

“I” or “we” in a pandemic? A linguistic case study on the personalization of Hungarian political communication during the coronavirus¹

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As politicians increasingly share personal content and information about themselves, the importance of political collectives – such as political parties – is diminished (Aczél 2009, Holtz-Bacha et al. 2014, McAllister 2009, Plasser 2008, Rahat & Sheaffer 2007, Szabó 2021, 2022). This phenomenon can also be observed in the Hungarian political discourse, including social media (Farkas & Bene 2022) and television (Horváth 2023). During the Covid-19 outbreak, the stakes of Hungarian political communication were even higher. This was due to the necessity of addressing the question of the existence of the rule of law (Szente 2020), the government’s incitement of public opinion, for example through the creation of enemies (Schlett 2018), the identification of the virus with war metaphors (Szabó 2020), or the one-sided and limited government communication.

What were the tendencies in the personalization of political communication during the coronavirus pandemic? My research sought to answer this question through an analysis of transcripts of interviews (N=39) given by the Hungarian Prime Minister to Kossuth Radio between 2020 and 2021, during the first three “waves” of the coronavirus. Using corpus linguistics methods, I examined the use of first-person singular (1PS) and first-person plural (1PP) pronouns and other possessive markers. This method allowed me to quantify the degree of personalization versus collective representation in the Prime Minister’s rhetoric. The database was examined using AntConc corpus linguistic analysis software (Anthony 2023).

In the case of 1PS, an upward-downward trend is apparent, while for 1PP an opposite curve is observed during the first three “waves” of the coronavirus. The use of first-person plural pronouns outnumbered the first-person singular pronouns, with the former representing 63.2% and the latter 36.8%. This indicates a predominant inclination towards collective representation. There was only one radio interview in which 1PS was used more frequently than 1PP. This can be explained by the Prime Minister’s attempt to deflect responsibility from 1PS (himself) to 1PP (in this case the government).

With regard to first-person plural possessive markers, the statement can be made on behalf of several groups, which in my paper can refer to family, party, nation, nations, European Union and humanity. Szabó (2021) used a radial model to represent the relative distance of first-person plural denotations from the speaker, and I further developed this to create Figure 1, which serves as the methodological basis for the research.

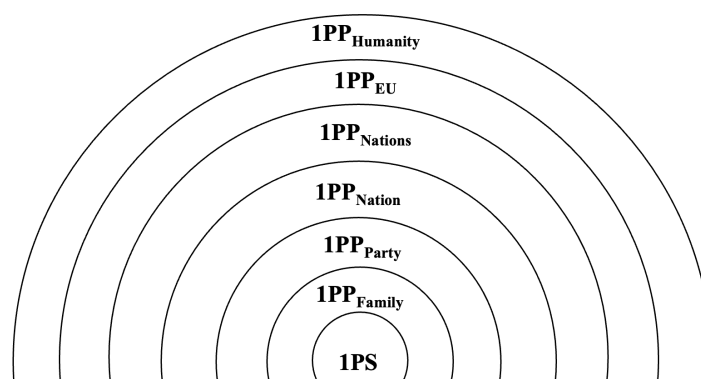


Figure 1: The relative distance of the referents of first-person plural pronouns to the deictic center (the authors’ own work based on Szabó 2021, p. 65).²

¹ Supported by the ÚNKP-23-1-I-CORVINUS-47. New National Excellence Program of the Ministry for Culture and Innovation from the source of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund.

² The different categories of 1PP are indicated by a subindex based on Szabó (2021, 2022).

The assumption of this model is that we see the world in an egocentric way, which also implies that the first-person singular (I) is located at the center, the first-person plural (we) is located further away (Szabó, 2021).³ Among the 1PP possessive markers 1PP_{Family} is the closest to the speaker, since this group includes the individuals with whom the politician has the closest private relationship. This group is followed by 1PP_{Party}, which is at least a community of people who are similar in their party identification. Next in line is 1PP_{Nation}, which includes people of the same nationality as the Prime Minister, i.e. Hungarians. Then come the supranational categories: 1PP_{Nations} and 1PP_{EU}, and finally the broadest category 1PP_{Humanity}.

The frequency of references to family, party, and humanity subcategories decreased, while those to nation, nations and the European Union increased.

From the very beginning, families played a central role in their communication. It is interesting to note that the proportion of people speaking on behalf of their own family in the corpus during the coronavirus was negligible. This discrepancy can be explained by the fact that during the Covid-19 outbreak, the PM focused on his party and the nation rather than his own family. It may be counterproductive too to speak of the latter at a time when community distancing rules were in place. Furthermore, it may serve a “hiding” function to deliberately say little on their behalf. The number of references to the European Union has increased, presumably because Hungary required the support of the 27 Member States to join forces, both financially and politically.

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³ The person markers are “located” at different distances from the speaker, and there is also a kind of ordering between them according to Rees’ (1983 cited in Jobst 2007) model – in the current research I interpret proximity to the speaker in this way.