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The 1st person plural in political discourse—American politicians in interviews and in a debate

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ABSTRACT

Billig (1995) wrote that politicians often evoke nationalistic views when delivering their speeches – they do this through the use of simple words (as personal pronouns) in a specified context. The context, and the way personal pronouns are utilized, creates decisive turning points for any politician, especially one on the electoral road (Johnson, 1994; van Dijk, 1997, 2002). A politician must decide which stance to take on given issues, which constituents to support, and with which group/ideology to self-identify. This paper analyzes self-identifications that particular American politicians develop through their employment of pronominal choice. The period that was of particular interest was during 2008 elections in the US and the subsequent year. We compared how the 1st person plural pronoun was used during the interviews and during the debate. This paper finds that American politicians make use of personal pronouns to evoke nationalistic emotions and achieve their career goals differently, depending whether it is during the interview or during a debate. We argue that the role of the venue as an external characteristic of context is underestimated in the political discourse research.

1. Introduction

We address others on a daily basis. In doing so, we reveal a great deal of information about ourselves (e.g., formality, status, solidarity, power, class, and sex). Forms of personal address have changed and may continue to change with time. Let us consider the evolution of personal address with regards to women, and the specific use of 'Ms.'. Until the early twentieth century, two forms were used to address women: 'Miss' and 'Mrs.' These forms initially distinguished young from mature women. During the 1960s, 'Miss' and 'Mrs.' changed to distinguish single from married women (Spender, 1980). Nowadays, we use the form 'Ms.' interchangeably for young, single and married women. Forms of address (in addition other references including the self) belong to the pronominal system, which is our research interest area.

People continuously make pronominal choices in their conversations. These choices also provide information about the interlocutors. Nevertheless, the meaning of personal pronoun choice can only be derived from its context. We can address one person as 'you' in various situations that provide additional meaning to the pronoun we use, e.g., 'you' as a student, 'you' as my friend, 'you' as John Doe, 'you' as an actor, and so on. Given that the meaning of the personal pronoun is closely bound to its context, the usage of pronouns can thus be easily manipulated. Experimental research has shown that the manipulation

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of personal pronouns influences the way we interpret our relationships with others (Fitzsimons and Kay, 2004; Kertz et al., 2006).

The ease with which personal pronouns may be used to convey different meanings makes them a perfect tool for rhetorical purposes. Not surprisingly, politicians often, if not always, use this tool. In Polish and Russian political scenes, solidarity is less important than an emphasis on differences (Pyykkö, 2002; Skarżyńska, 2002). Political language is a constant clash between 'us' and 'them.' In these cases, pronominal choice mainly functions to show the ideological differences, not the sameness. On the other hand, countries with longer democratic histories emphasize similarity in their pronominal choices. Personal pronouns are used primarily to show the speaker's solidarity with a particular ideology, and secondarily (if necessary) to show the speaker's difference with another group (Tabakowska, 2002).

In their research on political interviews, Bull and Fetzer (2006) emphasize that "(. . .) politicians use personal pronouns to good effect: for example, to accept, deny, or distance themselves from responsibility for politician action; to encourage solidarity; to designate and identify both supporters and enemies. Their choice of pronouns may also reflect their own personal and political ideologies." (2006:5)

Bull and Fetzer's (2006) study lacks quantitative data to support their conclusions. We consider that 'quantitative data' refers to provisions of data connected with frequency of pronoun use. In their work, the authors give text lengths, but do not provide information regarding how often analyzed pronouns occur in their text. Furthermore, they only focus on pronominal shifts, wherein a given speaker changes from 'I' to 'we' or from 'we' to 'I.' Bull and Fetzer do not examine whether or not usage of personal pronouns reveals whom the speaker supports.

This paper addresses two closely related functions of personal pronoun. First, we study the ways in which personal pronoun meanings change given particular contexts. This function makes personal pronouns a perfect tool for political rhetoric. This function evokes three questions that we asked: (1) What factors affect the distribution of personal and possessive pronouns? (2) Does the topic of the conversation make politicians uncomfortable, and thereby cause them to switch to a different pronominal meaning? or (3) Does the conversation's venue influence politicians' care in pronominal choice?

Secondly, we study how ideology influences politicians' application of personal pronouns. In his previous research, Billig (1995) pointed out simple tools used for nationalistic register. Among them, he includes 'I,' 'you,' 'we,' 'here,' and 'now.' These words serve to create what Billig calls 'banal nationalism.' *Banal* refers to the 'everyday' thing that is not noticed easily, hidden in its own simplicity and lack of attractiveness. These subtle words do not deliver an obvious message; they serve to create a background for and 'flag' (Billig's term) nationalism. To understand these words, the listener must interpret them from the speaker's point of view. Here, the question is: How does the distribution of personal and possessive pronouns reveal a speaker's ideological views?

This paper analyzes how politicians identify themselves with social groups through the distribution of the personal pronoun 'we' and the possessive pronoun 'our'. In the case of possessive pronoun 'our,' we are interested in the object that follows it – as such, we analyzed each instance in a broad context. They make the choice and we examine the ways they use the personal pronoun 'we' and the possessive pronoun 'our' in conversation.

According to Billig (1995), nationalistic thought is frequently used by all politicians on a daily basis; we just tend not to notice it. This paper tests his hypothesis – do American politicians evoke nationalistic 'flags' in their pronominal choices? We can test 'flagging' by analyzing how frequently politicians associate themselves with their country or Americans in general. Moreover, we argue that nationalistic flagging is done on purpose, i.e., it is used in a specific context, not any context. A speaker begins to use banal nationalistic flags to achieve a particular goal, e.g., to win more voters or supporters.

We assert that politicians change the meaning of personal pronouns depending on the venue and topic of the interview. The topic and venue may be closely interrelated; therefore, it is not always easy to make a clear distinction between the two. This paper considers both factors to be important to the pronominal choice that politicians make.

2. Previous studies on personal pronouns

The traditional view of pronouns is that they stand on behalf of nouns. From one point of view, pronouns basically provide an anaphoric function and relegate their deictic function. Some researchers have proposed the contrary – that deictic function (the way the speaker chooses to address himself/herself or the other) does indeed play an important role in pronominal use (Mühlhäusler and Harré, 1990:49; Simon and Wise, 2002; Bhat, 2004).

Bolinger (1979) presents many examples of such usage, in which the choice of pronouns changes the strength of the message. Examples from Bolinger (1979) (cf. Mühlhäusler and Harré, 1990:54) are stated below:

Example (1):

You do not smoke in this room.

One does not smoke in this room.

They do not smoke in this room.

We do not smoke in this room.

In these sentences, the chosen pronoun includes the addressee. Bolinger (1979) also shows that one cannot simply assign any meaning to a pronoun. Meaning depends highly upon context.

Example (2):

My aunt and I went shopping and we bought many things.

You and I, we have known each other for years.

When we still had tails and lived in caves we did not need dishwashers.

The meaning of 'we' in the last example remains ambiguous. We do not know whether or not the speaker includes himself/herself in 'we' as a human who has a tail.

