

“WE VS. THEY” AND THE POLARIZING STRATEGY IN BUSH’S WEST POINT SPEECH (JUNE 1, 2002): THE SECURITIZATION OF IRAQI REGIME

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Abstract: This article investigates the manipulation of the pronouns “we” and “they” by President Bush in his West Point speech of June 1, 2002. The US president mobilized these pronominal choices to buttress US claims about Iraqi threat and to legitimize US preventive war against Saddam Hussein's regime whose repercussions culminated in the relinquishment of just war rules. The article focuses on disclosing the ideological implications of these choices through the lens of Norman Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis. It more specifically elucidates how President Bush harnessed these personal pronouns to re-articulate and co-construct the US identity as being the incarnation of absolute good in contradistinction with the identity of the other (Iraqi regime in this context) which was depicted as being synonymous of absolute evil.

Keywords: CDA; G. W. Bush administration; Iraqi regime; war on Iraq; "we" vs. "they".

1. Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001 attacks and the ensuing atmosphere of fear and paranoia, the status of the US president as the unchallenged claim maker and truth teller gained more credence. Groping for some kind of explanation to what befell their country on September 11 and what waylaid it, the American people turned to President George W. Bush for assuaging explanations and securitizing measures. This increasingly important status occupied by President Bush granted him ample room for maneuver to frame and depict the political and the security atmospheres in ways that largely echoed the exclusive perceptions and conceptions of tight circles within his administration such as the Neoconservatives and the Christian Right. To that end, President Bush appealed to a series of linguistic tools and discursive techniques to defend and enhance the validity and the legitimacy of his claims about post-9/11 perils in general and Iraqi threat in particular.

The core objective of this article lies in its purport to contribute in the debate on the rationale underpinning US-led war on Iraq and its legitimacy. The article centers on the scrutiny of the use of the personal pronouns “we” and “they” in President George W. Bush’s West Point speech (June 1, 2002) to unveil the concealed ideological meanings and implications encoded in his pronominal choices and the characterizations and identifications associated with each pronoun. The article seeks to dismantle clauses where agents are the pronouns “we” and “they” by focusing on identifications and characterizations associated

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with each of them to prioritize self over other and to confer an aura of morality and legitimacy upon the perceptions and undertakings of self against the other.

The introduction of tools pertaining to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in the field of politics yielded plenty of new paths and a host of novel ways of construing and interpreting the plethora of material emanating from the field of politics. As far back as mid-20th century, a miscellany of conspicuous shifts in the roles that language can perform and the effects that it can engender occurred. This was largely due to a shift in epistemology which resulted in an important change in the role of language in the theorization and the construal of knowledge (Jaworski & Coupland, 2006, p 3). An important implication of this claim is that language has a constitutive power in that, instead of simply mirroring reality out there, it contributes in constructing reality (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002, p. 8).

The core premise of CDA lies at its claim to probe the concealed ideological meanings that spring from chaining up the description of linguistic features of texts to the synergy of clues contained in texts and Members Resources (MR) and the explanation of the broader social and cultural contexts that constitute and are constituted by the text (Fairclough, 1992, p. 135). This implied, from the perspective of CDA experts and practitioners, that the primordial importance to take a critical stance toward taken-for-granted ways of understanding world phenomena in general and politics in particular.

Drawing on M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), Faircloughian three-dimensional framework of CDA laid out a number of analytical devices and tools to be operationalized in order to unpack and demystify the narrative of politicians and to disclose the ways in which the speaker enacted different metafunctions that language can perform (i.e. experiential, interpersonal and textual). However, for the purposes of this study, analyses will be confined to the scrutiny of the interpersonal metafunction and more specifically the ways in which President Bush deployed the pronoun "we" to enhance and fortify feelings of sympathy, belonging and in-grouping within the US. The use of the pronoun "we" in President Bush's speech was paramount in erecting boundaries between the US and its enemy (i.e. Iraqi regime) that is distanced and out-grouped as the US other. This process constituted a pivotal discursive tool in the Bush administration's global agenda aiming, *inter alia*, at the "mythologization," the "demonization" and the "securitization" of the alleged Iraqi WMD threat and hence to legitimize the upcoming US-led war on Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq (Campbell, 1998).

