The Impact of Personal Pronoun Use in Customer-Firm Interactions

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Linguistic psychology: “currency of social processes”
- Presence or incidence of words are informative of the speaker’s psychological state, personality, social status, etc.

Subtle variations in language affect the audience and the speaker
- Advertising, word of mouth, customer interactions

Pronouns signal
- Psychological states
- Personality traits
- Relationship status/closeness

Chung & Pennebaker 2007; Kronrod et al. 2011; Morris 2012; Moore 2012; Packard & Berger 2016
WHAT PRONOUNS DO FIRMS USE?

“Your patience is greatly appreciated. Your call is important to us. Please stay on the line to maintain your calling priority.”

– on hold recording, bank

“We’re sorry for the poor experience you had while flying with us from Toronto. Your comments matter to us, and have been shared with the appropriate manager. We hope you’ll fly with [brand] again soon.”

– letter, airline

“Thanks for your question. If you aren’t happy with the product, you can absolutely return it for exchange or refund! However, we can’t issue store credit unless you return the product.”

– email, online retailer
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# GRAMMAR 101: PERSONAL PRONOUNS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First person singular</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First person plural</td>
<td>we</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second person</td>
<td></td>
<td>you</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIRM: *(I’m)* happy to help!

CUSTOMER: *(We’re)* happy to help!

Happy to help *(you)*!
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

“(I’m / We’re) happy to help (you)”

1. Should firm agents say I or We?  
   when referring to themselves as subjects/actors

2. Should firm agents say You?  
   when referring to the customer as objects/recipients of action

… What do firm agents actually say?
WHAT DO FIRM AGENTS SAY?

Customer-orientation theory

“Prioritize the customer’s needs and wants in everything we think or do.”

Saxe and Weiz 1982
Sent a bogus email to a random sample of top 100 online retailers

- inquiry (n = 20)
- complaint (n = 20)

Measured personal pronoun use in firm replies using LIWC

Amazon.com  Systemax
Staples  Williams-Sonoma
Apple  HSN
Walmart.com  Overstock.com
Dell  Kohl's
Office Depot  Toys 'R' Us
Liberty Interactive  Amway
Sears Holdings  Nordstrom
Netflix  BarnesandNoble.com
CDW  Walgreen
Best Buy  Redcats USA
OfficeMax  Vistaprint
Newegg  Buy.com
Macy's  Avon Products
W.W. Grainger  Saks Direct
Sony Electronics  PC Connection
Costco Wholesale  Symantec
L.L. Bean  Neiman Marcus Group
Victoria's Secret  Home Depot, The
J.C. Penney  Cabela’s
HP Home Office Store  Musician's Friend
Gap  Abercrombie & Fitch
Target  Fanatics
S1: RESULTS

Firm agents reference “I” (the agent) less than “we” (the firm) or “you” (the customer)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIWC Pronoun Category</th>
<th>When present</th>
<th>% of total words</th>
<th>% of pers. pronouns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I”</td>
<td>40.0%&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.9%&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7.1%&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“We”</td>
<td>100.0%&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>4.8%&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>49.4%&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You”</td>
<td>97.5%&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6.0%&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>41.1%&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Different letter superscripts indicate column differences at $p < .05$

Variation between inquiry and complaint non-significant (all $\chi^2 < 1.05$, $p > .30$)

We’re happy to help you!
Emphasizing “I” (the agent) over “we” (the firm) will positively affect consumers’ attitudes, intentions, and behaviors.

- Why?

I’m happy to help!  >  We’re happy to help!
WHY “I”?  

“I” may suggest that the agent…

- **Feels for the customer: Empathy**
  - “I” pronouns are correlated with
    - Situated concern
    - Socially-shared stress
    - Attempts to understand partner

- **Acts for the customer: Agency**
  - “I” pronouns are correlated with
    - Responsibility or claim for action
    - Establishing the subject in subject/object relations
    - Autonomy in action

WHY “I”? 

