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G3 Thesis

The persuasive power of personal pronouns in Barack Obama's rhetoric

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Abstract

Rhetorical skills are a very important part of political discourse. Being able to persuade an audience in a speech is central for politicians. This study aims to investigate how the personal pronouns *I*, *you*, *we* and *they* are used strategically in Barack Obama's speeches. Previous research suggests that certain personal pronouns can enable politicians to take on different identities, which in turn gives them an opportunity to distance themselves from problematic issues and also invoke specific ideological ideas on their audience. The study analyzes personal pronouns by the means of the co-text and the broader social context. It is found that *I, you* and *we* are used both to enhance the 'self' and portray the opposition in a negative way, while *they* focused on portraying the opposition negatively. However, the fact that politicians have speechwriters can be problematic when drawing conclusions of the pronominal choice.

Keywords:

Barack Obama, personal pronouns, political language, pronominal choice, rhetoric.

Contents

1. INTRODUCTION **4**

1.1 AIM, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCOPE **5**

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND **7**

2.1 PRONOUNS IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE **8**

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS **12**

3.1 MATERIALS **12**

3.2 METHOD **12**

4. RESULTS **13**

4.1 THE USE OF *I* **14**

4.2 THE USE OF *YOU* **17**

4.3 THE USE OF *WE* **19**

4.4 THE USE OF *THEY* **21**

4.5 CONVENTION SPEECHES 2008 AND 2012 ..... **22**

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION **23**

REFERENCES **26**

PRIMARY RESOURCES **26**

SECONDARY RESOURCES **26**

1. Introduction

Speeches have always been a very important part of politics, especially in American politics. Often held by the leader of a certain political group, speeches are meant to be a way for the politicians to inform the people about their policies, ideologies and values. Some speeches are aimed at specific groups; others are aimed at a whole nation. They can increase the credibility and prominence of the political leader (Holly 1989).

To give a successful speech is not merely about presenting good ideas, but also about having the skills of speaking persuasively, the rhetorical skills (Beard 2000). According to Oxford Dictionary (2010) *rhetoric* is the art of effective or persuasive communication techniques. Politicians today put a large amount of effort into their speeches; they work with experts in this area, who help them write their speeches and make sure every word is chosen wisely to represent the party's ideas in the right way. Usually, politicians give the speech to a group of supporters who are invited to a rally, convention or other political event, although the real and main audience is the millions of people who will listen to the speech through media (Beard 2000). So, even though not many of them listen to or read a full speech in the media, it is important for the speech to be easily understood and to be interesting enough to convince them to agree with the political party.

Politicians use many different rhetorical devices in their speeches in order to make the message more appealing and persuading. One aspect of it is the promotion of their own identity, which is becoming more and more important in elections (Caprara & Zimbardo 2004). Caprara and Zimbardo (2004) argue that personality-driven views towards political campaigns and elections are increasing in comparison to ideologically driven views. In political speeches the aim is to present multiple individual and group identities that the audience will want to identify with, thus also want to support with their votes (Allen 2007:2). Allen (2007) furthermore suggests

that if politicians manage to present themselves as multi-faceted characters, they will attract a more diverse, and possibly larger audience, who will want to support them.

One way of achieving this is through a very careful choice in the use of personal pronouns: The way presidential candidates choose to represent their identity by referring to themselves, to their opposition and to their audience can work as an effective persuasive device in speeches, interviews and other political matters (Allen 2007:2).

According to an article in the New York Times, Barack Obama is a gifted public speaker, and his skills are invoked not only by those who love him but also those who hate him (Haberman 2010). Due to his widespread reputation as a public speaker, I have chosen to focus on Obama's speeches in this study of the persuasive effect of personal pronouns in political speeches.

1.1 Aim, research questions and scope

This study will focus on the pronoun usage only in political speeches. The aim of this study is to analyze how political candidates take advantage of different personal pronouns when referring to themselves, their opposition and their audience with certain pronouns.

