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The Role of Personal Pronouns in Reflecting Clients' Stance in Family Counseling Sessions: Diversity, Nature, and Linguistic Patterns

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Abstract

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Discourse analysis is a well-established tool in social psychology, enabling researchers to understand how individuals project identities through their narratives. Within this framework, personal pronouns play a crucial role in reflecting the clients' stances in oral narratives. Despite their significance, the social, cognitive, and interpersonal functions of these pronouns in counseling sessions remain under-researched. This interdisciplinary study employed a linguistic and psychological perspective to examine the use of Persian personal pronouns in 19 family counseling sessions conducted over a six-month period at a clinical center in Ahvaz. Utilizing a narrative-based analysis, the study investigated the diversity and functions of personal pronouns both qualitatively and quantitatively. The findings revealed that I-statements, the use of the first-person singular pronoun, were consistently more frequent across all clients, which may indicate self-differentiation, autonomy-seeking, depression, self-focus, or negative affect. Furthermore, we-statements, the use of the first-person plural pronoun, ranked second in frequency. Finally, narrative analysis demonstrated that pronoun usage patterns differed by gender, with women exhibiting higher frequencies of both pronouns and we-statements compared to men.

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Introduction

Counseling techniques often use language to access a client's inner world, utilizing linguistic analyses to deepen psychological insight. Specifically, personal pronouns (I, we, she/he, you, they) function as powerful tools for uncovering a client's psychological state, relationship quality, and emotional processing patterns (Swanson et al., 2014; Jaggi et al.,2025). This study investigates the application of personal pronouns and their role in projecting identities in Persian clients' narratives.

The theoretical framework bridges applied linguistics, narrative analysis, psychology, and sociolinguistics. Within this paradigm, pronouns are viewed not merely as grammatical elements, but as markers of self/other orientation, solidarity, social distance, power, deference, and identity (Ghamari Kivi ,2014; Jaggi et al., 2025; Maienborn et al. ,2012; Pennebaker et al., 2003; Swanson et al., 2014). Extensive literature indicates that the use of the *I* pronoun is associated with indicators such as physical and mental health (Scherwitz & Canick, 1988), truthfulness, individual crises, and self-focus (Pennebaker et al., 2003). Furthermore, pronoun usage has been linked to general well-being and physiological outcomes (Newman et al., 2002). Conversely, the use of we-statements signifies shared identity and interdependence (Karan et al. ,2019).

Despite extensive interdisciplinary research, a critical gap remains regarding the precise application of pronouns by clients within Persian-speaking clinical and psychotherapeutic contexts. Current literature is largely limited to linguistically-oriented studies that compare Persian pronoun systems with Arabic and English within academic settings. Consequently, this study addresses the following central research question: How are personal pronouns employed in counseling sessions? Furthermore, it explores how these pronominal patterns vary in relation to clients' age, educational background, and social/marital characteristics.

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive-analytical approach, combining quantitative frequency counts with qualitative discourse analysis. The dataset comprises naturalistic recordings from 19 counseling sessions conducted in Ahvaz, Iran. Using purposive sampling, seven sessions were selected as the core analytical unit for in-depth discourse analysis to capture precise patterns. The unit of analysis for frequency counts was the individual session. Following Labov and Waletzky's (1967) narrative framework, this study focused exclusively on the "orientation phase" of the narratives, which Fludernik (2013) believes, is rich in personal pronouns, providing insights into how participants thrive to construct perspectives and psychological stances.

The sample included seven participants (4 females, 3 males) aged between 21 and 67, spanning diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. The sessions lasted 55–70 minutes each, involving spontaneous, narrative-driven interactions between a counselor and a client. Ethical protocols were maintained through using pseudonyms and removing all identifiable information to ensure confidentiality. Participants provided informed consent following the disclosure of linguistic purpose of the study. To facilitate in-depth discourse analyses, transcriptions included non-verbal cues (e.g., pauses, laughter, pitch) and structural markers. A multi-layered coding scheme was implemented, categorizing formal and informal Persian pronouns (1st/2nd/3rd person) and pragmatic functions, such as agency, emotional distance, and politeness. Data were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach, integrating frequency counts with contextual qualitative interpretations via MAXQDA 2020. Inter-coder reliability was verified using Cohen's Kappa (κ=0.76κ=0.76), ensuring the validity of the extracted thematic patterns.

Results

Table 1 provides a summary of the frequency and diversity of Persian personal pronouns utilized by the clients. Based on the analysis of the clients' oral narratives, a total of 302 personal pronouns were identified and coded. These pronouns included the first-person singular (man), first-person plural (mā), third-person singular formal and informal (u/un/ii/in/ishun), third-person plural (inā/unā), and second-person singular and plural (to/shomā/jenābe-āli).

