



# Analysis on the Referential Content of “We” in *The Report on the Work of the Government 2021* from the Perspective of Pragmatics

Jinyu Hu

Tiangong University, Tianjin, China  
Email: 1191184362@qq.com

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## Abstract

The Report on the Work of the Government is a summary of China’s development achievements in the past year and plans for future work. The English version of the report provides the international community with a crucial means to learn about this rising nation. From the perspective of pragmatics, this paper uses text analysis to explore and classify the content of “we” in *The Report on the Work of the Government 2021* according to relevance theory and adaptation theory. The results show that in the same discourse, the referential content of “we” is ambiguous and dynamic to some extent. In terms of the effect of use, “we”, which is often used in conjunction with modal verbs, plays a role in appealing and warning. Specifically, the self-referential “we” that is limited to a specific group emphasizes responsibility and mission; the “we” that refers to others in general can be used as a social indicator to narrow the distance between the speaker and receivers.

## Subject Areas

Linguistics

## Keywords

Deixis, We, *The Report on the Work of the Government 2021*

## 1. Introduction

The fifth session of the 13th National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China and the fifth Session of the 13th National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference were held in March, 2021. During this period, Li Keqiang, Premier of the State Council, delivered a report on the

work of the government in the National People's Congress. The report covers the conclusion of last year and plans for future work. Every year, the two sessions attract global attention. It is an important manifestation of my country's socialist democratic politics and the report delivered by Premier Li also shows the political stance of the government. The author chooses the English version of Report on the Work of the Government (delivered at the Fourth Session of the 13th National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China on March 5, 2021) as a sample to analyze the use of "we" and its referents and connotations.

## 2. The Classifications and Attributes of Deixis

Linguistic signs such as words and sentences are the products of brain processing that can reflect the speaker's personal psychological world and cognitive level. Xiong (2008) [1] described language symbol as "a two-sided body combining form and content". Therefore, by analyzing the explicit language symbols, not only can we understand the meaning behind the words, but also get a glimpse of the speaker's cognition and mental schema.

Deixis is a direct manifestation of the relationship between language structure and context (Huang, 2007) [2]. Levinson (1983) [3] divided the deixis into five categories: person deixis, place deixis, time deixis, discourse deixis and social deixis. Broadly speaking, the research scope of deixis also covers proper names, definite description and referring expressions. Referring expressions is one of the major topics of semantics, and due to the influence of contextual factors, we must refer to the context of the utterance in order to know the specific meaning of the deixis (Jaszczolt, 2002) [4]. Verschueren (1999) [5] thought that pragmatics should focus on the variability, negotiability and adaptability of language. As what is discussed by linguistic adaptation theory, the process of language use is that of continuous selection of language, and how to choose it is the result of multiple adaptations. In a dynamic context, the speaker should constantly choose different deixis. At the same time, the listener needs to determine the content of the deixis based on the context, mutual knowledge of both sides, and personal knowledge. Borthen (2010) [6] pointed out that plural pronouns were often vague, and the vagueness of reference was consistent with the optimal relevance assumption in relevance theory, but in this process, due to individual differences and the influence of contextual factors, ambiguity and misunderstandings often occurred. Levinson has also pointed out that deixis was still under-researched in the field of pragmatics. In order to make up for this shortcoming, scholars from various countries have carried out in-depth research on deixis from different perspectives. In the field of person deixis, besides English, the research covered Chinese, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, Afrikaans, etc. (Olmén & Breed 2018 [7]; Liu & Xue 2014 [8]; Li 2014 [9]; Hu & Le 2016 [10]). These researches mainly focus on the classification and the pragmatic effects of person deixis, and also the role of context in the comprehension of it. Some scholars have conducted comparative analyses of personal pronouns among dif-

ferent languages, and found that personal pronouns were generally vague. What's more, non-native learners had differences in the use of personal pronouns with native speakers.

Based on previous research, this paper tries to analyze the properties and connotation of the high-frequency demonstrative "we" in the English report *The Report on the Work of the Government 2021* from the perspective of pragmatics.

As the first-person plural form, "we", first of all, belongs to the category of person deixis, and the pragmatic analysis of "we" have covered different fields such as speeches, literary works, advertisements, etc. (Xie & Zhang 2012 [11]; Chen & Sun 2008 [12]; Wang 2014 [13]). Lin (2009) [14] concluded that the reference to "we" is specific and clear. When referring to the speaker itself, it mostly reflects the purpose of the speaker like being humble, objective or wanting to shirk responsibility. When referring to the listener, the psychological distance will be narrowed, thus achieving the purpose of empathy. In addition, "we" can also be used as social deixis. Brown and Levinson (1987) [15] pointed out that "we" can be a symbol of respect.

### 3. The Referential Content of "We" in the Report

According to the context, the referential content of "we" is not fixed, and it can be divided into the following types.

