THE USE OF PRONOUNS IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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The paper deals with the use of pronouns in political discourse. Politics seems to be overwhelming the world and subsequently linguistic shows its great interest to it. Political linguistics is a field of discourse analysis which focuses on discourse in political forums (such as debates, speeches, and hearings) as the phenomenon of interest. The commitment to analyze political speeches often use concepts and techniques drawn from linguistics for the purpose of explaining political phenomena. Use of personal pronouns is very important to identify the intention of politicians. In the paper, I study the use of “I”, “we”, “you” and “they” separately and then how they occur in sequence and what is the purpose of the choice. The pronouns are used to construct politicians’ image. In accordance with the research we can conclude that politicians tend to use the first person plural in most cases. Though we can say that during political speeches the choice of pronouns goes beyond their grammatical person, number and gender. They can be chosen for different reasons. They can be used to show the communicants’ attitude, social status, gender, motivation and so on.

Keywords: Political discourse, Personal pronouns, Image.

Introduction

In the modern world, especially in Georgia if I may say so, the interest towards politics is getting greater and greater. Subsequently political discourse and all the related problematic issues are becoming concerning for different disciplines. Linguistic seems to be one of the major research areas of political discourse. That is not surprising though as linguistics is curious by nature showing a deep interest towards all aspects of life. The language of media, especially the language of politicians detects all on-going processes and changes of life. In other words, we can easily say that nowadays the study of political discourse is an order from a society. To support my view, I can add that the political discourse is a very good means to have an impact and influence on the society. Consequently, it is used to give a birth to a new way of thinking and create a public opinion.

Do you see what I mean? This is the question we all want to have an answer when it concerns politics. Political discourse has a long history but linguists began to speak about political discourse as a separate branch of discourse only in the second half of the XX century. Since the early 1980s, there has been a growing interest in the area of political discourse all over the globe. It could be explained by the fact that all media means are full of political texts and political analyses of different events. One of the distinctive features of political discourse is that it is politically oriented, built on a certain “message” which is created for a certain electorate.

If we carefully study political speeches from a linguistic point of view, we can easily claim that a politician uses different linguistic means not to lose his/her image. Politicians need to prepare well before
speaking to public to show strong interest towards them; emphasize the membership of a common social
group; show familiarity with a help of being talkative and using a listener’s language /dialect or even
show the preference of individual values over the group value. And correctly chosen personal pronouns
are one of the best ways of achieving that goal.

Before actually giving some examples to prove the theory mentioned above, I would like to give a
brief insight of a political discourse and the use of pronouns in political speeches.

Literature Review

We all agree that politics is a-struggle for power in order to put certain political, economic and social
ideas into practice. Language, in this process, plays a vital role - no political action is prepared,
accomplished or implemented without a language. The study of political discourse, like the other areas of
discourse analysis, covers a broad range of subject matter. Defining political discourse is not a
straightforward matter. Some analysts define it so broadly that almost any discourse may be considered to
be political. At the same time, a formal constraint on any definition that we only deal with politicians and
core political events excludes the everyday discourse of politics which is part of people’s lives (Willson,
2003). Politics is getting more and more actual in the modern world; more and more people start to vote
and more and more people start to show their interest towards politics by watching political talk shows or
reading articles on the political issues; and obviously, the names of politicians, political events and
political discourse is becoming familiar to people of all ages.

As I have already mentioned political discourse has a long history but linguists began to speak about
political discourse as a separate branch of discourse only in the second half of the XX century. One of the
first authors studying political discourse is Peter Laslett with his collection of essays on political themes
“Philosophy, Politics and Society” published in 1956. Later a special research center was established
which performed semiotic analyses of political discourse. In other words, linguists began to analyze how
to word political discourse to make it successful; what linguistic and extra linguistic means were
necessary to help a politician achieve his/her aims (Msakhuradze 2014). Politicians manipulate people
with words, make them believe whatever they want them to believe with the help of appropriately chosen
words. Politics has always been a tool for power and authority. The one with better communicative skills
is a winner; the one who manages to make people believe what s/he says is a winner; the one who knows
how to please people is a winner.

