Thank you for thinking we could: Use and function of interpersonal pronouns in corporate web logs[i] [12/28/09]

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Abstract

This paper examines the function and use of first person and second person pronouns (*inter-personal pronouns* or IPPs) in Internet blogs maintained by several major U.S. companies for marketing and public relations purposes and evaluates their significance as a genre marker. After briefly assessing prior research on blogs in general and corporate blogs in particular, the linguistic properties of pronouns and pronominal distributions across different written genres are described. The paper analyzes usage data from a corpus of corporate web logs and develops an explanation of the function of IPPs in specific communicative contexts, especially that of corporate blogs. The evaluation of the results is followed by a concluding discussion of the factors that make pronominal expression highly characteristic of this emerging form of computer-mediated communication (CMC).

1. Introduction

Despite the popularity of digital forms of communication and their academic exploration, linguistic studies of emerging registers and genres are not quite as prevalent as one might assume. *Blogging* – a term and a technology that have only been with us for a short period – is a much-discussed phenomenon in media studies and social sciences (see Schmidt [2007] for a detailed overview), yet linguists have been slightly hesitant to investigate this new kind of written expression.[ii] At first glance, blogs appear to share many similarities with pre-digital forms of writing, such as diaries and editorials. It is perhaps for this reason that digital genres that differ more markedly from conventional genres of written language and can be described as conceptually more oral than blogs have received more attention in writings about computer-mediated communication.

Following the assumption that the systematic study of a new form of CMC can contribute to an improved overall understanding of language use, this paper examines a single linguistic phenomenon in a single emerging genre: the use of *inter-personal pronouns* (IPPs)[iii] in corporate blogs.

Personal pronouns as the realization of *person deixis* serve as a natural bridge between language and environment, making them an ideal object of study for investigations into register. This paper approaches the object of study from two principal directions. After sketching the development of blogs (section 2) and corporate blogs (section 3) and providing a description of pronouns and a survey of pronominal usage across existing genres (section 4), I then turn to an analysis of interpersonal pronouns in corporate blogs (section 5) and make concluding observations based on my findings (section 6). The data that forms the basis of this research is a corpus of corporate web log texts (roughly 5 million tokens), assembled between August 2006 and December 2007 in the context of my doctoral thesis project[iv].

2. Situational and functional properties of blogs

Web logs (frequently clipped to "blogs") are a novel form of online publishing that has gained significant popularity in recent years (for an overview of blog history, see Blood [2000] and Boyd [2006]). While blogs can be used in a multitude of ways, to many users they serve functions similar to those of a personal diary (McNeill 2005). The following example is a post from what can be characterized as a typical journal-style personal blog.

Text (1)
Dustin Blodgett, The DustBlog, "My Birthday," 19 February 2007

http://thedustblog.blogspot.com/2007/02/my-birthday.html (last accessed on March 29, 2010)

Well, it was my first birthday away from the family. It was interesting....teasin! it wasnt as bad as i thought and i practiced for my mission. I woke up and texted sis because she was born on my b-day, for those of you who forogt. Teasin sis! Umm i talked to mom and dad and the rest of the family throughout the day. Thanks for the calls everyone. Uhh...i went to breakfast (the good ol Galley) with Lizzie and Kenzie and afterwards ran home to find a package sent from Mom and the famoly in cali. I went to a basketball game and we won. Then i went out to dinner with a bunch of friends and ate hecka food. Afterwards we came back to Lizzie's and opened presents from Lizzie and Max. Max gave me a journal his mom gave him....that was special and i needed one so im thankful for it. Lizzie gave me the Spanish Book of Mormon. I was pretty excited cause now im gonna be fluent in Espanol! She also gave me an awesome CTR ring because I have been wearing Max's old one for the last year. Umm it also spins so it is way tight. Then I came back to my dorm and Max and I opened the rest of my presents. The Abillas gave me some nice notes and hecka food which is gettin me fat. haha thanks! O and thanks Ang for the Head and Shoulder bottle. You'll be gettin it back sometime haha! And then I opened the fam in Cali's package. I got a sweet shirt that had my Mission on the back. Kaley gave me the hymn book in Spanish, its pocket sized. And then a CD and hecka more food. Grandma also sent a letter. Shes awesome! And that was my b-day! This might be boring sorry!

It should be stressed that the narrative style in this example is only one form of blogging common in personal blogs, although narrative is, as Virtanen (this volume) points out, the most prototypical text type. Blogs can also be used to filter and collect hyperlinked references to other sources on the web (i.e. *filter blogs* [Herring et al 2004: 3]), to discuss issues of public interest (politics, news) and to engage others in debate. Personal blogs are distinguished from uses in settings such as news reporting, education, and business by the fact that the individual blogger may freely assign a topical focus with each entry. By contrast, when blogging is mandated in an organizational or professional context, it can be argued that some sort of conscious strategic goal is always associated with the activity.

One of relatively few linguistic descriptions of blogs comes from David Crystal (2006: 15):

[The blog] takes the form of a personalized web page where the owner can post messages at intervals. Many blogs are personal diaries, ranging in length from brief notes to extended essays; many are on topics of general interest or concern, such as a hobby or political issue. Some blogs are monologues; some have shared authorship, some are interactive.

