# (*I'm*) Happy to Help (*You*): The Impact of Personal Pronoun Use in Customer-Firm Interactions

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In responding to customer questions or complaints, should marketing agents linguistically "put the customer first"? Customer orientation theory, managerial literature, and surveys of managers, service representatives, and consumers suggest that agents in this setting should emphasize how "we" (the firm) serve "you" (the customer), while de-emphasizing "I" (the agent). We find evidence of this language pattern in use at over 40 firms. However, we theorize and demonstrate that these pronoun reference emphases are sub-optimal. Eight studies using lab experiments and field data reveal that relative to plural self-referencing "we" pronouns, singular self-referencing "I" pronouns enhance customers' perceptions that the agent feels (empathy) and acts (agency) on their behalf, increasing satisfaction, purchase intentions, and actual purchase behavior. Further, we show that customer-referencing "you" pronouns tend to have little impact on these outcomes, and can sometimes have negative consequences. These findings enhance our conceptual understanding of how language impacts social perception and provide valuable insights for marketers.

*Keywords*: language, social perception, customer service, personal selling

A central role of marketers is to manage the "speaking terms" of the relationship between firms and their customers (Duncan and Moriarty 1998; Vargo and Lusch 2004). This dialogue spans the range of marketing communications and customer-firm interactions in a variety of sales or service contexts (e.g., in person, telephone, email). A large literature has examined how adopting a customer orientation (Brady and Cronin 2001) can help marketers optimize marketing agent *actions* when interacting with customers (e.g., Chan and Sengupta 2010; Rust and Chung 2006; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996). But could the *words* marketing agents use in these interactions speak as loudly as their actions?

This paper examines how marketing sales and service agents' use of a particular category of words—personal pronouns—impacts customer attitudes and behaviors. Research in linguistic psychology has demonstrated that personal pronoun use is correlated with a speaker's mental state or traits (Chung and Pennebaker 2007; Pennebaker 2011), as well as with relationship closeness between speakers (Sela, Wheeler, and Sarial-Abi 2012). However, little attention has been paid to whether a speaker's use of different personal pronouns impacts their conversational partner's attitudes towards them. We predict that customer perceptions of an agent will vary based on the agent's use of pronouns that reference the speaker (the agent or firm) and the listener (the customer). Specifically, we examine how agent use of "I" (the agent) versus "we" (the firm) pronouns, as well as how agent use of "you" (the customer)[1] pronouns, affects customer perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward the firm.

In exploring these effects, this paper makes three contributions. First, we predict and reveal that managers and marketing agents believe that they should, and actually do, linguistically

[1] These three pronouns are used throughout this paper to refer to first-person singular, first-person plural, and second-person pronouns, respectively. See Appendix Table A1 for a list of all use cases of these three categories.

reference the two salient parties in a customer service interaction—the customer ("you") and the firm ("we")—while downplaying references to the agent ("I"). We show that this personal pronoun use pattern is inconsistent with natural English language use.

Second, and most centrally, we theorize and demonstrate that downplaying "I" pronouns in this context is suboptimal. We show that an agent's use of self-referencing "I" pronouns can enhance perceptions that the agent is emotionally and behaviorally involved in the interaction, and that this increases customer satisfaction with the agent. Further, we show that the benefits of "I" pronoun use spread to the entity the speaker represents: agent use of "I" pronouns increases customers' purchase intentions and behavior toward the firm. We also identify three theoretically-relevant variables that moderate the impact of "I" pronoun use in order to demonstrate that *how* these pronouns are used matters. These insights contribute to linguistic psychology by moving beyond its focus on "I" pronouns as a reflection of the speaker's internal state, to understanding the perceptual and behavioral impact of "I" pronouns on the listener.

Third, while the managerial literature, managers, marketing agents, and consumers endorse an agent emphasis on customer-referencing "you" pronouns, we predict and find that these pronouns fail to generate positive attitudes, intentions, or behaviors in the customer service contexts we examine. Indeed, we identify circumstances under which "you" pronouns can send negative signals to customers.

Taken together, this research offers new insight into the social consequences of "I" pronoun use and challenges conventional wisdom by showing how and why the linguistic manifestation of a customer orientation (i.e., "you" and "we") may not enhance customer or firm outcomes.

## *MORE THAN WORDS: A SIGNALING ROLE FOR PERSONAL PRONOUNS*

A growing body of research demonstrates the importance of language in marketing contexts. Subtle variations in language use impact consumers' self-control and motivation (Patrick and Hagtvedt 2012), word of mouth (Moore 2012; Schellekens, Verlegh, and Smidts 2010), and responses to advertising (Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2011; Sela et al. 2012).

