After we #VoteLeave we can #TakeControl: political campaigning and imagined collectives on Twitter before the Brexit vote

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After we #VoteLeave we can #TakeControl: political campaigning and imagined collectives on Twitter before the Brexit vote

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Abstract

This study explores the use of personal pronouns in the context of political agitation on Twitter in the run-up to the EU referendum 2016. Using a combination of corpus linguistic and discourse analytical techniques, it shows notable differences in the way in which personal pronouns were employed by Leavers and Remainers. In particular, *we* emerged as a significant factor distinguishing the online rhetoric of the two camps with Leavers using *we* more often and in a much more versatile manner. This study contributes to the growing body of research on ambient affiliations in political communication offering insights into the ways in which personal pronouns are strategically deployed to create imagined collectives for the purpose of political bonding and agitation online.

1 Introduction

Brexit has been one of the major political events in modern British history. In the EU Referendum held on 23 June 2016, the Leave campaign won over the pro-European Remain campaign with a narrow majority of 51.9%. Much of the Leavers' success has been attributed to populist rhetoric fuelled by the fear of immigration, economic losses and strong nationalist sentiments. While this rhetoric undoubtedly played an important role in swaying the public opinion towards Brexit, some commentators argue that it was not just economic inequality or concerns over immigration but a wider range of issues pertaining to values and identities that motivated the Leavers (Kaufmann 2016).

Similar to other political events such as the Arab Spring or Occupy Movement, social media sites, Twitter in particular, have been considered influential and consequential in swaying public opinion during the run-up to the EU referendum (Grčar et al. 2017). Researchers in political and computational sciences see contents of tweets as mirrors of public attitudes and political sentiments, and hail Twitter as a predictor of election results (Grčar et al. 2017; Di Fatta et al. 2016; Tumasjan et al. 2010). Not just the

content of messages sent on Twitter is important; its affordance to reach large and diverse audiences, the portability and replicability of messages (boyd 2011) and the possibility of establishing and strengthening socio-emotional relationships, or what Zappavigna (2014) calls a *communion of feeling*, makes Twitter a particularly useful tool for political agitation, which very much depends on creating affiliations and allegiances (Fetzer and Bull 2008).

Despite the significance of Twitter in political campaigning (Papacharissi 2015; Jungherr 2014), linguistic practices of networked bonding around political issues have to date received less attention (but see Coesemans and De Cock 2017; Sadler 2017). Linguistic devices for identity construction in political communication, specifically devices such as personal pronouns and metaphors used to construct in- and out-groups, have been extensively investigated under the methodological umbrella of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), but most of this research has been concerned with offline texts and practices (Musolff 2015; Baker et al. 2008; Charteris-Black 2004; Wodak et al. 1999). Although the distinction between offline and online is blurred, mobile technologies do come with certain affordances and constraints that shape the ways in which political identities can be constructed and communicated. The broadcastability and accessibility of Twitter allows for communication with large audiences in a short spell of time without any delays caused by editorial boards or other authoritarian bodies. At the same time, the word limit of 140 characters (increased to 280 in 2017) requires users to use this space economically, condensing tweets into key messages

(Coesemans and De Cock 2017). The shortness of messages and their mostly episodic, bullet point-like style (chronicling of events and sharing information) (Humphreys et al. 2013) means that the typical cohesive flow of written texts established through the use of anaphora and cataphora is absent. The resultant contextual absences can instil referential ambiguity, for example, in our understanding of personal pronouns and what or who they stand for. Sometimes this ambiguity could be rhetorically *useful* in that it could appeal to diverse audiences (Fetzer and Bull 2008) and multiple audiences characterise communication on social media sites such as Twitter[1]. Other times, tweeters might offer specific contextualisation cues to make sure that a particular identity is meant and not another.

The focus of this study is on the use of personal pronouns in the context of political agitation on Twitter. Studying the use of personal pronouns in political communication is significant for at least three reasons: Personal pronouns are the paramount linguistic devices of indexicality used to refer to the self and other(s); they act as important tools of signalling and maintaining individual or group membership; and greater use of personal pronouns, especially first and second person pronouns, is considered indicative of an involved style, whereas lesser use of these devices points to a nominal and impersonal style (Biber and Conrad 2009). Because political

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[1] In fact, the presence of multiple and specified audiences makes it impossible to know precisely who receives a message posted on Twitter – something which Marwick and boyd (2010) call context collapse.

campaigns build strongly on involvement to create affiliations and allegiances, the extent to which personal pronouns are deployed could indicate on the one hand the degree of involvement, and on the other hand the strategies of in- and out-grouping. Some personal pronouns that index identities, specifically *we* and *they*, are ambiguous and fuzzy in that they can simultaneously refer to multiple entities or identities hidden in the nouns or noun phrases for which they stand (Kleinke and Bös 2018; Fetzer and Bull 2008). This ambiguity makes them *useful* strategic devices in political communication allowing politicians to divert attention from themselves, to shift responsibilities, or to strengthen allegiances when necessary.

This study, therefore, explores the use of personal pronouns in the context of political agitation on Twitter in the run-up to the EU referendum. It is particularly interested in demonstrating the extent and types of personal pronouns used by Leavers and Remainers on Twitter to gauge the degree of involvement with ambient audiences. Given that some pronouns have a dual function, for example, *we* can include or exclude depending on the context, this study explores in more detail the specific kind of affiliations and memberships that influential tweets produced by the two camps evoke through the use of *we*.

