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The Power of Pronouns

By BEN ZIMMER

THE SECRET LIFE OF PRONOUNS

What Our Words Say About Us

By James W. Pennebaker

Illustrated. 352 pp.

Bloomsbury Press. \$28.

When [President Obama](#) addressed the nation after the killing of [Osama bin Laden](#) in May, some conservative reactions to his rhetoric were all too predictable. On National Review Online, Victor Davis Hanson highlighted the 15 times that Obama used “I,” “me” or “my” in the 1,400-word speech, and asserted that “these first-person pronouns . . . reflect a now well-known Obama trait of personalizing the

presidency.” A few weeks later, when Obama gave a speech at the C.I.A.’s headquarters in Langley, Va., the Drudge Report offered the headline, “I ME MINE: Obama praises C.I.A. for bin Laden raid — while saying ‘I’ 35 times.”

This “well-known Obama trait” has come up again and again in criticisms from the right — George Will has said that Obama is “inordinately fond of the first-person singular pronoun,” while Charles Krauthammer has written of the president’s “spectacularly promiscuous use of the word ‘I.’ ”

Regrettably, none of these pundits have bothered to look into how Obama might compare with his predecessors. But this kind of comparative word-counting is right up the alley of James W. Pennebaker, a social psychologist at the University of Texas at Austin. Toward the end of his penetrating new book, “The Secret Life of Pronouns: What Our Words Say About Us,” Pennebaker crunches the numbers on presidential press conferences since Truman and finds that “Obama has distinguished himself as the *lowest* I-word user of any of the modern presidents.” If anything, Obama has shown a disdain for the first-person singular during his administration.

“Why,” Pennebaker wonders, “do very smart people think just the opposite?” He chalks it up the selective way we process information: “If we think that

someone is arrogant, our brains will be searching for evidence to confirm our beliefs.” If we’re predisposed to look for clues that Obama is all about “me me me,” then every “me” he utters takes on outsize importance in our impressionistic view of his speechifying.

But even more counterintuitively, Pennebaker argues that Obama isn’t somehow being humble or insecure in his low frequency of first-person pronouns; in fact, his language use reveals him to be quite self-confident. Speakers displaying self-assurance have a lower frequency of I-words, even though most people would assume the opposite. So the knock on Obama may indicate that listeners can properly discern his self-confidence (along with what Pennebaker calls his “emotional distance”) but then attribute this quality to precisely the wrong details of his speaking.

Little wonder that Pennebaker’s “primary rule of word counting” is “Don’t trust your instincts.” Mere mortals, as opposed to infallible computers, are woefully bad at keeping track of the ebb and flow of words, especially the tiny, stealthy ones that most interest Pennebaker. Those are the “style” or “function” words, which, along with pronouns, include articles, prepositions, auxiliary verbs and conjunctions — all of the connective tissue of language. We’re reasonably good at picking up on “content words”: nouns, action verbs, adjectives and adverbs. But “function words are almost impossible to hear,” Pennebaker warns, “and your stereotypes about how they work may well be wrong.” (Quizzes at Pennebaker’s Web site allow readers to demonstrate just how wrong we usually get things.)

The under-the-radar sneakiness of function words actually makes them uniquely suited to Pennebaker’s wide-ranging research goals, which focus on uncovering traces of our social identity and individual psyche in everyday language use. It also helps that these little words make up a vast majority of the most common words in the language, which means that Pennebaker and his colleagues can collect them in large enough numbers to support statistical analysis of a whole variety of texts, from Twitter posts to despairing poetry.

Pennebaker admits that word-counting programs are “remarkably stupid,” unable to recognize irony, sarcasm or even the basic contextual clues that allow us to distinguish which meaning of a word is intended. Yet these

“stupid” programs have led to a series of unexpected findings ever since Pennebaker first saw the need for one 20 years ago. At the time, he and his graduate students were working through thousands of diary entries written by people suffering from depression, analyzing how people deal with traumatic moments. Writing about trauma seemed to help some people, but why? To answer the question, his team created a program to read the diary entries automatically and count words related to different psychological states, like anger, sadness and more positive emotions.

Helped by a grad student sleuth named Sherlock Campbell, Pennebaker looked past the content-related terms to discover that a change in the use of function words, particularly pronouns, was the best indicator of improved mental health. Recovery from trauma seemed to require a kind of “perspective switching” — reflecting on problems from different points of view — that shifts in pronoun use could facilitate.

“The Secret Life of Pronouns” outlines in lively and accessible detail how that initial discovery led Pennebaker to appreciate the many ways in which function words reveal our interior lives. He has found strong correlations according to such factors as gender, age and class. For instance, women, younger people and people from lower social classes more frequently use pronouns and auxiliary verbs — words that supposedly signal both lower status and greater social orientation. Lacking power, he argues, requires a deeper engagement with the thoughts of one’s fellow humans.

At times, Pennebaker’s post-hoc explanations are disappointingly sketchy. Why do men tend to use more articles than women? Because “guys talk about objects and things more than women do . . . the broken carburetor, the wife, and a steak on the grill for dinner.” Though he admits that’s a “shameless generalization,” it carries a whiff of the unscientific “Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus” school of gender stereotyping.

More convincing are cases where Pennebaker and his fellow researchers catch on-the-fly changes in the way people connect with others, from lying to loving. In seeking a bond, people readily accommodate to one another’s manner of speaking through “language style matching,” getting their function words in sync. When an experience is shared, whether it’s building a business relationship, supporting a sports team or commiserating after a

tragedy like 9/11, pronouns can mutate, with “I” dropping out in favor of the inclusive “we.” But “we” doesn’t always indicate solidarity: John Kerry’s advisers made that mistake during the 2004 presidential race, Pennebaker says, by trying to get their candidate to use “we” more often. Kerry was already using “we” too much, and to negative effect. “When politicians use them,” Pennebaker writes, “we-words sound cold, rigid and emotionally distant.”

So would cutting down on we-words have made Kerry more personable to voters? It’s not that simple. “My language therapy would have been to try to change his relationship with the audience and the way he was thinking about himself,” Pennebaker writes. He compares words to a speedometer: “You can’t slow the car by directly affecting the speedometer.” Paying closer attention to function words, he advises, can help us understand the social relations that those words reflect. Unfortunately, we might not be able to pay proper attention until we’re all equipped with automatic word counters. Until that day, we have Pennebaker as an indefatigable guide to the little words that he boldly calls “keys to the soul.”

“I, Me, Mine”: For more on Pennebaker’s analysis of the Beatles’ pronouns, visit nytimes.com/artsbeat.



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