

# Use of pronouns in political discourse: a study of the 2016 US presidential election debate and the 2019/2020 Croatian presidential election debate

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**Use of pronouns in political discourse: a study of the 2016 US presidential election  
debate and the 2019/2020 Croatian presidential election debate**

MASTER'S THESIS

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## **Introduction**

Not many people living in the Western world today would disagree with the impression that the society we live in now is becoming increasingly divided and politicized. The invention and rapid development of the Internet, as well as the increasing importance of the role it plays in our everyday existence, has led to previously unimaginable progress in many areas, such as medicine, IT, education, business, communication, etc. However, while there are many areas of our lives that have seen great improvements with the coming of the Internet era, it is difficult to disregard the harm it caused in others, such as social relationships, personal privacy, and security. The positive and negative effects of the World Wide Web on our increasingly complex lives are still a very popular and hotly debated topic in both scientific circles and water cooler conversations, and one of the biggest points of contention is its effects on the way we receive information. Many argue that the unprecedented availability of information and the massive outreach that it provides its users make the Internet a strong ally in the democratization of society, the fight for free speech, and the unfiltered exchange of knowledge. Even so, those leaning more towards the skeptical side would argue that the news is still heavily controlled and edited, alternative news outlets often lead to echo chambers and give way to political radicalization, social media and comment sections promote nothing but bickering and mental health issues, and the never-ending stream of information brought about a more paranoid, divided, and politicized society. To the sceptics' credit, it truly does appear that it is no longer possible to look up a recipe or say hello to a family member on Facebook without being bombarded with a barrage of news events, think pieces, arguments, campaign videos, and propaganda - not only by professional politicians, but also by journalists, musicians, reality TV stars, and even your friends and co-workers on social media. In a society overflowing with information, it is more necessary than ever to be capable to identify, decipher, and properly interpret the messages aimed at us to successfully find our footing in the modern world. Studying the disciplines of critical discourse analysis and political discourse analysis allow us to reach underlying meanings, identify hidden agendas, and properly interpret the world around us through in-depth readings of texts and spoken language. For example, an examination of pronoun use in a political speech can uncover which groups a politician wishes to associate themselves with, distance

themselves from or correlate to their political adversaries, whether they wish to make themselves appear emotionally involved in an issue or completely separated from it, whether they wish to speak from a position of power and authority or victimhood and subservience, etc. Understanding strategic pronoun use means understanding power dynamics, group identity, and personal biases, which makes it an important tool for disentangling the intricacies of the modern political landscape.

## **Critical discourse analysis and political discourse analysis**

Critical discourse analysis, as defined by Fairclough (1995), is a multidisciplinary approach to the study of discourse which focuses on the role of power and ideology in language, as well as the methods in which power and power structures are maintained, enacted and promoted through language (1995). It incorporates linguistic and rhetorical analysis, social theory and many other techniques and sciences to socially and politically interpret language. More specifically, it uses the study of discourse as a tool to explore social inequality, power relations and the “domination and abuse of one actor over another, as well as the methods of resistance against said domination” (Fairclough, 1995). In critical discourse analysis, the idea of *power* is broadly defined and may refer to the dominion a dictator has over their citizens, an employer’s power over an employee, a father or older brother’s authority over his son or younger brother and other relations. What is important, according to Fairclough, is that there exists an asymmetry between the participants in the discourse event, as well as that there is an unequal capacity in the control of the production and distribution of the text (1995). At the center of this power, as well as Fairclough’s ideas on critical discourse analysis itself, is ideology, which is transferred through discourse and allows a person in a position of power to maintain their dominance. In the field of political discourse analysis, the power in question is political power, and the actors participating in the discourse are politicians. As van Dijk explains it, critical political discourse analysis “examines the reproduction of political power, power abuse or domination through political discourse, as well as resistance or counter-power against discursive dominance,” while considering the “consequences of social and political inequality which originate from said dominance” (1998). However, political discourse is not reserved for politicians alone - activists, protesters, voters, even bloggers have the capacity to engage in political discourse. Furthermore, one must keep in mind that politicians are only considered to be engaging in political discourse

when serving as political actors or players in a political entity – a politician buying ice cream does not qualify as political discourse, unless, of course, they are doing it for the purpose of making a political statement. The audience is also a significant player in political discourse, and factors such as the scope and socioeconomic constitution of the audience can greatly affect political rhetoric (Tyrkkö, 2016). Therefore, a competent politician should possess the ability to influence the audience’s feelings and allegiances, manage group identities and manipulate inter-group relationships and interactions in order to push their own narrative and win favor. This form of political manipulation can be conducted very efficiently with the tactical and deliberate use of pronouns.

## **Pronouns in political discourse**

Throughout history, pronouns and forms of address have always played a big role in the power semantic. Take, for example, the complex historical evolution of the singular pronouns of address “you” and “thou”, or “vi” and “ti” in Croatian. Adapted from the way Roman emperors were addressed by the French court, and then embraced by the English following the Norman Conquests, the non-reciprocal “you” and “thou” played a role in the suppression of the lower classes and the preservation of the feudal hierarchy (Brown and Gilman, 1960). “thou-ing” someone meant expressing one’s superiority over that person, and expecting them to “you” you back meant expecting them to accept their inferior position in the power hierarchy. Furthermore, while the establishing of the solidarity semantic and the social liberalization that took place in the last couple of centuries have led to a less rigid society and somewhat rid the pronouns of their oppressive qualities, they are still an important factor in the behavioral norms and social expectations of the languages that kept them (Brown and Gilman, 1960). This is well-exemplified by the “Du-reformen” that took place in Sweden in the 1960s, where in the spirit of egalitarianism and progressiveness, the formal “ni” was universally replaced on all levels of discourse by the more amicable and democratic “du”.

Considering their undeniable historical significance in our society’s power dynamic, it comes as no surprise that pronouns play a significant role in today’s political rhetoric. Strategic pronoun use is an especially powerful tool in political discourse. Politicians can use pronouns as a persuasion strategy, emphasizing their own identity while undermining their rival’s authority (Al-Tarawneh, 2019), while also using them to express either distance or solidarity (Chilton, 2004). Furthermore, they can also use pronouns to strategically shift their

tone, appearing authoritative and strong, or harmless and approachable (Mulderigg, 2011). Finally, strategic pronoun use is one of the most powerful strategies for expressing in-group and out-group membership and manipulating perceived allegiances and affiliations (Tyrkkö, 2016). Considering the inherently vague and context - dependent nature of pronouns, they offer an extremely wide range of practical uses in political discourse (Moberg and Eriksson, 2013). Let us take, for example, the first-person pronoun “we”. Among populist politicians such as Adolf Hitler, the pronoun is commonly used inclusively to evoke feelings of unity and patriotism (Chilton, 2004), as well as to vilify the opposition by creating an “us” vs. “them” dichotomy. Petro Poroshenko, the former President of Ukraine, used the pronoun in opposition to Russian influence to create and strengthen a common Ukrainian identity (Klymenko, 2018). In the case of the Swedish governing coalition, the *Alliansen*, the repetition of the pronoun during press conferences was used to highlight unity and single-mindedness within an otherwise rocky coalition (Moberg and Eriksson, 2013).

