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First Person Plural Pronouns For Written Argumentation in Media Discourse

Abstract

Media discourse as an interesting mixture of facts and opinions has intrigued researchers from the domain of linguistics specifically in the fulfilment of its persuasive goals. Newspaper editorials are known as best examples of written argumentation where editorialists explicitly state their stance with respect to issues of import. In this regard, they make an interesting use of first person plural pronouns that perform various argumentative goals in the argument structure of the editorial genre. This research looks at the occurrence and function of first person plural pronouns in cross-cultural settings. 90 editorials (30 each) from Pakistani, Malaysian and American newspapers are collected to analyse the strategy. An interesting and differing usage of the strategy is uncovered in varying contexts based on prevalent socio-political intentions and situational dynamics. The findings of the study are equally useful for media professionals and students of rhetoric.

Keywords: *First Person Plural Pronouns, Newspaper editorials, Opinion Discourse, Stance, Written Argumentation.*

1. Introduction

The negotiation of social relations between members of a community gives birth to the concept of argumentation in a discourse, which is perceived as a social and verbal process meant to defend or criticise a standpoint through the act of reasoning (van Emmeren et al, 2002). The way the writer perceives its audience is mirrored through the discourse and reflects writers' commitment to persuading its audience.

Among media discourses, the opinion discourse has garnered the interest of researchers due to the existence of a variety of linguistic features and strategies of argumentation for the fulfilment of interactive communicative functions (Ahmed & Masroor, 2018; Asher, Benamara & Mathieu, 2009; Shi-xu, 2000). The agenda

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of this discourse is set by the editorial board (Ciofalo, 1998) and serves the purpose of influencing readers (Greenberg, 2000) from diverse backgrounds. The impact of editorials on society is powerful since it helps in opinion building and agenda-setting (Le, 2010). Being the genuine example of written argumentation (Belmonte, 2008) they are known for taking positions (Simurda, 1997). The act of taking positions can be achieved through the 'stance' or presentation of writer's persona in the text (Hyland, 2005) corresponding to the readers and context, which is part of the stance and engagement model proposed by Hyland (2005). Stance can be realised through a number of markers to project writer's authority such as self-mentions.

Argumentation is interactive and dialogic in nature. Text is a landscape that acts as a site for the negotiation of social roles. The crucial function of establishing and maintaining social relations is achieved through the use of pronouns. The projection of stance in editorials through self-mentions is realised through first person plural pronoun 'we' which is an integral marker of writer's projection corresponding to the intended audience (Fortanet, 2004). The purpose of this linguistic inquiry is to explore the occurrence and function of the strategy in cross-cultural settings. The study is significant as it examines the American and two less explored Asian cultures (Pakistani and Malaysian) for the use of the plural pronoun 'we' in written argumentation of editorial discourse. The rationale for such linguistic inquiry emerges from the fact that every text is structured with a specific reason (Richardson, 2007) that determines its communicative function (Swales, 1990) impacting the audience in multiple ways (Eagleton, 1981). This study aims to explore the usage of the plural personal pronoun in newspaper editorials across cultures. Being part of opinionated print media, editorials function to present the newspaper's stance on issues carrying national and global significance. The negotiation of meaning through argument building is achieved by the use of plural personal pronouns along with other strategies. Functional analysis of the prevailing discursive practices can reveal the workings of a genre in changing contexts and social actors. The adopted persona of a newspaper is insightful to reveal cultural preferences adopted in editorials of Pakistan, the United States of America and Malaysia.

2. Literature review

The element of authorial presence and credibility in the construction of arguments is not a new concept. It is dated back to Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (1954) where 'ethos' or author's credibility is considered as one among the three crucial elements (logos, ethos and pathos) for persuasion.

Among the discourses explored for the usage of plural pronouns include academic discourse. The most researched genres include academic papers in various contexts. Krapivkina (2015) researched the use of first person pronoun in articles from Russian and English contexts, while Carciu's (2009) focus was on the contrastive analysis of Anglo-American and Spanish research articles. The research article abstracts of Spanish and English were analysed by Martín (2003). The nature of scientific information and the aims of maintaining objectivity in research is reflected in the style manuals of such discourse that discourage the use of personal pronouns in the projection of scientific knowledge (Hyland, 2001).

The view of academic discourse as a neutral and impersonal platform for the dissemination of information, however, has been widely criticised (e.g. Bazerman, 1988; Fortanet, 2004; Harwood, 2005; Hyland, 2001). Consequently, research has uncovered several functions of the strategy in academic discourse such as maintaining discourse flow and organisation, guiding the readers, building arguments, as a show of author's research contributions and self-promotion (Cherry, 1998; Kuo, 1999; Hyland, 2001; Harwood, 2006; Vladimirov, 2006).

