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English Personal Pronouns as a Manipulation Strategy in Political Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Manipulation is a discursive concept which plays a key role in political discourse by which politicians can impose some impact on their recipients through using linguistic features, most prominent of which are personal pronouns (Van Dijk, 1995). The aim of this study is to investigate how politicians utilize the personal pronouns, namely; *We* and *I* and their possessive forms as a tool of manipulating the audience's mind based on Van Dijk's "ideological square" which shows positive-self representation and negative-other representation (Van Dijk,1998:p.69). To this end, American President Donald Trump's 2020 *State of the Union* speech was chosen to be the data of analysis. Only (8) examples out of (226) extracts of his speech involving the use the personal pronouns along with their indications were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. Results reveal that Trump uses

these pronouns to exercise an ideological influence on his audience, basically to present himself positively. The study concludes that Trump strategically uses personal pronouns as a functional indication of collectivity, nationalism, and direct/shared responsibility. Findings might help linguists and political analysts to understand how politicians have the ability to exploit the linguistic characteristics in their language to fulfill their ends manipulatively.

Key words: Ideological Influence, Ideological Square concept, Manipulation, Political Discourse, Personal Pronouns

1.LITERATURE REVIEW

Manipulation

Manipulation is an indirect, elusive motivating phenomenon mixed up of the actions of persuasion, deception and coercion. Manipulation is, therefore, centered in this area referred to as "gray area" (Handelman, 2009,pp.21-24). It might have a double-faced orientation; one is paternalistic when it is a well-intentioned action acted for others' benefits, the other is suppressive and influential by nature because it is dedicated mainly to the manipulator's self-interests and motivations at the expense of others (Barnhill,2014,p.52). According to Van Dijk (2006a,pp.359-361), manipulation in political communicative interaction of an ideological dimension can be tackled from a discursive, social and cognitive point of view because it could be a reflection of an illegitimate domination of powerful groups or individuals who practice a discursive interaction which contains social power abuse and controls the targets' mind, and therefore, the targets of such a discourse are "victims" of this manipulative behaviour. Moreover, manipulation is considered "a type of language in use or a talk-in-interaction of a pragmatic approach" to functions accomplished by speakers who utilize the abilities of language in specific contextual situations (Danler,2005,p.47; Blass,2005,p.173). That is why Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the best area where manipulation can

be discussed and analyzed, and Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach highlights the concept of "Ideological Square" which shows how the manipulative discourse is utilized by politicians to present themselves positively, while presenting others negatively (Van Dijk, 1995, 1998, 2006b).

Political Discourse and Personal Pronouns

Politics and language are so related, and in the middle of struggle for authority and power it is not easy for politics to work without the abundant characteristics the language provides. To put political discourse in a specific definition framework is not a straightforward matter because it seems that politics, politicians as well as language is a complex mixture controlled by the personal interests and domination of those active actors who practise forms of social, cultural, or ideological communication. However, politics is judged from two opposite points of view: the first is melancholic and negative because the political actors are considered to be corrupt and deceptive individuals, whereas the second picture of politicians is associated with positive-connoted implication due to their good role in running their nations (Beard,2000,pp.3-5). Political text and talk have been tackled because it is a mirror of reality, how power relations and ideological content are formed and expressed through doing discourse, and therefore how meanings are manipulated for the speakers' ends. Thus, a main approach to such a discourse, represented by CDA, is the best way of handling this communication visibly (Van Dijk,1995,p.146).

To accomplish the intended aims perfectly and make people believe what they say, politicians usually demonstrate their linguistic skills and choices on the basis of winning the people's feelings and emotions. Among these ideology-bearing features are personal pronouns which are one of the most salient and observed markers of political discourse. Personal pronouns

