

## SHIFTS IN LANGUAGE REVEAL &amp; EMPOWER PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

One of the most fundamental, yet often overlooked, components of language is the personal pronoun system. Pronouns reveal and empower different perspectives, providing insight into and even altering how a person is conceptualizing the self. Here we illustrate how the pronouns “I”, “you”, and “we” can enable shifts in perspective that bring a person further from, or closer to, others. We additionally highlight the implications of these pronoun shifts on the addressee(s). We review a growing body of research that focuses on how these words can function as both *windows*—providing insight into the thoughts and emotions of a speaker, and *levers*—that can subtly alter the speaker’s and addressee(s)’ thoughts, emotions, and even behaviors, across a range of domains. We conclude by discussing possibilities for future research.

Key Words: Language, pronouns, emotions, interpersonal connection

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## What “You” and “We” Say About Me:

## How Small Shifts in Language Reveal and Empower Fundamental Shifts in Perspective

Language is one of the most fascinating capacities of humankind. It allows us to express needs, wants, and ideas ranging from mundane to profound. One of the most fundamental—yet often overlooked—components of language is the personal pronoun system. Although personal pronouns are ordinary and everywhere, and so may be taken for granted, these small words serve a remarkable function: they powerfully reveal and empower different perspectives, providing insight into, and even altering, how a person is considering the self.

There is a long tradition of studying the psychological implications of pronouns. Prior work has looked at how pronouns provide insight into people’s personality (e.g., Raskin & Shaw, 1988; Sanford, 1942); mental and physical health (e.g., Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003); interpersonal relationships (e.g., Agnew et al., 1998; Simmons et al., 2005); cultural values (e.g., Kashima & Kashima, 1998); and influence interpersonal processes, such as connection (Fitzsimmons & Kay, 2004). Here we aim to carry forward this tradition by focusing on a particular feature of pronouns: their capacity to enable shifts in perspective. Specifically, we propose that the capacity to shift and signal perspective through pronouns can bring a person further from, or closer to, others—which has implications for the speaker and the addressee(s) in a range of domains. We focus our review on how the pronouns “I”, “you”, and “we” serve this function. Extending prior theorizing, we additionally discuss the generic uses of “you” and “we”, (e.g.,

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“You/We can’t always get what you/we want”), which allow people to frame experiences, including those that are deeply personal, as generalizable (Orvell et al., 2019). We review a growing body of evidence that illustrates how these pronouns’ generic and non-generic uses function as both *windows*—providing insight into the emotions, beliefs, attitudes, and disposition of a speaker, and *levers*—subtly altering the speaker’s and addressee(s)’ thoughts and emotions.

**How Pronouns Reveal and Empower Different Perspectives**

We propose that personal pronouns’ psychological power lies in their ability to nearly instantaneously (i.e., within milliseconds) reflect, signal and evoke different perspectives (Orvell et al., 2019). Pronouns can simultaneously provide insight into how a person is conceptualizing the self; signal a particular stance to the addressee(s); and evoke different perspectives for both the speaker and addressee(s). Relatedly, part of pronouns’ power lies in their capacity to shift meaning depending on the context; linguists refer to this capacity by characterizing pronouns as ‘shifters’ (Jakobson, 1957).

In even the most mundane of conversations, personal pronouns can rapidly shift meaning—for example, the word “I” can refer to Person A and then to Person B, as each speaker uses it in quick succession. Indeed, a basic understanding of the self and others within a social context is required to both understand and use parts of speech that shift meaning depending on context (e.g., pronouns, prepositions). An intriguing possibility is that grasping the shifting nature of pronouns might partly underlie the capacity to understand others’ perspectives (i.e., theory of mind; e.g., Milligan et al., 2007; Smokik & Blahova, 2021 e.g.), while also laying the foundation for the capacity to shift one’s own perspective via language. In some cases, different pronouns can be

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used to reflect the perspective of the same individual. Consider this exchange between Oprah and actor Jennifer Lawrence: Lawrence, reflecting on Oprah's question of how it felt to be nominated for four academy awards, answered, "**You're** immediately hit with fear. Or at least **I** was" (emphases added; Winfrey, 2017). Here, Lawrence first used "you" to reflect on her own experience in a generalizing manner. Then, realizing that she made a generalization, she switched back to "I", saying, "at least **I** was [hit with fear]". This example demonstrates how the personal pronoun system allows people to shift perspectives in relation to the self.

