

In-Group and Out-Group Pronouns in Jacinda Ardern's Christchurch Memorial Speech

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the strategic use of in-group and out-group pronouns in the speech of former Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern following the 2019 Christchurch Mosque attacks. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to Critical Discourse Analysis particularly the Ideological Square was employed to examine how pronouns contribute to the representation of social groups in the speech. The analysis focuses on the first-person plural pronouns which are we, our, and us as the in-group markers and the third-person pronoun they is considered as context-dependent because it represents both in-group and out-group referents. Antconc was utilized as a corpus-assisted tool to identify relevant pronoun occurrences and concordance lines. The data were analysed qualitatively to determine how the pronouns represent in-group and out-group identities. The findings show that in-group pronouns are used to shape a collective national identity which represents unity, solidarity and collective responsibility. In contrast, the out-group use of they positions the extremist ideology outside the collective national identity. The findings highlight that pronouns are used beyond their grammatical reference and hold a significant role in the construction of social identities and ideological representation. The study demonstrates how pronoun use shapes the positive representations of in-group and negative representations of the out-group following a traumatic national event.

Keywords: Pronoun, Ideological Square, Speech

INTRODUCTION

On March 15, 2019, New Zealand suffered an unprecedented national tragedy when two consecutive white supremacist terrorist shootings targeted the Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Avenue Islamic Centre in Christchurch, resulting in 51 deaths and 49 severe injuries of Muslim worshipers (Besley & Peters, 2020; Craig, 2021; Fernandita, 2021; Sartika et al., 2025; Vandenberg & Hoverd, 2020). The tragedy was historically distinct because the perpetrator live-streamed the 15-minute massacre on Facebook Live to globally amplify white supremacist and anti-immigrant ideologies, sparking immediate international outrage (Arda, 2023; Besley & Peters, 2020; Jalalian Daghigh & Rahim, 2020). Following this acute national trauma, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern designated the attacks as terrorism and raised the country's security threat level to high for the first time in its history (Vandenberg & Hoverd, 2020). Rather than responding with conventional, militaristic, or hypermasculine security narratives often deployed by heads of state during crises, Ardern adopted an empathetic discursive model, utilizing symbolic acts such as wearing a hijab as an expression of solidarity of hugging grieving victims to preserve national cohesion and public trust. (Arda, 2023; Proverbs et al., 2021; Sartika et al., 2025; Simpson et al., 2022). This approach culminated in her globally broadcasted address on March 28, 2019, at Hagley Park, which served as the primary discursive vehicle to unite the nation, voice shared grief, and dismantle xenophobic "us vs. them" narratives (Craig, 2021; Jalalian Daghigh & Rahim, 2020; Sartika et al., 2025).

The communicative management of national crises has historically been dominated by gendered expectations and hypermasculine traits (Sartika et al., 2025). Conventional crisis communication literature often privileges assertiveness, directness, and top-down dominance, while viewing empathetic, collaborative, and communal behaviors as signs of weakness or ineffective leadership (Sartika et al., 2025). Research indicates that in high-pressure security crises, female leaders are frequently scrutinized and subjected to gender-based stereotypes that frame empathy and decisive authority as mutually exclusive (Sartika et al., 2025). Despite the global recognition of Ardern's empathetic crisis response, the precise micro-linguistic mechanisms that enabled her to integrate compassion with authoritative decisiveness remain under-researched in political communication and language studies (Balla, 2023; Sartika et al., 2025). Balla (2023) observes that while political discourse analysis of male politicians is extensive, female political addresses remain a significantly under-researched area of inquiry (Balla, 2023).