It will not be a discovery if I say that discourse, as a concept, is difficult to define as there are
conflicting and overlapping definitions (Fairclough 1992). Discourse is a broad term with various
definitions and it “integrates a whole palette of meanings,” covering a large area from linguistics, through
sociology, philosophy and other disciplines (Titscher et al., 2000:77). It refers to “the whole process of
interaction of which a text is just a part”. As pervasive ways of experiencing the world, discourses refer to
expressing oneself using words. Discourses can be used to assert power and knowledge, resistance and
critique. The speaker expresses his/her ideological content in texts as does the linguistic form of the text.
That is, a selection or choice of a linguistic form may not be a live process for the individual speaker, but
the discourse will be a reproduction of that previously learned discourse (Fairclough, 1989:24). Political
discourse, as a sub-category of discourse in general, is based on two criteria: functional and thematic. It
can fulfil different functions due to different political activities. It is thematic because its topics are
mainly related to politics such as political activities, ideas and relations (Schaffner, 1996:202)

Among so many descriptions of political discourse I think the one given by van Dijk best describes
its nature: political discourse is a political genre with specific language thesaurus having certain
functions and communicative impact. Politicians use the language not only to make speeches but also to
act. As politics means power and authority and the words are actual participants that make the ideas
happen. Political discourse by van Dijk is a discourse with institutional form. In other words, political
discourse is a discourse where a person gives his/her opinion in a status of a politician in an institutional
environment (Kirvalidze, 2009).
Choice of personal pronouns is one of the discourse markers in the political discourse. The study showed that choice of deictic words such as personal pronouns is one of the weapons used by politicians to achieve their goals. Dixies is a Greek word and means to indicate. The etymology of the word shows that politicians indicate and show their intention to people by using deictic words of their preference.

According to Karapetjana (2011:43), the way politicians speak and present themselves is a part of their personality and a way to show themselves as individuals. The same could be said about their preference of choosing a personal pronoun. The use of personal pronouns can create an image of a politician both negative and positive. Karapetjana’s study suggested that the pronoun *I* implies a personal level, and makes it possible for the speaker to show authority and personal responsibility as well as commitment and involvement. Politicians use the pronoun *I* to present themselves as individuals and speak from their own perspective, preferably highlighting one’s good qualities and accomplishments (Bramley 2001:259). The studies claim that the personal pronoun *we* can be used by the politician if he or she wishes to share the responsibility, and also to create involvement with the audience (Karapetjana 2011:43). The plural form of the pronoun *we* is used when the decisions are controversial, to give a sense of collectivity and sharing responsibility.

However, *you* is more complicated, because it is also a generic pronoun that can be used in a very general way, where you is referring to anyone (Bramley 2001:261f). We can be used to invoke a group membership or a collective identity, and create a separation between us and them (Bramley 2001:260f). The pronoun *you* is used by the speaker to address parts of, or the entire audience. It can mean the speaker as well as others without the speaker.

As for *they*, it is used in political speeches to create an image of others and to divide people in groups (Bramley 2001:262). Bramley suggests that a politician’s pronominal choice indicates his or her varied identity, more specifically his or her individual or collective identity (Bramley 2001:263). De Fina (1995) presented a study that showed how uncertainty or consistency might have different effects on how the speaker’s self-presentation. Her findings showed that the pronouns selected for usage in a speech reflected the speakers attitude to people and to himself/herself. Pronominal choices in political speeches differ depending on if the politician who makes the utterance wants to share the responsibility with other people or colleagues or not. The choice of pronouns can also vary depending on how confident the speaker is that others will share his views and opinions (Beard 2000:46) (Håkansson, 2012).

**Methodology**

Methodology of the research is based on pragmatic analyses of political discourse as it is interested in the effect of words on the world. What influence does a politician have on people and how does s/he manage to achieve his/her goal? To narrow the discussion, I can say that the methodology of the research is based on lingo semiotic and anthropocentric-communicative methodology. That means to study political speeches through semantic (referential), syntactic (inter-linguistic) and pragmatic aspects. On the one hand, I studied political discourse as a part of discourse taking into account the communicative intention and strategy of both – an addressee and an addresser – in my case a politician and audience; as we all know that politicians use words as powerful tools to make people believe in them and follow them. On the other hands, I studied the use of personal dixies as one of the powerful tools of achieving politicians’ goals. Studying political discourse and its lexical, semantic and pragmatic aspects showed the importance of words in politics and importance pronominal choice in political speeches. Besides, political discourse could not exist in isolation- it is an explication of intersubjective and interactive discourse. One of the means to study interactive nature of a political discourse is the use of pronouns. These include the traditional explanation of pronouns as linguistic tools; pronouns as a means to express institutional relations; and, how pronouns are used to construct identities socially and objectively.