Empathy and agency matter in customer-firm interactions…

• **Empathy**
  - Key dimension of measuring service quality
  - Critical in service recovery
  - Drives satisfaction, repurchase intentions

• **Agency**
  - Sense of action and being “on my side”
  - Taking prompt action increases customer satisfaction, loyalty

Bolton & Drew 1991; Parasuraman et al. 1988; Singh & Sirdeshmukh 2000; Smith et al. 1999
SHOULD FIRM AGENTS SAY YOU?

“You” pronouns will offer little benefit for customer or firm outcomes given our participation framework.

• Why?

Happy to help!  Happy to help you!
WHY NOT “YOU”?  

The object in our participation framework is fixed  
- The actor (firm or agent) is focused on addressing the recipient of action’s (customer’s) needs  
- There is no customer but the customer  

If anything, “you” might have negative effects  
- Blaming and social distancing  
- External attribution  
- “You”, even in advertising, is rarely impactful  

Fahnestock 2011; Simmons et al. 2005; Chung & Pennebaker 2007; Ringberg et al. 2007
1. Do “I” (the agent) pronouns enhance customer attitudes and intentions? How? Studies 2 & 3

2. Could lay beliefs about “you” (the customer) pronouns be misguided? ---

3. Are these effects observable & important in the field? Study 4
**S2: DESIGN**

Design

- 3 (real firm responses) x 2 (interaction type: inquiry, complaint within subjects) x 2 (firm response: original, modified)
- N = 211 (undergrads)

Participant shown “their” initial email and firm’s response

Dependent measures

- Satisfaction; $\alpha = .77$
  - I am satisfied with my overall experience with this person
  - As a whole I am not satisfied with the response provided by this person (r)
  - How satisfied are you with the quality of service provided by this person

- Purchase intentions; $\alpha = .80$
  - In the future, I would purchase from Shopsite.com
  - If I was in the market for the kind of product they sell, I would use Shopsite.
  - In the future, I would not buy at Shopsite.com again (r)

Items adapted from Maxham and Netemeyer (2002).
Firm D (mass merchant, inquiry)

Original

Hi [Participant first name]
Thank you for contacting Shopsite.com regarding international shipping and returns. We are glad to review this matter for you.

Currently, we do not offer international shipping and returns. Shopsite.com can only ship to locations in Canada. Any additional restrictions are listed in the detailed description for each item on Shopsite.com.

[Participant first name inserted here], we thank you for your understanding and cooperation on this matter. If you have additional questions, please reply to this email.

Best regards,
Chris,
Shopsite.com

Modified

Hi [Participant first name]
Thank you for contacting Shopsite.com regarding international shipping and returns. I am glad to review this matter for you.

Currently, we do not offer international shipping and returns. Shopsite.com can only ship to locations in Canada. Any additional restrictions are listed in the detailed description for each item on Shopsite.com.

[Participant first name inserted here], I thank you for your understanding and cooperation on this matter. If you have additional questions, please reply to this email.

Best regards,
Chris
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13.9% of use cases (5 of 36) could not reasonably changed from firm (“we”) to agent (“I”). All 12 stimuli pre-tested as not statistically different in language typicality (Kronrod et al. 2011).
“I” pronouns increase satisfaction and purchase intentions over “We” pronouns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm</th>
<th>Product Category</th>
<th>Interaction</th>
<th>Satisfaction with Firm Agent</th>
<th>Purchase Intention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Original  Modified  t-stat</td>
<td>Original  Modified  t-stat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Apparel, lifestyle</td>
<td>Complaint</td>
<td>4.33   5.23   2.50 *</td>
<td>4.38   5.05   2.25 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Media, travel</td>
<td>Complaint</td>
<td>4.26   5.13   2.68 **</td>
<td>4.05   4.68   1.71 +</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Women's apparel</td>
<td>Complaint</td>
<td>4.79   5.59   2.37 *</td>
<td>4.51   5.21   2.33 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Mass merchant</td>
<td>Inquiry</td>
<td>4.42   5.51   3.50 **</td>
<td>4.56   5.34   2.22 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Apparel, outdoor</td>
<td>Inquiry</td>
<td>4.79   5.50   2.31 *</td>
<td>4.52   5.40   3.05 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Automotive</td>
<td>Inquiry</td>
<td>4.28   4.96   2.15 *</td>
<td>4.36   4.76   1.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p < .01, * p < .05, + p < .10

Omnibus: satisfaction (F = 39.95, p < .001); intentions (F = 25.95, p < .001).
2. Do “I” (the agent) pronouns enhance customer attitudes and intentions?