Influential tweets in our study are tweets that were produced by politicians, public figures and political organisations affiliated with or representing either the Leave or Remain campaign and that were retweeted at least 100 times. This study contributes to the growing body of research on

networked identities and imagined collectives (boyd 2011) showing the ways in which personal pronouns are strategically deployed to create imagined collectives for the purpose of political bonding and agitation online.

2 The role of pronouns in political persuasion

Personal pronouns are the paramount linguistic devices used to refer to the self or the other, often in replacement of a noun or noun phrase to which they can be anaphorically or cataphorically traced (Quirk et al. 1985). Although the relationship between pronouns and the noun or noun phrase for which they stand is grammatically straightforward, the actual use of personal pronouns in discourse is not always so clear cut (Fetzer and Bull 2008). With the exception of *I* which is unambiguous, other first and second person pronouns have a wide referential range and flexibility (Pavlidou 2014). For example, the first person plural *we* can refer to just a speaker and listener (*I* and *you*) but also extend to larger groups or identity memberships such as a political party, a government, a country or the whole of humanity (Pavlidou 2014). Quirk et al. (1985) identify eight special uses of *we* including the self-referential *we*, the generic *we*, the inclusive authorial *we*, the editorial *we*, the rhetorical *we*, *we* in reference to the hearer, in reference to a third party, and the rarely used royal *we*. Mühlhäusler and Harré (1990) classify the referential meanings of *we* into two groups: inclusive *we* referring to speaker, hearer and

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possibly some other people, and exclusive *we* including references to a group of people including the speaker but excluding the hearer (the authorial *we*, the editorial *we* and the royal *we*).

The polyvalent character of some personal pronouns makes them *convenient* rhetorical devices in political spheres, which depend on affiliations and are inherently driven by in- and out-grouping (Fetzer 2014). Pronouns can be useful for asserting allegiances and drawing boundaries between groups (*us* vs. *them*). Equally, they can signal inclusiveness and be strategically used to appeal to larger audiences. *We* in particular has been shown to be a strategic tool of constructing, reconstructing and deconstructing collectivity (Fetzer 2014).

A great deal of attention has been dedicated to pronouns in studies investigating discursive representations of marginalised groups, specifically immigrants and ethnic minorities. In the field of CDA, there is now a large body of research documenting diverse linguistic strategies of *othering*, often underpinned by specific uses of pronouns. For example, Wodak et al. (1999) show how in right-wing agitation in Austria, the plural *we* was strategically used to refer to one particular national identity (Austrians), while ethnic minorities were referred to with a vague impersonal *they* without making clear to which group *they* actually belonged. Similar trends have been established in nationalist propaganda found in other national and political contexts including the UK, Germany, Russia, and Poland.

The differentiated use of personal pronouns is not only restricted to right-wing or extremist propaganda; politicians across the board use pronouns manipulatively for political effects. For example, Wilson has shown how pronominal references can be strategically used to divert attention from a political persona, while De Fina (1995) demonstrates how in a self-promotional manner they can help present a speaker as an active agent. In more recent studies, Fetzer and Bull (2008) investigate the use of pronouns in political interviews and show how pronominal shifts (for example, from *you* to *we* and vice versa) can be used as a means of both over- and under-inclusion and as devices of evasion to discursively *wriggle out* of difficult questions. Analysing a panel discussion about Europe's future in the context of the 2008 annual meeting of the World Economic Forum, Cramer (2010) explores pronouns as tools of indexing Europeanness. The study shows how, for example, the inclusive *we* is used to construct European identity and alignment with European values and beliefs.

Given the rhetorical usefulness of pronouns, it is not surprising that they are a salient feature of political communication. Tyrkkö (2016) investigates quantitatively the use of personal pronouns in 875 political speeches delivered since the early 19th century. The diachronic analysis shows a significant rise in the use of personal pronouns over the last two centuries. Specifically, the self-referential plural pronouns *we*, *us*, and *our* increased quite dramatically, whereas references to the self (*I*, *me* and *mine*) experienced a substantial reduction. The author argues that this change

reflects a shift from a person-centred rhetoric to a more group-centred style brought about by wider changes in democratic societies, dislike for political self-promotion, and the development of broadcast and technology. Interestingly, a rise of references to *the other* has been observed at least since the early 20th century, suggesting a stronger tendency for exclusiveness through in- and out-grouping.

The vast majority of studies concerned with the use of pronouns in political contexts examined a variety of offline contexts, whereas increasingly important online communication has received little attention. A recent study by Coesemans and De Cock (2017) presents the first important contribution to our understanding of the use of pronominal references in the context of political microblogging. Studying tweets produced by Belgian and Spanish politicians during the 2014 European elections campaign, the authors identify several communicative practices that politicians adopt and adapt in order to increase their online visibility and influence. First, the authors notice a prominent use of self-references through first person pronouns. Second, through retweets, hashtags, and Twitter handles, politicians also use third person means to refer to themselves. The authors conclude that in the studied contexts politicians have shown a heightened awareness of the affordances and constraints of Twitter and adapted their communicative strategies accordingly. They utilised the platform not just for political messaging but as a tool for personal and professional branding, reflecting a more person-centred style, rather than the group-centred style observed in political

speeches in the study by Tyrkkö (2016). Thus, it seems that communication on social media sites such as Twitter 'encourages' politicians to be more self-centred. Yet, it must be noted that the politicians whose tweets were analysed by Coesemans and De Cock (2017) were individuals competing for seats in the European parliament and thus self-presentation played an important part in this contest. This might not be the same in the context of collective actions such as the Leave and Remain campaigns. Against this background, this paper endeavours to address the following research questions:

1) Which personal pronouns were utilised in influential Leave and Remain tweets and to what extent?