In such instances, we need contextual knowledge. We cannot ascertain a personal pronoun's meaning within a single sentence; the meaning of a pronoun is established above the syntactical level. Extralinguistic information also aids the analyses. It becomes important to know the topic and venue of the conversation because both variables influence personal pronoun choice. We argue that pronominal choice in part reveals with whom a politician is identifying himself/herself. Many crucial decisions are made based on this information. For example, in political elections, we decide whom to support or not.

Previous political text studies focused on ambiguity in the use of pronominal choice. For instance, politicians tend to overuse the first-person, plural pronoun for their political and rhetorical goals (Sacks, 1995; Tabakowska, 2002). Wilson (1990) provides an example of Churchill's speech, made after the evacuation of Dunkirk in 1940: "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds" (p. 47). Churchill's employment of the exclusive 'we' indicates that he himself is not engaged in the action.

The power of personal pronouns has been discussed in existing literature (Wilson, 1990, 1991; Brown and Gilman, 1960; Tannen, 1993; Mühlhäusler and Harré, 1990). According to Wilson (1990), pronominal choice reveals some information about the speaker and affects the hearer. Brown and Gilman (1960) focus on power and solidarity expressed through pronominal choice, i.e., when "one speaker addresses the other by first name but is addressed by title-name (e.g., doctor and patient, teacher and student)" (Tannen, 1993:167). According to Tannen (1993), power is not asymmetrical, as Brown and Gilman (1960) argue, but is closely related to solidarity such that one entitles the other. The author further states that "Communication is a double bind in the sense that anything we say to honor our difference violates our sameness" (Tannen, 1993:171). Mühlhäusler and Harré (1990) argue that Brown and Gilman's (1960) approach deals with the problem only from the cognitive perspective. Mühlhäusler and Harré (1990) propose a markedness system with some categories: rank, status, office, generation, formality, informality, public discourse, private discourse, intimacy, social distance, and high degree of emotional excitement (cf. Liebscher et al., 2010).

Some of these categories are difficult to measure unless the data is gathered under controlled conditions in an experimental design (e.g., emotional excitement). Still, such an approach eliminates one important factor considered in our study: the context of a real conversation, which should remain intact and unaltered by a researcher and his/her experimental design. Consequently, this paper does not apply the categories mentioned above. Section 2.1 focuses on the nature of our data, i.e., on political interview and a political debate as two different registers. We then present previous works that are relevant to our data.

2.1. Previous studies on interviews and political debate

Most conversations are governed by certain rules known to the interlocutors. If the rules are not followed, interlocutors may be excluded from the conversation (e.g., if a politician during an interview continually interrupts the interviewer or other speakers, he/she may have his/her microphone shut off). We learn these rules from our family, community, and society. These rules are influenced by our cultural background and by the location where the conversation takes place. A courtroom conversation, called a 'hearing,' has a different organizational flow from a restaurant conversation (Schegloff, 1991, 1993). Applying different names to conversations based on the location implies the significance of 'place.' Conversation settings influence different turn-taking rules (Heritage and Greatbatch, 1991:95). As Schegloff (1991:54) puts it, "It is the courtroom-ness of courtrooms in session [that] seems in fact to organize the way in which the talk is distributed among [the] persons present, among the categories of persons present, in the physical setting."

In news interviews, the sequence of turn-taking is specified *ad hoc*. Initially, an interviewer's (IR) question is followed by the interviewee's (IE) response; in this case, the roles of the speakers are clearly divided. The interviewer is in a position to ask questions, while the interviewee answers and does not ask questions in return. At this point, the interviewee may not interrupt the interviewer. According to Heritage and Greatbatch (1991:104), the interviewee may ask for permission to butt in, but he/she never does so without posting a request first. The interviewer, on the other hand, is obliged not to make any encouraging or discouraging statements in order to maintain objectivity.

Thus, we obtain a set of adjacency pairs in news interviews, "where we can assume that, in general, the answerer was the person to whom the question was addressed and that the answerer is addressing the questioner" (Wilson and Zeitlyn, 1995:73). While addressing the question, the interviewee cannot avoid using personal pronouns. A choice is made, whether it is to identify oneself (admitting that "I said so…" or "I did so…," etc.) or to identify with a certain group. Our research focuses on the issue of that choice. This paper is interested in the changeable meaning of 'we' in interviews with American politicians. For example, we examine how politicians juggle their identification with a particular group by using the personal pronoun 'we'. What influences the shift between different 'we'?

Within the CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) movement, there are two main research approaches that deal with context. Johnson's (1994:208) analysis exemplifies these approaches via two related issues: "(1) The question of what counts as relevant context; and (2) the dynamic and strategic nature of contextualization processes."

According to her findings, many approaches focus principally upon context within the discourse itself; they demonstrate how "context is attended to and constituted as a dynamic phenomenon within the turn" (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1992:151). Alternately, a large number of approaches study the effects of external experiences and context upon the conversation itself; they examine what participants bring to the discourse prior to its occurrence.

We know that the interview's environment (venue) and topic influence the distribution of the interviewees' pronouns (Givon, 1976; Wilson and Zeitlyn, 1995). The interview topic is widely considered as the main factor influencing the flow of conversation. Based on our research, we propose the opposite – that the impact of a venue is more significant than that of the topic itself. van Dijk (2002) also demonstrates that topic holds less importance than venue in political discourse. He lists categories that may influence political conversation, i.e. overall domain (i.e. politics), overall societal action (legislation), current interaction (political debate) and current setting (time, location). He further argues that neither topic nor style wholly categorize political discourse. Emphasis lies with (a) who is speaking to whom; (b) when the conversation transpires, and (c) the particular conversational goals (van Dijk, 1997, 2002). We emphasize the impact of location and purpose (interview or political debate) upon political discourse.

3. Data and methodology

The 2008 US presidential election is interesting in several ways. Many years had passed since a female ran for the vice-presidential post and succeeded in winning the primary election. The same can be said of an Afro-American candidate succeeding in a presidential primary. Ultimately, the voters were presented with a choice of pairs (tickets): the Republican ticket consisting of a white male candidate for president (John McCain) and a white female candidate for vice president (Sarah Palin), and the Democratic ticket consisting of an Afro-American male candidate for president (Barack Obama) and a white male candidate for vice president (Joe Biden). Each of the pairs met his/her respective challenger during the 2008 debates (two presidential, one vice presidential). Simultaneously, the US and world economies experienced a tremendous economic crisis, which – along with the 'war on terror' – became the focus of nearly all media resources, interviews, and debates. In this paper, we present and analyze the single vice-presidential debate and a corpus of interviews with American politicians.

This research pursues two goals. The first goal is to determine the distribution of the personal pronouns 'we' and the possessive pronoun 'our' in the 2008 US vice-presidential debate and interviews with Palin, Biden, Obama, and Clinton. The second goal is to find what influences the pronominal choice and how politicians use it to convey their message. The research questions are as follows: How does the distribution of personal and possessive pronouns reveal the ideological views of the speakers? What factors affect the distribution of personal and possessive pronouns? We chose interviews and debate to make a contrast between two different venues and genres. We show that it matters whether a politician is answering questions in an interview or in a debate.

