

***The Persuasive Power of Person Deixis in Political Discourse: The Pronoun ‘We’
in Obama’s Speeches About the 2007-2009 Financial Crisis as an Example***

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Abstract

Politicians resort to ‘soft power’ to influence others and to persuade them to support their attitudes about given issues through the use of language as a persuasive power. Among the linguistic tools adopted to achieve specific goals is the pronominal system. The present research tries to investigate the use of person deixis in political discourse. It adopts the general framework of pragmatics to scrutinize President Obama’s manipulation of the deictic entity “we” for persuasive ends.

This study adopts a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze Obama’s use of the pronoun “we”: the quantitative research is based on the use of a statistical approach to get empirical data. The statistical approach consists of counting the number of occurrences of the deictic category ‘we’ in Obama’s political speeches about the Financial Crisis. The qualitative method is used to analyse how the pronoun ‘we’ in the corpus under investigation is used by President Obama for persuasive ends. The findings of this study are based on the results of a case study of Obama’s 14 speeches delivered in 2009 about the 2007-2009 Financial Crisis. This paper sheds light on Obama’s manipulative discursive power to persuade his audience and to share responsibility regarding certain actions to maintain his position, to strengthen a sense of unity and solidarity among the American citizens at a time of economic recession and to create a positive image of the American nation.

Keywords: Power, persuasive power, person deixis, political discourse

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1. Introduction

Numerous studies have been conducted on the concept of power in its different modalities to shed light on the individual's ability to influence others and shape their views and thoughts. Soft power is the most appropriate means to achieve this purpose as people use it to control others. Among the areas where soft power is enacted is political discourse as politicians rely heavily on their ability to manipulate the linguistic system to influence their audience and persuade them to accept their views. Among the linguistic items used by politicians for persuasive ends is person deixis, especially the pronoun 'We' as it spreads the load of responsibility and creates harmony between the speaker and the audience. This paper tries to investigate the persuasive power of person deixis in political discourse through the study of Obama's manipulation of the pronoun 'We' in his speeches delivered in 2009 about the 2007-2009 Financial Crisis to impress and persuade the audience to support his recovery plans and gain their confidence.

2. Literature Review

Following Foucault's insights into modern power, it is worth noting that power is a vast and complex concept, which is "never definitively held by any one person, or social grouping, because power can be won and exercised only in and through social struggles" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 43). It replaces the physical force exercised on the body by a punishment acting deeply on the soul which is the "prison of the body" (Foucault,, p.30). it touches the individuals not as an obligation or prohibition but as a strategy enacted through a set of techniques and practices that serve as "weapons and relays" that address the soul to invest human bodies and subjugate them (Foucault,, p.28). It exists in various modalities to control the individuals' actions and minds such as hard power defined as the capacity of dominant groups to coerce others to do what they want using physical force (Wilson, 2008 , p. 114) and soft power defined as the ability to shape the preferences of others and to make them act as desired through attraction rather than threats or payments (Joseph & Nye, 2008, p. 95)

Power and discourse

Wodak and Meyer (2008, p.9) argue that discourse (re)produces social domination of one group over others and shows how dominated groups may resist such abuse through discourse. For Wodak and Meyer (2008, p.10), the constant unity of language and other social matters ensures that language is intertwined in social power as it indexes and expresses power. Although power does not necessarily stem from language, language can be a useful tool to challenge and subvert power and to alter the distributions of power in the short and the long term. It provides a finely articulated channel for differences in relationships of dominance, power and control in hierarchical social structures. Hence, discourse is crucial to control others' minds and to make them act as desired. Speakers often exercise soft power through language to influence and shape the hearers' views. In political discourse, for instance, political leaders resort to soft power to influence their audience and to maintain their position. They draw heavily on the manipulation of the linguistic system to achieve specific goals.

Discourse as a persuasive power in political discourse

Instead of compelling others, the dominant groups may persuade the dominated ones to act as they want. They rely on arguments and other forms of persuasion instead of direct threats. Among the most outstanding places where such persuasive power is enacted is political discourse. During the Financial Crisis, for example, President Obama relied on argumentation and the manipulation of language to persuade the White House and the American citizens of the decisions taken to deal with the economic recession.

