CZU: 81`42:616.98-036.21 **https://doi.org/10.59295/sum4(204)2026_11**

PERSON DEIXIS AS A SOCIOCULTURAL MARKER IN PANDEMIC DISCOURSE

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This paper examines person deixis as a persuasive strategy in presidential pandemic rhetoric. Besides its referential function, person deixis can increase the power of persuasion by building social relationships, distributing agency and responsibility, fostering inclusion and shaping collective identity. The use of person deixis creates a sense of belonging, a space where moral values are shared as a nation and serve a common goal, to defeat the virus. We aim at providing a contrastive analysis of the speeches delivered by Maia Sandu, President of the Republic of Moldova, and Joe Biden, former US President, at the beginning of the pandemic, by focusing on the socio-pragmatic and cultural dimensions of personal pronoun use. By combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches, we study the cultural norms reflected by deictic choices. The research can contribute to the research on pandemic discourse as it provides a cross-cultural analysis of distinct conceptualizations of social cohesion in times of crisis.

Keywords: *cultural values, discourse analysis, pandemic discourse, personal deixis, social deixis, persuasion, politeness strategies.*

DEIXIS PERSONAL CA INDICATOR SOCIOCULTURAL ÎN DISCURSUL PANDEMIC

Articolul dat examinează utilizarea deicticelor de persoană drept strategie persuasivă în discursul prezidențial. Pe lângă funcția referențială, pronumele personal atribuie discursului asertivitate, servind la construirea relațiilor sociale, distribuirea responsabilităților, astfel conturând identitatea colectivă. Utilizarea deicticelor de persoană generează, de asemenea, sentimentul de incluziune și apartenență, prin crearea unui spațiu în care valorile morale sunt împărtășite comunitar în același scop, de a învinge virusul Covid-19. În această lucrare ne propunem să realizăm o analiză comparativă a discursurilor livrate de Maia Sandu, președinte al Republicii Moldova, și Joe Biden, ex-președinte al SUA, la începutul pandemiei, pornind de la dimensiunile socio-pragmatice și culturale ale deicticelor în discursul public. Studiul îmbină analiza calitativă și cea cantitativă, pentru a cerceta modul în care alegerea formulelor de adresare și a pronumelui reflectă normele culturale. Articolul poate contribui la cercetarea discursului pandemic, oferind o analiză contrastivă a conceptualizării noțiunii de coeziune socială pe timp de criză.

Cuvinte-cheie: *valori culturale, analiza discursului, discurs pandemic, deictice personale, deixis social, persuasiune, strategii ale politeții.*

Introduction

Public communication during the COVID-19 pandemic required governments and health institutions to persuade citizens to adopt unfamiliar behaviour, from mask-wearing to social distancing and vaccination. In contexts of crisis, linguistic choices are never simply informational: they are strongly persuasive, relational, and cultural. Person deixis is among the most influential linguistic resources used in pandemic discourse. Personal pronouns such as *I, we* and *you* do more than identifying participants in the discourse. They encode social relations, construct collective identity and distribute moral responsibility.

In many works, Covid-19 communication has been mainly examined through metaphor while the use of pronouns remains unexplored. This article investigates the sociocultural function of person deixis in presidential pandemic discourse. The aims of our research are to examine the way person deixis used in pandemic discourse constructs relationships between the authorities and the citizens, how it contributes to persuasion, as well as determine the cultural values it shapes.

The analysis is based on valuable insights drawn from the works of notable researchers such as M. Bloor and Th. Bloor, Ch. J. Fillmore, P. Brown and S. C. Levinson, C. Barker, B. Paltridge, M. Bucholz, K. Hall, G. Yule, etc.

Methodology

Our investigation presents a socio-cognitive perspective by combining studies related to sociolinguistics, sociopragmatics and politeness theory. It provides a comparative analysis of two pandemic discourse samples delivered by Maia Sandu, president of Moldova (the Republic of), and Joe Biden, the former US President, in March 2020, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is worth noting that both speakers were candidates in the election running their campaigns for the president's office. Each speaker comes from a distinct cultural background, and we intend to analyze how social crisis may influence the patterns of discourse and the linguistic choices.