are a form of the Greek term *Deixis* that means "to point or indicate via language", where the context has priority in the activity of indication shared by the speaker and the hearer (Yule,1996,p.9). They are used to signal roles and for self-reference and identity (Van Dijk,2000). In political discourse, the personal pronouns should not only viewed as an expression of person, number and gender according to traditional grammar. Rather, they are judged and discussed in terms of the "identity work" they actually do in political discourse because these personal pronouns are deeply involved in constructing the "self" and the "other" (Bramley, 2001, p. V). Pronominal choices play a key role in presenting politician's real personality, either as an independent figure or a group-related individual. In other words, politicians use pronouns to reflect their varied identities, enhance the concepts of collectivity, solidarity or nationalism, or to establish the dichotomy of presenting themselves positively and others negatively, in addition to being able to strategically construct and change the roles of political actors (Wilson, 1990, p.76; Bramley,2001, p. 262). Thus, one can say that no study of political discourse would be considered good enough without taking the role of personal pronouns into account because such pronominal choices reflect a strategy of polarization which can be utilized for the ends pre-determined in this type of discourse.

Previous Studies

Manipulation has widely been conducted by scholars and analysts such as Nordlund(2003), Pronomarenko(2013) , Kamil & Al-Hindawi (2017), and others. In her valuable study, Nordlund (2003) investigated how different newspapers displayed the same news from divergent political positions in order to create the intended influence on the reader's mind, adding that the process followed two major types of manipulation: one was at the level of

syntax with some strategic moves like "transitivity, active/passive voice, modality, nominalization, permutation, initialization, innuendo and utterance context"; the other was referred to as lexico-semantic manipulation in which the words were selected on the basis of emotional or cultural connotation. Pronomarenko(2013) also explored manipulation in the language of journalism. He analyzed the journalistic texts of some newspapers observing that these newspapers reflected their political points of view which were aimed at influencing the readers' understanding and the society's mass consciousness as a whole. Tackling manipulation from a pragmatic point of view, Kamil & Al-Hindawi (2017) carried out a contrastive study on British and American political debates held by Clegg, Brown and Cameron as British PM nominees on the one hand, and Ryan-Biden & Bush-Kerry as American Presidential candidates on the other hand. They observed that their manipulative language consisted of three main stages which were "inauguration, argumentation and conclusion". Besides, the speakers' manipulative discourse had four noticed criteria of communication namely; "distortion, fabrication, equivocation and concealment", and was actualized by pragmatic devices such as (im) politeness, speech acts, personal pronouns, violation of conversational maxims, maneuvering and finally pragmatic strategies related to Relevance Theory. Among types of manipulation they observed are "volitional, deceptive, rational, submissive, social, and emotional" (Kamil & Al-Hindawi, 2017, pp.315-320).

However, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, no study has been so far conducted to explore and analyze the manipulation strategy of using personal pronouns in English presidential political speeches of Donald Trump at discourse perspective. Thus, this study would hopefully fill the gap in CDA literature by exploring how Trump ideologically manipulates the

recipients' thoughts via using personal pronouns for presenting himself positively.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study attempts to address the following research questions:

1. How does President Trump employ the personal pronouns *We* and *I* (and their possessive forms *Our* and *My*) in his speech to create some strategic indications?
2. What is the role of the ideological dimension, represented by positive-self / negative-other presentation, in manipulating the audience's thoughts and feelings for President Trump's political ends?

3. METHODOLOGY

American President Donald J. Trump's *State of the Union* speech on the 4th of February 2020, was selected to be the data of analysis. For the economy of space, only (8) examples out of (226) representative examples of the personal pronouns manifested in his speech are analyzed and statistically calculated and accounted for.

Van Dijk's (1998) ideological square is adopted in this study as the main analytical framework to analyze the data qualitatively and quantitatively. He characterizes it as a polarization of Us and Them through which the positive and negative features of in-group (Us) and out-group (Them) are (de)emphasized by applying (8) discourse structures. The polarization between Us and Them is reflected through using these personal pronouns in his speech adopting the following strategy: Positive-Self Representation; representing the in-groups' members (Us) positively, via discourse, by de-

emphasizing their negative and emphasizing their positive features (Van Dijk,1998).

Since the study seeks to analyze personal pronouns from a discourse analysis standpoint, it is highly recommended first of all to be acquainted with the contextual information and circumstances which surround Trump's speech. Therefore, who is the speaker?, what the general issues does the speech imply?, what is the occasion of the speech?, etc. are some questions the analyst should consider first. The next step is to deal with personal pronouns, and find out how the speaker uses them to arouse some referential indications, which help him affect the American people's thoughts and emotions for his ideopolitical aims outlined in his speech.

