

President Duterte's Strategic Use of Pronominal Personal Pronouns in his State of the Nation Addresses

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Abstract

This paper investigated the intelligent ways on how function words such as pronouns can be strategically used in political discourses to highlight positive image of a politician, providing avenue for the establishment of self, emphasizing authority, commitment, responsibility and accomplishments, also associating oneself in relation to groups, and disassociation and negativity towards opposition. Guided by the principles of critical discourse analysis, this paper analyzed how self-image, inclusion and exclusion, as well as possible negative image of others can be exposed through investigating the strategic use of pronouns *I*, *we*, and *they* in a corpus of state of the nation addresses of a controversial politician, often noted for his unpopular beliefs and language choices. The qualitative analysis was able to discover the president's high regard of self-involvement in governance evident in the frequency of use of the pronoun *I*, especially regarding oneself as authority valuing responsibility, accountability, and commitment, yet unabashed by regarding oneself in the negative light occasionally. The ambiguity of the pronoun *we* has been shown in its use in relation to the politician's regard as a member of the governing administration and as a member of the entire citizenry imploring nationalism. As opposed to the notion of the use of the pronoun *they* to create the divide and therefore exclusion and negativity towards opposition, this paper uncovered that this is very rare in the corpus.

Keywords: corpus, political discourse, pronoun, rhetoric

INTRODUCTION

Political discourse is a very interesting area of study in relation to the impact of small units of linguistic structures that may often be overlooked. Most people would claim that big words offer overwhelming contribution to the overall appeal of any piece of discourse, yet we fail to account the effects of the small details that indirectly but remarkably affects the perception of the target audience not only of the message being conveyed, but also of the attitude and image of the speaker. Personal pronouns are examples of these often-disregarded linguistic elements that is worthy to be examined particularly in its use in one of the most important public engagements of the head of state in the Philippines.

The State of the Nation Address is not only a platform for public political discourse, but an annual tradition and a constitutional mandate as required of the president.

Accordingly, it is where the head of state delivers reports on the country's status, reveals yearly agenda of the nation, and proposes relevant legislative measures to the Congress. It is made public through broadcast in various communication platforms. And in such political discourse as the SONA, the message of the president is not only directed to the members of the Congress, but more importantly to the citizens of the country. Thus, it is thereby essential to consider the relevance of the power of the use and manipulation of language elements in such political discourse in order to win the approval of the target audience. Chilton (2004) mentioned that 'language and politics are intimately linked at a fundamental level', seemingly agreeing to Gastil's (1992) idea about politics and discourse to be 'inextricably intertwined'. Thus, the skillful and strategic use and manipulation of the language and its elements may bring forth positive impact on the image building of the politician and therefore perception of audience on his interests, attitudes and credibility.

In every political discourse, the competent use of rhetorical devices is important in order to successfully persuade the audience to favor the speaker's intent in his message. It has been claimed that rhetoric is a powerful way to control the audience, attract their attention, and persuade them (Setiarini, Winarni and Junining (2019) cited in Fadzilah and Noor (2021)). Persuasion in this type of discourse has often been regarded as relevant most especially in the establishment of the credibility of the speaker. As early as the period of Cicero, public speeches in public meetings has rendered themselves valuable in the political processes like decision-making where the intellectual use of rhetorical device were deemed necessary. Intellectual in a sense that in such political processes which involves persuasion and bargaining (Miller, 1991; Hague et. al., 1998, cited in Chilton, 2004), the strategic use of language will be able to construct concepts that are essential in politics like authority, legitimacy, consensus, and etc. Further, when successful, the politician will most likely benefit from positive reception of the target audience through reciprocal altruism. In exchange of the perceived 'good' done by the politician, citizens will then reciprocate the act, although indirectly, maybe through the establishment of the politician's positive ratings and accord to credibility. As how van Dijk (cited in Alavidze 2017) described political discourse being a genre having particular language thesaurus with certain functions and communicative impact, the way politicians use language strategically will in itself act as a force that may turn ideas to reality.