The usage of the plural personal pronoun 'we' in academic discourse has intrigued researchers, specifically about the semantic categories of 'inclusion' and exclusion' (Harwood, 2006; Hyland, 2001; Mühlhäusler & Harre, 1990; Pennycook, 1994). Fortanet (2004) studied the use of 'we' in the oral discourse of academic English collected in Michigan Corpus of Spoken English (MICASE). The analysis revealed comparatively frequent use of inclusive 'we' than exclusive 'we' in the academic speech of MICASE. The uses of inclusive 'we' were attributed to efforts for reducing distance with students for building cooperation, while exclusive 'we' served as a distancing device with the students. Other uses of 'we' have also been identified alongside its role for creating affinity and distance. In the research article genre, Hyland (2001) observed the use of personal pronouns in science disciplines of 'hard' and 'soft' nature as a rhetorical strategy serving the purpose of establishing authority and building credibility. Similarly, the other roles of the first person plural pronoun in research articles include their use to serve the author's presence in text as a guide, originator, narrator of the research process, demonstrator, and opinion holder (Tang & John, 1999). The roles can vary due to their orientation towards the world of discourse or text external state of affairs (Ädel, 2006; Carciu, 2009; Hyland, 2005).

The use of 'we' in 'inclusive' and 'exclusive' contexts has also been looked upon in political discourse. In this regard, Íñigo-Mora (2004) attested the use of exclusive 'we' as a sign of power and authority among the parliamentary community. The device of personal pronouns is observed to act as a means to carryout persuasion in politics. The exclusion and inclusion strategies work for the politicians and propagation of their political ideologies, by closing distance with supporters and excluding the opponents.

The understanding of discourse can only be carried out through its view corresponding to the community practices, social, political, ethnic and cultural dynamics (Íñigo-Mora, 2004). The affiliations created through discourse can help drawing boundaries between contesting groups and thus the use of inclusive and exclusive devices can help to serve the political advantages (Harwood, 2005). This strategy can only be analysed by paying careful attention to the decisions made by the authors regarding self-portrayal in relation to their perceptions about the audience and persuasive goals intended by authors through that particular discourse under prevalent situations (Cherry, 1998).

The common usage of 'we' is identified as inclusive and exclusive (Downing and Locke, pg. 411), but some special uses of the strategy are identified by Quirk et al. (1985:350) including 'inclusive authorial we' for joint authorship, 'editorial we' used to avoid usage of 'I', 'rhetorical we' for a sense of collective nationhood, 'we' in place of 'you' to gain inclusivity and reduce authority, 'we' instead of

third person and a ‘royal we’ used by the monarchs. Mostly, the inclusive ‘we’ is identified as a solidarity strategy to reduce distance and to develop intimacy (Yule, 1996).

The use of a personal plural pronoun exists as a crucial strategy for fulfilling argumentative goals, especially in opinion discourse. The strategies and structures of argumentation in media, especially in opinion discourse, require careful attention of research (Masroor & Ahmad, 2017) especially in stance building in cross-cultural settings (Masroor, 2013), the findings of which can be used for the advantage of language users among these cultures (Masroor, 2016).

3. Methodology

This research is focused on the exploration of contextual, cultural and situational factors in discourse and relies on qualitative research methods to answer such questions (Silverman, 2010). Mostly, studies performed on the use of personal pronouns are carried out on the academic and some on political and legal discourse through corpus-based methods (Fortanet, 2004; Harwood, 2005, 2006; Hyland, 2001; Kuo, 1999; Tang & John, 1999), however, research gap exists with respect to their qualitative exploration in the opinionated print media.

The theoretical understanding of the study is derived from the concept of Metadiscourse which has established itself as a crucial notion in the study of discourse. The term found its initial meanings as ‘discourse about discourse’ (Amiryousefi & Rasekh, 2010) which now include such linguistic strategies that help authors organise, interpret and evaluate information, alongside engaging the readers (Aguilar, 2008; Crismore, 1983). Therefore, it relates the presentation of information to its social dimension, where significance is attributed to the manner in which information is presented and realised in discourse (Hyland & Tse, 2005; Hyland, 2005). The metadiscourse analysis focuses on the rhetorical aspects of discourse. The significance of the approach towards structuring arguments and understanding a particular genre builds an impetus of this research to analyse the standpoints of newspapers in the reflection of their opinions in varying contexts.

The use of the collective pronoun ‘we’ in editorials to explore how writers create their stance and engage their readers is analysed owing to Hyland’s Interpersonal Model of Metadiscourse (2005) that is built on the previous models of metadiscourse. The Interpersonal Model has two major dimensions: Interactive Metadiscourse focused on maintaining the flow of information and Interactional Metadiscourse focused on how text is mutually constructed among the writer and its readers. Interactive Metadiscourse includes markers that guide readers through text as a means of rhetorical awareness of readers and include Transition markers, Frame markers, Endophoric markers, Evidentials and Code Glosses. Interactional Metadiscourse includes markers that play a crucial role in argumentation and achieving persuasive goals by involving readers. The category includes markers such as Hedges, Boosters, Attitude Markers, Engagement Markers and Self-Mentions.

