

The political “we”, the academic “we”, and the academic debate “we”  
A review of the construction of the plural self in argumentative discourse

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*Introduction*

We address people, including ourselves, almost daily in various contexts. When being with family members, we may use “we” to suggest the shared interest and blood among family members. When giving speech at a national assembly, politicians may address their audience using “we” to win support. In academic discourse, one may use “we” to express a sense of authority<sup>1</sup>. When debaters deliver arguments, they may use “we” to represent their side, or they may want to identify themselves with judges.

Although the uses of personal pronouns in either daily conversational discourse, political discourse, academic discourse, or academic debate discourse often go unnoticed, they are powerful rhetorical tools in terms of influencing relationship with others (Fitzsimons & Kay, 2004; Proctor & Su, 2011). According to Tannen (2011), the metamessages sent by different means of addressing people “indirectly... frame our talk and express and negotiate our relationships to each other”. As Fitzsimons and Kay (2004) suggest, in natural language context, exposure of and use of the plural first person pronoun “we” increase the closeness and quality of relationships and interaction, and Proctor and Su (2011) contend that proper choice of personal pronoun will help politicians evoke resonance as a means of achieving success in political debate and interview. On the other hand, in the field of academic research, Vassileva (1998) identifies the multiple functions of “we” in academic writing including inclusivity and exclusivity, etc. In this paper, I would like to first review previous literature concerning power and solidarity as two important factors in pronominal choice, and the use of “we” in different contexts, and then make my own endeavor to identify some functions of “we” in the argumentative discourse of academic debate.

*The “papal we” and the “royal we” – a theological basis*

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<sup>1</sup> Although some view “we” in academic discourse as an inherence from the “royal we”, others argue that the “academic we” is not equal to the “royal we” because the academic circle as a whole is far more powerful than any individual (Vassileva, 1998).

The Biblical roots for the “papal we” comes from the St. Matthew’s account of the temple tax in *Matthew 17:24-27* (the New International Version):

*After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax came to Peter and asked, “Doesn’t your teacher pay the temple tax?” “Yes, he does,” he replied.*

*When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. “What do you think, Simon?” he asked. “From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own sons or from others?” “From others,” Peter answered.*

*“Then the sons are exempt,” Jesus said to him. “But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours.”*

Since the Bible was originally not written in English and the translators may add or change these personal pronouns while translating, I also referred to the New Living Edition of *Matthew 17:24-27*. The translated version in New Living Edition is ““Well, then’ Jesus said, ‘the citizens are free! However, we don’t want to offend them, so go down to the lake and throw in a line...’”. Through the comparison of the two translated versions, we may exclude the possibility that the first person plural was added by the translators, but a faithful representation of the original text. Throughout the Bible (the New International Version), this is the only passage where Jesus uses “we” to refer to himself and Peter instead “you and I”. This may be because Peter, the first pope, is God’s representative in human world. Therefore, in religious context, “we” means “God and I”, which explains why successive popes all use “we” to refer to themselves. When the pope says “our journey”, it will mean “my journey”.

In terms of the “royal we”, its origin can be traced back to 1169 when the English king Henry II used first person plural to mean “God and I” to show his power inherited from divine right (Parkinson, 2009). Perhaps the most famous example of the “royal we” would be “We are not to amused” by Queen Victoria. However, the current British monarch, Queen Elizabeth II seldom uses “we” to refer to herself. On the other hand, politicians also start to use “we” to refer to first person singular. In March 3, 1989, when talking about her new-born grandson,

Margaret Thatcher replied to a reporter saying that “*we* have become a grandmother” is exactly an example showing that politicians show the tendency to use “we” to refer to a singular self.

Above is the origin and change of “we”. However, I would like to point out that, based on my limited literature review, the use of “we” by American politicians rarely refers to the “royal we” which may be because of the difference in terms of culture, context, and political system.

