

USE OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN TWO TYPES OF MONOLOGIC ACADEMIC SPEECH

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate how the speaker employs personal pronouns (we, you, I) in academic speech with special attention to the use of “you” through the analysis of the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE). In the MICASE, two speech events (undergraduate lectures and public lectures) were chosen within which two linguistic environments were examined (words before and after the pronoun).

The results show that “you” was the most common personal pronoun in both undergraduate and public lectures. The analysis of words before the pronouns shows that “if” goes with “you” much more than “we” and “I” in both lectures, making “if you were/are” the most frequent pattern in undergraduate lectures. “you” seems to be a useful tool for engaging students in the narrative of the lecture.

Key words : academic speech

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the personal pronouns, “I” and “we” have often drawn attention from researchers in academic writing (Ivanic 1998; Kuo 1999; Tang and John 1999; Hyland 2001; Harwood 2005, for example).

In academic speech, based on the examination of personal pronouns in five university mathematics classes, Rounds (1987a,b) found “we” was the most frequently employed personal pronoun and described “we” as a useful device for the teacher because of its dual functions of exclusive and inclusive use. The use of exclusive “we” can show the teacher’s authority, by referring to both the teacher and the experts in the field, while inclusive “we” can form solidarity between the teacher and the students in class. By contrast “you” has been understood to maintain

some distance between them (Rounds 1987a,b).

It has to be noted that Rounds' classical study derived from a time when US universities offered non-English speaking graduate students work teaching undergraduates as teaching assistants (TAs), and needed to train them to be competent teachers (Byrd and Constantinides 1988, 1992; Hoekje and Williams 1992; Luo et al. 2001; Tanner et al. 1993). The focus of Round's studies (1987 a,b) was to identify successful TA performance, and to find the link with the use of personal pronouns. Because the analysis was based on the TAs' teaching practice, Rounds' data did not necessarily represent the use of pronouns in academic speech in general. For example, professors may not use "we" as frequently as TAs to create rapport with their students.

In fact, a recent study (Fortanet 2004) based on a much larger corpus of academic speech (the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English, MICASE) found that the most frequently used personal pronoun was not "we" but "you". Fortanet (2004) further compiled the sub-corpus consisting of "a selection of speech events related to mathematics" (Fortanet 2004, p. 52), the discipline of Rounds' corpus. The investigation showed the rate of "I" to be more than double that of both "we" and "you" (Fortanet 2004). It seems that the choice of personal pronouns is not simply due to the disciplinary character of mathematics. We may need to consider the purpose of academic speech and the relationship between the speaker and the audience which will reflect the purpose of the talk.

The concept of *stance* is useful to understand how speakers create and signal relationships with the propositions they give voice to, and the people they interact with (Biber and Finegan 1988,1989; Conrad and Biber 2000). Sets of choices for stance to present participant roles or subject positions are referred to as "footing" by Goffman (1981) and "framing" by Tannen (1979). The speaker's footing or framing can be shown in personal pronouns.

Analysis of personal pronouns can reveal the change in the stance to the audience due to the purpose of the speech. Furthermore, the purpose can be shown not only in the use of personal pronouns but also their collocates. It seems interesting to compare how speakers use personal pronouns, in particular "you", and the surrounding linguistic context in different types of monologic academic speech.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) How does the type of academic speech influence the choice of personal pronouns ("you", "we" and "I")?
- 2) Which words would be used before and after "you" in relation to "we" and "I" in two types of

academic speech?

3. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The data were based on two types of academic speech (nine undergraduate lectures: 69,083 words, and nine public lectures: 80,250 words) from the Michigan Corpus (MICASE), as was also used in Fortanet's study (2004). Undergraduate lectures were only given by full-time teaching staff at the university, while public lectures refers to one-off academic talks given at the university for those interested in some particular subject such as Peking opera. Interactional lectures and questions and answer periods in monologic lectures were excluded to avoid possible uses of a singular "you" referring to one student or one listener, because the purpose was to analyze the plural "you". Two linguistic environments were examined in this sub-corpus: one was the words prior to these pronouns, such as "when", "if", "that" and "what", and the other was the words after these pronouns such as "see" and "know". In other words, one linguistic environment looks into the sentence structure, while the other investigates the use of verbs to go with "you".

