

LANGUAGE USE AND POLITICAL AFFILIATION IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

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Given that previous research has indicated that language use can reflect aspects of identity and group affiliation, this study seeks to understand the ways that language use may align with political affiliation and the ways in which differences in language use across language groups may reflect part of the ideology of a particular group. To explore this topic, we used a survey distributed in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) to gauge pronoun usage. The preliminary results highlight differences in language use across political groups/affiliations.

Language Use and Affiliation

Language can be used to display group affiliations and individual identity. For example, language choices can tell us about ethnic/racial grouping (O'Grady et al., 2010), socio-economic status (Labov, 1966), gender (Sankoff & Cedergren, 1971), sexual orientation (Podesva, Roberts, & Campbell-Kibler, 2001), and religion (Levon, 2006). Further, researchers have shown that language use can change depending on social group (Romaine, 2000; Cramer, 2010; Joseph, 2006). Part of the reason we shift language use is that our identity creation is a social act, not an individual one (Cramer, 2010) and when we speak there is always an audience in mind (Joseph, 2006).

In many of the previous studies on language use and identity, pronunciation has been a common target for examining identity through language variation. However, Pennebaker found pronoun usage to be a clear indicator of personality as well. Pennebaker (2011) reviewed pronominal use on social media and discovered that individuals who used the pronoun "I" in their everyday speech tended to be more depressed than other individuals who varied their pronoun usage.

Further, pronouns have been particularly useful when examining political leaders. Cramer (2010) examined use of pronouns by Turkish delegates and European Union (EU) representatives during a period in which Turkey was working to become part of the EU. Cramer (2010) found that Turkish delegates to the European Union tended to use pronouns such as “we” to identify themselves as a group separate from the EU. Similarly, for the EU representatives, “they” was used to distinguish the political boundary between EU members who identified themselves as part of the EU and those that were either petitioning for EU membership or placed their national identity over their European identity. Cramer concluded that “repetition of pronoun use patterns helps to create, recreate, and make visible certain identities” (2010, p. 2).

However, displays of group membership may change as an individual negotiates multiple group memberships or as the context of talk shifts. Joseph (2006) points out that whenever a person is talking, their language use is tailored toward a particular audience. Thus the way that a person articulates a particular message may change depending on who they believe to be listening. Further, planning and preparation for speech may lead to different choices in pronouns as well. Vukovic (2012) found that pronoun usage of Montenegrin politicians differed between two types of speech: premeditated and spontaneous. Premeditated speech is planned and crafted in advance (i.e., a political speech to be given at an event) while spontaneous speech is unplanned (i.e., an impromptu interview with a reporter). Vukovic (2012) found that political leaders in the Montenegrin parliament used the pronoun “we” in speeches to convey a sense of unity between members of their own group while using “they” or “you” to generate negative images of their opponents. However, in the unplanned spontaneous speech the use of “we” was virtually

nonexistent. Instead, in interviews, the political leaders revealed a more personal tone, using more instances of “I” than in practiced speeches.

Much of the research that has investigated pronoun usage within the realm of politics has been focused on political leaders, however. There is little data to show if political ideology is reflected in the speech patterns of everyday citizens. This study hopes to see if political affiliation is indicated by pronoun usage of average citizens. This study focuses on one particular group, Hispanics in South Texas. The Rio Grande Valley (RGV) is an area of over 4000 square miles, including four counties (Starr, Cameron, Hidalgo, and Willacy) in the lower Rio Grande area of South Texas (Vigness & Odintz, 2010). The Rio Grande River serves as a border between the United States and Mexico and the population of the RGV is predominantly Hispanic, ranging from 86-97% Hispanic across the four counties (US Census Bureau, 2011).

