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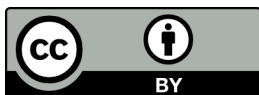
### ‘CHANGING HATS’ AND DEIXIS OF FIRST-PERSON PLURAL PRONOUNS IN J.D. VANCE’S 2025 MUNICH SPEECH

Iryna Alyeksyeyeva

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3109-0331>

[i.alekseeva@knu.ua](mailto:i.alekseeva@knu.ua)



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*Speeches of modern politicians supply linguists with the material to study how global and local political, social, cultural and economic changes are promoted or resisted in a particular context. These texts may be approached from the point of view of their linguistic structure as well as from a perspective of their embeddedness in discourse. The article explores the scope of the first-person plural pronouns as they were used by US Vice President J.D. Vance in his famous speech at the Munich Security Conference on February 14, 2025, so as to demonstrate the connection between the context and language forms. The study draws on the notions of personal deixis (grammatical encoding of participants in an interaction) and footing (a stance or alternating stances taken by a participant in an interaction) and hypothesizes that in Vance’s speech, the first-person plural pronouns, namely personal, possessive and reflexive types, vary in scope and include, besides the speaker, different entities, which is related to the politician’s switch of footing. The research makes use of quantitative analysis to assess the importance of the first-person plural pronouns in the speech compared to the second-person pronouns. At the next stage, contextual analysis is applied to clarify the reference scope of the first-person plural pronouns.*

*The study reveals a 2 to 1 ratio of the first-person pronouns (66.9%) to the second-person pronouns (33.1%). The first-person plural pronouns account for 35.6% occurrences and outnumber the first-person singular pronouns (31.3%). Accordingly, Vance’s speech focuses on the speaker. Contextual analysis uncovers that the Vice President uses the first-person plural pronouns to refer to himself and some other referent. The latter may be (1) another person (his spouse and another politician), (2) the Trump administration, (3) the American people, and (4) the USA and its allies (the EU, and the UK). Hence, it may be concluded that first-person plural pronouns facilitate the speaker’s switch of social roles in political discourse.*

**Key words:** *personal deixis, footing, political discourse, grammaticalization of context, first-and second-person pronouns, social role.*

**Алексєєва І.О. Зміна ролей і дейксис займенників першої особи множини у мюнхенській промові Дж. Д. Венса 2025 року**

Промови сучасних політиків є безцінним матеріалом для лінгвістичного вивчення стратегій просування або супротиву глобальним та локальним політичним, соціальним, культурним та економічним змінам. Тексти політичних промов можна вивчати з точки зору їх лінгвістичної структури, а також з точки зору їх вбудованості в дискурс. Особливу увагу зосереджено на зв'язку між контекстом та значенням мовних форм, що виявляється за допомогою дослідження обсягу займенників першої особи множини, які віце-президент Дж. Д. Венс використовував у своїй промові на Мюнхенській конференції з безпеки 14 лютого 2025 року. Розвідка спирається на поняття особового дейксису (граматичного кодування учасників взаємодії) та футингу (позицію або позиції, які займає учасник протягом мовленнєвої взаємодії). Гіпотеза дослідження полягає в тому, що в промові Венса займенники першої особи множини, а саме особові, присвійні та зворотні, змінюють свій референційний обсяг та включають, окрім самого мовця, різних референтів, що пов'язано зі зміною «футинга» політика. У дослідженні застосовано кількісний аналіз для оцінки важливості в промові займенників першої особи множини у порівнянні з займенниками другої особи. Наступним етапом розвідки є контекстуальний аналіз, спрямований з'ясувати референційний обсяг вживання займенників першої особи множини.

Дослідження виявило, що займенники першої особи та займенники другої особи вживаються в промові у співвідношенні 2 до 1 (66.9% та 33.1% відповідно), причому займенники першої особи множини складають 35.6% та переважають у кількості займенники першої особи однини (31.6%). Таким чином, результати кількісного аналізу свідчать, що промова віце-президента сфокусована на постаті мовця. Контекстуальний аналіз виявив, що референційний обсяг займенників першої особи множини у промові змінюється та включає самого Венса, а також (1) іншу особу (його дружину та іншого політика), (2) адміністрацію президента Трампа, (3) американський народ та (4) США та їх союзників (Європейський Союз та Велику Британію). Отже, встановлено, що використання займенників першої особи множини в політичному дискурсі допомагає мовцю виступати у різних соціальних ролях.

**Ключові слова:** *особовий дейксис, футинг, політичний дискурс, граматиалізація контексту, займенники першої та другої особи, соціальна роль.*

## Introduction

In the last decade, all aspects of human life have been affected by rapid and radical changes of economic, political, and cultural nature. Migration, AI, social media, pandemics, economic shifts, international military and political crises have been overwhelming and are likely to stay around for some time. Global politics is currently being reconfigured through political actions (sanctions, wars, opening or closing borders) as well as through speeches delivered by the most powerful political figures of today (see, for example, (Polkhovska, 2018; Worthington, 2024; Потапенко & Андрійко, 2025)). J.D. Vance, the 50<sup>th</sup> Vice President of the United States, is one of the leaders who precipitate changes. His rhetoric at the Munich

Security Conference on February 14, 2025, sent shockwaves through Europe and was interpreted as a breaking point in transatlantic cooperation. The current research focuses on the scope of the first-person plural pronouns (*we*, *our*) in this speech and suggests treating it as a context-dependent marker of the speaker's various social roles.

