

THE USE OF PERSON DEIXIS IN POLITICAL PERSUASION: FROM ANALYSIS TO PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATION

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Abstract: *The paper investigates the persuasive function of person deixis, particularly first and third person pronouns in political discourse, with a dual focus on theoretical analysis and pedagogical application. Drawing on a corpus of U.S. presidential nomination speeches, the study categorizes deictic usage into three functional types: (1) first person singular pronouns for asserting leadership and personal credibility, (2) third person singular reference for institutional distancing or role enhancement, and (3) first person plural pronouns for inclusive alignment and epistemic legitimation. The analysis demonstrates how shifts in person deixis strategically construct speaker identity, enhance persuasive effect, and create solidarity or authority depending on context. Particular attention is paid to the rhetorical transition from "I" to "we", which shifts the focus from individual action to group effort, encouraging a sense of shared responsibility. In addition to its analytical contribution, the study explores the integration of deictic awareness into ESP instruction at tertiary level. It proposes a task-based instructional framework aimed at raising learners' pragmatic awareness, rhetorical sensitivity, and intercultural communicative competence. A three-phase teaching model (comprising awareness-raising, analytical, and productive activities) is outlined to support learners in identifying, interpreting, and using deixis effectively in persuasive discourse. The paper thus bridges linguistic theory and classroom practice, demonstrating how critical engagement with authentic political texts can enhance ESP learners' communicative competence and critical thinking in real-world contexts.*

Keywords: *person deixis, political persuasion, ESP, critical discourse pedagogy, political speeches*

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Article history: Received: 28 July 2025; Reviewed: 28 February 2026; Revised: 24 March 2026; Accepted: 26 March 2026; Published: 8 April 2026



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Citation (APA): Kostova, B. (2026). The use of person deixis in political persuasion: From analysis to pedagogical application. *Studies in Linguistics, Culture, and FLT*, 14(1), 56-69. <https://doi.org/10.46687/FFKJ8702>

Introduction

In political communication, language does more than just conveying information: it builds identities, constructs relationships, and shapes ideologies. One of the key tools in this process is person deixis, that is the use of personal and possessive pronouns in discourse to position speakers and audiences. It has the ability to designate the addressee in real communicative situations and provides information about their identity. The choice of pronouns also manifests the speaker's commitment to the topic and confidence in the truth of the proposition. That is the reason why politicians rely heavily on deixis to foster connection and assert their authority.

This paper examines the strategic use of person deixis in political discourse, focusing on its role in persuasion. It studies first person singular and plural pronouns as well as third person singular reference in political speeches. While deixis has been studied extensively in linguistics, its persuasive function in political contexts and potential for pedagogical use remain underexplored. Therefore, the ultimate aim is to relate the conducted political discourse analysis to an application outside academic endeavours and to use it as a canvas for developing teaching/learning materials. Political texts, with their rich use of deictic expressions, offer valuable material for teaching students to critically analyze how language shapes meaning and influence. Thus, the paper aims to bridge theoretical linguistic analysis with practical classroom applications. Such educational application may contribute to raising pragmatic awareness within ESP instruction.

Studies on person deixis: literature review

Nowadays a vast body of literature exists on different aspects of the meanings created by pronominal usage. The reason is that the deictic nature of pronouns, i.e. their ability to encode important features of the context of utterance, has been discussed by numerous authors within various disciplines such as pragmatics as a philosophical discipline, logic, anthropology, and philosophy of language as well as linguistics (De Fina, 1995). The study of deixis in linguistics can be traced back to the foundational works of Benveniste (1971), Fillmore (1975), and Lyons (1977), who examined how pronouns and other indexicals create meaning of language in context. Person deixis, in particular, reflects the speaker's role and intended relationship with the audience. More recently, person deixis has been studied extensively and covers such aspects as linguistic strategies of involvement and the role of pronouns in politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987), construction of identity and interpersonal relationships of speakers (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; De Fina, 1995). The pragmatic significance of person deixis and the creation of deictic spaces it is responsible for and its

role for political persuasion have been highlighted in critical studies of political language (Chilton, 2004; Chilton & Schäffner, 2011; Wilson, 1990).