In recent years, scientists started recognizing that a significant part of understanding politics and politicians lies in understanding the subtleties of language they are using (Hampsher-Monk, Tilmans and van Vree, 1998). Due to their widespread and creative use, pronouns have shown themselves to be highly relevant factors in investigations of political discourse (Moberg and Eriksson, 2013). And with their fascinatingly wide array of viable uses and their extensive usage in political discourse, there is an undeniable need to explore and uncover manipulative practices hiding behind strategic pronoun use in political rhetoric.

## **The study**

For the portion of the analysis concerning the 2016 US presidential election, I chose to focus on the first presidential debate, held on September 26, 2016 at Hofstra University in New York, organized by NBC News and moderated by NBC Nightly News anchor Lester Holt. The 93-minute debate was split into six 15-minute segments, with each segment consisting of a two-

minute block during which each candidate could express their views on the topic at hand, followed by a nine-minute block reserved for replies and discussion. The debate covered 6 topics, neither of which was announced in advance: 1) the economy and the labor market, 2) Trade, 3) the US Deficit, 4) the Middle East and the War on Terror, 5) foreign policy and 6) the candidates' experience and goals. The NBC debate was the most watched political debate in US history, with 84 million people tuning in to 13 different channels to watch it. The polls showed a convincing victory by Hillary Clinton, with CNN's poll giving her 62% over Trump's 28%, ABC granting Clinton 46% over Trump's 41%, and Fox News declaring that she won by 61% to Trump's 21%<sup>1</sup>.

For the 2020 Croatian election, I also chose to focus on the first presidential debate, held on December 30, 2019 in Zagreb, and organized by RTL. The debate went on for 2 hours and 25 minutes and was organized into 5 thematic units concerning politics, the economy, and social issues. Each candidate had 60 seconds to respond to each question, 30 seconds to respond to a response and another 30 seconds to comment on their adversary's response. The candidates were also allowed to ask each other questions, and the debate also included a "quick fire round" with limited responses. The debate was allegedly watched by between 874 thousand and a million people, and the poll results were mixed – the RTL poll gave Milanović 73% against Grabar-Kitarović's 27%<sup>2</sup> while a poll by Jutarnji List showed that Grabar-Kitarović won by 85% against Milanović's 15%<sup>3</sup>.

Analyzing the first debates was a deliberate choice, and my reasoning was as follows. Firstly, given that they were the first official presidential debates, they were also many voters' first impressions of the candidates, so one can deduce that the candidates were instructed to present a cohesive summary of their plans and positions for the voters that were yet unfamiliar with them. The debates were also the first opportunity for the viewers to directly stack the candidates and their plans against the other and decide which one they prefer. Furthermore, considering that this was the first time the candidates faced off directly, it was more difficult for a candidate to study the opponent's debate style and devise counter-strategies, meaning that

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<sup>1</sup> "2016 United States presidential debates" – Wikipedia, 2016 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016\\_United\\_States\\_presidential\\_debates](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_United_States_presidential_debates)

<sup>2</sup> "Evo tko je pobjednik RTL-ove debate! "Kaže da je rat gotov, a priča o ustašama i partizanima" – Vijesti.hr, 2019 <https://www.rtl.hr/vijesti-hr/novosti/hrvatska/predsjednicki-izbori-2019/3623153/milanovic-pobjednik-ankete-na-portalu-vijestih/>

<sup>3</sup> "Prva debata uoči drugog kruga: od početka frcale iskre, Milanović Kolindi stalno spočitavao Sanadera, ona njemu loše rezultate Vlade" Jutarnjih, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/naslovnica/prva-debata-uoci-drugog-kruga-od-pocetka-frcale-iskre-milanovic-kolindi-stalno-spocitavao-sanadera-ona-njemu-lose-rezultate-vlade-9803773>



the approach to the debate would likely be more authentic of the candidates' general rhetoric and less reliant on responding to their opponent's strategies. Finally, these debates were the most popular ones in their respective elections. This means that they had the greatest outreach, and it could even be argued that they were the most influential debates in their respective elections. In order to improve readability and properly organize the study, the debates were divided into sections based on the types of pronouns that were isolated and focused on in the excerpts.

## **The 2016 NBC presidential debate**

### **The language of Hillary Clinton**

In order to properly understand the implicit pronoun use strategies the candidates utilize in the selected debates, it would benefit us to examine the general characteristics of their political rhetoric. As someone with a legal background and a political career spanning over 40 years and some of the highest offices in the American political system, Hillary Clinton is a very experienced and skilled politician and orator. She expresses her attitudes through long, compound and complex sentences, as well as strategic and deliberate language and intricate rhetorical strategies (Abdel-Moety, 2014). A staple of Clinton's political discourse is her interjection of personal experience in her political speech. This strategy is used to imbue the authority and esteem of a political figure with personality and character, and is commonly used among populist politicians (Abdel-Moety, 2014). It also may imply that Clinton's rhetoric was influenced by Margaret Thatcher (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). In the context of the Trump debates, this could also be perceived as an attempt to appear relaxed and natural on the debate stage, signifying confidence and experience. Clinton also likes using vocatives and referring to her interviewers and debate moderators by their first name rather often. This may just be a result of the associations she has made during her long career in politics, but it also serves to strengthen the social relationship between her and her co-speakers and, together with the occasional mild-mannered joke, adds another touch of personality to the politician (Abdel-Moety, 2014). Other methods of expressing her personality through the use of a more informal style of speaking include fillers such as *you know* and *well*, creative lexical choices (e.g. *bad guys* for terrorists) and metaphorical language (Abdel-Moety, 2014). She is also prone to interrupting her co-speakers as a result of high involvement. Clinton's pronoun usage is also

very deliberate and strategic. She uses “I” more commonly with verbs relating to thinking, feeling, speaking and, more uncommonly, action, while the meaning of her “we” constantly shifts, and can be deliberately vague and both inclusive and exclusive (Abdel-Moety, 2014). When discussing vital issues such as foreign policy and the war on terror, Clinton uses “a large number of strong obligational and epistemic modalities” to show determination and certainty (Abdel-Moety, 2014). However, Clinton’s strategy of establishing herself as confident and determined through careful and deliberate language use is not always effective. During her run in the 2008 democratic primaries, Clinton was heavily criticized for seeming artificial and inconsistent in debates, as well as pejoratively called a “flip-flopper” (Lempert, 2009). Also, an analysis of Clinton’s pronoun use showed that, while she often used first person pronouns to identify with her party, colleagues and the government, she very rarely used them to identify with the American people. This may imply a disconnect with her audience (Proctor and Su, 2011).