2) Does the use of personal pronouns in influential Leave and Remain tweets pertain to a more person- or group-centred style?

3) What kind of identities and memberships did influential Leave and Remain tweets draw on to mobilise voters?

Whereas the first two questions are answered using a quantitative corpus-based methodology, specifically adopting the framework proposed by Tyrkkö (2016), the third question draws on qualitative discourse-analytical techniques used in previous research on the use of pronouns in political communication (e.g. Fetzer and Bull 2008). The next section outlines in detail the data collection procedures and methods used to conduct this study.

3 Data and methods

The data under investigation comprises two corpora consisting of 1,456 Leave tweets (30,302 words) and 1,458 Remain tweets (35,691 words) respectively, which were retweeted in the run-up to the EU referendum. They were compiled from two sources of tweets. The first set of tweets was collected from the Twitter API platform between 20 February and 22 July 2016. All tweets posted during this period which include one of the keywords *Brexit*, *EU*, *referendum, voteleave*, or *votestay* were collected in real time. In total, 55,551,810 tweets were collected. The data was initially used for a larger project investigating the influence of Twitter on the Brexit vote. As the focus of this study is on identity politics with a wider reach, we filtered the large dataset for only those tweets that we deemed influential for the current study.

There are three main ways in which influence on Twitter can be measured: 1) by the number of followers indicating the size of a user's audience, 2) by the number of mentions of the user indicating her or his ability to engage in conversation with other users, and 3) by the number of retweets indicating the ability of the user to write content of interest that is widely disseminated (Grčar et al. 2017). Since we were not interested in the influence of a particular politician but in the creation of networked political affiliations and identities by the Leave and Remain campaign, we decided to use the number of retweets as a marker of influence. Beyond information diffusion to large audiences, retweeting is also an important *conversational tool* and a

means of participation and engagement with others (boyd et al. 2010). What is retweeted can be assumed to be an ongoing relevant topic of conversation with which audiences engage. Only tweets that were retweeted at least 100 times were marked as *influential*, whereas the rest were removed. Each remaining tweet was then manually classified as either Remain or Leave depending on the known stance of the handle that posted it.

It is not surprising that most of the influential tweets were tweeted by politicians and media institutions such as the BBC or the *Daily Mail*, with the majority coming from politicians' accounts. This is already an interesting result, indicating that views of single people *from the street* are less likely to be widely retweeted on Twitter in the context of political campaigns.

The set of influential tweets retrieved from the big data pool was small and dominated by singular voices (e.g. Boris Johnson, Louise Mensch, Chuka Umunna), which we felt did not reflect the whole campaign. Therefore, we decided to complement the data set by collecting tweets from MPs on Twitter, by utilising a historical archive of all tweets posted by past and present Members of Parliament. This constituted the second data set.

Tweets created between 20 February and 22 July 2016 containing the same keywords as above (*Brexit*, *EU*, *referendum, voteleave*, *votestay*) were downloaded from mpsontwitter.co.uk. Tweets which had been retweeted 100 times were included in the data set. Any duplicates were removed. As above, each tweet was then classified as either Remain or Leave depending on the known stance of the MP during the timeframe. Tweets from four MPs who

had either remained neutral during the campaign or had changed their stance on the referendum within our timeframe (as in the case of Sarah Wollaston, @sarahwollaston) were discarded. Using regular expressions and Notepad++, both sets of tweets were subsequently cleaned by removing URL links and converting unwanted html entities (e.g. *&amp*) to their applicable characters (e.g. *&*). Only the actual tweet texts were analysed including metadata in hashtags (#) and mentions (@) that the tweets contained.

We began our analysis by retrieving all instances of personal pronouns from the two corpora, Leave and Remain. When identifying candidates for the retrieval, we followed the analytical framework proposed by Tyrkkö (2016). Similar to his study, we were interested in personal references as markers of identity and therefore included personal pronouns proper (in both subject and object position) as well as possessive pronouns. Reflexive pronouns were not considered because they tend to be very low frequency items. The final set of pronouns included twenty-one items.

Both corpora were uploaded onto the corpus linguistic software programme Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al. 2004), which was used to retrieve the selected pronouns. Instances in which double meanings were possible were subsequently checked manually to resolve ambiguities. For example, all instances of *us* in which *us* was used as the abbreviation of the United States were removed. Similarly, occurrences of non-personal use of *they* and *them* were also excluded by manually checking the tweets in which the pronouns occurred. To identify general trends in the use of personal pronouns, the

twenty-one pronouns were subsequently grouped into four main semantic categories in accordance with their primary referent – an approach which we adopted from Tyrkkö (2016). These include the following categories: 1) singular self-references (*I*, *my*, *me*, *mine*), audience-references (*you*, *your*, *yours*), 3) plural self-references (*we*, *us*, *our*, *ours*), and 4) other-references (*he*, *his*, *him*, *she*, *her*, *hers*, *they*, *them*, *their*, *theirs*). Raw frequencies (RF) were retrieved for all twenty-one pronouns and combined in the relevant semantic categories. All results were normalised per 1,000 words using the following formula: the number of instances of a personal pronoun in a given corpus divided by the size of that corpus (in words) and multiplied by 1,000. To gauge whether the difference in usage of the pronouns in the two corpora was significant, we used the log-likelihood (LL) test available through the log-likelihood wizard created at the University of Lancaster[2]. The LL relies on the normalisation procedure based on total corpus size and hence it is well suited to deal with large quantities of non-parametric data. It is a good measure for testing the significance of differences between token counts of specific linguistic features across corpora (Dunning 1993). When reporting results, the following standard notation has been used to indicate the level of

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[2] http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/llwizard.html (accessed 12 August 2018).

statistical significance: NS not significant; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001 and **** p<0.0001[3].

