

Depiction of Self & Others: A Corpus-Based Study of Personal Pronouns in Autobiographies

Abstract:

Autobiographies provide useful insights from the narrator's personal experiences, feelings, ideas, challenges and struggles. This paper explores the autobiographies of two women politicians, Benazir Ali Bhutto (BB) and Indira Gandhi (IG) from Pakistan and India, with a focus on personal pronouns from a feminist perspective. This study undertakes only three personal pronouns (I, we and they) in order to examine how the selected authors, project their self-image in their autobiographies and how they describe their relationships with others. Through corpus-based discourse analysis (CADS) this research throws new light on the narratives of the female leaders by recounting their portrayal of selves accomplishing different roles and duties in their situational dynamics and constraints. The findings of the study contribute to feminist literature by providing insights into the struggles of 'accomplished' women in their respective societies that transcends any geographical, religious and cultural boundaries.

Key Words:

Autobiographies, Corpus Linguistics, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Personal Pronouns, Self & Others

Introduction

The impacts of feminist thinking can be traced on various sub-fields in linguistics and hence gave birth to new paradigms and approaches such as feminist pragmatics, feminist conversation analysis, feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), feminist sociolinguistics, and feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis (Edward & Milani, 2014). The feminists view language as an instrument to exercise power and coercion. Therefore, linguistic analysis with feminist approach, considering socio-cultural factors, is produced in order to highlight the underlying mechanisms of the discourses to represent the powerful and oppressed groups. Similarly, feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) puts emphasis particularly on the 'discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order: that is, relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group and the disadvantage to exclude and disempower women as a social group' (Lazar 2005, p.5).

Burck (2011) states that language not only shapes our lives, but also shapes the ways of describing life. The genre of autobiography serves the purpose here as it presents the accounts of life stories and the narrators' experiences (Moor, 2015). Similarly, Olney (2017, p.35) states that autobiography is a "metaphor of the self as it is becoming". For women particularly, it serves as a medium to talk about everyday subjects, to share experiences and to narrate challenges, pains and constraints during their lifespan (Were, 2017). The autobiographies, written by women authors are considered as counter-discourses to prevalent power discourses as they present their side of the story (ibid.). The tradition and practice of politics in Pakistan and India is still a male-dominated domain and not women-friendly (Bhutto, 1988, Gandhi, 1982).

It does not accommodate women in the governance for several reasons including colonialism religion, and preconceived ideologies which preserve the exercise of power only for males while women are supposed to stay at homes and take care of their families (ibid.). Therefore, studying women in power, helps the

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readers to understand their difficulties, pains, struggles and sufferings in their journey to higher positions such as presidents and prime ministers.

This work studies autobiographies of female presidents and prime ministers because these are the highest positions in any society and to get there for a woman is not an easy task in a male-dominated society. It focuses on how the women leaders use personal pronouns (PP) to present self and others in their live stories. It investigates personal pronouns in autobiographies of two women politicians from a South Asian context. For this paper, two autobiographies Daughter of the East by Benazir Bhutto and My Truth by Indira Gandhi have been selected. There are certain similarities between these two women politicians, firstly, they are from South Asian contexts and secondly, both have political backgrounds, that is, the fathers of selected female leaders were prime ministers of their times. Lastly, they share social and cultural similarities as both Pakistani and Indian are patriarchal societies. Therefore, the aim of the current work is to investigate whether they use autobiographies to resist the patriarchal traditions or they subjugated to these social norms and values. It explores how they delineate different aspects of their persona and self and how they cite pronouns to talk about others (family, political party, government and other people).

Research Questions

- What are the statistical measures of personal pronouns (PP) in the selected corpus?
- How do the authors denote their selves by using personal pronoun I?
- What does the first person (PP) We refer to? Family members? People of country? Political party?
- What does the writer refer with the pronoun they? Which significant others?

Literature Review

Language is interconnected with social structures ([Wodak, 2002](#)) and language in use or discourse is rooted in and determined by social practices ([Fairclough, 2015](#)). Therefore, discourse exhibits feelings of frustration to a job, an environment or to a social order ([Putnam et al., 2005](#)).

Autobiographies are the discourses that presents this play of linguistic patterns in the examples from the real context of the author's personal, professional and social life ([Kapasi, 2016](#)). The autobiographies serve as the instrument for the writers to reflect the process of their self-formation and hence become a key discourse to craft and sustain self-identity ([Elareem, 2015](#)). At the same time, they confront the prevalent discourses which promote the preconceived ideologies and social norms by serving as discourses of resistance ([González Díaz, 2009](#)).

