

EDUCACIÓN, HUMANIDADES Y SOCIEDAD EN TRANSFORMACIÓN

Miradas interdisciplinarias



Fabrizio Manuel Sirignano
Nadia Carlomagno
Miquel Gonzàlvez Blasco

(Eds.)

Dykinson ebook

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Capítulo 37. Pronouns and political identity on social media: a comparative study of Friedrich Merz's and Keir Starmer's online discourse

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Abstract: This study adopts a corpus-linguistic approach to examine how political actors employ collective pronouns in their online political discourse, drawing on two comparable subcorpora of Twitter (now X) posts. The first subcorpus consists of messages produced by Keir Starmer, while the second comprises posts authored by Friedrich Merz, published between January and September 2025. The compilation of two speaker-specific subcorpora enables a systematic cross-linguistic and cross-national comparison of pronoun use in British and German political communication. The objectives of the present study are twofold. From a quantitative perspective, the analysis seeks to identify the frequency and distribution of collective pronouns across the corpus, with the aim of uncovering significant differences between Starmer's and Merz's patterns of usage. From a qualitative perspective, the study examines the discursive and pragmatic functions of collective pronouns, specifically exploring whether these forms are used to construct internal collective alignment (e.g. party members, supporters, or national in-groups) or to demarcate boundaries between the collective self and external groups.

Keywords: corpus linguistics, political discourse, pronouns, social media, European politics

1. INTRODUCTION

In a context of increasing political polarisation and transformation of public communication, the study of collective pronouns offers a valuable lens for understanding how political actors construct and negotiate belonging, national identity, and democratic legitimacy. Among the existing literature, there seems to be a special interest in American politics, specifically in the use of pronouns by North American politicians. For instance, Matos and Miller (2023) analysed how Donald Trump defined ingroups and outgroups throughout the 2016 presidential election through a careful use of collective pronouns such as 'we' and 'our', in contrast to other pronouns like 'they'. Albalat-Mascarell and Carrió-Pastor (2019) also delve into the use of self-mentions as a rhetorical resource and how it is differently used by multiple politicians, among which Donald Trump is again a protagonist. Other studies have revolved around the use of pronouns by Joe Biden (Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2023; Amaireh, 2023), thus exploring the different uses of personal pronouns according to different ideological backgrounds and political affiliations.

However, there seems to be a lack of analyses that delve into pronoun use among European politicians, and more so when it comes to their online political discourse. Therefore, this paper presents a comparative analysis of the use of first-person plural pronouns in the digital discourse of politicians from the United Kingdom and Germany,

aiming to explore how the idea of political community is discursively constructed in two distinct European democratic traditions.

By examining the specific linguistic choices made by politicians in their online communication, this study seeks to illuminate the strategies through which political actors articulate inclusion and exclusion, and how these strategies shape perceptions of collective identity. Through a thorough analysis of digital political discourse, particularly on the platform X, this study addresses the rhetorical strategies through which politicians appeal to and define their constituencies, define the boundaries of political communities, and construct a sense of shared purpose or responsibility among their followers.

The study is grounded in the assumption that collective pronouns are far from being mere grammatical elements; rather, they operate as significant ideological markers and discursive strategies that serve to include or exclude particular groups. By employing the pronoun 'we', politicians actively delineate who is considered part of the political in-group and who is positioned outside it. In this way, the use of collective pronouns allows political actors to legitimate certain positions, policies, or actions, while simultaneously constructing narratives of unity, shared responsibility, and at times, confrontation. Consequently, the political 'we' emerges as a central rhetorical device, capable of both building consensus and mobilising partisan support, functioning as a tool that reinforces collective identity and political cohesion within a given audience.

The main objective of this study is thus to analyse quantitatively and qualitatively the use of first-person plural pronouns in the digital discourse of British and German politicians. In doing so, this study identifies the discursive referents of 'we' in both contexts (national, institutional or partisan), while contributing to the understanding of contemporary European political discourse from a comparative linguistic perspective, showing how pronominal choices reflect differing conceptions of democratic community. The analysis is framed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which allows for the examination of language as both a reflection and a mechanism of social and political power.

The corpus consists of tweets published between January and September 2025 by current Primer Minister of the United Kingdom Keir Starmer and current Chancellor of Germany Friedrich Merz. Using a mixed-method approach that combines quantitative analysis of frequency and collocations with qualitative analysis of pragmatic and semantic context, the study identifies patterns of collective-pronoun use and the implicit referents of 'we' in each political culture.

Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the field of comparative political discourse analysis by showing how an apparently simple linguistic category reflects profound differences in political culture, rhetorical tradition, and conceptions of democratic community. In examining the digital 'we' of British and German politicians, it becomes clear not only how leaders address their citizens, but also how they imagine (and delineate) the symbolic space of the people they claim to represent.

In this vein, the research questions of this study are as follows: what are the most significant differences in the use and distribution of collective pronouns between Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Chancellor Friedrich Merz?; in which contexts are exclusive and inclusive pronouns used, and do they differ from corpus to corpus?

2. PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

The study of the use of personal pronouns in political rhetoric has long been an object of interest for scholars. Among some of the most recent studies we can find Bachmann and Gleibs' (2024) study, where they analysed how what they call 'We-language' has surpassed 'I-language' for the first time since 1949 in Germany. More recently, Ponton et al. (2025) revisited pronoun use in both British and Russian discourse around Covid-19, revealing great similarities between the strategies used by former Prime Minister Boris Johnson and President Vladimir Putin. The use of personal pronouns by the Ukrainian President Volodimir Zelenski has also been studied, revealing that the use of different personal pronouns served different purposes, such as addressing the audience directly, indicate personal evaluation, or to share accountability (Luthfiyati & Hamidah, 2022). Moreover, Ahlström et al. (2025) point out that pronouns are also used as a rhetorical resource in more specific contexts, such as discussions about sustainable urban development within the framework of the agenda 2030.

In this sense, first person pronouns have long occupied a central position in political rhetoric, with particular focus on the first person plural 'we'. This pronoun has attracted considerable scholarly attention due to its rhetorical flexibility, enabling political actors to diffuse or strategically reassign responsibility for actions and decisions (Williams & Wright, 2024).

As Kranert (2017) observes, political actors often employ the pronoun 'we' "metonymically, in the name of the party as a group. Sometimes, however, the leader uses an inclusive 'we', suggesting an equivalence between the party and the nation" (p. 184).

This strategic ambiguity is further addressed by Fetzer (2014), who argues that inclusive instances of 'we' also leave room for ambiguous interpretations, because it may be interpreted differently by different audiences depending on their political alignment. As a result, supporters of a given party will interpret "favorable messages as addressed to them, and unfavourable messages as being directing towards others" (Fetzer, 2014, p. 345, as cited in Kranert, 2017). Political speakers, aware of these interpretive dynamics, exploit this and other collective pronouns as strategic rhetorical resources to manipulate alignment, responsibility and group boundaries.

The distinction between exclusive and inclusive instances of pronoun use has been further explored and addressed by Albalat-Mascarell and Carrió-Pastor (2019). In their study, they adopt Hyland's (2005) model of interpersonal metadiscourse and, within this framework, exclusive first-person pronouns and possessive forms are categorised as *self-mentions*, while inclusive and generic first-person forms function as *engagement markers*. Although both categories operate within the interactional dimension of metadiscourse, they fulfil distinct rhetorical purposes: self-mentions foreground the speaker or political actor as a responsible agent, whereas engagement markers serve to actively involve the audience and foster a sense of shared identity and participation.

For the purposes of the present study, both inclusive and exclusive instances of first-person plural pronouns and possessive forms are examined. This approach allows for a systematic assessment of potential variation in the thematic domains and discursive contexts in which inclusive and exclusive references are deployed, thereby shedding light on how collective identity and political alignment are strategically constructed in online political discourse.

3. CORPUS DESCRIPTION AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter analyses a corpus comprising 1,016 Twitter (now X) posts authored by the current Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Keir Starmer, and the current Chancellor of Germany, Friedrich Merz, published between January and September 2025. These posts were selected in order to construct two comparable, speaker-specific subcorpora that capture each politician’s online communicative practices during a defined and politically salient time frame.

The rationale for selecting these two political actors lies in their institutional prominence as leaders of two major European countries and their central role in shaping national and international political discourse. In addition, Starmer and Merz occupy contrasting positions within the political spectrum: Starmer represents the British Labour Party, traditionally associated with centre-left political ideology, whereas Merz is a leading figure of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), a party situated on the centre-right of German politics.

