

Personal Pronouns in Biden's Inaugural Speech: A Critical Discourse Perspective

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Abstract

This research primarily examines the first-person personal pronouns in political discourse, political speech in particular. This research aims to reveal how the pronoun I and we are exploited by the politician for the specific intention in political discourse. This research contextually investigates those personal pronouns and their inflectional forms based on the critical discourse analysis perspective, revealing the function and the purpose of producing a particular and an intentional personal pronoun to refer to specific addressee(s). That linguistic strategy in political context indicate the social and political relation between the speaker and the referents. The data in this research were taken from the script of Biden's inaugural speech given in 2021. From 224 first-person personal pronouns, Biden produced the pronoun I and its inflectional forms 63 times or 28,1% and the pronoun we and its inflectional forms 161 times or 71,9 in percentage. Even though the plural form was identified as the most first-person personal pronoun produced by Biden, the occurrence of the pronoun we and its inflectional forms excluded Kamala Harris as his vice president. Biden exploited the first-person singular personal pronoun to express his gratitude, quality, positive image and persuasively to ingratiate the citizens. On the other hand, Biden expressed the pronoun we and its inflectional forms to establish a sense of national unity, togetherness to confront the challenges, and sharing responsibility. Personal pronouns no longer deal with language structure analysis only, but they are also employed to persuasively affect socio-political position, especially in a political context.

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Introduction

A remarkable landmark dealing with personal pronouns in its non-traditional research is how power, authority, social separation, collectivity, togetherness, and

unity are constructed by employing the discursive personal pronoun. Personal pronouns, in the traditional perspective, refer to the person as the referent dealing with male or female and singular or plural forms. Romadlani (2021) highlights that personal

pronoun use in discourse context carries broader meaning and function involving situational, social, political, and cultural contexts. According to Fairclough (2003), discourse is a way of representing aspects of the world, processes, relations, and structures of the material world, the mental world of thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and the social world. The personal pronoun reflects the world according to the speaker, in the context of a speech exchange (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

Several studies portray how personal pronoun is not merely about male or female and singularity or plurality form of the referent as a traditional point of view is conducted at the various sources. Putri & Kurniawan (2015); Ali, Christopher, & Nordin (2017); Yi & Zhou (2020); Arshad & Arshad (2020); and Zhang (2021) examine the personal pronouns in non-traditional perspective, they examined personal pronouns as the property of political discourse. Arshad & Arshad (2020), for instance, investigated the personal pronouns under discourse analysis perspective, critical discourse analysis in particular, in three Pakistani English newspapers produced by three different media. They highlight that personal pronoun can be exploited to be rhetorical device in political discourse. Critical discourse analysis can be inferred as a tool in linguistic approach to capture the hidden meaning of spoken and written communication.

Employing similar perspective, Alemi, Latifi, & Nematzadeh (2018) also look carefully at how the first person plural pronoun construct inclusiveness or exclusiveness in Obama's political address regarding the ISIS issue. Personal pronouns can also be explored as the persuasive strategy in political communication. Focusing on pronoun *we* and *I*, Wageche & Chi (2016) and Riadi, Karim, & Gownellis (2022) reveal the function of those personal pronouns through critical discourse analysis approach in Obama's, Xi Jinping's, and Joko Widodo's political discourse. Based on the critical discourse analysis perspective, personal pronouns are more than indicating singularity or plurality, they can be used to signal the concept of in-group and out-group

(Hasan, 2013), which one is ours and which one is them in polarity parties in the political race.

A personal pronoun is one of the political discourse structure properties besides the topics and metaphors to explain in terms of the underlying mental representations (Dijk, 2008). Mykhaylenko (2019) and Yi & Zhou (2020) assert pronominal choice in political discourse reflects the speaker's desire and indicate the interpersonal relationship. Besides, the personal pronoun in political speeches signals the position of the speaker and the hearer (Stănculete, 2019). Focusing on the first-person personal pronoun, this research deals with how the speaker exploits the pronoun *I* and its inflectional forms and the pronoun *we* and its inflectional forms in political discourse. The pronominal choice such as *I* and its inflectional forms, somehow, deliberately in discourse functioned to confidently convey personal argumentation or opinion (Arshad & Arshad, 2020 and Laila, 2021). Besides, in the specific context, Kaewrungruang & Yaoharee (2018) highlighted that the pronoun *I* is also utilized to express the speaker's quality, confidence, and commitment to achieving the vision.