Wilson (1990), for example, analyzed contextually dependent uses of pronouns showing their ability to encode different aspects of the communicative intentions of speakers. He reached the conclusion that the meaning associated with pronominal usage is not systematically related to variables such as formality, status, class, sex or the like, but is more dependent on the specific context of utterance and the roles and goals of the speaker(s). The author also examined how individual politicians vary in the use of the pronominal system according to scales of distancing/involvement of self with respect to the topics under discussion or the discourse participants.

Another author who discussed pronominal choice in connection with persuasiveness is Zupnik (1994). The analysis she conducted of the political discourse of participants in a televised political debate led to several important findings: (1) vagueness of reference in this kind of discourse can be related to a continuous switch between different social identities; (2) this switch can help the speaker achieve persuasive effects. The term *vagueness of reference* refers to first person plural personal pronoun. Vagueness of reference created by the switch between first-person singular and plural personal pronouns is of particular interest to this paper and will be illustrated with examples from author's own dataset of political speeches.

Pronominal choice in political discourse is also studied by De Fina (1995). She examined semi-spontaneous political discourse and how pronominal choice in the speech of individual speakers/politicians created the way they present themselves in relation to a political conflict. The main conclusion she draws is that the analysis of person deixis can contribute to an overall understanding of the objectives and the establishment of political identity. It is also argued that pronominal choice signals different ways in which the speaker is present in a text. Therefore, it is maintained that the notion of involvement/speaker commitment is related to the use of pronouns.

The use of pronouns together with other linguistic means construing 'we-strategy' is studied by Ponton et al. (2025). They analyse speeches given by two political leaders representing different political traditions and cultures, with collectivist and individualist features, respectively. Their research into political discourse about Covid has found striking similarities in the rhetorical strategies of the politicians, which might suggest that both leaders recognise a more general need to obtain consensus. The authors concluded that this form of 'we-strategy' in political discourse might be affected by cultural factors.

This brief chronological retrospection of recent scholarship on pronoun use in political speeches has shown that there is a strong interest in identifying inclusive

and exclusive uses of pronouns in relation to persuasiveness in political text and talk. However, being conducted within the field of pragmatics or Critical Discourse Studies, much of this research, naturally, remains disconnected from pedagogical considerations. In order to find connections and convergences I conducted bibliographic searches in Google Scholar and ScienceDirect databases, handbooks in pragmatics as well as several journals dedicated to ESP (English for Specific Purposes; Journal of Teaching English for Specific and Academic Purposes; ELT Journal; Teaching and Teacher Education) to locate those studies which deal with overt teaching of person deixis. The search process yielded only 2 relevant studies: those by Harman (1990) and Zeis (2022). The numerous other studies found focused on the functions of deixis as used in teacher–learner interactions. In the first study, Harman (1990) refers to deixis as an alternative approach to teaching grammar, indirect speech in particular. He suggests outlining the deictic circle as an efficient teaching instrument with a communicative potential in the EFL classroom. The second study focuses on university learners’ language awareness about deixis. Zeis (2022) investigates the importance of deixis awareness and concludes that it contributes to the development of communicative skills and comprehension.

In our view, there is a need for more applied studies that connect theoretical insights with classroom practice in this respect. This paper addresses that gap.

Theoretical framework and methodology

The analysis, which is the starting point of the paper, is grounded in the pragmatic notion of speaker–hearer alignment through indexicals and the Critical Discourse Analysis approach to ideological positioning through language choices. This combined focus enables a close reading of political speeches with both a linguistic and rhetorical potential.