The description shows that several paradigmatically different definitions can be given to explain what a blog is: a technical one (as a publishing technology), one of formal convention (as a genre, "personal diaries") and one focused on its users.[v] Crystal makes quite a sweeping generalization in his description of the production and resulting stylistic aspects of blogs:

From a linguistic point of view, they have one thing in common: the written language is unmediated. The page you are reading now is a remove away from the text that originally appeared on my computer, because it has been regularized by the publisher's copy-editor and checked for house-style consistency by a proofreader. That is the fare of virtually all published material [...] but in blogging there is no such intermediary. The language of blogs displays the process of writing in its naked, unedited form. For precedents, we have to go back to the Middle Ages, before standard English evolved. (Crystal 2006: 15)

It is noteworthy that blogging is on the onset compared with other forms of *publishing*. By contrast, chats and instant messaging are not regarded as publishing, most likely due to their synchronous and ephemeral character, but from a purely technical point of view this makes little difference. Chats are produced in real time, not necessarily archived by default and not always available to a general public. Blogs, however, are generally more asynchronous than synchronous (but consider microblogging formats such as Twitter), they exist in a persistent form on the Web and can be found via search engines. The special characteristic of blogs that Crystal highlights is thus that they have the potential to act as publishing media (comparable to books, magazines, newspapers etc) but, unlike books, they are (according to him) produced in an "unmediated" way, without any editorial oversight or stylistic polishing. While this may apply to a prototypical personal blog, as illustrated in text (1), it is problematic to generalize such attributes to the entire genre, which is probably why other scholars favor safer (i.e. more technical) definitions.

The way in which standard software tools for blogging function and the dynamic of blog conversations – exchanges between bloggers who quote and link to each other – both work to structure and constrain blogs in regards to their visual presentation and the language they use. While they are topically highly diverse, the fact that blog entries are dated and attributed to the blogger, that they are presented in reverse chronological

order and that they are stored under an unchanging web address (the so-called *permalink*) for archival purposes is not a conscious choice of the blogger but preconditioned by the software he uses. This fact is relevant because the schematic presentation of text together with contextually salient meta-data enables the use of context-dependent language. While theoretically a blogger can avoid the use of explicit self-reference, such a style creates a discrepancy because he or she is per default credited by name for each entry. Since the writer of a blog post is also the publisher, it is generally assumed that the person to whom an entry is credited must also be the *I* of the post if any self-reference occurs. Conversely, the blogger is in a sense encouraged to use self-reference by the contextual factors: As the "owner" of the blog, her or she is not forced to discuss any specific topic and may write about whatever he or she likes; only the blogger has access to the publishing software, and every single post automatically identifies the blogger as the author. The cognitive analogy with (spoken) discourse is drawn because the blog is effectively an extension of the self in textual terms. As Crystal points out, a blog may be monologic (if there is no addressee) or dialogic (if there is). A similar description comes from Nilsson (2003: 31): "It could be argued that blogs combine both the monologue and the dialogue in a space-bound, electronic environment. They are simultaneously self-reflective thoughts presented publicly, and continuous conversations."

Lyons (1977) suggested that face-to-face interaction can be regarded as the generic template onto which virtually all kinds of mediated interpersonal communication (such as telephone conversations or letters, and, by extension, Internet chats) are conceptually mapped. The contextual information that the blogging frame provides – dated, attributed and archived entries, "about" pages that describe the blogger, hyperlinks to other pages and the use of deictic expressions – make it possible to conceptualize a blog entry as a sort of uninterrupted, planned, organized and persistent conversation.

These surroundings evoke the concept of the *deictic center* first proposed by Karl Bühler (1982 [1934]). The deictic center encodes an origin (or *origo*) of space, time, and person as the point of orientation of all deictic expressions. In spoken discourse the deictic center can clearly be located by all discourse participants, but this is not generally the case in written genres where the reader must construct it from the text and from contextual clues, such as his or her knowledge of the conventions of the genre. While the deictic center may shift in third-person literary narratives, spatially, temporally and in terms of actors (see Rapaport et al. 1989), blogs differ both from pre-digital and other digital forms of publishing in that they *always* provide a fixed set of contextual clues to the reader and in that the *origo* is always with the writer. The metadata provided with a blog entry follow Bühler's *origos* of space, time, and person. Only the category space is omitted, but since the blog itself is frequently conceptualized as a virtual place this is neither surprising nor problematic.[vi] The deictic center in blogs can be regarded as stable in terms of who the blogger is and when a particular entry was posted, but shifting with regard to the addressee. Apart from this blog deixis, two other aspects support the conversation metaphor cognitively: Blogs permit feedback via comments and trackbacks and they are perhaps the sole form of mass publishing media that can be maintained by an individual.

3. The corporate blog as a domain-specific genre

The corporate blog as a domain-specific type of blog can be considered a fairly recent innovation, although in recent years a steadily growing number of major international companies has taken up the practice. Reasons for the interest in blogging and other forms of social media are numerous: Blogs can be used internally for knowledge management, to improve communications and simplify project management, and externally for purposes such as recruiting, marketing, and public relations. A significant selling point of blogs for corporations, however, is specifically their function as persistent conversations between individuals. The paradigm of the social web is problematic for organizations in the sense that they are not equivalent to (human) social actors and are perceived accordingly. Blogs allow companies to personalize their communications – an important measure in a medial world that is becoming increasingly individualized.

While the aims of independent private bloggers are highly diverse and may be reasonably unspecific and self-focused (recognition, friendship, fame, recording one's thoughts), the goals of corporate bloggers can be assumed to be precisely defined. The goal of public relations is generally to positively influence how an organization is perceived by the public and it can be assumed that this holds true for company blogs which are created for that purpose as well. In order to achieve such a positive effect, however, it is crucial that company blogs are perceived first and foremost as real blogs and only secondly as material published by a corporate entity. Applying the concepts of communicative purpose and cognitive schemata (Virtanen, this

volume), it can be argued that corporate blogs formally follow the schema of personal blogs, but are more constrained and strategically aligned with regard to their purpose. Since they follow the conventions of personal blogs closely and since blogging technology allows the use of self-centered deictic expressions, corporate blogs do not differ significantly from other kinds of blogs in their principally high frequency of interpersonal pronouns, a characteristic that markedly places them apart from other forms of business discourse, where IPP usage is generally low. Table 1 shows the 20 most frequent tokens in a corporate blogging corpus of 5 million words (CBC/Corporati) vs. the 20 most frequent tokens in the written section of the British National Corpus[vii].

