

Personal Deixis from Pragmatic Presupposition Theory: Comparative Study of Trump's and Obama's Inaugural Addresses

Zimo Yang

*Dalian University of Foreign Languages, Lvshun South Road, Dalian, China
3060711625@qq.com*

Keywords: Pragmatic Presupposition Theory, Personal Deixis, Inaugural Addresses

Abstract: Presupposition theory from a pragmatic perspective emphasizes the dependence of presupposition on context, linking presupposition to the speaker and hearer while focusing on its dynamic nature. Political speeches, as a distinctive pragmatic act, inherently possess unique and irreplaceable contextual characteristics, which is particularly true for presidential inaugural addresses. This study selects the inaugural speeches of two U.S. presidents, Donald Trump (2025) and Barack Obama (2013), as corpora. Through corpus-based analysis using AntConc software, it observes that pragmatic presuppositions of the speakers (presidents) exhibit varying degrees of differentiation due to contextual factors such as their political affiliations and the international/domestic circumstances during their inaugurations. These differences are most notably reflected in their strategic choices of personal deixis.

1. Introduction

Presupposition plays a crucial role in communication, especially in political speeches where speakers carefully shape their messages to influence audiences. From a pragmatic perspective, presuppositions are not just about language but also depend heavily on context—who is speaking, who is listening, and the specific situation. This makes presidential inaugural addresses particularly interesting to study, as they reflect not only the speaker's political stance but also the unique historical and social circumstances of their time.

This paper examines the inaugural speeches of two U.S. presidents—Donald Trump (2025) and Barack Obama (2013)—to explore how their different political backgrounds and contexts influenced their use of pragmatic presuppositions. Focusing on their choices of personal pronouns (e.g., “we”, “you”, “they”), the study analyzes how each president strategically framed their relationship with the audience. Using corpus-based methods through AntConc as the tool, we identify patterns in their language that reveal distinct approaches: one more self-focused, the other more audience-oriented.

By comparing these speeches, this research aims to show how pragmatic presuppositions function in real political communication and how context shapes persuasive strategies. The findings

will contribute to a better understanding of the dynamic relationship between language, power, and public perception.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Pragmatic Presupposition

The term “presupposition” refers to a premise and was first introduced by Gottlob Frege, a 19th-century German mathematician and philosopher who founded mathematical logic and analytic philosophy. He argued that any assertion must have a presupposition, and if the presupposition contains a proper name, that name must refer to something^[1]. In other words, a presupposition is a necessary condition for a proposition to hold.

This concept caught the attention of linguists and began to be explored in the field of linguistics. In the 1950s, the British philosopher of language P.F. Strawson, in his book *Introduction to Logical Theory*, defined presupposition based on truth conditions as a relationship between sentences or propositions. He proposed that any meaningful statement in natural language implies a background assumption (presupposition), which can be expressed as another statement: “A proposition S presupposes a proposition S’ if and only if S’ is a necessary condition for S to be true or false.”^[2] However, under this view, presupposition was seen as “purely static and logically abstract”.^[3]

In the 1960s–1970s, linguists began to incorporate presupposition into semantics as a semantic relation for study. However, as pragmatics entered the discussion, scholars started emphasizing the context-dependent nature of presupposition, giving it a dynamic characteristic. As a result, the focus shifted from “the meaning of sentences or propositions” to “how people use sentences or propositions”.

As one of the early scholars who proposed and extensively studied the concept of pragmatic presupposition, R. Stalnaker argued that presuppositions are not merely tied to sentences or propositions but originate from the speaker. Unlike semantic presuppositions, he defined pragmatic presupposition as follows: “A speaker presupposes P at a given moment in a conversation if and only if he tends to behave in his linguistic behavior as if he takes P for granted and assumes that his audience also treats P as uncontroversial.”^[4] For this reason, pragmatic presuppositions do not necessarily have to be true—they simply need to be accepted as true by the speaker and listener^[4]. In other words, they reflect the shared attitude of the speaker and hearer toward a proposition^[3]. As He Ziran explains, “The notion of presupposition in pragmatics involves not only language but also people.”^[5] It refers to context-sensitive assumptions that depend on the beliefs, attitudes, and intentions of the speaker (and sometimes the listener).

Pragmatic presupposition also exhibits three key characteristics: unidirectionality, subjectivity, and concealment. Unidirectionality means that pragmatic presuppositions are unilaterally asserted by the speaker. Subjectivity refers to the fact that pragmatic presuppositions are context-dependent assumptions with an assertive nature; they do not inherently possess truth or validity. Concealment indicates that presupposed content is often implicit, and listeners may unconsciously accept the speaker’s presupposed “assertions” as true if not carefully scrutinized^[6].

