

# SUMMARY

## THE SECRET LIFE OF PRONOUNS

JAMES W. PENNEBAKER



# **Summary of “The Secret Life of Pronouns” by James W. Pennebaker**

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Discover what our words say about us.

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# QuickRead

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# Introduction

Think about the last conversation you had and the last e-mail and text message you sent. What was it about? Perhaps it was something as simple as making dinner plans or something more complicated like the strategy for your next sales meeting. While you may think you communicated just one message, your words actually communicated much more than you realize. Words like *You*, *a*, *am*, *to*, *I*, *but*, *the*, *for*, and *not* can reveal parts of your personality, thinking style, emotional state, and even your connections with others. In fact, these words “account for less than one-tenth of one percent of your vocabulary but make up almost 60 percent of the words you use.” These function words may be small but they are mighty powerful. For example, the commonly used word, *I*, is used at far higher rates by followers than by leaders and by truth-tellers rather than liars. People use articles like *a*, *an*, and *the* more often are likely to perform better in college than low users. Even more, you can compare the way you use function words with that of your prospective partner to see if you’ve found your true love.

Through *The Secret Life of Pronouns*, James W. Pennebaker aims to reveal how simple words can say a whole lot more than we realize. The analysis of function words can lead to new insights in topics like psychology and social sciences, including personality, gender, deception, leadership, love, history, politics, and groups. As you read, Pennebaker hopes that you will come to see the world differently and use the knowledge to better understand yourself and others around you.

# The Language Analysis Program

Over 100,000 years ago, our ancestors began communicating through spoken language and 5,000 years ago, humans started writing. In the last 150 years, we have evolved the way we communicate from using the telegraph, radio, and television to e-mail, text messages, and social media. And while the way we communicate has changed, we are still compelled to communicate ideas, experiences, and emotions in the same way as before.

In 2006, we began using the social platform Twitter. In just 140 characters, people were broadcasting updates in their lives with “tweets” that could be read instantly by almost anyone. Within minutes, you could know what your closest friends and famous celebrities were thinking. But there is more to tweets than meets the eye. If we analyzed the tweets of celebrities like Oprah Winfrey and Lady Gaga, you’d begin to sense their fears, emotions, and the ways they connect with others and themselves.

However, long before Twitter was born, author James W. Pennebaker had been analyzing our use of language. In the 1980s, Pennebaker and his research team collected essays of people who had been through a traumatic experience. The stories people wrote were powerful, yet haunting. People detailed their experiences with physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. They discussed divorce, addictions, suicide, terrible accidents, and even feelings of failure. While each essay detailed a traumatic event, the way people wrote varied greatly. Some wrote with humor, others rage, and many others seemed cold and detached. Unfortunately, simply reading the essays was not enough to determine which writers would experience an improvement in health and which wouldn’t.

That was until Pennebaker and his team created a computer program called Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count, or LIWC. The premise of the program was to identify and tally the words in the essays that related to a specific psychological concept. For example, the team built an anger dictionary that comprised of words related to anger, such as *hate*, *rage*, *kill*, *slash*,

*revenge*, etc. They then created dictionaries for sadness, anxiety, positive emotions, and other moods as well. Of course, they needed to cast a broader net so they developed other lexicons to measure the occurrence of pronouns, articles, and words related to cause-effect thinking. In the end, they created almost eighty different dictionaries to include nearly all the types of words that people used in everyday language.

When analyzing the use of function words, including pronouns, prepositions, and articles, the results were astounding. The more people changed the ways they used function words from writing to writing, the more their health later improved. For instance, researchers found that the more people switched between first-person singular words like *I*, *me*, and *my*, the more their health improved compared to those who used *we*, *you*, *she*, and *they*.

# Content, Function, and Style Words

When it comes to language, all words are *not* created equal. While some words provide basic content and meaning, others serve quieter support functions. It's these quiet words that can say more about a person than the more meaningful ones. Words can generally be divided into two categories: content words and style words.