On the other hand, generally speaking, the pronoun *we* and its variant are commonly used by politician in political speech specifically in presidential inaugural speeches as political discourse. The speaker, by using the pronoun *we* and its variant, is in an attempt to construct the conception of closeness, collectivity, togetherness, and solidarity with the involvement of the speaker to the hearers as similar or one entity (Ranjha & Islam, 2018; Kaewrungruang & Yaoharee, 2018 and Alinezhad & Nemati, 2019). Another manipulative involvement of this first-person plural pronoun is to mitigate and, at the same time, share the speaker's responsibility to others. This one is tricky and sometimes manipulative. To reduce the speaker's whole responsibility, for instance, the speaker tends to switch the pronoun *I* which should be uttered by using the pronoun *we* to take the others' involvement even though the speaker should be the one who must be in charge of the responsibility.

Based on the historical shift perspective of the personal pronouns study above, this research examines the first person personal pronoun both singular and plural form in political discourse to discover how power, authority, positive self-image, unity, communality, and togetherness are encoded through the personal pronoun choice. Besides counting the quantity of the first-person personal pronoun to figure out the less and the most, this research investigates the form and the function of those singular and plural first-person personal pronouns as well. In line with the research topic, this research contributes to answer these such research questions, what function of the first person personal pronoun in Biden's political discourse is and what kind of the first person personal pronouns frequently produced in Biden's political discourse is.

This is quite manipulative to see beyond when the singular form and when the plural one is involved in those speeches. Jasim & Mustafa (2021) consider that first-person personal pronouns are chosen to manipulate the audience's thoughts and strengthen the speaker's political position. To be more specific, this research examines the first-person personal pronoun in Biden's inaugural speech as the elected president of the United States of America. An inaugural speech is the first formal speech conveyed by the president after his or her inauguration. This is interesting to notice that Biden, it may be said, deliberately produced the pronoun *I* and its inflectional forms frequently, in what context it is exploited, and the function of that pronoun in political discourse. Different from a speech given in a debate or political campaign during the presidential election race, an inaugural speech does not influence the outcome of votes. One of the reasons why a president, in the inaugural speech, confidently produces the pronoun *I* to illustrate his or her positive character.

Methodology

Qualitative data provided in this research navigate this research into the qualitative research since qualitative research works on textual, behavioral, motives, and interpretation rather than numbers. This

research adopted qualitative and quantitative method. The quantitative method provides a quantification section to elaborate on the numbers of the personal pronoun choice found in the speeches. The qualitative method was applied to explain and interpret the function and in what context the singular and plural form of the personal pronoun was exploited at the speeches, while the quantitative one was used to show the less and most of the personal pronoun produced as the discourse practice in a social and political context. The data in this research were taken from the script of an inaugural speech given by Joe Biden in 2021 as the first formal public address as America's President. The speech was retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/>.

After gaining the script, the emergence of personal pronouns was marked by coloring the first person singular pronoun and the plural one with different colors to obtain the data. The data are analyzed by applying the pattern of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) namely description (textual analysis); interpretation (processing analysis); and explanation (social analysis). This research elaborates the form of personal pronoun and then identifying the referent of the personal pronouns in Biden's inaugural speech to recognize the parties it refers to. Besides, interpreting the personal pronoun referring to the particular parties also considers the social political position and advantage between the speaker and the hearers. The speaker certainly tends to take maximum political advantage from the pronominal choice. The function of the pronominal choice found at the speech can be obviously revealed based on the socio-political context to observe the purpose of the particular pronoun involved to construct the proposition. It provides an understanding the particular context of language structurally by investigating the complex relation between the meaning and the social circumstances (Fairclough, 2003).