The study will look at how American president Barack Obama makes use of the personal pronouns *I*, *you*, *we* and *they* in a speech before he became president and in a recent speech held when he had taken office. There are many more pronouns that could be interesting to analyze in addition to *I*, *you*, *we*, and *they*, although due to the time limitation the focus will only be on these four pronouns.

As mentioned before, politicians write their speeches with the help of professional speechwriters, which is important to keep in mind. One may not know how much of a speech the presidential candidate has written by himself

or herself. Due to this, it is only possible to discuss the pronominal choice and pronoun usage in these speeches, and not how Barack Obamas uses pronouns in general. In order to pursue the aim, the study will explore the following research questions:

1. In what strategic ways are the personal pronouns *I*, *you*, *we* and *they* used in Barack Obama's speeches?

2. Which multiple identities do the pronouns represent and what impacts do they have?

3. Are there differences in the use of pronouns in Barack Obama's rhetoric before and after he was elected?

2. Theoretical background/ previous research

Political speeches are a very interesting type of political discourse; they have a significant place in political campaigns and can have a big effect on the outcome of the campaign. Hence, political speeches are well prepared and carefully scripted works written for a purpose (Allen 2007). They often include many conventional rhetorical devices to make them more fascinating. Various types of figure of speech such as metaphors, metonymy, parallelism and contrastive pairs are some examples (Beard 2000). Previous studies show that many of these classical rhetorical devices are aesthetically appealing to people and therefore used frequently in speeches (Allen 2007).

The main functions of political speeches are to inform and to persuade an audience (Allen 2007). Chilton (2004:45f) suggests that political speeches or any kind of political discourse have three functions: legitimization, delegitimization or coercion. Legitimization and delegitimization are based on linguistics, and coercion is based on the speaker's resources and power. According to Chilton (2004:46) legitimization helps the speaker to "establish the right to be obeyed". In other words, it establishes legitimacy. He further argues that this is communicated linguistically through overt statements or implications, which include a number of different techniques, one of them being positive self-presentation. Delegitimization means the opposite; the opponent is presented negatively (Chilton 2004:46). Bramley (2001) argues that politicians need to present themselves and their opponent in ways that are favorable to their different images of 'self'. This presentation may not be the objective reality but can and often is the speaker's version of reality, which is socially and discursively constructed in that particular act of communication. Depending on setting and purpose of communication, the constructed reality may differ (Bramley 2001:11f).

2.1 Pronouns in political discourse

There are many different pronouns that can function in different ways; therefore it can be difficult to find one general definition of what a pronoun is. Some conventional explanations say pronouns are linguistic devices that express fixed social relations and are used to "socially construct identities rather than objectively represent them" (Bramley 2001:13)

The grammatical group of pronouns includes words that generally serve many different purposes. There are *personal pronouns*, *reflexive pronouns, reciprocal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, relative pronouns, interrogative pronouns,* and *indefinite pronouns* (Crystal 2004). Nonetheless, because of the morpho-syntactic similarities, these words are grouped together. However, these groups can vary depending on grammatical perspective and definition. Pronouns are usually explained on the basis of their anaphoric and referential features (Bramley 2001:13ff). According to Crystal (2004:40) pronouns are words in place of nouns or noun phrases or words that refer to some aspect of the speech situation. There are however exceptions to this definition, considering pronouns such as *every* and *other*. A more discourse-oriented definition is that first person and second person pronouns do not serve the purpose of replacing a noun or noun phrase; instead they are used to address and refer to speech participants. The first person represents the speaker and the second person the addressee (Bramley 2001:14). This study will focus on the personal pronouns *I, you, we* and *they.*

Personal pronouns refer to a noun or noun phrase, which has already been mentioned or is familiar to the listener because it is obvious from the context. They refer to the people or things in the act of communication or connected to it in some way (Crystal 2004).