Furthermore, previous research examining Ardern's Christchurch speeches has frequently focused on macro-level evaluations of her policy outcomes or qualitative descriptions of her emotional style (Craig, 2021; Proverbs et al., 2021). While some scholars have analyzed the emotional depth of her memorial address, such as Pritadewi's (2021) micro-linguistic evaluation using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Appraisal Theory, these studies are primarily descriptive and affective in scope (Pritadewi, 2021). They systematically map Ardern's emotional solidarity and attitude but do not critically address how her grammatical selections negotiate power, manage polarization, or reconstruct ideological boundaries (Pritadewi, 2021). Emotion-based and appraisal-focused frameworks are theoretically limited because they cannot fully explain the socio-cognitive boundary-setting involved in redefining national identity after a targeted terrorist attack (Jalalian Daghigh & Rahim, 2020). To address this gap, this study applies Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore the "Ideological Square" in Ardern's speech (Jalalian Daghigh & Rahim, 2020; van Dijk, 1998, 2004b). Pronouns are the primary grammatical instruments used to navigate this square, establishing social boundaries by polarizing the in-group ("Us") and the out-group ("Them") (Jalalian Daghigh & Rahim, 2020; van Dijk, 1998, 2004b). While prior literature has qualitatively observed that Ardern used statements like "They are us" to collapse cultural differences (Craig, 2021; Jalalian Daghigh & Rahim, 2020), there is a distinct lack of focused socio-cognitive analyses detailing exactly how she strategically leveraged specific grammatical pronoun shifts to construct a unified national in-group while simultaneously isolating an extremist out-group.

This study is guided by two primary Research Objectives:

1. **RO1:** To examine how pronouns were strategically employed to construct representations of the in-group in Jacinda Ardern's Christchurch memorial speech.
2. **RO2:** To analyze how the pronoun "they" was strategically employed to construct representations of the out-group in Jacinda Ardern's Christchurch memorial speech.

This study could contribute valuable empirical data to sociolinguistics, political public relations, and Critical Discourse Studies by demonstrating how strategic pronoun selections construct macro-social realities (Balla, 2023; Sartika et al., 2025). It is achieved by evaluating how the grammatical alternation between inclusive in-group pronouns (RO1) and exclusive out-group structures (RO2) synthesises empathy with state authority, the research suggests that compassion and decisive leadership are mutually reinforcing (Sartika et al., 2025). This micro-linguistic mechanism highlights the leader's communication paradox, illustrating how to discursively unify a diverse population whilst isolating extremist ideologies. Also, it offers a non-adversarial framework to manage polarisation, protecting marginalised minorities whilst maintaining national security (Proverbs et al., 2021; Sartika et al., 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Socio-Cognitive Framework of Political Discourse

Political discourse is not a neutral medium that merely reflects reality; rather, it is a highly strategic practice

that actively constructs social realities, shapes public cognition, and reproduces or challenges power relations (Balla, 2023; Wa, 2025). Within Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach provides a robust multidisciplinary framework to examine the interface between discourse structures, social structures, and social cognition (van Dijk, 1998, 2004b, 2006a). Van Dijk (1998, 2015) argues that the relationship between text and society is not direct but is mediated by the cognitive models, ideologies, and socially shared representations held by social groups (van Dijk, 1998, 2004b, 2013). At the heart of political cognition is the "Ideological Square," a socio-cognitive structure that governs how group identities and power dynamics are polarized through text and talk (van Dijk, 1998, 2004b). The Ideological Square operates through a dual-process of positive self-representation and negative other-representation, which is executed via four overall discursive strategies: (1) emphasizing positive properties of the in-group ("Us"), (2) emphasizing negative properties of the out-group ("Them"), (3) de-emphasizing negative properties of the in-group, and (4) de-emphasizing positive properties of the out-group (van Dijk, 1998, 2004b).

Linguistic markers, specifically personal and possessive pronouns—serve as the primary grammatical instruments used by political actors to execute the Ideological Square and negotiate social boundaries (Hassan et al., 2019; van Dijk, 1998). Pronouns are cognitively and contextually significant because they signal who belongs to the legitimate community and who is cast out (van Dijk, 1998, 2009). The first-person plural pronouns ("we," "our," "us") are frequently deployed to construct a collective, homogenized national identity, which can be utilized to build solidarity, foster consensus, or manufacture political compliance (Craig, 2021; Fernandita, 2021; van Dijk, 1998). Conversely, third-person pronouns ("they," "them," "their") are conventionally utilized to establish social distance and mark the out-group as the "Other," which can lead to marginalization or, conversely, to the strategic isolation of transgressive actors (van Dijk, 1998, 2004b). In situations of intense crisis and conflict, the linguistic construction of the "Self" and the "Other" becomes heavily accentuated as leaders seek to defend their community's core values (van Dijk, 2009). Therefore, critically analyzing pronoun selection and syntactic shifts is essential to deconstructing the hidden ideologies and power relations embedded in political crisis communication (Hassan et al., 2019; van Dijk, 1998; Wa, 2025).