Separating the first person personal pronoun as the research data from the other types of personal pronouns gave the

advantage to be more focused on classifying and quantifying the data. The researcher also checked the subjective, objective, possessive pronoun and possessive adjective form carefully in several times to ensure the validity of the data. The quantification of the personal pronoun found was then provided to obtain the exact numbers of singular and plural first-person personal pronoun. From the quantification, the less and the most employment of the first-person personal pronoun were also clearly captured to be the basic argumentation in elaborating and interpreting how the speaker contextually exploits the pronoun *I* and its inflectional forms and pronoun *we* and its inflectional forms as the discourse structure and discourse process through the political speech.

Results and Discussion

To begin with, this research deals with how Biden, through his inaugural speech, expressed first-person personal pronouns to construct his social and political relation to the hearers. As commonly cited, the pronoun *we* and its inflections are the most dominant personal pronoun used by a speaker in the political context, either written or spoken discourse (Bello, 2013; Romadlani 2021; and Riadi, Karim, & Gownellis, 2022). Quantitatively, the first personal pronoun choices in Biden’s speech can be seen in the following table.

Table 1. First person personal pronoun found in Biden’s speech

First-Person Personal Pronoun		Numbers	Percentage
Singular	I	32	28,1%
	My	20	
	Me	11	
Plural	We	91	71,9%
	Our	43	
	Us	27	
Total number		224	100%

Based on the table above, Biden seemed to deliberately use the pronoun *I* in a quite big percentage, 28,1 %. The more pronoun *I* and its inflectional forms are identified, the more authority and power the speaker desires to assert. It can be presumed from Romadlani’s (2021) findings that the pronoun *I* commonly exploited to construct the speaker’s positive self-image such as confirming integrity, democratic behavior, open-mindedness, and visionary politician. Besides Kaewrungruang & Yaoharee (2018), Stănculete (2019) also identified how the pronoun *I* and its variant are mostly identified rather than the first-person personal plural pronoun, *we* and its inflectional forms. That is one of the politician’s strategies to persuasively affect the hearers.

As elaborated above, Håkansson (2012) proposed that personal pronoun affects a massive impact on political speech. Pronominal choices can also be varied depending on how confident the speaker is to

share his viewpoints and opinions (Beard, 2000). Constructing a positive image is one of the politician’s goals in the political atmosphere. Hasan (2013) considers that personal pronouns are much related to the relationship of power and solidarity. Personal pronouns can represent in which poles the speaker mostly expresses his stand, power with the pronoun *I* and its inflectional forms, or togetherness with the pronoun *we* and its inflectional forms. It relies on how the speaker employs the personal pronoun in his speech. Mykhaylenko (2019) also highlights that personal pronouns in political discourse represent the speaker’s communication skills, education, and determination.

Pronoun I and Its Inflection

Pokhrel (2022) generalized that the pronoun *I* is commonly found at the beginning of the speech. As an introduction of the speech, the speaker commonly conveys gratefulness and his or her gratitude and praise to the

person or the group the speaker belongs to. In addition, this first singular pronoun is sometimes exploited to convey the speaker's professional and personal experience (Lenard, 2016). Biden, in his speech, also expresses his personal gratitude and praise to the senior political leaders from both Republic and Democrat parties in examples (1) and (2) below.

- (1) *I thank my predecessors of both parties for their presence here.*
- (2) *I thank them from the bottom of my heart.*

The involvement of the first person singular pronoun rather than the plural one in articulating gratitude and gratefulness in the inaugural speech indicated personal involvement. Standing personally to produce respect in public space signals a more positive image that can be claimed. Biden prefers using the pronoun *I* rather than the pronoun *we* which means that he excludes his vice president to state gratitude and gratefulness to express his respect. That positive value can be perceived by the audience about Biden to gain a positive image. One of the advantages of using the pronoun *I* in a positive proposition in political speech is to create a positive self-image (Dahnilyah, 2017).

The other examples of the first-person singular pronoun in Biden's inaugural speech are captured in examples (3) to (6) below. Generally speaking, the first-person plural pronoun is commonly utilized to construct togetherness, unity, and closeness between the speaker and the hearer (Wahyuningsih, 2018). The speaker inclusively addresses the audience or the hearer using *we* or its inflectional forms. This is quite fascinating to figure out that the use of possessive adjectives of first-person singular pronouns can be exploited to build the closeness between the speaker and the hearers. It highly depends on how the speaker addresses the hearers as in the following examples.