This ideological divergence, combined with their comparable leadership roles, provides a strong basis for a contrastive analysis of collective pronoun usage across both corpora. It allows the study to explore how collective reference is shaped not only by individual rhetorical style, but also by broader cultural, linguistic, and ideological factors. Consequently, the corpus design facilitates an examination of similarities and differences in the construction of collective identity, political alignment, and responsibility in British and German online political discourse.

The corpus is divided into two subcorpora. Table 1 below presents the distribution of the 1016 texts in the corpus and the exact number of words per subcorpus.

Table 1. Number of words and texts distributed per corpora.

Subcorpus	Number of texts	Number of words
Keir Starmer (UK)	712	22189
Friedrich Merz (Germany)	304	11734
	Total number of texts	Total number of words
	1016	33923

It is important to note that Keir Starmer’s corpus is significantly larger than that of Friedrich Merz, both in terms of the number of texts and the total word count. This disparity can be attributed to several key factors.

Primarily, Keir Starmer maintains a far more active and frequent presence on his personal social media accounts, whereas Friedrich Merz posts relatively sparingly on his direct profiles. Furthermore, an institutional distinction must be considered: in Germany, the Federal Chancellor has a dedicated official account (@bundeskanzler) used for public communications during their term, much like the @POTUS account in the United States. The data compiled for this study, however, was drawn from Merz’s personal account (@friedrichmerz), which is largely managed by his team. The decision to use this personal account was deliberate; as Merz was elected Chancellor in May 2025, utilising his personal profile allowed for the inclusion of posts from the first five months of 2025, prior to his assumption of office. This ensured a temporally consistent and comparable dataset with the period analysed for Keir Starmer. Consequently, the discrepancy in

corpus size also reflects a fundamental difference in digital communication strategy—where Starmer employs a more direct and continuous personal channel, Merz’s public discourse is institutionally bifurcated between a pre-election personal account and an official governmental channel post-election.

The objectives of the present study are twofold. First, from a quantitative perspective, the analysis seeks to identify the frequency of occurrence of the words security and defence in the corpus, as well as to investigate their most salient collocational patterns, highlighting significant similarities and differences across the two datasets. Second, from a qualitative perspective, the study explores the predominant themes and discursive patterns that emerge in connection with these concepts, thereby providing a comparative understanding of how security and defence are framed in political online discourse of both countries.

The textual analysis was conducted using AntConc, a specialised software tool for corpus linguistics. This application was employed to systematically interrogate the compiled subcorpora and extract all instances of collective pronouns. Following this automated retrieval, a detailed, manual qualitative analysis was undertaken for each identified instance. This critical phase involved examining the pronouns within their broader contextual framework to classify their specific discursive function.

4. RESULTS

In order to enable a more meaningful comparison between both subcorpora, frequencies were normalised with respect to a standardised base of 10000 cases. This procedure tries to compensate for the substantial disparity in overall word count between Starmer’s and Merz’s subcorpora and prevents absolute frequency values from distorting the comparative analysis, allowing for a more precise assessment of each speaker’s relative deployment of collective pronouns, independent of corpus length.

The analysis focuses on three categories of first-person plural pronouns that serve as key linguistic resources for the construction of collective identity: subject pronouns (*we/wir*), object pronouns (*us/uns*), and possessive pronouns (*our(s)/unser-*).

Table 2 presents both the raw and normalised frequencies of these pronouns in both subcorpora. While raw frequencies provide an overview of absolute usage patterns, the inclusion of normalised figures facilitates direct cross-corpus comparison and highlights differences that would otherwise remain obscured by variation in corpus size.

Table 2. Frequency of the different collective pronouns in the corpora and their normalised frequency with respect to a standardised base of 10000 cases.

	Keir Starmer (UK)			Friedrich Merz (Germany)		
	we	us	our(s)	wir	uns	unser-
Raw frequency	421	49	384	296	67	157
Normalised frequency (10k)	189.73	22.08	173.06	252.26	57.1	133.8

As the raw frequencies indicate, Starmer deployed a larger number of collective personal pronouns overall, with higher counts for ‘we’ and ‘our(s)’, the pronoun *us* constituting the only exception, being used more frequently by Merz by 18 points. These significant

discrepancies in raw frequency, however, are likely to be influenced by the larger size of Starmer's subcorpus, which may inflate absolute counts relative to Merz's.

