

Probing Personal Pronouns in English Speeches to Actuate

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Professor Cheryl Hamilton of American Tarrant County divided speeches into two types: One is informative speeches, and the other is persuasive speeches. It is obvious that the speech to actuate should be more inspired and motive than the speech to convince. So the language of the speech to actuate should have some special features. Personal pronoun is one of the basic elements of language. It is widely used in our daily speaking, and for a speaker, it is also an effective way to control the emotion of listeners. Different personal pronouns have different effects in a speech, and this thesis has analyzed the effects of personal pronouns in the speech to actuate respectively with the examples of “I Have a Dream” made by Martin Luther King and “My Education, My Future” made by Barack Hussein Obama Jr., the president of America. From the analysis, we can see the concrete role every pronoun played in the speeches of different styles, and how it impacts the success of a speech. Such an analysis and probe leads to a better understanding on the art of English speaking, which can help the learners of English make these skills in their charge.

Keywords: personal pronoun, English speech, actuate, calling-on style, advising style

Introduction

Speech, which is defined as “a talk, especially a formal one about a particular subject, given to a group of people” in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2002, p. 1382), has been playing a very important role in our life and society. As a special style of efficient communication, we have been influenced by it time after time. No matter running for monitor, group leader or general manager, and even president, you need an effective speech. Of course, due to the definition, a lecture and even what a teacher speaks at a class are also a kind of speech. So we can see that speech is widely around us for we usually play a role of a speaker or a listener. “Generally, English speech is characterized by rigorous thinking, logical expression, linguistic succinctness, variety of sentence structure and lively rhythm” (Li, Zhang, & Guan, 2004, p. 327). In a word, speech is a special style at the use of language, therefore, it certainly has some characteristic features in linguistics.

Cheryl Hamilton, the professor of American Tarrant County, divided speeches into two types: One is informative speeches, and the other is persuasive speeches. “Present ideas or information designed to promote understanding, or convey a body of related facts” (Hamilton, 2004, p. 270) is the definition of informative speeches by Hamilton. In another word, the goal of an informative speech is just to tell you something. A lecture and even what a teacher speaks at a class can be classified into it. “Persuasion is communication that is intended to influence choice” (Hamilton, 2004, p. 290). Unlike informative speeches, a persuasive speech will

try to make you receive the ideas of the speaker or even wish you can do something as the speaker has told you in the speech, and inaugural addresses and most public speeches can be classified into it.

Then Hamilton (2004) divided persuasive speeches into two types:

There are two basic types of persuasive speeches: the speech to convince and the speech to actuate. The two types differ in the degree of audience reaction sought: the speech to convince seeks intellectual agreement from listeners, whereas the speech to actuate asks listeners for both intellectual agreement and action of some type. (Hamilton, 2004, p. 292)

From the definitions by Hamilton, we can infer that what an informative speech needs is objectiveness and accuracy, while an effective persuasive speech should be inspired and motive. "In general, persuasive delivery must be more forceful and direct than informative delivery" (Hamilton, 2004, p. 292).

Actually, in terms of its style to influence the listeners, the speech to actuate can be divided into two types, too: the speech of calling-on style and the speech of advising style. In the speech of calling-on style, the speaker plays a role of the leader or spokesman of his or her listeners. In another word, the speaker and the listeners are one group, and the speaker is just a part in the group. However, in the speech of advising style, the speaker plays a role of an adviser, and he or she is not in the same group with the listeners objectively.

In a sense, we can consider that the speech to convince is just to send ideas, while the speech to actuate is to send will. The final intention of the speech to actuate is to make the listeners do something as what the speaker told them in the speech. It is obviously that the speech to actuate should be more inspired and motive than the speech to convince. So the language of the speech to actuate should have some special features.

In regard to the linguistic features of English speeches, Li Qing-ming, Zhang Yan, and Guan Xiao-lei had talked about this question in their *Probing the Linguistic and Rhetorical Features of English Speeches*. In their article, the author listed four linguistic features of English speeches: (1) frequent use of personal pronouns; (2) widespread use of abstract nouns; (3) basic sentence patterns; and (4) alternative use of long sentences and short sentences. In this article, the author will pay most of her attention to the speech to actuate as well as its two styles and talk about only one of its linguistic elements: personal pronoun. The author attempts to find out how it can help to make a speech be more inspired and motive and finally let the listeners take action in the way the speaker told them in the speech.