- (3) And at this hour, **my** friends, democracy has prevailed.
- (4) **My** fellow Americans, in the work ahead of us, we will need each other.

- (5) **My** fellow Americans, we have to be different than this.
- (6) **My** fellow Americans, I close today where I began, with a sacred oath.

To stimulate a rapport and create a closer relationship, the speaker can exploit the pronoun *I* and its inflectional forms in an appropriate context (Lenard, 2016). Those can be identified in examples (3) to (6) above from which the inflectional form of the pronoun *I*, the possessive adjective in particular, is also exploited to demonstrate the speaker's personal closeness to the hearers. It is normally seen in democratic life that a general election generates a polarity trace between the devotees of both candidates. Biden denotes the audience, especially all American citizens, by addressing them as his friends and fellows of America to indicate closeness even for those who did not vote for him. This is one of his strategies to ingratiate the citizens even who did not vote for the speaker as well. Address terms such as friend and fellow used by Biden also signal that everyone who heard Biden's address terms has known each other. In the political context, to construct the closeness and togetherness between the speaker and the hearers, the use of possessive adjective of the singular personal pronoun with the closed-indication address terms is potentially exploited to replace the pronoun *we* or its inflectional forms.

Another manipulative function of personal pronoun *I* is to visualize the speaker as well as possible. The pronoun *I* can be exploited to assert personal opinions (Kaewrungruang & Yaoharee, 2018; Arshad & Arshad, 2020; and Laila, 2021). As is found in the example (7) and (8), Biden shows his thought and understanding to signal to the hearers that he is a caring and gentle person. As a President, Biden posits his stand that he can understand what the citizen wants and what they feel especially about Americans' fear and trepidation. That is one of the ways for the president to gain massive support and construct a positive image publicly.

- (7) *I understand that many Americans view the future with some fear and trepidation.*

- (8) *I understand they worry about their jobs, about taking care of their families, about what comes next.*
- (9) *I know speaking of unity can sound to some like a foolish fantasy.*
- (10) *I know the forces that divide us are deep and they are real.*
- (11) *But I also know they are not new.*

Dahnilyah (2017) and Fadzilah & Noor (2021) consider that one of the functions of the pronoun *I* in political discourse is to convey the speaker's personal opinion and viewpoint. By personally uttering, it implies the speaker's quality and understanding of the proposition. Examples (9) to (11) demonstrate how Biden expresses his viewpoint related to national unity and forces issues as if fictional but they exist. Besides stating a personal point of view, the pronoun *I* also denotes the speaker's personal belief and knowledge about the issues discussed (Saj, 2012). Personal involvement in commenting on public issues designates the speaker's knowledge and attention. To construct a positive image for reaching political intention, the speaker utilizes that personal involvement.

Furthermore, as an elected president, Biden is not standing by himself. He has a vice president to run the presidency's responsibility with. As Kaewrungruang & Yaoharee (2018) and Wahyuningsih (2018) underline the speaker sometimes prefers using the pronoun *I* to accentuate himself, especially as a current elected President of America. The choice of that personal pronoun implicitly implies a specific message about the speaker's personality in public space as found in the following examples.

- (12) *I will always level with you.*
- (13) *I will give my all in your service thinking not of power, but of possibilities.*
- (14) *I will defend our democracy.*
- (15) *I will defend America.*
- (16) *I will fight as hard for those who did not support me as for those who did.*

One of the pioneer researches about personal pronouns in political discourse is conducted by Brown & Gilman (1960) who captured how the pronoun *I* is used to express

the speaker's authority. By using the pronoun *I*, the speaker signals his or her authority and power (Jasim & Mustafa, 2021 and Laila, 2021). As identified in examples (12) to (16), Biden exploited the pronoun *I* to express his commitment, promise and action personally. This cannot be claimed that those propositions are not deliberately conveyed, they are systematically arranged to construct a good image and responsible personality. Besides, based on those examples above, rather than including his vice-president by using the pronoun *we*, Biden decides to use the pronoun *I* indicating personal involvement in the issues discussed. This hints at how Biden desires to publicly exhibit his power and personal quality in his inaugural speech. One of the main reasons why the speaker prefers employing personal involvement in political discourse is to brand him or herself as a good, responsible, and qualified leader (Alavidze, 2017; Mykhaylenko, 2019; and Fadzilah & Noor, 2021). The speaker needs all of them to gain public trust in running the national government as stable as possible.