Interestingly, a different pattern arises when considering normalised frequencies. In this case, Merz shows a perceptibly higher use of the collective pronouns 'wir' and 'uns' compared to their English equivalents, with normalised frequencies of 252.26 and 57.1 respectively, surpassing Starmer's corresponding values (189.73 for 'we' and 22.08 for 'us'). A closer look into the corpus is needed in order to assess whether the increased use of the pronoun 'uns' derives from a rhetorical emphasis placed on the collective as affected participants or rather a reflection of the German language's tendency to rely on reflexive verbs. By contrast, the possessive pronoun 'unser-' occurs less frequently than 'our(s)' when normalised, suggesting a comparatively weaker emphasis on collective possession in Merz's discourse.

If the normalised frequencies of all collective pronouns per speaker are summed, it can be determined that Merz's combined normalised frequency is higher than Starmer's despite having lower raw counts, suggesting that Merz relies more heavily on the use of collective pronouns more intensively per unit of text.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Findings from Keir Starmer's (UK) corpus

A closer analysis of Keir Starmer's posts reveals a strategic and context-dependent use of first person plural pronouns, highlighting a distinction between partisan and national framing. The pronoun 'we' is employed in two primary ways: to denote the political party and its agenda, and to invoke a collective national identity. The first example illustrates a partisan use, where 'we' unequivocally refers to the Labour Party and its policies. In contrast, the second example demonstrates a national consensual use, where 'we' expands to encompass the entire nation, sharing in a common moment of sporting pride: (1) "Childcare should support families, not hold them back. That's why **we**'re making it more affordable and accessible — helping parents get back to work, easing pressure on household budgets, and giving children the best start in life" (Keir Starmer, 2025); (2) "Through to the final! What a performance @RedRosesRugby. **We**'re all rooting for you" (Keir Starmer, 2025).

The pronoun 'us', while less frequent in this subcorpus, is particularly significant for its consistent application in fostering patriotic unity. It functions to delineate an in-group (the British people) often in contexts involving national security, shared culture, or collective challenges, thereby reinforcing a sense of common identity and experience; (1) "Britain has the finest service men and women in the world. They, and their families, sacrifice so much to keep **us** safe and protect our freedom" (Keir Starmer, 2025); (2) "Football is in **our** country's DNA. It means so much to so many of **us**" (Keir Starmer, 2025); (3) "For too long, the blockers and Nimbys have strangled **our** chances of cheaper energy, growth and jobs, leaving **us** hostage to Putin" (Keir Starmer, 2025).

Finally, the possessive pronoun "our(s)" exhibits a balanced distribution between partisan and national referents, sometimes within the same utterance. This dual usage effectively blends party-specific plans with national outcomes, subtly presenting the party's agenda as inherently aligned with, and beneficial for, the country's broader interests. The second example below perfectly encapsulates this rhetorical move, where a party plan ("our Plan

for Change”) is directly linked to national assets (“our borders”, “our economy”); (1) “I am proud, and will always be proud, to lead a Labour government that takes on the tough but fair choices so **we** can deliver on **our** Plan for Change for working people” (Keir Starmer, 2025); (2) “With **our** Plan for Change, we’re restoring common sense and control to **our** borders” (Keir Starmer, 2025); (3) “The Universal theme park coming to the UK will boost **our** economy by billions of pounds” (Keir Starmer, 2025).

5.2. Findings from Friedrich Merz’s (Germany) corpus

In the German corpus, the pronoun ‘wir’ (we) frequently co-occurs with modal verbs like ‘müssen’ (must), constructing a discourse of collective duty and necessity. This combination does not merely state action but frames it as an imperative shared by the political leader and the citizenry, emphasising common responsibility in facing geopolitical and economic challenges: (1) “**Wir** müssen die Ukraine in eine Position der Stärke bringen, damit Verhandlungen zu einem gerechten Frieden führen können” (Friedrich Merz, 2025); (2) “#Europa selbst hat zusammen mehr Einwohner als die USA. **Wir** müssen jetzt mit mehr Elan als früher auf andere Regionen der Welt zugehen und Angebote zur Zusammenarbeit und für neue Freihandelsabkommen machen. Das ist jetzt die Stunde der Europäischen Union” (Friedrich Merz, 2025).