The samples for our cross-cultural analysis were selected based on two criteria: the social context and the aim of the discourse. We consider the timeframe to be critical as it is characterized by the lack of scientific information about the nature of the virus, which forced the two leaders to heavily rely on persuasive strategies to increase compliance with the restrictive health measures. Both speakers criticize the way the crisis is managed by the authorities while offering their own trustworthy model of leadership.

We selected the discourses which were delivered by the two presidential candidates, as part of their official election campaigns, and transcribed them. We manually identified and categorized the occurrences of personal pronouns *I, we, you* and *they*. Thus, the quantitative analysis provides an overview of pronoun frequency and distribution within discourse.

Given the fact that pronoun choice encodes norms such as politeness, respect, social distance and institutional authority, the analysis is followed by a qualitative interpretation which reveals the relationship between person deixis and social deixis. This is especially relevant for the Romanian language, where formal and informal second-person forms point to social hierarchy and relational distance, in contrast to English, where such distinctions are not marked by personal pronouns. The analytical framework is mainly focused on the sociopragmatic functions of person deixis and the linguistic choices are compared against the cultural expectations of each country.

1. Discourse Functions of Person Deixis

The function of persuasive discourse is to convince someone to agree with a position held by the speaker and, as a result, to act in a certain way. Crisis communication research shows that the audience responds not only to the message but also to the relational stance of the speaker, whether the message signals closeness or distance, shared responsibility or individual burden, solidarity or blame. The article "Deixis in Persuasive Texts", written by C. Hosenfeld, J. F. Duchan, and J. Higginbotham, emphasizes the role of strategic use of deixis in discourse. As such, "competent handling of deictic perspectives in persuasive text is essential to its effectiveness" [6, pp. 407-408]. Collectivist communities may respond more positively to messages emphasizing interdependence and shared obligation while individualist societies may prefer more autonomy and personal control.

1.1. Person and Social Deixis

First, it is important that we distinguish between *anaphoric reference* and *deixis. Anaphoric is* a term used to describe "a linguistic feature which refers to a previously mentioned element in any given text". *Deixis* refers to the characteristics of language (*deictics or deictic expressions*) that indicate something relative to the speaker or the situation. Pronouns are commonly considered to be *deictic* expressions [15, p. 10]. They are language aspects that require contextualization which helps us identify the participants in communication, their location in space and time, as well as social roles, identity and stance [10, p. 54]. These include *person deixis*, *place deixis*, *time deixis*, *discourse deixis* and *social deixis* [7, pp. 59-61; 9, p. 62].

As stated by R. D. Perkins in his work on deixis grammar and culture, *person* is a *deictic* category. He cites the British linguist J. Lyons (1977) who argues that the deictic component of the meaning of personal pronouns is often connected to other distinctions so that some study should be run in order to determine the deictic nature of the form. According to J. Lyons, the pronoun *I* is used by the speaker to assign him/herself as the referent and *you* is used to point to the addressee. *We* refers to the group of which the speaker is a part [Apud: 13, p. 101]. D. N. S. Bhat, former research associate in the Language Universals Project

of Stanford University, adds that the first-person pronoun can show whether the speaker is the agent or the recipient of the action [2, p. 6].

Person deixis and *social deixis* are analytically distinct, but in discourse they are tightly interrelated. Whenever a speaker chooses a person form, the choice always reflects or negotiates a social relationship. *Social deixis* is defined as the study of that aspect of sentences which reflects or shapes certain realities of the social situation in which communication happens [7, pp. 111-112]. *Social deictics* are terms of address that indicate aspects of the relationship between people [15, p. 10; 5 p. 166]. Thus, we consider that person deixis is a vehicle through which social deixis is expressed.

1.2. Sociocultural Dimensions of Person Deixis

An important aspect of personal identity is *face*, the main component within politeness theory, defined as the personal image that one has of oneself and the awareness of the social status of others [Apud: 8, pp. 188-193; 14, p. 244].