Various studies have investigated the strategic place of the use of pronouns in political discourses. Brown and Gilman (1960) were able to theorize the use of pronominals in relation to the perceived role relationship of the speaker and the audience. Gastil (1992) and Wilson (1990) proposed that politicians are likely to strategically manipulate their use of pronominal references for four reasons: 1.) to set forth ideological views on specific issues; 2.) to reveal close or distant associations to topic or participants; 3.) to make audience more receptive; and 4.) to attribute responsibility. Social identities were tied to the use of the pronoun *we* as in the studies of Helmbrecht (2002), Maitland and Wilson (1987), and Wilson (1990) and on the theory of equivocation as proposed by Bull and Fetzer (2006) as cited in Lin (2011). Enzink's (1997) systematic analysis model was utilized to examine the use of pronouns in the analysis of footing in political speeches,

which was developed by Goffman (1979), and further developed by Levinson in 1986. Some local researchers also found relevant insights as to how pronouns were used in political speeches and their rhetorical use (Salazar, 2011), and hegemony (Dimaculangan & Dimaculangan, 2018).

To examine the language use of President Duterte will be quite interesting. With his public image particularly on the use of language has been often pointed out by critics particularly on his use of vulgar words. However, looking into the obvious, the given, may not only be superficial but non definitive as well with regard to the true image he puts forward. Looking into function words, like pronouns, the analysis will be able to uncover the image the president builds of himself and of others in his speech, most especially those delivered during significant traditional speech event as the annual SONA.

Hence, this research attempted to examine the use of the pronouns *I*, *we*, and *they* in the State of the Nation Addresses that President Rodrigo Roa Duterte delivered during the entirety of his term as the president of the Philippines. Particularly, it will attempt to address the following questions:

1. How frequently did President Rodrigo Roa Duterte use the pronouns *I*, *we*, and *they* in his SONA?
2. Did President Rodrigo Roa Duterte use the pronouns, to wit:
 - a. The pronoun *I* to highlight his good qualities and accomplishments;
 - b. The pronoun *we* to assume collectivity and shared responsibility; and
 - c. The pronoun *they* to create the concept of 'exclusivity' and negativity of opposition?

This research project tried to illuminate the possibility that by examining the use of pronouns, we will be able to uncover the real image or self-identity that the president intends to really put forward.

METHODOLOGY

Corpus

This research project utilized the six official State of the Nation Addresses of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte, who as of this writing is the outgoing president of the Philippines. The official transcripts of the aforementioned SONA, from his first SONA in July 2016 to his last SONA in July 2021, were retrieved from the official website of the Official Gazette of the Philippines. The corpus was then entered into the Sketch Engine for processing. The concordance function of the corpus analyzer was used in order to determine the occurrences of the personal pronouns under study in the context. Further, the concordance presentation was set to sentence in order to better analyze the context where the personal pronoun in question appeared in the text. The use of the fourth-generation corpus analyzer allowed for more convenient processing of corpus, since the website will allow for faster processing and does not require installation of program in the user's computer.

Analytical Framework

In order to analyze the strategic use of pronominal personal pronouns of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte in his six official State of the Nation Addresses, the analysis will be anchored on the following assumptions on the pronominal choices of politicians as proposed by Karapetjana (2011) and Bramley (2001) particularly on the pronominals *I*, *we*, and *they*. It was proposed that a politician uses the pronoun *I* to show authority, personal responsibility, commitment and involvement, preferably highlighting his good qualities and accomplishments. The use of the pronoun *we* usually assumed to be associated to collectivity and shared responsibility. And as for the pronoun *they*, it was theorized that most often it is used to create the concept of 'others', which is associated with exclusiveness and negative elements as also mentioned by Allen (2007).

Generally framed within the context of critical discourse analysis duly regarded as both theory and methodology, this paper was guided by Fairclough's (1995) analysis of text as form-and-meaning analysis with domains including establishment of identities.

Unit of Analysis

This research project examined the pronominals *I*, *we*, and *they* in the corpus. And since, the president occasionally shifts from English to Filipino, the equivalent *ako*, *tayo* and *silá* were also analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

On the frequency of use of the pronouns *I*, *we*, and *they*

The processing of the corpus through the Sketch Engine has yielded the following findings as to the frequency of the use of the pronouns *I*, *we*, and *they* in the corpus of President Duterte's State of the Nation Addresses. Table 1 shows the number of occurrences of each in the entirety of the corpus of 59, 479 words.

