

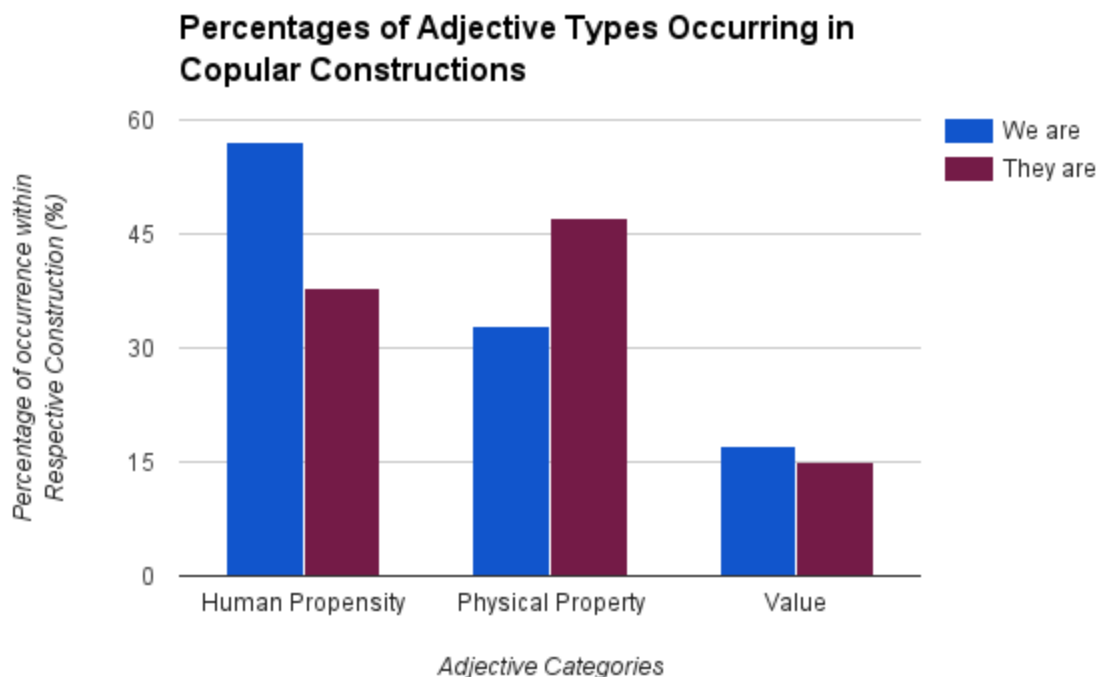
'We are' and 'They are' Constructions and the Construction of Social Categories

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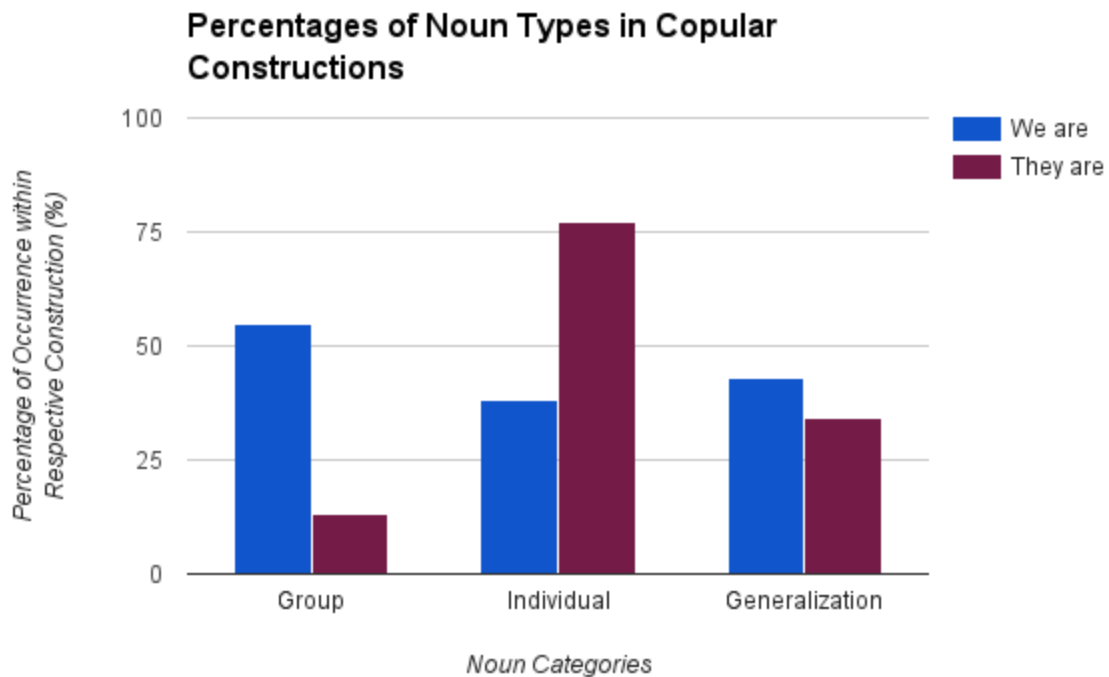
This study looks at how predicate adjectives and nouns are used with the pronouns 'we' and 'they' in discourse to produce and maintain social categories relative to the speaker. Pronouns have been found to be relevant in the establishment of social distance between participants depending on the pronoun being used (Fitzsimons & Kay, 2003). For example, a listener might perceive the participants to be closer in a story if the speaker uses the pronoun 'we' rather than the participants' individual names. Similarly, the first person plural pronoun 'we' and third person plural pronoun 'they' can have similar effects with regards to the inclusion or exclusion of the speaker. If the first person plural pronoun 'we' is used the speaker aligns themselves with the group in question whereas the use of 'they' distances the speaker from the group. This process along with the choice of predicate adjectives and predicate nouns allows speakers to produce different social categories through their speech. Predicate adjectives and nouns are those that follow the copula in a simple declarative sentence (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1993) such as in the sentence 'we are women' where the noun 'women' follows the copula 'are'. These predicate adjectives and predicate nouns were chosen to be analyzed specifically, because it has been found that these copular constructions are highly evaluative in nature providing a lot of the speaker's opinions about the subject matter (Gianluca & Stanislaw, 2014). Thus, analyzing this process will help us to better understand how social categories are produced and maintained in a social setting.