The default perspective from which people tend to reflect on the world is self-immersed, especially in individualist contexts (Na & Choi, 2009; Nigro & Neisser, 1983; Robinson & Swanson, 1993; Uz, 2014). Using the first-person singular pronoun (e.g., "I", in English) is the most straightforward way to adopt and express a self-focused perspective via language. However, a robust body of evidence suggests that too much self-focus—as indexed by increased use of first-person singular pronouns—is associated with poor psychological adjustment, a broad tendency to experience negative affect, and depressive symptoms (e.g., Lyons et al., 2018; Pennebaker & Chung, 2007; Rude et al., 2004; Tackman et al., 2019). People's naturally occurring use of first-person pronouns has provided a window into these relationships: In one study, researchers found that people who used higher rates of self-referential language such as "I" (as well as other linguistic indices) in public Facebook posts were more likely to receive a subsequent diagnosis of depression (Eichstaedt et al., 2018). In another study, Stirman and Pennebaker (2001) found that poets who died by suicide used more first-person singular pronouns in their poems compared to poets who did not die by

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3 suicide. The authors speculated that the elevated usage of first-person singular  
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5 pronouns reflected the extent to which suicidal individuals were focused on the self as  
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7 autonomous, rather than able to see themselves as embedded within a social world  
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10 (Stirman & Pennebaker, 2001).

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12       Something as subtle and ordinary as first-person pronoun use, then, provides a  
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14 window into the extent to which a person is turning inward, reflecting their relative  
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16 separation from those around them. However, people can also shift away from their  
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18 self-focused perspective to a broader one, that is shared with others, through their  
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20 usage of personal pronouns. The clearest example of how this might occur involves  
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22 shifting from the first-person singular pronoun “I” to the first-person *plural* pronoun “we.”  
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24 Whereas “I” reflects only the perspective of the individual who is speaking, “we”  
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26 necessarily connotes a shared experience between the speaker and another  
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28 individual(s). In this way, pronouns can also reveal the extent to which a person sees  
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30 themselves as connected to others.  
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**What “We” Says About the Self**

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37       That “we” broadens an individual’s perspective, signaling that a given  
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39 experience, identity, or even struggle is *shared*, has psychological implications. The  
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41 shared reality provided by the first-person plural pronoun may be particularly important  
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43 when it comes to people’s ability to cope with stressful events. Research indicates that  
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45 people gravitate from “I” to more other-oriented language, including “we,” in the wake of  
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47 collective traumas (e.g., Cohn et al., 2004; Stone & Pennebaker, 2002). People’s  
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49 intuitive capacity to adopt this collective perspective in the face of trauma may be one  
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means of finding psychological comfort, by signaling to themselves that they are not alone in experiencing pain.

“We” use also provides a window into the health of romantic relationships. In one recent meta-analysis of 30 studies that examined “we-talk” among couples, one’s own (and partner’s) increased use of first-person plural pronouns in laboratory settings was positively related to relationship outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, commitment, attachment) relationship behaviors (e.g., finding compromise), and associated with psychological health indices (e.g., lower perceived stress and negative affect; higher positive affect; Karan et al., 2019). The mechanisms underlying these effects are yet to be fully understand—“we” talk could reflect underlying thought processes and/or the tendency to engage in supportive behaviors. It is also possible that the association between “we-talk” and relationship outcomes is cyclical: While “we-talk” may initially reflect the extent to which one partner views an experience or identity as shared (i.e., interdependent; Agnew et al., 1998), “saying is believing” processes (Higgins & Rholes, 1978) may also be at work, such that engaging in “we-talk” might further reinforce feelings of interdependence, strengthening positive relationship outcomes or behaviors that contribute to relationship strength and well-being.