For Van Dijk, the powerful groups control the minds (knowledge and opinions) of others through discourse. Thus, discourse is not only a means of power enactment, but at the same time a power resource (1997, p.20). In fact, power has control over material resources as money and over symbolic ones as knowledge, and indeed over public discourse itself as in the media. Controlling the media and its public discourse is indirect and subtle. Political leaders, following Van Dijk's argumentation, either speak or write directly to the audience (speeches) or provide such discourses to journalists (press conferences) that they will naturally write what they want (p.20-21). Through discourse, politicians try to emphasise all information that portray them positively and to de-emphasise the information that do so negatively while they do the opposite in the discourse representation of their opponents (Van Dijk, 1997, p.22). Hence, discourse enables political leaders not only to control communicative events but more importantly to set the agenda, to define the situation and even the details of the ways the actions and policies are represented (ibid). If the audience have no alternative information, claims Van Dijk (1997, p.22), the credibility and persuasive rhetoric of politicians may be so strong that many recipients will adopt the beliefs expressed by these discourses. Hence, instead of commands to make others do what we want, we may shape their minds to behave as desired. For Van Dijk (1997, p. 19), if politicians' discourse can shape people's beliefs in this way and indirectly control their actions, this shows that they have successfully manipulated them through discourse. For example, by informing the American citizens about the dire economic and social consequences of the 2007-2009 Financial Crisis, Obama may attract popular consent regarding the economic reforms and thereby motivate people to act as the government prefers.

To conclude, the exercise of power through discourse is subtle and complex since power is "control of action which requires control of personal and social cognitions, which presupposes control of public discourse, which is possible through political, economic, social or academic power resources (position, knowledge, etc.)" (Van Dijk, 199, p.22).

Language and political discourse

To achieve their goals, politicians rely heavily on their mastery of discourse through their ability to manipulate language.

Aristotle's famous definition of humans as political animals able to use language to achieve their own ends better clarifies the unique human capacity for speech (Chilton, 2004, p.4). For Chilton, speech reflects the humans' perception of what is just or what is unjust as "*the human endowment for language has the function of 'indicating', by implication to the group, what is deemed right and wrong within that group*" (2004, p.5). Hence, language is crucial for doing this as it is a 'loaded weapon' enacted by users co-operatively for various purposes (Herman, 1995, p.14). Politicians recognize the role of language in achieving specific political goals. In this context, Wilson

(1990, p.10) asserts that the major aim of analyzing political talk is to shed light on the rhetorical devices employed by politicians to create a specific view of the world. Thus, language is vital for politics and that 'political activity does not exist without the use of language' (Chilton, 2004, p.6).

Among the linguistic devices to which politicians give much importance is deixis. It can be studied by any linguistic theory, but it is crucial for pragmatics as it gives the analyst information about the context of language production as who is speaking, to whom, when, and where (Triki, 2010, p.1). The present paper tries to investigate, from a pragmatic perspective, President Obama's manipulation of person deixis for specific ends.

Pragmatics is the science of language as it is used by real people in different situations for specific ends. It is interested in the way humans communicate, influence and manipulate one another, and generally in examining the meaning of language when it is produced in a context of use (Wilson, 1990, p.3)

Person deixis in political discourse

Defining deixis

Levinson (1983, p. 54) defines deixis as a term borrowed from Greek meaning 'pointing' or 'indicating' and referring to a set of linguistic items used to designate people or things in the world. It is concerned with the 'anchorage of events in terms of spatio-temporal location and of person with respect to an axis of reference called 'a deictic centre' (Triki, 1989, p.14). It is 'the use of certain linguistic expressions to locate entities in spatio-temporal, social, and discursal context' (Marmaridou, 2000, p. 65).

Deictic expressions consist of (I) person pronouns (I, we, you, s/he...), (II) demonstratives (this, that, ...), (III) time and place adverbs (now, here, ...) and (iv) some verbs (come, go,...). These deictic expressions are context-bound because their interpretation changes according to the context in which they are used. Hence, deictic expressions 'cannot be interpreted unless contextual parameters are taken into account' (Marmaridou, 2000, p.65). Both the speaker and the hearer are supposed to share the same context in order to decipher the different meanings of the deictic categories. Thus, deixis reflects the relationship between language and the context where it is used. It is worth mentioning that deixis is essential to get the right information and to achieve the communicative function of language. Deixis helps to relate language to its context and thereby to facilitate the interpretation and understanding of the different cases of language use.