2.2. Personal Deixis

The term deixis originates from Greek and is often called indexical expression or indexicals in philosophical studies, meaning “pointing and indicating”. As a traditional research subject in pragmatics, deixis focuses on how linguistic structures acquire meaning in specific contexts—in other words, determining what they actually “refer to” in a given situation. Thus, the study of deixis inherently relies on contextual enrichment^[7].

As a subcategory of deixis, personal deixis (e.g., pronouns like I, you) demonstrates strong context-dependence. Its interpretation requires not only the extraction of situational context but also the application of encyclopedic and logical knowledge. Additionally, personal deixis carries significant interpersonal functions^[8].

3. Theoretical Framework

The theory of pragmatic presupposition, proposed by R. Stalnaker, emphasizes the relationship between presuppositions and speakers. Later developments in pragmatics further revealed that pragmatic presuppositions are highly context-dependent.

This study observes that due to varying contextual factors—such as political party ideologies, domestic and international circumstances at the time of inauguration—the pragmatic presuppositions (particularly role-based presuppositions) of speakers (presidents) in two inaugural speeches exhibit noticeable differences. These variations are especially evident in their choices of personal deixis (e.g., pronouns like “we” or “I”).

For this reason, this research adopts pragmatic presupposition theory as its theoretical foundation, analyzing how shifts in a speaker’s presuppositions across different contexts influence their selection of personal deixis.

4. Results and Discussion

After filtering out function words (e.g., “be”, “of”) as stop words, this study analyzed the frequency and ranking of personal deixis in the corpus, including: first-person deixis (I, we, us, our), second-person deixis (you, your), third-person deixis (they, them, their)

Comparisons were made both within each president’s speech and between the two presidents’ texts. The analysis revealed that both presidents strongly preferred first-person plural deixis (we/us/our), particularly in the inclusive form (We-inclusive-of-addressee/addresser)[9]. This suggests that in democratic contexts, leaders employ inclusive pragmatic presuppositions by positioning themselves among the audience, which appears strategically necessary. Additionally, their choices of personal deixis reflect varying degrees of pragmatic empathy and distancing[8], further demonstrating how contextual factors shape linguistic strategies.

4.1. Trump’s Linguistic Pattern: First-person Deixis Dominance

Table 1: Personal deixis usage frequency and rank in Trump’s 2025 inaugural address.

Rank	Word	Frequency	Norm Frequency
6	we	86	29871.483
7	our	71	24661.341
11	i	36	12504.342
16	you	21	7294.199
29	their	12	4168.114
33	they	11	3820.771
82	your	5	1736.714

As shown in Table 1, Trump’s usage frequency of first-person deixis significantly surpasses that of second- and third-person deixis. The plural forms “we” and “our” rank highest, being the most frequent words in the entire speech except for the verb “will” (all other high-frequency words belong to the stop words list). Second-person deixis (“you” and “your”) appears 26 times, predominantly used in conjunction with first-person “I” or “we”. Third-person deixis occurs less

frequently and, apart from referring to beneficiary groups of new policies, demonstrates pragmatic presuppositions that marginalize certain referents. Below are selected representative examples from the speech with analysis:

(1) “I have heard your voices in the campaign, and I look forward to working with you in the years to come.”^[10]

(2) “I will fight for you, and I will win for you.”^[10]

(3) “The American people have spoken. I stand before you now as proof that you should never believe that something is impossible to do.”^[10]

In these examples, second-person deixis consistently co-occurs with first-person references. Example (1), addressing African American and Hispanic communities, reveals Trump’s pragmatic presupposition of aligning himself with minority groups. The repetitive use of “I” emphasizes his leadership commitments, while “you” creates a sense of being valued - establishing exceptional trust during this historically significant inauguration moment despite the formal context.

Examples (2) and (3), drawn from the speech’s conclusion, reflect Trump’s self-oriented pragmatic presuppositions. As head of government, he transforms institutional credibility into personal charisma through first-person “I”, with subsequent “we” referring more to his connection with citizens rather than official authority. This approach exhibits three key characteristics of pragmatic presuppositions: being unilaterally constructed by the speaker (unidirectional); not necessarily reflecting reality (subjective); and conveying a “folksy” image that listeners may uncritically accept as truthful (concealed).

(4) “And we have an education system that teaches our children to be ashamed of themselves, in many cases, to hate our country, despite the love that we try so desperately to provide to them.”^[10]

(5) “All illegal entry will immediately be halted, and we will begin the process of returning millions and millions of criminal aliens back to the places from which **they** came.”^[10]

These examples demonstrate Trump’s strategic use of third-person deixis, showcasing both pragmatic empathy and distancing. In (4), “children” as policy beneficiaries receives positive presuppositions, with Trump aligning emotionally with citizens to achieve political goals (pragmatic empathy). Example (5), contextualized by immigration-related crimes, uses third-person references to emphasize exclusivity against undocumented immigrants (pragmatic distancing).