Methods

Survey

An online survey was created in Qualtrics with 13 questions in total. Two questions were given on the survey to obtain consent and confirmation of the participant being 18 or older. The survey then included six demographic questions. Participants were asked their gender, age, ethnicity, first language, length of time lived in the RGV, and if they grew up in an area other than the RGV. Next, participants were presented with one open text question for a general text response which asked about the most important meal of the day (“Please write a brief description of which meal you think is the most important meal of the day and why?”). This question served as a tool for comparison for the later open-text question. Finally, participants were presented with four questions about political affiliation.

Participants chose their political affiliation from a multiple choice list and used a scale to indicate their position along the spectrum of conservative to progressive. Participants also provided key words that were important to them in their choice of political party/affiliation. Finally, participants were asked an open-text question regarding their reasons for their particular political affiliation (“Please write a brief description of what most attracts you to a political party (or affiliation) and why”).

Participants

To distribute the survey, we contacted instructors at a local university who we then asked to distribute the survey to their students. Thus, the participants in the study were all students at the university. Some instructors offered the survey as one option for extra credit in their courses. Data collection began in June 2016 and, for this preliminary set of results, closed in October 2016. During this time period, 40 Hispanic participants completed the survey.

The most common age range for participants was in the category of 20-29 years old (n=34), while six reported being in the age range of 30-39. There were 27 females and 13 males in the study. The majority of participants reported that Spanish was their native language (n=22), while nine marked that their native language was English. The remaining nine participants reported learning both English and Spanish as native languages.

The majority of respondents reported having lived in the Rio Grande Valley for over half of their life (n=30). Specifically, 15 reported having lived in the RGV for 16-20 years while another 15 reported having lived in the RGV for 21 years or more. The remaining 10 participants included three who had lived in the RGV for 1-5 years, five who had lived in the RGV for 6-10 years, and two that reported having lived in the RGV for 11-15 years.

Almost half of the respondents (n=17) claimed affiliation with the Democratic Party, while only four claimed affiliation with the Republican Party. This large difference in political affiliation among the major parties was not unexpected given that Democrat candidates typically do well in elections in the RGV. Indeed, in the 2016 presidential race, Hillary Clinton gained over 60% of the vote in all four counties of the RGV (NY Times, 2016). Of the remaining participants, 16 claimed to be non-affiliated while three marked “affiliated: other 3rd party”.

Table 1. Political Party Breakdown by Percentage

Democrat	43%
Republican	10%
Non-Affiliated	40%
Affiliated: Other 3 rd Party	7%

Analysis

In analyzing the results participants were grouped by their reported affiliations. Then the open-text responses were analyzed for pronoun use. In each category, not only were pronouns included, but also possessive determiners. For example, we used the category “I” which included “I, me, my, mine”, “You” which included “you, your(s)”, “We” which included “we, us, our”, and “They” which included “they, them, their”. The pronouns of each category were counted and divided by the total number of words to create a percentage of use.

An example response is included below:

I like that the party supports the military to protect Americans from foreign invasions. As stated, **I** am a Christian; however, **I** do believe that people should be allowed to marry, while it may not be my cup of tea, **I** am a tolerant person. **My** brother is gay and recently married. **I** believe in the Constitution, the bill of rights, and the Declaration of independence as a naturalized citizen. **I** am a former military spouse, having **my** husband serve in the military since 1999

to 2003. Are there problems? Yes no party is perfect. Will I be voting this year?
Yes even though I will be picking the lesser of the two evils.”

In this example response, there are 10 cases of the category “I” in a text response that is 114 words so 8.77% of the response utilized words from the “I” category.

Results and Discussion

Results by Topic

To allow for comparison across topics, we first analyzed the open-text question regarding the most important meal of the day. For this question, most participants used either “I” or “you” to express themselves. Notably, “you” was used most frequently (See Figure 1), which differs from the political open-text question.



Figure 1. Pronoun Usage for General Open Text Response

For the political open text question mostly “I” and “they” were used most frequently (See Figure 2). “I” was the predominant pronoun category, while “They” was second. The least used pronoun category was “You”, while “We” took third place.

