

THESIS SUMMARY

Lilla Petronella Szabó

It's nothing personal?

**A linguistic account of the personalization of American political
communication**

Supervisor:

Réka Benczes, DSc

Professor

Budapest
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Department of Communication and Media Science

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I. Background and relevance of the research

Political communication is becoming personalized. Political personalization is illustrated by the fact that we live in a world where citizens frequently encounter politics mediated by public officials who appear on late-night talk shows, share family photographs on their social media pages, and live stream as they are playing video games. Voters are exposed to content about individual politicians not only as professionals but as “human beings” daily (Langer, 2007, p. 373). At the same time, political collectives (e.g., parties) are declining.

Yet what is exactly meant under the term of political personalization? Firstly, one side of personalization in politics is the tendency that politicians are increasingly foregrounded at the expense of parties and other political groups, such as administrations (Karvonen, 2010; Rahat & Kenig, 2018; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007). Secondly, personalized politics is also frequently defined as the “politicization of the private persona” (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014, p. 156), which means that certain politicians are willing to share the intimate details of their lives which can refer to a wide range of activities from posting family images on politicians’ social media accounts to sharing childhood anecdotes in campaign speeches.

Political personalization can be defined as a process by which the politician’s self is foregrounded instead of the collective identity (such as their party or cabinet). In this definition, a politician’s self involves them as individuals and their “essence” which includes the professional and private angles of their life. Personalization in politics is not considered as an “absolute term” (i.e., politics cannot be viewed as either personalized or not personalized) but a “relative term,” in the sense that there are different degrees of personalization (Unger, 1971).

Why is it necessary to study political personalization? The question may be raised whether political personalization has any real-life consequences apart from a change in political communication itself.

First of all, in terms of democratic governance, McAllister (2007, p. 584) remarked that leaders have a higher level of autonomy in policy making because they receive their mandate from voters rather than their parties. However, this mandate – which is based on voters’ sympathy towards leaders – may make it more difficult to hold leaders accountable, which is harmful to democracy (Pedersen & Rahat, 2019).

The potential of political personalization to highlight politicians' private lives and personal characteristics is presented as a potentially negative consequence of the process by Rahat and Kenig (2018, pp. 209–210). They argue that the emphasis on the intimate details of politicians' lives and on their personal (non-political) characteristics conceivably shifts the focus from politically relevant issues. Nevertheless, as political institutions are on the decline, an increased interest in politicians may draw citizens towards political participation (Mazzoleni, 2000). This aspect of personalization was also confirmed by experiments concluding that political personalization prompted a higher level of political engagement from citizens (Kruikemeier et al., 2013). Therefore, the capability of the phenomenon to engage more citizens – possibly those who otherwise would not be interested – in politics is a generally positive feature (cf. Rahat & Kenig, 2018).

A second challenge for the study of political personalization – apart from its definition – is *how* it can be examined: more precisely, what the indicators of political personalization are. Needless to say, numerous solutions were provided by scholarly work in this regard: from the submission of individual bills in the Israeli parliament (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007), through the media representation of politicians as professionals versus private people (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014; Langer, 2007, 2010), to the explicit expression of their emotions on social media (Metz et al., 2020), several factors were considered as signs of political personalization. Naturally, the numerous research designs prompted contradictory results: while some aspects of politics, such as the decline of political parties confirms political personalization in Western democracies (Karvonen, 2010; Rahat & Kenig, 2018), other indicators, as the increased effect of party leaders on the outcome of elections provided mixed results (Karvonen, 2010).

Amid the multiple perspectives regarding the indicators of personalized politics, the aim of this work is twofold. Firstly, it wishes to contribute to the study of political personalization by providing a *linguistic* means of analyzing the phenomenon. To achieve this goal, American presidential nomination acceptance speeches given for the Democratic National Convention and the Republican National Convention between 1932 and 2020 are analyzed. Therefore, the second outcome of the thesis is that it explores the role of language in the process of meaning-making in a specific domain of political communication, namely political speeches.