#### *The function of personal pronouns – from narrow to broad*

Pronouns are generally viewed as the representations of nouns, which basically provide an anaphoric function while the deictic function is often overlooked (Proctor & Su, 2011). However, later studies suggest that the deictic function is crucial to pronominal use as well (Bolinger, 1979). Ortega (1996), when discussing personal pronouns, further extends the scope of personal pronouns, and argues that they also cover such extra-linguistic categories (social and pragmatic components) as politeness, respect, intimacy, and solidarity, etc. Therefore, proper choice of personal pronoun in argumentative discourse will subtly while largely influence the outcome.

#### *Power and solidarity*

Power and solidarity play a crucial role in deciding the way one addresses self and other. Tannen (1993, 2011) goes into detail to discuss the paradoxically inclusive relationship between power and solidarity from a sociolinguistic perspective. Generally speaking, power entails social status, and the position of being in control and not being imposed on; while solidarity, on the other hand, becomes the drive to be friendly. However, there also exists an intertwined relationship between the two as well. Let us take a conversation between Senpai (先輩) and Kouhai (後輩) in Japanese culture for example. In general, the former is superior and the latter is relatively inferior. A Senpai, who is from a culture where there is no such strict hierarchal class, may feel uncomfortable being addressed as ...-San even when they are already very close to each other, and asks his/her Kouhai to address him/her by their nicknames or first names without –San ending. On the one hand, being viewed superficially, this is a sign of solidarity; on the other hand, this is the sign of power as well because allowing one to call him/her by their nicknames or first names requires power.

Previous literature suggests that in political discourse, politicians tend to overuse “we” (Sacks, 1995; Tabakowska, 2002, as cited in Proctor and Su (2011)). This may be because politicians are often thought to be in power, and to achieve their political and rhetorical goals, they utilize first person plural form “we” to signify solidarity with his/her target audience.

In academic discourse, there exist two contradictory views concerning “we”. Some propose that “academic we” is inherited from the elitist “royal we” as a sign of power (Woodward & Woodward, 2012); while others argue the contrary (Vassileva, 1998).

In academic debate, from a power-solidarity dynamic perspective, I propose that the uses of “we” are mostly driven by solidarity for two reasons. First, at least three parties are involved in a debate: the Affirmative/Government team, the Negative/Opposition team, and the audience (judges/adjudicators included). Restricted by its unique rules (two or more teams debate concerning one proposition) and its ultimate purpose (education), the powerful one in a debate is the third party – audiences and judges, who can decide which side wins. In this respect, each team needs to appeal to the third party with the help of solidarity, and point out the shared ground with audience. Secondly, from a rhetorical perspective, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) argue the central position of audience in argumentation, and Burke (1969) contends that identification with audience plays an important role in argumentation. In this light, audience is the target for each team in achieving rhetorical goal. Therefore, solidarity is the driving force of employing “we” in most cases in academic debate. However, in addition to identifying with audience, “we” may also refer to one’s teammates when trying to strengthen the institutional image or deflecting personal responsibility for different rhetorical purposes. In this situation, solidarity may not refer to the one with the third party, but with one’s teammates.

### *The “political we”*

Despite of the tendency of overusing personal pronouns like “we” in political discourse, effective manipulation of personal pronouns does help to achieve better rhetorical goals (Fitzsimons & Kay, 2004; Proctor & Su, 2011).

Maitland and Wilson (1987) discuss how the choice of personal pronoun reflects politicians’ ideologies. On the basis of an analysis of three politicians in Britain in the 1980s, they contend that choices of pronouns reflect 1) their solidarity with an ideological paradigm; 2) dichotomy against those who possess different political ideology; and 3) their individuality within one

particular ideological paradigm. When it comes to first person plural form “we”, due to its semantic meaning, it has only the first two functions in political discourse.

Varying factors also influence the understanding and conveyance of personal pronouns. In political interviews, venue (context) and topic influence the distribution of the interviewees’ pronouns (Givon, 1976; Wilson & Zeitlyn, 1995, as cited in Proctor & Su (2011)). Proctor and Su (2011) argue that venue (context) is more important in terms of deciding the distribution of personal pronominal choice. When it comes to context, two types can be found: local (context within the text) and external (context outside of the text). Duranti and Goodwin’s (1992) approach focuses on the one within the text. In *Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon*, they write “Talk within the story...creates context for other talk...while yet other speech creates an appropriate context for the story itself.” On the other hand, Johnson (1994) proposes a more inclusive approach which takes related information of the relevant external context into consideration in conjunction with the local context. Bramley (2001) proposes a similar approach when analyzing interview of American politicians. In her model, “the local context of the detail of the surrounding talk (Drew and Heritage 1992 and Schiffrin 1994) is used to inform us to the nature of ‘we’ for the particular IE [interviewee]” (p.77), and the broader context of the American political culture is also taken into consideration.