B. Paltridge, professor of TESOL in Sydney, Australia, supports the idea that *identity* is not a static attribute. They explain that *identity* is permanently reconstructed through the ways we act, the ways we do (or do not) belong to a certain community and based on mutually agreed upon cultural understandings [12, p. 42]. Also, in the words of the linguists M. Bloor and Th. Bloor, it is essential in CDA [Critical Discourse Analysis, author's note] that we should pay attention to the way in which identity is performed in discourse. “People tend to identify with their own social groupings (Self) and often place themselves in opposition to other social groupings (Other).” [3, p. 20]

Agency structures determine the participants of discourse and the roles that are attributed in relation to a specific process [1, p. 144]. Deictic choices can shift perceived responsibility and agency. Messages using the pronoun *we* can foster collective effort, whereas messages emphasizing the pronoun *you* may motivate individual action. Agency determines how much control the speaker has over the situation and how successful assertion is in changing social reality. The speaker is not a mere narrator but becomes an active participant.

Politeness is an indicator of identity that the participants attribute to themselves within discourse. It refers to the “patterned behaviors” through which we interact with others daily to exchange ideas successfully and cooperatively. We share our feelings, opinions and experience “in accordance with a set of social and cultural norms”. Efficient communication depends on whether we are able to maintain the *face* of the interacting parties. As such, politeness includes the following elements: models of behaviour, mutual cooperation, social and cultural norms, maintenance of *face* of those involved in communication [14, pp. 244-245]. As noted by the researchers S. Strause and P. Feiz, both known for their work in applied linguistics and discourse analysis, *negative politeness* is carried out with the help of linguistic strategies that “diminish the degree of a potential FTA (*face threatening act*) in relation to the addressee.” [8, p. 194] M. Bloor and Th. Bloor, define it as “social distancing, deference” and point out that *negative politeness* is what immediately comes to our mind when we think of the word *politeness*: apologizing, saying “thank you” or “please”, using people's titles, avoiding directness, hedging, etc. [3 p. 105].

Positive politeness is “the wish to be approved of in certain respects”: using first names, indicating common interest, showing solidarity and inclusivity [idem, p. 105]. Using positive politeness as a discourse strategy helps in identifying a common ground between the audience and the speaker. Using address forms, personal stories, showing empathy, seeking for agreement, hedging – are all in-group identity markers [4, pp.103-117]. We can conclude that *negative face* is associated with formal politeness while *positive face* is expressed by the desire to be understood and approved of (Fig. 1.1).

Respect for face could be regarded as “norms or values subscribed to by members of a society”. Brown and Levinson argue that the reciprocal knowledge of public self-image or face of the ones participating in discourse and the social necessity of individual orientation in interaction are universal. What differs from culture to culture is the content of face [4, p. 62, 129-130]. Thus, person deictics are not simply referential devices but culturally loaded resources for constructing social relationships and persuading the public to align with the speaker.

Positive face wants:
The desire to be liked, accepted, ratified, and agreed with.
The want of every 'competent adult member' that his wants be desirable to at least some others.
Negative face wants:
The desire to be unimpeded, to have one's territory and/or personal freedom—free from intrusion.
The want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others.

Fig. 1.1. Positive and Negative Face, S. Strauss & P. Feiz, 2014 (adapted from Brown and Levinson, 1987)

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2. Cross-cultural Analysis of Person Deixis in Public Discourse

The speaker has a double position in discourse, being the central point and taking up a certain degree of responsibility. Therefore, in discourse we should look not only for the person but also for a certain status and category [11, p. 94]. The co-authors P. Mühlhäusler and R. Harré address the role personal pronouns can play in building identity. Their research indicates that "it is largely through pronouns and functionally equivalent indexing devices that responsibility for action is taken by actors and assigned by them to others. […] The sketch of the cultural norms is culturally specific. It is a sketch of the moral order of speaking rooted in Christian tradition of individual moral responsibility." [idem, p. 89]

To start with, Joe Biden's address on the coronavirus [16], delivered while he was actively campaigning for the presidential office (March 2020), demonstrates a strategic use of person deixis. The most frequently deictic form used in discourse is the inclusive pronoun *we* (also *us* and *our/selves*) which stands for all the participants involved in communication. The discourse numbers 62 occurrences, out of which 38 (inclusive) cases regard the US nation (Fig. 2.1).