Person deixis

Studies in political discourse have tried to shed light on the politicians' strategic use of deictic expressions for varied purposes such as persuasive aims (Adetunji, 2006, p.181). They manipulate the pronominal system to assume or reject responsibility and to establish solidarity with the audience and to persuade them regarding certain decisions. For example, Wilson's (1990) interpretation of the distribution of the pronouns 'I' and 'we' in the presidential debates between Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford in 1976, has shown that the politicians' shift from 'I' to 'we' is due to their desire to spread the load of responsibility and to avoid misunderstanding by the audience. Obeng (2002, p.10) also argues that 'political' pronouns are used to signal roles as agency or for self-reference and that the referents of these pronouns vary according to the overall context of the situation. Thus, the place, the time, the

participants, the content of the political speech/ address, and the goals of the “ongoing political business” are central to the selection of appropriate pronouns.

To conclude, politicians have several strategies which enable them to manage the political talk appropriately as the manipulation of the pronominal system. Hence, the study of person deixis can offer “ a pronominal window into the thinking and attitude of politicians towards particular political topics and political personalities” (Wilson, 1990, p. 59).

3. Methodology

Corpus description

The corpus under investigation consists of fourteen political discourses: six speeches, four addresses, two press conferences, and two remarks. They are delivered by President Obama from January 20th to December 8th 2009 about the 2007-2009 Financial Crisis. They are addressed to the American people about the economic recession and the swift measures taken by the American Government to tackle this problem. The corpus under study is downloaded from two web sites: www.presidentialrhetoric.com and www.realclearpolitics.com

Selection criteria

The Financial Crisis is chosen as the topic of the corpus under analysis for:

- It represented a historical event as it was considered to be the worst financial crisis since the 1930’s Great Depression.
- IT started in the United States of America, the world’s greatest power, and resulted in the collapse of large financial institutions and stock markets all over the world.
- It represents a local problem directly threatening the lives and the well-being of the American people. The new elected president Obama was in a difficult situation since delicate local issues, especially economic ones, are more difficult to handle than foreign issues.

The reason behind choosing these political discourses delivered in 2009 and addressed to the American citizen is that the year 2009 represents the first year for Obama in office and the Americans expect him to put his manifesto into practice. The choice of the Americans as the target of these political discourses is due to the fact that this recession threatens directly the Americans as it first began in their country. Thus, Obama would be handling domestic affairs and he would be primarily addressing the Americans to reassure them and to explain the decisions taken by his administration to solve the economic downturn at home.

Analytic instruments

Quantitative analysis

The quantitative method is used to get precise empirical data in the form of numbers and statistics.

Frequency distributions

The statistical approach consists of counting the number of occurrences of the person deictics (I, we, you, they, and s/he) and their variants (my, me, our, us, their...) in the selected political discourses. The concordance (Simple Concordance Program 4.0.7) is used to count the frequency of the person deictics and their variants.

Measures of Central Tendencies

After generating the frequency of the deictic categories in each political discourse, the mean is used to compute the average of the person deictics in the sum total of the corpus under analysis and to get a precise idea about the central tendency of the variables and to determine the deictic category that is most used in the corpus.

The mean is obtained according to the following rule

$$\bar{x} = \frac{\sum x}{N}$$

- x be any of the numbers whose mean is computed
- $\sum x$ be the sum of all the x s.
- N be the total number of observations. (Triki and Sellami-Baklouti, 2002, p.50).

Qualitative analysis

The statistical results obtained from the quantitative analysis of the person deictics in the corpus under study are analyzed qualitatively within the general framework of pragmatics, particularly within the notion of inclusive person deixis, to discuss Obama's use of person deixis for persuasive ends and to shed light on the way politicians rely on person deixis as a persuasive power.

Inclusive person deixis

Inclusion, in this paper, indicates the deictic acts of including the speaker and the audience in the political actions and ideas being discussed (Adetunji, 2006, p. 178). In fact, politicians use person deixis, for political reasons: to persuade the audience to accept their political views regarding different issues. The pronoun 'we' is the most used deictic category by politicians for persuasive ends. Arroyo (2000, p.4) asserts that the pronoun 'we' plays a powerful role of persuasion because it enhances a sense of unity, identification and belonging to the same group.