Pronoun We and Its Inflection

Unlike the pronoun *I*, *we* provides a more complex referential pronoun. This plural personal pronoun, according to Mykhaylenko, (2019), sometimes expresses an ambiguity of the referent and group membership. The referent of this personal pronoun in political discourse is highly crucial to portray the sense of the message. The pronoun *we* in a political context makes a sense of commonality (Pokhrel, 2022) and collectivity (Beard, 2000 and Lenard, 2016). Moreover, the pronoun *we* referring to the audience also encodes that the speaker attempts to establish a sense of national unity such as in the following examples.

- (17) Here **we** stand looking out to the great Mall where Dr. King spoke of his dream.
- (18) Here **we** stand, where 108 years ago at another inaugural, thousands of protestors tried to block brave women from marching for the right to vote.
- (19) **we** come together as one nation.

(20) But the American story depends not on any one of us, not on some of us, but on all of **us**.

(21) That is how **we** must be with one another. My fellow Americans, in the work ahead of us, **we** will need each other.

To declare the nationalism of the American, in example (17) and (18), Biden addressed all audience by using pronoun *we* to indicate the in-group concept in political discourse. Biden, in this case, confidently recalled more than 100 years Dr. King's dream about America to provoke the citizens' nationalism and patriotism. Biden intends to assert that they are historically in the same boat to encourage the nationalistic feelings that America belongs to them. This pronoun choice functions to strengthen all American unity. Bello (2013) and Stănculete (2019) in a detailed construction of the pronoun *we* highlight that the pronoun *we* can be manipulated for political effect to establish a sense of group unity or a sense of belonging to the community. Biden also emphasized the concept of unity and togetherness in examples (19) to (21). To declare togetherness and to express the unity of America, Biden used the pronoun *we* referring to all audiences who voted for him and those who did not vote for him to affirm that they are one nation. Biden seems to seek audiences' support, especially from citizens who did not vote for him in the Presidential election. Yi & Zhou (2020) argue that the pronoun *we* can be utilized to provoke a sense of unity (cf. Dahnilyah, 2017; Ali, Christopher, & Nordin (2017) and (Ranjha & Islam, 2018).

Besides producing the concept of unity, Biden, in his inaugural speech, also provoked the concept of togetherness by using the pronoun *we* and its inflectional form. The pronoun *we* in example (22) below refers to all American citizens facing some issues addressed such as political extremism, white supremacy, and domestic terrorism. Likewise in example (23) below, Biden convinced the audience that if they stand together to oppose some issues, they will be strong and they are able to crush the challenges.

(22) And now, a rise in political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism that **we** must confront and we will defeat.

(23) **We** will be a strong and trusted partner for peace, progress, and security.

(24) **We** can put people to work in good jobs.

(25) **We** can teach our children in safe schools.

(26) **We** can deliver racial justice.

(27) **We** can make America, once again, the leading force for good in the world.

Based on the examples in (22) and (23), the construction of togetherness in facing national problems can be expressed by using personal plural pronouns (Riadi, Karim, & Gownellis, 2022). Employing pronoun *we* in addressing problems and conveying the speaker's confidence in the issues is a manipulative strategy from the speaker to mitigate his or her responsibility. In his speech, Biden also underlined some issues in the future that they need to be faced together. In this context, Biden exploits the pronoun *we* referring to the audience to implicitly demand their contribution in challenging the issues. This confirms that the involvement of the pronoun *we* and its inflectional forms is commonly utilized to share the government authority's responsibility (Kaewrungruang & Yaoharee, 2018; Arshad & Arshad, 2020 and Jasim & Mustafa, 2021). Biden, in example (22) and (23), uses pronoun *we* referring to all American citizens to participate in completing the responsibility that he should be in charge with his vice president and his ministers. This means that Biden indirectly intends to mitigate his responsibility as the authority.