4.2. Obama’s linguistic pattern: addressee-oriented strategy

Table 2: Personal deixis usage frequency and rank in Obama’s 2013 inaugural address.

Rank	Word	Frequency	Norm Frequency
3	our	76	35950.804
5	we	68	32166.509
15	us	20	9460.738
27	they	10	4730.369
63	you	5	2365.184
76	i	4	1892.148
76	she	4	1892.148
76	their	4	1892.148

(6) “We, the people, still believe that our obligations as Americans are not just to ourselves, but to all posterity.”^[11]

(7) “We must harness new ideas and technology to remake our government, revamp our tax code, reform our schools, and empower our citizens with the skills they need to work harder, learn more, and reach higher.”^[11]

(8) “Our journey is not complete until all our children, from the streets of Detroit to the hills of

Appalachia to the quiet lanes of Newtown, know that they are cared for, and cherished, and always safe from harm.”^[11]

The data in Table 2 combined with examples (6)-(8) reveal that Obama used first-person plural deixis most frequently, totaling 164 instances. Among these, the pronoun “we” appeared 68 times, predominantly referring to Obama and all American citizens collectively. This reflects Obama’s self-role presupposition as part of the audience group, effectively reducing psychological distance through identity convergence.

(9) “You and I, as citizens, have the power to set this country’s course.”^[11]

(10) “You and I, as citizens, have the obligation to shape the debates of our time – not only with the votes we cast, but with the voices we lift in defense of our most ancient values and enduring ideals.”^[11]

(11) “We are true to our creed when a little girl born into the bleakest poverty knows that **she** has the same chance to succeed as anybody else, because **she** is an American, **she** is free, and **she** is equal, not just in the eyes of God but also in our own.”^[11]

While second- and third-person deixis appear less frequently, they demonstrate a key characteristic distinguishing Obama’s strategy from Trump’s first-person dominant approach - an addressee-oriented perspective emphasizing individuals within the audience group. This strategy creates more direct and noticeable pragmatic empathy effects in reducing psychological distance. Examples (9) and (10) share similar structures where “you” not only indicates American citizens collectively but, through its singular form, specifically addresses each individual, significantly enhancing closeness. In example (11), when advocating for gender equality, Obama chooses the singular “she” rather than plural “they” to reference women, establishing clearer and more direct psychological proximity with female citizens.

Comparing both speeches, while both presidents preferred first-person plural deixis, their different contextual presuppositions led to distinct strategic emphases. Trump focused more on first-person usage, particularly the singular “I”, reflecting his “individualistic heroism” role presupposition. Obama, however, adopted an addressee-oriented approach, achieving pragmatic empathy more effectively through singular forms of second- and third-person deixis.

5. Conclusion

This study first traces the historical development of pragmatic presupposition, clarifying its characteristics—particularly its context-dependent nature—and establishes a theoretical framework connecting context, pragmatic presupposition, and personal deixis strategies. Through intra-textual analysis and inter-textual comparison of two political speeches, we conclude that the two presidents, operating in distinct contexts, developed different pragmatic presuppositions, leading to their respective strategic choices: a first-person-dominant approach (Trump) and an addressee-oriented approach (Obama). Grounded in corpus-based evidence, this research attempts to further explore the pragmatic analysis of political speeches.

References

- [1] Frege, G. *Über Sinn und Bedeutung [On sense and reference]*. *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*, 1892, 100 (1), 25 – 50.
- [2] Strawson, P.F. *Introduction to Logical Theory*. London: Methuen, 1952.
- [3] Hu Zehong. *On Pragmatic Presupposition*. *Journal of South China Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 1996, (6): 14-19+117.
- [4] Stalnaker, R. *Presupposition*. In: *Contemporary Research in Philosophical Logic and Linguistic Semantics*. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1974: 31-41.
- [5] He Ziran. *Pragmatics and English Learning*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 1997.

- [6] Ke Ping. *Cultural Presupposition and Misreading*. META, 1999, (1): 133-143.
- [7] Levinson, S. C. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- [8] Ran Yongping. *Pragmatic Perspective, Empathy and Distancing in Deixis Choice*. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, 2007, (5): 331-337+400.
- [9] Levinson, S. C. *Pragmatics*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2001.
- [10] Trump, D.J. *The Golden Age of America Now Begins*. Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2025.
- [11] Obama, B.H. *Our Journey is Not Complete*. Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2013.