Maia Sandu's discourse was given in March 2020 [17], which coincided with the announcement of Moldova's first coronavirus case. Maia Sandu was also running the election campaign for the president's office.

Joe Biden's Discourse			**Maia Sandu's Discourse**		
Use of Pronouns	**Occurrence**		**Use of Pronouns**	**Occurrence**	
I/me/my	22		**I/me**	3	
you	8		**you/ You (polite)**	6/ 6	
we	24 (incl.)	32 (excl.)	**we/ us/ our(selves)**	20 (incl.)	14 (excl.)
us/ our(selves)	38 (nation)				
they/them(selves)	11		**they/them(selves)**	37	
Total (%)	135 (5,13%)		**Total (%)**	96 (3,87%)	
Out of	**2631 words**		**Out of**	**2475 words**	

Fig. 2.1. Use of personal pronouns in pandemic public discourse, author (2026)

Similar to Joe Biden's, Maia Sandu's discourse relies on the inclusive first-person plural pronouns *noi, pe noi, ne*, *nostru*, which creates a feeling of shared experience. We counted 20 occurrences of the inclusive

form versus 14 examples that are exclusive. Given the norms of the Romanian language, we also considered the elliptic forms indicated by verb inflection. The main focus of Maia Sandu's discourse is on the third plural pronoun *they* (37 occ.). We will comment on its social aspect later. To avoid repetitions, we will furtherly write only the initials of the speakers, marking the discourse samples as D-MS (Maia Sandu) and D-JB (Joe Biden).

In D-JB, pandemic is framed as a collective challenge, and recommendations are presented more like mutual responsibilities instead of strict commands. Civic duty being regarded as an act of patriotism and a source pride, the speaker (D-JB) appeals to the law-abiding nature of the American people.

e.g. D-JB: *We must, all of us, follow the guidelines of the officials" or 'neither should we panic or fall back.*

References like *"our country", "our people", "our scientists"* (D-JB) show belonging and the importance of individual action for the well-being of the whole community. By emphasizing joint effort through statements such as *"we're going to face this"*, *"we will beat it"*, the speaker calls for resilience and cooperation, encouraging compliance and reinforcing socially valued principles such as responsibility and concern for others.

In D-MS the inclusive pronoun *we* reduces social distance and presents preventive actions as moral obligation: e.g. „*Ce putem face? Cel mai important este să nu contribuim la răspândirea virusului…"*, *„fiecare dintre noi trebuie să se protejeze…"*. It highlights that the attitude of everyone plays a crucial role in the wellbeing of the community. The possessive forms *ai noştri, a noastră* (D-MS) emphasize belonging and social cohesion. It is about our parents, our grandparents, our relatives who have gone abroad, our country. The intent of such a deictic choice is to activate kinship. These forms reflect a cultural model in which collective identity is constructed through relational ties. By invoking family roles, the speaker appeals to moral obligations of care, responsibility and protection. Cultural values of familial duty and social compassion are deeply rooted in our historical past.

The choice of the speaker between the pronouns *we* and *I* can either foreground or obscure personal commitment. In D-JB utterances such as *"I assure you", "I'd like to thank those who are already making sacrifices…", "the leadership I believe is needed"* speak of a promising candidate who is directly engaged and responsible. The pronoun *I* in both discourses allow the speakers to maintain authority while remaining integrated within the collective group. At the same time the second-person form of address *you* appoints the audience as agents and reinforces their roles in responding to the pandemic crisis. In D-MS he first-person singular pronoun appears less frequently but plays a crucial role in expressing personal responsibility and commitment.

e.g. D-MS: *Vreau să mă adresez în special lucrătorilor medicali.*

e.g. *Vreau să vă amintesc că noi… am lansat o pagină.*

This strengthens trust by presenting the speaker as empathetic and socially aware.

