I AS A POWERFUL MEANS OF SELF-REPRESENTATION AND POLITICAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN TRUMP'S DISCOURSE DURING 2016 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

Bledar TOSKA, Vilma BELLO

Department of Foreign Languages, 'Ismail Qemali' University, Vlora, Albania

Abstract: *The primary aim of this paper is to look into the use of the metadiscoursal device I and its communicative effects on the audience in Trump's 2016 presidential debates with Clinton. As a means of self-representation, political identity construction and rhetorical interaction, this first-person pronoun is intentionally employed to explicitly mark Trump's presence in construing his discourse. The intention of the authors is to focus particularly on descriptive and qualitative analyses of I employed in combination with frequent verbs, such as believe, think, mean, want, disagree, pay, know etc. highlighting aspects of Trump's communicative strategy to invite the audience to align with his stances, policies, authoritative voice and, above all, political persona.*

Keywords*: I; self-representation; communication; interaction; political identity/persona*

1. INTRODUCTION

Politicians and their political activities frequently rely on language usage for communicative and persuasive reasons. So, language is seen as central to their verbal exchange activities when interacting with people for achieving their political aims. This becomes even more prominent in presidential election campaigns, in which they "are expected to verbalize their ideological positions" (Jalilifar and Alavi-Nia, 2012:136) and manifest their rhetorical abilities. As I have already highlighted, interactions, dialogical processes and rhetorical abilities are important metadiscoursal components which dictate the choice of particular devices or structures in politician's discourse (Toska, 2015:56).

The aim of this article is to investigate usages of the metadiscoursal device *I* and its effects on the communicative acts in Donald Trump's discourse during the three 2016 presidential debates with Hillary Clinton. I intend to analyse some relevant examples which mark his presence in an attempt to construe his discourse and metadiscoursively interact with his audience. *I* has been chosen for our analysis because it is frequently encountered in political discourse having a range of uses, but also because it explicitly conveys stances, policies, authoritative voice as well as political persona.

The main motivation for conducting such research was to explore they ways Trump uses *I* in his discourse, and since it is always employed with verbs in different tenses, to see the kind of verbal processes in which it is involved and what it communicates with them. This preliminary study would also help me pursue further research in the future concerning this self-mention pronoun from a contrastive perspective.

This work is divided into main parts. The first part includes the introductory part, the theoretical framework and the methodological approach embraced and the second part includes the analysis section and some discussion about the examples extracted for it. Short final remarks and bibliography end the paper.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework embraced in this work is Hyland's metadiscoursal one, mainly elaborated in the recent decades. He observes that metadiscourse is often defined as 'discourse about discourse' / 'talk about talk', clearly referring to aspects of the text itself and its internal organization (Hyland, 2005:16-18). However, his more promising and encompassing model considers it to be an interactional process "between text producers and their texts and between text producers and users" (Hyland, 2010:125). The

interactional component is extremely important, since it involves speaker-listener/writer-reader negotiations and effects on language use. This involves not only rhetorical interaction and interpretation but also political identity construction as well as usages of particular devices such as the ones considered in this work, that is I + verb constructions in the realm of communication. On top of that, Hyland's metadiscoursal perspective takes full account of the "direct *interaction* between the presidential candidate(s) and the electorate in a constantly ongoing and engaging dialogical process" (Toska, 2015:207), which is also one of the main focuses of this work, considering the control and influence that language use and linguistic choices have on political behavior.

3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Trump's transcripts of the three presidential debates have taken from Politico website (https://www.politico.com) and the entire Trump's corpus amounts to more than 21,000 words. I could find 645 usages of the self-mention *I* and the contracted forms *I've*, *I'd*, *I'll* and *I'm* (282 in the first debate, 194 in the second and 169 in the third).

Although I have been mainly focused on qualitative analysis, the use of the versatile commercial software WordSmith Tools 6.0 proved to be very useful in compiling the corpus, counting and locating the I + verb constructions in it, but also in extracting the examples including in this paper in the proper discoursal context. The illustrations have been taken from the three presidential debates in order to have proper representativeness of them. Also, these examples represent some of the most common themes discussed by Trump.