The Discursive Construction of the National In-Group

Following a racially and ideologically motivated terrorist attack, a primary challenge for political leadership is to prevent social division and construct a unified national identity (Sartika et al., 2025; van Dijk, 1998). Under Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, constructing a cohesive in-group requires the discursive assimilation of marginalized or targeted demographics into the collective "Self" (van Dijk, 1998, 2004b). In the Christchurch memorial speech, Ardern systematically achieved this by deploying inclusive first-person plural pronouns ("we," "our," "us") and possessive structures to frame the tragedy as a shared national grief, rather than an isolated incident affecting an alienated minority (Fernandita, 2021; van Dijk, 1998). Inclusive pronouns functioned as deictic anchors to establish social proximity and collective responsibility, modifying nouns associated with national unity, such as "our darkest of hours," "our collective memories," and "our nation" (Craig, 2021; Fernandita, 2021). By positioning the entire population as a unified recipient of external shock, Ardern linguistically merged the dominant majority with the targeted minority, drawing the grieving Muslim community into the national in-group (Craig, 2021; Fernandita, 2021; Jalalian Daghigh & Rahim, 2020).

A key micro-linguistic mechanism utilized by Ardern to deconstruct the traditional "us vs. them" boundary was her strategic reversal of third-person pronouns (Jalalian Daghigh & Rahim, 2020). Instead of utilizing "they" to signal social exclusion, Ardern equated the third-person plural "they" directly with the first-person plural "us" in her declarative statement, "They are us" (Craig, 2021; Jalalian Daghigh & Rahim, 2020). This inclusive deployment of "they" focused on the victims, their narratives, and their legacy, supported by concordance lines such as "they now form part of our collective memories" and "They were stories of bravery" (Craig, 2021). Within Critical Discourse Studies, this declarative equation acts as a radical speech act that collapses cultural, religious, and geographic differences (Craig, 2021). By declaring the affected migrant and refugee communities as the core of New Zealand's identity, Ardern dismantled the orientalist and exclusionary narratives that historically marginalize Muslims in Western political discourse, establishing a socio-cognitive

common ground rooted in shared humanity and mutual respect (Craig, 2021; Jalalian Daghigh & Rahim, 2020).

Ideological Boundary-Setting and Strategic Exclusion

While absolute inclusivity is a core aspiration of progressive leadership, crisis management functionally requires a simultaneous act of strategic exclusion to re-establish social order and state authority (Simpson et al., 2022). This tension represents a fundamental paradox of compassionate leadership, where a leader must balance radical openness and empathy with decisive boundary-setting and the assertion of power (Simpson et al., 2022). Simpson et al. (2022) theorize that compassionate leadership is a paradoxical practice requiring the integration of idealism with pragmatism, and inclusiveness with technical rationality (Simpson et al., 2022). To resolve these tensions without undermining her relational legitimacy, Ardern utilized "integrative rhetoric" and "controlled oscillation" (Simpson et al., 2022). At the micro-linguistic level, this was achieved by shifting the referential function of her pronouns from inclusive first-person plurals to a strictly exclusive third-person plural "they" (Fernandita, 2021; van Dijk, 1998).