In D-JB the exclusive form *we* (also *us, our*) refers to the staff that is running the presidential campaign and supports the integration of institutional action in order to reinforce trust and legitimize healthcare restrictive measures. As well, it emphasizes cooperation as a central response to crisis. In D-MS the exclusive pronoun *noi*, which stands for the speaker and her team, performs an important persuasive function. It reveals cultural expectations of cooperation and mutual support in difficult times: *„noi încercăm să vă ajutăm", „noi credem", „noi la PAS am inclus informaţii…"*.

The speaker clearly exercises agency in setting guidance and organizing responses. Citizens are morally responsible for the safety of the *others*, the elderly, the villages that are in the lockdown, those that have no families, etc. The healthcare workers are also there to support the community.

e.g. D-MS (to potential electors): *Nu trebuie să facem panică, dar trebuiesc să înţelegem că riscurile coronavirusului sunt într-adevăr mari.*

e.g. D-MS (to those who did not exit the country): *Fiecare dintre noi trebuie să se protejeze, respectând cu stricteţe regulile de igienă personală.*

e.g. D-MS (to medical staff): *În următoarele săptămâni veţi fi pe prima linie de luptă contra unui inamic invizibil şi periculos.*

These are just some examples of equal distribution of responsibilities across different social groups. In both discourses, D-MS and D-JB, the pronoun *they* does not function primarily to exclude, but rather to acknowledge the roles of different actors involved in managing the crisis and remind the audience about social duty or to vulnerable categories. In D-JB *they* (*other, those*) refers to specific social groups such as healthcare providers, the Department of Defense or scientists, also to poor children, small businesses and the infected ones.

In Romanian discourse references to specific social groups are also made through third-person plural forms such as *ei, aceşti oameni, aceşti/ alţi bătrâni* (D-MS). Hence, these forms identify the elderly, medical workers and citizens in isolation. It is rather curious to mention that the affected groups and the ones that are more at risk are referred to as *others, those.* With the help of *distal person deixis*, the pandemic is almost metaphorically framed as containment, isolating *those* (the infected ones or the ones in need) from *us* (the community): *"those infected families", "those who are more at risk", "those needing care", "those who are struggling"* (D-JB) versus *„cei mai slabi", „cei neajutoraţi", „alţi bătrăni, care nu au sprijin familial"* (D-MS).

The frequent alternation between *noi* and *Dumneavoastră (Dvs)* in D-MS reflects balance between the feeling of solidarity and politeness norms. The pronoun *noi* shows unity and shared identity while Dvs, the formal second-person plural form in Romanian, indexes social respect. Statements such as *„Ştiu că mulţi dintre Dumneavoastră nu aveţi încredere…", „Vă rog frumos să reţineţi…", „aveţi grijă de sănătatea Dvs"* are forms of deferential address that correspond to the cultural norms of public communication. The combination of inclusive and respectful forms allows the speaker to maintain relational proximity while preserving dignity. It reflects a communicative style characteristic of Romanian public discourse in which politeness and social relations influence interaction.

Direct imperatives are often softened by instructions with explanations, which encourages citizens to act responsibly.

e.g. D-MS: *Vă rog frumos să reţineţi… .*

e.g. *Vă rog să ne scrieţi, vă rog să ne sunaţi.*

e.g. *Vă îndemnăm în continuare să vă informaţi din surse credibile… .*

Negative face strategies are less used in D-JB, mainly to frame instructions as necessary for collective good. These are formulated with the help of modals rather than issued as direct orders. This acknowledges individual freedom while encouraging compliance.

e.g. D-JB: *We must, all of us, follow the guidelines of health officials… .*

e.g. *We must prepare now to take further decisive action… .*

Both leaders strengthen positive face, but the strategies differ. D-JB appeals to competence, and national pride, reflecting an individualistic culture where recognition of achievement and initiative is persuasive.