Even though pronouns do not convey meaning to the extent as content words, which give meaning to a sentence, they may change the meaning or understanding of the sentence or even the perception of the speaker

depending on how they are used. Pronouns also indicate the relationship between speaker and listener or between the speaker and a certain situation. Pronouns can place distance between speaker and listeners or a situation or express solidarity and unity.

In politics, the pronouns a political leader chooses to use in his or her speech, interview or debate are extremely important and can have an effect on the outcome of the speech, interview or debate. Several studies have been carried out on pronouns in political language and how the pronominal choice can affect the listener's understanding of the message. The pronominal choice can give a reflection of politicians' thinking and attitude towards a certain political issue and different political identities (Maitland & Wilson 1987). A study by Bolivar (1999) targeting two president candidates in political interviews showed that *I* was the most frequent personal pronoun used in political interviews because the questions asked often required an answer that reflected personal opinions and positions. However, in speeches where the politicians have the help of speechwriters the use of *I* may be different. Furthermore, Bolivar (1999) argues that politicians tend to want to exclude themselves in plural references such as *we* in order to distance themselves from responsibility of their future actions, except when they want to achieve a good effect in a campaign or when the politician is in the beginning of his or her presidency.

Looking at the uses of *you* Kitagawa and Lehrer (1990) distinguish between the uses of the *referential you*, *impersonal you*, and the *vague you*. The referential *you* identifies a specific individual, while the impersonal *you* works in the same way as the indefinite, which can refer to anyone and/or everyone. The vague use of *you* refers to a specific individual but not identified. All of these variations of *you* are interesting in reference to political discourse, although the impersonal use is of special interest. The impersonal *you* conveys a message, which connects to the "theme of

generality" (Kitagawa & Lehrer 1990). To put it more simply, the impersonal *you* tends to imply that the given information is a message that is generally accepted by listeners. Therefore, the impersonal *you* can be a useful device in speeches or in political debates in order to enhance the politician's credibility. Allen (2007) argues that it is an advantage for politicians to present their beliefs and political ideas as general ideas or even common sense because it makes it hard for the listeners to question what they are saying.

Another way to make use of the pronominal choice is when shifting agency, and the typical shift in agency is the switch from *I* to *you*. O'Connor (1994) argues that when a speaker switches from *I* to *you* but is still referring to 'self' there are two possible effects the speaker is looking for. The speaker either wants to distance himself or herself from the particular topic or the speaker is trying to involve others and share a particular view or feeling.

The first pronoun *I* is used to refer to the speaker, but it can also refer to the speaker's interactional and social identities (Bramley 2001). In political discourse these identities are presented as private or public identities, which can also be referred to as professional or institutional identities (Allen 2007). Politicians jump between the various identities; whether they choose to be private or public depends on the context and the effect the politician is looking for. Fetzer (2002) suggests that politicians need to present private aspects of themselves in order to express sincerity. However, this is done to enhance the credibility of the public identity, which is evaluated by the listeners.

Uses of *we* in political contexts can also vary just as *you* and *I*. The basic use of *we* is to refer to a collective identity or to indicate group membership. According to Bramley (2001) and Wales (1996) the more vague and implicit use of *we* gives the speaker the authority to speak for others; politicians have the opportunity to speak on behalf of their party and at the

same time deflect their personal responsibilities. The speaker can also use *we* to exclude or include listeners from group membership (Wales 1996).

Another typical function of *we* is to create a sense of solidarity and unity. By establishing the referent as the Nation or Americans for example, this can be created (Wales 1996). Wales (1996) also refers to this variant of *we* as the *patriotic we*. In her studies she found that politicians often use this when talking about characteristics generally shared by most of the country before they continue with the use of *we* in relation to specific political beliefs or opinions.

According to previous research, *they* serves the purpose of distancing the speaker from the political topic or issue spoken of (Wilson 1990). *They* also serves the function of portraying ideological differences between the speaker's party and the opposition. While doing this, *they* also decreases the speaker's responsibility and increases positive self-presentation (Allen 2007:11).