We collected three interviews for each politician. For Palin, we used interviews with Maria Bortiromo, Charlie Gibson and Katie Couric as the interviewers, respectively, all of which took place in August and September before the 2008 elections. The total number of words in Palin's interviews is 8004. In Biden's case, this paper used one 2008 interview and two 2009 interviews with George Stephanopulous, a second interview with Stephanopulous and an interview with Radio Free Europe. Biden's three interviews contain 13,587 words. For Clinton, we used three interviews with Charlie Gibson, Katie Couric and Cynthia McFadden, respectively, all of which took place in May 2008 and October 2009. The total number of words in all three interviews is 12,910. For Obama, we used interviews with the "Sun Times," Leo Harris, and Steve Kroft that took place in March and November 2008 and March 2009. The total number of words in his interviews is 16,598.

There is an unavoidable diachronic discrepancy in the interviews' data; other interviews that would match the same timeline for all of the four politicians could not be found on the Internet. The reason for this, it appears, is that Vice President Biden was restricted from giving interviews (this is authors' guess based on the absence of any other interviews in 2008). Biden is well-known for speaking bluntly; in politics, this method of expressing oneself can be detrimental. During Mexico's 2008 H1N1 outbreak, for instance, Biden commented that people should avoid flying, as planes are the places where germs are easily transferred. Immediately, the aviation community responded with incredulity and concern over the public's potential response to Biden's opinion. As a result, the Obama administration had to apologize for any misunderstanding and clarify the Vice President's stance several times.

In this work, we empirically identified personal pronoun categories through three steps. In the first, step, the whole text was read; in the second step, the texts were uploaded onto a corpus linguistics analysis tool designed by Laurence Anthony (AntConc: http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/software.html). Once the texts were uploaded, target pronouns were keyed in and searched for. Pronouns deemed insignificant (e.g., those used by the interviewers, in quotation or repetition) were eliminated from the printed lists. The focus is thus on specific pronouns relevant to this research. A reference number was assigned and maintained for each target sentence in the data. This step enables inquirers to review sentence context in AntConc. In the third step, a category for each instance was created. Participating readers in this study apply categories based on context. It is not possible to establish categories *ad hoc*; the context of each interview and the speakers' patterns of pronoun usage are

unknown beforehand. Patterns and context can only be established after one becomes familiar with the texts. To reinforce the understanding in this paper, interview and debate annotations were compared with those of a North American (USA) native speaker.

The personal pronoun 'we' and the possessive pronoun 'our' were analyzed. In the case of 'our,' the interest is on the object that followed it. All percentages are based on already normalized data and are shown in all charts that appear in this work. The normalization base was 1000. The normalized data then enabled comparisons among corpora of different sizes.

4. Data analysis

We chose the most frequent categories of pronouns to present in our charts (i.e., more than five instances per pronoun category). First, data were analyzed in the following order: Sarah Palin, Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama. Following the individual presentation of each politician's interviews, we compared the data in the discussion. Afterwards, data on the vice-presidential debate in 2008 are presented. Finally, the difference between the pronominal choice during the interview setting and during the vice-presidential debate is shown.

4.1. Sarah Palin's interviews

At the time of the elections, Palin was Alaska's governor. She was chosen for the vice-presidential post by John McCain's campaign crew. Her nomination was considered as a move to counter the strong appeal of the Obama-Biden ticket. The political scene lacked a female candidate since Hillary Clinton lost the Democratic primary to Barack Obama; undecided voters, particularly women, might be enticed to support Palin in Clinton's absence. The assumption was that many women voters will support a female candidate regardless of her political background. Palin had never involved herself with national or international politics before her nomination; nevertheless, she was an experienced politician at the local level as the governor of Alaska.

In Chart 1 you can see all categories that we found in the interviews with Sarah Plain. This chart shows percentages that are based on normalized data.

The interview data show that Palin (refer to Chart 1) used 'we' to indicate her solidarity with three groups: Americans 31%, Alaskans 28%, and the US 28%. She rarely used 'we' to identify herself with John McCain 8%. Here are some examples from our data with Plain's interviews.

Example (3) illustrates how she used the personal pronoun 'we' to identify with Americans:

> "I'm all about the position that America is in and that **we** have to look at a $700 billion bailout. And, as Sen. McCain has said, unless this nearly trillion dollar bailout is what it may end up to be, unless there are amendments in Paulson's proposal, really I don't believe that Americans are going to support this and **we** will not support this. The interesting thing in the last couple of days that I have seen is that Americans are waiting to see what John McCain will do on this proposal" (Couric–Palin:17).

Example (4) shows how the personal pronoun 'we' was used to identify with John McCain:

> "Specifically, **we** will make every effort possible to help spread democracy for those who desire freedom, independence, tolerance, respect for equality. That is the whole goal here in fighting terrorism also. It's not just to keep the people safe, but to be able to usher in democratic values and ideals around this, around the world" (Couric–Palin:8).

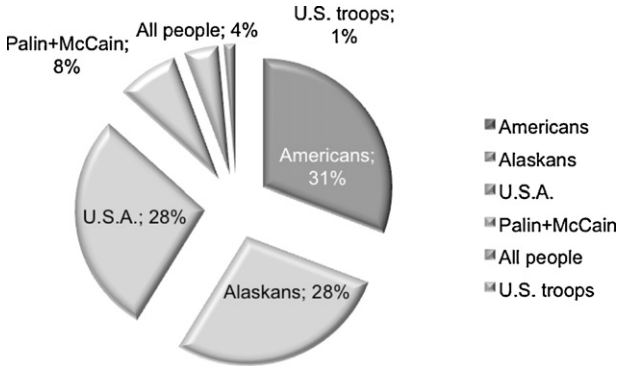

Chart 1. Categories of the personal pronoun 'we' in the interviews with Sarah Palin.

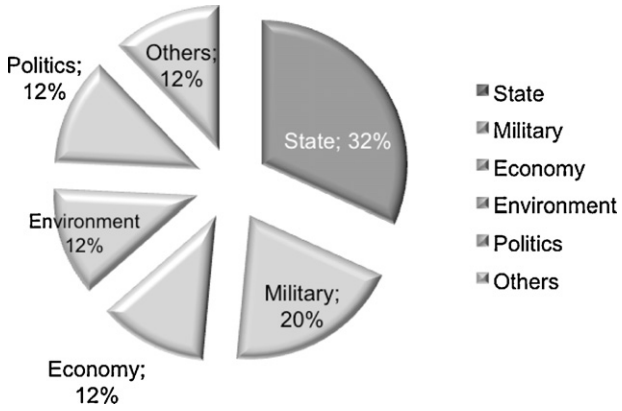

Chart 2. Sarah Palin's usage of the possessive pronoun 'our' in the interview data.

Example (5) shows how the personal pronoun 'we' was used to identify with Alaskans:

> "Do you want to see that happen? And with Alaskans' love and care for our environment and our lands and our wildlife, Alaskans are saying yes because **we** believe that it can be done safely, prudently, and it had better be done ethically also. Yes, **we** want to see that drilling. So hopefully the rest of America can understand that also. You go door to door and ask Alaskans if **we** are ready and willing to produce more and contribute more to the U.S. and they are going to tell you yes" (Bartiromo–Palin:5).