When referencing the perpetrator of the attack and the wider ideology of white supremacy and violent extremism, Ardern deployed a syntax of absolute exclusion (Fernandita, 2021; van Dijk, 1998). This was codified in her declarative statement, "they are not welcome" (Craig, 2021; Fernandita, 2021). In this exclusive context, "they" denoted an isolated out-group, linguistically separating racism, hatred, and extremist violence from the collective national values constructed by the first-person pronouns (Craig, 2021; Fernandita, 2021; Jalalian Daghigh & Rahim, 2020). By castigating the ideology of hatred as an external "virus" that has no place within New Zealand's safe harbor, Ardern successfully established firm socio-cognitive boundaries (Craig, 2021; Fernandita, 2021). This strategic exclusion allowed her to navigate the leader's paradox: she maintained moral and relational legitimacy by expressing unconditional compassion for the victims, while simultaneously generating pragmatic, cognitive legitimacy to implement rapid legislative reforms, such as the immediate banning of military-style semi-automatic weapons (Sartika et al., 2025; Simpson et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design by applying the Critical Discourse Analysis as the main methodology to examine the use of first-person plural pronouns in Jacinda Ardern's speech following the 2019 Christchurch Mosque attacks. This approach was utilized because the study sought to interpret how linguistic choices, specifically pronouns, shape representations of social groups and communicate ideological meaning within the discourse. Since the study put attention on the interpretation of linguistic features rather than quantity of the data collected, the quality of the selected data was prioritised. This is in line with Baker (2006) which mentioned that the data selection in discourse studies concerns the quality of the data rather than its quantity.

The main data selected and analysed in this study was the complete transcript of former New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern following the Christchurch Mosque attacks delivered on 28th March 2019. This study utilized a non-probability purposive sampling in order to choose the sample for the study. According to Etikan, Musa, Alkassim (2016), purposive sampling is also known as judgement sampling in which the sample will be chosen based on the qualities that it possesses. The researchers have set up three criteria in order to choose the sample that will offer the study an in-depth finding. First, the speech selected must be presented by the opinion leader. Second, the speech must emphasize the theme of solidarity and unity. Lastly, the speech must be presented following a terrible incident or tragedy. Thus, Jacinda Ardern's speech was chosen because it met all the criteria listed. The single speech chosen is also relevant to examine the pronouns and consistent with the study's qualitative research objectives.

A corpus analysis software toolkit which is Antconc was employed solely as a computational retrieval tool to systematically locate and organize occurrences of the target pronouns in the speech. The software was not used to conduct quantitative corpus analysis, but the retrieved concordance lines served as the textual basis for subsequent qualitative analysis of the pronouns within their discourse contexts. To use the software, the

transcript of the speech was uploaded in text file format. The Concordance tool in the software was used to locate and extract the occurrences of the targeted pronouns within its immediate syntactic and co-textual environments. For this study, targeted search queries focused on the pronouns we, us, our and they. The pronoun they was also examined in this study as a potential out-group marker to facilitate comparison with the in-group references constructed through the first-person plural pronouns we, us, our. Next, each concordance line and surrounding sentence were examined to identify the referents of the pronouns and determine whether different pronouns construct a distinction between groups. This is significant and relevant to the study in order to identify the in-group and out-group references.

This study adopted van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to Critical Discourse Analysis particularly the model of Ideological Square as the theoretical framework in analysing the representation of social groups through the use of pronouns. This model was developed by van Dijk to explain and highlight the polarization of 'us' vs 'them' where the speaker and her allies are considered to be 'us or in-group', while her opponents are placed in the 'them or out-group' category (van Dijk, 1998 as cited in Mahfoud and Khaldaoui, 2023).

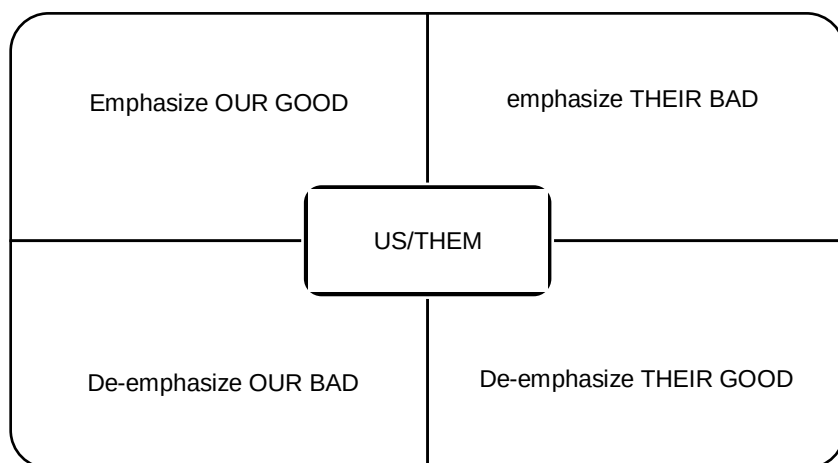


Figure 1 van Dijk's Ideological Square (1998)