Bramley (2001, pp. 77-110) identifies five basic functions of “we” in political interview: 1) institutional identity, 2) “us and them” dichotomy, 3) “we” as a means of co-implicating people, 4) “we” to indicate that it is not the interviewee who is involved in the issue (deflecting responsibility), and 5) “we” to invoke a general collective response.

#### *The “academic we” – to “we” or not to “we”*

There are two major views concerning the “academic we”. One argues the “academic we” is inherited from the “royal we”, while the other argues “we” refers to anything but the “royal we”.

The former resembles the “editorial we” which represents the power of a publication. In this light, academic writers use “we” to increase the convincing power or the sense of authority in their writings. Another concern that seems to encourage the use of first person plural form is that the third person can lead to imprecision and even to a kind of false modesty (“To “We” or

Not to “We”– The First Person in Academic Writing”, 2015). However, APA (American Psychology Association) Style recommends avoiding such “we” and using the singular form of the first person “I” when there is only one author for the purpose of objectivity and precision.

On the other hand, some scholars (Myers, 1989; Vassileva, 1998) argue that since the power of the whole academic community is stronger than individuals, the “academic we” cannot mean the same meaning as the “royal we”. Instead, plausible meanings of the “academic we” may include 1) the “humble we”, 2) the “authorial we”, and 3) the “collective we”<sup>2</sup> (Vassileva, 1998).

Halliday and Hasan (1976) contend that first person forms and second person forms “do not normally refer to the text at all” (p. 48), instead, the interpretation of referents is usually decided by the situation. In this sense, Vassileva (1998) argues that in academic discourse the surface of discourse in terms of “I-we” is about author-knowledge relationship; whereas the relationship becomes author-audience in terms of discourse realization, which becomes interpersonal axis of the relationship between authors and audience. Therefore, same as political discourse, context becomes key to the interpretation of “we”.

Vassileva (1998) conducted a cross-cultural research regarding the use of “I” and “we” in English, German, French, Russian and Bulgarian in academic discourse based on corpora of research articles in linguistic research. In her data analysis, the occurrence of first person pronouns “I” and “we” is 526 times among which the “we” accounts for 31% and “I” 69%. From Vassileva’s observation, “we” is used in the following ways in academic discourse:

1. To engage audience in the process of argumentation (“inclusive we”)  
E.g.: From what has been said, *we* may hypnotize that...
2. To introduce research methodology, procedure and data analysis (“exclusive we”, only the author(s))  
E.g.: *We* observe...
3. To refer to common knowledge/terminology/theory (“inclusive we”)  
E.g., The difference over understanding of what *we* mean by “discourse” came to the fore a few year ago.

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<sup>2</sup> The collective “we” can be further categorized into 1) the “inclusive collective we” and the “exclusive collective we” (Vassileva, 1998).

4. To refer to common experience (“inclusive we”)
  - E.g. So *we* inevitably caught in a trap.
5. Back-reference (“inclusive we”)
  - E.g.: As *we* have seen...
6. To refer to other people’s work (“inclusive we”)
  - E.g.: If *we* turn next to research studies ...

Although Vassileva’s research provide in-depth analysis across several languages, the research is not without limitation. First, academic writings can be roughly divided into two categories: science writing and humanity writing. On the one hand, science writings aim to present data extracted from researchers’ experiments. Except the use of “royal we” in some cases, the “academic we” usually refers to the “collective we” which represents the multiple writers of one paper. On the other hand, papers in humanity writings are concerned with explanations and interpretations which involve personal opinions instead of rigid experimental models. Therefore, academic writing in fields of humanity would allow greater scope for the use of first person pronouns (“I” and “we”). Second, theological factors rooted in the West are overlooked in the paper. As discussed above, influenced by religion, the imperial household and the “editorial we”, there is a tendency of researchers overusing the elitist “academic we”. In this light, taking theological factors into consideration as an external contextual factor would produce an even deeper insight regarding the use of “we” in academic discourse.