4. RESULTS and DISCUSSION

A Contextual Overview

On the 4th of February,2020, President Trump delivered his third State of the Union speech in which he addressed the American nation realizing the primary importance of this speech because just one year of his presidency term was left before the coming electoral race, as well as the legal problems and internal challenges he had to face. The speech was delivered before the day of impeachment trial because he was accused of power abuse and constructing the Congress intentionally. That is why the speech was considered to be defensive against the rival policies followed by some Democrats in Congress, and mainly presenting his policies, plans and achievements during the previous three years of presidency proudly and positively, while presenting others' deeds negatively and gloomily. To gain the American people's feelings and emotions and affect their minds for his ends, Trump talked about many issues that matter to the Americans starting up with the national economy which has highly flourished under his political

leadership as a powerful president and his economic know-how as an adroit businessman. Besides, his tough policy against China's active and developing economy in the USA, illegal immigration and national security have not been excluded from the speech. Also, his speech includes education, health care, religious freedom in the USA, military forces, social insurance, pensioners, terrorism, the peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis, ending the war in Afghanistan, etc.. Thus, one can say that he utilizes this annual occasion for his benefits perfectly. To be unlike the previous presidents, specifically of the Democrats, he employs the occasion of the speech to be viewed positively as man of actions, who could achieve many big and multiple breakthroughs in just three years since he was elected in 2017. Reading between the lines of the speech could show clearly that Trump aims at making the American citizens having more sense that the previous administrations, particularly the Obama's administration, were associated only with failures and inactivity that destroyed the American economy, trade, etc., and devalued the country internationally. Hence, this speech can be considered a good example of how the speaker presents himself positively and others negatively for pre-determined ideopolitical ends.

Using 'We' to indicate the speaker's direct responsibility

Example (1):

“Three years ago, we launched the great American comeback.” (Ext. 1)

From the beginning of the speech, one can see visibly how President Trump seizes this annual occasion to affect the recipients' mind and reshape their understanding for his benefits through using the personal pronouns manipulatively in a way which might go beyond the traditional standards of person, number and gender. In this example, the speaker shows his ability to turn the group-centered meaning and socially-collective sense of *We*, as a

first-person plural personal pronoun, into an indication where the speaker, represented by Trump, is implied and referred to as the only direct responsible for all the achievements done and actions taken for the sake of his country. The indication of this personal, direct responsibility is contextually established when he refers to the past three-year-duration of his presidency term. The other important indication of his good image is also presupposed via depending on the iterative sense of '*American comeback*' as if he wants to say that all the economic, health, education, military, etc., accomplishments have been achieved and come back to the Americans by his efforts after they were used, taken advantage of or even lost under the previous administrations. Therefore, President Trump intends strategically to enhance the sense of self at the expense of others.

Using 'We' to indicate the American people and the sense of collectivity and nationalism

Example (2):

“In America, we don't punish prayer. We don't tear down crosses. We don't ban symbols of faith. We don't muzzle preachers and pastors. In America, we celebrate faith, we cherish religion, we lift our voices in prayer, and we raise our sights to the Glory of God.”(Ext.97)

As stated in example (1) above where President Trump uses *We* as an indication of his direct responsibility for the exceptional prosperous duration of his presidency term, in this example he utilizes the personal pronoun *We* to reflect his social collective identity by which he talks on the behalf of the American people. Politicians realize the powerful impact of using pronouns on the audience. Accordingly, he uses *We* to establish the sense of collectivity and nationalism via sending the message of supporting each other, as well as standing side by side with all Americans of whatever

religious background they are. His aim is to beautify his image through associating it with paramount concepts of religious freedom and mosaic practices that America provides for the citizens. Therefore, he has been able to give a good picture as a president who appreciates all people of any religion, race, or colour.

