

PRONOMINAL CHOICE IN POLITICAL INTERVIEWS

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Abstract. Ways of achieving interactional goals of interpersonal involvement, responsibility and trustworthiness are fundamental to the political arena. The aim of this paper was to investigate the pragmatics of the pronominal choice in two political interviews. Discourse analysis was used to determine if personal pronouns functioned exclusively pertaining to the speakers' interactional goals and to evaluate their use in the light of what the interlocutor expected. The results revealed that the politician who created interpersonal involvement with the audience and used comprehensible and clear language established credibility, and such a strategy was more likely to receive positive evaluation. It may be concluded that the politician's communicative success may depend on the extent to which the applied linguistic strategy meets the expectations of the interlocutor. In such a case, the interactional goals of interpersonal involvement with its sub-components of responsibility and trustworthiness may be evaluated positively. Thus, the lack of trustworthiness may be experienced due to the politician's failure to communicate important meaning components.

Key words: media rhetoric, persuasive discourse, political interviews, personal pronouns, linguistic strategy, discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

Media rhetoric maintains that for a speaker to be effective, he has to take into account the following three kinds of persuasion: *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*, which are the terms dating back to Aristotle. Rhetoric, which is 'the art of persuasive discourse' (Cockcroft and Cockcroft, 2005), can be viewed as manipulative language. According to Durant and Lambrou (2009), audiences can be persuaded because they believe the speaker to be fair and honest; thus, this largely depends on the personal character of the speaker (*ethos*); they can be persuaded on the basis of the emotion aroused by what is said (*pathos*) and by the proof provided by the words (*logos*) (Durant and Lambrou, 2009: 29). For a discourse to be rhetorical, it must be inclusive and interactive, and both language and content are of considerable importance to effective communication (Atkinson, 1984).

Political interviews are an important tool for conveying a political message. The language used in the political interview accomplishes many functions, going beyond a mere transmission of information. Language is also used to

influence public opinion and engage in interaction with another person, and it 'has a potential for affecting that person' (Schiffrin, 1994: 415), establishing interpersonal involvement or rapport (Gumperz 1982a; Tannen 1989) and creating a credible image based on competence and trustworthiness. Largely, the communication of meaning as intended by the speaker is successful on condition that it is not only understood but also interpreted positively by the interlocutor, which consists in his beliefs and feelings upon hearing an utterance.

Thus, the **aim** of this paper is to identify whether the speakers' use of personal pronouns helps to achieve their interactional goals, which will allow the interlocutor to determine the degree of communicative success in a particular interaction.

It has been **hypothesized** that the extent to which the speaker succeeds in achieving his interactional goals may depend on whether he has managed to create interpersonal involvement with the audience and whether the interlocutor evaluates the linguistic strategy of the use of personal pronouns positively.

The paper deals with the case study of the pronominal choices made in the political interview with Latvian political actors elected to the public sphere: Atis Slakteris, the former Minister of Finance (this part of the paper is based on the talk 'Political Interviews' given at the University of Latvia in February, 2008), and the present Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The overriding purpose of language use in the political interview is the proposition that is conveyed through the language use. On the whole, political interviews intend to enhance people's (listeners'/viewers') understanding of a particular issue, and/or inform about possible solutions of the problem. However, the communicative effect of a political message does not only depend on advancing the level of understanding of the interlocutors, but it can also depend on bringing about changes in their opinion about a particular issue and/or attitude towards the interviewee. This can be achieved with the help of discourse strategies, which include a variety of linguistic devices used by interlocutors to serve the intended communicative functions. It is the unique combination of linguistic, rhetorical and other elements that make the investigation of political interviews relevant. Pronoun reference is important in political persuasion as pronouns can be used to fulfil legitimizing strategic functions (Chilton, 2004), granting authority to the speaker and promoting positive self-presentation.

Through empirical investigation of linguistic data in the media, scholars have shed considerable light on the use of pronouns in political discourse (e.g. McCarthy, 1994, Pennycook, 1994; Wales, 1996; O'Keeffe, 2002). It has been found that pronouns have different social roles and stances (e.g. Wales, 1996:

50). The concept *stance* helps to understand how speakers create and signal relationships with the propositions they express and the people they interact with (Biber and Finegan, 1988, 1989; Conrad and Biber, 2000).