Building on this work, we examine personal pronouns. Much research has revealed linkages between a speaker's use of "I," "we," and "you" pronouns and the speaker's own mental or social status (cf. reviews by Chung and Pennebaker 2007; Pennebaker 2011). For example, personal pronoun use has been linked to a speaker's self-enhancement motives (Barasch and Berger 2014; Packard and Wooten 2013), Machiavellianism (Ickes et al. 1990), group identity (Inigo-Mora 2004), and marital bliss (Seider et al. 2009), among other states and traits. While much is known about personal pronoun use as a reflection of the speaker's mindset, little work has considered the potential signaling effects of these pronouns on third parties (i.e., listeners). Further, while some research has examined when it is appropriate to use inclusive "we" pronouns with third-party audiences (Fitzsimons and Kay 2004; Sela et al. 2012), we are unaware of work that considers how a speaker's use of singular self-referencing ("I"), plural self-referencing (exclusive "we"), or other-referencing ("you") pronouns might affect social perceptions in dyadic interactions.

Our primary hypothesis is that "I" pronouns allow listeners to infer the speaker's personal involvement in a social interaction. We turn to Erving Goffman's (1981) conception of a conversation's "participation framework" to support this prediction. Goffman suggested that personal pronouns help establish the framework of roles and responsibilities among interaction participants. Consider the simple utterance, "I understand you." This phrase establishes a

participation framework that entails an actor ("I", the "understander," a grammatical subject) describing her own cognitions ("understanding") towards a recipient of action ("you", the person who is "understood," a grammatical object). Critically, however, within this participation framework, the speaker need not use pronouns to explicitly reference both parties to signal her cognitions, behavior, or intentions (i.e., "understanding"). She could simply say "You're understood", explicitly referencing the recipient of action ("you") while leaving herself ("I") implicit. Alternately, she could say "I understand", referencing herself ("I") while leaving the recipient of action ("you") implicit. If the speaker is working on behalf of a group or entity, she might opt to use a plural instead of a singular self-reference, saying "We understand." She could even just say "Understood", assuming the listener's implicit comprehension of who is understanding whom. We propose that these subtle variations in personal pronoun use can send important signals about the speaker's involvement with the listener and their needs.

## *CONVENTIONAL WISDOM IN FIRM AGENT PERSONAL PRONOUN USE*

In interacting with consumers, do marketing agents emphasize some personal pronouns over others? At the frontline of customer service interactions, the widely cited and practiced customer orientation theory (Saxe and Weitz 1982) demands a heightened demonstration of the "*firm's* concern for *customers*" and downplayed "concern for the *self*" (the agent; p. 344, emphasis added). This orientation towards the customer is expected to enhance both customer and firm outcomes (Homburg, Hoyer, and Fassnacht 2002; Ramani and Kumar 2008). If a customer orientation is manifested in an agent's personal pronoun use, then agents should emphasize firm-referencing "we" pronouns and customer-referencing "you" pronouns, while downplaying self-referencing "I" pronouns.

We find some preliminary support for this prediction in the managerial literature. Direct marketers are encouraged to use the word "you" when communicating with customers to generate a sense of engagement (Hanc 2016). A bestselling book on language use in customer service (Bacal 2011) recommends adding customer-referencing "you" and plural self-referencing "we" (the firm) pronouns to its "exemplar phrases," while minimizing references to the agent who is speaking ("I"). Customer service communication texts recommend the use of "you" and "we" pronouns to emphasize the customer and firm (Rudick and O'Flahavan 2002, p. 75), and encourage marketers to "use lots of pronouns"—in particular, "you" and "we" but not "I" pronouns (Kurtz 2015).

Taken together, our theorizing and the managerial literature lead us to predict that the parties involved in customer service interactions believe that marketing agents should linguistically emphasize "you" (the customer) and "we" (the firm), while de-emphasizing "I" (the agent). We also predict that actual agent responses to customers in the field will conform to this pattern.