For this study, the data was collected from the Contemporary Corpus of American English (COCA). Because this research was looking for category construction in discourse, only oral data was used. All of the adjectives that appeared after 'we are' and 'they are' were recorded and coded for their frequency and context. The predicate nouns were recorded by searching for nouns following 'we are' and 'they are' but a word was permitted to separate the noun from the copula to account for articles. These, too, were coded for frequency and which pronoun was used. While it is possible to have a noun phrase or adjective phrase that is longer than two words, for this study simple noun and adjective phrases were used. Upon the completion of the data collection, the adjectives were further coded for the type of adjective according to Dixon's categories: human propensity, size, physical property, speed, value, etc. (Dixon, 1977). In a sentence like, 'we are concerned' for instance, the adjective 'concerned' would be categorized as human propensity because it is describing an emotional or mental state. The nouns were categorized into group words, individual words, and generalizations. Group words include any words that refer to a group like 'team' while words like 'leader' or 'individual' were labeled as individual. The category labeled generalization was for any noun that referred to a social category. This was chosen specifically because generalizations have been found to be highly evaluative (Scheibman, 2007). For example, looking at the statement, 'we are women' again, the predicate noun is referring to a specific social category, women.

A total of 7,228 tokens were gathered with 3,251 tokens in constructions with 'we' and 3,977 appearing with the pronoun 'they'. Adjectives had 5,268 (73%) occurrences while nouns only had 1,960 (27%) occurrences. However, the nouns had a wider variety with 160 different nouns being used and adjectives only having 121. Among the adjectives, the three most common types of adjectives used were human propensity, physical property, and value. The percentages for these three can be seen in the following chart which indicates that human propensity was the most common with the first person pronoun at 57% and physical property was the most common for the third person pronoun with 47%.



For the nouns, the tokens were divided up into 'group' words, 'individual' words, and words that referenced social groups. For these three categories, group words were used significantly more with the first person plural pronoun with 62% compared to 28% for 'they'. However, the inverse was true for words emphasizing the individual which occurred more frequently with the third person plural pronoun, 63% compared to 32% for 'we'.



This data illustrates the process by which social categories are administered to particularly with relation to the speaker. As individuals speak, they use the two pronouns, 'we' and 'they,' to either align or distance themselves from the material at hand. When they do include themselves in the group being discussed there is an emphasis on the group which can be seen in the nouns that are used for these constructions. In contrast, when the speaker does not attach themselves to the subject matter and uses the pronoun 'they,' there is a preference to use nouns emphasizing the individual. Once these groups are established and the speaker's relation to them is addressed, further description occurs with the use of predicate adjectives. With the predicate adjectives, there is a higher tendency of inclusive groups to describe their feelings with adjectives in the human propensity category while the exclusive categories rely more heavily on physical properties to define them. The actual description of the groups provided by the adjectives appears to be of greater import than the initial labeling based on the significantly higher occurrences of predicate adjectives than predicate nouns.

By understanding this process of category production and maintenance, we are better able to understand how individuals use language as a tool to navigate through society and establish their own identity. When these social categories are established, the individual's identity can be seen to emerge, as well, through its relation to these categories. In this way, both social categories and social identities are produced and maintained through our discourse.

References

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