In conclusion, there are many different rhetorical skills politicians use in political discourse. These rhetorical skills can be used to legitimize the politician or to delegitimize their opposition. In addition to this the way speakers choose to refer to themselves and others with personal pronouns can also be used as a effective rhetorical device in political discourse. *I*, *you* and *we* in political discourse are well researched, while there are not as many studies analyzing *they* in political discourse.

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Materials

The study is based on two speeches held by Barack Obama, more specifically, his two presidential nomination acceptance speeches; the first one he gave at the Democratic convention back in 2008 before becoming president and the one he gave at the 2012 Democratic convention.

Table 1. Number of words in Obama's speeches from 2008 and 2012

	2008 Conventions speech	2012 Convention speech
Number of words	4562	4587

These two speeches were chosen firstly, because they provide the opportunity to contrast the use of language in Obama's speeches before taking office and see if and how it has changed now that he is president. Secondly, the acceptance speeches are held at the presidential nomination conventions where the presidential candidates for the first time give a speech as a formal president candidate for a party. These acceptance speeches are always broadcast on television, and a large number of people take part of the speeches, which makes it even more important for the candidates to enhance their credibility. These speeches are available online at the American Presidential Project website.

3.2 Method

The different pronouns were located with the search function in Microsoft Word. With the help of the linguistic context, the referents of the different pronouns were determined and what political strategic and persuasive function the pronoun choice fulfills. Before analyzing the pronouns, the speeches were read in full. Then, pronouns that were used strategically were located and analyzed. Firstly, the linguistic co-text was used to determine the

use of the personal pronouns. Secondly, the social and political context was considered in order to be able determine the persuasive significance of the pronouns.

4. Results

The study found that *I, you, we* and *they* are used in several strategic ways. Overall, it is found that *I, you* and *we* focus on both legitimizing and delegitimizing strategies, while *they* focus on the opposition and therefore deals with delegitimizing strategies. Table (2) displays the number of occurrences of the personal pronouns in the two speeches:

Table 2. Personal pronoun occurrence in Obama's speeches from 2008 and 2012

Pronoun	Convention Speech 2008	Convention Speech 2012
I	81	77
you	44	85
we	77	101
they	18	30
Total	220	293

In the following subsections the results from the analysis are presented in more detail. The first four subsections present the overall function of the personal pronouns. Section 4.1 discusses the strategic use of the pronoun *I,* what identities *I* represent, and their function. Section 4.2 deals with the different variations of *you* found in the speeches and their strategic function. Section 4.3 analyze and discusses the identities that *we* represents and their strategic function. Section 4.4 deals with the strategic use of *they*. The last subsection, 4.5, compares the function of personal pronouns in the speech from 2008 and 2012.

4.1 The use of *I*

The personal pronoun *I* is the most unambiguous pronoun out of the four analyzed in this study. *I* does not substitute another noun; it is used for self-reference (Bramley 2001:27). Nevertheless, when used in different/specific contexts it can fulfill many different functions. Since it is a self-referencing term it draws attention especially to the speaker.

In political discourse, politicians strive to present a positive picture of themselves, in other words they strive to be legitimized as a politician. In this study it is found that *I* is often used in connection to positive traits or events, although there are instances where it is used in connection to negative or problematic issues to achieve a specific effect. In (1) Obama describes the people that what the Democratic Party is offering will not be a quick fix, which may be problematic.

(1) Now, **I** won't pretend the road **I'm** offering is quick or easy. I never have. You didn't elect me to tell you what you wanted to hear. You elected me to tell you the truth.