The discrepancy in frequency among Palin's identification with Americans, Alaskans, and McCain may be interpreted in two ways: (1) it is a result of Palin's lack of political experience in the national political scene or (2) it evolved from her lack of interest in supporting McCain's candidacy. After careful review of the data, this paper posits the following theory: Palin may have been more interested in the American middle class as a whole and Alaska's affairs in particular than in showing her support for McCain. She had not spent enough time in the McCain campaign crew to identify with them. She was chosen as a candidate *ad hoc* and her pronominal choice clearly showed it. In addition, her support for her ticket partner proved to be much less than Biden's for Obama (we found that Biden indentified himself with Obama 44%).

Regarding the possessive pronoun 'our' in the interview data, six object categories are distinguished. The six categories are: environment, economy, state, military, politics and other. State and military are the most frequent object categories. In the state category, Palin talked mainly about Alaska, followed by the country, the nation, and finally the Constitution (Chart 2).

Example (6) is from the 2008 Couric-Palin interview:

> "I see the United States as being a force for good in the world. And as Ronald Reagan used to talk about, America being the beacon of light and hope for those who are seeking democratic values and tolerance and freedom. I see **our** country being able to represent those things that can be looked to as that leadership, that light needed across the world."

Example (7) is from the 2008 Bartimoro-Palin interview and belongs under the state category:

> "We need to drill, drill, drill. Otherwise, I cannot believe a domestic solution is any part of a national energy policy if they're not going to let Alaskans drill on our own lands and on federal lands within **our** own state."

Palin talked a great deal about the nation (Americans), and she identified herself strongly with the American people. This association is confirmed by (1) the frequency of the object used after 'our,' and (2) by the personal pronoun 'we' that Palin used most often to identify herself with Americans. In this regard, it can be said that she was connecting more with the middle class, than her direct opponent, Biden. Joe Biden's focus was on his running mate, not on any social group. He was avoiding direct identification with anyone else but Obama.

Example (8) is from the Bartimoro-Palin interview:

> "And I think **our** nation is at a cross-roads also."

The state category illuminates Palin's particular focus on Alaska's domestic affairs. In comparison, Biden, as a professional politician at the national level, did not identify himself with any state to the degree that Palin did.

The military object category follows closely behind state in frequency. A high frequency of military objects is not a surprise. During the campaign period, the US had been in a state of engagement with other nations, principally Iraq and Afghanistan. American political discourse has focused on military-related issues since the events of 9/11. Moreover, a higher

frequency in this category may be a logical consequence of Palin's pro-national stance. Palin used more banal nationalism flags, than any other politicians in the data. Her patriotism and care for Americans (the middle class) are the main features that emerged in her pronominal choice. She also talked about military issues, but here her identification is not that strong (1%). This paper provides an example for this category, and finds an interesting coincidence: only the women (Palin and Clinton) identified themselves with military troops. That identification is not strong in either instance; however, it is interesting that the men (Obama, Biden) did not show such identification in the data. Especially surprising is the fact that Obama did not identify himself with the troops, although the position he ran for would be in command of all military force.

Example (9) is from the Gibson-Palin interview and belongs under the military category:

> "Well, I'm giving you that perspective of how small our world is and how important it is that we work with **our** allies to keep good relations with all of these countries, especially Russia. We will not repeat a Cold War. We must have good relationships with **our** allies, pressuring, also, helping us to remind Russia that it's in their benefit, also, a mutually beneficial relationship for us all to be getting along."

In Palin's interviews, "our allies" was the military category's most frequent collocation of the 'our' object. This result may suggest that for Palin, the relationship of Americans with their allies remains as the most important military issue.

Regarding Palin's 'our' object, this study finds the environment category, in which Palin actually used this object more frequently than Biden. The finding is surprising because Democrats – not Republicans – are usually the ones considered to belong to the 'pro-green' party.

4.2. Joe Biden's interviews

Biden's interviews show different distributions of categories for personal pronouns. Unlike Palin with John McCain, Biden showed a strong identification (44%) with his running mate, Barack Obama. He also identified himself with his family (4%). However, he was less successful in identifying with Americans (the middle class) (20%) (Chart 3).

Example (10) is from the 2008 Biden-Stephanopulous interview:

> "Well, God willing, because, look, **we** can't – the whole idea here is the single most important thing we have to do as a new administration, to have – to be able to have impact on all of the other things **we** want to do, from foreign policy to domestic policy, is **we**'ve got to begin to stem this bleeding here and begin to stop the loss of jobs in the creation of jobs."

Example (11) demonstrates Biden's identification with the US (24%) and Americans (20%):

> "The piece **we**'ve been pushing for, Barack and I during the campaign, as you'll recall, is that **we** needed an economic recovery package **we** thought back in September, October, November. And **we** still think **we** really very badly need it" (Stephanopulous–Biden, 2008:10).

Regarding categories for 'our' objects, six groups plus the 'other' group (in which the instances that did not fit into any category are collected) are distinguished. The six categories are economy, state, politics, environment, military, and family. Of these, politics emerges as the most frequent category (39%) used by Biden for the object of the pronoun 'our.' (Chart 4)

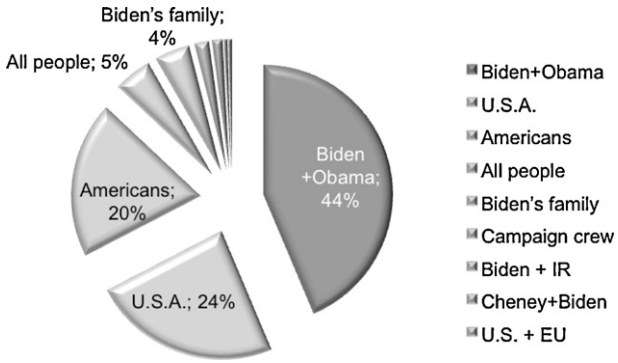

Chart 3. Categories of the personal pronoun 'we' in the interviews with Joe Biden.

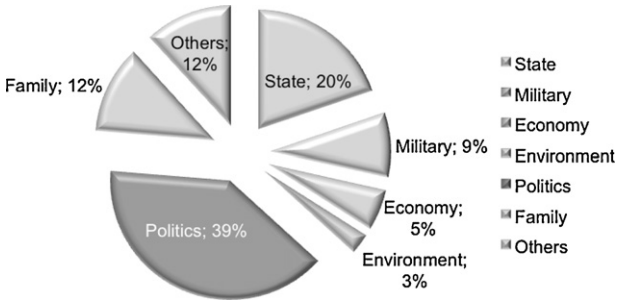

Chart 4. Joe Biden's usage of possessive pronoun 'our' in the interview data.

Example (12) from the 2009 Biden-Stephanopulous interview belongs under the politics category:

> "And – no, I don't want to give the attention, because, look, I think **our** policy has been absolutely correct so far. We have succeeded in uniting the most important and critical countries to North Korea on a common path of further isolating North Korea."