To explore political personalization, the focus will be on person deixis and more specifically, the prototypical indicators of person deixis: first-person singular (1PS) and first-person plural (1PP) pronouns in the subjective case, namely *I* and *we* (Tátrai, 2010, 2011, 2017). What is the

rationale behind selecting these specific personal pronouns? Political personalization assumes that while the weight of parties decreased, the importance of individual politicians increased in the political process. According to Rahat and Kenig (2018), this tendency has consequences in terms of politicians' way of portraying themselves and their parties: there is an increasing tendency towards using the *I* (the politician) and a decrease in *we* (the party). Consequently, there needs to be a point in time when 1PS references outnumber 1PP references. The following hypotheses can be formulated on the basis of these statements:

- H1: There is an increase in the number of 1PS *I* references in American presidential nomination acceptance speeches between 1932 and 2020.
- H2: There is a decrease in the number of 1PP *we* references in American presidential nomination acceptance speeches between 1932 and 2020.
- H3: At some point, 1PS *I* references outnumber 1PP *we* references in American presidential nomination acceptance speeches between 1932 and 2020.

However, the 1PP is also known for its ambiguity in political communication: when politicians utter “we,” they can refer to various groups (Jobst, 2007, 2010; Maitland & Wilson, 1987; Wilson, 1990). For example, in an analysis of the article “U.S. Defense Strategy,”¹ written by Caspar Weinberger, the United States Secretary of Defense between 1981 and 1987, Urban (1986, pp. 8–9) identified six different categories of the 1PP. These included the “President and I *we*,”² the “Department of Defense *we*”³, “Reagan Administration *we*,”⁴ “the US government *we*,”⁵ “the United States *we*,”⁶ and “the US and Soviet Union *we*.”⁷

The present research also makes a distinction between different categories of *we*. On the basis of previous studies (Beard, 2000; Fetzer & Bull, 2008; Íñigo-Mora, 2004; Szabó, 2020, 2021; Maitland & Wilson, 1987; Wilson, 1990; Zupnik, 1994), three main categories of *we* are

¹ The article appeared in *Foreign Affairs* in the spring of 1986 (Urban, 1986, p. 1).

² “The President and I believe that the answer lies in the Strategic Defense Initiative. We hope that strategic defense will eventually render nuclear missiles obsolete” (Weinberger, 1986, p. 681 cited in Urban, 1986, p. 8).

³ “I want to describe U.S. defense strategies and to summarize the major changes we have made in our thinking at the Department of Defense over the past five years” (Weinberger, 1986, p. 675 cited in Urban, 1986, p. 9).

⁴ “... the Reagan Administration has made a number of revisions and additions. We have added four pillars of defense policy for the 1990s...” (Weinberger, 1986, p. 679 cited in Urban, 1986, p. 9).

⁵ “Even with the SALT II restraints the Soviet Union has built more warheads capable of destroying our missile silos than we had initially predicted...” (Weinberger, 1986, p. 691 cited in Urban, 1986, p. 9).

⁶ “Should the United States decide that it is necessary to commit its forces to combat, we must commit them in sufficient numbers...” (Weinberger, 1986 cited in Urban, 1986, p. 9).

⁷ “In November in Geneva, President Reagan and President Gorbachev agreed that both governments will examine the possibility of creating risk-reduction centers [...] We also have conducted a series of policy-level discussions on regional issues. (Weinberger, 1986 cited in Urban, 1986, p. 9).

distinguished: *weFamily*, *weParty*, and *weNation*. Based on the features of political personalization, namely that it foregrounds the individual at the expense of the collective, and the subsequent “humanization” of politicians (cf. Langer, 2007, 2010), the following hypotheses are formulated:

H4: There is an increase in the number of *weFamily* references in American presidential nomination acceptance speeches between 1932 and 2020.

H5: There is a decrease in the number of *weParty* references in American presidential nomination acceptance speeches between 1932 and 2020.

Finally, I assume that instead of identifying with their own party, politicians crossed party-lines and aimed to address the whole nation: as a consequence, a growth in *weNation* is expected.

H6: There is an increase in the number of *weNation* references in American presidential nomination acceptance speeches between 1932 and 2020.