More importantly, it is the pivotal thrust of this study to unveil how President Bush's appeal to the usage of the pronouns "we" and "they" to re-articulate and re-narrativize the identities, the characterizations and the attributes of the US in contradistinction from its other (i.e. Iraqi regime) in ways that would condone, at least from the perspective of the US political and security elites, political and security paradigmatic shifts involving, *inter alia*, the legalization of US unilateralism, superseding nonproliferation with counter proliferation *à-la-carte*, rationalizing and legitimizing preventive wars, the revamping of just war rules and the *de facto* reshuffling of the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).

2. Historical and Contextual Information

The West Point speech, which President Bush delivered less than a year after the 9/11 attacks and a few months after the US war on Afghanistan, came to signal a clear break from the US Cold War foreign and security policies. The speech spelled out the core tenets of the "Bush Doctrine," a document that marked the official fall into desuetude of deterrence and containment. It, most importantly, underscored the obsolescence of nonproliferation and enshrined the merits of counter proliferation especially to curb threats that were conceptualized as being the incarnation of the intersection of radicalism and technology. Indeed, the perception

that the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks were “undeterrable” and “unpredictable fanatics” largely laid the ground for the embrace of one of the most controversial aspects of the Bush administration’s grand strategy which is the doctrine of preemption that was laid out in the President’s West Point speech and in the National Security Strategy of the United States (NSS) of September 2002 (Fukuyama, 2006, pp.81-82). In fact, the most conspicuous aspect of Bush Doctrine, as it was emphasized in the West Point Speech, was the clear-cut relinquishment of conventions of international law and the legalist paradigm, specifically those pertaining to *Jus ad bellum* (i.e. moral justifications for going to war) (Walzer, 2004, p. 75). More importantly, the George W. Bush administration operated a decisive break from the Cold War and post-Cold War discourse on nonproliferation as it relinquished multilateral treaty-based nuclear arms control as the official foreign policy of the US, in addition to having relegated the nuclear disarmament commitments of the NWS to a back burner in favor of an “arms control *à la carte*” paradigm (Rajkumar, 2005).

3. Methodology

The leveraging of personal pronouns by political speakers stands out as one of the most ubiquitous linguistic tools whereby the speaker encodes and sustains his conceptualization to the identity of the group with which he identifies and the identity from which he seeks to single out and distance his people’s identity. Briefly put, the wielding of pronominal choices stands out as a central tool for the delineation of the speaker’s categorizing vision to subjects and objects of his speech. For Norman Fairclough, pronominal choices, for instance, impact the discursive construction of both social relations and knowledge and meaning systems, because it is by dint of the manipulation pronouns that a speaker encodes different aspects of his communicative intentions (De Fina, 1995, p. 380). According to Michael V. Bhatia and Anna de Fina, when examined out of context, pronouns stand as “empty signs.” However, upon being inserted in any particular context, they assume their whole meaning as speakers often appeal to pronouns such as “we” and “they” to situate themselves and/or the entity with which they identify from others as they may mobilize this pronominal distinction in order to interact with their audience(s) either by bringing to the fore feelings of sympathy, solidarity and belonging or feelings of estrangement and emotional distancing (Bhatia, 2005, pp. 8-9; De Fina, 1995).

The “we vs. they” dichotomy, which hinges on the use of the pronouns “we” to refer to “self” and “they” and to characterize or construct an “other,” stands out as a ubiquitous linguistic tool that speakers in the realm of politics use to prioritize their outlook to issues to the detriment of others. This rhetorical tactic is widely spread and exists since a long time. Speakers in the realm of politics often take recourse to this type of reasoning to reinforce their positions and enlist support for their policies and decisions by attributing and characterizing all that is related to self in a positive way all in stigmatizing, demonizing and even de-politicizing all that is associated with their adversaries. In the case of President Bush’s West Point address, the “us vs. them” binary served as an effective tool for the US president to bolster his rationale in the discursive build-up of the US war on Iraq. The “we vs. they” is encompassing and reflective of the US long-lasting meta-narratives of “good vs. evil,” “barbarism vs. civilization” and “neo-Orientalism” that the West in general and the US in particular often appealed to confer upon its political stance, political righteousness, and moral infallibility (Barnett, 2016, pp. 9, 15).

