

Pronouns in Welcome: Linguistic Construction of Student Identity in Chinese University Banners

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Abstract: This study explores the nuanced role of pronoun usage in welcome banners at Chinese universities and examines its influence on freshmen's identity construction within the cultural context of China. Employing a systematic collection and analysis of a corpus of welcome banners, the research utilizes corpus analysis and word frequency statistics to investigate how pronoun choices shape and reinforce freshmen's sense of identity. The findings highlight the significant impact of linguistic subtleties on the orientation activities at Chinese universities, influencing freshmen's social integration and identity formation. By illuminating the linguistic characteristics of Chinese welcome banners, this research provides empirical evidence of how cultural and linguistic contexts affect student identity through orientation activities. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection between language, culture, and identity in higher education.

Keywords: Pronoun Usage; Identity Construction; Chinese University Banners; Socialisation in Higher Education

1. Introduction

The initiation rituals orchestrated by academic institutions, particularly through welcome banners, play a crucial role in shaping the initial experiences and future integration of new students into the academic community. These banners, symbolic of the university's ethos, serve not merely as greetings but as semiotic beacons guiding students through the cultural landscape of their new academic environment. They encapsulate the essence of the university's values and aspirations, embedding them into the collective consciousness of the student body.¹ This study explores the intricate role these linguistic artefacts play in the identity formation of students, situating them within the broader discourse of enregisterment and indexicality in sociolinguistic practice.

The investigation into the use of personal pronouns within these banners provides insights into the dynamic interplay between language and identity construction within the academic milieu. Pronouns transcend their grammatical function, acting as conduits for social interaction and identity affirmation, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and community among students. This research aims to unravel the layers of meaning embedded in these linguistic choices and their impacts on students' self-perception and integration into the university culture.

Despite the extensive exploration of linguistic styles in educational contexts, the specific influence of pronoun usage within university welcome banners on freshmen identity formation remains underexplored. This study endeavours to bridge this gap by shedding light on the subtle ways in which linguistic strategies in welcome banners can mould students' perceptions of their place within the academic community. This inquiry is not only of academic interest but also has practical significance for designing orientation activities that resonates with the cultural and identity aspirations of the student body.

2. Literature Review

The exploration of pronoun usage in Chinese university welcome banners and its impact on the identity construction of incoming freshmen is an intriguing area of study that lies at the intersection of linguistics and social identity within the educational landscape. This investigation is particularly relevant in the context of global education, where language serves not only as a medium of instruction but also as a critical tool for

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socialization and identity construction among new university entrants. The role of language in educational settings extends beyond mere information conveyance, actively participating in shaping student identities, as highlighted by Torres, Jones, & Renn through the lens of intersectionality.² This approach underscores the complexity of identity within the educational sphere, advocating for consideration of the interplay among various identity facets, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Building on this foundation, Gee's comprehensive perspective on identity further enriches the discourse by introducing four distinct ways to view identity: Nature-identity, Institution-identity, Discourse-identity, and Affinity-identity.³ This multifaceted approach allows for a deeper understanding of identity construction and recognition, emphasizing the dynamic and context-specific nature of this process. Gee's insights into the increasing importance of Affinity-identity in the context of "new capitalism" underscore the need to understand identity in relation to access to networks and experiences, reflecting broader societal and economic shifts.

A group of Chinese scholars have also examined this issue. Han emphasises the significant role personal pronouns play in reflecting and constructing the identities of individuals and groups, a concept crucial to analysing university welcome banners.⁴ Zhang further underscores the importance of language in constructing personal identities and fostering a sense of belonging, essential aspects of the freshmen's integration process.⁵ Moreover, studies by Huang,⁶ Qiu,⁷ and Zhao⁸ provide valuable insights into the linguistic style and attitudinal dimensions of welcome banners, highlighting their psychological and communicative significance. These works collectively underscore the complexity of language use in educational contexts and its profound impact on student identity and social integration.

However, while these studies provide robust frameworks for understanding identity from an intersectional perspective and through multiple lenses, they fall short of directly addressing the linguistic aspects of identity construction, particularly in relation to institutional discourse such as welcome banners. This gap underscores the necessity for research that specifically investigates how linguistic choices do in university communications, like welcome banners, can impact student identity, especially in non-Western contexts such as Chinese universities.