The paper presents an analysis of personal pronouns within a small corpus of contemporary political speeches given by U.S. leaders, selected for their rhetorical prominence and availability. It is part of a broader research on epistemic legitimation in American political discourse. Therefore, the excerpts are taken from political speeches given by various politicians who accepted the nomination for president of the USA. Each speech was examined for instances of personal pronouns and categorized according to their function. These categories were used to track the following patterns of persuasive deixis:

- First person singular “I” – establishing leadership or personal credibility;
- First person plural “we” (inclusive or exclusive) – aligning the speaker with an audience or a political group/the government;
- Third person reference – distancing the speaker from the communicative situation.

Political persuasion through personal deixis

First person singular use

The use of first-person singular pronouns is particularly effective in establishing the assertive tone of the respective speech. In examples [1] and [2], personal and possessive pronouns in the first person singular present narratives that reveal the identity and personal achievements of the speaker /*my record, I fought, I broke, I thought, I reached, I am proud*/. In [1] the addresser chronologically traces his personal professional path, emphasizing his moral qualities that do not allow him to support decisions of his party that are not expedient. Moreover, he is able to reach agreement and cooperation with representatives of the opposition. In [2] the intensification of the assertive tone is created by rhetorical means – three repetitions, syntactic parallelism and alliteration, which reveal the self-confidence of the speaker, the then acting president, generated by the results of the policy he carried out /*My record is one of progress, not platitudes. My record is one of specifics, not smiles. My record is one of performance, not promises*!.

[1] I ask you to judge me by my record: As a young prosecutor, I fought for victim's rights and made prosecuting violence against women a priority. When I came to the Senate, I broke with many in my own party to vote for a balanced budget, because I thought it was the right thing to do. I fought to put a 100,000 cops on the street. And then I reached across the aisle to work with John McCain, to find the truth about our POW's and missing in action, and to finally make peace with Vietnam. (Kerry, 2004)

[2] From August of 1974 to August of 1976, the record shows steady upward progress toward prosperity, peace, and public trust. My record is one of progress, not platitudes. My record is one of specifics, not smiles. My record is one of performance, not promises. It is a record I am proud to run on. It is a record the American people – Democrats, Independents, and Republicans alike – will support on November 2. (Ford, 1976)

In the following examples the use of the first person singular pronoun *I* is a display of extreme self-confidence and construes a particularly affirmative tone. Some of the speakers' intentions can be achieved because they are within the prerogatives of the American president – to be a responsible head of state and supreme commander-in-chief, to form a cabinet with ministers by portfolio or to appoint an attorney general /*I will be a commander in chief who will never mislead us into war, I will have a Secretary of Defense who will listen to the best advice of our military leaders. And I will appoint an Attorney General who actually upholds the Constitution of the United States*!. Other intentions, however, are not possible without the participation of the government institutions of the legislative and executive branches. It is true that the American president has the right to initiate legislation and propose his legislative program, but bills

become laws when they are adopted by Congress, and into real actions when they are implemented by the government (Mauk & Oakland, 2009, pp. 135-136). In this sense, the insistent use of the personal pronoun *I* creates additional symbolic power of the speaker, which he does not actually possess */I will keep taxes low and cut them where I can, My tax cuts will create jobs, My health care plan will make it easier/*. The speaker's presumption in example [3], realized through the personal pronoun in the first person singular, that his experience as a businessman is transferrable to state governance and he, single-handedly, without cooperation with other branches of government except the presidential institution, can achieve prosperity for the entire nation */I have made billions of dollars in business making deals – now I'm going to make our country rich again. Using the richest people in the world, which our country has, I am going to turn our bad trade agreements into great trade agreements/*. It is the use of the personal pronoun *I* that gives him the opportunity to evaluate himself extremely positively and to construct his identity as the most capable and therefore, the most suitable candidate */I am the law and order candidate/*. This is reinforced by the fact that in the English language there cannot be a sentence without a subject in the indicative mood.

[3] I will work with, and appoint, the best and prosecutors and law enforcement officials to get the job properly done. In this race for the White House, I am the law and order candidate. [...]