Recent research has attempted to use language as a window to understand when people will engage in collective action. By analyzing thousands of web searches, Adam-Troian and colleagues (2021) found that increased use of first-person plural pronouns at the population level predicted collective action, such as the number of protests in a given place, over time. Although the underlying mechanisms are difficult to isolate, the longitudinal design and time series analyses led the authors to conclude that

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3 first-person plural pronouns revealed the extent to which people saw themselves as  
4 identified with a group. This increased group identification, in turn, was predictive of  
5 more collective action (Adam-Troian et al., 2021).  
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10 These studies illustrate how “we” usage may function as a window into how a  
11 person conceptualizes the self in relation to others, and also as a lever which can shape  
12 their attitudes, relationships, and behavior. While innovative methods have begun to  
13 trace complex relationships between “we” usage and intricate psychological and  
14 behavioral outcomes, more research is needed to fully understand the extent to which  
15 “we-talk” *reveals* a person’s psychological state and working self-concept, versus  
16 *changes* them to instigate emotional and behavioral changes.  
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### 26 **What “You” Says About the Self**

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28 An individual may broaden their immersed perspective not only by use of ‘we’ but  
29 also by use of the second-person singular pronoun, “you”. There are two distinct ways  
30 that a person can use the word “you” to reflect on the self. The first involves taking an  
31 outsider’s perspective by using one’s own name and non-first-person pronouns (e.g.,  
32 you, she, they) to address or refer to the self, for example, “Catalina, **you** can do this.”  
33 We refer to this as “self-talk ‘you’”. The second way involves using “you” to generalize  
34 one’s own experience to anyone and everyone (as in the example, above, of Lawrence  
35 saying, “You’re immediately hit with fear” as she reflected on her own experience). In  
36 this case, “you” is not used to refer to a specific individual, nor to address the self  
37 directly, but rather, to refer to people in general. We refer to this usage as generic-you  
38 (Bolinger, 1979; Kamio, 2001; Kitagawa & Lehrer, 1990; Orvell et al., 2017). Research  
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3 indicates that both of these ways of reflecting on the self have implications for how  
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5 people feel; we review them each, beginning with self-talk 'you'.  
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8 Consider this quote from George Bush, Sr., on the night in 1992 that he lost the  
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10 presidential election to Bill Clinton: "Now to bed, prepared to face tomorrow: Be strong,  
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12 be kind, be generous of spirit, be understanding and let people know how grateful **you**  
13  
14 are" (emphases added; quoted in Duffy, 2018). In this example, Bush Sr. uses "you" to  
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16 address himself directly, as if he is offering himself comfort. Correlational and  
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18 experimental research suggests that this linguistic shift, from the default first-person  
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20 perspective to an outsider's second-person perspective, promotes psychological  
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22 distance, helping people take a step back (Kross et al., 2014). Achieving this  
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24 psychological distance from the self opens up a range of possibilities for changing the  
25  
26 way a person construes an experience. For example, self-talk 'you' has been  
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28 associated with enhanced rational thinking (Kross et al., 2017), cognitive reframing  
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30 (Kross et al., 2014), emotion regulation and self-control (Kross et al., 2014; Nook et al.,  
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32 2017; Orvell et al., 2021; Shahane & Denny, 2019; White et al., 2017), wise reasoning  
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34 (Grossmann et al., 2021; Grossmann & Kross, 2014), and moral decision-making  
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36 (Weidman et al., 2020). At a physiological level, it is associated with improved  
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38 cardiovascular responding under stress (Streamer et al., 2017). This research illustrates  
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40 how a subtle shift in the pronoun that a person uses to reflect on the self can initiate a  
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42 powerful change in perspective, which paves the way for changing the way a person  
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44 thinks and feels about a stressor.  
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51 As introduced at the beginning of this section, people can also use "you" to refer  
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53 to people in general. Generic-you allows people to express ideas—including ones that  
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3 are self-relevant or involve personal experiences—as timeless, broad, and  
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5 generalizable, expanding their scope beyond a specific situation (Kamio, 2001;  
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7 Kitagawa & Lehrer, 1990; Orvell et al., 2017). This shift from a default, immersed  
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9 perspective to a generic one (i.e., using generic-you) occurs spontaneously, as people  
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11 try to make meaning out of their own personal, often distressing, experiences (Orvell et  
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13 al., 2017). For example, in an interview with *GQ* magazine from the summer of 2021,  
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15 the actor Jason Sudeikis reflected on the end of his marriage by saying, “That’s an  
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17 experience that **you** either learn from or make excuses about...**You** take some  
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19 responsibility for it, hold **yourself** accountable for what **you** do, but then also endeavor  
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21 to learn something beyond the obvious from it” (emphases added; quoted in Baron,  
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26 2021).