## **The language of Donald Trump**

As opposed to Clinton’s well-versed and deliberate expression, Trump’s political speaking style is straight-forward and simple, and mostly consists of short and declarative SVO and SVC sentences. This approach makes his sentences feel more expressive and emotionally charged, paints him in a more powerful, determined and persuasive light and allows him to better connect with less educated voters (Mohammadi, 2017). Interestingly, this approach is very similar to his predecessor Barack Obama’s, who’s speaking style was also straightforward and colloquial, with short sentences, simple words and an above-average amount of first-person pronouns (Mašić and Kišiček, 2016). Within these simple sentences, Trump utilizes strategies such as nominalization, juxtaposition and topicalization to project responsibility and express his ideology (Mohammadi, 2017). He aims to paint a bleak, dystopian picture of current-day America, and the direct nature of SVO and SVC sentences allows him to more easily “point the finger” and highlight the culprit. This strategy is often adopted by political newcomers and outsiders, and is familiar to Croatian voters from the rhetoric of the populist Živi Zid party (Rogulj and Kišiček, 2018). Trump also uses vivid metaphorical language, similes, allegories and anecdotes as part of his persuasion tactics, such as when he refers to China as a “Monster” or when he claims that the “whole world is blowing up” (Al-Tarawneh, 2019). When it comes to pronoun use, Trump’s staple is the utilization of deictic pronouns to dichotomize the “Us”

and the “Them” (Mohammadi, 2017). He also opts to use “I” instead of “We” uncommonly often, possibly to signify that he considers himself as the agent of the action of positive change (Mohammadi, 2017). This also allows him to effectively individualize himself, and create a juxtaposition with Clinton as part of the collective *them*, a bunch of faceless, corrupt and incompetent bureaucrats who are to blame for the dystopian situation Trump’s campaign presents the USA to be in. Following from this, it is clear that “She” and “They” evoke extremely negative connotations in his speech. A common strategy in political discourse, Trump utilizes “The pronoun “we” both exclusively and inclusively, and to emphasize collectivity and solidarity with his voters (Pavlidou, 2014). However, as an unexperienced political speaker, Trump occasionally stumbles when it comes to more advanced rhetorical tools, such as strategic pronoun use (Tyrkkö, 2016).

To summarize, Clinton opts for the precise and cautious approach with her reliance on professional experience and outside experts, while Trump aims for emotional impact through simple and charged expression (Al-Tarawneh, 2019).

## **Analysis of the 2016 NBC presidential debate**

### **The personal pronoun “I”**

After the introduction and a short explanation of the debate format, both the candidates are asked to discuss their plans for improving the average American’s financial situation. Clinton gets the first word.

**CLINTON:** *“I want **us** to invest in **you**. I want **us** to invest in **your** future.”*

Clinton showcases strategic pronoun use in this sentence. Clinton is a common user of the “presidential “I””, which is common in pre-election discourse and defines the speaker as a representative of the ideological group he belongs to, helping them successfully profile themselves as leaders (Arroyo, 2000). The referent for the “us” in this sentence is vague and may refer to her team, her office when she wins the presidency, the entire US administration or the entirety of the American public. The grouping may be intentionally ambiguous, as it adds to the gravitas of the sentence. She uses the pronoun “us” to indicate solidarity, and the pronoun “I” to indicate both urgency and personal involvement.

When discussing her goals for the economy, Clinton said the following:

**CLINTON:** *“When I was in the Senate, I had a number of trade deals that came before me, and I held them all to the same test.”*

Here, Clinton showcased another staple of her political speech, which is her emphasizing her personal experience. Through her repetition of the first person singular pronoun “I“, the “Topos of personal experience“ (Küçükali, 2015), she signifies that she is a seasoned politician with years of experience, highlighting her expertise and authority. Prior interviews have already showcased how greatly Clinton's language was influenced by her previous political positions and how much she identifies with the US government (Proctor and Su, 2011). The repetition of the pronoun “I“ could also be interpreted as Clinton alluding to Trump's lack of political experience.

Most politicians will use the “interplay between the presidential “I” and the partisan “We”” as a strategy to “create an aura of unity” and to strengthen the association between them and their ideological group or following (Arroyo, 2000). However, Trump’s usage of the pronouns is wildly different. Even though he already uses the pronoun “I” very often when compared to the average politician, the frequency grows even more when Trump is defending himself from an accusation. When pressured by Clinton to explain accusations of tax avoidance, Trump defended himself by stating the following:

**TRUMP:** *“I have a great company. I have a tremendous income. (...) We owe \$20 trillion, and we’re a mess.”*

Trump begins his defense by juxtaposing the competent and successful “I” with the incompetent “We”, when he is really referring to *them*, the politicians. He continues by justifying these accusations using two strategies, the diffusion of responsibility, by claiming that all companies are doing it and that it is the administration’s fault that it can even be done, and the dispersal of blame through pronoun use:

**TRUMP:** *“I built an unbelievable company. (..) But on occasion, four times, we used certain laws that are there.”*

Trump’s deflection of blame in this sentence works on two levels. Firstly, he shifts the blame for his wrongdoings on the “laws that are there” and, by extension, the lawmakers who created said laws. Secondly, while he uses the singular pronoun “I” while discussing his professional successes, he uses the unifying “we” to share the blame with a group. This can be

described as a “self-politeness strategy” – a linguistic choice influenced by one’s need to protect and enhance one’s own face (Chen, 1999).

In the final quarter of the debate, Trump is asked to respond to allegations of racism.

**TRUMP:** *“and I just left Detroit, and I just left Philadelphia, and I just -- you know, you've seen me, I've been all over the place. You decided to stay home, and that's OK. But I will tell you, I've been all over. (...) I'll go one step further. In Palm Beach, Florida, tough community, a brilliant community, a wealthy community, probably the wealthiest community there is in the world, I opened a club, and really got great credit for it. No discrimination against African- Americans, against Muslims, against anybody. And it's a tremendously successful club. And I'm so glad I did it. And I have been given great credit for what I did. And I'm very, very proud of it. And that's the way I feel. That is the true way I feel.”*

Once again, we find the repetition of “I” to signify emotional engagement, as well as Trump emphasizing that he himself is the actor for positive change. This may be a defensive mechanism, or a mitigation strategy chosen specifically to combat the allegations of racism, and is indicative of Trump’s less prepared and more expressive and emotive language use.

## **The personal pronoun “We”**

The use of the pronoun “We” when referring to the political establishment greatly differs between Clinton and Trump. When Clinton uses the pronoun, she identifies with the “We”, speaking from a place of solidarity and personal responsibility. This is in line with her previous experience as part of the political administration, as well as her noted linguistic self-identification with her party and the establishment (Proctor and Su, 2011):

**CLINTON:** *“We have to restore trust between communities and the police. We have to work to make sure that our police are using the best training”*

On the other hand, and somewhat paradoxically, Trump uses “we” in an accusatory and alienating manner, as an equivalent of the polarizing “they”:

**TRUMP:** *“What are we doing? (...) Our country's in deep trouble. We don't know what we're doing when it comes to devaluations and all of these countries all over the world, especially China. They're the best, the best ever at it. What they're doing to us is a very, very sad thing.”*

According to Arroyo, deliberately unclear and vague references in political rhetoric are often a sign that a politician will employ manipulative practices (2000). While in this sentence he

does use the pronoun “we”, Trump is actually referring to acting politicians, a common villain in his rhetoric. One of Trump’s campaign’s major rallying points is the fact that, even though he is running for public office, Trump does not consider himself a politician, but rather a successful businessman. However, he still opts for the pronoun “We” instead of “they”. Speakers use this strategy to project the image of themselves and their addressees as one collective entity (Wieczorek, 2013). Trump’s strategy may be to show that he himself, like the audience, is a victim of these bad choices.