The collocation "our policy" occurred five times in this category. Biden's focus on politics distinguished him from Palin, who focused on state (mainly Alaska and then the nation as a whole) and military affairs. Biden did not talk much about 'the troops.' He adhered to the politics and proposed the goals of the Obama Administration.

4.3. Hillary Clinton's interviews

When we studied Clinton's interviews (12,910 words), we found that she strongly identified herself with the US government. In fact, 44% of all first-person, plural personal pronouns were used to identify the speaker with her government. This finding contrasts with our analyses of other politicians – in those cases, the speakers indicated much less interest in making this particular identification. Chart 5 provides all categories that we found for 'we' used by Hillary Clinton.

Example (13) provides one instance when Clinton identifies herself with the US government and is excerpted from Clinton and McFadden's 2009 interview.

Example (13)

> "Well, I think, to me they're not mutually inconsistent, but the President, and he repeated again to us yesterday, has said consistently is that, look, Russia does not prefer sanctions. You know? They [they] have lots of doubts and concerns about sanctions. But sanctions may be inevitable. Whether they are or not is what **we**'re trying to determine. So I [I] don't see any inconsistency in that" (Clinton–McFadden:44).

It is worth noting that Clinton next frequently identified herself with the Obama Administration and the Democrats (Democratic Party). One might consider these two groups as subsets, somewhat related to the government; we did for this study.

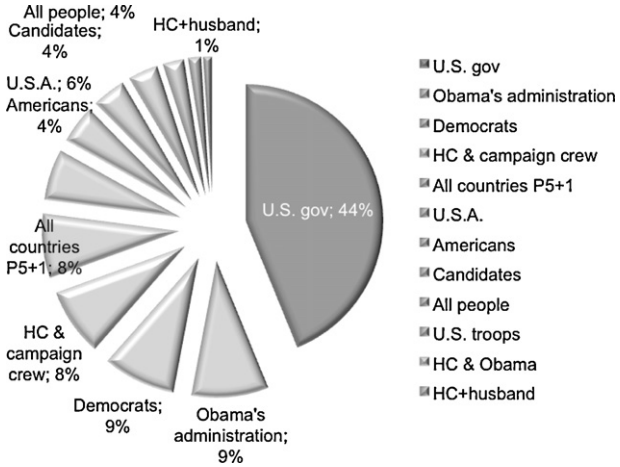

Chart 5. Categories of the personal pronoun 'we' in the interviews with Hillary Clinton.

Example (14) demonstrates how Clinton uses 'we' in the sense of 'Clinton and Democrats'. This quote also underscores Clinton's strong loyalty to her party and colleagues.

Example (14)

> "I have a very broad coalition. And, if you were to apply the Republican rules, because the Republican party basically conducts their primary more in line with the electoral map, uh, because they want it to be winner take all in these states, because they know that's a, a clearer indication of who will likely win in the Fall, or at least be much more competitive, um, I, I would already be the nominee if **we** had the Republican rules. Well, **we** don't, so **we**'re playing by the rules **we** have, but when you win the states that I've won, and you put them on an electoral map, I've won more than 298 electoral votes" (Clinton–Gibson:24–27).

Clinton's peers (Palin, Biden, Obama) failed to identify as furtively with the US government or government-related groups, but they did identify strongly (to varying degrees) with Americans. We realized, based upon our study, that Clinton almost never identified herself with Americans (4%). We can infer that her main focus may not have been winning people's hearts, but demonstrating her qualifications, connections/resources and capability to be the best candidate for the position. The following example, taken from an interview post-election, demonstrates how Clinton's resolve to accomplish the mission evolved to include identification with the Obama Administration.

Example (15)

> "I think it took longer for the people who had supported each of us than it took for us. I think that, you know, **we**'re both professionals. **We** both have a very, you know, a clear sense of who each of us is. And **we** saw the tremendous opportunities for this partnership. And, you know, **we** went to work" (Clinton–McFadden:27).

Lastly, we studied Clinton's use of the possessive pronoun 'our' in interviews. As before, we discovered that Clinton identified strongly with the US government (state category), but she also identified with the US military (14% each). The nature of these two categories is closely related to the 'US government' category, which we outlined under usage of personal pronoun 'we'. (Please refer to Chart 6 for detailed numbers regarding possessive pronoun 'our'.)

4.4. Barack Obama's interviews

After completing Clinton's analyses, we turned our attention to Barak Obama's data. Obama's corpus contained 16,598 words; the corpus comprised two interviews from 2008 and one from 2009. He identified himself most consistently with his campaign crew (35%), followed by Americans (18%). We believe that the time when the interviews were conducted provides some insight into why Obama identified himself as specifically as he did. However, we assert that time could not be the singular explanation. For example, Palin's interviews were conducted around the same time, yet she did not identify herself with her campaign crew at all. Other variables also influence whether or not a speaker identifies himself/herself with a particular group. In Obama's case, at the time of the interviews, he had been working with his crew on a personal level for an extended time, hence his strong identification. Palin, on the other hand, was introduced to the electoral race nearly at its conclusion. She simply did not have enough time to become familiar with McCain's team. Consequently, Palin used 'we' in contexts which highlighted her lack of attachment to a specific political affiliation (Chart 7).

The 2008 Harris interview provides numerous examples of Obama's identification with his campaign crew. Below is a reply made by Obama which contains the usage of this particular 'we:'

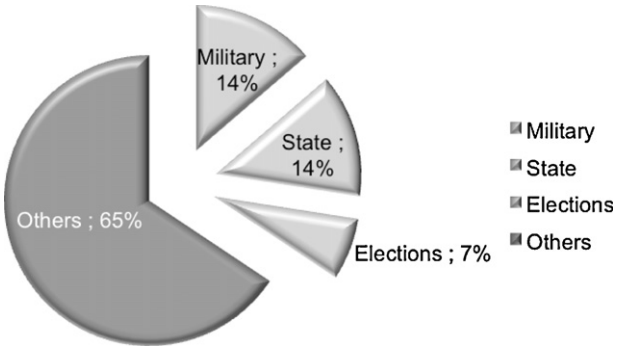

Chart 6. Hillary Clinton's usage of possessive pronoun 'our' in the interviews.

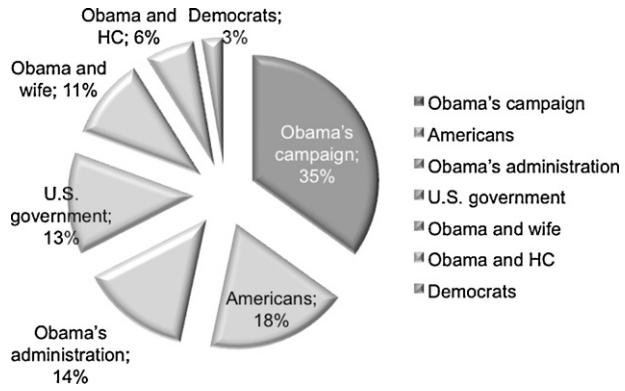

Chart 7. Obama's distribution of the personal pronoun 'we' in the interviews.