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28 We’ve found that people use generic-you to reflect on distressing, personal  
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30 events and frame them as representative of common or shared phenomena, rather than  
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32 as experiences that are unique to them (Orvell et al., 2017). We’ve further reasoned that  
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34 using the word “you,” which is so commonly used to refer to *other* people, to reflect on  
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36 the *self* should make the experience feel farther away—that is, it should promote  
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38 psychological distance (Orvell et al., 2017). This enhanced psychological distance  
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40 should, in turn, lessen a negative experience’s emotional sting (i.e., reduce subjective  
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42 emotional reactivity). Indeed, correlational and experimental evidence supports this idea  
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44 (Orvell et al., 2017; also see Nook et al., 2017). Fundamentally, it seems that the  
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46 broader perspective afforded by using generic-you to reflect on self-relevant, negative  
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48 experiences allows people to consider their experience as shared, lessening the feeling  
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50 that an individual is alone in their pain.  
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3 However, research also reveals that features of the situation can, at times,  
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5 motivate people to distance themselves from *positive* experiences. Although savoring  
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7 positive experiences is hedonically gratifying (Jose et al., 2012; Smith & Hollinger-  
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9 Smith, 2015), sometimes it may be helpful to minimize the focus on the self when  
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11 reflecting on positive experiences—namely, in interpersonal contexts. A failure to do so  
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13 may run the risk of increasing perceptions that one is bragging or self-involved. To this  
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15 end, in a pair of studies we found that people minimize their self-focus through subtle  
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17 shifts in language when sharing about positive news publicly (in the context of a social  
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19 media post) as opposed to privately (in the context of a diary; Orvell et al., In  
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21 preparation). Specifically, people cued to share a recent positive experience publicly  
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23 were more likely to use generic-you and also more likely to drop the first-person singular  
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25 pronoun “I” from the subject position (e.g. “So happy” rather than “I’m so happy”). In  
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27 contrast, people who were cued to reflect on the experience privately used significantly  
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29 more first-person singular pronouns. These results illustrate how sharing publicly in a  
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31 context where self-presentation concerns are relevant may lead an individual to  
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33 minimize the focus on the self through language.  
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40 Together, these studies demonstrate people’s capacity to engage in subtle shifts  
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42 in perspective through the pronouns they use to reflect on the self, and the implications  
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44 of doing so. The findings from these studies further provide a window into the underlying  
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46 motivations and contextual features that drive a person to shift perspective via  
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48 language. Evidence on people’s spontaneous use of generic-you (Orvell et al., 2017)  
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50 and self-talk you (Zell et al., 2012) in situations that require emotion regulation or self-  
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52 control suggest that people gravitate towards linguistic shifts that distance them from  
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3 their immersed perspective to facilitate hedonic goals—that is, to feel better (Tamir,  
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5 2009). At the same time, data indicate that people shift away from the self when  
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7 reflecting on *positive* information in the presence of others, suggesting that linguistic  
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9 shifts that provide self-distance can also be used to facilitate instrumental emotion  
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11 goals, such as positive self-presentation and/or the maintenance of interpersonal  
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13 relationships (Tamir, 2009). These findings complement decades of work examining  
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15 how people’s use of pronouns varies based on context (e.g., Campbell & Pennebaker,  
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17 2003; Kacewicz et al., 2014; Pennebaker & Lay, 2002).