Based on the figure above, it can be seen that the model was shaped by four principles. The principles include 1) Emphasize the good things about us, 2) Emphasize the bad things about them, 3) De-emphasize the bad things about us, 4) De-emphasizing the good things about them.

Although the model consists of four general principles, this study primarily focused on the first two strategies that are aligned with the research questions which are the emphasis of positive aspects of the in-group and the emphasis of the negative aspects of the out-group. This selective focus is based on the study's examination of how the pronouns construct the in-group and out-group representation. The other two principles are not the primary focus of the analysis as the study is concerned specifically with the ways pronoun use contributes to the positive representation of the in-group and negative representation of the out-group. This selective application of the framework is consistent with van Dijk's (2001) view which stated that Critical Discourse Analysis is a critical approach that encourages researchers to select, combine and adapt the linguistics and cognitive tool that best suits the issue that is being analyzed in their respective study. Given that the main objective of this study is to examine the use of pronouns in shaping in-group and out-group representations, the first two principles offer the most relevant analytical guideline to address the research questions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Use of pronouns in constructing in-group representation

Based on the analysis, it can be seen that the first-person plural pronouns we, us and our were used to address different social groups. The pronouns were identified to be utilized to shape an inclusive sense of collective identity and to associate the in-group with positive values and actions.

Table 1: Linguistics Distribution and Contextual Application of Pronoun 'We'

Example of extracted lines	Referent	Representation	Principle of van Dijk's Ideological Square
"We gather here, 14 days on from our darkest of hours..."	Wider national community including the Muslim community as the victim of the attack	Shared grief and collective remembrance	Emphasize positive aspect of the in-group
"we will remember those who have left this place..."			
"we are not immune to the viruses of hate..."		Collective awareness, responsibility and action	
"we can be the nation that discovers the cure..."			

Based on Table 1, the pronoun we was used in different contexts to address the wider national community in New Zealand, including the Muslim community affected by the attack. The first two examples demonstrate how we was utilized by Jacinda Ardern to express shared grief and collective remembrance due to the tragedy. This can be seen in the phrases 'we gather here, 14 days on from our darkest hours,' and 'we will remember those who have left this place,'. The use of we in these phrases positions the speaker and the wider community as collectively experiencing the aftermath of the attack, while also establishing a shared commitment to remembering the victims.

On the other hand, the latter examples shift the shared grief towards collective response. The use of the pronoun we in the statements 'we are not immune to the viruses of hate' and 'we can be the nation that discovers the cure' showed the community collectively aware of the issue of hatred and capable of responding to it together. Therefore, the use of we establishes a sense of responsibility in the community at large, encouraging them to take action together to address the hatred and prevent its recurrence.

These examples demonstrate how the use of we contributed to the positive representation of the in-group by including the wider community with shared grief, collective remembrance, awareness and collective action. This representation corroborates with van Dijk principle of emphasizing positive aspects of the in group since the community is discursively associated with positive values and collective effort.

Table 2 Linguistics Distribution and Contextual Application of Pronoun 'our'

Example of extracted lines	Referent	Representation	Principle of van Dijk's Ideological Square
"in our words and our actions, in our daily acts of kindness..."	Wider New Zealand community and the Muslim community	Collective responsibility	Emphasize positive aspect of the in-group
"our Muslim community being the target of hatred..."	Wider New Zealand community	Collective belonging and inclusion	

The possessive pronoun our was also employed to shape the in-group by establishing a sense of shared belonging within the wider New Zealand community. In the expression 'in our words and our actions, in our daily acts of kindness', this pronoun refers to the wider New Zealand community and associates the group with positive values. The use of our shows the positive actions and statements as a collective practice which in turn constructs the in-group as a community capable of carrying the responsibility.