I have made billions of dollars in business making deals – now I'm going to make our country rich again. Using the richest people in the world, which our country has, I am going to turn our bad trade agreements into great trade agreements. America has lost nearly one-third of its manufacturing jobs since 1997, following the enactment of disastrous trade deals supported by Bill and Hillary Clinton. (Trump, 2016)

Third person reference

Personal deixis can be used as a strategy for managing differences in power relations between the addresser and addressees. In examples [4] and [5], this is activated to designate the addresser by using his own name. In this way, the addresser speaks for himself in the third person singular */President George W. Bush will keep the promise of Social Security; In the Dole administration we will work with the nation's governors/*. The effect achieved by opting for this linguistic usage is the identification of the addresser with an institution and position – government and presidency, which legitimizes the speaker's personality. The rejection of the logical use of a personal pronoun in the first person singular leads to the preservation of the addresser's authority in [4] and its increase in [5]. Such conclusions can be drawn from knowledge of the

extralinguistic situation – the speaker in example [4] is an incumbent president, while the speaker in example [5] is a presidential candidate.

[4] To the seniors in this country, you earned your benefits, you made your plans, and President George W. Bush will keep the promise of Social Security. No changes, no reductions, no way. (Bush, 2000)

[5] During the Reagan administration – during the Reagan administration we abolished parole at the federal level. In the Dole administration we will work with the nation's governors to abolish parole for violent criminals all across America. And with my national instant check initiative, we will keep all guns out of the hands of criminals. (Dole, 1996)

First person plural use

Political persuasion, understood as the preservation of the affirmative tone of the utterance, though in a softened and muted form, is realized through the transition from the use of the pronoun “I” to the inclusive “we”. In example [6], the speaker performs the speech act of promise by taking responsibility for the country's future commercial transactions and protection of the fundamental freedoms of American citizens, enshrined in the First Amendment to the US Constitution. By using the personal pronoun *I*, the modal verb *will* and the verb with modal meaning *pledge*, the speaker makes a personal commitment to work towards achieving the set goals. However, the results and achievements will be for the benefit of everyone, of the entire society. This is clear from the consistent use of personal pronouns in the first person singular and in the first person plural (*I will never, ever sign bad trade deals; We are going to enforce all trade violations; I am going to work very hard to repeal that language and protect free speech for all Americans. We can accomplish these great things, and so much else*). The shift from “I” to the inclusive “we” creates an impression of the speaker's altruism and legitimizes him as ethical and benevolent.

[6] I pledge to never sign any trade agreement that hurts our workers, or that diminishes our freedom and independence. I will never, ever sign bad trade deals. America first, again! America first! Instead, I will make individual deals with individual countries.

No longer will we enter into these massive transactions, with many countries, that are thousands of pages long – and which no one from our country even reads or understands. We are going to enforce all trade violations against any country including through the use of taxes and tariffs, against any country that cheats.

[...] I am going to work very hard to repeal that language and protect free speech for all Americans. We can accomplish these great things, and so

much else – all we need to do is start believing in ourselves and in our country again. Start believing. (Trump, 2016)

Epistemic legitimation is achieved by shifting from an aggressive to an associative stance, primarily through the strategic use of person deixis. The strategy of the transition from “I” to “we” operates at an implicit level. In example [7], the speaker expresses his confidence and steadfastness in eliminating threats in contemporary society through the use of the personal and possessive pronoun in the first person singular, the lexeme *strategy* and the choice of the present perfect simple tense *I’ve laid out my strategy for defeating ISIS* /, but the real actions are intended to be carried out in solidarity *We will strike their sanctuaries; We will surge our intelligence; We will disrupt their efforts*/. It is not clear from the immediate context who the referent of the personal pronoun in the plural is – whether *we* stands for the presidential candidate in cooperation with his future cabinet or with all American citizens. This freedom in the possibilities of interpreting the speaker’s associative position in relation to the listeners can be misleading and serves to create a sense of inclusion, i.e. it acts at the level of emotions. Example [7] shows how egocentrism and assertiveness, typical for the campaign discourse, are completely contextually conditioned by the nature of the first-past-the-post presidential elections in the USA, *that’s the kind of commander in chief I pledge to be*/, are transformed into solidarity, expressed with the inclusive *we* *We will work tirelessly; We will reform our criminal justice system; we will defend all our rights*/.