Personal Pronouns

The Definition of Personal Pronouns

Personal pronoun, which is defined as "technical a pronoun used for the person who is speaking, being spoken to, or being spoken about, such as 'I', 'you', and 'they'" (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 2002, p. 1054), is one of the basic elements of language. It is widely used in our daily talking, and for a speaker, it is also an effective way to control the emotion of listeners. For different personal pronouns have different effects in a speech, then the author will show their specific effects respectively.

Some Interpretations of the Personal Pronoun Talked About in This Article

In this article, the close attention will be paid to the first personal pronoun (including "I" and "we"/"us"), the second personal pronoun ("you"), and the third personal pronoun (including "he"/"him", "she"/"her", and "they"/"them"). And what we talk about is just the situation it refers to people. Three pronouns should be paid attention to:

(1) It. Of course, “it” is also a personal pronoun, but speakers almost never use “it” for people in a speech. The reason may be that “it” is “used to talk about a child or an animal when you do not know what sex they are” (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 2002, p. 754) when used as a personal pronoun. Obviously, it may let the listeners feel disrespectful if the speaker used “it” to refer to them in his or her speech. Therefore, “it” is not included here;

(2) He. “He” is defined as “used to talk about a male person or animal that has already been mentioned or is already known about” (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 2002, p. 656). For what we talk about is the situation the pronoun refers to people, so the latter function of “he” can be past. So as “him”, its object form;

(3) They. “They” is defined as “used to talk about two or more people or things that have been already knows about” (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 2002, p. 1498). Because “they” can also be used to stand for things besides people, and this is beyond the topic we talk about, thus “they” used like this should be set aside. So as “them”, its object form.

The First Personal Pronoun

In most of the persuasive speeches, the use of the first person is widespread.

The Singular Form of The First Personal Pronoun

The singular form of the personal pronoun consists of “I” and “me”, which is the object form of “I”. “I” is a very important personal pronoun in the daily talking and even may be the most widely used one. In a speech, it refers to the speaker himself or herself.

In the speech of calling-on style, the use of “I” is a mild way to make a declaration. If a speaker used “I”, in a majority of cases, he or she told his or her own ideas which he or she was sure that the listeners would agree with him or her, and he or she was just a spokesman of them.

“I Have a Dream” is one of the most famous speeches in the history of English speech. It was made in August 28, 1963 by Martin Luther King, one of the most brilliant speakers in the history of America. The speech mainly appeals to the right of freedom and equality of the colours and calls on the Negro to unite to resist the segregation and discrimination. It can be chosen as the model of the speech of calling-on style.

In this speech, there are 64 personal pronouns which are up to our standard, and “I” appeared 15 times, accounting for about 23.4%; “me” did not appear. Let us see an example:

I say to you today, my friends. And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood; I have a dream—

That one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice; I have a dream—

That my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character; I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers; I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, and rough places will be made plane, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. (King, 1963)

Here, Martin Luther King said “I have a dream that one day...”, but in fact, it is the dream of every Negro. By this way, the listeners would feel that it was their mission to resist on segregation and discrimination, and it was with all their heart instead of being imposed on by others. It is obviously that the idea of the speaker would be easier to be accepted.

In the speech of advising style, “I” has two effects: One is to tell the listeners the experiences of the speaker, and the other is to show the speaker’s wish to the listeners. “My Education, My Future” is a speech made at Wakefield High School in September 8, 2009 by Barack Hussein Obama Jr., the president of America. By this speech, President Obama intended to send the message to the students that they should work hard and value the chance of study. It can be considered as a model of the speech of advising style. In this speech, there are 250 personal pronouns which are up to our standard, and inside them, “I” appeared 48 times, “me” five times, totally accounting for 21.2%. Let us see an example in it:

Now, I know it’s not always easy to do well in school. I know a lot of you have challenges in your lives right now that can make it hard to focus on your schoolwork.