The explicit manifestation of the author’s stance corresponding to the reader and arguments is carried out through the use of Self-mention discourse markers. The category of self-mentions pertains to the reflection of the author in the written

discourse for obtaining authorial distinctiveness. It includes first person pronouns such as *I*, *we* and makers of possession such as *ours*, *mine* (Ivanic, 1998).

4. Data

The data comprise 90 editorials collected over a period of three months, with 30 editorials each from newspapers of Pakistan (*Dawn*), America (*The New York Times*), and Malaysia (*News Strait times*). The data were collected electronically from the websites of the newspapers. The sampling procedure was systematic random and every third editorial was chosen over a period of three months (from January 2009 to March 2009). It was expected that the stance of the newspaper on various issues may vary due to varying role and situational circumstances the newspapers are facing in their respective contexts.

The occurrences of first person plural pronouns ('we', 'us' and 'our') were collected through the corpus tool AntConc 3.2.1.w (Anthony, 2014). The functional analysis of the occurrences was carried out qualitatively by studying these occurrences in their respective contexts in the editorials collected.

5. Analysis of 'we' in Opinion Discourse of Editorials

The analysis of first personal plural pronoun was executed by initially examining the occurrence of the strategy along with the forms used for the strategy, followed by the qualitative analysis of the strategy in the context.

5.1. Frequency and Form

The following Table 1 provides the frequency of the strategy among the selected newspapers.

Table 1 Occurrence of First Person Plural Pronouns

Newspaper	Occurrence			Total
	We	Our	Us	
	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	
NYT	58	0	1	59
Dawn	28	16	4	48
NST	15	0	0	15

The table above indicates that the highest frequency of the strategy is present in *NYT*, followed by *Dawn* and a minimum usage is observed in *NST*. The occurrences are also interesting regarding the form chosen to realise the strategy, as is exemplified below.

Example 1:

The only question is whether we are ready to be taught. (NST12)

Example 2:

In this year the number of suicide bombings in our region went up significantly. (D10)

Example 3:

Despair will get us nowhere at this critical stage. (D1)

The author's presence in the discourse in the form of plural personal pronoun can have varying degrees depending upon the rhetorical purpose intended such as a strong presence of 'we', a little less imposing 'our' and a weak form of 'us' (Carcu, 2009). Among all newspapers, *NYT* is the most direct in the use of strategy as reflected through the highest usage of 'we' (58 instances), followed by *Dawn* which relies dominantly on the use of 'we' (28 instances) along with some use of 'our' (16 instances) and 'us' (4 instances). The least usage of the strategy is observed in *NST* (15 instances of 'we').

5.2. Function

The usage of the strategy among newspapers varied due to the purpose it intended to fulfill in the process of argumentation. The functional analysis at this level was achieved by examining the type of strategy and functions newspapers fulfill through the strategy.

The inclusive and exclusive usage of 'we' in English is not marked by any morphological or lexical distinction. This leads to ambiguity in the identification of the referent in some cases and the reader has to rely on some inferences. Therefore, the functional analysis of 'we' was based on the qualitative analysis and interpretation relying on the context of usage.

5.3. Inclusive 'we'

The occurrence of inclusive 'we' was observed in the data for varying purposes. The following examples illustrate the use of 'we'.

Example 4

It simply shows that we can wring savings from modest efficiency gains in products we already use. (NYT 7)

Example 5

A Sense of Who We Are. (NYT 5)

The examples above are taken from *NYT*. The inclusive use of the first person plural pronoun in the newspaper is observed to fulfill the purpose of nation-building as in Example 4, the newspaper advocates the modest use of the resources for the national good. The second example points towards the theme of the editorial which is meant to create realisation among the masses as a nation.

Example 6

Despair will get us nowhere at this critical stage. (D1)

Example 7

To understand the Americans' approach to Pakistan we must begin with flagging up their interests in Afghanistan. (D14)

The above Example 6 from *Dawn* shows the strategy to create motivation in the Pakistani nation and to counter the despair surfacing in the prevailing situation of

terrorism. The second example highlights the role of the newspaper as an advocate to suggest ways to the government in dealing with America. This is achieved by showing solidarity with the government through including the newspaper along with the government in its act of suggestion.