[7] I’ve laid out my strategy for defeating ISIS. We will strike their sanctuaries from the air and support local forces taking them out on the ground. We will surge our intelligence so we detect and prevent attacks before they happen. We will disrupt their efforts online to reach and radicalize young people in our country.

It won’t be easy or quick, but make no mistake we will prevail. [...]

America’s strength doesn’t come from lashing out. It relies on smarts, judgment, cool resolve and the precise and strategic application of power. And that’s the kind of commander in chief I pledge to be. [...] We will work tirelessly with responsible gun owners to pass common sense reforms and keep guns out of the hands of criminals, terrorists and all others who would do us harm.

We will reform our criminal justice system from end to end and rebuild trust between law enforcement and the communities they serve. And we will defend all our rights, civil rights, human rights and voting rights, women’s rights and workers’ rights, LGBT rights and the rights of people with disabilities. (Clinton, 2016)

[8] But I can't do this alone. No President can. We must do it together. It won't be easy, and it won't be quick. We didn't get into this mess overnight, and we won't get out of it overnight. But we can do it – with commitment, creativity, diversity and drive. We can do it. We can do it.

We can do it. We can do it. We can do it. (Clinton, 1992)

The evasion from assertiveness is also realized on a rational level. In example [8] the speaker explicitly explains that no president can keep his promises without universal support */But I can't do this alone. No President can. We must do it together. We can do it/*. Here the transition from the first person singular to the first person plural is completely logical, especially in combination with the modal verbs *must* and *can*, which create the motivating tone of the sentences. Such uses of personal deixis as a means of realizing epistemic legitimation are examples of manipulative use of language employed to present subjective or ideological positions as universally valid, thereby influencing the audience subtly and emotionally rather than logically.

Pedagogical application of the findings: Towards materials development for ESP courses

The findings from the discourse analysis conducted in the previous section stress the relevance of person deixis not only as a rhetorical feature in political communication but also as a valuable pedagogical resource. In the context of English for Specific Purposes, particularly for learners aiming to develop advanced comprehension of political, legal, or media discourses, the explicit teaching of deixis provides an entry point for raising pragmatic and critical language awareness. Such awareness – often neglected in form-focused instruction – is essential for equipping learners with the skills to decode ideological positioning, speaker alignment, and persuasive strategies in authentic texts.

Theoretical Foundations for Instruction

Drawing on O'Keeffe et al.'s understanding that explicit pragmatic instruction is necessary and effective in a foreign language context (O'Keeffe et al., 2011, pp. 138-143) and Takahashi's (2013) two-tiered model of pragmatic awareness based on noticing and understanding, instructional materials were designed and presented here. Their aim is to help learners first identify (notice) deictic forms in political speech and then interpret (understand) their pragmatic functions within socio-political contexts. Noticing refers to learners' initial recognition of personal pronouns and deictic shifts; understanding involves the ability to articulate how such linguistic choices serve persuasive, ideological, or relational purposes. This model emphasizes the necessity of conscious attention in the development of L2 pragmatic competence. We maintain the view that learners

do not automatically acquire contextualized language use through exposure alone; explicit instruction is crucial.

Rationale for using political discourse in ESP

Political speeches provide an ideal genre for pedagogical exploitation due to their formulaic yet clear structure, rhetorical salient features, and socio-cultural influence. Speeches delivered at party conventions or public campaigns are accessible, often transcribed, and widely available in video format – enhancing multimodal learning. Their frequent use of deictic expressions makes them especially useful for raising awareness about language use in persuasive, or rather manipulative contexts.