4. *I*, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this second part of the paper I intend to analyse particular instances of *I* employed in combination with some frequent verbs in various contexts during the presidential debates and discuss issues related to Trump's political identity construction. As highlighted, there are 645 occurrences of *I* in the corpus, which are relatively evenly distributed in it. I have chosen 27 examples which I have categorized into eight sets according to the thematic features that they convey. I have also attempted to keep the examples as short as possible, but at the same time including enough

contexts in them so as the conveyed messages come across easily and clearly to the readership.

The combination of *I* with the hedge *think* is by far the most frequent I + verb constructions in the corpus. As Fraser observes, the hedging process is one of the most effective rhetorical strategies in discourse (2010:201), by means of which language users "recognize alternative voices and viewpoints and so withhold complete commitment to a proposition" (Hyland, 2005:52). Example (1) illustrates this point. Trump's intention is to signal a lack of full commitment to the fact that he and his opponent agree on child care issues.

(1) As far as child care is concerned and so many other things, **I think** Hillary and I agree on that. (1st debate)

Given the relatively high frequency of this construction in political discourse, it is not surprising to encounter uses of it one after the other in sentences or very short texts. *I think* in the next example foregrounds Trump's "plausible reasoning" and the intensity of "the degree of confidence" (Hyland, 2005: 52) he is prudent to attribute to the message.

(2) **I think** what the FBI did and what the Department of Justice did, including meeting with her husband, the Attorney General, in the back of an airplane on the tarmac in Arizona, **I think** it's disgraceful. **I think** it's a disgrace. (3rd debate)

I believe is also to be found in the corpus. It is employed in certain particular contexts with similar functions and metafunctions as *I think*, but it does convey the creation of an *ethos* based on Trump's beliefs, and more concretely on world perception. In example (3) Trump explicitly projects his stance and authoritative voice.

(3) We have enough problems in this country. **I believe** in building safe zone, **I believe** in having other people pay for them, as an example the [Arabian] Gulf states who are not carrying their weight but they have nothing but money and take care of people. (2nd debate)

In Trump's discourse during the three presidential debates I also encountered a significant number of *I mean* usages. As an elaboration construction it is employed to provide additional propositional meanings or further content explanations, which are instantiated in the three following passages.

(4) Jobs are essentially nonexistent. **I mean**, I've been saying in big speeches where I have 20 and 30,000 people. (2nd debate)

(5) The companies are leaving. **I could name**, **I mean**, there are thousands of them. (1st debate)

(6) We need strong borders. In the audience we have four mothers of - **I mean**, these are unbelievable people that I've gotten to know over a period of years whose children have been killed, brutally killed, by people that came into the country illegally. (3rd debate)

On top of that, the intentional usage of *I mean* aims at marking Trump's own presence in discourse and at ensuring the audience's recovery of the intended and conveyed meanings. The overall contexts may be different, as for example in (4) in which *I mean* "supports" the previous statement, in (5), in which it is used along with *I could name* highlighting ability to provide more details, or in (5), in which it elaborates on Trump's attitude to particular issues.

It is also quite interesting the fact that Trump makes extensive use of the future *will* with I + verb constructions. There is a well balanced dispersion of them in all the three presidential debates. I noticed during my qualitative analysis that this structure mainly comprises dynamic verbs, as illustrated in example (7) with *bring back*.

(7) **I will bring** -- excuse me. **I will bring back** jobs. You can't bring back jobs. (1st debate)

Careful analysis also reveals that these constructions are employed in a number of different ways, and sometimes very close to the function of boosters, the main function of which in discourse is to "attribute an increased force or authority to statements" (Bondi 2008, 32). The following two extracts also demonstrate this claim.

(8) **I will knock** the hell out of ISIS. We are going to defeat ISIS. ISIS happened a number of years ago in a vacuum that was left because of bad judgment. And **I will tell you**, **I will take care of** ISIS. We need to get on to much more important and bigger things. (2nd debate)

(9) They have no education. They have no jobs. **I will do** more for African-Americans and Latinos that she can do for ten lifetimes. (3rd debate)

Thus, we can see that Trump employs these structures not only to convey promises (*I will knock*, *I will take care of* and *I will do*), but also to guarantee the fulfillment of the actions in question.

In such cases, his presence and policies are foregrounded projecting him as authoritative to the audience.

Similarly, the *I* usages combined with the progressive aspect are significant in his discourse. They are all related to future actions conveying firm planning or intentionality, as in examples (10) and (11). The undertakings that the verbs *reduce* and *cut* convey communicate strategies to invite the audience to align with Trump's stances for his future actions.