**The Effects of “You” and “We” on the Addressee**

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24 So far we have focused on how an individual can shift their perspective by  
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26 means of the pronouns they use, from self-immersed (using “I”), to shared (using “we”  
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28 or generic-you), to that of an outside observer (using “you” to address the self, directly),  
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30 and how these shifts can function as both windows into, and levers affecting, the  
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32 speaker’s motivations, thoughts, and emotions. One question that follows is whether  
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34 these subtle linguistic shifts additionally have interpersonal implications.  
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38 Given that generic-you describes information that is generalizable and applies  
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40 broadly, one possibility is that people may rely on this linguistic mechanism to help  
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42 decipher the extent to which a novel behavior is normative—that is, reflective of what  
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44 people, in general, *should* do. Studies with adults and young children support this idea,  
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46 demonstrating that generic-you can have persuasive force (Orvell et al., 2021; Orvell, et  
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48 al., 2019). In a series of studies, adult participants were told their job was to figure out  
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50 the right way to do things in foreign land (i.e., where norms were unfamiliar). People  
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52 were more likely to judge behaviors associated with common social norms (e.g., how to  
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order food at a restaurant, greet people) as representing the normatively correct way to do things when they were described with generic-you (e.g., “You order your food with your eyes lowered”) vs. “I” (“I order my food with my eyes lowered”). In another study, children between 4.5 - 9 years of age were also sensitive to this linguistic cue, selecting actions described with generic-you, as well as generic-we, as representing the correct way to play a novel game significantly above chance—particularly when the generic pronouns were presented first (Orvell et al, under revision).

Generic-you also promotes resonance. We theorize that this effect stems, in part, from generic you’s capacity to express ideas that are timeless and widely applicable. We reasoned that people may find resonance in ideas expressed with generic-you because the generic construction would signal that the idea has broad value. Further, because “you” is so often used to refer to a specific person, we reasoned that it may additionally pique the addressee’s attention when used generically (Orvell et al., 2020). In a field experiment testing this idea, we used data collected from the Amazon Kindle application and found that passages from novels that readers had spontaneously highlighted while reading in their daily lives were over eight times more likely to contain generic-you compared to control passages that readers had not highlighted. These findings were particular to generic uses of you: Specific instances of you (i.e., that referred to a particular person or persons) were almost three times more likely to appear in *control* passages, that people had not highlighted, as opposed to highlighted passages. Moreover, generic-you appeared in highlighted passages more often than other ways of referring to people in general, including generic uses of “we,” “one,” or “people,” combined.

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3 In follow-up experiments that controlled for the idea being expressed, generic-  
4 you causally enhanced resonance—ideas resonated with people more when they were  
5 expressed with generic-you as opposed to “I” (Orvell et al., 2020). By virtue of using  
6 real-world data, the evidence from the Amazon Kindle study reveals how shifts in  
7 pronouns can help shape how people process information they encounter in daily life.  
8 And together, these studies demonstrate how generic-you can elevate the perceived  
9 significance of an idea.  
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19 It’s not just *generic* uses of pronouns that can function as levers in interpersonal  
20 contexts, however. As established, “we” communicates that a speaker’s perspective  
21 includes others. Experiments that manipulate “we” use have demonstrated that people  
22 are sensitive to whether a dyad is described as a unit, using “we”, versus as individuals  
23 (e.g., “Logan and I”). Namely, people perceive relationships described with “we” as  
24 being closer and more intimate (Fitzsimons & Kay, 2004).  
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33 “We” language not only has psychological implications, but appears to have  
34 associations with *physical* health, as well, corresponding to recovery among those  
35 battling illness. Among individuals with heart failure, for example, increased “we” talk by  
36 the *spouse* (and not the patient) predicted improvements in the patient’s health better  
37 than the patient’s responses to questionnaires (i.e., self-report) and a direct measure of  
38 joint coping (Rohrbaugh et al., 2008). As far as we know, prior work has not identified  
39 whether uses of “we-talk” in these contexts are generic (i.e., referring to a group of  
40 people beyond the speaker and their spouse) or specific (referring just to the dyad). For  
41 example, a partner could say, “We will get through this” (clearly specific) but they could  
42 also say, “Life only gives us what we can handle” (likely generic). In considering the  
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possible underlying psychological mechanisms that may help explain the association between “partner we-talk” and physical health, one theorized mechanism is that “we” signals to the patient that they are not alone. This would be true regardless of whether “we” is generic or non-generic, though future research could systemically test this idea. Either way, these data suggest there may be real healing power in recognizing that you are not suffering alone and highlights the capacity of language to communicate this.