It has different realizations particularly (1) the **universal 'we'** which is an inclusive 'we' that includes the speaker and the audience, both the immediate audience and that implied via mass media. It is used to instill a sense of unity and belonging in the addressee (Wodak et al, 2009, p.76). (2) The **historical 'we'** which refers to the speaker and the audience as well as absent third persons either alive or dead (Wodak et al, 2009, p.46). It is used to construct a very large imaginative 'we' group. (3) The **royal 'we'** which refers to the speaker and a group of partners. It is an addressee-exclusive 'we'. It is used by the speaker to spread the load of responsibility and to maintain his/her position (Adetunji, 2006, p.183).

4. Findings and discussion

The statistical results drawn from the calculation of the frequencies of the person deictics and their variants show that the pronoun 'we' is the most frequently used deictic category. This is illustrated in the following table.

	Jan 20	Jan 24	Feb 4	Feb 13	Feb 24	Mar 24	Apr 14	June 17	Jul 22	Sep 7	Sep 9	Sep 14	Oct 29	Dec 8	Total	Mean
I	3	7	6	20	77	138	31	12	157	101	65	9	21	39	686	49
My	2	1	1	3	8	13	8	2	14	22	11	6	0	11	102	
Me	0	0	0	1	9	11	4	3	16	15	8	0	1	5	73	
Myself	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	
We	62	24	33	55	135	253	131	66	167	87	70	48	43	106	1280	91.42
Our	66	6	13	41	117	49	68	21	29	22	45	14	20	49	560	40
Us	23	1	1	6	19	26	11	7	16	8	15	3	1	3	140	
Ourselves	3	0	0	0	0	2	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	9	
You	14	0	2	22	32	45	8	9	120	66	49	7	71	5	450	32.14
Your	3	0	1	9	15	1	1	0	28	25	15	3	31	1	133	
They	11	1	3	0	15	25	17	7	65	24	20	10	9	6	213	15.21
Their	10	2	5	7	28	24	24	13	21	14	33	11	9	19	220	
Them	4	0	1	2	10	13	7	2	19	5	7	7	1	2	80	
Themselves	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	0	7	
He	1	0	0	1	4	5	0	0	4	9	15	0	1	0	40	2.85
His	1	0	0	1	2	0	1	0	6	1	15	0	2	0	29	
Him	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	5	
She	0	0	0	2	4	0	0	0	2	25	2	0	0	2	37	2.64
Her	0	0	0	4	3	0	0	0	5	5	4	0	1	2	24	

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of the Person Deictic Categories and their variants

The measurement of the mean shows that the pronoun ‘we’ has the highest mean:

$$\overline{We} = \frac{\sum W_e}{N} = \frac{1280}{14} = 91.42$$

(N: the total number of the political discourses)

The following figure best clarifies that the pronoun ‘we’ is the most prominent deictic category used by Obama in the selected data. Therefore, the qualitative analysis, based on the notion of inclusive person deixis, tries to scrutinise Obama’s use and manipulation of this pronoun for persuasive ends.