Similarly, language manipulation is of paramount importance in managing aspects of positive self-identification in contradistinction from negative other-representation, especially by emphasizing positive attributes of the “self” and negative attributes of the “other” on the one hand and de-emphasizing the negative attributes of the “self” and the positive attributes of the “other” on the other hand. In other words, given its decisive

importance in terms of articulating and constituting identities and their respective attributes and behaviors, language can be harnessed by language wielders, mainly chief claim makers and unrivaled truth tellers such as presidents, to portray and delineate characterizations of self and other so as to silence and disqualify the enemy by demonizing his identity and securitizing his behavior and actions. By the same token, these claim makers and truth tellers can draw on their firm command over language and their pervasive influence on public opinion to depict their own identities and those of the communities, cultures and even civilizations with which they identify as being the embodiment and the epitomization of quintessential good.

The article, therefore, utilises Faircloughian three-layer framework of CDA (i.e. description, interpretation and explanation) by sifting through clauses where the agents are the pronouns “we” and “they” in order to demonstrate how President Bush made of use them to refer respectively to self and other (i.e. Iraqi regime). The use of the pronouns “we” and “they” were equally instrumental in establishing and enhancing distinctive and polarizing boundaries between who the self was and what it stood for and who the other was and what it stood for. The strategy of polarization set to motion by dint of pronominal choices was further fueled and energized through the deployment of disparaging and stereotypical depictions and characterizations of the distanced and the disowned entity to which the speaker referred by using the pronoun “they.”

4. Findings

The present study is dedicated to the critical analysis of the interpersonal metafunction in President Bush’s West Point Speech of June 1, 2002. It specifically looks into the ways in which President Bush utilized personal pronouns referring to both self vs. other in representing the identity of the speaker and other participants, conceptualizing relations between "interactants" and expressing the judgments and opinions of the speaker on what is being said (Halliday and Mathiessen, 2014, p. 20; Holtgraves and Yoshihisa, 2008, pp. 73-78)

Even with respect to the ratio of use of pronouns referring to self (i.e. “we”) and “other” (i.e. “they”), there was an easily noticeable preponderance of reference to “self,” which is by and large suggestive of attempts by President Bush to eclipse and drown the “other,” silence its voice as this last was always placed on the receiving end of an unremitting campaign of demonization and vilification. As it is shown in the table below, reference to “self” got the lion’s share with a percentage of 76.66 % against 23.33% for the “other.”

4.1 Description and Interpretation

Table 1.

Number and Percentage of Recurrence of Pronouns in the speech

	Pronouns	Number	Percentage
Self	We	46	76,66%
Other	They	14	23,33%

Source: President Bush’s West Point Academy Speech (June 1, 2002)

President Bush utilized the pronoun “we” to speak on behalf of his party (the Republican Party with all its factions, mainly the Neo-conservatives and the Christian Right), his government, the US Congress and the US army. President Bush’ resort to the use of the pronoun “we” to refer to either or all of the above-mentioned institutions was

meant to impress the US people, court its confidence and enlist its support by emphasizing the unrelenting and the unwavering mobilization and commitment of the US official institutions for the purpose of countering terrorism. The idea of wrapping individual perceptions and decisions pertaining to the President’s idiosyncratic reasoning under the garb of shared and common feelings and decisions leaves almost no doubt in the mind of US public opinion and even international public opinion about the possible fallibility or lack of wisdom in the characterizations and decisions made by the President. The fact of attributing the President’s individual perceptions and decisions to such “embedded membership” (Liddicoat et al., 1999) also serves for mitigating the responsibility of the President and diluting the possible negative implications and repercussions of his undertakings by deflecting attention from him and shedding more light on the entire official institutions of the US.