I get it. I know what it’s like. My father left my family when I was two years old, and I was raised by a single mom who had to work and who struggled at times to pay the bills and wasn’t always able to give us the things that other kids had. There were times when I missed having a father in my life. There were times when I was lonely and I felt like I didn’t fit in.

So I wasn’t always as focused as I should have been on school, and I did some things I’m not proud of, and I got in more trouble than I should have. And my life could have easily taken a turn for the worse. (Obama, 2010)

In these paragraphs, President Obama told his own experiences of school time and told the students that he had a similar feeling which they felt today. He used his own experiences as a supporting material, which was a convincing case for that Obama himself had been successful today. Let us see another example:

But whatever you resolve to do, I want you to commit to it. I want you to really work at it. ...

...So I expect all of you to get serious this year. I expect you to put your best effort into everything you do. I expect great things from each of you. ... (Obama, 2010)

From these sentences, Obama showed his hope to the students. For he is a successful person, the students can think that this is a way to success he pointed to them. And if they do as what he said, they may be as successful as Obama. Then some of them will take action after the speech. In this way, the messages can be sent more efficiently.

The Plural Form of the First Personal Pronoun

The plural form of the first personal pronoun consists of “we” and “us”, which is the object form of “we”. In the speech of calling-on style, the use of “we” or “us” will be:

Helpful in indicating that the speaker puts himself or herself in the same boat with, or on the side of, the audience, thus shortening the distance between the speaker and the audience and arousing their affirmative feelings and sympathetic responses. (Li et al., 2004, p. 327)

What is more, that is also “a mild way of requesting and commanding if the speaker calls upon his listeners to adopt a certain action” (Li et al., 2004, p. 327).

In Martin Luther King’s speech, “I Have a Dream”, “we” and “us” appeared 37 times totally, accounting for nearly 57.8%, more than a half! Let us see some examples:

...But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we’ve come to cash this check—a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. ... (King, 1963)

We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. ... (King, 1963)

And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who ask the devotees of civil rights, “When will you be satisfied?” We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro’s basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating “For Whites Only.” We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. (King, 1963)

From the examples above, we can see that Martin Luther King successfully made it close with his listeners by “we” or “us”. The listeners could get a sincere feeling of the group. The speaker was on the same side with them, and his idea was also the idea of their group, thus it was natural to do as what he said because he was on their own side. What is more, when you read it even today, you can still be stimulated and feel that you are a part of them.

However, in the speech of advising style, the percent “we” or “us” occupied in the total of personal pronouns is always less than the speech of calling-on style. In this type of speech, the speaker is always an adviser. As an adviser, he or she must be a successful and famous person or others that do not belong to the group of listeners and that always determine the distance between the speaker and listeners. So the speaker need not use “we” or “us” painstakingly. In President Obama’s speech, “My Education, My Future”, “we” and “us” totally appeared 10 times, just accounting for 4.0% in total 250 personal pronouns appearing in this speech. Let us see the following short part of the speech:

... I expect great things from each of you. So don’t let us down. Don’t let your family down or your country down. Most of all, don’t let yourself down. Make us all proud. ... (Obama, 2010)

From the sentences, we can see that, here “us” refers to the adults or the parents of students, but the listeners of President Obama are students. What President Obama said here is the hope of the adults to the students, and they hope them to work hard and do not make their own parents down. So we know the different effects the plural form of the first personal pronoun has in the speech of calling-on style and the speech of advising style.

The Second Personal Pronoun

The second personal pronoun consists of “you” only, for the singular form, the object form, and plural form of the second personal pronoun are all “you”.

In the speech of calling-on style, the speaker often “automatically avoids using the second personal pronoun ‘you’ which often implies a separation between the speaker and the listener” (Li et al., 2004, p. 327). In Martin Luther King’s speech, “I Have a Dream”, “you” just appeared eight times, only accounting for 12.5%. For example:

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive. (King, 1963)

Here Martin Luther King used “you” to list some objective situations of the listeners. In this way, the listeners would feel that the speaker knew their circumstance very well, and what he called on them to do was not visionary. Although the speaker used “you” instead of “we”, the listeners would get a more intensive experience that they were a group. Even though they had specific conditions respectively, they were in the same circumstance that they were all victims of segregation and discrimination. Thus, here the use of “you” is necessary even though it is different with the general way most speakers will take.