e.g. D-JB: *The American people have the capacity to meet this moment… .*

e.g. *We'll look out for one another and do our part as citizens… .*

e.g. *We have to harness the ingenuity of our scientist... .*

In D-MS, positive politeness plays a more central and continuous role, reflecting a sociocultural orientation in which relational closeness and collective identification are fundamental to leadership legitimacy. Authority is constructed less through the assertion of individual agency, like in D-JB, and more through the reinforcement of a shared purpose. D-MS emphasizes empathy, care and commitment. It also acknowledges the frontline workers' contribution.

e.g. D-MS : *Trebuie să avem grijă unii de alţii şi să demonstrăm responsabilitate faţă de cei mai slabi.*

e.g. *Ce trebuie să facem este să-i ajutăm, dar păstrând distanţa.*

Person deixis is closely connected to social deixis and politeness strategies such as negative or positive face. Pronoun choices contribute to the construction of relational proximity or distance. They also signal alignment and protect the face of the participants, according to each country's cultural norms. Personal pronouns function as powerful instruments for constructing social relationships and shaping collective identity. They are closely linked to persuasion because they influence the way responsibility and agency are conceptualised and communicated.

Conclusion

The first-person plural pronoun *we* is an essential tool for reducing the social distance between the speaker and the public. Third-person forms *they* may identify social groups who need protection. Within pandemic discourse, these choices become highly meaningful: they frame the speaker–listener relationship, create proximity or distance, and signal cultural norms.

Agency in the pandemic discourse is encoded through person and social deixis, the use of modal verbs and directive structures. The pandemic context intensifies the use of positive politeness in both discourses. Joe Biden's discourse underlines respect for autonomy. Maia Sandu's discourse reflects a more relational leadership model in which authority is grounded in shared identity and moral duty. Positive face strategies are used by the two leaders to highlight the significance of collective effort. Negative face strategies are used to give directives without provoking resistance or undermining trust, crucial when compliance cannot be controlled and the risk is high. This cross-cultural analysis demonstrates that politeness strategies are resources that encode culturally specific expectations about leadership, responsibility and social relations.

In Joe Biden's discourse national identity is invoked through references to *we* and *our nation*, which draw citizens and institutions together, as one single force, capable of responding to the pandemic. The distribution of deictics signals shows a dual strategy: he acknowledges the citizens' role in collective action while maintaining visible personal and institutional authority. The crisis seems to amplify the sense of shared identity, portraying national belonging as functional in addressing the pandemic. In this context, the use of *we* works as a symbolic marker of cultural unity, creating a sense of *us* that 'postpones' division and situates the pandemic response within the framework of shared duty. This selective collectivism demonstrates that crises can temporarily reshape cultural expressions of national identity.

In Maia Sandu's discourse references to *we and our citizens* emphasize belonging, solidarity and mutual care. Moldova's national identity is framed less as an abstract symbol and more as a practical model: citizens are not only members of the nation but also active participants in protecting the vulnerable ones and sustaining social cohesion. This reflects a cultural emphasis on family obligations and collective well-being. National identity is closely tied to moral responsibility, shared action and social reciprocity.

The pandemic context thus reshapes discourse patterns without fully altering underlying cultural models. Person deictics operate as sociocultural markers encoding leadership styles, ethical frameworks and national identities. Joe Biden's discourse demonstrates that even in an individualistic culture, appeals to collective identity and national solidarity can be activated strategically. Maia Sandu's discourse illustrates that in a collectively oriented culture, power and authority is maintained through solidarity rather than assertion.

This study opens several important directions for future research such as the diachronic examination of the interaction between person deixis and other persuasive linguistic strategists such as modality. The analysis may reveal shifts in pronoun choices and the use of modal verbs across different stages of the pandemic crisis. Such research would further enhance our understanding of the linguistic and cultural aspects of persuasive communication in times of crisis and the role of public discourse in shaping collective response and social cohesion.

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Presented: 02.03.2026
Reviewed: 24.03.2026
Accepted for publication: 20.05.2026