   How?
   
   • The agent feels (empathy) and acts (agency) for you
S3: DESIGN

Design

- 3 (no-pronoun control, “We”, “I”)
- N = 159 (mTurk)

Scenario: Order status request

Dependent measures

- Combined satisfaction and purchase intention items (α = .90)

Perceptions of the firm agent

- Empathy (understanding, empathetic, concerned; α = .90)
- Agency (acts on my behalf, tries hard, takes initiative; α = .95)
S3: RESULTS

“We” no different than control

“I” enhances outcomes

Omnibus: $F(2, 156) = 13.11, p < .001$
Control vs. “We”: $F(1, 156) = 2.38, p > .1$
“I” vs. others: $Fs > 12, ps < .001$
Firm agents who say “I” feel and act for the customer

... more than agents who leave pronouns implicit
... and *more* than agents who refer to “We” (the firm)
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Do “I” (the agent) pronouns enhance customer attitudes and intentions? How?  
   **Studies 2 & 3**

2. Could lay beliefs about “you” (the customer) pronouns be misguided?  
   **---**

3. Are these effects observable & important in the field?  
   **Study 4**
ARE FIRM BELIEFS MISGUIDED?

Multiple studies show no positive effects of “you” pronouns

However, we find negative effects when “you” pronouns are used incorrectly, in violation of our participation framework

• If YOU have your username, YOU can look into the account.
• If YOUR username is available, YOUR account can be looked into.

These negative effects are mediated by empathy/agency
1. Do “I” (the agent) pronouns enhance customer attitudes and intentions? How?  

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3. Are these effects observable & important in the field?

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Studies 2 & 3

---

Study 4
Examine over 1,000 real interactions and purchase data

Account for heterogeneity in customer-agent communications

Control for dyad-level (interactive) effect of customer pronoun use on firm agent pronoun use
S4: METHOD

Field data: 1,277 customer-firm agent email interactions at a large online retailer, observed purchases

\[ P_{i,\text{post}} = \alpha \text{Cust}_\text{Pronoun}_{ic} + \beta \text{Agent}_\text{Pronoun}_{ic} + \alpha \beta + z'_{i} + \epsilon_{i} \]

- \( P \) = purchases in a 90 day window from interaction date
- [Actor]_Pronoun = LIWC “I,” “You,” “We” values, mean-centered
- \( z \) = interaction-specific controls
  - Pre-interaction purchase volume
  - # of emails in interaction
  - Customer emotion language (LIWC posemo, negemo)
  - Judged: complaint, resolution, compensation, reason
  - Demographics: region, gender

Random-effects specification for lagged \( P_{i,\text{pre}} \) on interaction event not supported (Durbin-Watson).
S4: SUMMARY STATISTICS

Transactional sub-group’s pronoun use similar to full sample

Modal # emails = 2
(77% of cases)
S4: SUMMARY STATISTICS

Strong (and noteworthy) multi-collinearity

- Customer establishes the subject/framework

VIFs fall below threshold

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 &quot;I&quot; Customer</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 &quot;You&quot; Customer</td>
<td>-0.50</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 &quot;We&quot; Customer</td>
<td>-0.56</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 &quot;I&quot; Firm agent</td>
<td>-0.52</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 &quot;You&quot; Firm agent</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>-0.37</td>
<td>-0.44</td>
<td>-0.51</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 &quot;We&quot; Firm agent</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>-0.40</td>
<td>-0.49</td>
<td>-0.59</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All correlations are significant at $p < .001$.  