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Frequency of the use of "I", "we" and "you" and their possessive and objective forms

The results in Tables 1 and 2 show that unlike Rounds' study (1987a,b), among "you", "I" and "we", "you" was most frequently used in undergraduate lecturers while "I" was employed most in public lectures.

Table 1 Occurrence of personal pronouns in undergraduate lectures

Undergraduate lectures	Instances of subject position	Instances of possessive position	Instances of object position
First person singular	I: 470	My:41	Me:62
Second person plural	You:1295*	Your:170	You: 256*
First person plural	We:430	Our:73	Us:57

* shows the estimated number based on the actual distribution of the small sample.

Table 2 Occurrence of personal pronouns in public lectures

Public lectures	Instances of subject position	Instances of possessive position	Instances of object position
First person singular	I: 892	My:125	Me:125
Second person plural	You: 796*	Your:52	You: 182*
First person plural	We: 604	Our:104	Us:68

* shows the estimated number based on the actual distribution of the small sample.

4.2. The collocate of “we”, “I” and “you”

4.2.1. Combination of a word (conjunct or relative pronoun) + “we”, “you” and “I”

As shown in Tables 3 and 4, personal pronouns “we”, “you” and “I” do not seem to be combined randomly with conjuncts and a relative pronoun “that”. The two tables show one contrasting and one common features of the two corpora. First, as shown in bold letters below, “what” seems to be combined with the most frequently used personal pronoun in each corpus, thus producing “what you” in undergraduate lectures and “what I” in public lectures.

Table 3 Occurrence of words preceding personal pronouns in undergraduate lectures

Undergraduate lectures	---- we	---- I	---- you
Conjunct that	12	8	24
Relative pronoun that	18	28	53
Descriptive that	0	2	0
if	18	17	172
and	34	30	85
what	22	11	41
but	8	12	23
here	6	1	5
now	9	2	11
so	21	12	47
because	5	3	8

Table 4 Occurrence of words preceding personal pronouns in public lectures

Public lectures	---- we	---- I	---- you
Conjunct that	33	15	28
Relative that	43	74	61
Descriptive that	0	1	1
if	15	20	83
and	48	98	60
what	26	44	19
but	12	25	13
here	12	3	21
now	11	14	5
so	25	33	29
because	9	8	4

Example collocates of “what you” in undergraduate lectures are “what you get” (7 occurrences) and “what you want” (7), while those of “what I” in public lectures include “what I mean.” (5). The use of what you and what I in the two types of academic speech seems to reflect the purpose of the lectures. The purpose of public lecture is to present the speaker’s perspective on the topic, while that of undergraduate lectures is to pass the knowledge to the students.

Second, the common feature is that in both corpora “if” goes with “you” much more frequently than “I” and “we”. Table 5 shows examples of the collocate of “if you” which appeared more than

five times in each corpus, and the actual number of occurrences. The interesting aspect in undergraduate lectures is that “if you” was often combined with either “were” or “are”.

Table 5 “if you” collocates

Word after if you and its number of occurrences	
Undergraduate lectures	Public lectures
Have 15	Will 21
Look 15	Have 8
Were 11	Want 5
Think 8	
Give 8	
Do 7	
Are 7	
Take 5	
Wanna 5	

Examples such as “if you are a predator...” or “If you are the actor...” below indicate that the speaker is talking about a hypothetical condition, and making the audience part of a story he/she is creating in class. The same collocate never occurred in public lectures.