Example (16):

> "Understand what's happened in this race where **we** campaign actively in a state, and voters have the chance to see me directly, they check under the hood, and they kick the tires, when **we** don't have as much time on Super Tuesday for example, a big state like California where **we** can't cover the waterfront, Sen. Clinton ends up winning because people are much more familiar with her" (Obama–Harris:4).

As mentioned earlier, Obama additionally identified himself very strongly with Americans (18%). We took the following quotation from Obama's Kroft interview. In Example (17), Obama uses 'we' ("we Americans") as a banal nationalism flag, a flag of nationality. Arguably, Obama used banal nationalistic flags to gain supporters, but he did so less frequently than Sarah Palin.

Example (17)

> "Well, keep in mind that 1932, 1933 the unemployment rate was 25 percent, inching up to 30 percent. You had a third of the country that was ill housed, ill clothed, unemployed. **We**'re not going through something comparable to that. But I would say that this is as bad as **we**'ve seen since then" (Obama–Kroft:31).

Obama next identified himself with his administration (14%) and the US government (13%). We applied both groups to the same broader category: state. Obama's identification with state was not as strong as Clinton's, but was stronger than either Palin's or Biden's. Example (18) (below) illustrates Obama's use of the personal pronoun 'we' as identification with the US government.

Example (18):

> "One area that I'm concerned about, and I've said this publicly, is **we** have not focused on foreclosures and what's happening to homeowners as much as I would like. **We** have the tools to do it. **We**'ve gotta set up a negotiation between banks and borrowers so that people can stay in their homes. That is gonna have an impact on the economy as a whole" (Obama–Kroft:21).

In our example, note how Obama cleverly manages to disperse guilt. He begins the quote with first person singular. Then, when he attempts to explain what was done wrong, he switches to first person plural. Under various circumstances, such a tactic may prove a powerful tool. On one hand, Obama may not be responsible for something that he is explaining; by using the personal pronoun 'I,' he shows his great sense of responsibility. On the other hand, if Obama retains responsibility for something he failed to do, he lightens that responsibility by adding other (not specified) actors – he incorporates the personal pronoun 'we'.

We also found that Obama often referred to his wife (11%), unlike other speakers who rarely spoke of their spouses (Clinton, 1%) or family (Biden, 4%, Palin, 0%). Example (19) demonstrates this phenomenon.

Example (19):

> "Michelle and I talk about it, and **we** decide is there somebody that **we** should – there are some people **we** should talk to who know more about the real estate market in Kenwood – because **we** had never purchased a house before" ("Sun Times":27).

Our study turned to Obama's use of possessive pronoun 'our'. The object group for possessive pronoun 'our,' unlike personal pronoun 'we,' contains different categories. Among them, politics (14%) occurs most frequently, followed by real estate, and education (12% each).

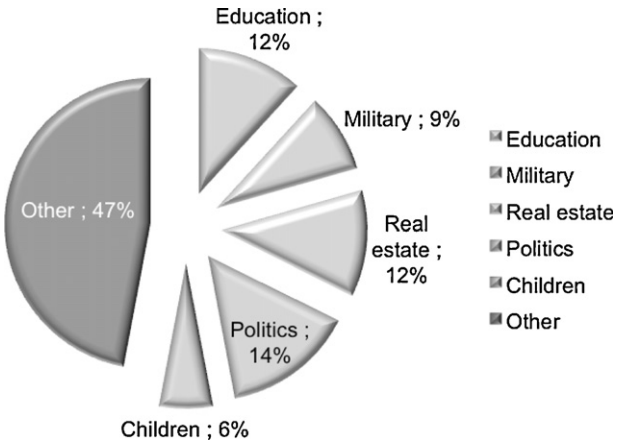

Chart 8. Barack Obama's distribution of possessive pronoun "our" in the interviews.

Chart 8 shows the distribution of 'our' categories in Obama's interviews. One may realize that three categories remain unique to Obama – real estate (12%), military (9%) and children (6%).

Through our analyses, we concluded that Obama mainly referenced children when he discussed either healthcare or education. More precisely, the 'children' category did not occur in different contexts. Please see Example (20) regarding this conclusion.

Example (20):

> "Making sure that everybody has health care, including **our children**, so that we don't have young people going to the emergency room for illnesses like asthma" (Obama–Harris:7).

5. Summary: American politicians in interviews

According to our data, Palin and Biden had more categories in common than the rest of the politicians. They used the personal pronoun 'we' in the same categories, although they emphasized the categories differently. For instance, Palin used 'we' more frequently than Biden in the US and Americans categories. Clinton also used 'we' in the US and Americans categories, but she evoked nationalistic emotions much less often than either Palin or Biden. Clinton principally identified herself with government, her priority. One important difference exists between Biden and Palin. The former identified himself strongly with Obama (44%), whereas Palin failed to identify herself at all with her running mate (John McCain).

Palin positioned herself as a common American, one of the middle class, yet she was able to stand apart from mainstream Republican Party rhetoric. According to her pronominal choice, she was an independent, although she ran under the Republican ticket. Palin self-identified primarily as an American (31%) and then as an Alaskan (28%). Based on conclusions drawn from our data, Palin appeared to be the only politician who strongly evoked local nationalism. This finding may serve to explain why McCain's choice for vice-president ultimately hurt his campaign. He chose someone who (1) had not been vetted or involved properly with his campaign and (2) did not self-identify with him or his team's vision.

Obama, on the other hand, self-identified mainly with his campaign team (35%) and administration (14%). He also significantly identified with his wife (11%); our study of other politicians' data did not find the same level of identification with the spouse. We found that although Obama identified himself as one of many Americans (18%), complete review of our data revealed that he self-identifies primarily as a politician who runs in elections. Lastly, only Obama and Biden talk about family; neither Clinton nor Palin mention the subject as far as pronominal choice is concerned. We conclude that, between genders, there is no significant difference in the pronominal choice that American politicians make. More precisely, there is no specific identification pattern for either male or female politicians.

Curiously, Clinton associated herself more with US government than any other politicians in our study. Her notable history in US government, and her previous role as First Lady in her husband's administration, may in part explain our results. No other politicians cited in our study lived in the White House; thus, her particular ties to federal government (at the time of her interviews) were stronger than those of the three other politicians. Even Biden, who maintained a significant presence in the US Senate, didn't demonstrate the same level of identification with US government in his pronominal choices. Moreover, only female politicians identified themselves with US troops.

Section 6 presents data from Biden and Palin's only vice-presidential debate, conducted in 2008. We evince the ways in which setting (venue) and purpose (e.g., formal debate vs. informal interview) influence pronominal choice.

6. Vice-presidential debate

Heritage and Greatbatch (1991) explain, in their research, certain features of the common interview: (1) turn-taking is organized and (2) any interruption is not welcomed. One can also identify these features, along with divergent ones, in political debate.

