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# Who is the True American? Personal pronouns as Indicators of Identity in Fareed Zakaria's « An Immigrant's Faith. »<sup>4</sup>

*Nadia Abid<sup>1</sup>*

## **Abstract:**

This paper is an attempt to highlight the pragmatic nature of personal pronouns and how they can be manipulated by language users. It is a pragmatic analysis of a written discourse, namely an article written by Fareed Zakaria in Newsweek on September 27, 2001. His article "An Immigrant's Faith" is actually a response to angry notes he received in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 claiming that a true American is a native-born and not an immigrant. The analysis of Zakaria's article relies on Wilson's (1990) scale of pronominal distribution. The use of this scale shows that Zakaria took advantage of two important features of personal pronouns which are their ability to express inclusion/exclusion and proximity/ distance. He is found, on the one hand, to include himself in and express proximity to an American identity which, he believes, should include all Americans regardless of their belongings and the time of their arrival to the USA. On the other hand, he is found to express distance from an identity that is defined by birth.

## **1. Background**

Who we are, who our parents are, where we were born and come from are factors that determine our identity and keep us distinct from others. Along with the geographical, social and ethnic belongings, language stands as a strong determiner of a person's identity. The relationship between language and identity is fundamental as language expresses our identity and shapes other people's views of who we are.

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The relationship between language and identity has drawn the attention of researchers from different disciplines. In sociolinguistics, for instance, it has been shown that an individual's dialect, variety or accent are overt signs of the region or the social class the speaker belongs to, or the kind of education s/he receives (Labov, 1972). These are strong indicators of the cultural identity that speakers display in their daily lives with various degrees of self-awareness (Byram, 1989). Byram (1989:40) argues that:

“For individuals or for whole groups, regions or nations, language is a way of marking cultural identity comparable to other cultural markers such as dress, housing or social institutions.”

In pragmatics, attention is mainly paid to the manifestation of the speaker's identity in discourse and his/her subjectivity. Pragmatics provides different linguistic tools to study the speaker's identity including the use of personal pronouns. Zupnik (1994:340), for instance, highlights the importance of pronouns in reflecting the speaker's identity by asserting that “pronouns serve to codify certain feelings of identification and belonging to the same group.”

In political discourse analysis, Orroyo (1999), Wilson (1990) and Zupnik (1994) conducted research on the use of pronouns by politicians. Their main focus was on the ambiguous nature of pronouns and their susceptibility to manipulation in the pursuit of particular aims such as persuading the public of decisions or actions, building solidarity, changing attitudes, expressing ideological and political affiliations (Wilson, 1990; Zupnik, 1994).

This study does not seek to reveal the speaker's manipulative use of pronouns in the pursuit of political aims, but tries to study the use of pronouns by Fareed Zakaria as an attempt to define his identity and redefine the American identity after the attacks of September 11, 2001. The present paper is mainly a qualitative study of pronouns in which instances of their use are analysed with reference to Wilson's (1990) scale of pronominal distribution. Wilson's scale, along with the corpus, i.e., Zakaria's article “an Immigrant's faith”, are thoroughly described in the methodology section which is followed by the analysis of the corpus and the conclusion.

## **2. Methodology**

This sections presents the methodology adopted in the analysis of Zakaria's “ An Immigrant's Faith”. It includes three subparts presenting

the corpus under analysis, the English pronouns as linguistic tools and Wilson's (1990) scale of pronominal distribution according to which pronouns are analysed.

## **2.1. Corpus**

The text selected for analysis, "An Immigrant's Faith", is an article published in the Newsweek US edition on September 27, 2001 and written by Fareed Zakaria, the editor of *Newsweek International*. Zakaria is not a native-born American but a Muslim Indian immigrant who immigrated to the USA in the pursuit of higher education. He is an outstanding journalist interested in America's foreign affairs. His columns appear regularly in *Newsweek*, *Washington Post* and *Newsweek International*. "An Immigrant's Faith" was actually a response to angry e-mails Zakaria received in the aftermath of the attacks claiming that the true and patriotic Americans are the ones who were born on American soil. Those angry notes implicitly referred to the attackers who are not native born but coloured Muslim immigrants. In his response Zakaria attempted to redefine the American identity from an immigrant's perspective.