Table 1. Number of occurrences

Pronoun	No. of Hits/ Occurrences
I	1,241
We	671
They	229

Evidently, the number implies the frequency of the use of the personal pronoun *I* is relatively higher compared to the frequency of use of the pronouns *we* and *they*. This probably illumines the self-representation of the president as principal to his role as the head of state therefore leading to render himself very much present in the discourse event. As the president frequents the use of the pronoun *I* than the other two pronouns, this may ascertain the principle of heroic leadership as established by Heifetz et al (2009). Amidst all the crisis, the president may have inherently taken profound responsibility to address various issues faced by the administration and the country as a whole.

To compare the plural personal pronouns *we* and *they*, it is clear that the use of the inclusive *we* is relatively higher compared to the exclusive *they*. This implies that the concept of inclusivity in the SONA that may associate the participation of the person of

the president as part of the social group is more frequently occurring than the concept of exclusivity of the others. Gochecho (2012) attested that such use of inclusive pronouns suggests solidarity and togetherness. Also, this may be reflective of the need to establish the participation of the citizens in their approval of the political matters put forward in the discourse, rather than to connote negativity toward others. This way, he may invite positive, nationalistic involvement from the audience by making them more receptive to his proposals as Gastil (1992) and Wilson (1990) suggested. The use of the pronoun they, although relatively infrequent compared to I and we, still occurred and may be used to establish the opposition and thereby invite negativity toward others.

On the use of the pronoun I

The use of personal pronouns may render itself vital in the construction of a politician's image (Alavidze, 2017). In the case of President Duterte who has been tainted with negative criticisms especially on his language use, it is significant to illuminate the self-image he had to establish focusing on minute but significant linguistic elements like the pronouns.

According to Karapatjena (2011), the politician's rhetoric is a way to represent themselves as individuals. Further, he argued that in most cases the preference of the politician to use the personal pronoun I is to show authority, personal responsibility, commitment and involvement, preferably highlighting his good qualities and accomplishments. With the use of the concordance feature of the Sketch Engine, the researcher was able to examine the occurrences of the use of the pronoun in context.

In relation to establishment of authority, President Duterte clearly have utilized the pronoun *I* to ascertain the power vested in him. Example 1 shows how authority is manifested in the use of the pronoun in directing government body to act on a situation under their jurisdiction.

Example 1.

I am calling [on] both houses of Congress to expeditiously craft a law establishing a new authority or department that is responsive to the prevailing 21st century conditions and empowered to best deliver [an] enhanced disaster resiliency and quick disaster response.

Statements such as this manifest the authority the president holds as the head of the state and thereby rendering this statement felicitous given his authority over the government body and the jurisdiction of the said government body to act upon the request.

The use of the pronoun *I* in his SONA showed relevance in his profound commitment to responsibility as the president of the country. In Example 2, he not only used the pronoun once, but he strongly objectified himself by juxtaposing it with repeated use of the objective personal pronoun *me*.

Example 2

To those who oppose and think that all these efforts are out of order, I hold myself – me and me alone should be responsible.

Evidently, commitment to his duties and responsibilities were shown in the context of his use of the pronoun I. Fight against corruption and war against drugs are certainly two of the pressing issues he closely associated his administration with alongside health care, environment, labor force to include OFWs, and many more. We can see how he used the pronoun repeatedly in his statement in Examples 3, 4 and 5.

Example 3

Let the dismissal of several high-ranking officials – whom I myself appointed – serve as a warning to all that I will never back down on my commitment to cleanse this government.

Example 4

I believe then, as I believe still, that progress and development will sputter if criminals, illegal drugs, illegal users of drugs are allowed to roam the streets freely, victimizing seeming with impunity, the innocent and the helpless.

Example 5

A year ago, I also warned government officials and employees that I will never tolerate corruption in my administration, not even a whiff of it.

Seemingly, by the examples set forth above, these ascertained the claim of a politician's use of the pronoun I in association with his ideological views often associated with his claim to personal responsibility on issues close to him as claimed by Gastil (1992) and Wilson (1990) which agrees to the proposition of Karapatjena (2011) and Bramley (2001) that in so doing he also highlights his achievements in such a way as to construct positive image of him as a leader. Look at Example 6 that exemplifies his obligation as an agent of change for the citizens of this country.

