The Politics of Pronouns

Douglas Selwyn

The pronoun is a modest part of speech. Lacking an identity of its own, the pronoun only stands in for someone or something else. Pronouns are so quiet, so common, and so seemingly familiar that we don’t quite notice them. But pronouns are sly as well as shy. They often carry a very strong message about who “we” are and how “we” see the world. And they carry challenging questions: Are “you” part of “us?” Does “we” include “me?” When “we,” the people, are working for the common good, does that common good include me? Or you?

Whose World Class City Is This?
I began to think about the role that pronouns play in our lives when business and political leaders in Seattle began to lobby citizens of the Puget Sound area to use taxpayer dollars to fund the building of a privately owned baseball stadium. The then lowly Mariners were playing in a concrete mausoleum called the Kingdome. It was an engineering marvel, tons and tons of concrete constructed to outlast us all. Solidly built, utilitarian, no art or pretense to it. Aesthetics? Nah. But it functioned; it kept the rain out (mostly), kept the roof on (mostly), and was relatively cheap. When the time came, it took a great deal of explosives to implode because it was so resolutely what it was.

But, it was not sexy, it did not have luxury boxes, it did not have open air or sunset views, or a winning baseball team playing in it. It was, in short, not a world-class stadium. And the political and business leaders of the Puget Sound region told the citizens of the Puget Sound region, who would have to vote approval for the stadium, that we in the region deserved to have a world class stadium in a world class city. It was time for “us” to step up to the plate and get what “we” deserved.

But who was the “we?” Few of the people I asked felt included by that pronoun. Not school teachers, not social workers, not students, not working-class folks. A very small percentage of the people I spoke with in the neighborhood in which the new stadium would be built considered themselves part of that particular “we.” Many of those living in the neighborhood would be forced to move their businesses or residences so the stadium could be constructed. None of the street folks who populated the adjacent Pioneer Square area, who would be forced out by the “upgrade” to world-class status, seemed to feel they were part of the “we.” The homeless in the nearby downtown region didn’t seem very concerned about whether the city in which they were homeless was world class or not. “We” did not seem likely to include them.

The voters of King County, by a slim margin, voted against raising our taxes to build “them” a stadium. And yet the new stadium stands. “Our” state legislature decided that we, the voters of King County were surely mistaken and overrode the decision. We were now a world class city, whether we wanted that designation or not.

The situation in King County was hardly unique. Owners around the country echoed the threat made in Seattle: build us a stadium or we will leave, a sort of musical chairs quick-step that featured privatized profits and socialized expenses and losses. We (the owners) make money, while we (the taxpayers) pay the expenses. Now, which “we” were number one? If “our” team left, “we” would be here in a baseball-less, world-class-less city, while “our” team became somebody else’s home team, and “our” guys would be “their” guys. The players would, of course, be paid millions either way, paid for by our tax dollars and ticket purchases.

Whose Country Is This?
It is not a trivial question. When the topic turns to the more obviously political arena the pronouns take on much more observable heat. “We” have learned that referring to the human race as men is leaving out half of it. And it’s not enough to say, “Well, you know what I meant.” It was more accurate than perhaps intended to have one of “our” famous founding documents note that “all men are created equal.” Of course, it wasn’t all that accurate either, as Native American, African American, or non-land-owning European Americans knew all too well. Who were, who are, “We, the People?”

The United States is technically a democratic republic, but there are millions of citizens who can not vote, who have no say in what happens to us in “our” lives. Other people decide and tell us what we will do, what we can do, or what will happen to us if we don’t do. For years, young
men could be arrested for refusing to fight in wars that leaders they could not vote for commanded them to fight in. Were they included in this notion of democracy, or democratic republic?