In contrast, in the speech of advising style, the use of “you” is very wide. For the distance between the speaker and listeners is here, the speaker does not need to evade painstakingly. In President Obama’s speech, “My Education, My Future”, “you” occupied 158 in total 250 personal pronouns. Except for five times appeared in greetings, such as “Thank you”, there are still 153 times, accounting for 61.2%. Let us see some examples of it:

I want to start with the responsibility you have to yourself. Every single one of you has something that you’re good at. Every single one of you has something to offer. And you have a responsibility to yourself to discover what that is. That’s the opportunity an education can provide.

Maybe you could be a great writer—maybe even good enough to write a book or articles in a newspaper—but you might not know it until you write that English paper—that English class paper that’s assigned to you. Maybe you could be an innovator or an inventor—maybe even good enough to come up with the next iPhone or the new medicine or vaccine—but you might not know it until you do your project for your science class. Maybe you could be a mayor or a senator or a Supreme Court justice—but you might not know that until you join student government or the debate team. (Obama, 2010)

You’ll need the knowledge and problem-solving skills you learn in science and math to cure diseases like cancer and AIDS, and to develop new energy technologies and protect our environment. You’ll need the insights and critical-thinking skills you gain in history and social studies to fight poverty and homelessness, crime and discrimination, and make our nation more fair and more free. You’ll need the creativity and ingenuity you develop in all your classes to build new companies that will create new jobs and boost our economy. (Obama, 2010)

No one’s born being good at all things. You become good at things through hard work. You’re not a varsity athlete the first time you play a new sport. You don’t hit every note the first time you sing a song. You’ve got to practice. The same principle applies to your schoolwork. You might have to do a math problem a few times before you get it right. You might have to read something a few times before you understand it. You definitely have to do a few drafts of a paper before it’s good enough to hand in. (Obama, 2010)

In these paragraphs, President Obama used “you” under two conditions: (1) to show the actual situations of the listeners. The first paragraph told that every student had some skilled things and something to offer, and of course it was a part of the actual situations for the students. What is more, there are a few of words with unsure mood, such as “might”, “could”, and so on in the second and fourth paragraphs. On the surface, these are just some conjectures. However, these messages are all facts actually, and the effect of the way the speaker used is just equal to particularize some cases; and (2) to show the hope of the speaker to the listeners. In the third paragraph, the speaker used the general future tense widely to show his hope to them and, from other point of view, to show them their duty or business to their own future. From the perspective of the students, they might think that if they do as what the speaker asked them to do, they would be as successful as the speaker in the future. Then they will get the driving force to follow what the speaker said in the speech. Then the effect for the sending of message will obviously be better.

The Third Personal Pronoun

In a speech, the third personal pronoun is seldomly used, both in the speech of calling-on style and in the speech of advising style. The reason may be that the function of the third person is to refer to a person who is either the speaker or the listeners, while the feeling of presence is very important in a speech. Thus, the third person can hardly call the attention of speakers.

The Singular Form of the Third Personal Pronoun

The singular form of the third personal pronoun consists of “he” and “she”, and the object forms of them are respectively “him” and “her”.

In Martin Luther King’s speech, “I Have a Dream”, the speaker used “he” for only one time, and did not use “she”. Let us analyze it:

... We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. ... (King, 1963)

Here, Martin Luther King assumed a Negro to explain their request for the equality in the political rights. The example of a Negro had universality and figurativeness to the listeners, and everyone could think that the “a Negro” Martin Luther King said was himself. In another word, everyone of the listeners could feel the attention the speaker paid to him. In this way, the heart of the listeners can be increasingly open, and of course, it will give a big hand for the sending of the message to the speaker.

