump expresses his ideas on building a wall at the border of the US and Mexico, he uses *we* more often than *I* to motivate the audiences. It is considered the *inclusive we* since he tries to create solidarity with the audiences. *"**We** have to have strong borders. **We** have to keep the drugs out of our country. **We** are — right now, **we**'re getting the drugs, they're getting the cash. **We** need strong borders. **We** need absolute — **we** cannot give amnesty."*

3. The Use of *I* and its functions

Between the two candidates, Clinton uses the first personal pronoun *I* more often than Trump (79 and 62 occurrences, respectively). In Clinton's speech, her more frequent uses of *I* than *we* suggest that her persuasive strategy is central to an attempt to express herself as an individual rather than as a representative of any group. One of the possible interpretations is that she wants the audiences to look at her as an individual political figure, not as the wife of ex-President Clinton or the successor of the incumbent President Barack Obama. For example, Clinton had a tendency to say *"I want… I think"* as in *"**I** want us to do more to help small business. That's where two-thirds of the new jobs are going to come from. **I** want us to raise the national minimum wage, because people who live in poverty should not — who work full-time should not still be in poverty. And **I** sure do want to make sure women get equal pay for the work **we***

do". In the above excerpt, the function of the pronoun I is to express her strong opinion and express her image as a female leader.

In addition, when discussing foreign issues such as the situations in Syria, Clinton used *I* more often than we. For example, *"I think we can take back Mosul, and then we can move on into Syria and take back Raqqa".* The *I* dominant strategy was employed to have the audiences see her as a leader with her individual standpoint rather than as a wife of a former US president or as a mouthpiece of a certain political party. Sharing her personal opinion that supported the policy of Democratic Party to take back the city of Mosul in Iraq from ISIS is one strategy of *I*.

Trump's rare use of the pronoun *I* suggests that he is less likely to express himself as an individual. Only in the two contexts of his fitness for the presidency and issues regarding the Supreme Court did he use the pronoun *I* more often than *we* significantly.

In his speech regarding the Supreme Court, he also used the pronoun *I* more often than *we* such as *"I feel that the justices that I am going to appoint — and I've named 20 of them — the justices that I'm going to appoint will be pro-life".* In this context, Trump uses the pronoun *I* to express his opinions such as *"I feel that… I am going to…".* It is worth analysing why the pronoun *I* is used more often in these two topics. One of the possible reasons is that Trump prefers to express himself as an individual when discussing his life and family as a way to show his leadership.

The context of fitness for the Presidency is the only context in which both participants used the first personal pronoun *I* more often than *we*. The reason and function of *I* is relatively obvious since this question focused on the nominees themselves, and not on their policies. When Trump expressed his opinions to answer the questions about his fitness for the Presidency, he used the pronoun *I* more often than *we*. For example, *"I would say the only way — because those stories are all totally false, I have to say that. And didn't even apologize to my wife, who's sitting right here, because I didn't do anything. I didn't know any of these — I didn't see these women".* In this context, Trump used the pronoun *I* to affirm his statements such as *"I would say… I have to say… I didn't do… I didn't see".*

However, it is worth noticing that although both participants used the pronoun *I* more often than *we* when discussing their fitness for the Presidency, Clinton used *we* more (12 occurrences) than Trump (2 occurrences). Her strategy is interesting because Clinton asked questions to audiences and used the *inclusive we* to connect with the audiences. The use of questions and *we* provoked the audiences to think about what kind of leader they really want. After that, she expressed her standpoint to support diversity and equality. For example, *"I think it's really up to all of us to demonstrate who **we** are and who our country is, and to stand up and be very clear about what **we** expect from our next president, how **we** want to bring our country together, where **we** don't want to have the kind of pitting of people one against the other, where instead **we** celebrate our diversity, **we** lift people up, and **we** make our country even greater".*

DISCUSSION

As Hakansson (2012) puts it, the discourse functions of *we* in political speeches can be divided into two main categories which are inclusive and exclusive. The *inclusive we* refers to the speaker and the second person pronoun *you* while the *exclusive we* refers to the speaker and the third person pronoun and puts the second person *you* or the direct audience into another side. In the presidential debate, the direct audiences are the public or American citizens who have the right to vote for the next president. As can be seen from the data, the *inclusive we* is used more often than the *exclusive we* since both candidates aimed to persuade the public audiences to vote for them.

In Trump's speech, he mostly used *inclusive we* as his strategy to unite himself with the people of the United States of America. In many parts of his speech, he pointed out what was important to the nation, what needed to be done to make America great again as his slogan stated and it was the responsibility of all Americans to work together with him to achieve those goals. He evoked the nationalistic emotions through the use of the pronoun *we.*

It is important to note that the election campaigns took place during the period of the Democratic Party's Barack Obama's presidency while Donald Trump was from the Republican Party. He tried to align himself more with the commoners and put the current government as well as Clinton, the representative from the ruling party, on the other side. It can also be interpreted that Trump's strategy was to persuade people who were not happy with the work of the current government to take his side through his frequent use of the *inclusive we.*

Let us look at the functions of the pronoun *I* used by both participants. Mostly, *I* was used to express the opinions of the candidates, followed by the desire to express the individuality of each candidate when discussing some certain topics such as fitness for the Presidency, such as *"I want… I think… I feel… I don't… I did".* Also, *I* was used to express their ideologies as a great leader of the country such as in Clinton's speech, *"…I feel strongly that the Supreme Court needs to stand on the side of the American people, not on the side of the powerful corporations and the wealthy…".* Trump also used *I* to express his ideology and leadership as well as his strong character, as in *"I believe if my opponent should win this race, which I truly don't think will happen,"* and *"I mean, they are outsmarting — look, you're not there, you might be involved in that decision".* The use of I in political speech can therefore be interpreted as a discourse strategy to show ideas, and to present personal viewpoints and feelings to the audiences.

CONCLUSION

This study focuses on the discourse functions of the different first person personal pronouns *we* and *I* used in the political speeches of the two nominees during the final 2016 Presidential Election debate. The findings reveal that the two participants used the personal pronouns *"I"* and *"we"* differently. The findings of this study reveal an important notion that a small linguistic unit such as a personal pronoun can have a large impact on the hearers and hearers' decision making. In this study, the two participants used the first person pronouns

we and *I* differently to express their different ideologies while persuading their audiences.

To answer the first research question on how the first personal pronouns *we* and *I* were used in the speeches given by the two presidential nominees in the 2016 US Presidential Election debates, the findings show that the occurrences of *we* and *I* vary differently by the two participants. In terms of frequencies, the pronoun *we* is used more than *I*, as accounted by 55% and 45%, respectively.

To answer the second research question on what the discourse functions of the first personal pronouns *we* and *I* are in the speeches given by the two nominees, it can generally be argued that the dominant use of *we* in the Presidential Debates was the discourse strategy of both participants to focus on their relationship with the audiences and the unity between the candidates and American people as a whole (Hakansson, 2012). That is to say, *we* was preferred in the political speeches as a way in which the speakers shared their public selves as well as the similar problems, roles, and responsibilities to the country with the audiences.

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