Examples of “if you were” in undergraduate lectures

N	Concordance
1	or against me at the beginning, and if you were against me at the beginning,
2	yourselves as a cluster of cancer cells, if you were all holding hands and joined
3	hold hands. unlike normal cells. um, if you were to take, a clump of, tumor
4	as part of a clump of cancer cells, if you were all, holding hands if you let
5	sure we're all on even footing here. if you were to attempt, to graft an organ,
6	in their plasma membranes. now if you were to just look at these
7	goes up in this environment, in contrast if you were in the environment where it's
8	evolved over time, and the argument if you were gonna make an evolutionary
9	let's compare this with what happens if you were measuring the velocity of a
10	us to reach it. actually, it turns out that if you were to calculate what it would
11	with learning and culture. yet if you were to look inside the Paris

Examples of “if you are” in undergraduate lectures

N	Concordance
1	to do this when he talked uh which if you are a Roman means, would you
2	make up half the Roman army. so if you are ticking off the class which
3	web. okay, so you have that to look at if you are uncertain about what the data
4	variables in it that skew the outcome. if you are testing precipitation reactions
5	ys adaptive. for example if you are a, predator looking_ say a
6	a goal what you want, a target. if you are the actor, what you want the
7	two items are quite critical. first of all, if you are called upon, to carry out your

4.2.2. Combination of “we”, “you” and “I” + a word (verb or modal verb): words coming after these pronouns were then analyzed in the two types of lectures.

Tables 6 and 7 show the verbs and modals after “we”, “you” and “I” occurring at least ten times with one personal pronoun. Proportion of the occurrences of one personal pronoun with a verb against the total occurrences of the verb is shown next to the number of occurrences.

Table 6 Occurrences of verbs and modal verbs after personal pronouns “you”, “we” and “I” in undergraduate lectures.

verbs	you-	%	we--	%	I--	%	Total
know	252	92.3	15	5.5	6	2.2	273
have	90	55.5	52	32.0	20	12.3	162
read	11	78.6	1	7.1	1	7.1	14
need	29	74.4	4	10.3	6	15.4	39
find	11	68.8	2	12.5	2	12.5	16
see	45	68.2	11	16.7	5	7.6	66
get	48	66.7	15	20.8	2	2.8	72
look	27	64.3	5	11.9	4	9.5	42
want	21	60.0	2	5.7	9	25.7	35
wanna	13	41.9	3	9.7	15	48.4	31
think	14	26.9	6	11.5	25	48.1	52
call	0	0.0	11	100.0	0	0.0	11
mean	0	0.0	0	0.0	75	100.0	75

Modals	you-	%	we--	%	I--	%	total
were	17	65.3	9	34.6	0	0	26
are	21	60.0	14	40.0	0	0	35
might	18	78.2	4	17.3	1	4.3	23
can't	19	70.3	4	14.8	4	14.8	27
can	129	78.1	26	15.7	10	6.0	165
could	34	69.3	10	20.4	5	10.2	49
will	37	62.7	11	18.6	11	18.6	59
should	17	58.6	5	17.2	7	24.1	29
may	11	100.0	0	0	0	0	11
would	12	42.8	6	21.4	10	35.7	28

Table 7 Occurrences of verbs and modal verbs after personal pronouns “you”, “we” and “I” in public lectures.

Verbs	you-	%	we--	%	I--	%	Total
have	88	28.1	77	24.6	48	15.3	313
had	10	34.4	7	24.1	12	41.3	29
see	61	82.4	6	8.1	3	4.1	70
get	27	50.9	13	24.5	13	24.5	53
find	14	82.3	0	0	3	17.6	17
want	9	21.9	5	12.1	27	65.8	41
wanna	2	11.7	1	5.8	14	82.3	17
take	13	68.4	4	21.0	2	10.5	19
know	63	62.4	18	17.8	17	16.8	101
look	6	46.2	1	7.7	5	38.5	13
need	7	22.6	22	71	2	6.5	31
think	5	4.3	17	14.5	92	78.6	117
mean	0	0	0	0	34	100	34
guess	0	0	0	0	11	100	11
showed	0	0	0	0	11	100	11
hope	0	0	0	0	10	100	10