## **2.2. Linguistic tools**

Personal pronouns are chosen as linguistic tools to analyse "an Immigrant's Faith" because of, first, their ability to express proximity to or distance from a group of people and their ideas and attitudes. Second, because they are able to shift reference in different instances of discourse. This stems from the fact that there is no one to one correlation or correspondence between the grammatical function of the pronoun and its reference within the context of utterance (Pennycook, 1994).

### **2.2.1. Proximity/ Distance**

Proximity is commonly expressed through the first person pronouns "I" and "we". Both pronouns indicate self-reference and any pronoun used to indicate self other than I/ We represents a distancing strategy on the part of the speaker (Wilson, 1990). The choice of a particular pronoun indicates how close or distant the speaker is to the topic under discussion or to the participants involved.

### **2.2.2. Shift of reference**

Another feature of English personal pronouns is their ability to shift reference. A pronoun can refer to different persons including some

and excluding others (Triki, 1989; Wilson, 1990; Zupnik, 1994). For instance, the pronoun “you” can refer to the immediate addressee(s) in a particular speech event, and can be impersonal to include all human kind (Haverkate, 1992; Wilson, 1990). The pronoun “we”, as well, has a double reference, it can either be inclusive including the speaker and hearer or exclusive excluding the hearer depending on the speaker’s intentions. The pronoun “I”, despite its reference to a unique speaker, encodes the speaker’s/writer’s multiple identities in discourse enabling him/her to shift from one identity to another.

The distant third person pronouns “he/she/they” commonly refer to anyone other than the speaker and to the addressee who may or may not be present in the place of interaction. However, they can be employed in that particular immediate context to address the participants who are normally addressed with the pronoun “you”. The purpose of the present study is to show how proximity and distance are expressed by pronouns and how their shifting nature is used by Zakaria to define himself and the American identity.

### 2.3. Wilson’s model

To analyse personal pronouns in “an Immigrant’s Faith”, pronominal reference will be classified according to Wilson (1990). He identifies three types of pronominal reference and the relationship between them which is either one of proximity and distance or one of contrast. The first type is **Self-Referencing** which refers to the way in which the speaker chooses to portray himself/herself in relation to the topic and addressees which are, in this study, respectively identity and the people who sent the angry notes to Fared Zakaria. The second type is the **Relations of Contrast** which refer to the way in which the speakers make use of the pronominal system to compare and contrast others on a negative or positive scale e.g. I/You; I/ he/they. The third type includes **Other Referencing** which refers to the use of pronouns outside the roles of the speaker and addressees as a distancing strategy.

### 3. Analysis

To analyse the text, it is essential to define its structure to contextualise the speech event, the relationship between the participants and the topic discussed on the one hand, and to facilitate the interpretation of pronominal use and reference on the other. This is



particularly important for the reference of personal pronouns since their multiple references are not grammaticalised in English. Thus, their interpretation depends on the context i.e., the speaker, the hearer, the relationship between them, the context of delivery etc.

The writer of this article is an immigrant American journalist who wrote it as a response to some angry e-mails he received from some Americans pretending that they are patriotic and true Americans because they are native born. Those people are therefore the immediate addressees in addition to Newsweek readers either inside or outside America. The analysis will proceed with reference to Wilson's scale, i.e. self-referencing, relations of contrast and other references.

### **3.1. Self-referencing**

This part explains and shows how the pronouns referring to self, I and we, are manipulated by the writer to refer to his different identities and to the American identity he believes in.

#### **3.1.1. The pronoun "I"**

Fareed Zakaria, the writer of this article, has multiple identities as he belongs to different communities. He acquired an Indian and Muslim identity by being born to a Muslim Indian family in Bombay. He became American as a result of his immigration, integration in the American society and acquisition of an American citizenship. He is also a journalist and editor of Newsweek Overseas Edition. In his article, the reference to all these identities are manifested through the use of the first person pronoun "I" which represents a clear case of the writer's reference to himself (Wilson, 1990). However, the pronoun can shift reference as the writer refers to his different identities in different instances in discourse (Triki, 1989; Pennycook, 1994). Fareed Zakaria uses "I" and its variants "me/my" eight times, three of which explicitly refer to his identity of a journalist.

- (a) "One of the pleasures and perils of including **my** e-mail address in my stories is that people use it."
- (b) "Mostly it is a pleasure. But every now and then **I** get an angry note from someone who adds with ferocious pride that he is a native-born American ("and proud of it! The last such missive thundered."
- (c) "After all, **I**'ve thought of writing back."