He is speaking as a representative of the Democratic Party and he is surely talking about what the party offers with him as a leader, not what he as an individual is offering. Accordingly, the pronominal choice would be *we (*the road *we* are offering is not quick or easy), although in this case the choice is *I.* In the first clause *I won't pretend* Obama is suggesting he is a man of truth, who does not give false pretenses. The next clause *the road I'm offering* helps him further his point; by using *I'm* he is taking responsibility, for delivering an unpleasant truth. In the next two sentences he emphasizes this even more, *you didn't elect me to tell you what you wanted to hear. You elected me to tell you the truth*. These sentences suggest that he will tell the truth, even if it is not what the audience wants to hear. The use of *I* in this paragraph allows Obama to talk about a potentially problematic issue, while still maintaining a positive picture of himself.

According to Bramley (2001:128f) *I* can function as a way to describe a politician's qualities, which is a part of expressing their identity as an individual politician, which is illustrated in (1).

In addition, it could be argued that Obama is also attempting to establish a relationship with the audience. Wilson (1990) suggests that politicians often do this by the means of *I*, although this is more clearly illustrated in (2) where Obama shows a high level of personal involvement and commitment.

(2) In the face of that young student who sleeps just three hours before working the night shift, **I** think about my mom, who raised my sister and me on her own while she worked and earned her degree; […] When **I** listen to another worker tell me that his factory has shut down, **I** remember all those men and women on the South Side of Chicago who **I** stood by and fought for two decades ago after the local steel plant closed.

In (2) of this example Obama mentions a student working night shifts to be able to afford a college degree. He subsequently connects this to himself and his family: *I think about my mom, who raised my sister and me on her own while she worked and earned her degree*. By using *I* and giving an account about himself and his family, he is letting the audience know that he has experienced this, thereby he is implying he has knowledge about people in the same position. Then, Obama is speaks about factory workers who lost their job and connecting this to what he has done to support people in similar situation; *I remember all those men and women on the South Side of Chicago who I stood by and fought fo*r. By using *I* here, Obama emphasizes what he as an individual has done and implies that he is caring and involved in the workers. In the whole paragraph *I* functions as a way for Obama to point out his qualities as a leader through his identity as an individual politician. As mentioned, Obama shows a high level of personal involvement and commitment, which establish a positive self-presentation in order to legitimize himself and his policy. In other words, in this study it is found that the speaker positions himself through descriptions and narratives about his

own life. Bramley (2001) suggests that through recounts and narratives as such politicians' performance in relation their job, authority, knowledge and responsibility is shown.

Moving on, there are different types of identities represented by *I* found in the speeches; private and public identities as earlier mentioned. (Allen 2007). Fetzer's (2002) studies suggest that it is central for politicians to present private identities in order to express sincerity and credibility. There are multiple examples of private aspects of Obama's identity throughout the speeches. Example (3) illustrates one of many; in this example Obama legitimizes his politics by showing his personal relationship to it:

(3) My grandparents were given the chance to go to college, buy their own home, and fulfill the basic bargain at the heart of America's story […] And **I** ran for President because **I** saw that basic bargain slipping away.

In this paragraph Obama presents his private identity by telling the audience what his grandparents were able to achieve because of certain politics. So, when he says *I ran for president because I saw that basic bargain slipping away*, it indicates that he really cares and is sincere in his intention because it is connected to his private life. Another important aspect of this is that presenting private identities is a way of staying relatable to the audience, which Obama manages to do in this paragraph. According to Caprara and Zimbardo (2004), this is also important in order to attract a larger audience.

In spite of the importance of private identities, it is inevitable not to present to public identities in political discourse because they have a connection to power and leadership. In the following example (4) Obama manages to present a public identity, while expressing sincerity and credibility:

(4) The times have changed, and so have I. **I'm** no longer just a candidate. **I'm** the President. And that means **I** know what it means to send young Americans into battle, for **I** have held in my arms the mothers and fathers of those who didn't return. **I've** shared the pain of families who've lost their homes and the frustration of workers who've lost their jobs.

In example (4) Obama is taking on his public identity, *I'm the president*. Nonetheless, instead of connecting the phrase to power he connects it to the more sensitive and emotional side of being president. *I know what it means […] I've held in my arms* and *I've shared the pain* are phrases that emphasize his sincerity and at the same time portraying him as person with good qualities. That is to say, these phrases helps Obama to establish a even more positive self-presentation and it also increases his legitimization.