When “we” have studied “our” history, the history of the United States, who have “we” studied and from whose point of view? Accounts of Columbus, through the early 1990s, presented a very one-sided picture of the “discovery of America.” I (and virtually every other student in the United States) was taught that a European Christian, with bravery and skill, came to an uncivilized, primitive, and decidedly un-Christian land and claimed it (and all the people on it) for God and for his patron. He was widely recognized as a hero and the date of his landing was celebrated as a national holiday. This was defined as the moment when “our” history as a civilized nation began. The native people who greeted Columbus when his boat touched sand have been relegated for five hundred years to bit players in this European American version of who “we” are. They were cast as godless savages who had finally been discovered, been kissed awake by the explorer prince who crossed the great water, carrying civilization with him.

Stories challenging this Euro-centered version of national history were kept to the fringes until the virtual eve of the five hundredth anniversary of the landing. Finally, stories that brought another point of view were added to “our” history. These stories helped us realize that Native Americans do not view Columbus as a hero, and view his coming not so much as a discovery as an invasion. “Our” story has grown a bit larger, a bit more complex, though the process has not been without controversy. “We” don’t always welcome change.

When I look to the students in many of our public schools I have a hard time finding their stories within the curriculum or textbook histories of “our” country. When the students and I studied the American Revolution, we had a conversation about the issue of voting and representation, issues of no small importance to the founders. There was only one person in our classroom who would have been able to vote in our democracy at the time of “our” revolution, and that was me, the only European American male in the room. So whose democracy was this?

The students and I went through the textbooks supplied by the district and noted the topics, the pictures, the issues, and the points of view expressed in chapter titles, in captions, in maps and charts, and in what is included or excluded. Chapters entitled “Discovery,” “Westward Expansion,” “The Founding of the Nation,” “Manifest Destiny,” “Growth and Expansion,” “The Growing Nation,” “Exploring the Americas,” make it very clear whose story is being told, and the lens through which the stories are viewed. There is a definite point of view, a frame...
of reference that is unstated but clear; “we” know who we are, and who we are not.

Whose World Is This?
The scene is just as problematic when the class is World History. Many public schools in the United States offer world history courses that barely give lip service to Central or South America, and scarcely mention Canada. The countries of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Egypt have ancient histories, disconnected sometimes even in name from their contemporary forms. The region they occupy is actually defined by where it isn’t (the “Middle East” being midway between Europe and the “Far East”). Asia and China have ancient histories as well, and then disappear. Places reappear when they become colonies, or fight wars with the West. Contemporary Afghanistan will undoubtedly make it into the next round of publications, as the country that harbored, at that time, America’s Most Wanted, and Iraq has clearly re-surfaced in the past decades. Now that Saddam is captured, the focus may swing elsewhere, to another country destined to be re-remembered by history.

Students in history classes rarely get any sense of who the people of Iraq, Afghanistan, Russia, Iran, Guatemala, Venezuela, Argentina, or Vietnam are on their own terms, through their own eyes. World history is a history of a few places of the world as defined by a decidedly Western point of view.

Pronouns Come with Underlying Assumptions and Agreements
The power and danger in pronouns is the assumed agreements that underlie their usage. One assumed agreement is that the user can clearly define who falls into the category of the pronoun. Sometimes it’s easy. If I say to a friend that “We will be over at ten o’clock tomorrow,” my friend and I both know who is included in the term “we.” Sometimes it’s not so clear or obvious, as when someone says “They don’t value life the way we do,” or, “They are evil doers.” This suggests a second assumed agreement. The speaker or writer using these constructs assumes and implies that speaker and listener (writer and reader) share (or should share) the same frame of reference and value system such that the meaning of the pronoun is clearly the same to each. This has been true throughout human history; the other is portrayed as evil, as less than human, as capable of the grossest atrocities, and as a threat that must be defeated. This rallying cry has launched troops from virtually every empire in history, and continues to this day; it is the province of no individual leader or nation.

A third assumed agreement is that those grouped within “we” are grouped accurately and absolutely by the speaker or writer according to a common, significant trait. There are no subtle gradations or exceptions allowed for when categorizing people as “we” or “they,” “us,” or “them.” Pronouns make it very difficult to be less than absolute and categorical, to spin less than a very wide web. As Mr. Bush put it, “You are either with us or against us.”