Example 8

With the uncertainty that has resulted from the comings and goings of elected governments, more than ever do we need the continuity and certainty that a non-elected and non-partisan constitutional monarchy provides. (NST11)

The above example from *NST* is a move by the newspaper to gain political consensus on the need for developing neutrality and reduce inter-party politics, just like the role played by the monarchy. However, this strategy is used carefully by including the newspaper along with the political parties in its act of advising, instead of directly requiring the political parties to align their political objectives for the national good.

5.4. Exclusive ‘we’

The exclusive use of ‘we’ in the data was observed to fulfill various objectives as exemplified below.

Example 9

We know that higher taxes are never an easy sell politically — and would be especially difficult now, when Mr. Obama needs support from Republicans in Congress to quickly pass his recovery package. (NYT 2)

Example 10

As far as we’re concerned, that’s not Mr. Panetta’s only qualification for the job, but it is certainly on the list. (NYT 4)

Example 11

We were not impressed with Mr. Geithner’s excuses for his tax problems, but barring any new damaging disclosures, we heard nothing disqualifying. (NYT 8)

The above examples from *NYT* show the exclusive function of ‘we’, where the newspaper is showing its presence as an independent autonomous body. It is seen as a think tank and a critic to the government by monitoring the political process in the country. Through the exclusive function of first person plural pronoun, the newspaper engages the readers by arguing the case and providing opinion on the issues of national significance.

Example 12

AS we await the Pakistan state’s response to the Indian dossier on the Mumbai attacks, we can think of several grounds for criticism. (D13) Despair will get us nowhere at this critical stage. (D1)

Example 13

Without downplaying the government’s role in letting the judicial crisis fester, in the build-up to the march we have noted that there are other grave national crises confronting the state. (D24)

In Example 12, *Dawn* although poses as an autonomous body, acts as a guide to the government and as a critic shows the government ways to ponder upon the problem of dealing with India on a particular issue. In the second example, the newspaper expresses an opinion and invites the government’s attention to the issues without countering the government and acting as a guide on the political process.

Example 14

Apart from the pass percentages and the numbers answering in English, all we have been given are the broad geographical differences. (NST23)

Example 15

Even then, we have no knowledge of the regional variations within the country and city schools. (NST23)

The role of *NST* as exemplified above is to develop a political will and explicate the political process by commenting on the ongoing situation without taking a lead and significantly affecting the process. The examples above seem to be a passive commentary on the workings of the government, providing the option to the government to take it or leave it.

6. Discussion

The analysis has reflected that while fulfilling the argumentative goals, first person plural pronoun is used for varying functions. The stance of *NYT* is explicitly bold. It is observed in the role of a nation builder and opinion leader, monitoring and criticising the political process and creating awareness in the masses. *Dawn*’s role is observed as a motivator as well as an opinion builder to develop political consensus and bring the public and government in agreement to fight external threats. *NST* is observed to act as a passive commentator on the political process without the adoption of any leading role to control political factors. A further role of the newspaper can be explicated through the table below which shows the frequency of the ‘inclusive’ and ‘exclusive’ strategy of first person plural pronoun.

Table 2 Occurrence of Inclusive and Exclusive First Person Plural Pronouns

Newspaper	Function			
	Inclusive		Exclusive	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
NYT	9	15.25	50	84.7
Dawn	35	72.9	13	27.08
NST	10	66.6	5	33.3

The table above illustrates the difference in the stance adopted by each newspaper in argumentation. The use of the exclusive function of ‘we’ is the highest in *NYT*, followed by *Dawn* and the least usage is observed in *NST*. Similarly, *Dawn* and *NST* are observed to rely on the inclusivity instead of showing their presence as independent autonomous bodies. The differences are interpreted considering the roles newspapers play in their respective societies, as well as differing situational dynamics. *NYT* being a newspaper of international repute is tasked with addressing a global audience and adopts a stance of an opinion leader. *Dawn’s* stance is reflective of tensions faced by the country due to political crises and regional threats of terrorism. It is seen as a reconciliatory body by channelling its efforts to bring the public and government in agreement and to guide the government to tackle regional issues. The stance of *NST* least explicit and can be called dubious. This can be interpreted considering the country’s situation where the survival of multiple races in the region can be ensured by keeping the flag low and aiming for indirectness.

7. Conclusion and Future Directions

The use of personal pronouns is a matter of choice (Tang & John, 1999) and creating awareness among readers and writers of text regarding the available choices and how to interpret them in argumentation. This research has highlighted how reader-writer interactions are established and how newspapers project their stance in alignment with the socio-political and situational dynamics.

The insights into the functioning of first person plural pronoun in newspaper editorials across cultures are significant considering the less available research on the linguistic category and its functions in this particular context. The professional journalists and students of written argumentation could benefit from the findings to acquire metalinguistic awareness arising out of interrelations between linguistic forms, contexts and dynamics of social relations in the process of meaning-making and negotiating. Further researches are recommended to explore the relationship of argumentation with its prevalent context.

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