In interviews, interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee is often interpersonal. It has been found out that the personal pronouns *I*, *you* and *we* are more prevalent than *he*, *she*, *it* and *they* (O’Keeffe, 2007: 97). The first person pronouns *I* and *we*, the second person pronoun *you*, the third person pronouns *he*, *she*, *it*, and *they* derive their functions directly from their relation to the speaker in the communicative event. Interpersonal pronouns are rarely neutral in their reference; moreover, often their meaning is derived from the context.

The first person singular pronoun *I* and the second person pronoun *you* refer directly to the interlocutors engaged in the discourse. The singular forms *I/me/myself/mine* refer to the speaker; they show his personal involvement, being especially useful when good news is announced. They can also indicate that the speaker views himself self-important, placing himself ‘above and outside the collective responsibility of their colleagues’ (Beard, 2000: 45). The pronoun *you* gives an immediate sense that the interlocutor is being addressed personally, although often it can refer informally to people in general to describe a common kind of experience.

The plural forms *we/us/ours* can vary according to the context; they refer to the speaker and to one or several other people. The distinction is based on whether the listener/viewer is excluded or included in the referential sphere of forms. The use of the pronoun *we* can be divided into two categories: the inclusive *we*, which can be used to refer to the speaker and the listener/viewer and the exclusive *we*, referring to the speaker and one or more others, but that does not include the listener/viewer (Fairclough, 2001:106).

In its broadest reference, the pronoun *we* and its forms can refer to the speaker and one more person (e.g. the speaker and prime minister), the speaker and a group (e.g. the speaker and government and/or political party), the speaker and the people of the country, the speaker and the people all over the world (Beard, 2000:45).

The plural pronoun forms give a sense of collectivity and help to share responsibility, especially when **decisions** are highly controversial, **unpopular** and doubtful. A similar effect can result from the use of the impersonal singular pronoun *one* instead of *I*, which is used to make general statements. Since the pronoun has a distancing effect, politicians often avoid using it because they try to achieve the opposite effect.

Another dichotomy is displayed between the use of the pronouns *us* and *them*. When the plural third person pronoun is used in its nominative *they*, accusative *them* or genitive *their/theirs* case, a sense of otherness is evoked either consciously or subconsciously. Druszak (2010: 194) sees ‘othering as a discursive strategy oriented to manage interpersonal, especially group-based, relations by

articulating (or implying) opposite valuations of the self (in-group) and the other (out-group)'. By contrasting the pronouns *us* and *them*, we are claiming that *they* are different and perhaps inferior in some way to *us*, which entails distancing oneself from *them*.

METHODS

The present study takes a qualitative perspective, focusing on the description of what people do and say, the explanation of their attitudes, and the causes of certain phenomena. It deals with pragmatic interpretation of the use of personal pronouns in political interviews using the discourse analysis of two cases: the analysis of an interview with the former Latvian Minister of Finance Atis Slakteris during the infamous 'Bloomberg interview' on December 17, 2008 (Online 1), transcribed by the author of this paper, and an interview with the present Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis on February 21, 2010, published on *stenmarck* blog (Online 2).

To ensure the validity of findings, triangulation was applied. Triangulation in this study involves the application of the relevant theories pertaining to the study, discourse analysis and the description and interpretation of the use of pronouns by two researchers.

The present analysis draws on Goffman's (1981) model of communication called a *participation framework*, suggesting that the participants of the communicative situation occupy different roles in relation to the message they communicate.

The interviews under analysis were transactional in nature and took place in the public sphere; their goal was to find out the politicians' political position and stance on particular political issues related to the problems caused by the economic crisis. The content of the political interviews was dependent on the socio-cultural context in which the discourse of the interviews was embedded and on the participants of the interviews. The interviewers and interviewees were aware of the communicative social context, that is, the interviews were held in front of the audience, who, although not co-present, had the status of the ratified audience. The participation status of such an audience is ratified as 'their attention is planned for in the design of the utterance' (Durant and Lambrou, 2009: 70).

Since the political interview is 'aimed at and shaped for and by the audience' (O'Keeffe, 2007: 4), the participation frameworks were inclusive of the audience as a participant in the interactions in the interviews: they were constructed between the interviewers, the interviewees and the audience who watched and listened to the interviews. Thus, the interviewees were expected to take into consideration the knowledge and understanding of the target audience when replying to the questions posed by the interviewers.

As the interviews took place in institutional settings, the power relationship between the interviewers and the interviewees were asymmetrical, i.e., the interviewers held the institutional power, providing them with the possibility of controlling the interaction by, for example, opening, changing, or terminating topics.