Modals	you--	%	we--	%	I --	%	Total
will	29	46.0	6	9.5	28	44.4	63
can	123	72.3	21	12.3	26	15.2	170
might	16	66.6	7	29.1	1	4.1	24
would	15	24.1	7	11.2	40	64.5	62
could	14	63.6	5	22.7	3	13.6	22
don't	11	15.9	25	36.2	33	47.8	69
are	2	4.4	43	95.5	0	0	45

The analysis of words appearing after “you” in Tables 6 and 7 shows that some verbs and modal verbs tended to accompany either “I” or “you”. In undergraduate lectures, the most frequently used pronoun, “you” tended to go with verbs to show students’ activities such as “read”, “need”, “find”, “get”, “see” and “look”. On the other hand, in public lectures where the purpose is to present the speaker’s opinion on the topic, “I” seems to be the most dominant pronoun and tends to accompany “think”, “mean”, “guess”, “show” and “hope”.

The choice of verbs to accompany personal pronouns again seem to be related to the purpose of the speech. Thus to examine the collocate further in two corpora, “you” was analyzed with the four most frequently employed verbs and modal verbs in each corpora.

Table 8 Most frequent collocate of “you” and verb in undergraduate lectures.

Collocate	No. of occurrences	Collocate and no. of occurrences
You know	252	No collocate
You can	129	You can see 26 , and you can 21, that you can 7, but you can 6, you can go 7, you can look 6
You have	90	You have to 18 , if you have 15, that you have 5, so you have 5
You see	44	That you see 6, and you see 5

Table 9 Most frequent collocate of “you” and verb in public lectures.

Collocate	No. of occurrences	collocate and no. of occurrences
You know	63	No collocate
You can	122	You can see 37 , you can make 6, you can get 5, (you can fill 4)
You have	88	If you have 8, here you have 8, that you have 7, so you have 7
You see	61	Here you see 10, and you see 7, that you see 6, what you see 5

Tables 8 and 9 show that “you know”, which was four times more often in undergraduate lectures than public lectures, did appear on its own; it seems that “you know” has a different function from other collocates. It is interesting that “you can see” was the most frequently used collocate in both types of lecture, while “you have to” only appeared in undergraduate lectures.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown that “you” was the most common pronoun in the undergraduate lectures, while it was “I” in the public lectures. To understand the functions of these personal pronouns in two types of academic speech, it seems that we need to examine not only the choice of personal pronouns in academic speech, but also the preceding conjuncts and proceeding verbs of pronouns. The use of “you can see” in both types of lecture shows that this collocate seems useful for guiding the audience, irrespective of the type of lecture. It is interesting that in the two corpora “if” is the most common word to go before “you”, and “you can see” is one of the most common collocates. “you” does not seem to be used to create a distance from the audience.

The analysis of preceeding and proceeding words of the pronouns has also shown some variation between the two types of monologic academic speech. Unlike Rounds’ findings (1987a,b), this study has shown that the speaker in undergraduate lectures used “you” most often. Why not “we”? As

“we” can either refer to the experts and the teacher on one hand, and the teacher and the students (Rounds 1987 a,b) on the other, use of “we” may be ambiguous. Teachers may have avoided this ambiguity and chosen “you” to talk directly to their audience. Evidence to this can be found in some of the most frequently used collocates of “you”. One is a hypothetical form “if you were/are” in undergraduate lectures, which demonstrates that the speaker intends to engage the audience in the talk, rather than using impersonal forms or third party nouns. Another is that “you” accompanies verbs to show that it is the students who need to act, such as “you read” as was also shown in the collocate of “what you”. In contrast, in public lectures “I” tends to precede the verbs to show the speaker’s thinking, such as “I mean”, which was also part of collocate of “what I”. Because the purpose is to present the speaker’s ideas to the audience, it can be said that the speaker often refers to “I” as the thinker in the presentation.

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