The occurrences of “I” in the three instances mentioned above seem to be a clear case of the writer’s reference to himself as a journalist. However, the last one is ambiguous as it is not clear whether the real referent “he” is Fareed Zakaria the journalist or the immigrant. From the context, i.e. the reception of the angry notes from white Americans who pretended to be true Americans because they are native born and from his sarcastic tone (the last such missive thundered), the “I” in (c) can be interpreted as a reference to his identity as an immigrant. He decided to reply not only as a journalist but also as a dark-skinned Muslim immigrant who felt concerned with the notes because they explicitly exclude the immigrants from the scope of being true Americans. The use of the pronoun “I” commits him to the truth of his statements and holds him responsible for what he is going to write, i.e. his own conception of the true American. The following utterances display Zakaria’s overt reference to his identity of an immigrant expressed by the first person pronoun “I”.

- (d) “The idea is that with ‘**my** foreign sounding’ name **I** could not understand the true patriotism of a son of a soil.”
- (e) “In the 20 years that **I**’ve lived in America, the country has become more receptive to people and ideas from all over the world.”

The identity expressed by the pronoun “I” is marked by Zakaria’s foreign name which is contrasted with the “son of the soil” who has a European Christian name and whose ancestors were born on American soil. Zakaria declares that he does not understand the type of patriotism that native-born Americans claim. For him, being an immigrant does not exclude him and other immigrants from being true Americans. Being a true American does not mean being white or the son of the soil but includes people of all races, religions and from all walks of life.

In utterance (e), there is an overt declaration of his identity as an immigrant who came to the USA 20 years ago. During his stay in America, the country has become more receptive to people and ideas from all over the world. However, the angry notes he received have shown that some Americans are not receptive to people from other countries. This is an implicit criticism that excludes those people from an America that is open to all people and all ideas. The high esteem he has in America is displayed in the following statement:

- (f) “people with dark skin have been asked to get off planes, spit at and, in a few awful cases, shot dead. But I have faith in my country.”

In this instance Fareed Zakaria explicitly identifies himself as an American who has faith in his country. However, he implicitly refers to his identity as a dark skinned immigrant. This can be inferred from the contrast between “people” with dark skin and “I”. Although he was not compelled to get off planes, he feels a kind of sympathy towards those people because he shares the colour of their skin. He, however, tends to identify himself more as an American than as a dark skinned because he has faith that his country “America” will keep its values of equality. He has faith in his country which according to him will treat all Americans equally by giving them equal opportunities and helping them achieve their dreams. This is what an immigrant seeks in America and believes s/he can achieve in it.

### **3.1.2. The pronoun “we”**

The pronoun “we” designates a range of individuals moving outwards from the writer himself to the writer and addressees and the whole community (Wilson, 1990). In the text under analysis there are seven occurrences of “we”. One of the seven shows an explicit reference to Zakaria’s identity of an immigrant.

- (g) For us immigrants, becoming American was a choice, marked by sorrowful partings and tough new beginnings.”

This is an instance of an exclusive “we” which includes the writer and his fellow immigrants and excludes his addressees, i.e, the white Americans though they are the immediate addressees. The exclusive “we” stands as an opposite to the implicit “you” (the white Americans). For immigrants, being American was a choice and the result of a painful struggle and not something given by birth. A true American is therefore not someone who happened to be born in the USA but someone who chooses and works to be American. There is 1 occurrence of exclusive “we” against 6 of inclusive “we” including all Americans (native-born and immigrants, whites and dark-skinned). The comparison shows the writer’s desire to belong to an America that embraces all and to identify with an identity that is defined in non-ethnic terms.

- (h) “Jefferson’s phrase, ‘the pursuit of happiness’ is our distinctive contribution to human kind.”

- (i) “For the past decade Americans have hankered for great dramas and heroic causes. As of Sept.11, we might just have one.”
- (j) “The struggle against religious fanaticism and global terrorism is both honourable and necessary, we did not choose it, but it will make us recognise what we have lost.”

The use of inclusive “we” is an attempt by Zakaria to include all Americans regardless of their origin, race and religion as it allows raising the feelings of togetherness, commonality, and belonging. It expresses proximity to the American people and the collective American identity that is based not only on multi-ethnicity but also on values such as individualism, achievement, freedom, equality and the search for a good life or in Jefferson’s words “the pursuit of happiness.”