#### *“We” in academic debate*

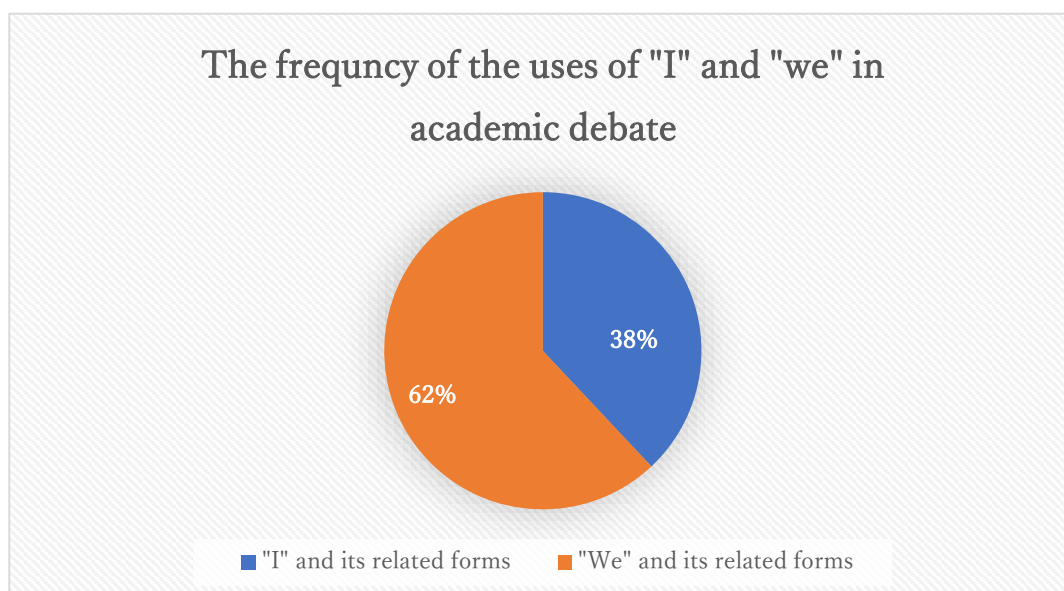
Academic debate is a special context which is different from conversation in natural language context. In a natural conversation context, most rules (such as turn taking, politeness and face) are constrained by culture, interlocutors’ social status etc., and are therefore implicit; while in academic debate, rules such as turn-taking are explicit (the order of speech), and are not much constrained by cultural factors<sup>3</sup>. When being compared with political debate, despite the fact that both concentrate on argumentation, the ultimate goal of academic debate is education while its counterparts in the real world is a tool/platform which enables politicians to win support or to pass bills.

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<sup>3</sup> Although most rules in academic debate are not constrained by culture, it still plays a part in academic debate. I once observed a Japanese academic debate, and both sides used honorific languages at the very beginning of their speeches. For example, some debaters would say “Yoroshiku onegai shimasu [Please let me start.]”, “Hajimemasu [I will start.]” at the beginning of their speeches.

A comprehensive analysis concerning the context of academic debate is thus necessary. Bitzer (1968) proposes the concept of rhetorical situation which resembles context in pragmatics. In a certain rhetorical situation, at least four factors constrain speakers'/writers' argumentation. These factors include (but not limited to): exigence (in academic debate it refers to the goal to persuade the judges), rhetor (in academic debate, it refers to debaters), audience (judges and possible regular audience in academic debate), and constraints (this concept is vague, but at least three aspects are involved: text which emerges from discourse, linguistics constraints (imposed by the genre of the text or the conventions of language use), and geographical and historical background (recent event, other people, culture, religion, politics, moral values, economy, etc.)). The sum of the four essential factors can be seen as the similar to the combination of local context and external context in political discourse.