Table 1: 20 most frequent tokens in CBC/Corporati and the wrtten section of the BNC

Rank	Token-CBC/Corporati	Part-of-speech tag	Token-BNC(written)	Part-of-speech tag
1	*the*	DT	*the*	AT0
2	*to*	TO	*of*	PRF
3	*and*	CC	*and*	CJC
4	*of*	IN	*a*	AT0
5	*a*	DT	*in*	PRP
6	*in*	IN	*to*	TO0
7	***I***	**PP**	*is*	VBZ
8	*is*	VBZ	*to*	PRP
9	*for*	IN	*was*	VBD
10	*It*	PP	*it*	PNP
11	***you***	**PP**	*for*	PRP
12	*on*	IN	*with*	PRP
13	*with*	IN	*he*	PNP
14	*this*	DT	*be*	VBI
15	*that*	IN	*on*	PRP
16	***we***	**PP**	*I*	**PNP**
17	*are*	VBP	*that*	CJP
18	*be*	VB	*by*	PRP
19	*at*	IN	*at*	PRP
20	*was*	VBD	***you***	**PNP**

The pronouns of the first and second person (labeled with the part-of-speech tag *PP* in CBC/Corporati and *PNP* in the BNC, and referred to in this paper as 1PP and 2PP) rank clearly higher in CBC/Corporati, though their proximal distance to one another is the same (*I* and *you* are four positions apart). This is a notable contrast especially when considering the overall similarities of the two lists, one of which (the BNC) is representative of a wide range of genres, while the other one is based on a sample from a new and highly specialized subgenre of computer-mediated communication. The interpersonal pronouns of the first and second person significantly outrank those of the third person in blogs, while the situation is reversed in the BNC, where *he* outranks *I* and *you*. Notably, nonpersonal *it* occupies the exact same slot in both lists.

The overall impression of pronominal egocentricity in blogs is confirmed when comparing specifically a list of the 20 most frequent pronouns in CBC/Corporati and the BNC (Table 2).

Table 2: 20 most frequent pronouns in CBC/Corporati and the BNC

Rank	Pronoun-CBC/Corporati	Pronoun-BNC(all sections)
1	*I*	*it*
2	*it*	*I*
3	***you***	*you*
4	***we***	*he*
5	*they*	*they*
6	*he*	*she*
7	***me***	***we***
8	*them*	*who*
9	***us***	*them*
10	*she*	*him*
11	*him*	***me***
12	***myself***	*her*
13	*her*	*one*
14	*one*	***us***
15	*itself*	*something*
16	*themselves*	*nothing*
17	***yourself***	*himself*
18	*himself*	*anything*
19	***ourselves***	*itself*
20	*herself*	*themselves*

A close comparison reveals several interesting details:

− The use of interpersonal pronouns dominates in CBC/Corporati, whereas third-person reference is more prevalent in the BNC

− This is not affected by the relatively high frequency of *I* and *you* in the BNC – full noun phrases are still much more frequent than pronouns in the BNC

− The rank sequence of the IPPs *I, you, we, me, us, myself, yourself, ourselves* is identical in both corpora, with all instances ranking equally or higher in CBC/Corporati

− The significant role of interpersonal pronouns in CBC/Corporati is the only notable difference between the two corpora – otherwise they are relatively similar

The virtual context of blogging thus seems to mirror that of a real-world conversation to the extent that both are egocentric and assume a temporal and spatial orientation that is transparent and accessible to all participants.

As outlined, a blog can be regarded as a technological frame in which the blogger linguistically creates a self-focused discourse situation that allows him or her to address a variety of communicative partners. This mediated environment shares some similarities with a face-to-face conversation, the planned and structured elements of written language not withstanding. Importantly and in significant contrast to spoken language, bloggers can voice their thoughts, opinions and experiences uninterrupted, without having to cede the floor to a communicative partner and they can plan and organize their language before publishing a post. What blogs share linguistically with spoken discourse is an ego-centered orientation that uses the spatial and temporal context to define a deictic center. The *here* and *there* of the blog are hyperlinked, the *now* and *then* are specified by time stamps associated with blog entries, and the *I* and *you* of the blog discourse are blogger and reader, though both self-reference and reference to others can be used with different meanings. Although blogs exist that are topically introspective and linguistically monologic (they have 1PP, but no 2PP), this

kind of writing is relatively rare in corporate blogs – after all, a company seeks to present itself effectively to an outside readership, making audience-oriented writing an important goal.

4. Interpersonal pronouns in English

Before conducting a more detailed analysis of personal pronoun use in corporate blogs, I will present an overview of their properties in English as such and across different genres.

Most linguists classify pronouns as a subtype of noun (e.g., Huddleston and Pullum 2002). Pronouns are able to act as the head of a noun phrase in the major noun phrase positions and they are distinguished by their inability to take determiners. English personal pronouns retain several levels of grammatical information, such as case, number and gender, not all of which are marked morphologically on full nouns. The tendency to reserve specific pronouns for different types of discourse participants (self, addressee, others) and to encode information relating to categories such as gender and social status in them exists in many languages and points to the cognitive salience of these factors. In language acquisition, gaining an understanding of pronouns as contextual pointers that may shift their reference with every turn of a conversation comes relatively late in the development of children (around age 3, according to Wales 1996). Pronoun systems show significant variation across languages and dialects, e.g. by marking inclusive and exclusive pronominality, dual and trial number, social deixis and other categories that English does not explicitly indicate.

The pronoun paradigm below reflects only standard Modern English and omits non-standard varieties, many of which morphologically encode more grammatical information than the standard permits (e.g. American English *y'all* marking plural on in the second person, see also Heyd, this volume).