Firstly, "we" refers to all the members working in the Chinese government besides the speaker. All power in the People's Republic of China belongs to the people. The National People's Congress is the highest authority of the People's Republic of China, and it is responsible for the people and is subject to their supervision. On behalf of the government, Premier Li delivered the report to NPC to ask for their deliberation and approval. Therefore, from the perspective of the government, Premier Li is a representative.

1) *Last year, we carried out the following work in implementing the decisions and plans of the Party Central Committee, and to respond to Covid-19 and advance economic and social development.*

Here is a brief conclusion of the work concerning Covid-19, economy and society. We can see that under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, "we" take a series of measures that show the function of the government. In this report, "we" is mostly used to refer to the government.

Secondly, "we" is used to refer to the Chinese people. The most basic identity of the speaker is a member of the People's Republic of China, and because of his unique social status, he can act as a representative of all Chinese and express the aspirations of the people of all ethnic groups.

2) *Facing the severe combined impact of a sudden coronavirus epidemic and a deep global economic recession, we the Chinese people of all ethnic groups, under the strong leadership of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core, responded with tremendous tenacity.*

In this sentence, “we” is followed immediately by “the Chinese people”, which clearly explains the referent of “we”. This also reflects the speaker’s approval of this identity and the sense of belonging obtained from it. The audiences of *The Report on the Work of the Government 2021* are not only the deputies present, but the whole country and the whole world can listen to and watch it through TV, radio broadcasts or Internet, etc. Therefore, “we” is not only a person deixis, but also social deixis used to narrow the distance between the speaker and all listeners, especially those who share the same identity with the speaker, so as to arise the resonance with listeners.

Thirdly, “we” refers to China. In China, it is people that master the whole country. The election of people’s representatives and the holding of the National People’s Congress have proved this point with fact. Li Keqiang is a citizen of the People’s Republic of China, and like all citizens, he is the master of the country. Therefore, “we” can refer to our country in the report.

3) *We upheld multilateralism and endeavored to build a human community with a shared future. We supported global cooperation on combating Covid-19 and called for building a global health community. China thus made important contributions to advancing global peace and development.*

These three sentences above apply past tense to show what we have done last year. In the first two sentences, the subject is “we”, while in the last sentence; the subject becomes “China”. The last sentence can be seen as a conclusion to the former two: “made important contributions to advancing global peace and development”. Based on the context, it is obvious that “we” refers to China here.

#### 4. Conclusions

This paper first points out the necessity and importance of the study from the classification and disciplinary attributes of deixis, and then takes *The Report on the Work of the Government 2021* as the research object to clarify the properties and referential content of “we” according to the relevance theory and adaptation theory in combination with the context. The analysis shows that, on the one hand, “we” in the report is often used as the subject of the sentence, followed by modal verbs, and plays the role of appealing, caution and summarizing. On the other hand, contrary to the point of view that the reference of “we” is specific and clear, the referent of “we” may be abstract, vague and dynamic, and needs to rely on the cognitive ability of the speaker and the specific context. The “we” in the report can be divided into three categories according to its referents: 1) refers to all government members, including the speaker; 2) refers to the Chinese people of all ethnic groups; 3) refers to the People’s Republic of China. Both the State Council and the People’s Republic of China serve the people and are inseparable from the people’s support, so different from the British royal family who used “we” to indicate power, the use of “we” in the report is more inclined to emphasize internal consistency and unity. What’s more, the word “we” in the report is more used to refer to a group including the speaker to publicly declare

their responsibilities, which reflects the spirit of taking responsibility and initiative. When referring to others, “we” can be used as social deixis to narrow the social distance with the others, which reflects the unity of the speaker and the listeners.

Due to the limitation of time and technology, the examples cited in this paper are relatively limited, so researchers can use the software to carry out further analysis. In addition, deixis is also a reflection of the cognitive schema and inner world of the speaker or writer. Therefore, the understanding process of deixis can be studied from the perspective of cognitive science. From the field of comparative analysis, we can compare the report with the election speeches of western politicians to find the similarities and differences in the use of deixis. In short, *The Report on the Work of the Government 2021* is the wisdom of the whole country and people, and the language used, the content and the organization of the report deserve our further analysis.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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## Appendix (Abstract and Keywords in Chinese)

### 从语用学角度分析《2021 政府工作报告》中“we”的指称内容

**摘要：**政府工作报告是对我国过去一年内发展成果的总结以及对未来工作的规划，报告的英文版是国际社会认识中国、了解中国的重要途径。本文从语用学的视角，采用文本分析，结合关联论和顺应论对“we”在《2021 年政府工作报告》中指称内容进行探究归类。分析结果显示，在同一语篇中，“we”的指称内容在一定程度上是模糊动态的。在使用效果上，多与情态动词搭配使用的“we”起号召、警示等作用。具体来说，限于特定群体的自指型“we”多强调责任与使命；泛指他人的“we”可作社交指示语，拉近与对方的距离，产生共鸣。

**关键词：**指示语，we，政府工作报告