Table 1. Diversity and Frequency of Personal Pronouns Used by Clients

	I (man)	We(mā)	informal he/she(u/un/in/ii)	Formal he/she(ishun)	They (inā/unā)	You (to/shomā/ jenābe-āli)	Total
Maryam	26 (52%)	6(12%)	13(26%)	2(0.04%)	2(0.04%)	1(2%)	50
Ahmad	30 (62%)	4(0.08%)	2(0.04%)	10(21%)	0	1(2%)	47
Zahra	13 (59%)	2(0.09%)	0	7(32%)	0	0	22
Ali	12 (30%)	3(0.07%)	0	9(22%)	1	5(12%)	40
Pari	15 (41%)	9(25%)	11(30%)	1(0.02%)	0	0	36
Javad	14 (60%)	3(13%)	6(26%)	0	0	1(4%)	23
Laleh	49 (58%)	10(12%)	1(0.01%)	6(0.07%)	2(2%)	16(19%)	84
Total	159(52%)	37(12%)	32(10%)	35(11%)	5(0.02%)	24(7%)	302

Findings indicate that the first-person singular pronoun (man) holds a notable predominance, accounting for the highest frequency (52%) across all clients. The use of the first-person plural (mā) consistently ranks second in frequency across all cases (12%). Regarding references to the third person, two distinct categories prevailed: higher tendency to use the formal and respectful third-person pronoun (ishān) compared to the informal form (u/iin/un). Second-person pronouns (to/shomā) accounted for 7% of the total pronouns. Finally, female participants outnumbered male participants (mean = 48 vs. 36) in all pronouns.

Table2. Discursive Patterns and Linguistic Indicators of Clients in Counseling Sessions

Category	Conceptual Definition	Linguistic Indicator	Example
I-statements and Self-Focus	focus on intra-person experiences; expressing ownership of an experience; demonstrating agency and autonomy; reflecting depressive moods or stressful conditions from a personal perspective	Absolute predominance and high frequency of the first-person singular pronoun (man) during the orientation and narrative phases.	"I told him many times that I am not the kind of person who lets anyone play with my emotions." "I've given up on life for years..."
Social Distancing and Lack of Intimacy	Using linguistic resources to express disengagement, reduced respect, interpersonal conflict, shift of responsibility onto others (absent individuals in the narrative).	Informal/disrespectful third-person singular (un/iin/ii) to refer to others (e.g., spouse or child).	"I wouldn't put it past him" (Pari, referring to her husband during separation) "He's too dependent on me." (using disrespectful /iin/ for "he")
Interactive Bonding and Generalized Reference	Managing interactive situation with counselor; reconstructing dialogue with others; using second-person to establish general rules based on personal experiences.	Using second-person singular/ plural (to/shomā/jenābe-āli) directly or metaphorically	"When you are the mother of the family, the responsibility for all shopping and cooking falls on you".(Metaphorical address from a female client to the male counselor).
Collective and Dyadic Identity Projection	Reflecting interdependence in relationships; presence of a dyadic/familial identity; striving for problem-solving; seeking empathy; referring to a primary reference group (e.g., paternal family in single clients)	Using first-person plural (mā) within the contexts of marriage, divorce, or singlehood	"We didn't want it to turn out this way." (meaning himself) "We talked about this a lot." (Pari, during separation)
Pseudo-We-statements and Stress Masking	Systematic shifting from "I" to "We" in predictable contexts to mask tension, deflect responsibility, mitigate errors, or manage stress arising from personal, emotional, or sexual needs	Employing first-person plural (mā) in contexts where the intended subject is the individual (man)	"We send money to him, but he doesn't appreciate it at all." (Maryam, referring to herself) "When we were in shape, things weren't like this." (Ali, referring to his personal sexual desires)

Conclusions

This study investigated the use of personal pronouns in counseling sessions, examining the nature and linguistic patterns in clients' narratives. Data derived from frequency analysis demonstrated that the clients' linguistic choices are affected by factors such as gender, education, and family background.

Findings demonstrated a significant prevalence of first-person singular pronoun, reflecting a focus on individual experience and identity ownership. This finding aligns with established research (Pennebaker et al., 2003) regarding the self-centered nature of personal narratives. Furthermore, gender-based variations were observed, with women exhibiting higher frequencies of first-person plural pronouns (we), consistent with studies highlighting female relational and empathetic communication styles (Tannen, 1990; Karan et al., 2019).

Regarding interpersonal dynamics, the use of third-person pronouns served as a linguistic indicator of social distancing or formality, a pattern congruent with previous analyses (Nanbakhsh, 2012). Additionally, the correlation between higher education levels and more complex verbal interactions aligns with existing literature on linguistic complexity (Sillars et al.,1997). While marital status and *we-talk* did not yield a straightforward correlation in this sample, the findings overall suggest that pronoun selection is a reflection of individual identity, and social distancing within counseling contexts.

This study demonstrated that analyzing personal pronouns in Persian counseling sessions reveals critical psychological and identity-based patterns. These findings highlight the significance of personal pronouns, offering clinicians essential tools for deeper phenomenological understanding and therapeutic outcomes.

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Author Contributions

The study was designed, conducted, and reported by the sole author.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Data availability

The data used in this study are available upon reasonable request from the author, subject to ethical considerations and the protection of the participants' confidentiality.

AI Use Statement

The author used ChatGPT-6 for readability purposes. The author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the published article.

Ethical Approval

The author declares that all procedures performed in this study were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible institutional and national research committee.

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