Using 'We' to indicate the speaker's shared responsibility

Example (3):

“We are coordinating with the Chinese government and working closely together on the coronavirus outbreak in China.” (Ext.64)

In example (3), President Trump indicates via the use of *We* his shared responsibility for some political moves just in case if any unfavourable reactions would happen in future. The sense of shared responsibility is reflected through the America-China inter-government cooperation concerning COVID-19 outbreak in China. In spite of its limited use in the speech in comparison with the two uses of the above examples (1 & 2), President Trump utilizes the pronoun *We* here to imply that some political actions or steps need to be taken unanimously as a strategy of disclaimer.

Using 'Our' to indicate the American people and the sense of collectivity and nationalism

Example (4):

“In reaffirming our heritage as a free nation we must remember that America has always been a frontier nation.” (Ext.99)

Here, President Trump also uses strategically the possessive form *Our* to indicate the American people and reflect his collective, national identity. He intends to mention the American history in this occasion in a way to agitate the national affiliation and feelings in the minds of his recipients reminding

them of success and development achieved in the past at the hands of the ancestors that must continue shining now and in future. On the other hand, there is a hidden implication urged via this pronoun, which is that President Trump wants to imply that the future will be more powerful and more prosperous as long as the current policy under his leadership follows the right steps and measures which guarantee the national prosperity for the American citizens. So he bets on the workability of the sense of inclusiveness and nationalism affecting the audience's thoughts and feelings, and manipulatively confirming his image positively.

Using 'Our' to indicate the speaker's direct responsibility

Example (5):

“Our agenda is relentlessly pro-worker, pro-family, pro-growth, and, most of all ,pro-American”(Ext.6)

In this example, President Trump uses *Our* to indicate himself as being responsible for everything good to his subjects. The possessive construction refers to his plans and projects which are dedicated to supporting the American families and working class, i.e., ending poverty. As a veteran businessman, he realizes the importance of the topic of economy to the American people. That is why President Trump desires to be viewed as a saviour of the low/middle-income class, who will bring justice, prosperity and satisfaction to them. And what reinforces this indication of his direct responsibility is that he employs the prefix '*pro-*' which means '*to support*', and repeated it four times to create some rhetorical influence on the audience, which is hopefully to be workable to fix his heroic image firmly.

Using 'Our' to indicate the speaker's shared responsibility

Example (6):

“Because of *our powerful sanctions*, the Iranian economy is doing very, very poorly.”(Ext.111)

To avoid being accused of wrong decisions or bad moves about some sensitive issues, politicians or officials tend not to speak on behalf of themselves only but rather on behalf of others. President Trump, here, uses the pronoun *Our* to refer to serious decisions represented by '*power sanctions*' which usually need unanimous agreement in order to avoid any critical consequences in future. The pronoun *Our*, therefore, is used to send a message of the speaker's shared responsibility with other political partners, and a way of disclaimer.

Using 'I' to indicate the speaker's authoritative, determined personality

Example (7):

“From the instant *I* took office, *I* moved rapidly to revive the U.S. economy.”(Ext.6)

Trump strategically utilizes the first person singular pronoun *I* in his State of the Union speech to be publicly understood as a man of deeds and not of words. The message he wants to send to be decoded by the American people is that he is, unlike the previous presidents or any potential presidential candidate, the only leader who cares for his people; feels their pains; can improve the national economy and enhance the living condition of the American families via his successful economic plans and projects. The sense of his authoritative and determined personality is also metaphorically established when he uses the verb '*to revive*'. He implicitly intends to send another important message that the failed policies and decisions of the previous administrations resulted in serious economic situations by which the American economy was de facto dead. He via his rapid actions and long-term economic expertise moved to save the economy from the disastrous situation caused by the previous administrations.