Next, a similar pronoun is also used in a different context to represent belonging. This can be observed in the phrase ‘our Muslim community being the target of hatred’. Through this statement, it can be seen that the possessive pronoun our is used to refer to the wider New Zealand community and at the same time drawing the Muslim community as a part of the collective national community. Therefore, this use of our contributes to the construction of an inclusive national identity in which the Muslim community is incorporated into the broader in-group. These instances show how the use of our contributes to the positive representation of the in-group by constructing the wider community as compassionate, inclusive and connected to its Muslim members. Thus, this corresponds to van Dijk’s principle of emphasizing positive aspects of the in-group through the use of pronouns.

Table 3: Linguistics Distribution and Contextual Application of Pronoun ‘us’

Example of extracted lines	Referent	Representation	Principle of van Dijk’s Ideological Square
"they have left us humbled and they have left us united..."	The wider New Zealand community	Collectively affected and united by the victims’ voices	Emphasize positive aspect of the in-group

Another prominent use of pronouns can be seen from the utilization of us in the speech. It can be seen from the phrase in Table 3 which is ‘they have left us humbled and they have left us united’. This statement is prominent as the pronoun us was used to represent the wider New Zealand community who were collectively affected and saddened by the tragedy and collectively remembered the victims who have died due to the attacks.

Table 4: Linguistics Distribution and Contextual Application of Pronoun ‘they’

Example of extracted lines	Referent	Representation	Principle of van Dijk’s Ideological Square
"They were stories of bravery."	Stories of the victims impacted by the attacks	Positive value associated with the Muslim community	Emphasize positive aspect of the in-group
"they now form part of our collective memories..."		Collective remembrance, connection and shared belonging	
"They will remain with us forever."			
"They are us."	The Muslim’s victims who were killed in the attack	Incorporates the victims into the collective us	

Table 4 illustrates how pronoun they was used in the speech. These instances show the fluidity of the pronoun which can potentially be used as a marker to represent the out-group depending on the referent and context. In these instances, it can be seen they was used to refer to the stories and experiences of the victims impacted by the attacks. In the statement ‘They were stories of bravery’, the positive value of bravery is associated with the affected community through the stories shared about their experiences. This is significant as it shows how their experiences were being heard and acknowledged within the wider community.

Similarly, the next two examples also refer to the stories of the victims. This can be seen from the statements ‘they now form part of our collective memories’ and ‘They will remain with us forever’. In these examples, the pronoun they positions the stories as a significant part of the community’s collective memories which in turn develops a sense of collective remembrance and connection between the wider community and the experience of the victims.

Finally, the most significant usage of the pronoun they is used in the statement ‘They are us.’. This simple statement holds significant ideological meaning as rather than using the pronoun they to exclude the Muslim community from the wider national New Zealand community, the pronoun explicitly used to incorporate the

Muslim community into the in-group. This shows how the pronoun can be used to emphasize the positive aspect of the in group through the construction of inclusion, belonging and collective identity.

Use of pronouns in constructing out-group representation

Table 5: Linguistics Distribution and Contextual Application of Pronoun ‘us’

Example of extracted lines	Referent	Representation	Principle of van Dijk's Ideological Square
“even the ugliest of viruses can exist in places they are not welcome here”	Act of racism, hatred, islamophobia	Negative ideology	Emphasize positive aspect of the in-group

In contrast to the extensive use of inclusive pronouns, the pronoun they was not used much in reference to the perpetrator or the out-group associated with the attack. Based on Table 5, it can be seen that one prominent statement given by Jacinda Ardern in the speech is ‘they are not welcome here’. While it may look like it is referring to the perpetrator, the subsequent statements indicate that the reference extends beyond the individual perpetrator to the broader ideologies and forms of behaviour associated with the attack including racism, hatred, Islamophobia, violence and extremism. This can be seen from these following statements, ‘Racism exists, but it is not welcome here. An assault on the freedom of any one of us who practices their faith or religion, is not welcome here. Violence, and extremism in all its forms, is not welcome here’.