In President Obama’s speech, “My Education, My Future”, Obama used “he” for four times, and “she” for 13 times, totally accounting for 6.8%. Most of them were used to tell the stories of others. Let us see some examples:

I know that feeling. When I was young, my family lived overseas. I lived in Indonesia for a few years. And my mother, she didn’t have the money to send me where all the American kids went to school, but she thought it was important for me to keep up with an American education. So she decided to teach me extra lessons herself, Monday through Friday. But because she had to go to work, the only time she could do it was at 4:30 in the morning. (Obama, 2010)

I’m thinking about Andoni Schultz, from Los Altos, California, who’s fought brain cancer since he was three. He’s had to endure all sorts of treatments and surgeries, one of which affected his memory, so it took him much longer—hundreds of extra hours—to do his schoolwork. But he never fell behind. He’s headed to college this fall. (Obama, 2010)

In the first paragraph, President Obama told his own experiences. In the process of this, he referred to his mother. He told the students how hard his mother was to bring himself up. In the words that followed, he told the stories that he struggled with difficulties. In the second paragraph, Obama told the stories about a boy named Andoni Schultz. This boy had serious disease which had made his life harder than the ordinary, but he kept fighting with his fate and now he has got at last what an ordinary person could get. Here President Obama used his own experiences and the story of an iron and hard-working boy as the supporting materials and intended to encourage the students to value what they have got today. The situation of most students is better than young Obama and the boy, so they should value what they have got and do more things with it. Of course, the listeners can come to a conclusion like this. Under the inspiration, they will take action after the speech.

The Plural Form of the Third Personal Pronoun

The plural form of the third personal pronoun consists of “they” and “them”, which is the object form of “they”. They are seldomly used, too. In Martin Luther King’s speech, “I Have a Dream”, there are only three “they” totally, accounting for 4.7%. Let us see the three “they” in the speech:

In a sense, we’ve come to our nation’s Capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. ... (King, 1963)

... The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone. (King, 1963)

That my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character; I have a dream today. (King, 1963)

In the first paragraph, “they” refers to the architects of the United States. Martin Luther King traced back to the foundation of America to prove the rationality of the Negro to struggle for their rights. In the second paragraph, “they” refers to the white people who agree with the Negro. The speaker wanted his listeners to take action sanely. In the third paragraph, “they” refers to Martin Luther King’s four little children. In this paragraph, the speaker was talking about his dream, so he referred to his own children. It was easy to call up the listeners’ memory about their own children. And if their children could get equality with the white, their common dream would come true. This is their goals as well as their future. With the beautiful dream, they would try their best to struggle. And like this, Martin Luther King achieved his goal to make the speech.

In President Obama’s speech, “My Education, My Future”, “they” appeared 11 times, “them” two times, totally accounting for 5.2%. Let us see an example:

And Jazmin, Andoni, and Shantell aren’t any different from any of you. They face challenges in their lives just like you do. In some cases they’ve got it a lot worse off than many of you. But they refused to give up. They chose to take responsibility for their lives, for their education, and set goals for themselves. And I expect all of you to do the same. (Obama, 2010)

Before this, President Obama listed the stories of three young persons named Jazmin Perez, Andoni Schultz, and Shantell Steve, and in this paragraph, “they” refers to these three young persons. These three persons are all the models of hard working. Here, President Obama compared the students with these three persons and intended to let the students find out that their situation was better than these three persons, and they

might get more achievements if they worked as hard as these three persons had done. It is obviously that President Obama used this way to encourage the students to value what they have had today and work hard to make more achievements.

Conclusion

In the preceding sections, we have analyzed and probed the personal pronouns in two English speeches: The one is Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream", as the model of the speech of calling-on style; the other is President Obama's "My Future, My Dream", as the model of the speech of advising style. From the analysis, we can see the concrete role every pronoun played in the speeches of different styles, and how it impacts the success of a speech. Such an analysis and probe leads to a better understanding on the art of English speaking. What is more, an analysis and probe like this can help the learners of English make these skills of English speaking in their charge. In the context of economic globalization, it is necessary for a person, especially a non-English speaker. Therefore, an analysis and probe like this is meaningful.

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