In conclusion, *I* has many different functions in Obamas speeches. *I* refers to several different identities, which benefits Obama due to the way he chooses to connect it to the direct co-text and context such as personal events.

4.2 The use of *you*

This study found that the pronoun *you* is used in many different ways in Obama's convention speeches, both as a rhetorical device to invoke ideas about people and as a simple linguistic features depending on which version of *you* that is used. Previous studies have suggested that politicians often make use of the impersonal or generic *you* in political discourse (Bramley 2010; Allen 2007; Kitagawa & Lehrer 1990). As observed in section 2.1, Kitagawa and Lehrer (1990) suggest that this version of *you* conveys a message of generality where the communicated information is regarded as common sense or generally accepted ideas shared by many. This study found results in line with their suggestions.

Example (5) below presents instances of the impersonal *you*. Here, *you* is used to further Obama's education policy and emphasize its importance.

(5) And in this election **<u>you</u>** can do something about it. **<u>You</u>** can choose a future where Americans have the chance to gain the skills they need to compete, no matter how old they are or how much money they make. Education was a gateway to opportunity for

me. It was a gateway for Michelle. It was a gateway for most of **you**. And now more than ever, it is the gateway to a middle class life.

In the first line *you* refers to all Americans who can vote; it is not specified if it is Democrats or Republicans. Therefore, the listeners can choose to identify with the group or not identify with it. By selecting *you* instead of *we* ('*we* can do something about it') as the pronominal choice in this particular section, Obama broadens his target group to include all potential voters, not only Democrats, which would be the case if he chose *we*. Then, when Obama say *It was a gateway for most of you* the referent of *you* is rather unclear, although from the direct co-text and the marker *most of* it can be argued that the target group has narrowed in comparison to *you* in line 1 because he is referring to a more specific group.

In (6) the generic *you* functions as a strategy to criticize the opposition by excluding them from the generalized truth that is presented.

(6) **You** don't defeat a terrorist network that operates in eight countries by occupying Iraq. **You** don't protect Israel and deter Iran just by talking tough in Washington. **You** can't truly stand up for Georgia when you've stained our oldest alliances. If John McCain wants to follow George Bush with more tough talk and bad strategy that is his choice – but it is not the change we need.

By using *you* in (6) the message is presented as if it were common sense; something everyone knows or should know, although this is specific political policy of the Democrats. However, it is legitimized because it is presented in this way. If Obama alternatively were to say "*we* don't defeat a terrorist network… ", he would not achieve the same effect. Another notable thing is that *you* also functions as an indirect accusation of the opposition. *You don't defeat a terrorist network that operates in eight countries by occupying Iraq* implies that someone has done this, and in the next lines it is obvious that it is George Bush that is being referred to. Therefore, *you* in this paragraph is both legitimizing and delegitimizing, because it portrays the opposition negatively.

Above all, the central function *you* has is that it has the possibility to put across information as common sense or general thoughts shared by most people. This in turn can be used to the speaker's benefit by invoking specific ideologies on people, while it delegitimizes the opposition.

4.3 The use of *we*

As in the case of *I*, *we* represents different identities, although *we* is more ambiguous. In this study it is found that *we* refers to the American people, the people who vote for and support the Democratic party, and to Obama and unidentified others. In other words, *we* refers to a collective group in which the speaker is always included. However, due to the collective identity the speaker's individual identity is not as strong as if the speaker were to use the personal pronoun *I*. Therefore, attention is not only drawn to the speaker, but to the group. According to Bramley (2001) politicians often use this version of *we* in connection to negative events to deflect attention away from 'self'. In this study it is found that Obama takes on a collective identity or institutional identity as a member of the Democratic Party when speaking of negative events or problematic issues. This allows Obama to decrease his individual responsibility or to mark a distance from events that place him in a negative light. In other words, the usage of *we* is a legitimizing strategy. In example (7) *we* functions as a way for Obama to deflect responsibility.