In summary, the expectations with regards to personal pronouns is that the 1PS references grew, and globally, the 1PP references decreased. With regards to the 1PP references the decrease of party-identification (*weParty*) and the increase of family (*weFamily*) and national (*weNation*) identification is hypothesized.

The thesis aims to provide corpus-based evidence with regards to the personalization of politics. In order to achieve its goal, a qualitative and quantitative analysis of first-person pronouns is conducted. The method is qualitative to the end that aims to interpret who first-person pronouns referred to in the texts, namely what kind of pronominal categories can be established. The data-driven analysis aims to show that there is a tendency of increasing personalization in American presidential nomination acceptance speeches by collecting the occurrences of pronoun categories in the speeches.

II. Methodology

The current research adopts an “experiential view” of deixis (Marmaridou, 2000). Deixis is conceptualized on the basis of the “pointing out” idealized cognitive model (ICM) and maps the physical act of the speaker’s pointing something out into the linguistic (symbolic) act of pointing (Marmaridou, 2000). An ICM (a structured system of knowledge) depends on different structuring principles including propositional structure, image-schematic structure, metaphoric mappings, and metonymic mappings (Lakoff, 1987, p. 68). To interpret person deixis from the perspective of political personalization, two of these structuring principles are addressed in the thesis: the image-schematic and the metaphoric structure (Marmaridou, 2000).

According to Marmaridou, the image-schematic structure on which the ICM of deixis depends is the CENTER-PERIPHERY image schema (Marmaridou, 2000). The CENTER-PERIPHERY image schema structures the deictic ICM in a way that the speaker is viewed as the CENTER (i.e., the most important element upon which the periphery depends) and the PERIPHERY, namely the entities to which the speaker points, are determined relative to the center/speaker. Levinson (1983, p. 64) visualized the various distances from the speaker as concentric circles the center of which is the speaker:

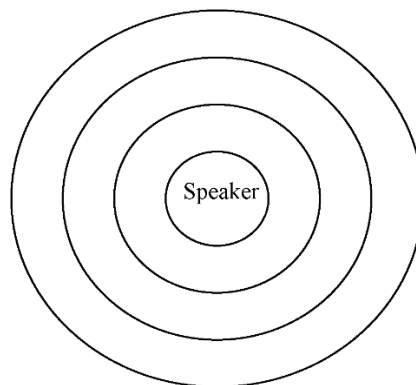


Figure 1. Spatial proximity in deixis relative to the speaker, based on Levinson, 1983, p. 64.

As Figure 1 demonstrates, the different distances can be marked in relation to the speaker; thus, as speakers we can point to entities which are closer to us (e.g., “this pen”) or entities which are further from us (e.g., “that pen”).

The deictic schema is not only structured by humans’ embodied experiences via image schemas but by means of metaphorical mappings as well (Marmaridou, 2000). The metaphorical

mapping which holds within the deictic ICM maps the physical space onto the social space. The mapping of the physical space onto the social space means that we conceptualize social distances in terms of physical distances relying on the INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS / SOCIAL DISTANCE IS PHYSICAL DISTANCE conceptual metaphors. Thus, social deixis can be interpreted in terms of spatial deixis. The conceptualization of SOCIAL DISTANCE as PHYSICAL DISTANCE also means that a difference in social rank between interlocutors is translated into the physical space between them; in turn, “Social solidarity is understood as spatial proximity” (Marmaridou, 2000, p. 101).

Thus, within an experiential framework, it is possible to conceptualize person deixis in terms of spatial relations. The thesis suggests that personal pronouns can be conceptualized in terms of physical distance. This claim is based on Rees’ (1983, cited by Jobst, 2007, 2010; Maitland & Wilson, 1987; Wilson, 1990) model of pronouns which indicates how an individual speaker can distance themselves from an issue or other individuals by using different pronouns. The linear model proposed by Rees (1983) as cited by Maitland and Wilson (1987, p. 498) is replicated in Figure 2.