Politics of Iraq
The United States’s recent war with Iraq highlights this point in stark terms. “We” were told by “our” politicians and news media, that “we” were on a mission to combat evil. As was done in Vietnam, the world became split in two; those who were good, probably Christian, freedom loving, patriotic, and “with us” (the coalition of the willing), and those who were against us (evil doers, Muslims, those who have no regard for human life, non white). Those who had doubts and questions were quickly thrown into the “against us” category, be they members of Congress, members of “Old Europe,” or even members (now former members) of the president’s team, who questioned the policies, the rationale, the data that were used to sell the American people on the need to go to war. They were labeled as unpatriotic, as persons supporting terrorists, and clearly not a part of the America whose story was being told.

When war started, “our” correspondents quickly lined up behind the government. This was not a time to question, they said, it was a time to support a president leading his country at war. Reporters were embedded with the military (many read that as “in bed with”), and told the story of “our” troops and weaponry moving against the evil doers (the enemy), and it was crystal clear with whom the reporters aligned themselves. The story of the war was told to the American people through the eyes of the U.S. military, through the eyes of U.S. soldiers, through “our” eyes. We heard little from those who continued to question the rationale for war, or the accuracy of the accounts of what was taking place. We heard nothing about casualties inflicted on Iraqi citizens; it was not the policy of the military to release those numbers, and those who requested them had no place in the story. “We the people” saw little of the damage visited upon the innocent Iraqi citizens, who had been reduced in status to collateral damage, as other citizens had been reduced in other wars by other administrations.

The rest of the world was hearing about a very different war than were we here in the United States. Stories written by journalists from Syria, Egypt, Israel, or Palestine, from countries in “Old Europe,” or elsewhere in the world showed a very different picture of the war as it unfolded, and clearly understood what was happening in very different ways than did the reporters from the United States. They did not automatically see the events unfolding in Iraq from “our” point of view; they are not us. They told the story as they understood it, as they shaped it based on their own frames of reference. And the United States was simply one of the players in those stories being observed and reported on by third parties (the various reporters). The reporters from other nations did not necessarily or automatically align themselves with the point of view of the United States government, and did not tell the story as if the U.S. soldiers were automatically on the side of good in its crusade against evil. That difference in alignment absolutely changes the story being told, and thus the understanding of its audience about the events it portrays and explains. It’s not that the reporters from the rest of the world were more correct than were the reporters from the United States, but it’s crucial to understand that stories told only by reporters aligned with one side or the other, are incomplete, at best.
To the “Other,” We Are the “Other”

There may be no more important lesson that we help “our” students to learn than that to the other person “we” are the “other person.” When the world is divided into us and them, us, to them, are them. We must work to help them appreciate that there is always more than one way to see or to understand something, that “our” point of view is not the point of view. And that who the teller of a story defines as “we” absolutely determines the way a story is told and understood. As we found out with Columbus, if there is only one version or account of an event, we are receiving an incomplete account of the story, no matter how honorable the intentions of the teller, for they can’t tell what it means, or how it is perceived by the others in the story. This handicaps our attempts at fully understanding the truth of the event or situation.

So, what can we do? We can help our students to recognize the limits of relying on one source for their news or opinions, and to guide them to develop strategies for approaching the events of their world from multiple perspectives, through multiple sources. We can encourage them to identify the alignment of the writers they read and the speakers they listen to; with whom do they most sympathize and how might that affect the story they are telling? We can encourage our students to dig for proof, for evidence that supports claims made by politicians, by journalists, or by textbook authors; on what are these writers or speakers basing their opinions or statements? What might someone else, with another point of view say about the issue? We must, finally, help them to align themselves with all parties, to understand the world as if they were in sympathy with all participants so that they can come to as full an appreciation of the world as possible.

We can be of best use to our students if we help them to identify and appreciate the politics of pronouns, to learn to see through the underlying assumptions that they carry with them, and to always strive to understand the rest of the story.

Douglas Selwyn taught in the Seattle public schools for more than fifteen years. He is currently a professor of education at Antioch University. His previous publications include an NCSS bulletin, Arts & Humanities in the Social Studies (1995). He can be contacted at dselwyn@antiochsea.edu.