## *IS CONVENTIONAL WISDOM WRONG?*

Despite its broad endorsement and predicted use in practice, we argue that this pronoun use pattern is suboptimal because of the dominant participation framework of customer service interactions. Our theoretical case builds on work in rhetorics and sociology emphasizing the importance of context in language. In an interaction where a consumer is receiving sales or service assistance, linguistic (Fahnestock 2011, p. 147) and normative expectations suggest a participation framework in which an actor ("we" the firm or "I" the agent) adopts the role of thinking, feeling, and/or acting to address "you" the customer and/or your needs—for example, "*We* have exactly what *you're* looking for". Grammatically speaking, this participation

framework implies that the firm or agent is an actor (grammatical subject) responding to the recipient of action (grammatical object), the customer.[2] Because a speaker can independently vary the extent to which they reference the actor ("we" or "I") and the recipient of action ("you"), we consider the potential benefits of self- and other-referencing pronoun use separately below.

*Should Firm Agents Refer to the Actor as "We" or "I"?*

Contrary to managerial conventions of emphasizing "we" over "I" pronouns, we theorize that firm agent use of "I" pronouns should be encouraged. Although "I" pronouns are commonly linked to a speaker's egotistical self-focus) or self-interest (Ickes, Reidhead and Pattterson 1986; Pennebaker 2011), the participation framework of a firm agent serving a customer renders such negative perceptions of "I" pronoun use unlikely. Assuming that firm agents follow conversational norms (Grice 1991), their self-references in this setting should be relevant to their role as a customer-oriented—rather than self-interested—actor. Thus, speaker self-references in our context may indicate that they are "centering" their personal attention on the listener (Gordon, Grosz, and Gilliom 1993). Rather than signaling self-focus, then, the use of "I" pronouns could signal the agent's emotional and behavioral involvement with the customer's needs. Accordingly, we hypothesize that "I" pronoun use will positively affect customer perceptions of two key dimensions of a firm agent's involvement: empathy and agency.

Empathy is commonly described as the ability of one individual to understand and share the concerns of another (Davis 1994). In linguistic psychology, "I" pronoun use has been linked

[2] We sent a bogus customer email to 40 major online retailers to test this assertion (see Study 2). Two independent judges coded firm agent responses to these emails. The firm agent referred to the self ("we" or "I") as the grammatical subject (actor) in 89% of cases and referred to the customer ("you") as the grammatical object (recipient of action) in 74% of cases. Overall, the firm agent referred to his or her self as the actor 220 times versus only 39 times for the customer, a ratio of nearly 6 to 1.

to the speaker's personal concern about a situation (Scherwitz, Berton, and Leventhal 1978) and to the speaker's attempts to understand their interaction partner (e.g., Ickes et al. 1990; Wales 1996). While prior research does not consider whether such internal states are signaled to the listener, we predict that "I" pronouns can generate social perceptions of a more personal, one-on-one actor ("I will take care of that right away"), which should increase listener perceptions of the speaker's empathy. This effect should obtain relative to no self-references (i.e., leaving the speaker implicit: "It will be taken care of right away") and to plural self-references (i.e., the exclusive "we": "We will take care of that right away")[3], which suggest a more impersonal, many-to-one conversation (Fahnestock 2011). In fact, firm agent use of exclusive "we" pronouns could relationally distance the agent from the customer (Fitzsimons and Kay 2004; Sela et al. 2012), negatively impacting perceived empathy by suggesting that the agent is more a part of the firm than partner to the customer. Since empathy is a key dimension of service quality (Bolton and Drew 1991; Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml 1988) and is a demonstrated driver of customer satisfaction and repurchase intentions (Singh and Sirdeshmukh 2000; Smith, Bolton and Wager 1999), if the firm agent's use of "I" pronouns does signal empathy, this should have positive consequences for customers' attitudes, intentions, and behaviors toward the firm.

Second, we predict that the use of "I" pronouns signals the agent's behavioral involvement in the customer's needs (agency). "I" pronoun use has been linked to a speaker's sense of responsibility and autonomy in action (Ahearn 2001; Chung and Pennebaker 2007; Kashima and Kashima 1998; Marinova, Ye, and Singh 2008). Thus, compared to no self-references, which imply an anonymous, disembodied actor, and to exclusive "we" self-references, which imply a nebulous, distant actor, "I" pronoun use should enhance perceptions of firm agent agency.

[3] Independent judges found that the exclusive "we" (describing the firm and its agents, excluding the customer) was used by firm agents 100% of the time in Study 2 field data and 98% of the time in a sample (N = 100) of the Study 4 field data. Our conceptual and empirical focus is therefore on the agent's use of the exclusive "we."