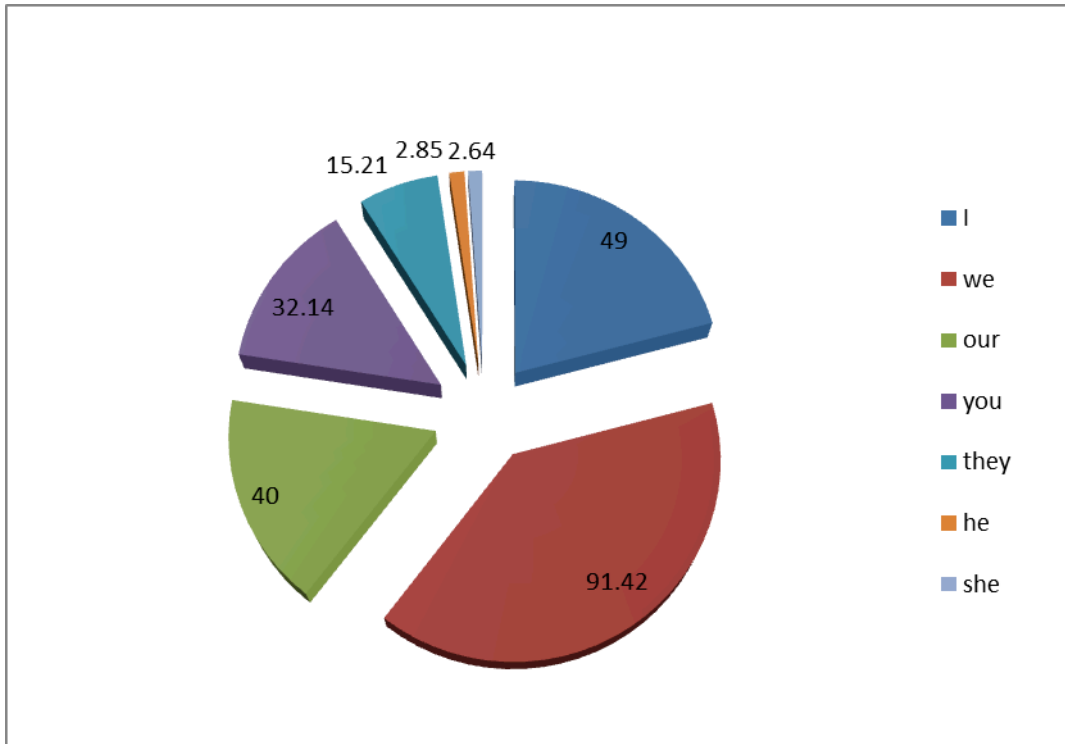


Figure 1: The mean of the person deictic categories

Politicians resort to inclusive person deictics which include both the speaker and the audience in the political position being discussed to persuade the audience into accepting their views. The pronoun ‘we’ is most frequently used by politicians for persuasive ends as is confirmed by the statistical results obtained from the corpus under analysis. Hence, the pronoun ‘we’ with its different realizations: the universal ‘we’, the historical ‘we’, and the royal WE will be scrutinized in this section.

The Universal WE in the corpus under study, includes the speaker being President Obama and all the American people as in *“That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood. Our nation is at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred...”* (January 20th 2009).

It is used to create a stereotypical image of the American nation as in: *“We remain the most prosperous, powerful nation on earth. Our workers are no less productive than when this crisis began. Our minds are no less inventive, our goods and services no less needed than they were last week or last year. Our capacity remains undiminished”* (January 20th, 2009, p.2). In this passage, by enumerating the traits of the typical American character (cleverness, hard work, ... etc.), Obama tries to create a positive self-presentation of the American character.

He refers, using the universal WE, to the grand narrative of the American past to remind the audience of the sacrifices made by their predecessors to ensure a better life for them, and of their heroic past that can be built upon. This is clear when he says on September 7th: *“We pause to remember and to reflect and to reaffirm. We remember that the rights and benefits we enjoy today weren’t simply handed to America’s working men and women. They had to be fought for, by men and women of courage ..., from the factory floors of the Industrial Revolution to the shopping aisles of today’s superstores.... So as we remember this history, let’s reflect on its meaning in our own time”* as *“The time has come ...;to carry forward that precious gift, ..., passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal,*

..., and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness"(January 20, 2009). Hence, reminding the audience of the characteristics of the American character, Obama tries (i) to boost the Americans into participating in the process of solving the economic crisis. This is clear when he says on January 20th: "*Starting today, we must pick up ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America.* (ii) to instil a sense of responsibility and mutual duty among the Americans as in this extract "*What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility—a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task. This is the price and the promise of citizenship* (January 20, 2009). He insists that solving the crisis does not depend only on the government's measures, but rather the solution lies with the Americans as "*No one policy or program will solve the challenges we face right now,But ...; if we act as citizens and not partisans and begin again the work of remaking America, then I have faith that we will emerge from this trying time even stronger and more prosperous than we were before*" (January 24th, 2009).

using the universal WE, Obama calls for a new spirit of common purpose and destiny and a need for unity among the American society necessary to recover from the recession and to reach lasting prosperity as in: "*The road to that prosperity is still long, and we will hit our share of bumps and setbacks before it ends. But we must remember that we can get there if we travel that road as one nation, as one people*" (March 24, 2009).