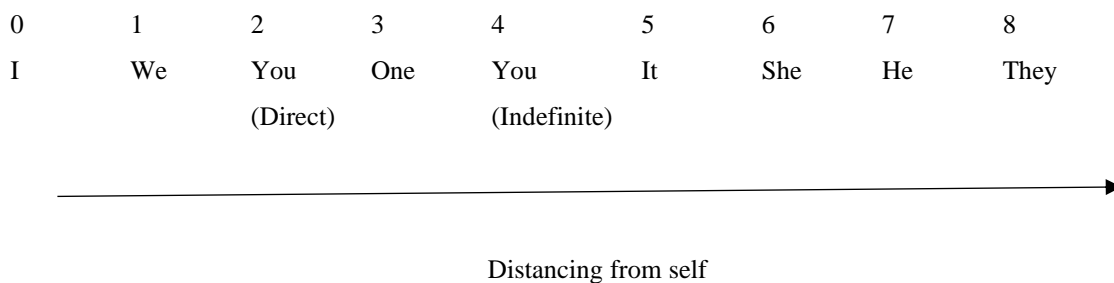


Figure 2. Distancing from the self via personal pronouns as devised by Rees (1983, cited by Maitland & Wilson, 1987, p. 498).

The fundamental principle behind the scale presented in Figure 2 is that as speakers select the personal pronouns to use in their messages, their reference point is the first-person singular *I* (i.e., the deictic center) and move further away from the most subjective *I* (Wilson, 1990, p. 58). Rees considered Figure 2 as a generic position for all speakers (Wilson, 1990, p. 58). By way of illustration, in his 1984 speech, Walter F. Mondale contrasted the Democratic Party (under whose colors he ran) and the Republican Party in the following way.

- (1) “I do not envy the drowsy harmony of the Republican Party. *They* squelch debate; *we* welcome it. *They* deny differences; *we* bridge them. *They* are uniform; *we* are united. *They* are a portrait of privilege; *we* are a mirror of America.” (Mondale, 1984)⁸⁹

Example (1) shows how Mondale positioned himself as a member of the Democratic Party, referring to it with the pronoun *we* (marked by number 1), which is relatively close the deictic center (*I* in 0 position). This is in opposition with the most distant pronoun *they* (8), which refers to the Republican Party in this case. *They* is positioned at the distal end of Rees’ (1983, cited by Maitland & Wilson, 1987) model of pronouns.

Based on the literature (Beard, 2000; Urban, 1986; Proctor & Su, 2011; Szabó, 2020, 2021), the thesis observed four analytical categories: *we*_{Family}, *we*_{Party}, *we*_{Nation}, and *we*_{Humanity}. *We*_{Family} is designated as the most intimate category in the sense that it refers to those people who are the closest to the speaker and generally involves references to the candidate’s spouse or family. *We*_{Party} involves the groups to which candidates belong, including their party and – if applicable – the government they had formed. *We*_{Nation} overlaps with the pragmatic definition of the inclusive use of the 1PP, as it includes the speaker (politician), the addressee (the citizens), and others who are non-addressees (Laczkó & Tátrai, 2015; Tátrai, 2010, 2017). *We*_{Humanity} is the farthest from the deictic center (the speaker) in this typology. Consequently, *we*_{Humanity} includes those references which involve the speaker and the whole of humanity.

The relative position of the different categories of *we* to the speaker are illustrated by Figure 3 which is based on the radial model of the relative distance of personal pronouns from the deictic center (Figure 1).

⁸ Mondale, W. F. (1984). Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-democratic-national-convention-san> Accessed: 16 February 2022.

⁹ The emphasis is mine in each citation, unless otherwise indicated.

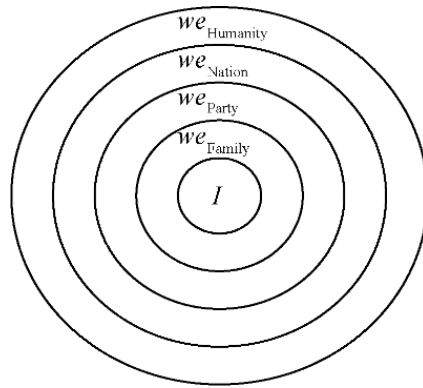


Figure 3. The relative distance of the referents of first-person plural pronouns to the deictic center.