Supporting this argument, service employees who visually presented themselves as part of the larger firm entity (rather than as an individual) by wearing uniforms were seen as less personally responsible by the customer (Smith, Chandler, and Schwarz 2017). Further, because firm agents who are perceived to protect the customer and provide prompt action increase customer satisfaction and loyalty (Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml 1991; Singh and Sirdeshmukh 2000), if the firm agent's use of "I" pronouns does signal agency, this should have positive consequences for customer attitudes, intentions, and behaviors.

*Should Firm Agents Refer to "You" the Customer?*

While we expect "you" pronouns to be widely endorsed and used in practice, given the participation framework of customer service interactions, we argue that this emphasis on customer-referencing "you" pronouns may be a managerial misprediction.

Customers who engage a firm agent for sales or service assistance have, by definition, already established the interaction's participation framework (Goffman 1981), dictating the roles of the conversation by articulating their needs to a firm agent. The firm agent's role should be as an actor focused on addressing the customer's needs (Fahnestock 2011). While the agent can choose whether they refer to themselves as an actor who is part of the firm ("we") or as an individual ("I"), the object in this participation framework is fixed: it can only be "you," the customer. Because there is nobody but "you" (the customer) to receive the agent's attention in dyadic marketing interactions, we argue that "you" pronouns provide little signaling value. The agent's customer orientation is more clearly indicated through pronouns that signal *who* is oriented towards the customer ("we" the firm vs. "I" the agent), rather than by declaring the customer as the obvious recipient of help ("you").

Further corroborating our prediction, research in advertising has found that signaling

effects of "you" pronouns only occur under very specific circumstances. "You" pronouns have positive effects in ads only when customers are not involved in the firm's message (Burnkrant and Unnava 1995), a situation unlikely to occur when customers engage a firm agent for help. Further, for "you" pronouns to be effective in advertising, the underlying arguments must be strong and positive, there must be no competing stimuli to encourage message involvement, and "you" use must be moderate in volume (Burnkrant and Unnava 1995). That is, in general, research has found that "you" use in advertising has null or negative effects on product attitudes (Escalas 2007; Meyers-Levy and Peracchio 1996).

The lack of a clear signaling benefit for "you" pronoun use, in combination with established null effects regarding its use in advertising, suggests that managerial beliefs about the importance of "you" pronouns when engaging customers may be misguided. Instead, we predict that firm agent use of "you" pronouns will have little or no effect on customer attitudes, intentions, and behaviors in this setting. We show that it can even be detrimental in certain cases.

*Empirical Investigation*

Eight studies employing surveys, experiments, and field data test our predictions. Studies 1 and 2 examine whether managers and employees involved in customer sales and service believe that firm agents should—and actually do—linguistically emphasize "you" the customer and "we" firm, while de-emphasizing "I" the agent. Studies 3-5 test our hypothesis that, contrary to these beliefs and practices, firm agent use of "I" pronouns enhances customer satisfaction and purchase intentions relative to "we" pronouns and to no self-referencing pronouns. Studies 4 and 5 also test the underlying processes (i.e., agency and empathy) for this effect via mediation and moderation. Studies 6 and 7 examine managerial mispredictions of the importance of customer-referencing "you" pronouns. These studies find no positive effect for "you" pronoun use in the

given participation framework, despite concerted efforts to reject the null (e.g., large sample sizes, use of a moderator that should enhance the impact of "you"). Further, Study 7 shows a negative impact of "you" pronoun use when our participation framework is violated. Finally, Study 8 demonstrates the positive impact of "I" pronouns (but not "we" or "you" pronouns) on purchase behavior in over 1,200 real customer service interactions.

## *STUDY 1: BELIEFS ABOUT FIRM AGENT SELF- AND CUSTOMER-REFERENCING*

This study examines lay theories about personal pronoun use in service interactions. We predict that in such interactions, managers, firm agents, and consumers believe that agents should explicitly reference the "you" the customer and "we" the firm, but not "I" the firm agent.

### *Participants, Design and Procedure*

American participants in a paid online panel (N = 507) were asked to imagine themselves as a customer service agent for a fictional online retailer called Shopsite.com. They were presented with a customer email that asked about shipping (see the Appendix for full stimuli), and were asked which of two responses would be most appropriate to use in their reply. For half of the participants (N = 254), the only difference between the responses was how the firm agent referred to themselves: by using plural "we" or singular "I". For the remainder (N = 254), the only difference between the responses was how the firm agent referred to the customer: by using explicit "you" pronouns or by leaving references to the customer implicit (no "you" pronouns). This design enabled independent tests of our predictions that: (1) plural "we" pronouns would be preferred over singular "I" pronouns for self-referencing; and (2) "you" pronouns referring to the customer would be preferred over no explicit references to the customer (no "you"). After selecting a reply, participants indicated whether they currently or previously worked as agents or

managers in customer service.