Language is deeply rooted in domains of politics as the political acts are performed through language and political goals are achieved by using language ([Bello, 2013](#)). In political domain, language is used to construct self-identity and group membership. The politicians choose specific language devices (for example personal pronouns) to carry out for the construction of self, significant others and collective groups. They use personal pronouns to constitute self (I, my) as well as multiple identities (we/us), their associations and significant others (they/them). The politicians also choose personal pronouns to denote their ideological groups through the polarizing categories of us and them (Bello, 2013).

Personal pronouns denote the persons in three categories in their subjective and objective forms, first person (I/me, we/us), second person (you) and third person (he/him, she/her, it and they/them) and they used as a replacement or substitute in the place of nouns (Ali et al., 2017). The role of pronouns is not confined to these traditional boundaries (substituting nouns) or referential sites ([Bramley, 2001](#)). The pronouns are also carried out to do some identity work because they provide nuanced understanding in their interactive roles rather than being deictic or fixed roles (ibid.).

[Fairclough \(1996\)](#) proposes relational values of English pronouns which help to build social relationships. Hence, discourse works above the levels of grammar and semantics in order to capture the ways in which language is used in various social, cultural and political arenas ([Simpson and Mayr, 2013](#)).

Feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA) interrogates such discourses which serve the purpose to maintain domination and coercion of dominant groups (Lazar, 2005). It also takes interest in scrutinizing the discourses of which are used as an instrument of resistance to existing societal, cultural and political practices. The central aim of FCDA is to interrogate 'discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order: that is, relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group and disadvantage, exclude and disempower women as a social group' (Lazar 2005, p. 5).

The existing literature on autobiographies of women leaders include ([Nadeem, 2015](#), Kapasi et al., 2016, Were, 2017) and few works on personal pronouns in political discourse such as interviews and speeches incorporated (Bello, 2013, [Khan & Malik, 2016](#), Ali et al., 2017).

Bramley (2001) investigated personal pronouns in the interviews of Australian politicians from 1995-1996. He obtained 32 interviews from both local as well as federal tv channels and radio stations and then converted this data into corpus. This work examines how politicians use personal pronouns to constitute and interact identities. It highlighted that personal pronouns are not only used to make references, but they are also employed for identity work.

Edward & Milani (2014) examines the corpus of herbalist pamphlets in South African context. This work considered both qualitative and quantitative paradigms by adhering to corpus linguistics and feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA). The findings show that the pamphlets support to maintain the patriarchal order in the society by portraying the men and women differently.

The analysis of personal pronouns has been carried out by Ali et al., (2017) with the focus on newspaper discourse. The researchers explored how personal pronouns are used to reflect the socio-political ideologies by taking a critical stance. The results of this work revealed that personal pronouns were employed to show distrust on Iraqi government and hence presents a negative role of government.

These studies show that there is a dearth of significant research which explores autobiographies as medium of resistance and of the research which investigated personal pronouns as tools to craft self and multiple identities in autobiographies.

Methodology

The current research adopted mixed method to analyse personal pronouns in the corpus of autobiographies. The core aim of mixed methods paradigm is to provide a complete understanding of the research issue by incorporating both quantitative and qualitative frameworks rather than each paradigm alone (Cresswell, 2014). This work takes help from corpus linguistics at the quantitative level with the focus on linguistic analysis of tailored made corpora of autobiographies. The analyses of the linguistic devices from the larger corpus bring to light the predominant patterns in any social set up or identity groups ([Edwards & Milani, 2014](#)). Therefore, the methods of corpus linguistics have been employed by many scholars ([Obaid et al, 2017](#), Villanueva et al., 2018, [Yoon et al, 2015](#)).

The qualitative approach in this research relies on feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) that examines the discourses in which overt manifestations of power (sexual harassment, physical violence, gender discrimination etc.) are at display. It also undertakes the discourses which attempt to resist the gendered practices of societies. FCDA specifically focuses on the examination of gender relationships in discourses whether texts or talks whereas the CDA aims to investigate social inequality as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimized and so on by language use (or in discourse).

Both corpus linguistics and CDA takes interest in social problems and real-life data. Therefore, CDA and corpus linguists have begun to see the potential of a cross-fertilisation of their respective methodologies, leading to what [Partington \(2008\)](#) calls Corpus-Assisted Discourse-Studies ([Baker et al. 2013](#), Edwards & Milani, 2014).