### **Theoretical background**

The research draws primarily on the deeply context-dependent notion of deixis defined as "the ways in which languages encode or grammaticalize features of the context of utterance or speech event" (Levinson, 1983, p. 54), where a context is understood as "a set of pragmatic indices, co-ordinates or reference points (as they are variously called) for speakers, addressees, times of utterance, places of utterance, indicated objects, and whatever else is needed" (Levinson, 1983, p. 58). The deictic center is typically anchored to the speaker: (1) the speaker is the central person, (2) the central time is the time of speaking; (3) the central place is the speaker's location and the moment of speech, (4) the discourse center is the point of the speaker's speech production, and (4) the social center is determined by the speaker's social status to which the status of other addressees relate (Levinson, 1983, p. 64). As the research delves into the usage of the first-person plural pronouns in J.D. Vance's speech delivered at the Security Conference in Munich, 2025, it is personal deixis that is central to the study.

The research material, i.e. an episode of an unmediated interaction within political discourse, is a vivid illustration of Levinson's claim that deixis markers remind theoretical linguists that "natural languages are primarily designed (...) for use in face-to-face interaction, and thus there are limits to the extent to which they can be analyzed without taking this into account" (Levinson, 1983, p.54). A componential analysis (Lyons, 1968, p. 470-81) of the pronominal systems reveals the following: speaker inclusion for the first person, addressee inclusion for the second person, and speaker and addressee exclusion for the third person (Levinson, 1983, p. 69). Yet, scholars note that the pronoun *we* is far from being straightforward in terms of the traditional category of plural: "*we* does not mean plural speakers in the same way that *they* means more than one third person entity" (Lyons, 1968, p. 277).

Studies show that the reference capacity and the function of *we* depends considerably on discourse. Exploring these features of the pronoun in university lectures, Fortanet (2004) concludes that it may refer to a wide range of referents (from large groups to the speaker) and perform numerous functions that fit into two

categories, namely representation and metadiscourse. Another research into academic discourse (EFL teachers' interactions) argues for six distinct references: "(1) 'we' that refers to speaker and more than one addressee, (2) 'we' that refers to speaker and more than one third party, (3) 'we' that refers to speaker and indefinite group, (4) 'we' that indicates 'you', (5) 'we' that indicates 'I', and (6) 'we' that indicates "they" (Muthi'ah et al., 2022, p. 384).

Contextual dependence of *we* and its vast referencing capacity necessitate turning to Goffman's notion of footing. The scholar illustrates footing by describing an interaction between President Nixon and a journalist: the President finishes the official part of his communication with journalists and starts an informal part by rising from the desk and switching from officialese to commenting on a female journalist wearing slacks. For Goffman, footing is roughly "participant's alignment, or set, or stance, or posture, or projected self" (Goffman, 1981, p. 128). The scholar notes that "the same individual can rapidly alter the social role in which he is active, even though his capacity as animator and author remains constant – what in committee meetings is called 'changing hats'" (Goffman, 1981, p. 145). Footing switches take place in many ways, primarily through a topic change or a register shift. However, besides these, Goffman points out the specific usage of pronouns, namely giving preference to 'we' over 'I' (Goffman, 1981, p. 145).

Thus, to describe a politician's speech as a complex phenomenon shaped by various factors ranging from the speaker's personality to his persona and his attitude to the audience or third parties, the theoretical framework of the current research draws on the assumption of a deictic nature of the pronoun *we* and the concept of footing that undergoes changes during an interaction.

### **Methodological notes**

At the first stage, the research procedure included elements of quantitative analysis, namely singling out occurrences of the first-person plural pronouns (*we*, *our*, *ourselves*) and juxtaposing their frequency with the first-person singular pronouns (*I*, *my*) and the second-person pronouns (*you*, *your*). This was used to uncover the proportion of personal indexicals in the speech and compare their significance.

The second step was drawn on contextual analysis and involved relating the first-person plural pronouns to their referents in the context. Identifying referents of the first-person plural pronouns in each particular case revealed switches of footing in

the speech and shed light on those social roles that the Vice President played throughout his speech.

### Results and discussion

Table 1 presents the results of the quantitative analysis of the first- and second-person personal and possessive pronouns in Vance’s speech.

*Table 1.* Frequency of first and second-person pronouns in Vance’s speech

	Pronouns	Frequency (times per item)	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency
First person singular	<i>I/me</i>	43	52	31.3
	<i>my</i>	9		
First person plural	<i>we/us</i>	39	59	35.6
	<i>our</i>	20		
Second person	<i>you</i>	41	55	33.1
	<i>your</i>	14		
<b>Total</b>			166	100

The Table shows that, overall, Vance’s speech is speaker-centered: the occurrences of the first-person pronouns make up more than two-thirds (66.9%) in relation to the hearer-oriented second-person pronouns (33.1%). However, the actual meaning of *we* should be scrutinized in the context as its scope may vary: it may include (1) the speaker and the hearers, (2) the speaker and some third party or both (1) and (2), namely the speaker, the hearers, and a third party.