Content words include nouns (*table, uncle, justice, Fido*), regular and action verbs (*to love, to walk, to hide*), adjectives (*blue, fast, mouth-watering*) and adverbs (*sadly, hungrily*). These are the words that are absolutely necessary to convey an idea to someone else. Imagine having a conversation with someone who doesn't speak English very well. If that person is trying to describe a picture, they would use content words. So while you may not be able to understand one another very well, you'd get a good idea of what was going through their mind.

Style (or function) words, on the other hand, are words that connect, shape, and organize content words. Therefore, style words don't function very well on their own because they don't have much meaning. It's easy to assign meaning to nouns like *table, walking, blue, and bug*. However, it's much harder to imagine style words like *that, because, really, and the*. This is why when we analyze texts, we tend to skip over style, or function, words. They are harder to spot even though we use them more often than content words. While style words are easily ignored, they are powerful markers for determining our social abilities.

This is due to the area in our brain called *Broca's area*. Named after the nineteenth-century French surgeon Paul Broca, the Broca's area is located in the frontal lobe. This is the area of the brain that controls our social skills and "dozens of studies have demonstrated how frontal areas are linked to abilities to express and conceal emotions." The most dramatic example of how frontal lobe damage can change social behavior is that of Phineas Gage. In the mid-1800s, the conscientious railroad explosive expert



accidentally sent a rod into his skull, destroying much of his frontal lobe. While he wasn't killed, Gage's personality changed drastically. Instead of being his usual reserved and respectful self, he was now impulsive, obscene, and loud. He was a completely different person and, unfortunately, never returned to his former self.

In other words, since the frontal lobe is closely linked to personality and social behaviors, language areas in the frontal lobe - like Broca's area - are related to personality and social behaviors as well. Therefore, function words have the power to reveal how we view the social settings around us. For instance, "Function words require social skills to use properly. The speaker assumes that the listener knows who everyone is. The listener must be paying attention and know the speaker to follow the conversation. So the mere ability to understand a simple conversation chock-full of function words demands social knowledge."

# How Men and Women Use Language

To understand more about how different people use language, let's take a look at the differences among genders. Do men and women use words differently? Yes! But what are the differences exactly? You may think you know the answers but you might be surprised to find that when it comes to using first-person singular pronouns like *I*, *me*, and *my*, women are likely to use them more in everyday conversation. Men, on the other hand, use more articles than women. Let's take a deeper look at what all this means.

A person's use of pronouns reflects their focus of attention. So if someone is anxious, self-conscious, in pain, or even depressed, they are more likely to pay attention to themselves. Research suggests that, on average, women are more self-aware and self-focused than men, meaning they are more likely to use first-person singular pronouns in natural conversations, blogs, and speeches. Women are also likely to use cognitive words like *understand*, *think*, *because*, *reason*, and *rationale* more than men. This is likely because women also use social words at far higher rates than men, such as *they*, *friend*, or *parent*.

As mentioned previously, men use articles more than women do. While articles like *a*, *an* and *the* seem rather insignificant, they are actually very important words. You see, when a person uses an article, he is talking about a particular object or thing. Men are more likely to talk about objects and things more than women, like the broken carburetor, the wife, and a steak on the grill for dinner. In other words, men and women socialize differently and will, therefore, use words at different rates. Of course, gender is just part of it; additionally, our mindset can influence the words we use as well.

It was the year 2000 when Pennebaker was asked to study the language of a person's diaries. That person, GH, was undergoing therapy to transition from a female to a male and had been receiving injections of testosterone every two to four weeks. During the project, Pennebaker came across a gentleman who was also taking testosterone. At 60-years-old, the man had

been injecting himself with testosterone for four years to try and restore his upper-body strength. While the man didn't keep a diary, he agreed to allow Pennebaker to analyze all of his outgoing e-mails for the previous year.