(7) And I will never—I will never—turn Medicare into a voucher. No American should ever have to spend their golden years at the mercy of insurance companies. They should retire with the care and the dignity that they have earned. Yes, **we** will reform and strengthen Medicare for the long haul, but **we'll** do it by reducing the cost of health care, not by asking seniors to pay thousands of dollars more.

In the first line Obama is fully committed to making sure Medicare does not become a voucher; *I will never*. By using *I* he indicates that he takes

responsibility for this. Nonetheless, he then implies something else. Instead of continuing with *I,* he switches to a collective identity; *we will reform and strengthen*, which implies that he shares the responsibility of reforming Medicare with others. To put it more simply, because the responsibility is shared it is hard to say who will be accountable for it.

Furthermore, another typical strategic function of *we* found in this study is that *we* explicitly establishes a patriotic feeling in the audience through inclusion, while simultaneously invoking specific political ideas which are presented as general attitudes shared by the people. Example (8) is a typical example of the patriotic *we.*

(8) As Americans, **we** believe **we** are endowed by our Creator with certain, inalienable rights, rights that no man or government can take away. **We** insist on personal responsibility, and **we** celebrate individual initiative. **We're** not entitled to success; **we** have to earn it. **We** honor the strivers, the dreamers, the risk takers, the entrepreneurs who have always been the driving force behind our free enterprise system, the greatest engine of growth and prosperity that the world's ever known. But **we** also believe in something called citizenship. Citizenship: a word at the very heart of our founding, a word at the very essence of our democracy, the idea that this country only works when **we** accept certain obligations to one another and to future generations.

In this example, Obama co-implicates Americans by means of the pronoun *we*; he prescribes what Americans are supposed to believe. *As Americans, we believe we are endowed by our Creator with certain, inalienable rights, rights that no man or government can take away* is presented as a general belief that is shared by most Americans. He continues to present his statements as generally accepted beliefs shared by all Americans, although he speaks about specific Democratic ideas: *But we also believe in something called citizenship. […] the idea that this country only works when we accept certain obligations to one another and to future generations.* By presenting them in this way, he paves the way for the acceptance of Democrat ideals.

To sum up, *we* represents several different identities in Obama's two speeches. The presented identities have a great impact on how the audience

will receive the message and the legitimization of the speakers and their ideas.

4.4 The use of *they*

The analysis showed that *they* is used in two ways in Obama's speeches; either it is used for its anaphoric features in a non-strategic way or it is used to exclude the opposition by portraying them a negative way. Bramley (2001:182ff) suggests that *they* often functions as a tool for establishing 'us and them' because *they* excludes *I* and therefore creates 'self' and 'other'. In (9) Obama attacks the opposition by implying that their arguments are weak. He is using *they* to exclude the opposition.

(9) Now, our friends down in Tampa at the Republican Convention were more than happy to talk about everything they think is wrong with America. But **they** didn't have much to say about how **they'd** make it right. **They** want your vote, but **they** don't want you to know their plan. And that's because all **they** have to offer is the same prescriptions **they've** had for the last 30 years.

In this example, *they* refers to a clearly identified group even though it is not mentioned. Looking beyond the linguistic context and considering the social context it is safe to say that Obama and the Democrats are the in-group here and everyone who identifies with the Republicans is excluded from that group. What is important to have in mind is that this speech takes place at a Democratic convention where the majority of the audience supports Obama already. In spite of this, the challenge for Obama is to convince potential voters who are not present at the convention; the audience who takes part of the speech through media. So, when Obama says *They want your vote, but they don't want you to know their plan* he shows ideological differences and implies that he and his party are ready to tell voters what their plans are. The focus is on the opposition's weaknesses and therefore it is also delegitimizing.

To conclude, *they* is used strategically to focus on portraying a negative picture of the opposition in Obama's speeches. There are no instances in the speeches where *they* functions as a legitimization strategy.