Moving beyond dyads, research has shed light on how cultural success can be shaped by canonical (i.e., non-generic) use of pronouns. In an analysis of songs that have been ranked on Billboard charts, Packard and Berger (2020) found that songs with higher rates of second-person pronouns were more popular. Importantly, the authors tied this effect to when “you” occupies the object position in a sentence (e.g., “I will always love you” rather than “You are so beautiful”). The authors theorized that when “you” is the grammatical object, it implicitly invites the listener to think of a specific “you” (that is, someone) in their own life (Packard & Berger, 2020). Using experimental studies, they find empirical support for this proposed mechanism. This study illustrates how the capacity of “you” to shift meaning is thus a crucial part of why it can function as a lever: people all around the world may love Whitney Houston’s “I will always love you” — but each of them has a different “you” in mind.

Evidence using varied methods and levels of analysis suggests that people are attuned to the perspective revealed by the pronouns that others use—in written, spoken, and even sung communication. Further, there is some evidence to suggest that these pronouns can differentially shape people’s beliefs, judgments, and even physical

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3 health—although more research is needed to understand the underlying mechanisms  
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5 and contextual factors that may influence these effects.  
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**Cultural Variation in How Pronouns Reveal and Empower Perspective**

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10 The literature reviewed so far has focused on how pronouns, including generic  
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12 pronouns, can reveal and alter a person's self-focus, and the implications of this for  
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14 relationships, health, emotions, and cognition among English speakers. An important  
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16 issue is what patterns we might observe in other languages and cultural contexts.  
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19 At a macro level, research has linked the use of personal pronouns to cultural  
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21 values of individualism—which focus on individual agency and autonomy—and cultural  
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23 values of interdependence—which focus on maintaining group harmony (Markus &  
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25 Kitayama, 1991). At a structural level, Kashima and Kashima (1998) observed an  
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27 association between languages that allow for “prodrop—which is the practice of  
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29 dropping a subject pronoun such that it can be inferred through context, even when it is  
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31 not explicitly stated—and lower levels of individualism (Kashima & Kashima, 1998). The  
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33 authors suggest that this association reflects how languages mirror the cultural value of  
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35 de-emphasizing the individual, and considering them within a broader context (Kashima  
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37 & Kashima, 1998).  
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42 Research has also examined the relationship between cultural values and  
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44 pronoun use in published texts. Uz (2014) examined the use of first- person singular  
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46 pronouns in books across nine languages (i.e., American English, British English,  
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48 Chinese, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Russian and Spanish) finding a strong  
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50 relationship between country-level individualism and first-person pronouns ( $r = .62$ ). In  
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52 another large-scale investigation looking at the use of pronouns in American books over  
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## SHIFTS IN LANGUAGE REVEAL &amp; EMPOWER PERSPECTIVE

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3 time, the rate of first- and second-person pronouns increased, whereas first-person  
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5 plural pronouns (e.g., we) decreased. The authors posit that this trend reflected the rise  
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7 of the value of individualism over time in the United States (Twenge et al., 2012).  
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10 Similar findings have emerged when looking at the level of individuals. People  
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12 with more interdependent mindsets favor using “we”, and experimentally activating an  
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14 interdependent mindset also elicits higher “we” usage (Na & Choi, 2009). Similarly, in a  
15  
16 study conducted with German-speakers, focusing people’s attention on “I” pronouns  
17  
18 activated an individualist mindset, while focusing people’s attention on “we” pronouns  
19  
20 activated an interdependent one (Wolgast & Oyserman, 2019; also see Gardner,  
21  
22 Gabriel, & Lee, 1999). These mindsets subsequently affected people’s ability to engage  
23  
24 in perspective-taking, with “we” mindsets promoting this capability (Wolgast &  
25  
26 Oyserman, 2019), again illustrating how pronouns can bring us closer to or farther from  
27  
28 others.  
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33 Research has also explored whether linguistic shifts that have been applied as  
34  
35 levers among English speakers lead to similar psychological outcomes in other  
36  
37 languages. For example, in English, adopting a self-distanced perspective through self-  
38  
39 talk you promotes self-control. In a recent study, Chen & He (2021) found that cueing  
40  
41 Mandarin Chinese speakers to reduce their self-focus by means of prodrop (vs. reflect  
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43 using the first-person singular pronoun) leads to similar outcomes, facilitating people’s  
44  
45 ability to delay gratification. These findings underscore the importance of gaining  
46  
47 psychological distance from the self for self-control (Mischel & Rodriguez, 1993; Fujita  
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49 et al., 2006) and identify how distinct linguistic constructions can facilitate this process.  
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## SHIFTS IN LANGUAGE REVEAL &amp; EMPOWER PERSPECTIVE