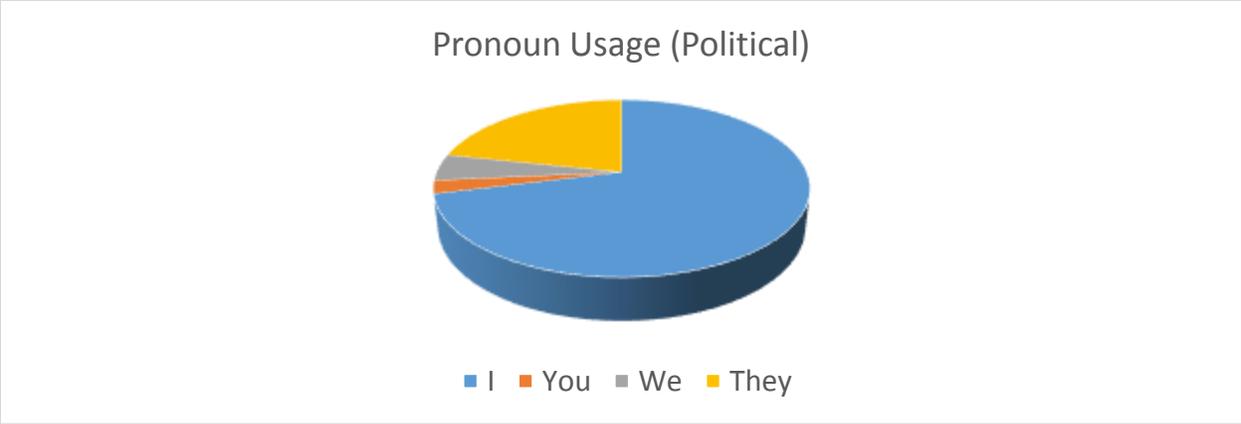


Figure 2. Pronoun Usage for Political Open Text Response

While the context of use for both questions was the same (as part of a survey with similarly phrased questions), responses show that pronoun usage for the two questions was notably different. In the breakfast question, “You” was often used generally to refer to humans, while the general “You” was used infrequently in the political question.

Results by Political Affiliation

Of all the words gathered by the political open text question, around 37% were pronouns. Responses to the political question were then analyzed by political party. All of the groups used the pronouns in category “I,” ranging from the most in Affiliated: Other/3rd Party to Republican to Democrat to Unaffiliated who had the least uses of “I” (See Figure 3). Also notable across groups was the tendency to begin the response with “I” and then shift to other pronouns