An inclusive universal WE is used by Obama to persuade the Americans into accepting the measures taken by the government to address the crisis. He says on April 14th 2009: "*We cannot rebuild this economy on the same pile of sand. We must build our house upon a rock. We must lay a new foundation for growth and prosperity- a foundation that will move us from an era of borrow and spend to one where we save and invest; where we consume less at home and send more exports abroad*". He tries to persuade them that these measures are necessary to rebuild the economy on a new strong foundation that cuts with the old practices and paves the way for a new era of affluence. Being a strong orator, Obama plays on the whims of his citizens through the utterance "*we must build our house upon a rock*", where he draws a parallel between the Americans and the Founding Fathers who came to a new land with the aim to build "a city upon a hill" with new visions that cut with the past ones. Obama addresses the Americans as if history were repeating itself and thereby they must take tough decisions to rebuild the nation, to abandon the old practices and to start once again a new age for America. He says in the same speech (April 14): "... *from where we stand, for the very first time, we are beginning to see glimmers of hope. ... a vision of an America's future that is far different than our troubled economic past. It's an America ...; humming with new energy and discoveries that light the world once more*". Obama maintains that, despite the economic challenges, the decisions taken by his administration give the Americans a sense of hope and shape a new vision of American future. He urges the Americans to use the moment to come together and work hard to rebuild the nation so that the "house upon a rock" will persist and the American Dream will survive. This shows Obama's strong argumentation to impress the audience and push them to accept the actions taken by his government.

To sum up, the universal WE is used by President Obama to create a stereotypical image of the American Character and mainly to instil a sense of responsibility and unity among the American population deemed necessary at a time of financial crisis.

The historical WE, in the corpus under investigation, is used by Obama to refer to Americans long dead who participated in the Civil War to whom he adds American people from the audience and absent Americans either alive or dead. By including all the Americans, Obama gives an excerpt of the American grand narrative to push the audience to learn from the crises of the past which can be a source of inspiration in their process of rebuilding the nation. He says on January, 20, 2009 : “ *because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war ..., and emerged from that dark chapter stronger ..., we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall some day pass*”.

Obama articulates another historical WE referring to the Americans that played a major role in crafting the 1930s New Deal policies that transformed the American economy from depression to prosperity. To this group, he adds the audience and absent Americans when explaining the importance of the partnership between the government and the private sector at a moment of economic turmoil: “*...at a moment when other nations were giving up, as President Roosevelt said, “[selling] their heritage of freedom for the illusion of a living”.... We boldly defended our system of free enterprise... We did not give in to ideologies that dismissed the role of government nor those that denied the role of the marketplace*” (February, 13th). Using the historical WE and referring to past decisions, Obama relies on positive experiences of the past to persuade the addressee, the Business Council, to accept this partnership on which the growth of the country depends. Hence, the past represents a source of empowerment for Obama when presenting the measures needed to solve the crisis.

To conclude, Obama uses the historical WE to refer to the past seen as a resort in the process of rebuilding the nation.

The Royal WE refers, in the corpus under study, to the American Government. Obama is the spokesman of his government when explaining the measures taken as in “ *We took steps to stabilize our financial institutions and ..., and we passed a recovery act that has already saved jobs and created new ones* (July 22, 2009). He uses the royal WE instead of the presidential I to spread the load of responsibility and to tell the audience that the actions are not fully the responsibility of one individual but the outcome of collective work of the Government’s members. Thus, he avoids damaging his own position as a president.

Obama also uses this royal WE to create a sense of self-praise. He seems to glorify his administration’s actions by saying: “*In just under three months, we have responded to an extraordinary set of economic challenges with extraordinary action – unprecedented in both its scale and its speed* (April 14).

Through the process of self-praise, Obama tries to gain the support of the audience, to make them believe that the decisions made are the right ones and consequently gain their allegiance.

To conclude, Obama uses the royal WE mainly to spread the load of responsibility and to maintain his position

5. Limitations of the study

This paper has tried to analyse Obama's use of the pronoun 'we' for persuasive ends, but it has some limitations as (i) the generalisation of the findings would have been more reliable, had the analysis covered all the person deictics. (ii) The research findings could have been more generalizable if the corpus contained different political discourses by different leaders.

6. Conclusion

This paper has tried to study the general theme of power particularly the persuasive power of person deixis in political discourse mainly the inclusive WE. The analysis of the selected Obama's political discourses about the Financial Crisis in 2009 has shown that the pronoun we is the most used deictic category for persuasive ends. It is used by Obama to create a stereotypical image of the American character, to remind the audience of their glorious past, and to spread the load of responsibility, to persuade the audience and gain their support.

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