- (k) “The most difficult task for America is not rooting out a terrorist network. It is fighting this fight without losing faith in our ideal.”

This is an instance of an inclusive “we” that makes America’s battle against terrorism a task that should be fought by all Americans. The attacks conducted by coloured immigrants should not threaten the unity of the American people and shake Americans’ confidence in the principles and values upon which the American identity is founded. This is a reminder to the American people of their collective American identity that is defined by Kook as follows:

“The values of equality, individualism, and achievement are seen to underlie the basic identity of American society, that is, basic liberal values. Hence, the American “character” is defined in non-ethnic and distinctly political terms.” (1998: 157)

With reference to Zakaria’s utterances, the identity of the American society is collective. It is a collection of ethnicities that are different but equal in terms of opportunities, freedom, achievement and the search for a good life. Being a true American means living by those values, respecting and fighting for them either inside or outside America. Whatever happens to America, whatever the fight is and whoever the enemies are, Americans should stick to their values which are characteristic of the American identity.

### 3.2. Relations of Contrast

In an act of communication, the speaker or writer usually addresses a reader or listener. This relationship is expressed through the explicit contrast between “I” the source of the illocutionary act (Searle, 1979) and “you” the hearer or the receiver of the message. The pronouns “I” and “you” are used by Zakaria to compare and contrast others either positively or negatively. “I” initially refers to Fareed Zakaria while “you” refers to the addressees i.e. the native born Americans.

- (l) “But every now and then I get an angry note from **someone** who adds with ferocious pride that **he** is a native-born American.”

The addressees are assumed to be the native born Americans who wrote the angry notes to Fareed Zakaria. It is noticed that the addressees are not addressed with the pronoun “you” but with the impersonal pronoun “someone” as well as the third person singular “he”. The choice of the third person instead of a second person is intentional and can have different interpretations. The impersonal address can express denial of anyone who believes that true Americans are the ones born in the USA and offspring of white families. It is also used by Zakaria as a distancing technique to keep those people distant and to reject their definition of the American identity.

- (m) “What did **you** do to become American other than happen to be born here?”

In this utterance there is an implicit contrast between the “I / we” of the immigrant and “you” of the native born Americans. This contrast of pronouns is accompanied by another contrast between their perceptions of being true Americans. For immigrants, being an American is a choice and an identity that has to be worked for while for native-born it is simply being born on an American soil. The question he asked implies a kind of blame to those Americans who claim to be Americans without doing something for their country. Being an American is not acquired by birth, it is acquired by work, fighting for survival and making one’s own world. It is doing and becoming and not just being. According to Zakaria, immigrants’ conception of the American identity is the one to be identified with as the true American identity is based on adherence to such values of equality and achievement (Kook, 1998). This is supported by his following utterance:

- (n) “But this is the oldest form of American patriotism- a belief that in this New World you can make your own world.”

In this statement there is a shift from the personal “you” meaning the native born Americans to an impersonal “you” meaning anyone and everyone or the human kind. The shift of the pronominal reference goes hand in hand with a shift from an identity limited to the native born to a broader one that is collective including anyone regardless of his/her origin and race etc. A shift from an identity restricted to the native born, to a larger one which represents the true identity of Americans who believe that in the New World any immigrant and native born can make his/her own world. The definition presented here is the one that Zakaria argues for and its truism is reinforced by the use of the pronoun “you” including the human kind and the simple present which commonly expresses facts and general truths (Yule, 1982). The true American is therefore someone who creates his own world in America and someone who enjoys this sense of achievement. Zakaria argues that this sense of achievement and the myth of the self-made man are the old form of patriotism that should be preserved and they also represent the major principles making up the American identity.

### **3.3. Other referencing**

In the article the third person plural is the one mainly used to refer to people other than the writer and his addressees. The pronoun “they” is manipulated by the writer to distance himself from a group of people and their ideas.

- (o) “That’s why they cared little that hundreds of Muslims were killed. They were the wrong kind of Muslims free in thought and deed.”