Figure 3 encapsulates the image schematic representation of the first-person pronominal categories. As shown by Figure 3, the advantage of the radial model of personal pronouns with reference to the distance from the speaker's self over the linear model is that it makes the CENTER-PERIPHERY image schema perceptible: it shows that the speaker (*I*) stands in the center and that the referents of the 1PP categories (we_{Family} , we_{Party} , we_{Nation} , and we_{Humanity}) are positioned relative to the speaker (i.e., the deictic center). The categories presented by Figure 3 do not designate inclusivity in the sense that politicians' family members are not necessarily members of their political parties, for example. Thus, the concentric circles merely indicate the relative distance from the nominees.

The 1PS pronoun was considered as the direct indication of taking personal responsibility in earlier research (Beard, 2000; Urban, 1986; Wilson, 1990). Additionally, from the perspective of the speaker (the deictic center), the 1PS *I*, the speaker's "self" can be considered as the utterance which is the closest to the speaker themselves. The following steps were taken in order to identify the 1PS in the observed corpus:

1. The whole presidential nomination acceptance speech was read (cf. Proctor & Su, 2011).
2. Each presidential nomination acceptance speech was uploaded separately to the AntConc (Anthony, 2020) corpus linguistics analysis tool and the 1PS *I* was searched for (cf. Proctor & Su, 2011).
3. The returned hits were normalized to 1,000 words, in line with corpus linguistic conventions (Gries, 2010).

In this research, the identification of the 1PS references in the corpus is expected to show whether politicians referred to themselves more frequently as we move forward along the

designated timeline of 1932 and 2020. In line with political personalization, I expected that the number of politicians' self-references grew.

The analysis of the 1PS pronouns was followed by the 1PP pronouns. The 1PP pronouns found in the presidential acceptance speeches were categorized in the four groups of *we*_{Family}, *we*_{Party}, *we*_{Nation}, and *we*_{Humanity}. In order to identify the referent of the 1PP, I followed the subsequent analytical steps:

1. The whole presidential nomination acceptance speech was read (cf. Proctor & Su, 2011).
2. Each presidential nomination acceptance speech was uploaded separately to the AntConc (Anthony, 2020) corpus linguistics analysis tool and the 1PP *we* was searched for (cf. Proctor & Su, 2011).
3. A separate Microsoft Excel file for each speech was created and the sentences which included the 1PP *we* were listed.
4. The 1PP pronouns were categorized as *we*_{Family}, *we*_{Party}, *we*_{Nation}, and *we*_{Humanity}. The categories were determined in the following manner:
 - 4.1. First, it was checked whether there was an anaphoric reference within the sentence and the hit was categorized accordingly (cf. Bazzanella, 2002; Jobst, 2007, 2010). If relevant, the referent was interpreted in terms of conceptual metonymy.
 - 4.2. If there was no anaphoric reference in the sentence, the larger context was observed in which the sentence occurred and identified the closest anaphoric reference. If relevant, the referent was interpreted in terms of conceptual metonymy in each subsequent step.
 - 4.2.1. If the 1PP reference was compatible with the referent of the closest (non-pronominal) subject, the 1PP was marked as a co-referent.
 - 4.2.2. If the 1PP was not compatible with the closest (non-pronominal) subject, I selected the category on the basis of the larger context, "shared knowledge" and "the ongoing interaction" (Bazzanella, 2002, p. 248).
5. The returned hits were normalized to 1,000 words, in line with corpus linguistic conventions (Gries, 2010).

By way of illustration, the following excerpt from Nixon's 1968 speech was not possible to categorize without the knowledge of the larger context:

- (2) "As *we* look at America, *we* see cities enveloped in smoke and flame." (Nixon, 1968)¹⁰

¹⁰ Nixon, R. (1968). Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, Florida. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-republican-national-convention-miami> Accessed: 16 February 2022.

In the case of this sentence, the referent of the two 1PP pronouns cannot be identified on the bases of the sentence alone, and thus, it could belong to any of the proposed categories. However, the larger context enables us to select the category of we_{Nation} :

- (3) “For a few moments, let us look at America, let us listen to America to find the answer to that question. As *we* look at America, *we* see cities enveloped in smoke and flame.” (Nixon, 1968)

The context indicates that Nixon addressed the audience and invited them to “look at America.” Since this study considers the audience as a category including not only those people who were present at the convention but those who followed the convention through the media, these hits were marked as we_{Nation} .