As discussed in the previous section, some personal pronouns in English can have a wide referential range and the kind of identities that they refer to can only be discerned from investigating in detail the context in which they are used. For this reason, the general quantitative insights were expanded by a qualitative analysis of the influential tweets. Because the first person plural *we* emerged as a significant distinguishing feature of influential tweets produced by Leavers and Remainers, the qualitative analysis focused on the use of this pronoun.

In order to understand what kind of identities *we* encompassed in the context of the Leave and Remain campaign, all influential tweets with the pronoun were analysed to identify and code the meaning(s) and identities that it evoked. Social actors are described and identified not just through the use of nouns and modifiers but also through the actions that they perform or are subject to (Van Leeuwen 1995), as well as the objects or effects of the actions.

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[3] P stands for p-value, also referred to as calculated probability. Conventionally, a result is considered significant if it reaches p<0.05 (less than 1 in 20 chance of being wrong), which is usually indicated with *. If the p-value is less than 0.01 (p<0.01), this is indicated with two stars ** pointing to very significant results; *** are used for highly significant results, when the p value is less than 0.001 or **** for p<0.0001.

For example, in the sentence *He beat the hell out of Tom* it is the action and the modifier of the action that construct *he* as a violent person who does harm to others. Hence, whole tweets including hashtags and mentions were scrutinised for cues that evoke *we*-identities and their qualities.

The categorisation of the instances of *we* in the two corpora proceeded by applying the categories of meanings of *we* identified by Mühlhäusler and Harré (1990). No instances of exclusive *we* were identified; only inclusive *we* was used in the data albeit many different groups and memberships were evoked, sometimes in one tweet. For example, the following tweet *After we #VoteLeave, the British people can decide how to spend the £350m we send to the EU each week* includes two instances of *we*; the first one is clearly a reference to voters in support of Leave (signalled by the use of the hashtag), whereas the second *we* extends this reference to all British people.

The next section presents first the general trends regarding the use of personal pronouns in the corpora of influential Leave and Remain tweets identified quantitatively. Subsequently, insights obtained from the qualitative analysis of the constructions of *we*-identities are discussed.

4 Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the raw (RF) and normalised frequencies (NF, per 1,000 words) of the 21 personal pronouns retrieved from the Leave and Remain corpora.

Table 1 Raw and normalised frequencies of personal pronouns in influential Leave and Remain tweets

Pronoun	RF Leave	NF Leave	RF Remain	NF Remain	LL	P
I	131	4.3	156	4.4	0.01	NS
me	59	1.9	31	0.9	14.04	***
my	46	1.5	122	3.4	24.35	****
mine	1	0.0	1	0.0	0.01	n/a
you	87	2.9	97	2.7	0.14	NS
your	45	1.5	41	1.1	1.42	NS
yours	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.00	n/a
he	77	2.5	49	1.4	11.70	***
him	14	0.5	4	0.1	7.64	**
his	59	1.9	29	0.8	15.93	****
she	16	0.5	9	0.3	3.30	NS
her	4	0.1	11	0.3	2.35	NS
hers	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.00	n/a

we	325	10.7	288	8.1	12.39	***
us	66	2.2	98	2.7	2.14	NS
our	161	5.3	159	4.5	2.48	NS
ours	1	0.0	2	0.1	0.20	NS
they	79	2.6	68	1.9	3.61	NS
them	23	0.8	39	1.1	1.97	NS
their	40	1.3	44	1.2	0.10	NS
theirs	1	0.0	0	0.0	1.56	n/a
TOTAL	1235	40.8	1248	35	14.6	***

Generally speaking, we find more personal pronouns being used in the influential tweets produced by Leavers with approximately 41 pronouns per 1,000 tokens as opposed to Remainers, who used 35 pronouns in every 1,000 tokens. The difference is significant and could potentially indicate a more involved stance (Biber and Conrad 2009) of Leavers' behaviour on Twitter. When we look at the use of specific pronouns, further conspicuous tendencies can be observed. For example, both campaigns made frequent references to men as indicated by greater use of *he*, *him* and *his* as compared to the female references *she*, *her* and *hers*, which were almost absent. This suggests that regarding the use of pronominal references, male voices and perspectives dominated the influential tweets in the run-up to the EU referendum, highlighting a gendered dimension of the campaign. This is perhaps not surprising given that in the UK politics is still dominated by men with the

female participation being around 30% (one third of all MPs)[4]. The *we* pronoun was used to a significantly different extent by Leavers and Remainers; it occupied 10.7 per 1,000 tokens in influential Leave tweets in comparison to only 8.0 per 1,000 tokens of Remain's. This result suggests that Leavers relied more on creating a sense of inclusiveness since all instances of *we* in the corpora were examples of inclusive *we* (see below). Conversely, Remainers tended to refer more often to themselves through *my*, which stands out as a frequent feature of the influential tweets produced by the Remain camp. This suggests that influential voices supporting the Remain campaign were more self-promotional, since *my* as a possessive refers to entities that belong to the speaker (*my* article, *my* blog). However, when the twenty-one personal pronouns were grouped into semantic categories, the difference in the use of singular self-references was less striking. As indicated in Table 2, when the frequencies of all singular self-references were aggregated, the difference was not significant. What Table 2 supports and Figure 1 visualises, though, is a greater use of plural self-references and other-references in the influential Leave tweets suggesting that the Leave campaign was more often speaking on behalf of or for wider communities (Fetzer 2014).