This paper highlights three main differences, upon which the following paragraph focuses. The first difference concerns turn-taking methodology. With regards to interviews, turn-taking is a natural result of questions asked to politicians by interviewers. In the 2008 vice-presidential debate, however, turn-taking was determined by the flipping of a coin. The second difference relates to interview question banks and how these banks are employed. There may be different questions for different politicians, and the interviewer is not obliged to ask exactly the same question to each politician interviewed. However, in the vice-presidential debate, the speakers had exactly the same question to answer, and they had the same amount of time for the response. These rules were very unique to the vice-presidential debate analyzed in this study. The third difference involves the role of the interviewer. In debates, this role is ascribed to a moderator. A moderator resembles an interviewer, but serves more like a guard – he/she makes sure that all the rules are observed and that the candidates address the questions properly.

Only a single US vice-presidential debate was conducted in 2008. It catered to two candidates: Palin (Republican) and Biden (Democrat). Overall, there are 17,421 words in the debate, with 316 instances of the personal pronoun 'we' and 94 of the possessive pronoun 'our.'

6.1. Sarah Palin's personal pronouns in the debate

During the 2008 vice-presidential debate, Palin used the personal pronoun 'we' to identify herself first with McCain (43%), then with the middle class (37%), and finally with Americans (18%). In contrast to earlier interview data, Palin identified herself more often with her running mate (McCain) during the debate. This finding supports our expectation that venue and purpose influence pronominal choice. Our data (see Chart 9) indicates Palin manipulated self-identification to achieve a particular purpose during the vice-presidential debate versus her interviews. The time that elapsed between Palin's interviews and the debate is not considerable. The first interview took place August 2008; the other two were conducted September 2008. The vice-presidential debate was held October 2008. We cannot conclude that the passage of time influenced Palin's radical change in pronominal choice. Rather, the venue itself and purpose of the debate (namely to win the ticket) influenced her pronominal choice.

Regarding the possessive pronoun 'our' and its object groups, we distinguished six categories (i.e., economy, family, military, state, environment and values) plus one bundled category, 'others'. Moreover, we remark that our interview data ('our' object group) did not contain a family category; this category was unique to debate data and obtained by analyzing Palin's use of possessive pronouns. Example (21) demonstrates two instances:

Example (21):

> "In the middle class of America which is where Todd and I have been all of our lives, that's not patriotic. Patriotic is saying, government, you know, you're not always the solution. In fact, too often you're the problem so, government, lessen the tax burden on **our** families and get out of the way and let the private sector and **our** families grow and thrive and prosper."

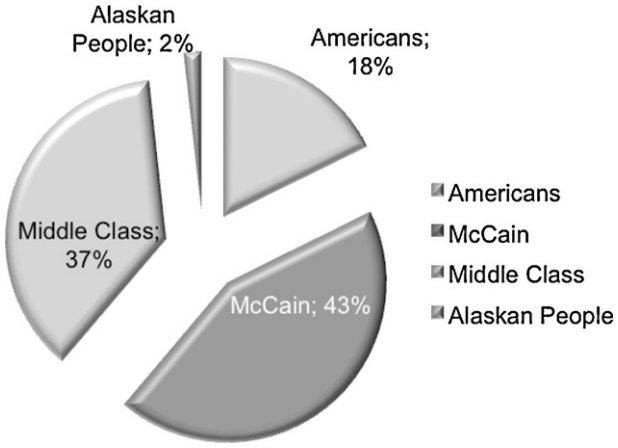

Chart 9. Distribution of the use of the personal pronoun 'we' by Sarah Palin in the vice-presidential debate 8th October 2008.

In the family category, Palin talked a great deal about children, as shown below.

Example (22):

> "Fear about, how are we going to afford to send **our** kids to college? A fear, as small-business owners, perhaps, how we're going to borrow any money to increase inventory or hire more people."

Interestingly, during the debates, Palin did not identify with the middle class as frequently or intently as she did during her interviews. This paper concludes that, during the interview phase of her campaign, Palin wished merely to gain middle class recognition. Example (23) illustrates how Palin appealed to the middle class:

Example (23):

> "John McCain, in referring to the fundamental of **our** economy being strong, he was talking to and he was talking about the American workforce. And the American workforce is the greatest in this world, with the ingenuity and the work ethic that is just entrenched in **our** workforce."

Palin discussed the American workforce and its issues with great emphasis, and she stressed her identification (and that of the McCain campaign) with this group. Finally, with respect to the vice-presidential debate and its object group 'our,' Palin focused less on her identification as an Alaskan. In Example (24), she spoke more about the nation, the McCain Administration, and the country:

Example (24):

> "As for disagreeing with John McCain and how **our** administration would work, what do you expect? A team of mavericks, of course we're not going to agree on 100 percent of everything."

6.2. Joe Biden's use of personal pronouns in the debate

As with Palin, this paper studied Biden's language during the 2008 vice-presidential debate. Biden employed the personal pronoun 'we' almost exclusively to self-identify with Obama (82%). He identified himself with the middle class three times (2%) and with Americans as a whole 12 times (16%) (Chart 10).

Unlike Palin, we only distinguished two object categories for Biden's use of the possessive pronoun 'our' (i.e., military and economy) plus one bundled category, 'others'. Our studies of the debate data revealed that Biden most frequently self-identified with the US military. This finding differed from findings we generated from his interview data, wherein Biden self-identified most frequently with politics. Examples (25) and (26) demonstrate Biden's identification with US military.

Example (25):

> "Gwen, with all due respect, I didn't hear a plan. Barack Obama offered a clear plan. Shift responsibility to Iraqis over the next 16 months. Draw down **our combat troops**. Ironically the same plan that Maliki, the prime minister of Iraq and George Bush are now negotiating."

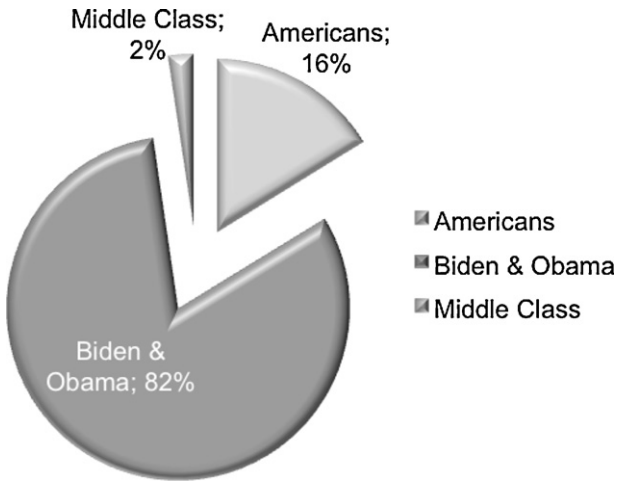

Chart 10. Joe Biden's distribution of personal pronoun 'we' in the vice-presidential debate.

Example (26):

> "The fact is that **our commanding general** in Afghanistan said today that a surge – the surge principles used in Iraq will not – well, let me say this again now – **our commanding general** in Afghanistan said the surge principle in Iraq will not work in Afghanistan, not Joe Biden, **our commanding general** in Afghanistan."