In this paper, I would like to analyze a sample data collected at a debate course called 21<sup>st</sup> Century Program English C (Inoue, 2016) at Kyushu University, and try to summarize the uses of “we” in academic debate with the subjects being Japanese English learners. Participants were sophomore students from 21<sup>st</sup> Century Program who are native speakers of Japanese. There were seven speakers in the debate (four males and three females; three from the affirmative team and four from the negative team). The debate format was a standard “Policy



Debate” format (Alleles & Inoue, 2016, p.7), and the debate topic was “Resolved: The Japanese government should adopt a social security system that provides a basic income to all Japanese citizens”, the 2016 HEnDA national topic (All Japan High School English Debate Association).

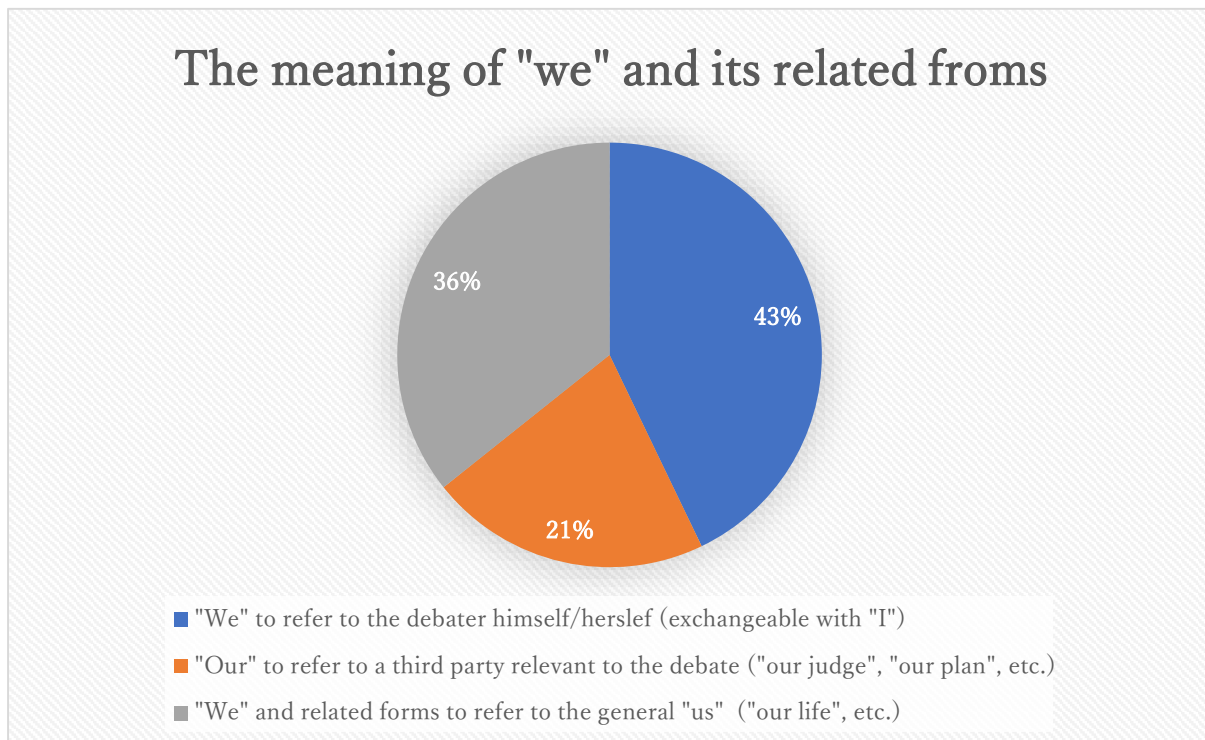


Participants were required to prepare scripted speeches, and deliver them during the debate. In the cross-examination session, one speaker from the opposite side will ask the previous speaker from the other side questions concerning the last speech, during which communication was most off script (debaters were allowed to refer to their speeches in cross-examination).

Throughout the one-hour long debate, debaters from each side used first person singular and first person plural (including related forms such as “my”, “me”, and “our”) 66 times, among which the frequency of the use of “we” and its related forms are 42 times, accounting for 63.6%.