4.2 Explanation

Table 2.

Excerpts of use of the pronoun “we”

Number	Excerpts
1.	Wherever <u>we</u> carry it, the American flag will stand not only for our power, but for freedom.
2.	<u>We</u> fight, as <u>we</u> always fight, for a just peace— a peace that favors human liberty.
3.	<u>We</u> will defend the peace against threats from terrorists and tyrants
4.	<u>We</u> wish for others only what <u>we</u> wish for ourselves — safety from violence, the rewards of liberty, and the hope for a better life.
5.	<u>We</u> will not leave the safety of America and the peace of the planet at the mercy of a few mad terrorists and tyrants.
6.	<u>We</u> will lift this dark threat from our country and from the world.
7.	<u>We</u> are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name.
8.	And <u>we</u> will lead the world in opposing it [evil].
9.	<u>We</u> can support and reward governments that make the right choices for their own people.
10.	<u>We</u> will work for a just and peaceful world beyond the war on terror.

Source: President Bush’s West Point Academy Speech (June 1, 2002)

By using the inclusive pronoun “we” in reference to the US government, Congress, the US army and US public opinion, and to which he tied positive characterizations and attributes such as the promotion of freedom (excerpt 1), human liberty (excerpt 2), peace (excerpt 3), generosity and magnanimity (excerpt 4), world safety (excerpt 5 and 6) and the combat of evil (excerpt 7, 8 and 9) and terror (excerpt 10), President Bush meant to instill in the minds of public opinion inside and outside the US the unlimited and bottomless goodness and virtuosity of the US. In addition to reinvigorating and bolstering unity and silencing opposition inside and outside the US, these characterizations were also destined to enlist the maximum of support from international community and international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for his diplomatic and military build-up against Saddam Hussein’s regime. The representation of the US and its allies as being unconditionally committed to the defense and the promotion of the above-mentioned ideals was a means to inculcate into the minds of national and international public opinions that the US and its allies were definitely in the camp of good and that those who were not identified as being on the side of the US were necessarily against it and were thus in the camp of evil.

President Bush’s mobilization of the “we vs. they” in tandem with positive self-representation in opposition to negative other-representation, which largely undergirded and fueled the US post-9/11 politics, was perceived as being self-serving and self-defeating arguments (Van Dijk, 1998, p. 25). For Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the idea of isolating “good” people from “evil” ones is simply infeasible and fictitious as the “line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being, which makes President Bush’s recalcitrant categorizing dichotomy more dangerous than erroneous (Solzhenitsyn, 1974, p. 615). Indeed, by classifying people, races, ethnies and states into monolithic entities and according to a logic that runs in a collision course with human nature, President Bush fragilized and jeopardized the same world security that he ceaselessly presumed to defend. The adamant and the indiscriminate bundling of every individual, race, state, nation or civilization that does not subscribe to the US contingent, subjective, exclusive and culture-bound conceptions and perception to world phenomena under the rubric of “evil,” “axis of evil,” “rogue states,” “terrorists” or “barbarians” in addition to having fueled and emblazed the US “folly of empire,” it also granted “othered,” “out-grouped” and distanced peoples and states more solid reasons and arguments to acquire deterrents to protect themselves against the “hubris” of a hyper-power blinded by its absolute over-confidence in its more infallibility and the righteousness of its presumable mission to concretize God’s will on earth (Judis, 2004, p. 186). As such, the Bush administration’s security strategy, as it was enshrined in a miscellany of authoritative documents and political and security blueprints such as the National Security Strategy of the US (NSS) of 2002, the Bush Doctrine, with its “us vs. them” polarization, which was framed through the prism of the US idiosyncratic and self-serving beliefs and perceptions about the congenital goodness of the self and the intrinsic evilness of the other, it made the world an insecure place for life. Capturing the gist of the grave implications of this conception world affairs, Louis Menand decried the reductionist and the parochial hues of the “we vs. they” and “good vs. evil” binaries as he emphasized that the world is too colorful, too diversified and too pluralized that no discourse can confine it to the straitjackets of a binary representation and as this line of reasoning merely negates free thinking (Menand, 2002, p. 98).