The analyses for both men were completed using the LIWC computer program. What they found was that while their use of articles, prepositions, nouns, verbs, and negative emotion words had no change at all, there was a fascinating difference in the use of social pronouns like *we*, *us*, *he*, *she*, *they*, and *them*. As their testosterone levels dropped, they used more social pronouns. This means that both GH and the other gentleman would slowly become less self-focused in the days following their testosterone injections.

# What Writing Can Reveal About Our Thinking

Imagine being asked to describe yourself to a stranger. What words would you use? What traits would you highlight? Perhaps you would discuss your values, tell a story, talk about your job, friends, and relationships. You might say something like, “I’m a nice person. Very down to earth. Drama-free. Hard worker. Caring. Honest. Sympathetic. Supportive. Intuitive. Inquisitive. Curious.” In other words, you focus on content words, like adjectives to describe yourself and your values. However, as you’ll find out, your use of function words will be the ones that reveal more than you could ever imagine.

In an experiment conducted by Pennebaker, he asked participants to write essays that followed their stream-of-consciousness and write down whatever came to mind at the moment. Based on his findings, Pennebaker was able to identify three unique styles of writing and thinking: *formal*, *analytic*, and *narrative*.

The first style of thinking, formal thinking, is often stiff and humorless, with a touch of arrogance. It can also be seen as the opposite of immediacy as it includes big words and high rates of articles, nouns, numbers, and prepositions. The highly formal writer is also likely to be more intellectual and a bit distant, viewing their writing as a serious performance. Furthermore, formal thinkers are more likely to be concerned with status and power and less likely to be self-reflective. They drink and smoke less compared to others, and are more mentally healthy, but also tend to be less honest with themselves.

The second style of thinking is analytic. These are the people who work to understand their world, they use exclusive words like *but*, *without*, and *except*. They use negations like *no*, *not* and *never* and insight words like *realize*, *know*, and *meaning*. Additionally, they use tentative words like *maybe* and *perhaps*, certainty words like *absolutely* and *always*, and

quantifiers like *some*, *many*, and *greater*. Analytic thinkers make higher grades in college, tend to be more honest, and are more open to new experiences. They read more and have more complex views of themselves than others.

The final style of thinking is narrative. These people are natural storytellers and are more likely to use personal pronouns of all types, especially third-person. They will also use past-tense verbs, conjunctions, and especially inclusive words like *with*, *and*, and *together*. Narrative thinkers can't help but tell a story of some kind. So it should come as no surprise to learn that these people tend to have better social skills, more friends, and rate themselves as more outgoing. Now that Pennebaker could categorize writing styles in this way, it became easier to infer how people think, how they organize their worlds, and how they related to other people. In other words, a person's "almost invisible function words are revealing the very essence of who they are."

# How Words Can Determine a Person's Emotional State

When it comes to emotions, they have the power to change the way people see and think about the world. They can either motivate people to work harder or cause them to give up in despair. They can broaden our perspectives, guide our thinking, and affect the way we talk and interact with others. However, not only do we need to understand our own emotions, but we also need to be able to read other people's emotions to understand better what they are thinking or planning to do. One way we can do this is by examining the pronouns they use.

Let's take a look at Rudolph Giuliani, the mayor of New York City from 1994 to 2001. In 2000, a front-page article in the *New York Times* reported some noticeable personality changes that members of the press were recognizing in Giuliani. This piece caught the attention of Pennebaker so he decided to take a further look. He found that in Giuliani's eight years as mayor, he was often referred to in the media as an "insensitive bully, a man seething with anger and self-righteousness." In the late spring of 2000, however, Giuliani was diagnosed with prostate cancer. At the time, he withdrew from the senate race against Hillary Clinton, separated from his wife, married Judith Nathan, and began living with a friend while undergoing treatment for his cancer.

By early June, people noticed a significant change in Giuliani, regarding him as more genuine, humble, and warm. Pennebaker, of course, began to analyze his language in speeches from before and after the diagnosis. He found that compared to his first years as mayor, Giuliani dramatically increased his use of *I*-words, dropped his use of big words, and increased both positive and negative emotion words. In other words, Giuliani was demonstrating an interesting personality switch from cold and distanced to warm and immediate.