When the debate came to a discrimination lawsuit filed by the Justice Department against Donald Trump in 1973, he once again used the plural pronoun to disperse guilt and dismiss the attack:

**TRUMP:** “(...) *we, along with many, many other companies throughout the country -- it was a federal lawsuit -- were sued*”

## **Possessive pronouns**

When asked about his own plans for the US economy, Trump stated the following:

**TRUMP:** “***Our** jobs are fleeing the country. (...) You look at what China is doing to **our** country in terms of making **our** product*”

The repetition of “our” as a way to strongly identify with the American people is a common strategy in Republican politics, and was also used by Sarah Palin in her 2008 run for Vice-president (Proctor and Su, 2011). Trump also used this strategy in his 2016 presidential acceptance speech to separate himself and his supporters from his political opponents (Mohammadi, 2017).

**TRUMP:** “***Our** jobs are fleeing the country. They're going to Mexico.” (...) “So **we're** losing **our** good jobs, so many of them” (...) “But **we** have to stop **our** jobs from being stolen from **us.**”*

Trump aims to achieve a sense of urgency and danger through the gradual intensification of his lexical choices. At first, Trump says that the jobs are “fleeing”, as if by their own accord. Later in his response he laments that Americans are “losing their good jobs”, only to conclude

that the jobs are “being stolen from them.”. The repetition of the pronoun “our”, similarly to pronouns “we” and “us”, can be used to conceptualize individual politicians, coalitions and parties as insiders within a group identity (Chilton, 2004). Here, Trump is using the pronoun both to present himself as “one of the people”, and to signify that he was also a victim of the bad choices enacted by the acting politicians.

Trump also uses possessive pronouns aggressively, as showcased in the following example:

**TRUMP to CLINTON:** “*Your husband signed NAFTA*”

In this quote, Trump refers to Bill Clinton, the 42<sup>nd</sup> president of the USA, as *your husband*. The possessive pronoun is used here in an attempt to link Clinton to the deal and shift the blame for it.

## Gendered pronouns

Interestingly, gendered pronouns were not that commonly used in the debate. They mostly appear in the debate during heated moments and verbal attacks, such as when Trump calls out Clinton for not making the changes she advocates for now during her mandates in many public offices:

**TRUMP:** “*when **she** started talking about this, it was really very recently. **She's** been doing this for 30 years. And why hasn't **she** made the agreements better?* “

And later, when Clinton calls Trump out for tax fraud:

**CLINTON:** “*(...) we don't know all of **his** business dealings, but we have been told through investigative reporting that **he** owes about \$650 million to Wall Street and foreign banks. Or maybe **he** doesn't want the American people, all of you watching tonight, to know that **he's** paid nothing in federal taxes.* “

## The personal pronoun “they”

The pronoun “they” plays an important role in the rhetoric of the two candidates. Their usage of the pronoun may serve as the best indicator of the debate styles the two candidates chose to utilize.

**CLINTON:** “*a lot of really smart, wealthy people know that. And **they** are saying, hey, we need to do more to make the contributions we should be making to rebuild the middle class.*”

Several times in the debate Clinton will appeal to an expert *they* in an attempt to shut down Trump’s arguments, most commonly when discussing the economy. Clinton chose to combat Trump’s knowledge and experience in the economic sector, his strongest field and the one he holds the most authority in, by bringing in an authority of her own, a vague *they* referring to a group of experts who have dismantled Trump’s economic program.

Police reform and the unjustified police killings of African Americans has been a very polarizing and controversial topic in the United States. When asked about her opinion on the issue, Clinton strategically used pronouns to provide a neutral answer and avoid alienating a portion of her audience:

**CLINTON:** “***They** want support, **they** want more training, **they** want more assistance.*”

Clinton uses the “they” instead of “I” here to separate herself from the argument in a way. *They*, the police, are painted as the originator of this position, not her. In this way she attempts to both avoid negative backlash for not taking a harsher stance and present her idea as coming from a figure of authority on the subject, lending it more credibility. However, this could also be interpreted as a lack of conviction on Clinton’s part, and such a safe approach to divisive matters lead to her being named a flip-flopper in the 2007 Philadelphia Democratic debate (Lempert, 2009).

**TRUMP:** “*(...) **they're** taking our jobs, **they're** giving incentives, **they're** doing things that, frankly, **we** don't do.*”

A staple of Trump's political speech is the use of the pronoun “they” to express “affective polarization” (Bull and Fetzer, 2006). Creating the narrative of there being an “us” and a “them”, and of the two being in opposition, is a common move among populist politicians seeking to artificially create unity with their audience by directing them against a common enemy. Trump’s speech includes both explicit (“we” vs “they”) and implicit (“we” vs “the politicians”) polarization strategies.

When his turn came to discuss the issues of the African American community, Trump had this to say:



**TRUMP:** *“Look, the African-American community has been let down by our politicians. **They** talk good around election time, like right now, and after the election, **they** said, see ya later, I’ll see you in four years.”*

In this example, Trump implies that the *they* that he has been attacking and blaming for the current condition of the United States also includes Hillary Clinton herself. Furthermore, Wieczorek states that through the repeated use of “they”, a politician can construe a reality that paints out-group members look like unfamiliar and damaging factors (2013). Trump may be attempting to alienate Clinton from her audience with his multiple uses of the pronoun.

## **Indefinite pronouns**

**TRUMP:** *“Now, **everybody** in mainstream is going to say, oh, that's not true. Look, it's true.”*

Trump’s strategy throughout the election was to highlight the fact that he is not a career politician or bureaucrat. Indefinite pronouns are usually used when the number or identity of things is either unknown or unimportant. The use of “everybody” here enhances the scale of the threat, or conspiracy, against Trump, allowing him to present himself as a victim of a villainous system.

## **The 2019 RTL presidential debate**

### **The language of Zoran Milanović**

Zoran Milanović’s political rhetoric has, for better or for worse, evolved significantly from his beginnings as Ivica Račan’s successor at the head of SDP, Croatia’s second biggest party, throughout his 2011-2016 mandate as the prime minister of the Republic of Croatia and up until his current office, the one of the President of the Republic of Croatia. Dražen Lalić notes that for the first seven months of his mandate as prime minister, Milanović’s rhetoric was very composed and tactful, with him publicly denouncing the speculative and manipulative tactics of his predecessors (2013). His honest and straight-forward approach to rhetoric was unquestionably one of the factors that lead him to victory in the 2011 election. He has also famously publicly castigated populists and populist discourse on several occasions. His expression is very vivid and metaphorical, with an extensive vocabulary of

Latin, literary references, foreign expressions and classic Croatian proverbs. He is also fond of using biblical references in his public speeches, a strategy which may have been inspired by Obama's rhetoric. However, while many saw his method of expression as a breath of fresh air, his common use of obscure references and Latin proverbs was also, as Lalić notes, perceived by some as elitist and out of touch with the Croatian public (2013). During his run as the prime minister, he also had his fair share of rhetorical gaffes, the most famous one being the time he compared the predicament of a woman who lost her home in a flood to a pipe leak in his apartment<sup>4</sup>. When it comes to debates and discussions with the political opposition, Milanović is aggressive, with quick and direct responses and authoritative body language. Milanović loves to argue and to debate, and considering the view counts of the online clips of him arguing with the opposition in the Parliament, his supporters seem to enjoy it as well. However, Milanović's cocky and arrogant presentation often ends up feeling inappropriate, especially in more formal situations<sup>5</sup>. Milanović's arrogance is possibly his most famous and polarizing trait. While Grabar-Kitarović thrives in ceremonial and orderly environments, Milanović often fails to exhibit appropriate dignity and decorum. Given Milanović's extensive experience in Croatian politics, as well as his often-demonstrated love of debates and arguments, one can expect strategic, deliberate and, of course, aggressive pronoun use.