The study by Tang and John,⁹ which explores the role of the first-person pronoun "I" in academic writing, and the research presented in "A Study on 'I'" examines the use of first-person pronouns as evidential in academic writing, both contribute valuable insights into the negotiation of identity through language use. These studies highlight the complex interplay between language use and the construction of authorial identity in academic settings, revealing a tension between the desire to assert individuality and the need to adhere to traditional academic norms.

Drawing from these insights, it becomes evident that an intersectional approach to identity, coupled with an understanding of the multifunctionality of pronouns as explored by Rounds,¹⁰ can provide a robust framework for analysing welcome banners. Such an analysis could illuminate how linguistic choices in these banners contribute to the construction of a collective identity among freshmen, influencing their sense of belonging and engagement with the university community. This perspective opens avenues for more inclusive and mindful language practices in educational institutions, aiming to foster a sense of unity and belonging among new students.

3. Methodology

The methodology of this research was structured to gather and scrutinize welcome banners from various digital platforms to ascertain the influence of pronouns in shaping the identities of incoming university students. The data collection phase, conducted in December 2023, entailed an extensive search through multiple databases and online forums. These selected sources are renowned for their widespread influences and diverse demographics, offering a comprehensive and multifaceted collection of welcome banners. By integrating these diverse sources, the research methodology aligns with Dong et al.'s comprehensive analytical approach,¹¹ ensuring a thorough examination of language use in welcome banners.

For clarity and easy reference, the sources of data collection are enumerated in Table 1, presented

within the main text below:

Table 1 Digital Platforms and Resources Used for Data Collection

Platform/Resource	URL	Active Since	Description and User Base
Weibo (微博)	www.weibo.com	2009	A leading social medium with over 445 million monthly active users by 2018.
WeChat (微信)	www.wechat.com	2011	The world's largest free messaging and calling app with over 1 billion monthly active users in 2018.
Zhihu (知乎)	www.zhihu.com	2011	A Chinese question-and-answer website with more than 220 million users and over 30 million questions.
Douyin (抖音)	www.douyin.com	2016	The platform for short-form mobile videos, with approximately 500 million monthly active users.
Baidu (百度)	www.baidu.com	2000	China's largest search engine and one of the largest AI and Internet companies.
China Digital Library	www.dlib.com	2009	A database on Chinese newspapers providing full-text and image databases.
People's Data (人民数据)	data.people.com.cn	Not Specified	An exclusive platform collecting information and documents of the Party and government sectors.
Wise Search (维智搜索)	www.wisers.com	1998	A database covering more than 1,000 print medias and 300 websites in mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, Europe, America, and Singapore.
Illustration of Banners	Publication Details	2010	A book that illustrates 193 family planning banners, issued by the government.
Population Culture - Couplets, Riddles, and Banners	Publication Details	2001	A series of family planning books introducing population cultures.

The platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, Zhihu, Douyin, and Baidu are particularly influenced in digital communication in China, providing fertile ground for analysing current linguistic trends in welcome banners. The China Digital Library and the People's Database offer access to a wealth of political and cultural texts, invaluable for contextualizing the banners within the broader socio-political framework of China.

By drawing from these diverse sources, as detailed in Table 1, the study ensures a comprehensive analysis of the language used in welcome banners, particularly focusing on the frequency and context of pronoun usage. This methodological approach not only facilitates a broad quantitative analysis but also supports a deeper qualitative interpretation of the data, which is crucial for understanding the subtleties of language and identity construction in the context of higher education in China.

4. Pronominal Perspectives: Shaping Freshmen Identities Through Welcome Banners

Nothing is certain but death and banners—this internet buzzword illustrates the importance of banners as a vast, all-weather social language landscape in Chinese society. China's long history of character writing has made calligraphy and inscriptions a form of public social writing that has played a role in social education over centuries. This tradition made banners, which is short and easy to understand, a key discourse of the Communist regime for propagating its messages to the people. The "Red Star," an essential newspaper of the Red Army General Political Department, called on all soldiers to write banners to spread revolution ideology to the ordinary people in 1934.[#] Since then, the banners have played an essential role in propaganda in major events affecting China such as the Korean War, the Cultural Revolution, the Reform and Opening-up policy, and the "family planning" policy. Banners have also been hung during festivals and social events of various scales. Banners have a long history in modern Chinese society and remain vibrant political symbols and social labels.