Data

The data for this research includes two autobiographies: Daughter of East (1988) and My truth (1982) by

Benazir Bhutto (BB) and Indira Gandhi (IG). They were obtained from Lums library and Cardiff university library respectively.

The details about these autobiographies are provided in table 1.

Table 1. Details about the Autobiographies

Autobiography	Author	Pages	Chapters	Publication
Daughter of the East	Benazir Bhutto	326	15	1988
My truth	Indira Gandhi	200	10	1982

Corpus Compilation

Both the books, in this study, were in printed forms. The Optical Character Recognition (OCR) scanners were used to digitize the books. In this paper, the sketch engine has been employed to analyse the personal pronouns in the specialised corpus of selected autobiographies.

For this analysis, the corpus size is 212, 507 words. Most commonly in corpus analysis, the wordlists are lists of frequencies of the words in the corpus (Edwards & Milani, 2014). The word lists of pronouns were obtained with the help of sketch engine which is a web service and a corpus software (Kilgarrieff, et al., 2014). It contains ready-made corpora for analysis and the researchers can also use their tailored made corpora for the analysis (ibid.). It provides the opportunity to get a detailed word list for any part of speech. For example, the word list of pronouns, in this work, shows lemmas, tags, lempos and frequency. Lemma groups all the word forms of a lexeme under the same class (Flowerdew, 2012). Tagger refers to the software which automatically gives part of speech category to every word in the corpus (Meyer, 2004). Lempos refers to the positional attribute of the word. It provides combination of lemma and first letter of the relevant part of speech with a hyphen, for example, house-n, go-v, I-d and we-d etc. In sketch engine, 'd' is a tag, used to denote lempos of personal pronouns (See Appendix A for further details). For detailed text analysis, the concordances of personal pronouns (I, we/us, they/them) will then be analyzed critically.

Findings and Discussions

Results of Quantitative Analysis

In order to research question 1 for this study, the data was processed in the sketch engine in order to get the wordlist of personal pronouns. The statistical measures along with the frequency and per million hits in the whole corpus have been shown in table 2

Table 2. Wordlist of I, we/us, they/them with Per Million Hits in the Corpora

Personal Pronouns	Daughter of the East	Per Million	My Truth	Per Million
I	3593	19,624	1602	24, 352
We	920	5,024	748	11, 370
Us	335	1,829	128	1,945
They	594	3,244	403	6,126
Them	330	1,802	179	2,721

Results of Qualitative Analysis

The concordances of I, we, they were explored, and the representative examples were selected for further analysis.

1st Person Singular

Both the writers use personal pronoun 'I' to denote the following functions.

Use of I to Project Self-Image

As shown from the results, the personal pronoun I is used for personal references in the selected corpus that is, to present their actions and activities, their accomplishments, responsibilities and learnings.

- *Then, of course, I was much more involved in the 1930 movement (Gandhi)*
- *A little later I had my first encounter with conscience and duty.*
- *As a student at Radcliffe, however, I had also learned first-hand the powerlessness of third world countries in the face of the self-interest of the superpowers. (Bhutto)*
- *More than a million of my countrymen came out to greet me when I returned to Pakistan from two years of exile in April 1986*

The pronoun I is also employed by the authors to delineate their feelings, depressions, sufferings, pains, personal issues and experiences. Hence, the use of I in the autobiographies helps the reader to understand the self-identity of both the authors under investigation.

- *In a huge rally in Washington, D.C., where, ironically, I caught my first whiff of tear gas.*
- *While my mother and I were passing the agonizing night in prison, my father's body was being secretly flown to Garhi for burial. (Bhutto)*
- *Even though I fell and was hurt, I didn't allow the flag to fall. (Gandhi)*
- *It is very difficult for me to pinpoint whether I actually heard about Jallianwalla Bagh*

'I' as Strategy of Resistance

There are examples of 'I' in the autobiographies where they have opted for conformity and have subjugated themselves to patriarchal norms to show how these women at times are either self-stereotyping or cannot think beyond these common-sense assumptions. These examples are the focus of this paper as it aims to explore the ways in which the authors show resistance in male-dominated societies and the examples where they become victim of religious, cultural, political and social norms. For instance,

- *in the struggle to return democracy to Pakistan, and the years I consequently spent imprisoned without charge*
- *In September of the same year I was also arrested.*
- *It is also employed as strategy of resistance at personal, professional and social level as shown in the following examples along with the analysis of this excerpt.*
- *At that moment I pledged to myself that I would not rest until democracy returned to Pakistan, that the light of hope that he had kindled would be kept alive.*