Table 3: Personal pronouns in standard Modern English

		Singular			Plural		
		Subject	Object	Reflexive	Subject	Object	Reflexive
First		I	me	myself	we	us	ourselves
Second		You	you	yourself	you	you	yourselves
Third	Masculine	He	him	himself	they	them	themselves
	Feminine	She	her	herself			
	Neuter	It	it	itself			

While the term *pronoun* suggests that they stand in for nouns, this idea needs qualification. Most pronouns can be used either deictically or endophorically (anaphora or cataphora), and in the latter case the pronoun effectively replaces the entire noun phrase (not just the head noun), a form of pragmatic economy that "enhances communicative efficiency by avoiding needless repetition" (Langacker 1987: 490). When used deictically, however, a pronoun does not replace anything, rather, it is usually the default referring expression. Thus while *Cornelius Puschmann* and *I* would semantically be coreferential when used by me, both the full nominal and the third person pronoun would be highly marked if I were to use them to refer to myself in actual discourse. This is observed by Wales, who remarks:

> The 1PP and 2PP are characteristically used in the situational context, and refer normally to human beings in a 'dialogue', the speaker ('I') and addressee ('you'): properly, 'inter-personal' pronouns. It is harder here to see their function linguistically as substituting for a noun, since the speaker and addressee can be referred to by an infinite number of nouns, depending on their known or perceived attributes: woman, mother, teacher, harridan, wit, etc. [...] the choice of terms depends on the speaker's perspective, and is more varied than applies to the 1PP. (1996: 3)

While use of 3PP can thus be understood largely via economic principles of linguistically structuring information that applies in more or less any situation of language use, 1PP and 2PP are tied intrinsically to the roles filled by speakers in concrete discourse situations (in other words, in situations where a deictic

center exists). In such settings, their use is the default and use of full noun phrases is generally marked. Exceptions are restricted to specific contexts, such as particular speech acts, as in *I, Cornelius Puschmann, hereby solemnly swear* […], when swearing an oath.

The simple example functions both as a first-person speech act and as a third-person, context-detached declarative statement. The full noun phrase is inserted to neutralize context as a required source of information – to extract the deictic center, in Bühler's terms – and through this it is made perfectly explicit who *I* is beyond the situation in which the oath was sworn. At the same time, 1PP is not entirely omitted in favor of the full noun phrase because this would prevent the oath from functioning as a speech act. Essentially, when speakers refers to themselves in the third person they disembody themselves from their discourse role, just as referring to a discourse partner via 3PP or full noun phrase ejects him or her from the discourse, a linguistic behavior that is regarded as pathological or at least antisocial in most contexts. The basic distinction between self, discourse partner and third persons is thus clearly reflected in the pronominal paradigm and applied even before the mechanisms of linguistic economy (see Lyons [1977], who describes deixis as the more basic pronominal reference than anaphora). From a cognitive point of view, it is noteworthy that 1PP and 2PP are perfectly mono-referential in spoken discourse: Both *Cornelius Puschmann* and *he* can hypothetically refer to more than one individual, but in a face-to-face conversation *I* and y*ou* unambiguously point to the speaker and the addressee(s) in the instance they are used. Because the spatial and temporal footing is much less solid in a computer-mediated discourse environment, the deictic anchoring of IPPs (especially 1PP-pl and 2PP) is significantly less rigid than in face-to-face conversation – a fact that is consciously exploited by many bloggers.[viii]

Person as a grammatical category is generally interpreted as being structured as a strict hierarchy: If the speaker himself or herself is included in those referred to, use of 1PP-pl is the next plausible option following 1PP-sing. After 1PP-sing as the default IPP, the pronominal circle of reference extends outwards, from the speaker to the speaker plus others, to an addressee (minus the speaker) plus others, to third parties. Pragmatically, 1PP-pl is frequently an attractive alternative to 1PP-sing, as it creates a basic dichotomy between the speaker and all those with him or her (physically, or sometimes [only] rhetorically) on one side and all others persons on the other.

The following example demonstrates the versatility of 1PP-pl in this respect:

Text (2)

Cenk Uygur, *The Huffington Post*, "The Republicans Lost Iraq" (excerpt), 2 December 2006

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/cenk-uygur/the-republicans-lost-iraq_b_35432.html (last accessed on March 30, 2010)

As Fareed Zakaria pointed out in his last column in Newsweek, there were two consecutive days in Baghdad recently where **we** protected the Mahdi Army one day and fought them the next. **We** are alternately protecting and fighting the Shiites and the Sunnis. **We** are clearly caught in the middle of a chaotic civil war. It is impossible to "win" in this situation.

Journalist Cenk Uygur's blog is part of the liberal news and blog aggregator site *The Huffington Post* (www.huffingtonpost.com) and the text in (2) is one of many contributions critical of the Iraq war. In the excerpt, Uygur uses 1PP-pl in the function of a national *we* – it denotes all citizens of the United States collectively, which may or may not include the reader. This is one of many examples where 1PP-pl is extended beyond a physical situation while also being non-anaphoric (the reader must infer to whom *we* refers) and it exemplifies how a skillful writer can seek to create solidarity with his or her readership through the choice of the appropriate pronouns. As a later example, text (3), will show, this usage potential is especially relevant in texts where the intended referent appears to shift from one instance of 1PP-pl usage to the next.

A specific aspect of mediated uses of 1PP-pl is brought to the surface in (2): The distinction between inclusive and exclusive uses of the pronoun is often difficult to recover (i.e. the blogger's intended reference may not always be clear) and whatever his or her intention, the meaning can shift in either direction at the time of reading, depending on who the reader is. While anaphoric uses will exclude the reader unless he or she has been explicitly named, virtually all purely deictic uses of 1PP-pl potentially include the reader and at the same time depend on the reader's readiness to consider himself or herself as included.