Kutner et al. 2004
### RESULTS

90 day results shown. Temporally persistent to 180 days. Replicated in zero-inflated Poisson on purchase event DV.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Covariates</th>
<th>(1) &quot;I&quot; Model</th>
<th>(2) &quot;You&quot; Model</th>
<th>(3) &quot;We&quot; Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purchases&lt;sub&gt;prep&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>0.3 (0.0) ***</td>
<td>0.3 (0.0) ***</td>
<td>0.3 (0.0) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of emails</td>
<td>175.5 (198.9)</td>
<td>147.7 (202.2)</td>
<td>147.7 (202.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer posemo</td>
<td>-192.8 (133.6)</td>
<td>-187.5 (135.8)</td>
<td>-187.5 (135.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer negemo</td>
<td>-629.7 (238.6) **</td>
<td>-571.7 (242.2) *</td>
<td>-571.7 (242.2) *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complaint</td>
<td>-307.0 (1147.2)</td>
<td>-44.9 (1164.0)</td>
<td>-44.9 (1164.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>305.2 (263.2)</td>
<td>344.2 (268.3)</td>
<td>344.2 (268.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>-157.0 (3437.9)</td>
<td>-171.6 (3485.0)</td>
<td>-171.6 (3485.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order reason</td>
<td>-672.9 (10352.2)</td>
<td>-1036.0 (1042.0)</td>
<td>-1036.0 (1042.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website reason</td>
<td>-985.6 (1168.3)</td>
<td>-1034.0 (1198.0)</td>
<td>-1034.0 (1198.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi reason</td>
<td>-955.5 (1993.2)</td>
<td>-668.0 (2024.0)</td>
<td>-668.0 (2024.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region 1</td>
<td>-578.6 (1188.9)</td>
<td>-613.0 (1207.0)</td>
<td>-613.0 (1207.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region 2</td>
<td>2296.8 (1640.8)</td>
<td>2075.0 (1663.0)</td>
<td>2075.0 (1663.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region 3</td>
<td>-618.4 (1279.6)</td>
<td>-642.9 (1298.0)</td>
<td>-642.9 (1298.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-171.9 (758.4)</td>
<td>-45.8 (765.4)</td>
<td>-45.8 (765.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05, + p < .10

Other reason and Region 4 are baselines for respective dummy sets.
### S4: RESULTS

90 day results shown. Temporally persistent to 180 days. Replicated in zero-inflated Poisson on purchase event DV.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1) &quot;I&quot; Model</th>
<th></th>
<th>(2) &quot;You&quot; Model</th>
<th></th>
<th>(3) &quot;We&quot; Model</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>3720.9</td>
<td>(2339.0)</td>
<td>525.5</td>
<td>(2305.4)</td>
<td>1654.0</td>
<td>(2328.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I&quot; Customer</td>
<td>692.5</td>
<td>(117.3) ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I&quot; Firm agent</td>
<td>1236.3</td>
<td>(267.1) ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I&quot; Customer X Firm</td>
<td>226.1</td>
<td>(49.4) ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;You&quot; Customer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-483.4</td>
<td>(139.2) ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;You&quot; Firm agent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>(127.6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;You&quot; Customer X Firm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-68.6</td>
<td>(38.5) +</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;We&quot; Customer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-387.8</td>
<td>(312.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;We&quot; Firm agent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-129.8</td>
<td>(181.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;We&quot; Customer X Firm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>79.8</td>
<td>(114.0)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Covariates (hidden)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, + $p < .10$
CONTRIBUTIONS

We investigate the linguistic manifestation of a customer orientation—and its consequences

- Firms’ beliefs and practices about pronoun use are misguided

We explore the signaling (vs. reflective) properties of pronouns

- “I” pronouns lead to positive perceptions of a speaker via empathy and agency; “you” pronouns have little effect

Our advice for firm agents

- Speak more personally
- Attend to customers’ pronoun use
LIMITATIONS

Does this only work for email?

• We believe it should apply in other written contexts (e.g., Twitter).
• We find the same pronoun use pattern in a spoken (phone) context.

“We” can’t always be “I”

• Policies or actions taken by firm must use “we”
• Our data show this occurs in 14-18% of “we” cases.
FUTURE RESEARCH

Why do agents avoid “I” in the first place?

• Strategic / taught
• Organizational identification
• Commitment to employer, or lack thereof

Moderators of “I” effect

• Processing of implicit versus explicit pronouns
  • Glad to help / I am glad to help you
• The other “we”
  • agent + customer / agent + firm

Agnew et al. 1998; Smidts et al. 2001
I’m happy to take your suggestions or questions!