Using 'My' to indicate the speaker's ideopolitical polarization

Example (8):

“And very incredibly, the average unemployment rate under my administration is lower than any administration in the history of our country.” (Ext.9)

The possessive derivative *My* of the personal pronoun *I* in this extract represents a clear picture of the ideological struggle of presenting self positively and others negatively. President Trump uses *My* as a good example of manipulation strategy by which he wants to affect the American people's mind for purposeful ends outlined in his speech. The pronoun *My* has been critically noticed to be used as a strategic standard for ideological comparison between the speaker's deeds, actions and generic economic reform steps on the one hand, and the others' failures, weaknesses and destructive economic policies on the other hand. In almost all the examples associated with the pronoun *My*, President Trump aims at bettering off his image as a man of deeds, and derogating the image of the other presidents particularly President Obama who was(in-)directly viewed and associated with negativeness, inactivity and economic deterioration. The pronoun *My* has been, therefore, a clear linguistic characteristic utilized strategically to manipulate the targets' thoughts and feelings for ideopolitical purposes.

After conducting a qualitative analysis of Trump's use of the personal pronouns *We* and *I* and their possessive forms *Our* and *My*, Table (1) below displays a quantitative analysis of these personal pronouns used as a manipulation strategy in his speech. The frequency and percents of the pronouns are statistically calculated, in addition to their indications to each

Table.1 Personal Pronouns As a Manipulation Strategy

Personal Pronouns			
Items	Indications	Frequency	Percent
1.a We	<i>Indication of Trump's direct responsibility</i>	53	23.45
1.b We	<i>Indication of the American people and the sense of collectivity and nationalism</i>	21	9.29
1.c We	<i>Indication of Trump's shared responsibility</i>	13	5.75
2.a Our	<i>Indication of the American people and the sense of collectivity and nationalism</i>	62	27.43
2.b Our	<i>Indication of Trump's direct responsibility</i>	9	3.98
2.c Our	<i>Indication of Trump's shared responsibility</i>	3	1.32
3. I	<i>Indication of Trump's authoritative, determined personality</i>	45	19.91
4. My	<i>Indication of Trump's ideopolitical polarization</i>	20	8.84
Total		226	100%

The personal pronouns *We*, *Our*, *I* and *My* have been used in the speech to form a total number of 226. President Trump uses the pronoun *We* to create three strategic indications, namely; to indicate his direct responsibility in 53 examples with a percentage of 23.45%, to indicate the American people and his sense of nationalism as well as collective identity in 21 examples which hold 9.29%, and to indicate his shared responsibility in 13 examples constituting 5.75%.

President Trump utilizes the possessive form *Our* in three main indications which are: 62 times with a percentage of 27.43% to indicate the American people and his sense of collectivity as a reflection to his collective identity; 9 times that form 3.98% as an indication to his direct responsibility,

and only 3 examples to indicate his shared responsibility with a percentage of 1.32%.

The first person singular pronoun *I* has been used strategically by President Trump. He uses it 45 times in his speech with a percentage of 19.91% to reflect his authoritative, determined personality of deeds and achievements. The pronoun *My* has been used by President Trump 20 times which hold 8.84% of the total of the employed pronouns. The pronoun *My* has been an indication of his ideopolitical polarization and favouritism in comparison with other figures and administrations.

In terms of the results and discussion stated above, the answers to the research questions previously posed will be stated below:

Research Question 1: How does President Trump employ the personal pronouns We and I (and their possessive forms Our and My) in his speech to create some strategic indications?

President Trump manifests a higher level of political and linguistic dexterity in using the personal pronouns particularly *We*, *Our*, *I* and *My* by which he could send active messages to his audience to affect their understanding for his ends. President Trump goes beyond the traditional classification of pronouns concerning person, number, and gender. This can be seen through the pronoun *We* and its possessive form *Our* by which some important indications have been actualized as shown in table (1). The personal pronoun *I* has also been used strategically to affect the people's mind. He could indicate his powerful, authoritative personality as a man of actions and reforms. The pronoun *My* has been used by President Trump to value the opposite situations between his administration and others' previous ones at the basis of ideological dimension by which he is depicted favourably, while others negatively.

Research Question 2: What is the role of the ideological dimension, represented by positive-self / negative-other presentation, in manipulating the audience's thoughts and feelings for President Trump's political ends?