The repeated expression ‘is not welcome here’ establishes a clear boundary between these forms of hatred and the wider New Zealand community. Rather than focusing exclusively on the identity of the perpetrator, Jacinda Ardern directs the rejection towards the ideologies and actions associated with the attack. Therefore, the use of they contributes to the construction of an out-group by positioning racism, hatred, violence and extremism as unacceptable within the national community. This corresponds to van Dijk's principle of emphasizing negative aspects of the out-group.

Ideological Representation and the Construction of “Us” and “Them”

In-group representation

The findings demonstrate that the usage of pronouns in Jacinda Ardern's speech shapes the construction of ideological representation of “Us” and “Them”. The use of the first-person plural pronouns we, our and us mainly construct the wider New Zealand community as a collective group through solidarity, shared grief, collective responsibility and inclusion. Rather than presenting the response to the Christchurch Mosque attacks as an individual or isolated experience, the use of first-personal plural pronouns positions the wider New Zealand community as sharing the emotional and social consequences of the tragedy. This indicates that pronouns hold a significant role in bridging the members of a community together and shaping a shared sense of national identity especially in times of conflict.

The findings concerning we, our, us demonstrate the construction of a collective national “Us” is developed throughout the speech. The use of the pronoun we is particularly prominent in references to shared grief and collective remembrance. The expressions such as “we gather here, 14 days on from our darkest of hours” and “we will remember those who have left this place” put the wider community as collectively experiencing the aftermath of the attack. Instead of positioning the attacks as belonging only to the victims or their families, the use of we frames the situation as a shared national concern. This has led to a sense of solidarity among the community by presenting them as sharing the emotional consequences of the tragedy and collectively remembering those who were tragically killed.

The use of we also shifts from shared experiences of grief towards collective responsibility and action. In the statement “we are not immune to the viruses of hate”, the wider community is illustrated to be collectively aware of the existence of hatred, while the statement “we can be the nation that discovers the cure”

demonstrates the community to have the capability of overcoming the hatred. Through these expressions, we does not merely refer to a group of people, but it is referring to a strongly united group who have a shared responsibility and are ready to take action together. This finding is aligned with Aliaakbar and Hadina (2015) who highlighted that pronouns can shape the power relationship between the speaker and audience. In this study, the use of we allows Jacinda Ardern to bring the wider national community into the discourse and collectively involve them in taking the responsibility of responding to the tragedy. The use of pronoun we also can be related to Wang (2010) who stated that the first-person pronoun we can reduce the distance between the speaker and the audience regardless of their differences. In this speech, this reduced distance helps create a sense of solidarity between the speaker and wider community by positioning them as part of the same collective.

Besides, the positive representation of the in-group can also be seen through the use of the possessive pronoun our. This pronoun has been used in the speech to create a sense of connection and belonging between the Muslim community and the wider national community at large. For example, the statement “our Muslim community being the target of hatred” establishes a significant connection that the community has with the Muslims by clearly acknowledging them as a part of the group. Rather than mentioning the Muslim community as a separate or isolated group, the possessive pronoun establishes a sense of collective belonging between the wider New Zealand community and its Muslim members. The statement also acknowledges the suffering experienced by the community by presenting the attack against them as a shared concern. This contributes to an inclusive form of national identity in which the Muslim community is recognised as part of the collective “Us”.

This representation is aligned with van Dijk’s principle of emphasizing positive aspects of the in-group. In the speech, the use of the pronouns we, our and us represents the wider community with positive attributes and qualities such as kindness, collective remembrance, responsibility and being the group that are ready to take action together to overcome acts of hatred and violence. Not only that, the pronouns also position the Muslim community within the national collective reinforcing the idea that their suffering is also a shared concern of the wider community. This finding is consistent with Hamadneh and Muttaleb (2025) which found that the in-group can be positively represented through qualities of innocence, endurance, vulnerability and dignified suffering. The analysis of the study demonstrated how the experience of the civilian victims can be foregrounded in ways that emphasize their humanity and strengthen their moral position. Similarly, Ardern’s use of pronouns foregrounds the suffering of the Muslim community while at the same time solidifying their belonging within the wider national community. The community is represented as sharing grief and remembrance while demonstrating kindness and solidarity. These representations correspond to van Dijk’s first principle of emphasizing positive aspects of the in-group as the pronouns contribute to the development of a positive image of the collective “Us”.