In excerpts 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19 the US President mobilized “we-ness” to provide his appraisalment of the US identity and mission in the world by

focalizing on the delineation of what he considered them to be the functions of the US as an exceptional nation endowed with the unique mission of spreading democracy and freedom and safeguarding world peace. This implied its being granted an imprimatur to conceptualize and devise the appropriate means that it saw fit to accomplish this presumably lofty and universal goal. A conspicuous implication of this idiosyncratic process of “functionalization” was that the US arrogated for itself the right to reframe the principles and laws of International Relations (IR) through the exclusive prism of its contingent and subjective conception to world affairs. Concurring with the truth-relativizing reasoning of what is true for you’ need not be ‘true for me,’ Friedrich Nietzsche posited that “what we call truth is no more than today’s ‘convenient fiction’ (Campbell, 2011, p. 4). This process of re-invention of IR was by and large fostered by drawing the maximum of dividend from the atmosphere of trauma and awe triggered by the 9/11 attacks, which prompted, at least momentarily, public opinion inside and outside the US to line unconditionally behind the Bush administration in whatever decision or measure it undertook even in contravention of international law and long-lasting IR mores.

Table 2.

Excerpts of the use of the pronoun “we”

Number	Excerpts
11.	We will preserve the peace by building good relations among the great powers.
12.	In defending the peace, we face a threat with no precedent.
13.	We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best.
14.	We cannot put our faith in the word of tyrants, who solemnly sign non-proliferation treaties, and then systemically break them.
15.	We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge.
16.	In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action. And this nation will act.
17.	The choices we will face are complex.
18.	We must uncover terror cells in 60 or more countries, using every tool of finance, intelligence and law enforcement. Along with our friends and allies.
19.	We must oppose proliferation and confront regimes that sponsor terror, as each case requires.

Source: President Bush’s West Point Academy Speech (June 1, 2002)

For the sake of demarcating the identity of self and singling out its attributes from those of the enemies of the US, President Bush appealed to the pronoun "they" to refer to the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks and to the so-called "rogue states" by associating them with evil and delusion (excerpt 20), unpredictable threat (excerpt 22), totalitarianism and hegemony (excerpts 23 & 24) and tyranny (excerpt 25) and identifying and characterizing them as blackmailers (excerpt 21). As it is demonstrated below in excerpts 20 through 25, President Bush utilized the pronoun "they" as an anaphora to refer back to the enemies of

the US (i.e. "rogue states" like Iraq), to evil doers and to Muslims which were re-lexicalized in other venues within the speech as "evil" and "terrorists" and depicted them with a negatively-loaded lexis suggestive of the untrustworthy and unpredictable nature of the US enemies who were characterized as being bent on "blackmailing" "harming" innocents and imposing a totalitarian regime. President Bush appraisements to the US enemies were centered on identifying them by dint of their functions (i.e. functionalization). That is to say, the US President Bush's mischaracterizations of Iraqi regime and its like-minded states and stateless organization (often indiscriminately bundled together under the banner of "rogue states") were drawn upon as a hallmark for the identification and the ascertainment of Iraqi regime as being evil, an epithet that was enough to rationalize and justify the US hard-line stance against it. According to the Director of the Preventive Diplomacy program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, Joseph Montville, "evil" can never be partner in negotiations. "You can't make a deal with evil," he observed. You can only kill it" (Qtd. in Jarratt, 2006, p. 89).

Table 3.