A similar dynamic can be observed with regard to 2PP. While most uses of 2PP exclude the speaker, its scope can cover a range of referents as well, as text (3) illustrates:

Text (3)

The Mommy Blawger, [ix] The Baby Blawg, "Natural 'Birth Control'", 21 August 2006

http://babyblawg.blogspot.com/2006/08/natural-birth-control.html (last accessed on March 30, 2010)

Doctors need more training in natural birth control. Well, duh. Didn't need a study to tell me that one. Point 1: Most people refer to "natural family planning" or "natural family spacing" (or even "fertility awareness") rather than "natural birth control". That is not a term that **you** hear often. Point 2: I think it's hillarious when people say "**you** can get pregnant while breastfeeding, **you** know". Well yes, but if **your** baby is under six months old and **you** are exculsively breastfeeding (and not sleep-training) **you** are about as likely to get pregnant as if **you** are on the pill. But **you** don't hear people warning each other "**you** can get pregnant on the pill, **you** know".

The sample, taken from a pregnancy blog, exemplifies use of 2PP to refer alternately to the blogger, the reader, and to a generic third person. Potentially, the blogger is referring purely to herself, but use of 2PP actively involves the reader without risking the kind of logical confusion that might arise if 1PP-pl were used. As English does not mark 2PP for gender, number or social distance (i.e. T-V distinction[x]) it achieves maximal scope in blogs, where, like 1PP-pl, it can potentially address almost any reader.

As outlined, pronouns of the third person can for several reasons be regarded as distinct from IPPs because of the status of the former as true noun replacements versus the status of the latter as distinct realizations of discourse roles. In instances of language use where no temporal and spatial orientation is indicated, the use of such discourse roles can be confusing and ambiguous, which explains the low overall frequency of IPPs in written language. It is only on a second level that ways in which the issue of a certain kind of content conditions the frequency of pronouns comes into play: Utterances that involve the speaker and addressee inevitably contain more pronouns, whereas statements about third parties contain fewer. Since there is no definite discourse partner and since we often find what amounts to self-omission in many kinds of written texts, everyone referenced in such writings is essentially a third person. Finally, deliberate rhetorical distancing plays an important role in genres that seek to embody objectivity, that is, the ejection from any single context of interpersonal interaction, such as academic writing, legal texts, news reporting and instruction manuals[xi]. It is noteworthy that the discourse role of outsider that 3PP inevitably assigns is purely rhetorical in blogs. Since both *we* and *you* are flexible in their reference when used in a blog (where there is no physical discourse situation), they can always be interpreted to include the reader, unless the reader is explicitly named and designated as a third person. This is not possible in face-to-face conversation, where the situation shapes the deictic configuration to a large extent.

Across genres, explicit self-reference of the author both marks involvement and suggests a degree of self-presentation on his part. In an early study, Chafe and Danielewitcz (1987: 23) observed that:

If people have a natural inclination to talk about themselves, it is apparently in letters that they have the best opportunity to do so, being freed of whatever inhibitions might be imposed by the immediate presence of an interlocutor. The use of first person pronouns is thus not necessarily a feature which differentiates spoken from written language, but rather a feature which the absence of a direct audience may even foster when the circumstances are right. At the same time, as we can see from the figure for academic papers, writing can create a context in which maximum suppression of one's own identity is possible.

Three factors help explain the relative lack of IPPs in academic writing: (a) the absence of a discourse situation, (b) the non-involvement of the speaker in what is verbalize, and (c) the conscious motivation to suppress the self. The high frequency of self-reference in letters that Chafe and Danielewitcz (1987: 23) notice is similarly explicable via the combination of speaker involvement, the interpretation of the text as an uninterrupted chance to express oneself and a lack of need to suppress self-centered language. In essentially the same way as in letters, the pronominally reflected self-suppression in academic writing stands in marked contrast to the self-centered mode of blogs (as discussed in detail in section 5).[xii] This has important consequences specifically for corporate blogs, which seek to personalize the discourse between an institution and individuals. Whereas academic discourse seeks to distance the author from the text and thereby to objectify the content, corporate blogs aim to achieve the opposite.

Similar results in terms of underrepresentation of personal pronouns in academic writing and, to a lesser extent, news texts, are visible in Johansson's analysis (1985) of the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus (LOB).

However, the picture is slightly more nuanced: While Chafe and Danielewitcz examined self-involvement only, the analysis of LOB took reference to other actors into account. Johansson (1985: 31) notes:

> With all these forms, except *we*, the fictional texts have a much higher frequency than the other category groups. [...] The personal pronouns do not all behave in the same way, however. The frequency differences are especially large with *I* and *you*, he and she. This is a reflection of the proportion of dialogue as well as of subject-matter; fictional texts contain a great deal of dialogue (hence, the high frequency of *I* and *you*) and typically deal with persons and their experiences (hence, the higher frequency of *he* and *she*).

While Johansson attributes the high 1PP frequency to the prevalence of dialog, his description of fiction containing much language related to "persons and their experiences" is significant, albeit with qualification. Blogs, for example, are centrally concerned with persons and their experiences, yet these are presented from the blogger's point of view (1PP) to a discourse partner (2PP), with the third person that describes others used much less frequently. It is significant that a presentation from this subjectified perspective is possible in blogs, whereas it is not possible in many other genres where the relevant contextual information is unavailable.

5. Use of interpersonal pronouns in corporate blogs

As I have shown, the blog is a form of publishing that echoes certain situational parameters of spoken discourse by providing meta-information on the speaker and the time of coding, thereby constructing a deictic center that can be retrieved by the blog reader. Furthermore, blogs can be characterized as planned, structured and uninterrupted speech in the sense that they are maintained by individuals who are not restricted to a single topic and not subject to the constraints of on-line speech production. Based on these circumstances, the following hypotheses can be formulated:

−   Bloggers are likely to use egocentric deictic reference because this allows for an easier conceptualization of blogging in terms of spoken discourse, which is a familiar form of communication to both the blogger and the readers.