## **The language of Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović**

When it comes to the rhetoric of former President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, Gabrijela Kišiček, who has steadily conducted expert reviews and comments on Croatian campaign debates, identifies three "rhetorical faces"<sup>2</sup>. The first one concerns the pre-written statements the former President gives, for example, on foreign trips and press addresses. Unlike Milanović's speech, which feels creative and improvisatory, Grabar-Kitarović's sentences are well-prepared and well-rehearsed. This is, as Kišiček notes, highlighted even further by the former President's nearly perfect diction, articulation and flow of speech<sup>5</sup>, which may stem from her academic background in linguistics. However, this highly-controlled rhetorical style

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<sup>4</sup> "Milanović tješio ženu kojoj je potopljena kuća "i meni je lani pukla cijev u stanu" – Jutarnji.hr, 2014 -

<https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/milanovic-tjesio-zenukoj-je-potopljena-kucai-meni-je-lani-pukla-cijev-u-stanu-672409>

<sup>5</sup> "Dr. sc. Gabrijela Kišiček analizira mane i slabosti naših javnih ličnosti, Milanoviću zamjera nezrelost, Kolindi emocije: Ne znam što se dogodilo..." Vinko Paić, 2020 - <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/mozaik/zivot/dr-sc-gabrijela-kisicek-analizira-mane-i-slabosti-nasih-javnih-licnosti-milanovicu-zamjera-nezrelost-kolindi-emocije-ne-znam-sto-se-dogodilo-1050298>

<sup>6</sup> „Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović: Dvije godine naučenih izjava i "umjetne" izvedbe" Gabrijela Kišiček, 2017. -

<https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/kolumna-gabrijele-kisicek-grabar-kitarovic-dvije-godine-naucenih-izjava-i-umjetne-izvedbe---466716.html>

was often criticized for sounding unnatural, forced and hard to identify with. The second face, the improvised portions of her speech, are quite rare, but feel a lot more natural and stylistically unique. However, Kišiček notes that, instead of building a sense of spontaneity through a more natural performance, she tries to show herself as relaxed and natural through questionable and “semi-infantile” statements<sup>5</sup>. Grabar-Kitarović is often criticized for her struggle with finding a rhetorical identity and her lack of rhetorical adaptability. Her excessively formal style and overly expressive intonation actually create an image of insecurity and stiffness<sup>6</sup>. Her third face refers to the rhetoric she uses when faced with crises and criticism. Kišiček notes that this face is difficult to analyze, due to Grabar-Kitarović’s tendency to refuse to respond to negative criticism<sup>5</sup>. Lexically, Grabar-Kitarović uses a well-balanced vocabulary that is simple and easy to understand, with only a small, select number of foreign and loan words. Furthermore, when it comes to stylistic choices, Grabar-Kitarović is most fond of using well-established metaphors, the fluctuations in her speaking tone are fluid, and she is well-versed in manipulating an audience. Given Grabar-Kitarović’s well-prepared and trained rhetoric, one might expect a safer and more measured approach to the debate.

## **Analysis of the RTL 2019 presidential debate**

### **First person personal pronouns**

In the debate’s introduction, when asked why she believed that she would be a better choice than her opponent, Grabar-Kitarović said the following:

**GRABAR-KITAROVIĆ:** *“Kad sam postala predsjednica, zemlja je bila u dubokoj krizi. Danas Hrvatska jest bolja (...) Zato tražim pet godina jer **ja** sam ona promjena koja je tada bila potrebna i sada tražim kontinuitet te politike.”*

At the very beginning of the debate, Grabar-Kitarović introduces one of her central points – her previous presidential mandate is the reason that Croatia is currently socially and economically better off than in the 2011 – 2016 period, during Milanović’s mandate as prime minister. She will attempt to blame the post-2008 economic crisis on Milanović’s government, thereby painting him as an incompetent prime minister and, by extension, an incompetent candidate for the presidency. This will be done through the constant juxtaposition of the “I”, the actor for positive change in her rhetoric, and Milanović’s government as the other, the negative factor. Grabar-Kitarović proceeds to push the thesis in

the continuation of the debate. However, she does so in reference to her position in the 2008-2009 government:

**GRABAR-KITAROVIĆ:** “*Gospodarski rast u vrijeme prve Sanaderove vlade bio je od iznad 3 do iznad 5 posto u zadnjoj godini mandata u kojoj sam **ja** bila (...) Sve druge zemlje Srednje Europe tada su značajno pokrenule svoje gospodarstvo, **mi** nismo*”

The “we” in the quote is a “we” of solidarity, also common in American political rhetoric (Chilton, 2004). Furthermore, similar to Trump’s use of the first-person pronoun, Grabar-Kitarović’s “we” does not include her, but is used to refer to Milanović’s then-government in an accusatory manner.

Milanović’s “I” usage is dominant in sentences where he aims to juxtapose himself with Grabar-Kitarović, as is evident in the following example:

**MILANOVIĆ:** “***Ja** sam bio karijerni diplomat, Kolindu je doveo Sanader.*”

First-person singular pronouns are effective in emphasizing a politician’s individuality and the individual voice (Ilie, 2018). In this example, Milanović pushes the idea of himself as a self-made politician, and contrasts it with Grabar-Kitarović, strengthening the perception of her relationship to Ivo Sanader to imply that he put her where she is, while referring to her by her first name to further undermine her authority. As the main figure behind the Hypo and Ina-Mol corruption affairs, as well as a convicted war profiteer, Sanader is one of the most disliked figures in Croatian politics and public life, and has become the face of post-war privatization scandals and corruption. Therefore, by highlighting Grabar-Kitarović’s connection to Sanader, Milanović intends to defame Grabar-Kitarović and link her to the rampant corruption and crime happening in HDZ in the pre-2018 recession period.