In the realm of sociolinguistic inquiry, vocabulary serves not merely as a conduit of communication but as a reflection of language style, which in turn mirrors individual personalities, social relationships, and psychological states. This nexus of style and substance is particularly evident in the utilization of functional words—pronouns, articles, prepositions, negatives, and conjunctions—which subtly yet substantially reflects mental states and cognitive attitudes toward various subjects and events. These words are often characterized by their high frequency and unobtrusive yet socialized nature.¹² Among these, personal pronouns stand out in

interpersonal metafunctional analysis, revealing the depths of relationships between communicators.¹³



Figure 1 Banners at the School of Civil Engineering, Shandong Jiaotong University (Left); Department of Chemistry, Guangdong University of Education (Right)

Our corpus, comprising 544 banners, reveals that 258 employ personal pronouns, bifurcating into two distinct categories—light-hearted and serious—each serving the dual function of welcoming and providing encouragement or caution.

4.1 Affable Engagement Banners: Fostering Inclusivity

This category encompasses banners crafted with a tone of geniality and informal camaraderie. They frequently employ colloquial language, netspeak, and personal pronouns that collectively foster a welcoming and approachable ambience. The use of humour serves not only as an icebreaker but also as a linguistic tool that facilitates rapport-building between the institution and incoming students. Within this corpus, personal pronouns are prevalent, reflecting an attempt to establish a direct conversational link with new entrants, indicative of a desire to create an inclusive and communal academic environment.

Among these, 411 banners, accounting for 75.6% of the total, adopt a colloquial tone, leveraging netspeak, personal pronouns, and technical jargon. The vernacular is notably informal, interspersed with humour to extend a convivial welcome to newcomers. For instance, personal pronouns feature in 239 banners, constituting 58% of this category. The pronouns ‘I’ (我, wǒ), ‘we’ (我们, wǒ men), and ‘you’ (你, nǐ) surface with varying frequencies—104, 25, and 230 occurrences, respectively. An exemplar of this style is seen in the banner from the Faculty of Chemical Engineering at Kunming University of Science and Technology, which cleverly substitutes chemical elements for Chinese characters—Ag for yíng (迎), Mn for méng (萌), and Zn for xīn (新).

Faculty of Chemical Engineering, Kunming University of Science and Technology

欢迎 2019 级小萌新!

(huān yíng 2019 jí xiǎo méng xīn!)

This banner uses chemical elements instead of Chinese characters, such as Ag instead of yíng (迎), Mn instead of méng (萌) and Zn instead of xīn (新).

Tangshan Normal College

道路千万条，迎新第一条，入学感迷茫，学长来帮忙。

(dào lù qiān wàn tiáo, yíng xīn dì yī tiáo, rù xué gǎn mí máng, xué zhǎng lái bāng máng.)

This banner is modelled on a line from the movie *The Wandering Earth*: Among tens of thousands of matters, safety is the very first one. Irregular operations will make your loved ones shed tears.

School of Computer Science and Technology, Huaqiao University

亲，您已被计科签收，请五星好评哟!

(qīn, nín yǐ bèi jì kē qiānshōu, qǐng wǔxīng hǎopíng you!)

“Dear friends, you have been signed by the department, please give a five-star review!”

Another banner from Tangshan Normal College draws inspiration from popular culture, adopting a safety campaign’s catchphrase to articulate the paramount importance of welcoming the new, innovatively blending safety and hospitality.

4.2 Solemn Commitment Banners: Articulating Expectations and Values

The Solemn Commitment Banners are characterised by a more formal and traditional linguistic style. These banners are designed to convey the gravitas of the educational journey upon which the students are embarking. They frequently articulate the ethos of the institution, underscore the expectations placed upon new students, and provide encouragement as well as cautionary advice. The use of personal pronouns within this category is more restrained and selectively employed, which corresponds with the solemnity of the message conveyed. Here, the language functions as a conduit for instilling a sense of duty, ambition, and awareness of the academic rigour that await the students. A total of 133 banners, making up 24.4% of the total, opt for a traditional, formal register, setting forth expectations, encouragement, and caution. Within this subset, 19 banners incorporate personal pronouns, equating to 14.3% of the serious category. These banners often utilize a poetic structure, as seen in the offering from the School of Electrical and Electronic Engineering at Huazhong University of Science and Technology, where a play on words transformation “lit” into “electric burning”, a metaphor aligning professional identity with cultural heritage.

School of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Huazhong University of Science and Technology

电气骄子，照亮中国，电燃梦想，气贯山河。

(diàn qì jiāo zǐ, zhào liàng zhōng guó, diàn rán mèng xiǎng, qì guàn shān hé.)