The Giuliani project revealed that language usage reveals people's emotions and that pronouns and other stealth function words can serve as a subtle emotion detector. It also proved that elevated use of *I*-words can make people appear more introspective and vulnerable, meaning people are looking inward and trying to understand their emotions. This can also be seen in the way people respond to tragedies in their lives. While Giuliani chose to acknowledge the pain, others may choose to ignore it. In the moments following a traumatic loss, people are often disoriented, numb, and in excruciating pain. Therefore, to reduce the pain, they regulate their attention away from their bodies. As a result, they use fewer *I*-words and a low rate of negative emotion words. They use relatively small and simple words, short sentences, and fewer cognitive words.

Pennebaker noticed this trend in the writing he found following the events of September 11, 2001. Working with popular blog site Livejournal.com, Pennebaker and his team scoured the site for bloggers who regularly posted in the months before 9/11 and the weeks following. They analyzed the language of the blogs and found startling changes in pronoun and emotion word use from before, during, and after the attacks. Immediately, online bloggers dropped their use of *I*-words and increased their use of first-person plural *we*-words. In fact, the use of *we*-words almost doubled from before to after attacks. "The types of *we*-words people used were a mix of *we* meaning Americans and *we* referring to family."

The 9/11 project revealed many things about shared trauma. Shared trauma brings people together; deflects attention away from the self; becomes an overall positive experience; and makes people less analytic as they use simpler words, avoid thinking deeply, and seem more passive and accepting of new information.

# Language and Social Status

Now it's time to dig into the use of words and what they reveal about our social status. How do you think words help us determine the leader in the room? As social animals, we are entrenched in social hierarchies. We see them everywhere, from ant colonies, dog packs, and chimpanzee troops, to elementary school playgrounds, boardrooms, and nursing homes.

Interestingly, our use of function words can determine where you are on the social ladder.

When it comes to people who are higher in the social hierarchy, they tend to use *I*-words at a much lower rate, *we*-words at a higher rate, and *you*-words at a higher rate. So what does this all mean? People of high status are more likely to use words like *we*, *us*, *our*, and *you* in social situations over *I*, *me*, and *my*. While this may seem surprising to many, it makes sense. You see, those who are more dominant tend to look at their audience while they speak but look away while listening. On the other hand, low-status people do the opposite.

Low-status people are more likely to look inward, which means they use *I*-words more often and reflect attention to themselves. Pennebaker took a deeper look at pronoun usage and social status when examining the language of former US president Richard Nixon during the Watergate scandal, the political scandal that would eventually lead to Nixon's resignation. During the scandal, it was revealed that Nixon had secretly installed a voice recording system in his office of the White House. It was these tapes that Pennebaker and his team listened to when analyzing the language between Nixon and his political advisors.

Consistent with previous lab studies, Nixon used far fewer *I*-words than others. 3.9 percent of Nixon's words were first-person singular pronouns compared to his aides' 5.4 percent. Furthermore, Nixon used *we*-words 1.4 percent of the time versus 0.8 percent and *you*-words at 3.4 percent versus 1.8 percent. However, by the last recording in July of 1973, Nixon increased



his *I*-word usage to 7 to 8 percent of all his words. So what does this change in frequency mean? Simply put, as Nixon's world began to crumble around him, he became less dominant and powerful.

# Language Style Matching

When you are writing or talking, in most cases, you are writing or talking *to* another person, right? This means that most language occurs among people in ongoing social relationships. So what does this mean? This simply means that we can use our word tools to investigate more than the individual...we can study human relationships. So the way that you and your lover, parent, boss, and enemy talk to one another provides important clues surrounding the nature of your relationship.