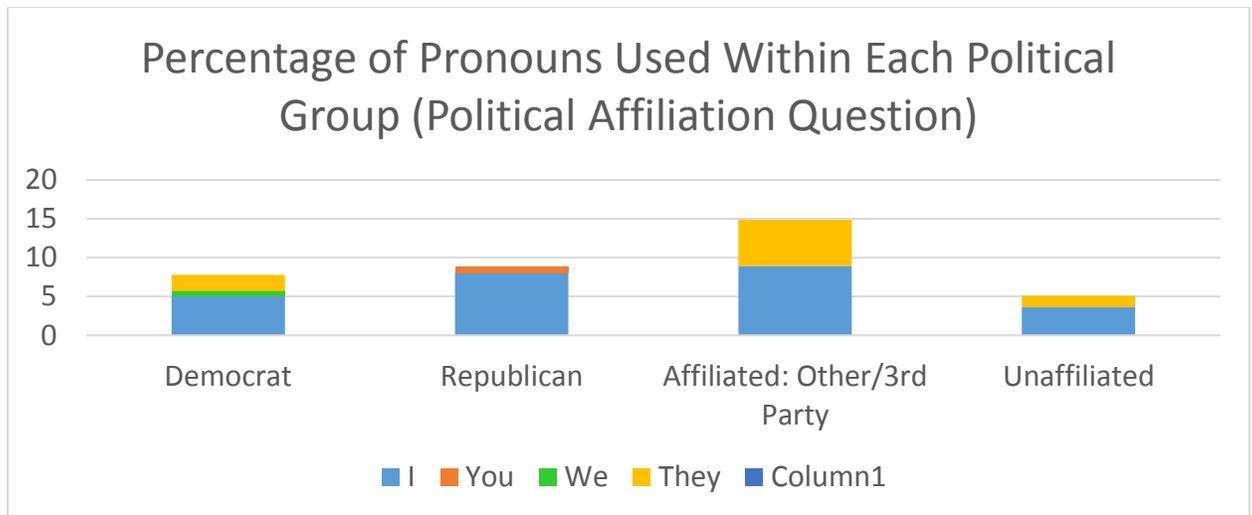


Figure 3. Percentage of Pronouns Used to Total Amount of Words for Political Open Text Response

However, Republicans were the only group that used “you” within the political question. Democrats were notably the only group that used “we”. Three groups used “They”: Democrat, Unaffiliated, and Affiliated: Other/3rd Party. However, affiliated 3rd party used noticeably more of “they”.

Table 2: Example Responses to Political Open-Text Question by Party with Analysis

<u>Republican</u>	<u>Affiliated: Other/3rd Party</u>
I can identify with both political parties. I lean more towards republican but its stricter on its policies of certain religion beliefs. I feel that if you have standards, beliefs or any certain values then you can trust a moral compass. At times democracy can be too liberal.	The transparency of party officials is a big factor for my interest, I like to understand the reasons that certain politicians maintain certain stances and I do not appreciate when they change their positions to gain support.
<u>Democrat</u>	<u>Unaffiliated</u>
Immigration is what attracts me to politics because us as Hispanics need to support each other in this aspect. Latinos need to stand together and support what benefits us as a group.	How the representative chooses to achieve their political plans. In other words, their ideology, standards, and political agenda.

Reflections of Political Ideology in Pronoun Usage?

Republican's use of "you" was quite general but notably seems to include them. This finding differs from previous findings that focused on political leaders, such as Vukovic (2012) in which political leaders used "you" to create negative perceptions of a separate, other party. Instead, the "you" pronouns and possessive determiners used by Republican participants seem to represent all humans or people that think alike or hold the same values as the republican respondent.

As seen in Table 2, the Democrats' use of "we" seems to highlight association with group identity, especially Hispanic or Latino group identity. This is also seen in some of the uses of "I". For example, one participant wrote, "Even [though] I am US citizen, I am Hispanic and I always look forward to the Hispanic culture." This use of "I" shows that the participant is situating their particular identity within other group identities that are important to the political affiliations held.

The use of "they" by the unaffiliated and affiliated: other 3rd party groups (even to some degree among Democrats) allows participants to separate themselves from other groups that they disagree with. It is also interesting to note that the combination use of pronouns (the "I" and "they" categories), which allowed participants to contrast between an individual's group and other political groups, was used most frequently by the affiliated: other/3rd party while the unaffiliated group used these pronouns less than any other group analyzed. It is possible that participants attracted to 3rd parties felt a greater need to stake out their claim of space in relation to the other major parties or that they feel a higher degree of separation between their much smaller group and larger political groups around them. Conversely, given the limited use of "I" and "they", the Unaffiliated might not have formed

clear political opinions, do not mentally see themselves as distinct from any political party, or view any political party distinct from the other.

Conclusion

These preliminary findings show exciting potential for further research in this area of inquiry. Similar to previous findings, pronoun usage shifts depending on the context (in this case topic). This seems to be consistent with other studies within the same field. However, it is exciting to note that despite a small number of participants (n=40), differences emerged in pronoun usage between the groups on the open-text political question. Each party displayed distinct patterns in pronoun choices: republicans using “you”, democrats using “we”, affiliated: other/3rd party using the largest amount of “I” and “they” pronouns, and unaffiliated individuals using the least amount of pronouns in general. However, much more data is needed to confirm these early findings. We hope that future research can be expanded to include a more diverse demographic from many areas of the country. Further, interviews would be a useful tool in future research to obtain spontaneous speech samples.

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