“Electrical elites illuminate China, electric burning dreams, energy pervades the mountains and rivers.”

This banner uses a poetic structure, replacing the word “lit” with a homophone that is characterized of the profession, “electric burning.”

Huazhong University of Science and Technology

读万卷书，立人生新目标；行万里路，拓事业新天地。

(dú wàn juàn shū, lì rén shēng xīn mù biāo; xíng wàn lǐ lù, tuò shì yè xīn tiān dì.)

“Read thousands of books, set a new goal in life; Travel thousands of miles, expand the cause of a new world.”

Hubei University of Automotive Industry

你长高了，父母老了，他们肩上的行李你该接过来了。

(nǐ zhǎng gāo le, fù mǔ lǎo le, tā men jiān shàng de xíng li nǐ gāi jiē guò lái le.)

“As you grow taller and your parents are growing old, it is time for you to take over the luggage on their shoulders.”

In summation, this paper delineates the dichotomy of banner styles and their implications for freshmen’s identity construction from the vantage point of personal pronoun use, thereby enriching our understanding of the interplay between language, culture, and identity within the academe.

5. Pragmatic Identity Construction Through Personal Pronouns in Welcome Banners

The strategic deployment of personal pronouns within welcome banners operates as a significant pragmatic tool for identity construction among new university entrants. This section elucidates the interplay between pronoun usage and the emergent social identities of freshmen, as reflected in the banner corpus.

5.1 The Invocation of “You” in Identity Shaping Through Welcome Banners

In the realm of linguistic pragmatics, personal pronouns serve as pivotal markers of social hierarchy and relational dynamics. They demarcate the dialogic space between the addresser and addressee, often signalling the addresser’s social standing and attitude towards their audience.¹² For instance:

Department of Tourism Management, Chengdu University of Information Technology

确认过眼神，你是旅游管理的人。

(què rèn guò yǎn shén, nǐ shì lǚ yóu guǎn lǐ de rén)

“Confirm the eye contact, you belong to tourism management.”

This banner employs the pronoun “you” to directly address and include the new students within the academic community, thereby facilitating the identification with their chosen field of study.

Tangshan Normal College

路修好了，图书馆建了，就等你了。

(lù xiū hǎo le, tú shū guǎn jiàn le, jiù děng nǐ le.)

"The paths are paved, the library stands built, all awaiting you."

Here, the banner articulates the university's readiness for its new students, both metaphorically and physically, enhancing the freshmen's sense of belonging and importance.

Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics

你们就是学姐望眼欲穿的等待。

(nǐ men jiù shì xué jiě wàng yǎn yù chuān de děng dài.)

"You are what the senior sisters eagerly await."

This banner conveys anticipation and constructs an environment of communal solidarity, anticipating the integration of new male students into the existing social fabric, as anticipated by their female predecessors.

School of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, Huazhong University of Science and Technology

初见你那天，就像 H_2O_2 遇见 MnO_2 ，有了生气。

(chū jiàn nǐ nà tiān, jiù xiàng H_2O_2 yù jiàn MnO_2 , yǒu le shēng qì.)

"Our initial encounter, akin to H_2O_2 meeting MnO_2 , infused vitality."

Here, the analogy with a chemical reaction not only conveys a vibrant welcome but also establishes a sense of shared identity rooted in the discipline of chemistry.

School of Software, Nanjing University

你们来的这一天，阳光很好，bug 很少。

(nǐ men lái de zhè yī tiān, yáng guāng hěn hǎo, bug hěn shǎo.)

"On your arrival, the sunshine is splendid, and the bugs are few."

The personification of the environment on the day of the students' arrival is a metaphorical representation of the new phase in their academic journey, with the "bugs" possibly referring to challenges that are minimized by the supportive university context.

In these instances, "you" is not merely a grammatical placeholder; it is a linguistic tool that actively engages the freshmen, fostering a sense of individual recognition and collective belonging. Through this engagement, the banner creators—embodying the voice of the institution—use "you" to effectively facilitate the identity transition of new students from their previous high school selves to their new collegiate personas. This linguistic strategy helps inculcate in freshmen a sense of being valued members of the university community, emphasizing their development as scholars and professionals within their chosen fields.

The overarching utilization of "you" in the banners we examined underscores its pivotal role in the identity construction process. By addressing the freshmen directly, the banners not only extend a warm welcome but also assist in the crucial transformation of their self-conception from high school graduates to university scholars. This transformation is instrumental in shaping their academic trajectory and fostering a sense of belonging to their new educational milieu.