*Results*

In the self-referencing conditions ("we" vs. "I"), a strong majority of participants preferred plural "we" pronoun use (85.8% vs. chance, $\chi^2(1, N = 254) = 920.11$, $p < .001$) to singular "I" pronoun use (14.2%). This preference held when analysis was limited to participants with customer service work experience (88.3% vs. chance, $\chi^2(1, N = 179) = 118.79$, $p < .001$) and to those who had managed service employees (91.8% vs. chance, $\chi^2(1, N = 67) = 55.54$, $p < .001$).

Participants in the customer-referencing conditions ("you" vs. no "you") were significantly more likely to choose the response with explicit "you" pronouns (88.5% vs. chance, $\chi^2(1, N = 253) = 1311.21$, $p < .001$) compared to the response with no "you" pronouns (11.5%). This preference held when analysis was limited to participants with customer sales/service experience (87.4% vs. chance, $\chi^2(1, N = 175) = 780.05$, $p < .001$) and to participants who had managed sales/service employees (83.8% vs. chance, $\chi^2(1, N = 68) = 37.12$, $p < .001$).

*Discussion*

Consistent with our predictions, Study 1 suggests that customer sales and service managers, firm agents, and consumers believe that firm agents responding to customers should: (1) refer to themselves using plural "we" rather than singular "I" pronouns, and (2) emphasize customer-referencing "you" pronouns. These results were replicated in a similar study using scaled rather than forced-choice response items (see Web Appendix Study A).

## *STUDY 2: VERIFYING FIRM AGENT PRONOUN USE IN PRACTICE*

Study 2 compares pronoun use in real customer service responses from 40 different retailers to pronoun use in natural English language. We predict that the pronoun use pattern in our 40-firm sample will differ from pronoun use patterns in natural language, such that our sample should show more use of "we" and "you" pronouns and less use of "I" pronouns.

### *Participants, Design and Procedure*

Two bogus customer emails were sent to each of 40 firms randomly selected from the top 100 online retailers of 2013 as identified by *Internet Retailer*. For generalizability, the emails were designed to capture the two main types of customer service interactions (inquiries, complaints; Bolton 1998). See the Appendix for stimuli.

We measured "we", "you", and "I" pronoun use in each real firm response in three ways. First, we coded whether each pronoun category was used (yes/no). Second, we used Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker et al. 2007) to assess the proportion of words falling into each personal pronoun category (Appendix Table A1). Third, we compared the pronoun use pattern in our 40-firm focal sample to three global natural language samples.

### *Results*

Firm agents used at least one "we" pronoun in 100% of their responses, and at least one "you" pronoun in 97.5% of their responses. In contrast, "I" pronouns were used in fewer than half (45%) of their responses ("we" vs. "I"; $\chi^2(1) = 22.81$, $p < .001$; "you" vs. "I" $\chi^2(1) = 19.91$, $p < .001$). When "I" pronouns were used, they appeared significantly less frequently as a proportion of words than "we" or "you" pronouns ($M_I = .94$ vs. $M_{we} = 4.83$; $t(39) = 6.68$, $p <$

.001; $M_I$ = .94 vs. $M_{you}$ = 6.04; $t(39) = 12.35$, $p < .001$).[4]

The pronoun use pattern observed across these 40 firms is inconsistent with three large samples of natural language use comprising (a) global English language speakers, (b) unstructured oral conversations, and (c) online written contexts (Samples A, B, C in Appendix Table A2). Our sample of 40 firms featured a significantly higher incidence of "we" and "you" pronouns, but a lower incidence of "I" pronouns compared to these natural language samples.[5]

*Discussion*

As predicted, relative to natural language use, firm agents' responses across 40 major online retailers showed heavy use of "you" and "we" pronouns and suppressed use of "I" pronouns. Taken together, Studies 1 and 2 suggest that managerial beliefs and practices result in an emphasis on "you" (the customer) and "we" (the firm), and a de-emphasis on "I" (the agent).