4.5 Convention speech 2008 and 2012

Comparing the use of pronouns in the convention speeches from 2008 and the one from 2012, there are more similarities than differences in the way the speaker chooses to use personal pronouns. Comparing the number of personal pronouns found in the speeches (Table 2), it is illustrated that there is a very small difference in the number of instances. However, the difference is number of instances must be analyzed in the contexts in which the different pronouns occur in order for the comparison to be of value. The most noticeable difference (Table 2) is in the pronoun *you*, which was used almost twice as frequently in the speech from 2012 speech compared to the from 2008.

Table 3. Caption[1]

Pronoun	Convention Speech 2008	Convention Speech 2012
I	81	77
you	44	85
we	77	101
they	18	30
Total	220	293

It is found that in the speech from 2008, there are few instances where *you* functions as legitimizing strategy. Instead, *you* function more as a delegitimizing tool. On the contrary, there are more instances of *you* functioning as legitimizing than delegitimizing in the speech from 2012. In the 2012 speech the impersonal *you* is more frequently used, and often linked

[1] Table 3 is a replica of table 2, reproduced in section 4.5 for convenience.

with the verb *choose* expressing the importance of people to take part in the elections as illustrated in example (11):

(11) And now **you** have a choice […]. **You** can choose that future. **You** can choose the pathway where we control more of our energy.

There could be many possible explanations for this difference. However, considering the broader social context and time period of the speeches, Obama is more dependent on people who voted for him in 2008 to actually go out and vote again in order for him to be re-elected. Therefore, it is important for him to not only encourage people to go out and vote, but also important to legitimize himself even more and explain why he should continue to be president.

According to Bolivar's (1999) study, previously mentioned in section 2.1, politicians often use *I* more frequently at the beginning of their careers. The results of this study are not in line with this previous research, since the frequency of *I* is relatively the similar in both speeches. A possible explanation for this could be that previous research that suggests this is often based on political interviews, which in many ways differ from political speeches.

Altogether, the pronominal choice of the speeches is similar. The small difference that is found is mostly due to differences in time period and social context of the speeches.

5. Conclusion and discussion

The analysis has shown that personal pronouns are a very important part of political rhetoric. Through a careful choice of personal pronouns, politicians

can persuade the audience that they are better and more legitimate leaders than their opposition.

The results suggested that *I, you* and *we* could be used strategically to both delegitimize the opposition and legitimize the speaker, while *they* functions as a delegitimizing strategy because it often refers to the 'other'. In the chosen material the outcome of *they* was very limited. Perhaps if the chosen material were bigger and broader the outcome would be different. However, from previous research it is evident that *they* is not a well researched area within political discourse. Politicians' priority is to present themselves and their ideas in a positive light, which *they* fail to do proven from the results of this study. *I* and *we* represent the different identities that the speaker takes on, which were showed to benefit the speaker to a great extent. Nonetheless, as previous studies suggests the identities that politicians present are often created objective realities, which is important to keep in mind as a listener. As for the comparison between the two speeches held by Obama, there were not many differences found. The results proved that the pronominal choice is considerably consistent, which in itself is very interesting. However, because the study only analyzed two of his speeches and the fact that politicians often use speechwriters, no general conclusions can be drawn about his general pronoun usage. For future studies it would be interesting to analyze this more; are the pronominal choice consistent throughout other speeches by Obama? Would the pronominal choice be consistent in political debates and interviews?

Overall, the results of the study were in line with many of the previous studies mentioned in section 2.1. Nonetheless, it is important to consider that many of the previous study analyze political interviews or political debates. In such political discourse, politicians cannot prepare their speech in the same way they do in political speeches. Therefore, such political discourse may reveal more about the politicians' spontaneous pronoun usage.

Finally, there are many ways politicians persuade their audience, and it may be of interest to analyze other rhetorical strategies such as metonymy and metaphors that politicians make use of.

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