Excerpts of the use of the pronoun "they"

Number	Excerpts
20.	All of the chaos and suffering they (a few dozen evil and deluded men) caused came at much less than the cost of a single tank.
21.	They (our enemies) want the capability to blackmail us, or to harm us, or to harm our friends — and we will oppose them with all our power.
22.	We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge.
23.	Now, as then, they (our enemies) seek to impose a joyless conformity, to control every life and all of life.
24.	In time, they (Chinese leaders) will find that social and political freedom is the only true source of national greatness.
25.	In poverty, they (Muslims) struggle. In tyranny, they (Muslims) suffer.

Source: President Bush's West Point Academy Speech (June 1, 2002)

The "us vs. them" polarization that President Bush enacted in his West Point speech and through which he managed to re-imagine the identity of the US in contradistinction from that of its enemies was of capital importance in delineating the US war on "rogue states" such as Iraq according to a "Manichean" logic, as being a new phase in an eternal and everlasting antagonism between good and evil (Grant, 2006, pp. 94-95). The inculcation of this way of reasoning in the minds of public opinion inside and outside the US deemed to be, especially from the perspective of the Bush administration's political and security planners, as an important stage in a broader strategy envisaging to naturalize and legalize radical and unprecedented transformations in the conduct of its political and security policies. These last were, in turn, exploited for the purpose of rationalizing and legitimizing the upcoming war on Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. Therefore, President Bush drew on the use of the pronoun "we" to give the impression that the US political elite in all official institutions, from the White House to Capitol Hill

to other political actors such as opposition parties automatically lined behind President Bush to buttress his views and decisions about the threat and the most adequate means to curb it. As such, the “we” from this venue, was used, as N.R. Bramley and D. Silverman, posited to represent different facets of the politicians’ collective ‘selves’ and relationships to different ‘others’. These ‘selves’ include: ‘self’ who has taken on an “institutional identity” and is a representative of an active united political party; ‘self’ as part of a political party in opposition to another party; ‘self’ as affiliated with people; ‘self’ as a person who needs to deflect individual responsibility by leaning on a collective identity; and, ‘self’ who presents issues to the people as collective issues, and not as an individual ‘self’ (Bramley, 2001, p. 126; Silverman, 1987, p. 57).

Sometimes the construction and the promotion of the “us vs. them” binary can be further accentuated by appealing to the techniques of Teun van Dijk’s conceptual square (or ideological square) that rests on the emphasis of what is positive about self and what is negative about the other in parallel with the de-emphasis of what is negative about the self and what positive about the other.

5. Conclusion

Scrutinized through the lens of Fairclough’s three-layer model of CDA, President Bush’s appeal to the polarizing structure of “we vs. they” was instrumental in re-articulating and reinventing the identity of the US and its attributes in contradistinction from those of the US enemies. The study has, therefore, come to establish that by deploying the pronouns “we” to refer to self and tie them up to all that is positive and good all in disowning Iraqi regime as the US other through the use the pronoun “they” which was almost always yoked to all that is negative and evil. This process of dichotomizing positive self-identification from negative other-representation was found to be highly instrumental in laying the ground for the re-calibration of the fundamental documents, laws and conventions that govern and regulate International Relations (IR), mainly in terms of threat assessment and declaration of war. President Bush’s manipulation of the “we vs. they” binary as a device of othering constituted a pivotal tool for underscoring the uniqueness of the post-9/11 security atmosphere. This self vs. other polarization, with which Bush’s rhetoric was imbibed, has also pinpointed the undeterrable nature of the new breed of threats incarnated by the intersection of radicalism and technology as are the cases of Iraq, Iran and North Korea (often bundled together in the US official political lexicon as “rogue states”). Moreover, this categorization of identities ushered in a subtle shift in focus of US security paradigm from nonproliferation to counter proliferation as the central component of US nuclear strategy, together with a blunt disdain to just war norms through the conflation of pre-emptive wars and preventive aggressions. It is worthy of mention in this venue that this “revolution” in the US political and security *modus operandi* continued to shape, or least to tincture, the policies of the subsequent US governments (i.e. the Obama and the Trump administrations), making of the US look more like a rogue state endangering world security and the states that it claimed to be protecting the world from their ostensible evil.

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