In a continuation of the discussion about national economics, after Milanović stated that his government ended their term with positive economic trends, Grabar-Kitarović responds by saying:

**GRABAR-KITAROVIĆ:**” *Vaš rast postaje pozitivan u zadnjoj godini mandata, kada sam **ja** postala predsjednica.*”

In this sentence, Grabar-Kitarović somewhat sabotages her own basic claim. By admitting that there was actually a trend of growth, she negates her previous assertion that the situation was completely negative throughout the Milanović government’s mandate. Also, by calling it “vaš rast”, she attributes the growth to Milanović or Milanović and his government, while,

quite paradoxically, also claiming responsibility for the growth in the second half of the sentence. Grabar-Kitarović's assertion also does not hold up simply because of the limitations of the Presidential position in the Republic of Croatia. In Croatia, the president has minor, if any, effect on the economy, which is handled by the government and the parliament.

Milanović even calls Grabar-Kitarović out on her assertion by joking:

**MILANOVIĆ:** *“Da vaš dolazak ima veze s gospodarskim rastom je isto kao i reći da to imaju klimatske promjene u Burmi.”*

Milanović also uses first person pronouns defensively, such as when Grabar-Kitarović addresses an out-of-context quote in which he, among other things, referred to Croatia as a “slučajna država” (“accidental country”). Milanović’s awkward wording was widely discussed amongst right-leaning pundits and journalists, and used to show him as unpatriotic:

**GRABAR-KITAROVIĆ:** *“Ako je vama normalno reći da je Hrvatska slučajna država...”*

In his defense, Milanović states the following:

**MILANOVIĆ:** *“Kako uopće možete doći na ideju da hrvatskom premijeru, kojeg su izabrali hrvatski građani uvjerljivo, predbacujete da svoju domovinu smatra slučajnom zemljom?”*

Here, Milanović avoids the more obvious and natural use of the first-person pronoun, and instead refers to himself as “the Croatian prime minister”. In this way he is both highlighting his authority and deflecting the accusation, making it seem like Grabar-Kitarović is attacking not him, but the constitutional position of prime minister itself.

**GRABAR-KITAROVIĆ:** *“ja jesam pomilovala gospodina Sulića, na prijedlog komisije (...)”*

In this example, Grabar-Kitarović fails to show the ability to take the blame for her controversial political decisions, something that Milanović made quite an effort to present himself as doing. With the first person singular, Grabar-Kitarović seems to be on the right track to accept responsibility for the questionable pardon, but proceeds to shift the blame to the commission a moment later.

**MILANOVIĆ:** *“Dosta mi je političara koji u kampanji pričaju jedno, koji su Guliveri riječi, a Liliputanci djela (...) Vi nemate stav.”*

Similar to what Trump did to Hillary, but putting his own verbose spin on it, Milanović also categorizes Grabar-Kitarović as a faceless, cowardly politician. Interestingly, he also accuses her of flip-flopping, which was an accusation previously brought against Clinton for her similarly rehearsed, deliberate and safe speaking style (Lempert, 2009).

While there was a noticeable lack of first-person plural pronouns in this debate when compared to its American counterpart, they are not completely lacking, as shown in the following example:

**MILANOVIĆ:** *“Ostavili ste zemlju u kaosu, zadužili za 120 milijardi kuna, zaduživali smo se po kamati od sedam posto, ostavili smo suficit i peti kvartal rasta.”*

The use of first-person plural pronouns serves as one of the primary linguistic features for establishing connections between a voter and a political party (Klymenko, 2018). Milanović’s frequent use of the first-person plural pronoun may be a linguistic remnant from the rhetoric he used as leader of his party. However, it may also be an indication of pride and taking responsibility for his previous political work.

The power of constructing dichotomies, as is evident from many different areas of social life, is that the person constructing them can associate the formed sides with moral rules and normative judgements (Weicht, 2018). In a large part of the debate, Milanović uses the “we” pronoun to highlight his “us” vs. “them” division. Grabar-Kitarović and HDZ are grouped on one side, serving the role of the villainous, corrupt and amoral “they”, while Milanović presents himself as the savior:

**MILANOVIĆ:** *“Vi stalno govorite o stranačkim podjelama. To su podjele, **mi** ili **oni**. **Ja** želim okupljanje (...) HDZ vam vodi kampanju i harangu mržnje, **oni** su itekako tema. Jedan od **mojih** motiva je da pomognem Hrvatskoj.”*

As was shown in the NBC debate, one of Trump’s main justifications for why he joined the presidential race was to save the US from corrupt and incompetent politicians. Milanović seems to utilize a similar strategy, but his concept of the antagonist, the “them” or “corrupt politicians”, contextually adapted to Croatian politics, is HDZ.

**MILANOVIĆ:** *“**Mi** smo parlamentarna demokracija, a **vi** ste kandidat HDZ-a (...)”*

Milanović’s Coup de Grâce is stating that it is HDZ, not Grabar-Kitarović herself, leading her campaign, and painting both her and them as the actors for hate and division in Croatian

society, while claiming to be the unifying factor. Furthermore, he even makes the implication that HDZ is separated from or even an enemy of the system of parliamentary democracy.

## Possessive pronouns

Possessive pronouns played a much larger role in the Croatian debate, as well as in both Milanović and Grabar-Kitarović's offensive and defensive strategies. As previously stated, through strategic pronoun use, politicians can manipulate their own and their opponents' perceived affiliations (Tyrkkö, 2016). Milanović effectively utilizes this strategy to highlight the link between Grabar-Kitarović and her native party, the controversial and highly disliked Croatian Democratic Party (HDZ).

**MILANOVIĆ:** *“Stalno ponavljaju da je **moja** vlada zadužila hrvatsku (...) vlada Sanadera, u kojoj je sjedila i Grabar-Kitarović”*

Here, Milanović opts to use a possessive pronoun and refer to the twelfth Croatian government as “Moja vlada”. This is also evident in the following example.

**MILANOVIĆ:** *“To svakako nije **moj** uspjeh (...) **Moj** ministar je najuren iz vlade zbog jedne sumnjive nagodbe.”*

The repeated use of the pronoun may be an attempt to show responsibility, maturity and a willingness to learn, which is something that Grabar-Kitarović failed to demonstrate during the debate.

While Milanović seems to accept and take responsibility for some of the aforementioned negative economic trends, he also intends to shift the blame for the economic downturn on the previous HDZ government, the one headed by Ivo Sanader. While the link implied by Milanović in this sentence is a relatively “soft” one, he will proceed to use possessive pronouns to further highlight the links between Grabar-Kitarović and groups and figures that are disliked in the public eye. Furthermore, this is not the only character defamation strategy Milanović intends to use. Later in the debate, he links Grabar-Kitarović to the “šatoraši”, another controversial group with mostly negative public perception, in order to further undermine her.

**MILANOVIĆ:** *“Nakon što ste **vi i ekipa nasilnika u šatoru** mjesecima trovali Hrvatsku porukama "uništimo Jugoslavene", izgovorio sam "**mi ili oni**". (...) Eto, to su ti vaši junaci.”*

It is well established that first pronouns can be used in politics to indicate relationships of group proximity (Ilie, 2018). By linking Grabar-Kitarović with a controversial right-wing group, Milanović is building an image of the former president as someone who sows division in society. This is in line with his rhetoric as prime minister. Milanović has, several times during his mandate, called out Grabar-Kitarović for what he perceived as incitement to violence and amoral behavior. This was well exemplified in the two politicians' clashes during the European migrant crisis of 2015-2016, when Milanović chastised Grabar-Kitarović for associating with politicians espousing anti-immigrant rhetoric, such as Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán. However, "mi ili oni" is a direct example of the populist "us" vs. "them" rhetorical strategy, something the current president has previously vehemently denounced.