Reading between the lines of his speech critically, one can say inevitably that President Trump's speech has been written manipulatively and encoded ideologically to better off his image positively and agitate the sense of negativity about other rivals in the American people's mind. This is because that politicians have the ability to produce a discourse in which some ideological tendencies are reflected in doing discourse (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997 as cited in Paltridge, 2012, p.187). President Trump gives a higher priority to this ideological presentation which has turned into a point of departure for using the personal pronouns to seize the recipients' attention, thoughts and feelings for his agenda. Firming up his direct responsibility for actions matter to the most of the American people, his determined, powerful personality as a man of deeds and real economic reforms, his collective identity as a man who cares for his subjects, and his administration only rather than anyone else, are the main criteria under which the speech has been delivered. Thus, the ideological evaluation on the basis of presenting self positively and others negatively is the frame under which the personal pronouns have been used as manipulation strategies in President Trump's State of the Union 2020 speech.

5. CONCLUSION

In the view of the analysis of using personal pronouns as a manipulation strategy in President Trump's political speech, the study has come up with the following conclusions:

- (a) the speaker uses the pronouns *We*, *I*, *Our* and *My* as key strategies to manipulate the audience's mind and to support his political position.

(b) the constructed ideological stance is the basis to employ the personal pronouns to be a source to some important indications the speaker seeks to fulfill in his speech. That is to say, manipulation has been actualized when President Trump could make himself a centre of interest via generating indications, albeit to varying degrees, to his personality, responsibility, and collective identity.

The findings of the current study might help linguists and political analysts as well as college students to consider how politicians have the ability to exploit the linguistic characteristics for their agenda. Hence, it is recommended to conduct further research on the role of manipulative language in political discourse from other perspectives, and highlight the key linguistic features which can be used as manipulation strategies.

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الضمائر الشخصية الانكليزية بوصفها استراتيجية للمناورة في الخطاب السياسي : تحليل نقدي للخطاب

طالب الماجستير: راند محمد جاسم

كلية اللغات – جامعة بغداد

ا.د. صباح صليبي مصطفى

جامعة بغداد – كلية اللغات – قسم اللغة الانكليزية

المستخلص

المناورة مفهوم خطابي تؤدي دورا أساسيا في الخطاب السياسي التي بوساطتها يتمكن السياسيون من فرض نفوذ معين على متلقي الخطاب عند استعمال سمات لغوية، ومن أهمها الضمائر الشخصية (فان دايك، 1995). تهدف هذه الدراسة الى استقصاء الطريقة التي يوظفها السياسيون في استعمال الضمائر الشخصية وتحديد الضميرين 'نحن' (WE) و 'أنا' (I)، فضلا عن صيغ التملك التابعة لهما ، بوصفها وسيلة للمناورة تستهدف إدراك المتلقين القائمة على مفهوم المربع الإيديولوجي لفان دايك ، (Ideological Square) الذي يشير الى تقديم الذات تقديما ايجابيا و تقديم الآخرين تقديما سلبيا. و لتحقيق اهداف الدراسة ، اختير خطاب حالة الاتحاد (State of the Union) لعام 2020 للرئيس الامريكي دونالد ترامب ليكون مادة للتحليل. و جرى تحليل (8) امثلة من مجموع 226 مقتطفا من خطابه الذي تضمن استعمال هذه الضمائر مع دلالاتها نوعا وكما . تظهر النتائج إن الرئيس ترامب

يوظف تلك الضمائر لممارسة تأثير أيديولوجي على متلقيه وفي الأساس تقديم ذاته تقديمًا إيجابيًا . وتتلخص الدراسة إلى أن ترمب يوظف الضمائر الشخصية بوصفها مؤشرًا وظيفيًا لمفهوم الروح الجماعية (collectivity) أو القومية (nationalism) ، أو مؤشرًا للمسؤولية المباشرة أو المشاطرة مع الآخرين. إن نتائج الدراسة من شأنها أن تساعد اللغويين و المحللين السياسيين على فهم الكيفية التي يوظفها السياسيون في استغلال الخصائص اللغوية في لغاتهم تحقيقًا لأهدافهم بطرق المناورة .

الكلمات المفتاحية : التأثير الأيديولوجي، مفهوم المربع الإيديولوجي، المناورة، الخطاب السياسي ، الضمائر الشخصية