−   Bloggers are likely to feature prominently in their own discourse, either explicitly (via 1PP-sing) or more implicitly (via 1PP-pl, 2PP, or other strategies).

−   Bloggers are likely to conceptualize blog entries on a continuum between monologue and dialogue, because the fluid referentiality of 2PP allows them to frequently shift focus, in extreme cases from one clause to the next.

Corporate blogs, specifically those that place emphasis on public relations, seek to establish a tri-part relationship between the writer of the blog, its readership and the company as a whole. Therefore, the basic assumptions that hold true for blogs in general must be extended to reflect this dynamic:

−   Corporate bloggers can be assumed to address readers more explicitly than the more introverted and diarist-like personal bloggers, due to their purposeful and goal-oriented nature.

−   Corporate bloggers are likely to consciously exploit the inclusive rhetorical potential of 1PP-pl in order to set off the company as a unitary whole and contrast it with third parties.

−   Corporate bloggers similarly are able to use to rhetorical potential of 2PP to address both a generic readership and very specific focus groups (such as clients, investors, or competitors).

Text (4), in which Jonathan Schwartz, CEO of Sun Microsystems, addresses both employees and external stakeholders, illustrates the full potential of corporate blogs in this regard:

> Text (4)
> Jonathan Schwartz, Jonathan's Blog, "We Think We Can," 30 July 2007
> http://blogs.sun.com/jonathan/entry/we_think_we_can (last accessed on March 29, 2010)
>
> Paraphrasing Henry Ford, "**You** think **you** can, or **you** think **you** can't - either way, **you**'re right." That quote struck **me** as the perfect summary of **our** fiscal year 2007 performance. **We** did what **we** said **we**'d do a year ago. As **you** may have seen, **we**'ve announced **our** fourth quarter and full fiscal year results (**our** fiscal year ends with the school year, in June) . **We** exceeded the commitments made a year ago, to restore **Sun** to 4% operating profitability in Q4, and did so by delivering **our** single best operational quarter since 2001. On an annual basis, **we** improved **Sun**'s profitability by over a billion dollars. A billion. **We** grew revenue, expanded gross margins,

streamlined **our** operating expenses - and closed the year with an 8% operating profit in Q4, more than double what **some** thought to be an aggressive target a year ago. **We** did this while driving significant product transitions, going after new markets and product areas, and best of all, while aggressively moving the whole company to open source software (leading **me** to hope **we** can officially put to rest the question, "how will **you** make money?") . And **we**'re not done - not by any stretch of the imagination. **We** have more streamlining to do, more commitments to meet, more customers to serve and developers to attract. But it's evident **we**'ve got the right foundation for growing **Sun** - with real innovation the market values, as shown by Q4's 47% gross margins, the highest on record in five years. **I**'ll be with a variety of external audiences most of this week – and **I**'ll summarize their questions and comments in a few days. In the interim... to **our** customers, partners, and most of all, **our** amazing global employee base - thank **you** for thinking **we** could. **You** were right. Keep thinking that way. **You** ain't seen nothin' yet.

As in (2), Schwartz uses 1PP-pl with rhetorical extension to refer to all employees of the company, including himself. But use of 1PP-pl in this function does not prevent him from using 1PP-sing to present himself as distinct from "everyone at Sun," nor to use the full noun *Sun* as denoting something other than *we*. Instead, an intricate interplay of discourse roles is developed:

− 1PP-pl, used as subject with a range of dynamic verbs of action and movement and semantically as agent, denotes the employees of Sun Microsystems (or, in a more restrictive interpretation, the management team).

− 1PP-sing is used in contexts where agency of the institutional *we* would not result in a semantically well-formed proposition. E.g., Jonathan Schwartz will summarize what external audiences have to say, since this is something that the collective company is not literally capable of doing.

− 2PP can denote the single blog reader (and all readers collectively), any single employee of Sun (and all employees collectively) and customers and partners in those contexts where Schwartz is the speaker, while it reflects back to him and the company where he is paraphrasing the speech of others (*how will you make money?*)

− *Sun*, the company name, is used only three times and always in object position (*restore Sun / grow Sun*) or as part of a noun phrase in object position (*Sun's profitability*), while 1PP-pl dominates in subject position.

− The indefinite pronoun *some* is used once to explicitly refer to a third party, as is the expression *external audiences* to describe people who are not employees of the company.

The rhetorical significance of institutional *we* becomes clear when one examines its verbal collocates, for example *say, do, announce, grow, improve* and *exceed,* all of which are used transitively. The company's annual earnings have not been announced by an indefinite collective of employees, but by the management team and *what we said we'd do a year ago* refers to a controversial plan to refocus Sun that was formulated by Schwartz. But it is obviously of strategic value for the CEO to downplay his role and instead present the company's success as the result of a team effort (using *we* instead of *I*). At the same time, the use of *we* is preferable to any other conceivable reference (*you, Sun, the company*, etc.) because (a) it includes Schwartz himself), (b) it asserts a discourse situation that is made plausible via the blog, and (c) because it allows to position the collective *we* apart from *some* outsiders who have been skeptical about the restructuring plans .

On the basis of the described contexts and functions in which IPPs appear, it is possible to develop a taxonomy of post types and evaluate them before the background of the strategic goals they can potentially serve. It it furthermore possible to associate quantitative usage date from CBC/Corporati with these post types to highlight which uses are most common in which blogs.

In terms the assignment of discourse roles and consequent designation of IPPs, there are several possible alternative post types:

− *Nobody*: The blogger avoids self-reference and does not address an audience.

− *Only you*: The blogger avoids self-reference and addresses an audience (2PP).

− *Only me*: The blogger refers to himself or herself (1PP-sing) and does not explicitly address an audience.

− *Only us*: The blogger refers to the company, the blog team etc. (1PP-pl) and does not explicitly address an audience.