The above excerpt taken from BB's autobiography is related to the time when she was facing the pain of her father's unfair death. Looking from the feminist lens, the tone of her message is very assertive and a rare occurrence in a Pakistani society where women rarely show such kind of independence of character and pledge to themselves in such a manner. The assertive 'I' shows that unlike other women of her society, she is not concerned about the consequences of her actions though she might be aware that the cost of such a resolve might result in a constant and nerve-racking struggle against 'those' in power. It is not easy to mould people especially men to allow a woman to take such a path towards restoring democracy. It is assumed that she clearly knew she might not have enough support in her journey. Here, she seems to prove her mettle as a daughter of a politician and being trained by her father on whose footsteps she pledges to follow. We can also notice that she speaks in the voice of a politician ('I pledge to myself') and tries to show to her readers that her commitment is for a greater cause and is a matter of her personal choice rather than something being imposed on her or for some personal benefit. The use of personal pronoun here acts as a symbol for the exhibition of self-determination, selflessness and strength of character which can be ultimately be interpreted as a tool for resistance against all odds to achieve her goal.

- *In marrying him I was breaking age-old traditions, It was an intercommunity and an interreligion marriage.*

The above excerpt has been taken from IG's autobiography when she got married. Her husband Feroz Gandhi was a Parsi and hence her marriage was with a person whose religion was different from Gandhi's. Before partition, the Muslims and Hindus used to live in the sub-continent and hence share the boundaries of almost similar patriarchal traditions ([Asani, 1988](#); [Ahmed, Abbas & Khushi, 2013](#); [Dilpul, 2016](#), [Kaur, 2017](#)). In a male dominated society, a woman is not allowed to get married with the man of her own choice. In such circumstances the marriage with a man from a different religion becomes almost impossible. In such patriarchal conditions, Gandhi resisted against the traditional chains in order to marry a man from a different religious community.

1st Person Plural We as Inclusive

The results of the personal pronoun we showed 1668 hits in the whole corpus of two autobiographies. At personal level, both the authors used we to denote their families, their friends and their fellow students as reflected through the following instances:

Including Families & Friends

- I pass the now-empty gun room which we used as a family dining room (the family)*
- I think we visited every historic site.*
- we studied leaves, insects and everything in detail*

Furthermore, at social level, the use of personal pronoun we denoted that the authors share responsibility with their volunteer groups, freedom fighters and their party officials, for instance

Including Volunteer Groups & Freedom Fighters

- In the Monkey Brigade, we also had our own meetings and processions.*
- Together we turned out letters and reports on the human rights abuses in Pakistan from the spare bedroom we had converted into an office.*

Including Party Members

- because every time we had a meeting of the Executive of Parliamentary Party*
- then three million by the time we reached the Minar-i-Pakistan.*

Lastly, at broader level, the use of 1st person plural we shows their alignment with their own nation and also with other countries in the world. There are certain instances in the corpus of autobiographies which highlight the use of we to denote the whole humanity, for example,

Including Nation, other Countries and Humanity

- It is important that the world remember the repression we in Pakistan had to bear following General Zia's coup d'etat. (the whole nation)*
- We share common problems, common difficulties, common threats. (Afro-Asian group)*
- To God we belong and to Him we must return," (humanity)*

3rd Person Plural they to Denote others

By using they, the authors of both autobiographies denoted other people in their lives. Some of these other people are significant others whereas few are less important to them. therefore, this section is divided into two sub-sections clearly depict these significant and less significant others.

Significant Others

In this work, the significant others refer to the people which directly or indirectly affect the lives of the authors under this study. For instance, BB frequently describes the army officials because she lived in army regime for 11 years and the generals conspired to throw her father and ultimately led him to death as shown in the following instance.

- a) *The generals must not think they have won.*

Furthermore, BB talked about her unmarried aunts because of the traditional chains of society which did not allow to marry them to protect the property of their forefathers such as

- a) *Bhutto cousins available for marriage, they had been consigned to a life of purdah behind their compound walls in Hyderabad.*

She also appreciated some of the jail staff who helped her during her years of detention. She also raised voice for the prisoners in Pakistani jails as she herself experienced the hygienic and poor conditions in the jail as reflected through following instances respectively:

- a) *At great risk to themselves, they smuggled me a pen and a new notebook*
b) *more than 40,000 prisoners in Pakistan jails, and that they are held in miserable conditions*

Like Bhutto, Gandhi also mentioned her opponents at several places in her autobiography. Moreover, she also used the 3rd person plural they to denote foreign delegations as shown from the following instances respectively (a, b).