From the semantic perspective, the meaning of “we” in this debate can be further categorized into: “we” as self-reference, “our” as referring to a third party relevant to the debate (“our judge”, “our plan”, etc.), and “we/our” as a reference to the general us. The data is showed in the pie chart below.

Three types of “we” were identified in terms of meaning via the analysis of the transcript: “we” as indication the debater himself/herself, “we” as reference to a third party other than the debater himself/herself inside the debate, and as a reference to the general us outside the debate.



1. “We” as indication to the debater himself/herself (interchangeable with “I”)

“As *we*<sup>4</sup> have stated so far, the introduction of basic income...”

(the first speaker from the Government team delivering constructive speech)

This extract was retrieved from the first speaker in the debate, and he therefore cannot refer to any other previous debater to form a group which can be eligibly addressed as “we”. Instead, the “we” can only be interpreted as “I” at the semantic level. Similar usage can also be found in other speakers’ speech as “So we believe the public pension is more kind, more good for elderly people”.

## 2. “Our” as a reference to a third party in the debate

“And then, *our* opponent side also mentioned that government can afford basic income but no longer can afford public pension system.”

Although the speaker used first person plural’s related from in the speech, “our argument” together refers to a third party instead the debate or the debater’s teammates. Similar examples also include “I especially want to thank all of our judges...” and “Ah, our pal...in our plan...”.

## 3. “We” and related forms as reference to the general us

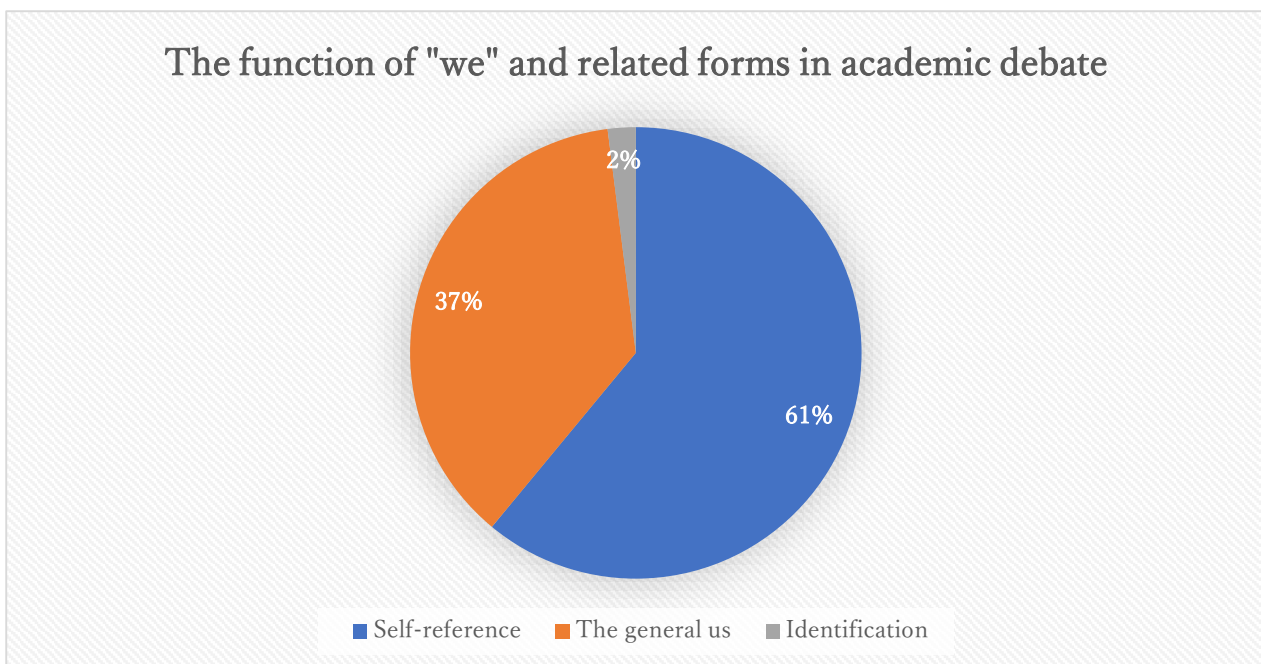
“It is not possible to live *our* sufficient life with basic income. Therefore *we’ll*...”