In this utterance by Zakaria, the pronoun “they” does not have the same referents. The first instance of “they” refers to “Bin Laden and his band of puritans” while the second instance refers to Muslim Americans who are “free in thought and deed.” Though he is a Muslim, Zakaria keeps distance from Bin laden and his followers and denounces their deeds and beliefs. According to Zakaria, Bin laden and his band of puritans are killers and are not the right kind of Muslims because, if they are, they should have cared for the Muslim Americans who were also killed in the attacks. Muslim Americans, including Zakaria, are neither

responsible for nor do they agree with what Bin Laden and his fellows did. The attackers are contrasted to “they” referring to the Muslim Americans who embody the American values of freedom of thought and deeds. He identifies himself and the Muslim Americans as Americans who believe in the values of freedom and equality which are shared by Americans regardless of their race, religion and colour and which make up the collective American identity.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The analysis of the article has shown that personal pronouns have been used by Fareed Zakaria to identify with an identity that he defends and which was shaken and came under attack after September 11, 2001. He is found to take advantage of the ability of the English pronouns to express proximity and distance and to shift reference to express closeness to a collective American identity adhering to a set of values and not defined in ethnic or religious terms. He also manipulates those specific features of pronouns to express distance from an undesired identity presented by native born Americans. Apart from proximity and distance, the shifting character of the personal pronouns has enabled the writer to shift their reference to help him include himself in or exclude it from a group of people or ideas.

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# FareedZakaria.com

September 27, 2001 U.S. Edition

About

**Newsweek**

An Immigrant's Faith

Articles

**The right to the pursuit of happiness is America's unique contribution to humankind.**

By Fareed Zakaria

Books

One of the pleasures and perils of including my e-mail address (zakaria@NEWSWEEK.com) in my stories is that people use it. Mostly it's a pleasure. But every now and then I get an angry note from someone who adds with ferocious pride that he is a native-born American ("and proud of it!" the last such missive thundered). The idea is that with my "foreign-sounding" name I could not understand the true patriotism of a son of the soil. Actually, it's the other way around. Native-born Americans don't understand an immigrant's love of country. "After all," I've thought of writing back, "what did you do to become an American, other than happen to be born here?" For us immigrants, becoming American was a choice, marked by sorrowful partings and tough new beginnings.

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What keeps an immigrant going is faith in his new country. This might not always look like patriotism because it doesn't take the familiar forms--Fourth of July picnics, the fluttering of the Stars and Stripes. Instead it's likely to show itself in a quiet dedication to work, family and friends. But this is the oldest form of American patriotism--a belief that in this New World you can make your own new world.

Alone among the great civilizations, this country embodies the simple idea of making a better life. Other cultures celebrate military conquests, religious devotion and ideological grandeur. America celebrates the suburban home with a two-car garage. Jefferson's phrase, "the pursuit of happiness," is our distinctive contribution to humankind.

For the past decade Americans have hankered for great dramas and heroic causes. As of Sept. 11, we might just

have one. The struggle against religious fanaticism and global terrorism is both honorable and necessary. We did not choose it, but it will make us recognize what we have lost. The boredom of peace, the banality of prosperity, the trivia of family life don't seem all that bad in light of the events in New York and Washington.

The past decade has truly been one of happy times. There was an amazing spirit of ease, adventure and openness in the air. In the 20 years that I've lived in America, the country has become more receptive to people and ideas from all over the world.

In striking at the World Trade Center, where dozens of different nationalities, faiths, languages, foods and fashions all gathered together, the terrorists struck at what makes America unique. The mongrel mixture of the Trade Center offends Osama bin Laden and his band of puritans. That is why they cared little that hundreds of Muslims were killed. They were the wrong kind of Muslims--free in thought and deed.

The greatest victory for bin Laden, of course, would be if America lost faith in its openness. That is his goal. In the aftermath of the bombings people have become fearful and suspicious of people who "look different." People with dark skin have been asked to get off planes, spit at and, in a few awful cases, shot dead.

But I have faith in my country. For every case that has been reported, there must have been thousands of dark-skinned people who did fly. (After all, how would the technology industry function if all Indians were grounded?) And every person of standing, from President Bush to Mayor Giuliani to the heads of the airlines involved, has spoken eloquently about the evil of targeting Arab-Americans or Muslims or anyone who looks different. If America is looking for a real challenge, this is it. The most difficult task for America is not rooting out a terrorist network. It is fighting this fight without losing faith in our own ideals.

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