(10) Under my plan, **I'll be reducing** taxes tremendously, from 35 percent to 15 percent for companies, small and big businesses. (1st debate)

(11) **I'm going to cut** regulations. **I'm going to cut** taxes big league, and you're going to raise taxes big league, end of story. (1st debate)

Also, continuity of Trump's actions, as in passage (12) below with the verb *watch*, denotes his authority and competence in handling situations which involve care and dedication. *I am going to appoint* in example (13) denotes a mixture of future intentionality and aspiration, through which he represents himself as a future mature and efficient political persona, whom the electorate can trust and support. The appeal for the *ethos* element is in the foreground despite the divergences of opinions that the audience may have.

(12) She didn't even know what that letter meant. You know, it's amazing. **I'm watching** Hillary go over facts and she is going after fact after fact and she's lying again because she said she, you know, what she did with e-mails was fine. You think it was fine to delete 33,000 e-mails? (2nd debate)

(13) The justices that **I am going to appoint** will be pro-life. They will have a conservative bent. (3rd debate)

Business and issues related to that is one of the most frequent topos that Trump touches upon in his discourse. I noticed that within this context there are a number of very interesting usages of *I*s combined with dynamic verbs such as *build*, *pay*, *start* or *run*, as instantiated in passages (14), (15) and (16) below.

(14) Well, for one thing -- and before we start on that -- my father gave me a very small loan in 1975, and **I built it into** a company that's worth many, many billions of dollars, with some of the greatest assets in the world, and I say that only

because that's the kind of thinking that our country needs. (1st debate)

(15) But I will tell, you that, number one, **I pay** tremendous numbers of taxes. (2nd debate)

(16) Well I think I did a much better job. **I built** a massive company, a great company, some of the greatest assets anywhere in the world worth many, many billions of dollars. **I started** with a $1 million loan. I agree with that. It's a $1 million loan, but **I built** a phenomenal company. And if we could run our country the way **I've run** my company, we would have a country that would you would be so proud of, you would even be proud of it. (3rd debate)

If we pay attention to the overall logical structure of these passages, we can see that the business topos is forwarded as a strong argument, in which the explicit Trump's projection is foregrounded intentionally to invite the electorate to align with his business and political persona as well as with his future policies. The presence of *I* also reflects Trump's efficient background as a businessman capable of acting proficiently in business terms.

It is also worth mentioning that "political behavior and linguistic behavior are in constant interaction and as a result politician's discourse indicates who they are, what they want to achieve or other metalinguistic aspects" (Toska, 2015:62). As I observed above, the boosting process appears to be relevant in their discourse as it creates a sustainable and efficient *ethos* by means of the self-mention *I* and typical verbs combined with it in similar contexts.

In the following three illustrations *I know* downplays the presence of the audience (Hyland, 2005:52-53) and limits the possibility of disagreement (Bondi, 2008:33).

(17) Look, I've been under audit almost for 15 years. **I know** a lot of wealthy people that have never been audited. I said, do you get audited? I get audited almost every year. (1st debate)

(18) Maybe there is no hacking, but there is - now Russia - and the reason they blame Russia is they think they're trying to tarnish me with Russia. **I know** nothing about Russia - **I know** about Russia, but **I know nothing** about the inner workings of Russia. I don't deal there, I have no businesses there, I have no loans from Russia. I have a very very great balance sheet. (2nd debate)

(19) **I know** Buffett took hundreds of millions of dollars. Soros, George Soros took hundreds of millions of dollars. (3rd debate)

Thus, Trump self-promotes his positive and knowledgeable image increasing his political identity in front of his political opponent and the overall audience. Such metadiscoursal strategies attribute more argumentative qualities to his speech and linguistic behavior.

Other important I + verb construction include those that denote explicit alignment, as illustrated in examples (20) and (21). Analysis of such instances shows Trump's attempts to communicate to the audience his stances on particular matters.