- a) *When they considered that somebody was close to me, they would attack that person rather than me.*
b) *Later they came to India. (foreign delegations)*

Less Significant others

This category in this work is used to define the people from other cultures, ethnicities and people from their own history. They mentioned these people in order to share some examples from history, to delineate their own experience with the people of other cultures and ethnicities. For example,

Instances from History and other Cultures

- a) *Where the people had lived as they had for centuries at the mercy of their tribal chiefs and landlords*
b) *All they (the British) saw was our brown skin.*
c) *This was Franco's Spain and they said one must know some Spanish.*

Conclusion and Recommendations

The results have helped to synthesize several findings. Firstly, this work agrees with the existing literature that autobiographies are the mirrors in which the writers reflect their own images (Jakubowska, 2010, Elarem, 2015) as the selected women portray their 'selves', be it social, biological, religious or cultural. It also confirms that personal pronouns are not only reserved for deictic or anaphoric references, instead they are used to describe self as well as association with other groups (Bello, 2013, [Ali et al., 2017](#)).

This research has added to the limited, but growing scholarship regarding the woman politicians' written political autobiographies. It also adds an original contribution to the field based on the unique combination of two political leaders from South Asian context and corpus analysis by providing orientations for selected pronouns (I, we, they) in this work along with concordance lines which increases the robustness of the results.

This study is exceptional in its approach by showing that personal pronouns are used to project self-portrayal, to align the writers with their families, friends, political parties and nations, to denote the significant others. The personal pronouns in the corpus of this study also highlighted the descriptions about

histories of both countries, global perspectives, other cultures and ethnicities. The analysis of concordance lines of I provided insights about their responsibilities, activities, learnings, experiences, pains and sufferings. They also highlighted how they fought against the patriarchal structures of a male dominated society to which each woman under this study belongs. For this reason, the current study becomes important because it highlights the sufferings of these politicians which led them to fight for the sufferings of other women. From a feminist perspective, this analysis paves the way for other women who have been fighting their battles in their families, communities or societies and for women who have been struggling to construct their identity specifically.

This work has opened new dimensions for future researchers. The model, applied in this research, could be applied to the autobiographies of other politicians (both men and women). The future researchers can draw a comparison between autobiographies written by men and women by exploring similarities and differences using corpus-based discourse studies (Partington, 2008).

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Appendix A

WORDLIST Daughter of the East (28 Items)

Lemma	Tag	Lempos	Frequency
1 I	PP	I-d	3,593
2 my	PPZ	my-d	2,655
3 me	PP	me-d	1,197
4 he	PP	he-d	1,066
5 we	PP	we-d	920
6 it	PP	it-d	842
7 his	PPZ	his-d	813
8 you	PP	you-d	804
9 they	PP	they-d	594
10 our	PPZ	our-d	584
11 their	PPZ	their-d	458
12 him	PP	him-d	431
15 us	PP	us-d	335
16 them	PP	them-d	330
17 your	PPZ	your-d	247
18 her	PP	her-d	202
19 its	PPZ	its-d	107
20 myself	PP	myself-d	97
21 themselves	PP	themselves-d	49
22 himself	PP	himself-d	47
23 one	PP	one-d	25
24 herself	PP	herself-d	16
25 ourselves	PP	ourselves-d	11
26 yourself	PP	yourself-d	10

WORDLIST Gandhi. My truth (26 Items)

Lemma	Tag	Lempos	Frequency
1 I	PP	I-d	1,602
2 it	PP	it-d	816
3 we	PP	we-d	748
4 my	PPZ	my-d	484
5 he	PP	he-d	465
6 they	PP	they-d	403
7 you	PP	you-d	294
8 our	PPZ	our-d	270
9 me	PP	me-d	238
10 them	PP	them-d	179
11 his	PPZ	his-d	170
12 him	PP	him-d	164
14 us	PP	us-d	128
15 she	PP	she-d	109
16 your	PPZ	your-d	74
17 her	PPZ	her-d	60
18 its	PPZ	its-d	59
19 one	PP	one-d	47
20 her	PP	her-d	31
21 ourselves	PP	ourselves-d	23
22 itself	PP	itself-d	15
23 themselves	PP	themselves-d	14
24 himself	PP	himself-d	14
25 myself	PP	myself-d	13