When I started to work on the paper, the presidential election was not yet held in the US. Thus, I started by looking at the theory of political discourse and personal dixies to analyze the speeches of two presidential nominees Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. I have chosen their acceptance speeches as
empirical material. After studying the theory, I began to look at their speeches. Hillary Clinton’s speech lasted 1:05 and Donald Trump’s speech lasted 1:14. First I listened to their speeches and then I began to count how many times they used personal pronouns and in what context. Here is what I found

**Data Analysis**

In the paper, I am giving the analyses of the announcement speeches of two presidency candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. As I have already discussed the usage of personal pronouns is very important to identify the intention of politicians. We can say that during political speeches the choice of pronouns goes beyond their grammatical person, number and gender. Personal dixies can be chosen for different reasons. Personal dixies can be used to show the speakers’ attitude, social status, gender, motivation and so on.

Brown and Gilman’s pioneering study (1960) showed that the choice of pronouns is affected by the relationship between the speaker and the listener. Addressing someone in the same way as they would address you shows solidarity and equality. Addressing someone with a ‘higher status’ in a different way than that person would address you shows inequality and social distance. Both power and solidarity are relationships between at least two people, and differences of power can be found in all societies (Brown & Gilman 1960:1ff).

One pronoun shift that is common in political discourse is the alternation between ‘I’ and ‘we’. This reflects the politician’s moving between his/her identity as an individual and his/her identity as a member of a group.

Let us have a look at speeches by two presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump when they accepted the nomination to be the candidates.

Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton on July 28, 2016:

And so it is with humility, determination, and boundless confidence in America’s promise that I accept your nomination for President of the United States!

As you see in this case Hillary shows personal responsibility as well as commitment and involvement.

Another function of the first person singular pronoun of I in political speeches includes giving a sense of here and now, suggesting that I captures the moment. I can also be used to create a ‘relationship’ with the audience, because using I makes the speech seem as if it is on a more personal level. I might also be used to show commitment to the audience and personal involvement in issues; I gives the speaker a personal voice that distances him from others. This means that it cannot always be expected that the other members of his party agree with the speaker’s opinions when the pronoun I is used (Bramley 2001:27). The advantage of using I is that it shows personal involvement, which is especially useful when positive news is delivered. The disadvantage is that it is obvious whom to put the blame on when something goes wrong. It can also be seen as an attempt of the individual speaker to place himself above or outside the shared responsibility of his colleagues (Beard 2000:45).

The most motivating reasons for a politician to use the pronoun I in the speech is to be seen as good and responsible, to describe himself/herself in a positive way and highlight personal qualities. Examples of personal qualities that politicians want to express include being someone with principles, moral, power and who is not afraid to take action when necessary (Bramley 2001:28).

E.g. Hillary Clinton says:

Twenty years ago I wrote a book called “It Takes a Village.” A lot of people looked at the title and asked, “What the heck do you mean by that?”

This is what I mean: None of us can raise a family, build a business, heal a community or lift a country totally alone.

As you see in this case Hillary shows personal responsibility as well as commitment and involvement.
As you can see she tries to show her personal attitude towards I highlighting her good qualities and accomplishments.