In such example, “we” and its related forms become the reference of the general us which is not limited to the debaters and the judges present but anyone outside the debate abut will also be influenced by the implementation of basic income. Similar examples include “In other words, it is enough”

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<sup>4</sup> The italicized words in the transcript were added by the author for better recognition of the first person plural used in the debaters’ speech.

In the regard of function of “we” in this debate, among the 42-time occurrence of “we” and “our” in the one-hour long debate, 26 of them are used to refer to self, meaning his/her own team, and 15 times of the occurrence of “we” and “our” refer to the general us. Interestingly, in the last rebuttal speech of the negative team, the speaker said “I especially want to thank all of *our* judge...”. “Our” here seems to refer to both the two teams in the debate because they had the same judges in the debate. Then, if we place the word “our” back to the original sentence, which is located at the end of the whole debate, “our” serves the similar function with identification because the debater was trying to leave a good impression to the judges and achieve a more persuasive argumentation. Therefore, in this sense, I would like to categorize it as the third type: identification<sup>5</sup>. Based on this point, we may hypothesize that language proficiency and debate experience to some extents determine the choice of personal pronoun in debate, and experienced debates tend to more flexibly use personal pronouns as a rhetorical device.



### 1. Self-reference:

“So hence *we* believe, uh, the Japanese government should not introduce the basic income system.”

<sup>5</sup> This strategy was used by the debater who has more debate experience and relatively higher English proficiency.

“We” was mostly used to refer to self, both the speaker himself/herself and his/her team members in this debate. Both the positive team and the negative team showed noted preference toward using “we” to refer to the speaker himself/herself. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that debaters may regard using “we” as a strategy to enhance the convincingness of their argumentation because “we” represents an institutional image as agreed among all members of their own teams. Another possible explanation comes from Asia’s collectivism culture. Generally speaking, compared with the West’s individualism culture which values the wellbeing of individual, Asian cultures, especially East Asian culture value the concept of group. Therefore, when arguing one’s stance in an argumentative context, one may prefer using “we” to replace “I” with the aim of emphasizing the notion of a group.

## 2. The general us:

“After this, *they* cannot get new job and become homeless. In other words, even if *we* get to work, it is enough that you will be in accident and become homeless.’

“We” can also be used to refer to the general us in the context of academic debate. This extract shows a very interesting shift of personal pronoun. In the first sentence, the debater used “they” to refer to a general group who will lose jobs and home. According to the context, “we” in the second sentence can also be interpreted as referring to the identical group portrayed by the debater. Being different from the first self-reference, “we” covers not only debaters but seems to be more inclusive with audience and the masses being counted. Therefore, the shift from “they” to “we” indicates the debater’s intention to invite others to assume themselves to be a member the group in order to enhance the convincing power of his/her speech.

## 3. Identification:

“I especially want to thank all of *our* judges, particular...”

The rarest (once) use of “we” in this debate came from the last speaker who was about to be giving a summary speech. The debater used “our” to address the judges. Obviously, “our judge” could not mean only the debater and the debater’s teammates’ own judges when the opposite team was in the debate as well, neither could it mean audience’s judges because there was no audience in that debate. Instead, it semantically referred to the judges for both teams. In this

sense, the debater seemed to be the representative for both teams, and addressed the judges as “our”. However, although “our” semantically refers to both teams’, it was a move of identification with the judges initiated only by the speaker’s team due to the antagonistic characteristics of academic debate. In addition to its function as identifying with the judges, it was also the first time that the debaters recognized the existence of a crucial party in the debate – the judges. This indicates that most novice debaters focus too much on the opposite team, and ignore the importance of the judges in debate. This also explains why such more “rhetorical” strategies were seldom used in this debate, who are actually the ones that should be persuaded in order to win a debate. Therefore, it is necessary to raise novice debaters’ consciousness of knowing the importance of the third party, judges and audiences, in the situation of debate, in order to achieve better rhetorical results.