In these contexts, "you" transcends its grammatical function, becoming an instrument for identity formation, where freshmen are not merely audience members but active participants in the academic dialogue. Such linguistic choices by the institutions serve as foundational elements in the identity metamorphosis from high school graduates to university students.

5.2 The Use of "We" in Welcome Banners: Constructing Communal Identity

The pronoun "we" operates within a spectrum of inclusivity and exclusivity, often delineating a communal identity that may either embrace or delineates the speaker from the audience. Its deployment in academic settings frequently navigates between warmth and solidarity or formality and distance, reflecting nuanced layers of interpersonal relationships and institutional hierarchy.¹²

Within our corpus analysis, "we" surfaces 36 times across varied contexts in orientation banners, each instance carrying its distinctive nuances of collective identity. This section deciphers the multifaceted

employment of “we” and its implications for the identity construction of freshmen during orientation.

(1) Inclusive “We”: Establishing Solidarity

When “we” encompasses both the speakers and the addressees, it engenders a shared identity, suggesting an alliance between upperclassmen or faculty and incoming students. This use is observed 12 times, illustrating a deliberate effort to forge a collective sense of belonging to the university community.¹⁴ For example:

你是0，我是1，我们一起，就是整个世界。
(nǐ shì 0, wǒ shì 1, wǒ men yī qǐ, jiù shì zhěng gè shì jiè.)
“You are 0, I am 1, together we are the whole world.”

This banner from the School of Life Science and Technology at Shanghai Jiao Tong University employs binary digits metaphorically, positioning the individual freshman and the collective university as integral components of a larger entity. Such banners leverage common ground in academic or professional language to construct a shared identity between the new entrants and the institution.

接过你的行囊，我们就是一家人。
(jiē guò nǐ de xíng náng, wǒ men jiù shì yī jiā rén.)
“Take your bags, we are a family.”

The Graduate Student Association of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences uses “we” to signify a seamless transition into the academic family, reducing the psychological distance for new students and fostering immediate affiliation with the institution.

因为年轻，未来属于我们。
(yīn wèi nián qīng, wèi lái shǔ yú wǒ men.)
“Because we are young, the future belongs to us.”

Baidu’s banner resonates with the youthful demographic of the freshmen, reinforcing the communal identity based on age and shared aspirations.

这里生龙活虎，我们一起来打怪啊。
(zhè lǐ shēng lóng huó hǔ, wǒ men yī qǐ lái dǎ guài a.)
“This place is alive. Let’s fight against it together.”

At Shanxi University of Media and Communication, “we” is wielded to equate the challenges of university life with a collaborative quest, emphasizing communal effort and solidarity.

The inclusive “we” underscores a collective identity, embodying the freshmen’s integration into the university’s social and academic fabric. These banners strategically utilize “we” to cultivate a sense of unity and shared purpose, thereby facilitating freshmen’s assimilation into their new roles as university students.

(2) Exclusionary “We”: Delineating Group Boundaries

In contrast to the inclusive “we”, which fosters a sense of unity, the exclusionary usage of “we” subtly distinguishes between the speakers (and their associated group) and the addressees. This distinction, observed 15 times in our corpus, serves to initially set apart the freshmen from the existing university community, only to subsequently welcome them into the fold, thereby facilitating a transition in their social identity.¹⁴ Examples of this nuanced usage include:

别怕，我们用地质锤敲碎你们前程路上的所有障碍！
(bié pà, wǒ men yòng dì zhì chuí qiāo suì nǐ men qián chéng lù shàng de suǒ yǒu zhàng ài!)
“Don’t be afraid, we will smash all the obstacles in your way with a geological hammer!”

Here, “we” encompasses the seniors, faculty, or the university community at large, distinct from the incoming freshmen. This banner conveys a protective stance, assuring newcomers of guidance and support in their academic journey, thereby extending an invitation to join the collective entity represented by “we.”

你们也是信管的？好巧。不巧，我们在等你。
(nǐ men yě shì xìn guǎn de? hǎo qiǎo. bù qiǎo, wǒ men zài děng nǐ.)

“Are you also an information management major? What a coincidence. Unfortunately, we are waiting for you.”

The School of Information Management employs “we” to create an anticipatory scenario where the existing members have been awaiting the arrival of new students, thus indicating a preparedness to integrate them into the academic community.