Therefore, the findings suggest that Arden’s use of first-person plural pronouns extends beyond their grammatical function by helping to develop a shared national identity in which the wider New Zealand community is bridged through common shared experience, positive values, collective responsibility and a sense of belonging.

Out-group representation

Based on the findings, it can be seen that the use of pronoun they shows the boundaries between the in-group and out-group are fluid. This pronoun does not consistently construct and represent the out-group. Instead, the function of they varies according to its referent and the context it is used. This is evident when this pronoun is seen to be utilized as referent to the victims of the attacks and their stories that specifically connected and linked to the wider national community of New Zealand. In the same speech, the pronoun they is also employed to position the acts of racism, hatred, violence and extremism outside the boundaries of the collective “Us”.

The most apparent use of they in referring to representation of the positive emphasis of in-group is in the statement “They are us.” Through this expression, Ardern directly omits the distinction between the victims

referred to as “they” and the wider community of the country by “us”. The Muslim community is consequently positioned as part of the wider national collective rather than as a separate social group. This demonstrates that the use of they does not necessarily construct the referent as an out-group, but it can be specifically employed to establish inclusion, belonging and shared identity. This finding is significant because it demonstrates that the boundary between “Us” and “Them” is not necessarily rigid, but can be negotiated through the discourse.

The use of they becomes more exclusionary when it is associated with racism, hatred, violence and extremism. This is particularly evidenced in the statement “they are not welcome here”, which is followed by references to racism, hatred, violence and extremism as forms of ideology and behavior that are rejected by the national community. Rather than directing the rejection towards a specific community or group, Ardern directs it towards the ideologies and behaviors associated with hatred and violence. In this context, they functions as an out-group marker by positioning these negative ideologies and behaviour outside the collective “Us”.

The use of they corresponds to van Dijk’s second principle of emphasizing negative aspects of the out-group. The negative representation is directed towards the act of racism, hatred, violence and extremism. This suggests that the out-group boundary constructed in the speech is based more on rejected values and behaviour rather than a particular individual. Based on this usage of the pronoun they, it can be seen that the Muslim community is incorporated into the national “Us”, while negative ideologies and behaviour associated with hatred and violence are positioned outside it. This finding is comparable to findings from the study of Al-qaysi and Singh (2024) which found that the in-group was primarily represented through the experiences of victims, whereas the out-group was represented through description of their negative actions and the generalization of responsibility across broader groups. This is similar to this study which shows that the negative representation associated with they is not focused on the individual perpetrator, but it extends to the broader actions and ideologies of racism, hatred, violence and extremism.

To sum up, the use of they demonstrates the pronoun can function not only to distinguish social groups, but also to negotiate who is included within or excluded from the collective identity constructed in the speech.

In conclusion, this study examined the use of pronouns in constructing in-group and out-group representation in Jacinda Ardern’s speech following the 2019 Christchurch Mosque attacks. The findings show that the first-person plural pronouns we, our and us constructed a collective national identity through shared grief, solidarity, collective responsibility and the inclusion of the Muslim community. Meanwhile, they demonstrated a more flexible function by incorporating the victims into the wider “Us” and positioning racism, hatred, violence and extremism outside it. Overall, the findings demonstrate the pronoun use contributed to the construction of social identity, belonging and ideological boundaries between “Us” and “Them”. Future research may examine a larger collection of political speeches and extend the analysis through comparative, cross-cultural, and longitudinal studies involving different political leaders. Such studies could provide a broader understanding of how pronoun use constructs in-group and out-group representation across different political, and cultural contexts.

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