III. Results

To summarize the results, the following observations can be made:

- 1) The number of occurrences of the 1PS *I* grew between 1932 and 2020, which confirms H1.
- 2) The number of 1PP references did not decrease between 1932 and 2020, which refutes H2.
- 3) The number of 1PS *I* occurrences outnumbered the 1PP *we* only in the case of Republican candidates' speeches. The same did not happen in Democratic addresses and the overall data also does not confirm this trend. Therefore, H3 is only partially justified.
- 4) *We*_{Family} references manifested a growth; however, not from 1932 – as initially expected – but from 1984, which partially justifies H4.
- 5) *We*_{Party} references partially justified H5, as they did not decrease exponentially: in fact, *we*_{Party} increased from 1932 to the beginning of the 1980s. However, subsequently to a peak in the number of *we*_{Party} references in 1984, a decreasing tendency can be observed.
- 6) *We*_{Nation} references justified H6, as they exhibited a generally increasing tendency from 1932.
- 7) The hits in the corpus only returned a negligible number (n=1) of *we*_{Humanity} references, possibly due to the nature of the speeches, as they were written for national campaigns.

The thesis also presents two case studies, as a solely data-driven analysis is not suited to account for a more nuanced interpretation of first-person pronouns and their role in political personalization in political speeches.

The results of the case studies show that qualitative analyses can provide a more complete picture of *how* political personalization happens and account for the subtleties of personalization which are easily overlooked in a data-driven approach. This is supported by the private 1PS and 1PP references in Obama's and Reagan's speeches: while there is no significant difference in terms of the ratio of references which were categorized as private in the two addresses, variation can still be detected. Whereas Obama used the private sense of the 1PS and 1PP to talk about his family, Reagan rather mentioned himself or his wife and himself but in a professional capacity (as President and First Lady). Although no broad conclusions

can be drawn on the basis of the case studies presented here, the results support the data-driven analysis, as there are more elements of personalization in Obama's 2008 nomination acceptance speech as compared to Reagan's 1984 remarks.

The thesis provides new results in terms of theory and methodology as well. The following points summarize the novelties explored in this research.

1. The thesis provides a linguistic account on the personalization of political communication. More precisely, it offers an analysis of subjective first-person references in the context of personalized political communication. **By setting up the analytical categories of first-person references (namely, *I*, *we*_{Family}, *we*_{Party}, *we*_{Nation}, *we*_{Humanity}), the thesis provides a novel framework for future research on personalized political discourse** in a wider range of text types (e.g., genres of political communication, including other campaign speeches, inaugural speeches, etc.) and languages.
2. The theoretical framework draws on cognitive linguistic research, including image schema theory and conceptual metaphor theory. Based on the experiential view of deixis, which claims that deixis is based on the CENTER-PERIPHERY image schema (Marmaridou, 2000), it provides a spatial interpretation of pronominal references through the INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS / SOCIAL DISTANCE IS PHYSICAL DISTANCE conceptual metaphors. The analyzed first-person pronoun categories (*I*, *we*_{Family}, *we*_{Party}, *we*_{Nation}, *we*_{Humanity}) are placed on a radial model of pronominal distance from the speaker's *I* which was created on the basis of Rees's (1983, 1983, cited by Jobst, 2007, 2010; Maitland & Wilson, 1987; Wilson, 1990) linear model. **The thesis offers a modified version of Rees' model. The radial model that is adopted in the thesis allows for the conceptualization of personal pronouns in terms of the metaphorical distance from the speaker, providing a basis for further data-driven analyses of pronominal distance in political discourse.**
3. A common criticism of image schema theory is the omission of socio-cultural considerations (Kimmel, 2005). The present study relies on the cultural and political context of the United States of America, along with the social changes which contributed to the personalization of political communication. **In doing so, the thesis embeds the CENTER-PERIPHERY image schema (which provided the ground for**

interpreting first-person pronoun relations) in the context of American political communication.

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