Biden's second-most frequent object category for 'our' was economy. Similar to Palin, this paper notes an interesting shift in Biden's self-identifications between his interviews and the vice-presidential debate itself, as the interviews focused on state and politics. During much of 2008, the economic crisis captured the attention of the international media and the world at large. In his interviews, neither Biden nor his interviewers highlighted the importance of trends developing within financial markets. Data on this period reflect this point – the economy category in 'our' object group is almost nonexistent (with only two instances). However, as a participant in the vice-presidential debate, Biden adjusted his language to address the most urgent issues in American society at that time: military policy and the economic crisis. In Biden's case, as in Palin's, venue and purpose (not the passage of time between interviews and the debate) directly influenced pronominal choice. Example (27) highlights Biden's appeal to purpose.

Example (27):

> "Look, folks, this is the most important election you've ever voted in your entire life. No one can deny that the last eight years, we've been dug into a very deep hole here at home with regard to **our economy**, and abroad in terms of our credibility. And there's a need for fundamental change in **our economic philosophy**, as well as our foreign policy."

6.3. Sarah Palin and Joe Biden compared

According to our data and analyses, during the vice-presidential debate, Biden continued to show more loyalty to his running mate than Palin did toward hers. Nevertheless, it must be said that Palin supported McCain more consistently in the debate than during her interviews. Chart 11 presents a distribution of the personal pronoun 'we' from the debate and highlights differences between the two speakers.

Clearly, Sarah Palin still identified herself closely with the middle class and Americans in general. Joe Biden, on the other hand, appeared less interested in appealing to social groups. He effectively focused on his purpose during the debate: to support his running partner and win the election as a team. Unlike Palin, this paper concludes that Biden was consistent in his identification pattern and, therefore, seemed more credible to voters. In light of recent news concerning Palin (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/13/us/13palin.html?ref=sarahpalin), one might conclude the following: that her weakness lay not in lack of national political experience, but in how she self-identified. She regarded herself as an independent and failed to self-identify with a particular political view – we believe this stance made identifying with her more difficult for most American voters.

7. Interviews and vice-presidential debate – the importance of venue

As we analyzed our data, we uncovered differences in pronominal distribution for all speakers involved. These differences confirm a strong relationship between the conversation's setting and personal pronoun distribution. Murphy (1988), in his five experiments, finds that context plays a considerable role in the choice of personal pronouns. However, he does not investigate the role that topic plays in his research.

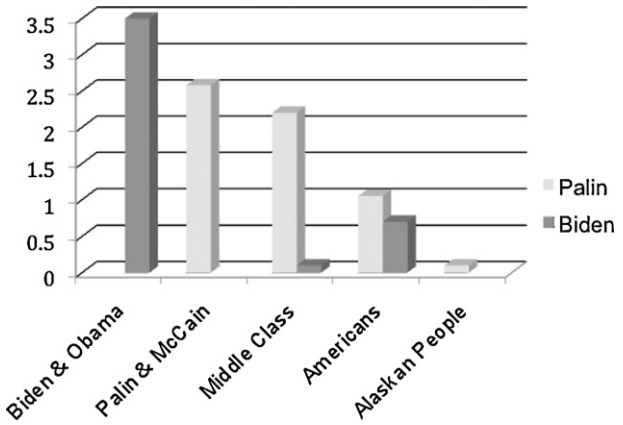

Chart 11. Sarah Palin and Joe Biden: distribution of the personal pronoun "we" in the vice-presidential debate.

According to previous studies (Givon, 1976, 1983; Duszak, 2002), the distribution of personal pronouns is topic driven. Based on collected data, this study acknowledges the presence of relation between the topic and usage of personal or possessive pronouns. Still, this relation is not as strong as that of personal or possessive pronouns and setting/external context of the communicative act. The findings of this study become evident in comparative analyses of the interviews and the vice-presidential debate.

This study uncovers the difference between the distribution of personal pronouns in the interview setting and in the vice-presidential debate setting. The topics in both settings are similar. However, for each speaker, different distributions for the personal pronoun 'we' and the possessive pronoun 'our' are found. Our finding confirms van Dijk's (2002) argument that external context primarily characterizes political discourse and influences the context of its text. We argue that venue and purpose (which are closely related factors) remain the principal characteristics that influence political discourse.

The setting and purpose of the vice-presidential debate is more formal compared with the setting of the interviews. The audience is also different between the interviews and the debate. The interviews were usually carried out in front of the camera (there was only one radio interview with Joe Biden) with no immediate audience. In addition, the interviews did not have a significant political impact. The vice-presidential debate, on the other hand, was conducted in a sizeable studio with the candidates addressing an audience. Moreover, the outcome of the debate strongly influenced each candidate's immediate political career. Both candidates (Palin and, to some extent, Biden) altered the distribution of personal pronouns in the debate and placed emphasis on dissimilar object categories. Therefore, in comparison to topic, this study asserts that the setting/venue primarily influences personal pronoun distribution in conversation.

8. Discussion

Based on our analyses and previous research (Johnson, 1994; van Dijk, 1997, 2002), we find that external context, more than topic, influences pronoun distribution. The most influential factors were venue and a purpose in the political discourse. For example, consider meeting in a courtroom or a cafeteria. The given topic may be identical in both settings, but the conversations might proceed differently. We discovered that the same politicians, when speaking in interviews and debate, addressed like questions dissimilarly and chose personal pronouns differently. Two research questions are raised. First: "How does the distribution of personal and possessive pronouns reveal ideological views of speakers?" and second: "What factors affect the distribution of personal and possessive pronouns?"

This study concludes that politicians reveal self-identification through pronominal choice, i.e., whom they support. Moreover, pronominal choice indicates the relation strength between a politician and his/her party. Our research provides Sarah Palin as an example of a politician with poor relation strength at the national level. Throughout the 2008 presidential campaign, Palin remained too independent in pronominal choice; she failed to self-identify with the Republican presidential candidate (John McCain). During the vice-presidential debate, however, Palin changed tactics and began to identify closely with McCain. This lack of consistency may be one of the reasons why Palin did not succeed in convincing Republican voters to support her cause. It also shows how personal pronouns can be manipulated depending on the goal of the speaker.

Conversely, Hillary Clinton identified herself more furtively with US government. She focused on convincing others that she had the qualifications and resources. She did not use personal pronouns to incite banal nationalism, nor did she use them to appeal to the hearts of American voters. The same can be said of Obama, who avoided banal nationalism in his pronominal choice. Biden employed 'we' specifically to align himself with Obama, however he also incorporated banal nationalism at times by self-identifying with Americans and the state. Our data determines that Sarah Palin and Joe Biden mostly stirred nationalistic views through their pronominal choice. Hillary Clinton and Barak Obama, on the other hand, held to their principles (to get the job done or to succeed in the election, respectively).

Future research regarding pronominal choice can compare two conditions: (1) political interviews that are run in a controlled environment, and (2) political interviews that are not run in a controlled environment. Such comparison may provide additional data to prove the importance of venue. It may also reveal further information regarding the ways in which politicians use pronominal choice to evoke banal nationalism. As a final thought, we posit that banal nationalism will remain an inescapable facet of American politics (or any politics), but not all politicians will use it to the same extent. Use will be a matter of choice.

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