你们是0，我们是1，你我携手编写世界。
(nǐ men shì 0, wǒ men shì 1, nǐ wǒ xié shǒu biān xiě shì jiè.)
“You are 0, we are 1, you and I create the world together.”

This banner from the School of Life Science and Technology at Shanghai Jiao Tong University employs binary digits to symbolize the indispensable role of newcomers in completing the university community, suggesting that their arrival is the key to unlock a new chapter of collective achievement.

请与我们一起来奏响这罗曼地科的青春乐章。
(qǐng yǔ wǒ men yī qǐ lái zòu xiǎng zhè luó màn dì kē de qīng chūn yuè zhāng.)
“Please join us in playing the youth music of ‘luó màn dì kē’.”

The Geographical Science Students’ Union cleverly uses a homophone to extend an invitation to freshmen to partake in the vibrant and ‘romantic’ life of the department, using humour to bridge the gap between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

In each instance, the exclusionary “we” initially sets the freshmen apart from the established group, only to then draw them in, signifying their transition from outsiders to integral members of the community. This rhetorical strategy underscores the freshmen’s evolving identity - from newcomers to recognized members of their respective academic and social circles.

(3) Antithetical “We”: From Speaker to Addressee

The antithetical usage of “we” represents a nuanced linguistic shift where the pronoun, traditionally denoting the speaker, is reoriented to signify the addressee. This rhetorical strategy, occurring four times in our corpus, subtly transitions the reference from the speaker’s collective to the audience, often in a context that implies expectations or aspirations directed at the freshmen. This approach, by embedding the speaker within the narrative, minimizes psychological distance and softens the delivery of prescriptive or aspirational messages.¹⁴ Instances of this usage include:

我们先定一个小目标，比方说，一周先学个七天，以后期末考试拿个均4.8。
(wǒ men xiān dìng yí gè xiǎo mù biāo, bǐ fāng shuō, yì zhōu xiān xué gè qī tiān, yǐ hòu qī mò kǎo shì ná gè jūn 4.8.)
“Let’s set a small goal first, for example, study for seven days a week, and then aim for an average of 4.8 in the final exam.”

Zhejiang University utilizes “we” to articulate a goal that, while stated collectively, is intended for the freshmen. This banner encapsulates a set of expectations, couching them within a communal framework that ostensibly includes the speaker, thereby reducing any potential resistance to the high standards being set.

亲爱的家长，放开您的手，我们能行！
(qīn ài de jiā zhǎng, fàng kāi nín de shǒu, wǒ men néng xíng!)
“Dear parents, let go of your hands, we can do it!”

Guangxi University of Finance and Economics addresses parents directly, using “we” to reassure them of their children’s capabilities. Here, “we” inclusively encompasses the freshmen, asserting their readiness and ability to navigate university life independently.

不要生活在自我与狭隘的小时代，要做勤奋与自信的合伙人，用努力与奋斗致我们的青春。
(bú yào shēng huó zài zì wǒ yǔ xiá ài de xiǎo shí dài, yào zuò qín fèn yǔ zì xìn de hé huǒ rén, yòng nǚ lì yǔ fèn dòu zhì wǒ men de qīng chūn.)
“Do not confine yourself to a narrow, self-centred existence. Aim to be a diligent and confident partner, dedicating effort and struggle to our youth.”

In this Baidu banner, “we” ostensibly includes the speaker but is directed at the freshmen, urging them to embrace a broader, more engaged approach to their youth. The banner employs “we” to foster a sense of shared journey and collective aspiration among the new students.

In each case, the antithetical “we” serves to include the addressee within a collective framework, effectively transforming prescriptive advice or aspirational goals into shared objectives. This linguistic strategy not only aligns the speaker with the audience but also invests the freshmen with a sense of agency and belonging, as they are rhetorically positioned not merely as recipients of advice but as active participants in a communal endeavour.

(4) Singular Collective “We”: The Singular-to-Plural Shift

The Singular Collective “We” usage represents a stylistic shift where the singular “I” is substituted with the first-person plural “we”, observed on three occasions within the corpus. This linguistic strategy is employed by the speaker to diffuse personal responsibility, suggesting a collective effort or support that may be more notional than real.¹⁴

This form of “we” ostensibly expands the speaker’s identity to include a broader community or institutional entity, thereby implying a more significant backing or collective commitment than might exist. For instance:

Wuhan Business and Technology University

我们不会先定一个小目标，只会定一个大目标：愿陪伴所有的学生成长成才。

(wǒ men bú huì xiān dìng yí gè xiǎo mù biāo, zhǐ huì dìng yí gè dà mù biāo: yuàn péi bàn suǒ yǒu de xué shēng chéng zhǎng chéng cái.)