Table 2 Referential categories of personal pronouns in influential Leave and Remain tweets

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[4] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2017-40192060 (accessed 12 August 2018).

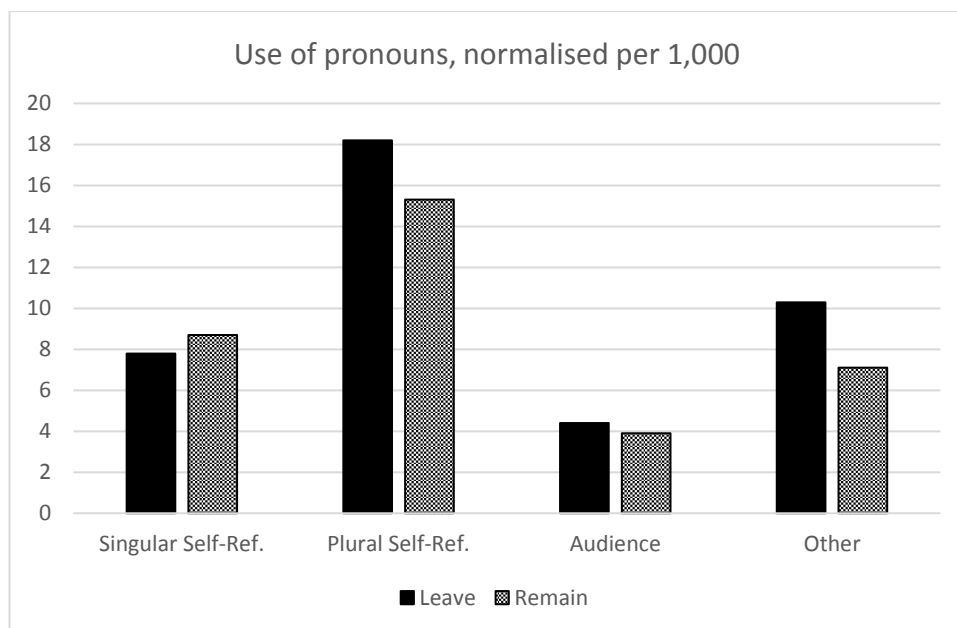| Pronoun	RF Leave	NF Leave	RF Remain	NF Remain	LL	P
Singular Self-Ref.	237	7.8	310	8.7	1.48	NS
Plural Self-Ref.	553	18.2	547	15.3	8.37	**
Audience	132	4.4	138	3.9	0.96	NS
Other	313	10.3	253	7.1	19.98	****

Figure 1 Referential categories of personal pronouns in influential Leave and Remain tweets, normalised per 1,000 words.

In general terms, the findings fit the tendencies regarding the use of personal pronouns in political speeches observed by Tyrkkö (2016); a greater use of plural self-references and other-references and a relatively smaller proportion of audience- and singular self-references confirm the shift in political style from a more person-centred to a stronger group orientation. Since the use of the first person plural *we* emerged as a significant distinguishing feature of the influential tweets produced by Leavers and Remainers, we now turn our attention to the use of the pronoun in context.

Identifying the kind of identities evoked by *we* in the two corpora revealed some striking differences in the ways in which this pronoun was employed by the two camps. The Leavers did not only use the pronoun more frequently, they used it in a much more versatile manner. Rarely the kind of identities that were signalled by *we* involved anaphora or cataphora referring to specific names of groups (e.g. *citizens of this country*); rather, the identities were constructed through the content of the messages including devices such as hashtags or @handles that all worked together to discursively evoke a particular *we*-identity. What is more, the messages together with hashtags and @handles implied certain evaluative and affective characteristics with which the *we*-identities were then imbued.

In the corpus of the influential Leave tweets, seven clear Leavers' identities could be identified. These are: disadvantaged people of Britain, members of the EU, opponents of established political elites, World War Two heroes, advocates of democracy, global citizens and supporters of British

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families, farmers and consumers. These identities entail diverse memberships and can potentially speak to large numbers of audiences, uniting those who might not have shared the same political views before the campaign. We begin by analysing tweets in which *we*-identities are constructed on the basis of a negative self-presentation.

An image of disadvantaged British people dominates the self-presentations. The below tweets (examples 1–5) are indicative examples of this construction in our corpus.

(1) Amount we send to Brussels each week: £350m. Cost to build a new, fully staffed NHS hospital: £350m. It's time to #VoteLeave

(2) The @EU_Commission bills the UK £350m per week - after 40 years. Wonder what level it will reach if we suffer another 40 years? #VoteLeave

(3) We do need more money in our public services... imagine what we could do with an extra £350m a week... #TakeControl #VoteLeave

(4) Another great interview @patel4witham @itvnews! £350m recognition of money we don't control! #VoteLeave #TakeControl

(5) If we #VoteLeave on 23 June we can #TakeControl of the £350m we send to the EU every week.