Social relationships have their own personality. Think about the relationships you have with your friends. Are they all the same? No. You talk to each friend differently, hang out in different ways, and even communicate differently. In other words, each interaction has its own fingerprint or conversational personality, which means we are likely to adapt to how we talk with each person. Think about nonverbal behaviors like when someone crosses their legs, you're likely to cross your legs as well. This is normal behavior and is a marker of true engagement. The same can be true in conversation. When two people are engaged with one another, their use of function words will mimic one another as well. This is called Language Style Matching, or LSM.

To understand this concept further, Pennebaker conducted an experiment in which he analyzed the conversations of potential couples while speed-dating. In a typical speed-dating session, couples will meet and talk with eight to twelve suitors for just a few minutes each. At the end of each "date," each person rates the other person before moving to the next date. Most people report that speed-dating conversations range from superficial to passionate to exhausting. So could Pennebaker and his research team determine which couples could go the distance based on a four-minute conversation? Yes! Well, to a degree. Let's explain.

After analyzing each conversation, it was revealed that couples who showed above-average LSM were nearly twice as likely to want to meet again.

Additionally, 77 percent of the couples with high LSM scores were still dating three months after their speed-date, compared to 52 percent of couples with low LSM scores. This means that couples who naturally synchronize their function words with one another are more likely to maintain a relationship over time.

# Language and Teamwork

When it comes to company-climate, there are three types of companies: *I*-companies, *we*-companies, and *they*-companies. To get an idea of the organization's climate, employees are asked to talk about their typical workday. If employees say things like, "*my office*," or "*my company*," then this is a sign of a positive work atmosphere. People who work at *I*-companies are more likely to be happy and can easily separate their work and home lives. Furthermore, when employees say things like "*our office*," or "*our company*," then pay special attention. People in *we*-companies have embraced their workplace as a part of their identity. This means these employees work harder and have a greater sense of fulfillment about their work lives.

On the other hand, when employees begin using "*the company*," "*that company*" or refers to co-workers as *they*, then be wary. *They*-companies typically have employees who proclaim their work identity has nothing to do with them, they are unhappy workers, and the companies experience high turnover. As you can see, the use of pronouns is important when determining the good and bad of company culture. Something as simple as *we* or *they* can say a lot about how a person identifies with their job and organization.

There was an experiment in the 1970s that illustrated the importance of identifying with a group and using *we*-words. Conducted by psychologist Robert Cialdini, researchers interviewed students who attended universities with top-ranked football teams. When asked about the outcome of the previous football game, if the team won, students usually answered with "*we won*." However, if the student's team lost, they usually answered with "*they lost*." But why? Well, when we take partial credit for our team's winning, we are basking in the glory of the win. In other words, we want to feel close to groups that are successful and distance ourselves from the losers.

Similarly, researchers found that couples who used *we*-words like *we*, *our*, and *us* when being interviewed about their relationship were more likely to have success. However, couples who used *you*, *your*, and *yourself* during interviews were more likely to have a toxic relationship. Furthermore, the use of pronouns can also predict how well a group will work with one another. For instance, let's take a look at Wikipedia, an encyclopedia that is based on the contribution of several authors. By analyzing the group discussions behind the various editors, graduate student Yla Tausczik found that when editors used similar language when communicating with one another, they produced high-quality articles. In other words, when Wikipedia authors were in synch with one another, which they measured by their use of stealth words, they produced the best, most authoritative articles.

# Final Summary

Language has always been a powerful tool in our lives. We use it to write, speak, and communicate with others. It has the power to inspire change in people's lives but also has the power to destroy them as well. However, it's not necessarily the content words that are most the telling, it's the mundane words that we typically ignore. The style, or function, words have the power to reveal how we think, what we think of others, and even where we fit in society. They can reveal if people think formally, analytically, or narratively, thus revealing even more about their character and personality. Furthermore, they can even tell us which couples will go the distance and which will fail. They can tell us what we need to know about a company's culture and even reveal what employees truly think about the organization, simply by the pronouns they use. At the end of the day, pronouns are more revealing than ever, so start paying attention.



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