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3 Finally, one area of inquiry involves how different languages refer to people in  
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5 general. “You” can be used to refer to people in general in many languages, including  
6  
7 those that are not related to English (Jensen, 2009; Kitagawa & Lehrer,  
8  
9 1990; Siewierska, 2004). This suggests that there may be an underlying conceptual  
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11 reason for why the word “you”—which traditionally refers to a specific individual(s)—  
12  
13 takes on generic meaning. Recent research has begun to examine whether generic-you  
14  
15 is associated with the same psychological functions in languages other than English.  
16  
17 Salvador and colleagues (in press) found that generic you is tightly linked with norms  
18  
19 among Spanish speakers; however, the impersonal “se” was the preferred mechanism  
20  
21 when it came to both expressing norms and informing people’s interpretation of them.  
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26 Together, these findings further underscore the capacity of personal pronouns to  
27  
28 reflect and initiate people’s perspectives in ways that have implications for how they  
29  
30 think and act. Furthermore, these examples highlight the remarkable bidirectional  
31  
32 relationship between language and culture.  
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### 35 Future Directions

36  
37 Researchers examining the psychological implications of personal pronoun use  
38  
39 have already taken advantage of a dizzying array of methodological approaches. With  
40  
41 the development of increasingly sophisticated tools for mining “big data” and machine  
42  
43 learning algorithms, there are exciting possibilities—with both basic and translational  
44  
45 implications—for what we may be able to learn from people’s subtle use of pronouns.  
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49 These insights have implications for physical and mental health, public health,  
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51 education, public policy, and other domains.  
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From a basic and translational science perspective, there is also a critical need for researchers to examine how dynamics such as socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, or gender may interact with the patterns described in this paper. An interesting feature of “we” is that its scope is ambiguous, and necessarily implies that some people are not included (Wales, 1996). Even in cases where “we” is used to make a generalization that applies to people in general, there is necessarily a contrasting group implied. There thus may be important individual differences or contextual features that influence whether “we” pulls in the addressee or pushes them away. One consideration is whether the addressee considers themselves to be in the same in-group as the speaker. This could apply to generic-you, as well. That is, it is possible that using generic-you or -we to address someone who does not feel that they belong (e.g., due to the context or not sharing the speaker’s social identity) could elicit negative feelings or reactance, at the suggestion that whatever idea is being expressed applies to them. For example, imagine how a person who cannot give birth would feel if they were told, “Childbirth is the most powerful human experience you can have” (where ‘you’ refers to people in general).

Another question for future research is whether cultural differences affect people’s sensitivity to generic you or we. To the extent that an individual is embedded in a tight cultural context, where adherence to norms is closely monitored (Gelfand et al., 2011), people may be even more sensitive to generic uses of you or we, that cue the normatively appropriate way to behave. Another possibility is that in interdependent cultural contexts, that stress the interconnectedness between the self and others, certain uses of “we” may be viewed inappropriately, as an effort to impose the speaker’s

## SHIFTS IN LANGUAGE REVEAL &amp; EMPOWER PERSPECTIVE

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sense of self onto the addressee(s). It will be critically important for researchers to understand these nuances through investigations that include speakers of different languages and in different cultures.

**Concluding Comment**

The last several decades have brought a burgeoning interest in understanding what our words can reveal about us (e.g., Berry-Blunt et al., 2021; Boyd & Pennebaker, 2015; Boyd & Schwartz, 2021; Chung & Pennebaker, 2007). Following in a long tradition of research, here we demonstrate how personal pronouns' capacity to reveal, initiate, and empower different perspectives is associated with a range of psychological implications for the speaker and addressee(s). Fundamentally, language connects us to other people. And the ways in which people use language—and personal pronouns in particular—have the capacity to reveal and alter our mental representation of these connections. By shifting perspective, through use of “I”, “we”, self-talk ‘you’, or generic-you or -we, a person can bring themselves further from or closer to others. These shifts not only have implications for the speaker, but for the addressee, as well.

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