Kenneth Burke (1969) argues that identification is the key issue in rhetoric. In addition to the self-reference function of “we” and its related forms, “we” is often seen as a strategy of identification with audience (in academic debate audience often refers to the judge) to construct a sense of shared common ground. On the other hand, from this debate’s transcription, “we” was seldom (only once) used as a strategy of identification with the judges. To propose a possible explanation, I would discuss the function of “we” in this debate on the basis of rhetorical situation theory (Bitzer, 1968).

To begin with, the exigence in academic debate. Factual condition and related interest are two essential elements (Smith & Lybarger, 1996) in the analysis of exigence in a rhetorical situation. When perception of a factual condition and interest in the condition are congruent, the exigence is “exigent”. However, since the ultimate of goal of academic debate is education (in this debate course, students learned English writing and speaking via debate), and debaters are students instead of policy makers or experts in relate fields, the ratio of perceived factual condition and interest is rather low and the exigence is therefore lower than its political counterpart. In this light, debaters would tend to use “we” to refer to their own team, or they would use “we” as a reference to the general us, instead of trying to identify with judges and audiences<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Although “we” in academic debate usually refers to one’s own side or the general us experienced debaters/English speaker did show a tendency to identify with the third party in party. Therefore, it may be hypothesized that English proficiency and debate experience affect the uses of argumentation strategy in academic debate.

In terms the role of debaters, it is obvious that debaters played multiple roles simultaneously in the debate. In the debate, they needed first to present and to defend their arguments, and then to attack arguments from the opposite side. Additionally, in ideal situation, debaters would also need to persuade judges that their model is better than the opposite's. Therefore, the uses of "we" would mostly function as self-reference and general reference to everyone.

The next is the judge. In academic debate, there are generally two types of audience present: "privileged audience" - judge and "regular" audience. Based on Bitzer's definition, the regular audience would be anyone who happens to be in the debate and can be influenced, and the judge should be those who are capable of being able to be influenced *plus* of being mediators of change – deciding which side wins. Since judges were the only audience in this debate, I would like to solely focus on the judges to explain the function of "we" in this debate. First, the judges are experienced debaters, which means that they are familiar with most sorts of rhetorical appeals used to appeal to audience in academic debate. Therefore, they are sensitive to all these persuasion strategies, and will focus more on the content. In addition, most judges have wide professional knowledge and their own consideration of the topics. This means that debaters need to adopt various strategies to achieve an ideal effect, and "we" functions more than merely an identification with others.

Lastly, other constraints also play important roles in the choice of personal pronouns. In terms of linguistic constraints, since academic debate is different from political debate in which speakers utilize varying rhetorical devices to incentivize his/her audience, the language of academic speeches is concise and well-organized, which aim to present evidence, not emotional appeal. In addition, debate format is also a vital constraint in academic debate. Since the speech time for each debater is limited, they will have to convey the most valuable and important message.

Therefore, from the perspective of rhetorical situation, using "we" as an emotional appeal is not the major function of "we" in academic debate, which leaves us with other functions including self-reference and referring to the general us.

### *Conclusion*

This paper briefly examines the origin of "we", its application in different types of argumentative discourse including politics and academic paper writing, and discusses possible

explanation of “we” in foreign language debate through the analysis of a sample debate discourse. Through the comparison between the frequency of “I” and “we” used in academic debate, it is not difficult to find that “we” was more frequently used since it can also refer to the general us while the first person singular form “I” does not have such semantic function. From the aspect of reference, “we” and its related forms can be used to refer to groups inside the debate (self, the judges, or plan) and outside the debate (the general us). In terms of the pragmatics functions, we found that the functions of “we” in academic debate are less diversified when debaters are English learners who are at intermediate level of language proficiency. Possible reasons may be because of the lack of language proficiency and debate experience, and restrictions imposed by the four essential factors in rhetorical situation.

However, the analysis is not without limitations. A major problem is the limited amount of data and participants, which means other types of “we” may have yet appeared. In addition, this qualitative analysis is only from the perspective of the researcher, which can be subjective due to the restrictions of personal experience and knowledge. Therefore, further research is necessary with more in-depth qualitative analysis of the uses of pronouns as well as interviews and questionnaires for triangulation.

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