Let us see how Donald Trump uses the pronoun I at his acceptance speech on July 21, 2016:

*America is far less safe and the world is far less stable than when Obama made the decision to put Hillary Clinton in charge of America’s foreign policy. I am certain it is a decision he truly regrets.*

As you can see Donald Trump shows his personal authority and personal responsibility to what he says. And again, he says:

*Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it* (ibid)

As for the usage of “we” the researches show that we can be used by the politician if he or she wishes to share the responsibility, to give a sense of collectivity and sharing responsibility, and also to create involvement with the audience (Bramley, 2001). One of the reasons for the use of the pronoun ‘we’ is that politicians may not be certain that the decisions they make will necessarily be viewed in a positive way. Therefore, the use of ‘we’ spreads the responsibility. ‘We’ can be manipulated for political effect and is used in this speech to establish a sense of group unity. The first person plural pronouns ‘our’ and ‘us’ are used in a similar way to ‘we’. This use is to shorten the distance between the speaker and the audience. It may include both the speaker and the listener into the same arena, and thus make the audience feel close to the speaker and his points and to persuade them to work as a team. E.g. Hillary Clinton says:

*That is the only way we can turn our progressive platform into real change for America. We wrote it together – now let’s go out and make it happen together.*

As for the using the pronoun you, it is used by the speaker to address parts of, or the entire audience. Plural meaning of ‘you’ is used in the generic sense, in which ‘you’ includes everyone. When politicians use “you” they mean all electorate. By using “you” the effect is to give more weight to their argument.
Let us see presidential candidate’s choice of “You”:

Hillary Clinton:

For all of you whose hard work brought us here tonight. And to those of you who joined our campaign this week, thank you. What a remarkable week it’s been.

or

And to all of your supporters here and around the country: I want you to know, I’ve heard you. Your cause is our cause. Our country needs your ideas, energy, and passion.

As you can see Hillary Clinton wants to show solidarity by emphasizing that You covers the whole country including herself. The same could be said about Donald Trump:

I have visited the laid-off factory workers, and the communities crushed by our horrible and unfair trade deals. These are the forgotten men and women of our country, and they are forgotten, but they will not be forgotten long. These are people who work hard but no longer have a voice. I am your voice.

Or

As your president, I will do everything in my power to protect our LGBTQ citizens from the violence and oppression of a hateful foreign ideology. Believe me. And I have to say as a Republican, it is so nice to hear you cheering for what I just said. Thank you.

While talking about personal dixies as pragmatic markers, van Dijk states that the discursive polarization of Us and Them, typical for political discourse, not only reflects mental representation of people talked about, but also the categories of participants talked to in a communicative situation (Dijk 2002:226).

Politicians may use ‘they’ to create an ‘us and them’ distinction between a group to which they belong and an ‘other’ group. The contexts in which ‘they’ occur in political speeches can be divided into oppositional, neutral and affiliative contexts. This usually involves criticizing or being criticized by an oppositional political party or member of that party. This is when the politicians talk about people who support him/her such as his/her political party or people whom s/he supports. The neutral context is one in which the politicians refer to others as different group of people towards the ‘other’. In such cases the ‘other’ usually means different sectors of the public (Bramley 2001). But whatever we say, the fact is that politicians try not to use that pronoun very often.

While analyzing the two speeches I found out that:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Pronoun</th>
<th>No.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillary Clinton</td>
<td>We</td>
<td>99</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You</td>
<td>76</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>They</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald Trump</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>78</td>
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<td>We</td>
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<td>You</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td></td>
<td>They</td>
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Conclusion

According to the studies I can summarize again and say that:

- **I** implies a personal level, and makes it possible for the speaker to show authority and personal responsibility as well as commitment and involvement;
- **We** can be used by the politician if he or she wishes to share the responsibility, and also to create involvement with the audience and to give a sense of collectivity and sharing responsibility;
- **You** is used by the speaker to address parts of, or the entire audience.
- **They** is used in political speeches to create an image of other and to divide people in groups. (Karapetjana 2011), (Bramley 2001).

To conclude I can say that pronominal choices in political speeches differ depending on if the politician who makes the utterance wants to share the responsibility with other people or colleagues or not. Pronominal choices can also vary depending on how confident the speaker is that others will share his views and opinions (Beard 2000:46) (Håkansson, 2012). In other words, the one with better communicative skills is a winner; the one who manages to make people believe what s/he says is a winner; the one who knows how to please people is winner.

The study of authentic materials prove that pronouns as pragmatic markers need to be considered as linguistic “bullets” used by politicians to achieve the goals. Apart from grammatical meanings, pragmatic meaning od pronouns could play an important know due to their additional connotaton o pronouns in accordance with pragmatic notion.

References