− *You and I*: The blogger refers to himself or herself (1PP-sing) and addresses an audience of 1-to-X people (2PP).

- *You and us*: The blogger refers to the company, the blog team etc. (1PP-pl) and addresses an audience of 1-to-X people (2PP).

Table 4 illustrates these different strategies with regard to their use of IPPs.

Table 4: Strategies of IPP use in corporate blogs

	Nobody	*Only you*	*Only me*	*Only us*	*You and I*	*You and us*
2PP		X			X	X
1PP-sing			X		X	(X)
1PP-pl				X		X

In the following, individual examples for each strategy will be provided.

5.1 *Nobody* strategy

> Text (5)
> Greg Sterling, SearchEngineLand.com, "Microsoft's Johnson: 'Once Yahoo And Microsoft Agree On A Transaction,'" 22 February, 2008
> http://searchengineland.com/080222-163028.php (last accessed on March 29, 2010)
>
> This afternoon, Kevin Johnson, president of Microsoft Platforms & Services Division, issued an email to Microsoft employees (that was released via its PR firm). The letter has a tone of confidence that assumes a deal with Yahoo will ultimately take place. It reiterates what Microsoft believes to be the benefits of that deal and looks beyond regulatory approval to integration issues. It downplays Yahoo resistance, potential culture conflicts between the companies and potential layoffs with an upbeat message about the future.
>
> Below is the full text of the email: [quoted text follows]

Omission of overt self-reference is possible in scenarios where the writer is not himself a part of the events or actions described. In *Nobody*-type entries, 2PP reference is missing as well, so that what is verbalized is not told to anyone in particular. The most natural topic for such a post is an event that, in terms of personal involvement, has a certain distance from both blogger and reader.

5.2 *Only you* strategy

> Text (6)
> Anon, Thomson Holidays Blog, "Top Places to Party," 30 November 2008
> http://thomsonholidays.blogs.com/my_weblog/2007/10/top-places-to-p.html (last accessed on March 29, 2010)
>
> If **you**'re feeling a little down-in-the-dumps lately, the chances are it is our good old English weather that is to blame. So if **you** fancy hotting things up a bit, and **you**'re after a bit of liveliness into the bargain, then check out our Top Places to Party around Europe. From Ibiza to Malta, Bulgaria to Valencia, our guide gives **you** the best night-spots for that much-deserved break. Go on, **you** know **you** want to... Top Places to Party

Blog entries such as (6) are encountered primarily in those rare cases where no individual blogger is credited as the author of a post. Because the contextual information about the author is not provided, blog deixis cannot be relied on, and therefore self-reference must be largely omitted (but note the use of the plural possessive determiner, *our*). The lack of a discernible speaker in conjunction with the use of the imperative

(*go on*) makes the function of the blog as advertising apparent. Very few contexts are imaginable in which the speaker is so significantly backgrounded in favor of the addressees, paired with suggestions regarding what they should do. Such peculiarities place these types in significant distance from mainstream blogs and provoke accusations of being "fake blogs" ("flogs"; see Puschmann 2010: 122).

5.3 *Only me* strategy

Text (7)
Marc Monseau, JNJ BTW*, "*Through the Eyes of Another…," 30 July 2007
http://jnjbtw.com/?p=92 (last accessed on March 29, 2010)

For doctors and family members caring for someone who is unwell, it's often very difficult to understand and emphasize with what they are going through. Even more so if the disorder is pyschological. **I**'ve often heard about organizations trying to help folks see the world through the eyes of patients often turning to new technology and other tools that create a virtual reality. Recently, Sri Ramaswami, a friend of **mine** in PR at Johnson & Johnson's Janssen company, told **me** about a new virtual reality tool that they had developed to help people understand what it's like to walk in the shoes of a schizophrenic. Some coverage of this initiative here, here and here.

While there is clearly an implied reader addressed in posts such as (7), the reference is not made explicit. The audience is neither directly involved in what is communicated, nor is it invited to comment, surveyed or ordered to do anything. At the same time it is not possible for the blogger to present the exact same information without referring to himself and his (indirect) involvement via his friend.

5.4 *Only us* strategy

Text (8)
Lionel Menchaca, Direct2Dell, "Ratings & Reviews in More Languages," 15 October 2007
http://direct2dell.com/one2one/archive/2007/10/15/31771.aspx (last accessed on March 29, 2010)

Late last week, **we** rolled out ratings and reviews functionality in France, Germany and Spain for Consumer and Business systems. Since **we** began offering the ability to share ratings and reviews on October 4, **we**'ve now expanded the functionality to the following countries: Canada France Germany Ireland Spain United Kingdom United States **We** plan to offer in more languages moving forward.

Entries of this type are especially characteristic for corporate, institutional or team blogs due to the fact that the corporate *we* can be plausibly used without a prior specification of who it refers to in such blogs. Blog entries such as (8) are a part of the organizational website and the actions described have not been conducted by a single individual (see also [4] and [5]).

5.5 *You and I* strategy

Text (9)
Thomas Mahon, English Cut*, "*greetings from u.s.a.," 16 November 2007
http://www.englishcut.com/archives/000232.html (last accessed March 29, 2010)

I arrived in America safely, and am having a lovely time. As **I** said in my last post, **I** am only visiting Atlanta and New York. **I**'m in Atlanta today and tomorrow, and New York Monday, Tuesday and until Wednesday noon. As always, if **you** wish to meet up, please feel free to get in touch, **I** look forward to seeing Everybody again. Thank **you**.

These types of posts exemplify a configuration where both discourse roles (blogger and reader) are fully applied. The request of the blogger to contact him makes 2PP plausible, although one could also imagine the use of other pronouns (*anyone, someone*), since this is what the blogger does when he expresses that he looks forward to *seeing Everybody*.