Grabar-Kitarović proceeds with a broad denial of the accusations, implicitly calling out Milanović as the one causing the division:

**GRABAR-KITAROVIĆ:** *"Ne dijelim birače **ni na moje ni na vaše**, na Škorine, lijeve, desne bilo kakve. Tražim povjerenje većine birača koji će prepoznati program."*

While also lambasting Milanović's economic failures as prime minister:

**GRABAR-KITAROVIĆ:** *"U vrijeme **vaše** vlade bio je konstantno negativan, tek u 2015. godini kad **ja** postajem predsjednicom, onda i on postaje pozitivan"*

Once again, Grabar-Kitarović fails to distance herself from Sanader and his corrupt government. In the statement discussing the Sanader government she makes somewhat of an effort by stating that it was good when she was there, while in the passage about Milanović she once again presents herself as the saving grace for his government. Again, similarly to Trump, her strategy is to paint a bleak picture of Croatian society, blame it on Milanović's government, and then to show herself and herself alone as the savior and actor for positive change. In a later response, she even specifies the blame:

**GRABAR-KITAROVIĆ:** *"**Vaš** dolazak je preokrenuo sve pozitivne signale."*

While in previous quotes Grabar-Kitarović presented "vaša vlada" as the guilty party, in this sentence she uses the possessive to shift all of the blame on Milanović himself.

Following this, Milanović stays on the offensive, and criticizes the then-president of her controversial use of her authority via the presidential pardon:

**MILANOVIĆ:** *"Što se tiče **vaše** komisije za pomilovanja (...)"*



In this example, Milanović does not just remind the public of the then-president's friendship and controversial act of pardoning another privatization profiteer and criminal, Leon Sulić. The use of the possessive pronoun here carries several undertones. Of course, the pardon commission is not "hers", but an autonomous body which recommends who the president should pardon. The possessive here both implies ownership of the commission by the president, which would at best imply questionable employment choices, and at worst corruption.

On several occasions throughout the debate, Grabar-Kitarović also attempts to use Milanović's strategy of defamation through citing his connections with questionable and corrupt individuals. However, unlike Grabar-Kitarović, the moment the accusation is made, Milanović rushes to distance himself from these individuals. This can be seen in the following example, when Grabar-Kitarović called out Marina Merzel, Milanović's party colleague who is currently on trial for bribery and money laundering, as well as other controversial figures from his party and former government:

**MILANOVIĆ:** *"Marina Merzel je bila županica koju je birao narod, ne ja, Sabu kao gradonačelnika je birao narod, Čačić je otišao kada su mu Mađari napakirali kaznu zatvora. On nije bio član **moje** stranke."*

Right after the accusation was made, he shifts the responsibility for Marina Merzel and Željko Sabo to the democratic process itself, while playing down his connection with Radimir Čačić. This tactic of instantly dismissing accusations can also be seen when Grabar-Kitarović mentions his ex-party colleague Milan Bandić, the late mayor of Zagreb and one of the most controversial figures in modern Croatian politics. Grabar Kitarović also uses the possessive to strengthen the perceived link between Milanović and Bandić:

**GRABAR-KITAROVIĆ:** *"Što se tiče Bandića, **vi** ste rekli da je **vaš** prijatelj."*

Milanović responds with:

**MILANOVIĆ:** *"Da, izbacio sam ga iz stranke. (...) Tko su **vaši** savjetnici? Koji su to ljudi?"*

Milanović accentuates his role in the removal of the corrupt Bandić from his party, and goes right back on the offensive, questioning Grabar-Kitarović and "her" advisors. At no point does Grabar-Kitarović try to acknowledge or apologize for her mistakes. Milanović, on the other hand, despite his cocky and defensive nature, takes responsibility for his failures and his

lapses in judgement in this instance. He uses the first-person possessive on two occasions in regard to the corruption scandal of his finance minister Linić:

**MILANOVIĆ:** “*To svakako nije moj uspjeh (...) **Moj** ministar je najuren iz vlade zbog jedne sumnjive nagodbe.*”

As previously stated, pronoun use can significantly affect a politician’s tone and presentation (Mulderigg, 2011). The repeated use of the first-person possessive may be a strategic choice, intended to show maturity and a willingness to learn.

## Gendered pronouns

Gendered pronouns and first names are used mostly to undermine the opponent’s authority when faced with accusations and in personal attacks. However, the pronouns were not used that often during ideological conflicts, like they were in the US debate (Al-Tarawneh, 2019). Zoran Milanović can be identified as the main culprit here:

**MILANOVIĆ:** “***Ja** nisam proganjao agente SOA-e. **Ona** nešto insinuirala, vjerojatno misli na Linića. (...) *To je nešto što vjerojatno **Kolinda** podržava. **Ja** ne podržavam.*”*

## Other pronouns

While expressing why he is the better candidate, Milanović stated the following:

**MILANOVIĆ:** “*Građani se moraju zapitati **koga** vide kao osobu koja integrira sustav, **tko** ima veće iskustvo, **tko** se pod pritiskom ponaša stabilnije (...)*”

The “who” in this sentence is very implicative. Milanović is claiming to be the more stable and experienced candidate while masking it as something the audience needs to figure out for themselves, giving them a superficial sense of agency.

## Discussion

One of the most obvious differences between the two debates is the relative absence of the solidary “We” in the Croatian one. This specific usage of the first-person plural pronoun is known to be a powerful tool to express equality and solidarity, especially when expressing patriotism and national identity (Wieczorek, 2013, Chilton, 2004). Despite this, it was very

seldom used in the Croatian debate. However, a likely explanation could be found in the differences in the power and responsibilities that come with the presidential position in the United States and in Croatia. The President of the United States has the power to sign and veto legislation, make treaties, control foreign policy and appoint judges, along with numerous other explicit and soft powers. The presidential function in Croatia is, in comparison, extremely limited, and, other than serving as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, mostly boils down to ceremonial functions, receiving foreign ambassadors and participating as a representative of the country in domestic and foreign summits and talks. Therefore, while American candidates used the “We” of solidarity when discussing how they will change and influence the direction of the country, this type of discussion would be mostly pointless in Croatia, as issues of the highest importance are handled by the government and prime minister, not the president.

However, all four candidates strategically used the pronoun inclusively and exclusively to denote in-group and out-group membership (van Dijk, 1998). Clinton used it to express unity and solidarity, while other candidates used it to indicate or emphasize their opponent’s association with groups and people with negative public perception. As per her previously noted tendency to identify with government bodies, Clinton also occasionally used the pronoun almost as a spokesperson, in a manner resembling the rhetoric of British members of parliament (van Dijk, 2010).