We aimed at finding out if the applied linguistic strategy of the use of personal pronouns had contributed to the attainment of the Ministers' interactional goals through examining the extent of the responsibility the Ministers were prepared to take on themselves, the willingness to share success with other colleagues, their confidence in whole groups of people sharing their views, and the readiness to accept failure as that of their own.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The undertaken interpretation of linguistic interactional strategies and the power relations at play in both the interviews was based on a qualitative analysis of two interviews (a 737-word interview with Mr. Slakteris and a 777-word interview with Mr. Dombrovskis). In the interview with Mr. Slakteris, the language errors in the samples have been retained.

We aimed at uncovering the use of personal pronouns, whose choice, according to Maitland and Wilson (1987), is part of person's individual interactional style. The interactional styles of Mr. Slakteris and Mr. Dombrovskis were largely affected by the following factors: they gave the interviews in English, namely, not their native language; the target audience was assumed to be the English speaking community; the relationship among the interlocutors was formal.

In order to analyse the interactional style, it is important to mention the context and the propositional content of the interviews. The former Latvian Minister of Finance Atis Slakteris secured a 7.5 billion Euro loan from the IMF, World Bank and other organizations in December 2008. Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis took office in March 2009 after the previous government had collapsed. He managed to implement an austerity programme, taking the necessary fiscal measures needed to escape from the threat of financial default.

Mr. Slakteris used the pronouns *we/us/our* 29 times, the pronouns *I/my/mine* 12 times, but the pronoun *you* – twice; thus, the analysis of their use gave us considerable insight into what he was saying and probably how he wanted to be viewed.

The inclusive *we* was used to refer to the speaker himself and his interlocutors, thus claiming solidarity, for example 'If we look in real situation about situation in economic around the world and in Latvia. How situation will develop, we'll see'. In the following example, the inclusive *we* stands for the Minister and the people of Latvia, the EU and the world, including the interlocutors: 'it's important to ... to ... have possibilities and we are part of international community [...].'. It should be stressed that a more frequent use of the inclusive *we* would have

achieved interpersonal involvement with the interlocutors and contributed to trustworthiness.

The speaker often used the exclusive *we*, which excluded the interlocutors. As it can be seen in the following 40-word response, it is quite densely packed with the personal pronoun *we* used 6 times and the possessive pronoun *our* used once:

We are in discussion process with IMF and EU and we propose our macroeconomical stabilization programme and we are discussing what we will do and ... and... after this we will decide together how much we need and, of course [...].

In this case, the plural personal pronoun *we* stands for the Minister and the government. Perhaps Mr. Slakteris used the pronoun to distance himself from the interviewer and to emphasize the authority of his judgement. Also, Mr. Slakteris seemed to be willing to share responsibility for success with other colleagues. In 'we will decide together', the reference is made to himself, the government of Latvia, the EU and the IMF, which might indicate the importance and seriousness of the process.

By using the plural third person pronoun *they* in its nominative case as in: 'And in that time of course not only government but I think all population they were too ... too optimistic', Mr. Slakteris either consciously or subconsciously evoked a sense of otherness. By contrasting the pronoun *they* with the *government* and *I*, he was effectively saying that the people of Latvia were not like him, that they were different or perhaps inferior in some way as they were too optimistic.

Mr. Slakteris used the singular form *I* when asked directly about his personal opinion; for example, in reply to the interviewer's question whether he personally thought that 2.1 billion dollars would be enough he said:

If we look in real situation about situation in economic around the world and in Latvia and I think ... I think...ya ...it's reasonable number but from my point of view Latvia will be ready to ask a little bit more (laughs) Two billions euros or two point five till three but... but...but...not because we need money exactly now but ... but to keep economy working.

The pronoun *I* was employed in the expressions he used for discourse management. It can be seen from the example above that, although the use of the pronoun *I* can be considered as a discourse strategy to gain time to think, its use was not very successful: the Minister was not able to give his point of view; in fact he was rather evasive. It is interesting to note that by making *I* the subject of particular verbs, the politician positioned himself in the discourse as the one of a thinker. The pronoun *I* was used with the semantic category of mental verb *think* (mental process) and *know* (mental state), which is supposed to underline the predominance of opinion.

Mr. Slakteris failed to assume his personal responsibility, whereas he appeared to be quite confident when he was speaking about the global crisis:

but it's not only Latvian problem, I know it's in London. For example, my daughter ... she ... she lives in London, for example and ... situation very similar.