5.6 *You and us* strategy

> Text (10)
> The Official Palm Blog, "Happy America Recycles Day!," 15 November 2007
> http://blog.palm.com/palm/2007/11/happy-america-r.html (last accessed March 29, 2010)
>
> In the spirit of America Recycles Day, **we** just wanted to reiterate that Palm fully supports recycling. As mentioned in a previous post, Palm's recycling program is free and takes cell phones and handhelds in any condition, from any brand and also any old accessories that go with it. If **you** want to participate, just download a pre-paid mailing label here, or pick one up at a Palm retail store. (Don't forget to erase all your personal information before sending it in). Here are the links to Palm's recycle site and the National Recycling Coalition. And of course there's no reason not to recycle everyday!
> -Palm Recycle Team

As the most likely type of post in terms of how discourse roles are assigned, this strategy fully establishes the noted tri-part relationship between blogger, reader and company via IPPs. As in (4) and (5), the blogger uses both *we* and the company name (*Palm*), the 1PP-pl standing in for *Palm Recycle Team*.

6. Conclusion

This paper has presented an analysis of the use of inter-personal pronouns (IPPs) in corporate blogs. It has done so assuming that the corporate blog is an emerging domain-specific genre of computer-mediated communication. The goal was to depict the implicit conceptualization that bloggers and blog readers alike have of the specific communicative situation that blogs create and that are reflected linguistically in IPP use. It has been shown (a) that blog technology provides important meta-data that bloggers can rely on to encode deictic information in their writing through the use of pronouns (via a deictic center) and that blog readers can use to reconstruct said context, and (b) that it is the virtual nature of the discourse situation that makes rhetorical extensions of the pronouns possible, both in ways anticipated by the blogger and in unforeseen ways. The specific communicative goals associated with corporate blogging favor personalized and subjectified expressions over a more detached style (exemplified in academic writing). For this reason, strategies that assign more discourse roles are overall preferred to those that assign fewer ones. The latter type is also rarely used because it ignores contextual information which implies a discourse situation that blog readers have become to expect. The specific example of pronouns – deictic bridges between text and context – serves to highlight the significance of genre all the way down to the foundations of grammar in real-world discourse, because *genre*, understood broadly as situational context paired with convention, is extremely salient in computer-mediated communication. The openness and dynamicity of the communicative situation found in blogs result in a continuum between interpersonal communication and expository writing and in an interplay between different communicative actors (blogger, addressee, company). It is specifically this interplay which is at once a challenge and an opportunity for corporate bloggers, who must appear as competent discourse partners in a constantly shifting communicative environment.

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i   I am indebted to Theresa Heyd, two anonymous reviewers and especially Anja Wanner for extensive feedback on both formal and conceptual aspects of earlier versions of this paper.

ii   There are certain exceptions: See, for example, Herring & Paolillo (2006) for a discussion of blogs and issues of gender and genre analysis, a topic that has sparked much interest in computational linguistics recently (Koppel, Argamon, & Shimoni 2003; Schler, Koppel, Argamon, & Pennebaker 2006). Also see Nowson, Oberlander, & Gill (2005) for issues of style and author personality in blogs. Nilsson (2003) is one of the few attempts to assess blogs linguistically. However, her assessment uses a relatively small corpus and examines a limited number of features.

iii I adopt the term from Wales (1996), who uses it to denote pronouns of the first and second person in English.

iv   See Puschmann (2010) for a detailed description of the data. The corpus assembled for my PhD project (henceforth abbreviated as *CBC/Corporati*) consists of 25,476 posts (5,356,486 tokens) from 137 corporate blogs maintained by large and medium-sized U.S. companies. It was assembled between April 2, 2006 and December 15, 2007.

v   Many definitions highlight the technical aspects of blogs since only they can be regarded as fully stable. E.g. Herring et al. call blogs "frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence" (2004: 101). Other definitions place stronger emphasis on their use: Schmidt describes blogs as "a tool for information, identity and relationship management" (2007: no pagination).

vi   In terms of person, the deictic center is virtually always the blogger, the temporal deictic center is generally coding time, and the spatial deictic center is either the place of coding (the location of the blogger at the time of writing) or the blog itself, conceived as a virtual place. The (older) genre of the personal homepage seems to differ in this respect (see de Saint-Georges 1998). Spatial metaphors are generally prevalent when conceptualizing the Internet, making blogs virtual personal spaces where people can think aloud.

vii The list of the most frequent words in the BNC (all sections) reproduced in Table 1 has been adopted from Kilgarriff (1998). Also see Kilgarriff (1998) for a description of the BNC tagset.

viii Note that there is a gradual decline of precision when it comes to how clearly the referring IPP is linked to its referent. While 1PP-sing clearly identifies the blogger, 1PP-pl can be coreferential (see section 5). Use of 2PP can refer to discourse partners but also to indefinite referents (see also section 5).

ix This blog alias is used by the anonymous author of *The Baby Blawg*, see the user profile of the "The Mommy Blawger" (www.blogger.com/profile/15089652068368856212, last accessed on March 29, 2010).

x   Many languages encode a distinction of social intimacy or distance between discourse partners in 2PP (e.g. *Tu – Vous* in French; *Du – Sie* in German). For an analysis of social deixis and the T-V distinction in 2PP use, see Brown and Gilman (2003).

xi Television news are exemplary in this regard: While there is arguably a technologically mediated discourse situation, frequently discourse roles are not assigned, and there is no use of interpersonal pronouns. On a second level (and in more recent usage) 2PP is used to address the audiencem and in some contexts self-reference is also possible. News formats illustrate the duality that shapes pronominal distribution: At once news formats seek to appear objective and the subject matter is markedly detached from the speaker as a person.

xii See Miller and Shepherd (2004), who point to early blog researcher Rebecca Blood's characterization of blogging as "an outbreak of self-expression" (2000: no pagination) that Blood relates to the reverse chronological ordering of posts that is conventional in blogs.