Vance starts his address by thanking the audience and by listing all those who are present. In other words, he outlines those eligible to be covered by *we*: ...*thanks to all the gathered together delegates and luminaries, and media professionals and thanks especially to the hosts of the Munich Security Conference for being able to put on such an incredible event. We’re of course thrilled be here. We’re happy to be here* (White House, 2025).

Then, the Vice President makes the introductory part of the speech personal by using both *I* and *we*, with the latter referring to Vance himself and another person, namely

- the UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy: *I saw Foreign Secretary **David Lammy** and joked that both of **us** last year had different jobs than **we** have now* (White House, 2025).

- Vance's wife: *The first time **I** was ever in Munich was with **my wife**, actually, who's here with **me** today, on a personal trip. ...**we**'re very moved and **our** thoughts and prayers are with Munich and everybody affected by the evil inflicted on this beautiful community. **We**'re thinking about you, **we**'re praying for you, and **we** will certainly be rooting for you in the days and weeks to come* (White House, 2025).

It is in the main part that Vance starts 'changing hats'. At first, the scope of *we* is the US (Trump) administration, on whose behalf the Vice President speaks and, thus, he performs a US top official on a mission: *...while **the Trump administration** is very concerned with European security and believes that **we** can come to a reasonable settlement between Russia and Ukraine – and **we** also believe that it's important in the coming years for Europe to step up in a big way to provide for its own defence... And under Donald Trump's leadership, **we** may disagree with your views, but **we** will fight to defend your right to offer them in the public square* (White House, 2025).

There is a footing switch when Vance voices the American people: *Now, these cavalier statements are shocking to **American ears**. For years, **we**'ve been told that everything **we** fund and support is in the name of **our** democratic values* (White House, 2025).

At times, the referent of *we/us* may be both the US political elite and Americans on the whole: *...to many of **us** on the other side of the Atlantic, it looks more and more like old entrenched interests hiding behind ugly Soviet era words like misinformation and disinformation...* (White House, 2025) However, *we*-*'Americans'* is particularly important for the speech whose key message is to transfer the responsibility for Europe to European elites. In fact, the passage that blatantly conveys this idea describes the future of the Europe – America alliance as a dichotomy by constructing *our European friends, the Europeans* as one party and *we (President Trump, America)* as the other: *...as **President Trump** has made abundantly clear, he believes that **our European friends** must play a bigger role in the future of this continent. **We** don't think you hear this term 'burden sharing', but **we** think it's an important part of being in a shared alliance together that **the Europeans** step up while **America** focuses on areas of the world that are in great danger* (White House, 2025).

The further text contains another usage of *we* that refers to Europe (the EU and the UK) and the United States and, thus, emphatically presents them as a team sharing values and challenges by boosting the inclusive *we* with its reflexive counterpart pronoun *ourselves*: *...we ought to ask whether we're holding ourselves to an appropriately high standard. And I say 'ourselves', because I fundamentally believe that we are on the same team. We must do more than talk about democratic values. We must live them... It's a terrible story, but it's one we've heard way too many times in Europe, and unfortunately, too many times in the United States as well* (White House, 2025). To emphasize the similarity of challenges and importance of consolidation, Vance modifies *we* with the pronoun *all*: *...the crisis I believe we all face together, is one of our own making* (White House, 2025).

The final passage of the speech is a call on European leaders for action, yet to avoid imposing on his hearers directly by using *you*, Vance chooses the first-person plural pronouns *we* and *our* whose scope covers Europe and the USA: *To believe in democracy is to understand that each of our citizens has wisdom and has a voice. And if we refuse to listen to that voice, even our most successful fights will secure very little. (...) We shouldn't be afraid of our people even when they express views that disagree with their leadership* (White House, 2025).

### Conclusions and perspectives

The quantitative analysis of the first-person singular, first-person plural and second-person pronouns reveals that the speech delivered by J.D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference, 2025, was essentially speaker-centered as more than two-thirds of the pronouns in the speech refer to the first person, with the plural pronouns *we* and *our* leading. This would presuppose inclusivity of the speech, yet the further context-based study demonstrated that Vance alternated between his different social roles and the scope of referents of *we* varied: the Vice President appeared in the speech as an ordinary guest to Munich visiting the city with his spouse; he also spoke on behalf of the USA administration; in several passages he was one of the American people. To finalize the speech, the Vice President used the first-person plural *we* inclusively to refer to the allies (the USA, the EU and the UK) and to call for consolidating and committing to shared values.

The current research may be furthered by exploring how deictic elements are used to construct politicians' persona and identity, which appears particularly promising in the modern discourse of identity and symbolic politics exercised in dramatically polarized societies.

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The author declares no competing interests.

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