In these tweets, *we* has a dual indexicality; it signals the identity of Leave voters (*If we #VoteLeave*) but extends it to all British people who are portrayed as being at a disadvantage. The image of the disadvantaged British

is not created through concrete naming strategies but through foregrounding causal links between policies of the EU and their *bad* effects on people living in Britain. In examples (1) to (5), the amount of £350m is highlighted, which, according to the tweeters, Britain contributes to the EU budget per week. This claim was put forward by the right-wing populist UK Independence Party (UKIP) party and was subsequently discredited as totally inaccurate. Nevertheless, the number played an important part in the rhetoric of Leavers and was quickly taken up in public discourse. In our corpus, 37 influential Leave tweets make reference to this amount and present it as a fact. The *we*-identity foregrounded in these tweets is that of people from whom a significant amount of money is being taken away (topos of loss) and as a result they are disadvantaged because they lose out on vital services like the National Health Service (NHS). This makes them weak and lacking control (*we don't control*, *we suffer*). The only possible way to stop this *suffering* and to turn the disadvantage into an advantage is to take back control and exit the EU. This is emphasised by the use of the two hashtags #VoteLeave[5] and #TakeControl, which almost always occur at the end of the tweets acting as a kind of coda.

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[5] Vote Leave was the name of the official campaign in favour of leaving the EU involving members of parliament from the Conservative and Labour Party as well as UKIP. Many members are prominent political figures including Boris Johnson, Michael Gove and Gisela Stuart.

Coda is an important tool of narrativity which creates a bridge between the story world and the present moment and mostly conveys evaluative and moral messages (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012). The tweets can be indeed seen as examples of stories but not the kind of fully-fledged narratives studied by Labov and Waletzky (1967) but as instances of digital narrative activities which Georgakopoulou (2007) calls *small stories*. Similar to other examples of small stories explored in social media, for example, Facebook updates (Page 2012, Georgakopoulou 2014), the tweets analysed in this study demonstrate narrativity through explicit references to time, place and events and a proposal how the events should be understood and acted upon. The latter is mostly evoked in the hashtags at the end acting as codas. In this sense, #VoteLeave and #TakeControl are not only the solutions to the outlined problems but also moral imperatives and commands for action as signalled through the use of the imperative mood. The underlying image of disadvantaged people is changed to those who can have agency and be in control again (*we can #TakeControl*) by voting to leave the EU. The hashtags also act as a narrative glue in the story of Leave which creates a sense of collectivism and ambient bonds between those who are in favour of leaving the EU.

Not surprisingly, another cause of disadvantages is the EU policy of free movement, which in the view of those in support of Leave contributes to uncontrolled immigration, as shown in examples (6) to (10).

(6) @MarkFoxNews Free movement rules while we are in EU means
permanent, uncontrolled immigration from the EU. #VoteLeave

(7) If we stay in the EU, with free movement of millions of immigrants,
our quality of life in Britain will deteriorate.

(8) Cameron continues to use #ProjectFear to cover up the fact that as a
member of EU we cannot control immigration #VoteLeave

(9) The EU's free movement rule, means we pay EU immigrants £860
million in benefits. If we remain, this will rocket, along with
immigration #VoteLeave

(10) German Islamist terrorist has free movement to the UK. We are
NOT safer in EU. Controlling our borders makes us safer

Here *we* refers mostly to Britain as a member of the EU (*we are in EU*, *a member of EU*, *we stay in the EU*), which due to this membership cannot control immigration and hence is again portrayed as being disadvantaged. This is directly emphasised in examples 7, 9 and 10, in which immigration is linked to deterioration of quality of life (*our quality of life*), terrorism and seen as a financial burden (*we pay*). As example 10 shows, the EU is portrayed as not a safe place because it allows free movement of terrorists and hence puts Britain in danger. Such portrayals of immigration are archetypal for right-wing propaganda and have been documented in a variety of contexts (Baker et al. 2008; Wodak et al. 1999). As in the previous examples, most of

the tweets finish with #VoteLeave, implying that leaving the EU is the solution to the specified problems and the moral imperative.

One of the facets of the *we*-identity that emerged in the influential Leave tweets is that of dissatisfaction with established political elites, specifically with politicians who were in favour of Remain such as David Cameron and George Osborne (examples 11–13).

(11) If we vote to leave we will be needing a new Prime Minister and Chancellor so George Osborne will not have a say in any post-Brexit budget

(12) George Osborne's announcement re an 'emergency budget' is simply a threat to punish voters if we #VoteLeave because it would not pass

(13) #Project Fear becomes Project Threat as Cameron and Osborne threaten to lay waste to our economy when we #Brexit

Examples (11) to (13) project the outcome of the referendum in favour of the Leave campaign (*if we #VoteLeave*), at times with a high degree of certainty (*when we #Brexit*). They also project a future without two political figures, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, who both are constructed as posing a threat to the British economy. This argument may have appealed to those who might not essentially be against the EU but wished for a change in the government.

Although the image of the disadvantaged *we* is prominent in the corpus, more often than not the influential Leave tweets project a positive image of British people and the country. The tweets in examples (14) to (16) are indicative of such positive identity constructions:

(14) Amazing point by Andrea, we exclude some of the best nurses in the world from working in the UK because of the EU #VoteLeave

(15) Who do we want to be in control? People we elect or EU bureaucrats?