“We will not set a small goal first, only set a big goal: willing to accompany all students to grow and become talented.”

Here, “we” seems to represent the institution and its entire staff, pledging a comprehensive commitment to student development. However, this “we” primarily emanates from the individual speaker, magnifying their pledge to student success.

Guizhou University

我们不能解放全人类，但我们可以让你的贵大生活无忧。

(wǒ men bù néng jiě fàng quán rén lèi, dàn wǒ men kě yǐ ràng nǐ de guì dà shēng huó wú yōu.)

“We cannot liberate all mankind, but we can make your life carefree.”

In this banner, while “we” appears to encompass the university community’s collective mission, it fundamentally reflects the speaker’s assurance towards enhancing freshmen’s university experience.

In these instances, the Singular Collective “We” serves to construct an image of a nurturing and supportive academic environment, with the speaker positioning themselves as part of a larger, benevolent collective dedicated to the students’ welfare and growth. This rhetorical manoeuvre not only amplifies the speaker’s commitment but also embeds it within the perceived collective ethos of the institution, thereby strengthening the freshmen’s perceived support network as they transition into their new academic and social identities.

(5) Generalized “We”: The Ambiguous Collective

The term for this usage of “we” could be “Ambiguous Collective ‘We’”. It encompasses instances where “we” is employed without a defined referential object, making it a nebulous and all-encompassing entity. This usage, occurring twice in our analysis, is notably prevalent in political rhetoric, where it serves to unify a diverse audience under a broad, often inspirational, banner without specifying the exact members of the group. Example:

我们都在努力奔跑，我们都是追梦人。

(wǒ men dōu zài nǔ lì bēn pǎo, wǒ men dōu shì zhuī mèng rén.)

“We are all running hard, we are all dreamers.”

Originating from President Xi Jinping’s New Year’s Message for 2019, this banner encapsulates a wide

array of individuals—students, teachers, labourers, and office workers—under the collective banner of perseverance and aspiration. The “Ambiguous Collective ‘We’” here is designed to resonate with anyone who is in pursuit of goals or dreams, thereby motivating freshmen to embrace the journey of striving and dreaming with courage and determination.

Through the lens of the “Ambiguous Collective ‘We’,” we discern various identities sculpted within orientation banners: school newcomers, major-specific freshmen identities, young strivers, and the institution itself as a supportive entity. The first six identities primarily relate to the freshmen’s transition, whereas the last one reflects the institution’s role in their journey. The diverse applications of “we” forge dual identities for newcomers—school and professional, academic and youthful—urging them to engage diligently in their studies, embrace challenges, and pursue their aspirations. This strategic use of “we” not only mitigates the newcomers’ apprehension towards the novel academic environment but also subtly motivates and guides them to navigate this new chapter of their lives with a constructive and proactive outlook.

5.3 The Strategic Deployment of “I” in Welcome Banners

In the realm of discourse, the pronoun “I” is pivotal in delineating the speaker’s stance, ranging from objective detachment to subjective engagement. The literature suggests a gendered dichotomy in its use, where male discourse tends toward minimizing “I” to project objectivity, often in serious contexts, whereas female discourse more frequently employs “I” to convey personal viewpoints, typically in lighter narratives. This distinction underscores a strategic choice in discourse construction, aligning with the formal or informal tone desired.

(1) “I” in Campus Welcoming Narratives

In the unique context of university welcomes banners, which serves as the inaugural interaction between the institution and new students, there is a deliberate tilt towards a more engaging, personalized narrative. Employing “I” in these banners aims to cultivate an image of warmth and accessibility, drawing from the more personal, female discourse construction to bridge the institutional-student gap.

(2) Direct Expressions of “I”

The use of “I” directly by banner creators, occurring 92 times, seeks to forge a personal connection with the freshmen, portraying the institution or its representatives as approachable and supportive figures. For instance:

我家小孩，我会担待@小萌新。
(wǒ jiā xiǎo hái, wǒ huì dān dài @ xiǎo méng xīn.)
“My child, I will take care of @Xiaomengxin.”

This banner presents the institution’s representatives as caretakers, extending a personal, protective welcome to the newcomers.