Example 6

I was inspired to institute real changes for the greater good of the Filipino people, as I was greatly overwhelmed then by the daunting challenges that lay ahead.

However, the use of pronoun *I* in association with positive image building may not be totally true in the case of President Duterte, since it was also evident that he used the pronoun *I* in contexts that may not necessarily create a good image about him, as how he established that about himself going for the unpopular.

Example 7

I stand here before you today bearing no conceit, but if there is one thing that I could be proud of is that not once did I waver in doing the unpopular even if it meant upholding the greatest good for the greatest number.

On the use of the pronoun we

According to Karapetjana (2011), politicians use the pronoun *we* to create involvement with the audience and shared responsibility. In the various occurrences of the use of the pronoun *we*, it has been noted that occasionally, the pronoun has been used to show the shared responsibility of a group with whom the president associated himself to be part of, and in other times, the pronoun was used to refer to him as part of the citizens of the

country. This phenomenon ascertain the claim by Gastil (1992) and Wilson (1990) on the distribution of responsibilities, which are reflected on the examples below.

Example 8

In our bid to accelerate human capital development, we seek to ensure lifelong opportunities by enhancing the quality of and access to education and training programs.

Example 9

The destitute and the indigents, or those who cannot afford hospitalization, can now be provided with free services by the government-operated, public hospitals as we have strengthened the implementation of the No Balance Billing Policy.

Example 10

My countrymen, it is a sad commentary that we cannot distinguish our need from our greed, our principles from our prejudices, the real from the fake, and the truth from a lie.

Example 11

We are our own tormentors – addressing the Filipino people – we are our own demons, we are as rapacious predators preying on the helpless, the weak and the voiceless.

Clearly, the ambiguity in the use of the pronoun *we* is seen in the aforementioned examples above. In examples 8 and 9, the president used the pronoun *we* in the context of his association with the government responsible to perform certain responsibilities. Whereas, in the examples 10 and 11, he used it in the context of his association of himself as part of the citizenry of this country imploring the shared responsibility not only among the officials manning the government but the entire nation.

On the use of the pronoun *they*

Bramley (2001) claimed that the use of the pronoun *they* in political discourse tends to create a certain divide, separating the self of the politician to the perceived 'others'. Further, as claimed in other studies, that the exclusive *they* most likely connotes negativity (Gastil, (1992), Wilson (1990), Maitland and Wilson (1987), Allen (2007)). In President Duterte's SONA, there were 229 occurrences of the use of *they*. However, from the context where this pronoun occurred does not generally attempt to convey negative connotations of the 'others' in reference to oppositions. The example below is one of the very few instances that the pronoun *they* implicated negativity towards an opposition.

Example 12

Do not believe the others because they are not my friends. They are my political enemies.

In most of the occurrences that implied negativity were those in the context of *they* referring to corrupt officials, criminals, and other law violators. More contexts were those that refer to just groups with whom the president does not associate with.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, this research has shown how examining a collection of speeches of the same nature can be examined with the help of corpus analyzer such as Sketch Engine. The

concordance function assisted in identifying linguistic elements and the context in which such linguistic elements appear in the corpus. Through this, the following have been found in the analysis:

- The pronoun *I* has been relatively used more frequently by the President in his SONA in the last 6 years showing high regard of himself in his commitment as the head of the state;
- Although claimed to have been utilized to highlight positivity on the image of the politician, President Duterte did not solely utilize the use of the pronoun *I* in reference to him having positive, heroic image, but occasionally, he fearlessly used this in reference to his unpopular beliefs;
- The pronoun *we* had been used in two different occasions in reference to the president regarding himself as part of a group. First, he used it in reference to his associations with the administration in carrying out duties and responsibilities. Second, he used it in reference to his regard of himself as part of the rest of the citizens imploring nationalism and shared responsibility to the country; and
- Although popularly claimed in various studies, the use of the pronoun *they* was not totally used by president Duterte to negatively connote his opposition, but instead used it simply in exclusion of him as part of those references.

This further represents how audience can be informed of the ideology, attitude and self-identity of a political leader. In public political discourse events such as the SONA, informational nature of the event may also be a self-promotional event for the political leader, thus placing one in an advantage to utilize one's strategic knowledge and use of linguistic elements to further one's political gain.

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