(16) We are the fifth biggest economy in the world – we will prosper outside the EU #VoteLeave

Here the *we*-identity of Leavers is based on the image of open citizens who strive for democracy and global trade but are constrained by the EU. In order to break free from these constraints, it is necessary to vote leave. The Leavers also self-present as active agents of change (*we can*, *we elect*) and supporters of British families, farmers and consumers (see examples 17–18). A brave new future is projected for these groups after Brexit.

(17) Michael Gove explains how after we #VoteLeave we can help family budgets by cutting VAT on energy bills

(18) After Brexit we can pay our farmers more direct to promote what is best for British agriculture, British consumers; animal welfare

(19) Gove: After we #VoteLeave we can #TakeControl and spend the £350m we send to the EU every week on our priorities

Finally, the influential Leave tweets cite voices of those who fought in the Second World War and, in doing so, link the Leave campaign with the heroic past and fight for freedom (see example 20). Here the *we*-identity of Leavers acquires yet another moral dimension; voting to leave the EU is a moral gratitude for the sacrifices of those who fought in WWII.

> (20) WWII Heroes: 'don't give away what we fought for' urging voters to back Brexit #VoteLeave

Turning to the corpus of influential Remain tweets, we identified among them a smaller range of Remainers' identities including: the British people, Labour party, the opponents of the Conservative party and economists. Most of the instances of *we* refer to Remainers but in the context of leaving since the pronoun occurs mostly in the conditional construction *if we leave* (42 occurrences). This projects the possibility of leaving the EU (see examples 21–24), which is rather striking in the context of the Remain campaign.

> (21) IFS said there would be a £20–40b budget black hole if we leave by 2019/20 – meaning sharp cuts and tax rises #StrongerIn

> (22) Just spoke to UK CEO of a major US bank who says 2,000 jobs in his firm will go to mainland Europe if we leave. The cost of BREXIT is real

> (23) Former   heads   of Tesco/Sainsbury's/M&S/Asda/Waitrose/Morrisons   and   B&Q warn that 'prices will rise' if we leave the EU #Strongerin #EUref

(24) Excellent by @ChrisLeslieMP on the real economic risks facing us

if we leave EU #Remain #StrongerIn

As can be seen in examples (21) to (24), the projection of leaving serves as a warning of dire consequences to which Brexit might lead, especially in financial terms. It is striking that almost all the instances of the construction *if we leave* are followed or preceded by projections of economic risks including job losses, cuts and rising prices, at times emphasised by bringing in the voices of economists, as in example (25).

(25) IFS: Leavers may not like economists, but we are right about dangers

of BREXIT

Similar to #VoteLeave and #TakeControl, #StrongerIn acts as a coda but it is less of an imperative to vote Remain and rather a form of evaluation of the current status. Whereas the influential Leave tweets project the current state as negative, blame the EU for it and then hail the exit from the EU as the key to a bright new future, the influential Remain tweets present the future after Brexit as something to be afraid of, while the benefits of being in the EU are rarely emphasised. Against this background it is perhaps not surprising that the Remain campaign was branded *Project Fear* by the Leavers and this theme features prominently in the corpus of influential Leave tweets in the form of the hashtag #projectfear (206 occurrences).

Another *we*-identity identified in the influential Remain tweets is that of supporters of the Labour party and opponents of the Conservative wing.

As examples (26) to (30) show, this is signalled through the use of the hashtag #LabourInForBritain or the description of Brexit as a Tory Brexit:

(26) To avoid a Tory Brexit we need more Labour voices to save this campaign over the next week and a half #remain

(27) Today we face one of the most important decisions. To protect jobs, growth and the economy we must vote to remain in EU #LabourInForBritain

(28) Yeah, because all these Brexit right wing Tories/kippers really want to improve workers rights if we leave the EU

(29) The Labour Party wants to stay in the EU so we can create a real social Europe #LabourInForBritain

Those who speak in these influential Remain tweets align themselves with the Labour party and self-present as supporters of workers' rights and of people who are in poverty. This is a potentially difficult alignment given that a number of central political figures within the Labour party were in favour of Brexit as were many Labour voters. The traditional divide between left and right did not cleanly apply to the Brexit vote. In contrast, the Leavers did not create allegiances with the Conservative party in their influential tweets and instead targeted political figures on both sides who were in favour of remaining in the EU.

5 Discussion

The quantitative analysis of personal pronouns in the corpora of influential Leave and Remain tweets shows a more group-centred style as indicated by the prominence of plural self references compared to the other types. This suggests that, in this context, creating affiliations and allegiances was generally more important than self-promotion and publicising personal political goals. Examining the differences between the two camps, it appears that a group-centred style was preferred by both camps but emerged as more prominent in the influential Leave tweets. Not only did the Leavers use *we* more, they also did so in a much more versatile manner mobilizing diverse memberships.