Moreover, these texts exemplify a genre where language is ‘doing’ – used to promise, align, exclude, criticize, and mobilize. This makes political discourse an ideal site for task-based learning, content-based instruction, and critical discourse pedagogy. In particular, the notion of “we-strategy” and shifts between “I” and “we” pronouns reveal how speakers navigate power, inclusion, and authority.

Expanded model for materials development

The sequence of tasks proposed below can be developed into a coherent instructional module, outlined as a three-phase model: awareness-raising, analytical, and productive.

Phase 1: Awareness-Raising (Context and concept presentation)

Objective: To situate learners within the communicative and cultural context of the political speeches.

- Task 1: Learners view video excerpts from selected political speeches and discuss the context of delivery (e.g., campaign, crisis response, convention).
- Task 2: Pre-reading activities introduce key terms (deixis, modality, alignment, and legitimation).
- Task 3: Learners read annotated transcripts, with deictic elements visually highlighted.

Outcome: Students develop awareness of the genre and recognize the strategic uses of personal pronouns.

Phase 2: Analytical (Noticing + Rule Formation)

Objective: To investigate the pragmatic functions of person deixis in context.

- Task 4: Learners complete a guided worksheet identifying instances of first and third person deixis and make hypotheses of the speaker's intentions (e.g., create solidarity, shift blame, and build credibility).
- Task 5: Students analyze shifts between "I" and "we" using provided discourse excerpts, discussing how such shifts affect audience perception.

Outcome: Students formulate explicit rules about how deixis constructs relationships in political text and talk.

Phase 3: Productive (Application + Reflection)

Objective: To enable learners to use deictic strategies in their own spoken and written production.

- Task 6: Learners draft short campaign-style speeches or articles incorporating specific deixis strategies (e.g., alternating "I" and "we" to express authority and inclusivity).
- Task 7: The group discussion focuses on the perceived persuasive effect of different deictic choices.
- Task 8: Learners write (possibly co-author) a short handbook titled "*How to Use Personal Deixis Persuasively*".

Outcome: Students gain confidence in identifying and using personal pronouns for persuasion.

Implications for ESP curriculum design

Integrating this deictic framework into ESP courses aligns with current trends in genre-based pedagogy, critical language awareness, and pragmatics-focused instruction. In fields such as political science, law, international relations, and media studies, the ability to analyze and produce texts that reflect speaker's stance and audience positioning is an important communicative skill. Furthermore, this approach supports interdisciplinary collaboration and enriches ESP curricula with authentic discourse. It fosters not only linguistic competence but also socio-political awareness and intercultural communicative competence, which is increasingly relevant in contemporary global communication.

Conclusion

This study has examined the persuasive function of personal deixis in a corpus of American political speeches, demonstrating that the strategic use of pronominal forms is central to the construction of speaker authority, ideological positioning, and audience alignment. The analysis has shown that first person singular deixis is predominantly used to affirm personal credibility and assertiveness, while

third person singular deixis often serves to elevate the speaker by associating them with institutional authority or to distance the speaker from potentially contentious propositions. Most notably, the shift to first person plural deixis functions as a mechanism of epistemic legitimation, enabling a transition from an assertive to a more associative rhetorical stance that appeals to collective identity and shared responsibility.

Beyond its analytical contribution, the study underlines the pedagogical value of integrating deixis into ESP instruction. Political discourse offers a rich and accessible site for raising learners' pragmatic awareness and developing their ability to interpret language in context. The instructional framework proposed here demonstrates how deictic analysis can be employed to foster deeper engagement with authentic texts, enhance rhetorical literacy, and develop critical thinking skills. By bridging theoretical linguistics and language pedagogy, this research contributes to the broader goal of equipping learners with the tools necessary to navigate and deconstruct persuasive language in socio-political contexts.

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