The pronoun ‘uns’ (us) is predominantly used to articulate a vision of national and European solidarity. It appeals directly to the German public, positioning them as central actors within a historical continuum and within the European project. This usage strengthens the narrative of a unified Germany bearing responsibility (both to its own citizens and to its European partners); (1) “Die Europäische Union wartet auf **uns**. Jeder und jede Einzelne von uns in dieser neuen Regierung weiß, in welcher #Verantwortung **wir** ab morgen stehen, vor den Bürgerinnen und Bürgern, aber auch vor unserer Geschichte” (Friedrich Merz, 2025); (2) “Die frohe Osterbotschaft erinnert **uns** daran, dass Veränderung möglich ist. Deutschland wird wieder Verantwortung übernehmen– in Europa und in der Welt. Nicht laut, aber verlässlich. Nicht überheblich, sondern partnerschaftlich. Es liegt jetzt an **uns**, die Zukunft zu gestalten” (Friedrich Merz, 2025).

Regarding the possessive pronoun ‘unser-’ (our), its most salient pattern is the collocation with ‘Land’ (country), which serves as a powerful anchor for national sentiment. It is often used in tandem with ‘wir’ to articulate a joint mission for national renewal. While typically national in scope, it can also take on a more partisan tone, as seen in the second example, where it claims exclusive credit for assembling a governing team presented as the best possible stewards for the nation: (1) “**Wir** machen **unser** Land wirtschaftlich stark, bekommen die irreguläre Migration in den Griff und geben der jungen Generation die Chance, wirklich gute Jobs in Deutschland zu bekommen. Dieses Land soll mutiger und zuversichtlicher werden” (Friedrich Merz, 2025); (2) “Das ist unser Team für Deutschland: Die Besten für **unser** Kabinett. Die Besten für **unser** Land” (Friedrich Merz, 2025).

6. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has analysed the ways in which Keir Starmer and Friedrich Merz use collective pronouns to build partisanship, to appeal to patriotic sentiments, among other rhetorical purposes. The comparative analysis of first person plural pronouns in their online political discourse reveals a conscious and adaptive deployment of linguistic tools

to build solidarity and assert political vision. While both leaders strategically navigate the spectrum between partisan and national identity, their linguistic choices reflect distinct rhetorical priorities and contextual pressures.

Quantitatively speaking, the analysis reveals that Merz's texts employ first person plural pronouns and possessives more intensively than Starmer's, implying a stronger, more consistent linguistic orientation toward group identity.

In qualitative terms, both politicians engage in exclusive pronoun use to reference their own parties. However, a key divergence emerges: Starmer frequently pivots to an inclusive use of 'we', strategically broadening its reference to encompass the entire nation and involve every citizen. Merz's discourse, while intensely collective, more consistently frames this group (it being the nation as a whole) within a context of duty and national rejuvenation.

A significant similarity unites both subcorpora: the analysed pronouns are predominantly used either to delineate party actions or to position the speaker and their party as integral agents within a broader national context. This dual function establishes a potent rhetorical relationship between the political entity and the nation. In essence, the pronouns serve to conflate partisan agenda with national interest, a technique both leaders employ.

Of particular significance is the nuanced function of collective pronouns in constructing opposition. It is noteworthy that in instances where collective pronouns are used to designate a distinction between ingroups and outgroups, these outgroups rarely refer to a specific domestic political opponent or social faction. Instead, it is predominantly framed as external geopolitical entities or abstract threats. Thus, the collective 'we' is solidified not through division within the nation, but through the shared posture of a unified nation confronting outside pressures, be they rival countries, hostile actors, or global crises. This strategic externalisation of opposition elevates the rhetoric above partisan conflict, framing the political agenda as a matter of national security and collective resilience.

Ultimately, this study confirms that pronouns are pivotal instruments of political persuasion, used primarily to appeal to collective responsibility and to evoke nationalist or patriotic sentiments. Starmer's approach tends toward assimilation, linguistically integrating his party into the national fabric to claim a universal mandate. In contrast, Merz's strategy emphasises mobilisation, constructing a unified in-group charged with historical and European responsibility. Both methods leverage the power of collective pronouns and possessives to build solidarity, though their linguistic intensity and focal points differ.

This exploration paves the way for further research. Future studies could involve a larger, more diachronic corpus to track the evolution of this 'We-language' across European political landscapes. A compelling contrastive analysis could also compare its usage between European and American political traditions, deepening our understanding of how cultural contexts shape the most fundamental language of political belonging.

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