Mr. Slakteris referred to his knowledge about the global crisis from the point of view of an insider, because his daughter lived in London. Thus, he stepped outside his official role as a Minister and presented himself as a private person. However, that was done rather inappropriately.

The personal pronoun *you* was used twice, for example: 'What do you mean by "this point"?' to refer to the interviewer, which, if used more frequently, would have enhanced his credibility and established interpersonal involvement with the audience.

When analysing the interview with Mr. Dombrovskis, it was observed that the Prime Minister used the pronouns *we/us/our* 28 times, the pronoun *you* once, and the pronouns *I/my* twice.

The most frequent referent of *we* and *us* was the exclusive one, indicating the administration of Latvia, which was represented as a serious and responsible institution. However, the administration has various roles depending on the sphere of action: national, international, and party-political. The use of the particular exclusive *we* might indicate the combined roles of the government and the party, which Mr. Dombrovskis represents:

That means that we had a huge amount of fiscal consolidation in front of us. That has now been done. We have also taken the necessary decisions concerning the 2010 budget with a fiscal consolidation of another 10 percent, giving us a budget deficit of 8.5 percent.

The use of the administration *we* was represented in contraposition to *they* if another party came to power:

Of course we are looking to win the election but, in any case, any new government will be confronted with the same issues. They will have a substantial budget deficit.

The use of the pronoun *they* does not have any attitude; it seems to be a mere statement of the fact. However, in combination with the exclusive *we*, the proposition established the competence of the speaker.

Through *we/us* strategy, the speaker identified and invited the interlocutor to identify with the speaker, as it is in the case of the use of inclusive *we* in the following example:

The worst is behind us. We can see some positive signals in the statistics when it comes to the financial sector. We are back to the pre-crisis level. Our credit rating is improving; we saw it last week with the Standard & Poor credit rating, ... we are on track again.

In the example below, it can be seen that the Prime Minister also used the first person pronouns *I* and *my* to refer to himself as a politician, and the actual words he uttered might possibly signal his personal responsibility and involvement. Mr. Dombrovskis admitted that he and the government had been too optimistic. For instance, asked how he assessed the situation in Latvia a year ago, he replied:

In my first statement after I became Prime Minister, 12th of March 2009, I said that we were close to a bankruptcy. In macro-economic terms we were estimating a recession of 12 percent. That was obviously too optimistic, since we can see the result today; a decline of 18 percent during 2009.

However, the speaker was also evasive when using the first person pronoun *I*: 'I wouldn't expect to go for any major issue in 2011'.

The Prime Minister appealed directly to the audience through the use of the second person pronoun *you* only once: 'But you could say that it is part of a broader problem'. It is likely that if the speaker had used the pronoun more often, it would have helped him to achieve involvement with his audience and enhanced his credibility more successfully.

CONCLUSIONS

A politician's interactional style is part of one's individual political personality, and the strategy of using personal pronouns is expected to recur irrespective of the situation in which one finds himself. Resulting from the study, the following conclusions have been drawn:

1. The use of personal pronouns can help to identify the speaker's interactional style, which in its turn might create a certain image of a politician.
2. The achievement of interactional goals may depend on whether the interlocutor evaluates positively the linguistic strategy of the use of personal pronouns, creating or distorting the image of the politician accordingly.
3. The pronominal form *I* implies a personal level: it enables the politician to show his personal involvement and commitment, authority and personal responsibility. Used in combination with the semantic category of mental verbs, the pronoun *I* may give the impression that the speaker is willing to account for his convictions and that he can be held responsible for his words. However, the context may fail to enhance the speaker's trustworthiness.
4. By applying the exclusive personal pronoun *we*, a politician may wish to share the load of responsibility. The exclusive *we* as referred to the whole world may also lay emphasis on the importance of the speaker's intentions.

5. By using the inclusive personal pronoun *we*, a politician might aim at establishing rapport with the interlocutors, thereby encouraging solidarity and creating interpersonal involvement with the audience. In addition, the politician who uses comprehensible and clear language is more likely to receive positive evaluation than the one who does not.
6. Politicians' communicative success depends on the extent to which the applied linguistic strategies are those that their interlocutors expect. In such a case, the interactional goals of interpersonal involvement with its sub-components of responsibility and trustworthiness may be evaluated positively. The lack of trustworthiness may be due to the politicians' failure to communicate important meaning components.

To conclude, it should be emphasized that the meaning of pronouns is pragmatic as they can be understood with the reference to co-text or to the context in which they are uttered.

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