(20) I'm sure you've probably have heard that. It was a disaster. The fact is almost everything she has done has been a mistake and it's been a disaster. But if you look at Russia, just take a look at Russia and look at what they did this week, and **I agree** she wasn't there, but possibly she's consulted. (2nd debate)

(21) Now John Podesta said you have terrible instincts. Bernie Sanders said you have bad judgment. **I agree** with both. (3rd debate)

Similarly, the non-alignment counterparts are significantly used, especially by means of the *I disagree* construction. Again these structures indicate Trump's attitude to issues in question and foreground his authoritative voice as opposed to alternative positions that his opponent or the audience might have. Examples (22) and (23) typically illustrate my points here.

(22) **I disagree**. Right now, Syria is fighting ISIS. We have people that want to fight both at the same time. But Syria is no longer Syria. Syria is Russia and it's Iran who she made strong and Kerry and Obama made into a powerful nation and a rich nation, very quickly, very, very quickly. (2nd debate)

(23) Because **I disagreed** with Ronald Reagan very strongly on trade. I disagreed with him. We should have been much tougher on trade even then. I've been waiting for years. Nobody does it right. And frankly now we're going to do it right. (3rd debate)

The last set of examples included in this paper concern instances related to psychological states and similar processes in Trump's interactional processes as his texts unfold. The self-mention pronoun *I* in combination with *want*, *am proud*, *understand* or *would love* express dialogical

aspects of his metadisourse in the three debates (the four following examples illustrate this).

(24) **I want** you to be very happy. It's very important to me. (1st debate)

(25) And by the way, my tax cut is the biggest since Ronald Reagan. **I'm very proud of** it. (1st debate)

(26) They never endorsed a presidential candidate. The border patrol agents, 16,500 just recently endorsed me. And they endorsed me because **I understand** the border. She doesn't. (2nd debate)

(27) The other things are false, but honestly **I'd love** to talk about getting rid of ISIS and **I'd love** to talk about other things. (3rd debate)

The ideas of wanting, desiring or wishing, as psychological states, contribute to the proper Trump's identity construction and self-representation image in an attempt to open up an efficient path of dialogue with the overall electorate.

The eight set of examples considered in this section of the paper provide some background for further discussions in the realm of the metadiscoursal device *I* in combination with common verbs in order to explore additional topics related to Trump's political identity construction. Hopefully, some aspects of his interactional process with the electorate covered here would be milestones for future considerations and scientific analysis.

5. *I*, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This descriptive study attempted to highlight a number of issues related to the usage of the self-mention *I* along with some common verbs indicating and conveying particular topoi in the realm of metadiscourse during Trump's three presidential debates with Clinton. The theoretical approach embraced here showed that it was substantially supportive to analyze the examples provided. I believe that the arguments forwarded are indicative of my claims that the usages of *I* along with common verbs dictate Trump's presence and political persona in the given context.

Although I do not claim definite conclusions, I do claim tentative remarks which would help me and other scholars conduct more significant research in *I* and Donald Trump.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Bondi, M. (2008). Emphatics in academic discourse: Integrating corpus and discourse tools in the study of cross-disciplinary variation. In Annelie Ädel, and Randi Reppen (eds), *Corpora and Discourse: The challenges of different settings*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. 31-56
2. Fraser, B. (2010). Hedging in political discourse: The Bush 2007 press conferences. In Urszula Okulska, and Piotr Cap (eds), *Perspectives in Politics and Discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. 201-214.
3. Hyland, K. (2005). *Metadiscourse*. London: Continuum.
4. Hyland, K. (2010). Metadiscourse: Mapping Interactions in Academic Writing, *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 9, no. 2.
5. Jalilifar, Alireza and Maryam Alavi-Nia. (2012). *We are surprised; wasn't Iran disgraced there?* A functional analysis of hedges and boosters in televised Iranian and American presidential debates. *Discourse & Communication* 6 (2). 135-161.
6. Toska, B. (2015a). …*every time you've offered an opinion, you've been wrong*: Obama dialogically interacting in the last 2012 presidential debate. In R. Săftoiu, M. I. Neagu, and S. Măda (eds). *Persuasive Games in Political and Professional Dialogue*. Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. 55-84.
7. Toska, B. (2015b). A New Vision for the Future: Obama and Romney Metadiscoursing in the Presidential Debates. In A.N. Batrićević and M. Krivokapić (eds), *Mapping the World of Anglo-American Studies at the Turn of the Century*. Newcastle upon Tune: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 205-221
8. Politico Website (https://www.politico.com), accessed 31March 2018).