Several resemble cases can be found in examples (24) to (27). Biden preferred choosing the pronoun *we* and its inflection to refer to all American citizens. Biden produces those utterances to convince the audience about their ability. It means that Biden involves all the citizens of the United States of America to contribute to providing people to have good jobs, ensuring their children study in safe schools, delivering racial justice, and making America a superpower nation. Biden

did not, by himself, state that he was able to provide a good job for the people, safe schools for the children, and racial justice. As a president, Biden also did not state that he could make America greater in global politics. By using the pronoun *we* which did not refer to himself and the candidates of his ministries, Biden camouflaged his responsibility as a state administrator. Beard (2000) considers that one of the advantages of using the pronoun *we* in political speech is to share responsibilities.

The other cases of constructing togetherness and sharing responsibility by using the pronoun *we* and its inflectional forms are also found in examples (28) to (31) below. In examples (28) and (29), Biden explicitly commands all American people to set aside politics and face the pandemic and other issues together as one nation. Moreover, in those examples especially in example (32), Biden used plural personal pronouns referring to all the American citizens implied that he was in the position to share his government's responsibility with the audience. Broadly speaking, the pronoun *we* in political discourse spreads responsibility (Hasan, 2013; Alinezhad & Nemati, 2019; and Yi & Zhou, 2020). This is commonly known that issues dealing with the global relationship are the government's responsibility based on the facilities and the capacity. Furthermore, Biden also explicitly conveyed that each American citizen had a duty and responsibility in the example (31). Romadlani (2021) asserts that the pronoun *we* and its inflectional forms can be manipulated as a political strategy to have public involvement in sharing responsibility.

- (28) **We** must set aside the politics and finally face this pandemic as one nation.
- (29) Let **us** add our own work and prayers to the unfolding story of our nation.
- (30) **We** will repair our alliances and engage with the world once again.
- (31) And each of **us** has a duty and responsibility, as citizens, as Americans, and especially as leaders.

It can be obviously seen from the examples above how the speaker refers to the audience by using pronoun *we* and its inflectional forms

to address all of the audience. The speaker tends to involve all the audience, American in particular, to share his duties as a president. That pronoun Jasim & Mustafa (2021) assert that this first person plural pronoun can strategically utilized to overshadow the government's responsibility.

Conclusion

Grounded personal pronoun especially the first person personal pronoun in discourse analysis perspective, as elaborated above, this research originates that pronoun *we* and its inflectional forms are used more than the singular forms. Biden, in his inaugural speech, frequently produced the first person plural pronoun rather than the first person singular pronoun. Biden employs the pronoun *we* and its inflectional forms to elicit the concept of unity and togetherness. Those concepts are expressed by recalling all American citizen's memory about their history to provoke nationalism. Those concepts are also exploited to convince the people to confront the challenges and some crucial national issues discussed together. The most manipulative usage of the pronoun *we* and its inflectional forms referring to the audience is how the speaker tends to mitigate the responsibility by sharing the responsibility with the people. This seems exactly different if the speaker providing the pronoun *we* and its inflectional forms address the responsibility by referring the pronoun to his or her government. If Biden does, it means that he and his government commit to complete the responsibility they should.

In his inaugural speech, Biden occasionally employed the pronoun *I* and its inflectional forms as well to articulate a positive image in the political context. Moreover, by using the first person singular pronoun, Biden also demonstrates his personal quality by promising and commenting some issues based on his knowledge and his personal viewpoint. Furthermore, Biden also highlights personally the citizens' thoughts and feeling as well as expresses the concept of closeness between a president and the citizens. That strategy seems quite significant to ingratiate all American citizens to run his presidency. Based on the

analysis above, this research theoretically highlights that the use of pronoun *I* and its inflectional forms can be utilized to construct the closeness concept between the speaker and the hearers by using a possessive adjective with the closed-indication address terms. That concept of closeness and togetherness to signal in-group parties in political context is not always expressed by producing the first person plural pronoun as the previous researches shed light on. The first person singular pronoun rhetorically can also be manipulated to signal closeness between the speaker and the hearer(s) depending the address terms used after the possessive adjective form of the first person singular pronoun.

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