Both the US and the Croatian candidates used the pronoun “I” most often while highlighting their past experiences and accomplishments. However, the US candidates, especially Trump, also used it to express personal involvement when discussing controversial topics. This specific use of the pronoun to signify one’s personal involvement and commitment to one’s words was previously identified by Anna De Fina and described as a staple of political self-identification (1995). Furthermore, Pavlidou highlighted switching from “I” to “we” as an effective strategy to diffuse agency (2014), while Mulderrig noted the manipulation of perceived agency through the use of managing actions (2011). The alternated use of “I” and “we” to minimize agency was a common element of Trump’s and, albeit to a lesser degree, Grabar-Kitarović’s managing actions. Also, while both Grabar-Kitarović and Trump used the “I” to present themselves as the sole actors for positive change, Milanović and Trump used the pronoun to manifest their individual voice (van Dijk, 2010) against a collective and faceless “they”.

Mulderrig also wrote about the emergence of “soft power” and its increasing importance in the political discourse of advanced, liberalized countries. The concept is an alternative to the “hard power” commonly enforced by authoritarian regimes, and refers to the power one achieves not through threat of violence, but by shaping others’ beliefs and desires (Mulderrig, 2011). In the debates, establishing an “us” vs. “them” dichotomy through strategic pronoun use was a common strategy for achieving soft power. Another method of achieving soft power is through creating “utopian visions of the future” (Mulderrig, 2011). This strategy was present in Grabar-Kitarović and Trump’ speech, and realized through the use of the first person “I”.

In his work on political discourse analysis, van Dijk highlighted the importance of deictic pronouns for denoting political polarization (1998). In the debates, positive self-presentation and negative other-polarization (Wieczorek, 2013) were achieved through the establishment of an “us” vs. “them” dichotomy using pronouns. This self-other polarization, both implicit and explicit, was a staple of every candidate’s rhetoric, but it was most present in Trump and Milanović’s speech. While the “They” in Trump’s speech referred to the corrupt and incompetent politicians that ran the country into the ground, in Milanović’s speech it was the corrupt and criminal HDZ. Given their heightened usage of polarization strategies, it can be said that Trump and Milanović approached the debate more aggressively than their counterparts.

The use of the second-person singular possessive pronoun to link an opponent to a controversial figure or group was a staple strategy of Milanović’s rhetoric, and also present, but less common, in Grabar-Kitarović and Trump’s speech. When faced with accusations, Milanović also used the first-person singular possessive to admit responsibility for past mistakes. The first person plural possessive pronoun was, similarly to the first-person plural pronoun, relatively absent in the Croatian debate, while in the US debate it was used by Trump to express solidarity, similarly to the pronoun “We”.

In the Croatian debate, the pronoun “vi” was used entirely instead of “ti”. Furthermore, first names were used more sparingly in the Croatian debate, implying a higher level of mutual respect and professional distance between the candidates.

Gendered third person pronouns were mostly present in character attacks and heated moments, as noticed in Milanović’s, Trump’s and, less commonly, Clinton’s speech. Examined through the lens of Fairclough’s ideas of power and power dynamics, the

prevalence of gendered pronouns in character attacks and as part of defamation strategies may imply the male candidates' enforcement of the archaic idea of male dominance over women. However, it may also be the result of the more aggressive debate strategies utilized by the male candidates.

Due to the spacial limitations of the thesis, several interesting examples of strategic pronoun use had to be left out. Furthermore, some more generalized conclusions made in this section of the thesis were made based on an analysis of the debate as a whole, and the small sample of examples used in the "analysis" portions of the thesis may not provide a completely accurate image of the full debate. The examples were chosen because they were perceived as the clearest illustrations of specific pronoun use strategies. A larger and more comprehensive analysis of pronoun use or other rhetorical strategies in Croatian political discourse would be an important undertaking, as it would serve to paint a clearer image of Croatian political rhetoric as a whole.

## **Conclusion**

My aim with this thesis was to explore pronoun use strategies in the political rhetoric of high-level politicians. I wanted to uncover the manipulative tactics, implicit affiliations and hidden conflicts that were expressed through strategic pronoun use. I also wanted to find some correlations between the language use strategies of the US and the Croatian candidates, and perhaps even expose an influence of the former on the latter. I did this by exploring the language the candidates used in the first debates of their respective elections. For each candidate, I isolated several interesting instances of strategic pronoun use, and proceeded to analyze them with the help of relevant research from the fields of critical discourse analysis and political discourse analysis. I discovered several overlaps in the way the candidates use pronouns to achieve certain goals. The candidates mostly used first person singular pronouns to highlight personal experience and emotional involvement, and Grabar-Kitarović and Trump used it to present themselves as saviors in negative situations. Clinton also used the pronoun to highlight her political experience, while Trump and Milanović used it when faced with criticism. While all the candidates used the first-person plural to highlight unity and solidarity, Milanović and Trump used it as an offensive strategy by way of an "us" vs. "them" dichotomy, with Milanović using the possessive to show responsibility. Milanović effectively used second person pronouns to strengthen the association of his opponent with controversial groups with negative public perceptions. All candidates but Clinton commonly used

possessives in their offensive strategies. Gendered pronouns and first names were mostly used in heated ideological conflicts and personal insults. I also uncovered a lack of relevant work discussing political discourse in contemporary Croatia, and I believe more research is to be done to illustrate a more comprehensive image of Croatian political rhetoric.

## **SUMMARY:**

In my thesis, I explored pronoun use strategies utilized by presidential candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in the 2016 NBC presidential debate, as well as by presidential candidates Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović and Zoran Milanović in the 2019 RTL presidential debate. My goal was to uncover manipulative tactics achieved through strategic pronoun use, and to conduct a comparative analysis of strategic pronoun use in US and Croatian political rhetoric. I opened my thesis by summarizing the theoretical framework through a short examination of the role of power in critical discourse analysis and political discourse analysis. To highlight the importance of pronouns in political rhetoric, I proceeded by listing several manners in which politicians can use pronouns to manipulate an audience and achieve their political goals, which I then demonstrated with several historical examples of strategic pronoun use in political discourse. Afterwards, I provided a general overview of the debates I chose, the 2016 NBC debate and the 2019 RTL debate, and explained my reasoning for choosing them. Following this, I utilized relevant resources to construct a general idea of each candidates' rhetoric, as well as some general expectations for strategic pronoun use in the debates. The analysis consisted of picking out illustrative examples of language use from the debates, isolating said examples and interpreting implicit and explicit meanings with the help of relevant literature from the fields of critical discourse analysis and political discourse analysis. In the "discussion" segment, I highlighted a lack of the solidary "We" in Croatian political discourse, as well as common use of the pronoun to denote in-group and out-group membership. When it comes to the pronoun "I", I discovered its presence in emphasizing personal involvement and manipulation of perceived agency in Grabar-Kitarović and Trump's rhetoric, and in individualization strategies in Trump and Milanović's rhetoric. The establishment of an "us" vs. "them" dichotomy through pronoun use as a means to achieve political polarization and gain soft power was a staple in most of the candidates' rhetoric. I found that Milanović commonly used possessives to highlight his adversary's association to

controversial figures and groups and, along with first-person pronouns, to concede responsibility for past failures. Gendered pronouns were mostly found in character attacks and heated moments. I also uncovered a lack of research on strategic language use in Croatian political discourse and emphasized its importance for future research.

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