我最真实的“意思表示”——七月的李现 八月的杨紫 都不如九月的你。
(wǒ zuì zhēn shí de “yì sī biǎo shì” - qī yuè de lǐ xiàn bā yuè de yáng zǐ dōu bù rú jiǔ yuè de nǐ.)
“My most authentic ‘expression of meaning’ - Li Xian in July and Yang Zi in August are not as good as your banner in September.”

This conveys a personalized endorsement of the new class, elevating their arrival above popular cultural references.

(3) Personification Through “I”

In 12 instances, “I” serves to anthropomorphize objects or concepts, rendering the university’s environment and ethos more relatable and dynamic. Examples include:

自从我被挂上去晒了这么多天后，终于等到了你。
(zì cóng wǒ bèi guà shàng qù shài le zhè me duō tiān hòu, zhōng yú děng dào le nǐ.)
“Since I was hung up under the sun for so many days, finally waiting for you.”

This banner personifies the welcoming banners, infusing them with a sense of anticipation and

liveliness for the freshmen's arrival.

放心吧，你不会记住我，只会经过我，然后奔向社会。

(fàng xīn ba, nǐ bú huì jì zhù wǒ, zhǐ huì jīng guò wǒ, rán hòu bèn xiàng shè huì.)

"Rest assured, you will not remember me, you will only pass me, and then run to society."

This banner subtly personifies the transient yet impactful role of the university experience in the broader journey of life.

(4) Echoing Freshmen Voices

Interestingly, "I" is also utilized to reflect the voices and aspirations of the freshmen themselves, projecting their hopes and commitments onto the canvas of campus life:

今天我上大学了，感觉自己萌萌哒。

(jīn tiān wǒ shàng dà xué le, gǎn jué zì jǐ méng méng dā.)

"Today I go to college, I feel adorable."

Students' Union of Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics captures the freshmen's excitement and optimism.

Central South University for Nationalities

爸爸妈妈，四年后我一定会成为你们的骄傲。

(bà ba mā ma, sì nián hòu wǒ yí dìng huì chéng wéi nǐ men de jiāo ào.)

"Mom and Dad, four years later, I will become your pride."

我是个宝宝，也是未来的社会主义法学家。

(wǒ shì gè bǎo bao, yě shì wèi lái de shè huì zhǔ yì fǎ xué jiā.)

"I'm a baby and a future socialist jurist."

Jiangwan Campus, Fudan University articulates the freshmen's dedication to personal and professional growth.

The multifaceted use of "I" in welcome banners adeptly shapes various identities: the welcoming institution, the personified elements of campus life, and the freshmen poised for transformation. Each deployment of "I" serves to humanize the institution, facilitate the students' transition into their new academic roles, and encapsulate the transformative essence of the college journey. This analysis aligns with the academic discourse's emphasis on the strategic use of linguistic elements to construct and negotiate identities within specific social contexts.

6. Conclusion

The exploration into the employment of personal pronouns within Chinese university welcome banners, as detailed in the sections "Pronominal Perspectives: Shaping Freshman Identities Through Welcome Banners" and "Pragmatic Identity Construction through Personal Pronouns in Welcome Banners", unveils a multifaceted linguistic strategy pivotal in freshmen identity construction. This nuanced analysis has elucidated how the strategic utilization of pronouns transcends mere welcoming, actively engaging in the subtle craft of socializing newcomers into the academic and communal ethos of the university.

The distinction between "Affable Engagement Banners" and "Solemn Commitment Banners" reveals a dual approaches to address freshmen, with each employing pronouns to foster a specific sense of identity and belonging. The former, through its casual tone and inclusive language, establishes a rapport with the new students, enveloping them in a communal embrace that signals their welcome transition into the university fold. The latter, in its more formal and aspirational tone, sets forth the values and expectations of the academic community, guiding freshmen towards the realization of their scholarly and personal potential.

This study's findings underscore the profound impact of linguistic choices in welcome banners on shaping freshmen's perceptions of their new academic environment and their place within it. By weaving a complex tapestry of identity through the nuanced use of pronouns, these banners perform a crucial role in the transitional phase of students, bridging their past and future selves.

This research enriches our understanding of the intersection between language, culture, and identity in educational contexts. It offers valuable insights for crafting orientation activities that resonates with the culture and identity aspirations of the student body, ensuring a more inclusive and engaging initiation into university life.

Notes:

On December 5, 1934, the Red Army's official newspaper, *Red Star*, issued a call for a "Company Slogan Writing Competition".

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