The qualitative analysis shows that the influential Leave tweets exploited the wide referential range of *we*. While *we* was used mostly to refer to Leave voters, they were speaking on behalf of and for diverse *memberships of discontent*. Not only the British were evoked within this large group; also people dissatisfied with political elites or the level of public services, people who feel disadvantaged, British families, farmers were all included in the campaign messages. Interestingly, allegiances to the established political parties were avoided and instead political figures who were in favour of Remain singled out and criticised. Although the *we*-identities foregrounded in the Leave tweets were often portrayed as being disadvantaged, which is typical for populist rhetoric (Van Kessel and Castelein 2016; Kazin 1995),

this was possibly a strategic move to give more weight to the Leave vote, since #VoteLeave was often added at the end of the tweet in form of a coda signalling that leaving the EU was the only way to turn the identified disadvantages into advantages. It also projected audiences who vote to leave as agents of change, thus turning them from passive *sufferers* to those who can do good for themselves and their country. Conversely, the influential Remain tweets were less persuasive in that a smaller range of *we*-identities could be identified. When *we* was used as a marker of group identity, rather exclusive membership was mobilised (economists) or groups that were already divided by the Brexit campaign such as the main political parties.

Also, and possibly unintentionally, the influential tweets projected the possibility of leaving the EU through the frequent use of the construction *if we leave* mostly preceded or followed by outlining a negative outcome, for example, *there would be a £20–40b budget black hole if we leave*. Although the use of *if* implies a hypothetical scenario, nevertheless it introduces the possibility of leaving the EU and doomsday-like events that will affect the population at large as indicated by the inclusive *we* as in *if we leave*. Thus, not leaving the EU is legitimised through the strategy of scaremongering. On the contrary, the Leavers often presented Brexit as a done deal (*after we #VoteLeave*, *when we #Brexit*), which was mostly preceded or followed by positive outcomes as in *after we #VoteLeave we can help family budgets*. Thus, leaving the EU was premised and legitimised through an optimistic outlook suggested not as a hypothetical scenario but as a real prospect.

Essentially what such constructions do is to create a sense of hope for the discontented people, who were included in the influential tweets. They conjure a kind of feel good experience. The plea to *#VoteLeave* is not just a mobilisation to take political action and vote to leave the EU, it is a vote for a supposedly better future. Giving prominence to hope and a better future is a rhetorical theme that has been employed by many successful politicians, including the former president of the USA Barak Obama (e.g. Clayton 2007). Thus, the rhetoric of hope is not essentially a trait of a conservative or liberal stance. It is a powerful theme that is employed across the political spectrum to mobilise and persuade voters. Its persuasive power lies in the potential to generate enthusiasm, which, as shown in experimental studies on political campaigning, can increase interest and bolster voters (Brader 2006). Hope was conspicuously absent from the influential tweets produced by the Remainers which seemed to be dominated by fearful scenarios. Fear too is a powerful emotion that has been shown to persuade voters in that it can increase their responsiveness. Yet, it can also create some dissonance (Brader 2006).

While it would be too simplistic to assume a causal link between the use of personal pronouns in influential tweets and the political success of the Brexit campaign, the way in which the Leave campaign used personal references on Twitter, specifically *we*, points to a more involved and persuasive style. Strengthened by the rhetoric of hope, this persuasive style could have appealed to, engaged, and connected publics that were not on the

same political wave before the EU referendum, for example both Conservative and Labour voters.

Although this study points to salient uses of personal pronouns as rhetorical devices to mobilise political support, it is based on a small set of tweets collected just before the referendum, and generalisations beyond this sample cannot be made. Also, this study analysed in depth the use of just one pronoun, and, although *we* appears to be a significant distinguishing factor in the rhetoric of the two camps, examining other personal pronouns as well as other linguistic devices such as metaphors could offer further valuable insights into the ways in which collective identities are imagined on Twitter and how these imagined collectives are exploited for the purpose of political agitation online.

6 Outlook

The analysis of the two corpora of influential Leave and Remain tweets has shown that, similar to political communication offline (e.g. Tyrkkö 2016), political campaigning on Twitter adopts a group-centred style to mobilise voters and build support. Messages that were retweeted at least 100 times prior to the EU Referendum demonstrated more involvement as reflected in greater use of inclusive pronouns and fewer self-promotional ones. The politicians and organisations from whose accounts the tweets were originally

sent demonstrated a great deal of awareness concerning the affordances and constraints of Twitter. Specifically, the constraint of 140 characters was strategically exploited by crafting simple messages centred on one key pointusing devices such as hashtags to reinforce a point, offer an evaluation or include an imperative to take action, and create affiliations around the two main campaigns, #VoteLeave and #StrongerIn.

In his analysis of the use of Twitter as a narrative tool for political campaigning, Sadler (2017) makes the point that Twitter does not require the development of wholly new literacies. At the same time, he argues that the site demands higher interpretative skills; readers are presented with short factual messages *en masse* that they need to mentally order, classify, link to events, question, etc. The question arises: to what extent do audiences actually engage with high level interpretation? After all, the messages are short, with the use of personal pronouns, specifically *we*, reinforcing the understanding that the messages are facts that affect us all (*we send*, *we pay*, *we don't control*). In doing so, *we* gives the messages personal appeal and legitimacy, which many might not see as in need of questioning. In this sense, the constraint of Twitter's word limit seems a *useful* affordance for political persuasion, especially the kind used in a populist style (Moffitt 2016). In his seminal analysis of populist persuasion in the history of the USA, Kazin (1996) shows that the language of populists, whether on the right or left of the political spectrum, is mostly based on simple, hortatory and repetitive messages with few complex elaborations. Twitter's affordance to reach wider

audiences, most notably common people, and the word limit that does not leave much space for complex explanations or elaborations indeed makes Twitter a *good* medium for populist performances (Moffitt 2016).

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