## *STUDY 3: THE IMPACT OF "I" VS. "WE" PRONOUNS USING REAL AGENT RESPONSES*

Study 3 initiates our examination of the signaling effects of personal pronoun use. In this study, we test whether firm agents' use of "I" versus "we" pronouns affects customer attitudes and intentions towards the firm. Using real firm email responses from six of the companies sampled in Study 1, we examine the impact of replacing "we" pronouns with "I" pronouns.

[4] There were no differences in pronoun use across inquiries versus complaints ($\chi^2$s > .4, $p$s > .3), attesting to the generalizability of pronoun use across the two main categories of customer-firm interactions.

[5] The same "unnatural" pattern of pronoun use sustained with a sample of oral (telephone) service interactions and responses to consumer requests for help from professional advice columnists (Appendix Table A2, Samples D and E). In contrast, consumer (i.e., non-professional) responses to requests for advice or information from other consumers entailed a pronoun use pattern closer to natural language (Appendix Table A2, Sample F), suggesting that this behavior may be specific to paid/professional help agents.

*Participants, Design and Procedure*

Canadian undergraduates (N = 211) completed the study for course credit. Participants were asked to imagine themselves as a customer in each of two unrelated customer service interactions—an inquiry and a complaint. Each participant saw one of three inquiry interactions and one of three complaint interactions (order was randomized). Participants evaluated each of these independently, resulting in approximately 35 participants per condition.

Our stimuli used the real firm agent responses from six of the firms in Study 1. Any information identifying the real firm was removed and replaced with the fictional firm name Shopsite.com. Firm agent response was manipulated by using either the original firm response from Study 1 or a modified version. In the modified condition, original "we" pronouns were replaced with "I" pronouns when this did not change the sentence's meaning.[6] Sample stimuli are presented in the Appendix. This resulted in a mixed design with interaction type (inquiry, complaint) as a within-subjects factor, and firm replicate (1, 2, or 3) and firm agent response (original, modified) as between-subjects factors across each of the two interaction types.

After reading the scenario, participants indicated their satisfaction with the agent and their purchase intentions toward the firm using items adapted from Maxham and Netemeyer (2002; Satisfaction: "I am satisfied with my overall experience with this person," "As a whole I am not satisfied with the response provided by this person", "How satisfied are you with the quality of service provided by this person?"; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; $\alpha = .77$; Purchase Intentions: "In the future, I would purchase from Shopsite.com," "If I was in the market for the kind of product they sell, I would use Shopsite.com," "In the future, I would not use Shopsite.com again"

[6] For example, "We thank you for understanding" was modified to "I thank you for understanding," but "We do not offer international shipping" was not modified to "I do not offer international shipping," as it is the firm that offers free shipping. This constraint occurred only 5 times out of 36 cases of "we" pronoun use across the six stimuli (13.9% of cases). We consider this issue further in the General Discussion.

(reverse item); 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .80$). When combined, the satisfaction and purchase intentions items also showed high reliability (six-item $\alpha = .83$). We report results for satisfaction and intentions separately in this study, but report them as a single measure in later studies for brevity. Results replicate under both procedures in all studies.

*Results*

A one-way ANOVA supported the predicted main effect across the six firm replicates. Compared to the original firm agent responses using "we" pronouns, the modified responses using "I" pronouns increased satisfaction ($M_{original} = 4.48$ vs $M_{modified} = 5.32$; $F(1, 405) = 39.95$, $p < .001$) and purchase intentions ($M_{original} = 4.40$ vs $M_{modified} = 5.07$; $F(1, 404) = 25.95$, $p < .001$).

The model also revealed marginal main effects across the six firm replicates on satisfaction ($F(5, 405) = 2.14$, $p < .10$) and purchase intentions ($F(5, 404) = 2.13$, $p < .10$). This marginal variation is of little empirical interest, as there was no interaction of replicate with firm agent response condition for either dependent measure ($F$s < 1). We also found no effects for interaction type (i.e., inquiry or complaint; $Fs < 1.3$, $p$s > .25), so we discuss it no further. Means and statistical tests for each firm independently are presented in Appendix Table A4.

*Discussion*

Study 3 demonstrates that simply changing firm agent self-references from "we" to "I" pronouns can improve customer satisfaction and purchase intentions. These results were obtained using real firm agent's language from six firms across different product categories, and hold despite other variation in linguistic content in these responses.

*Alternative.* If "I" pronoun use by firm agents is unexpected or atypical, our results might be explained by expectancy violations (Kronrod et al. 2011). To assess this, we conducted a post-

test using the same participant pool as Study 3. The modified "I" responses were not perceived to be less typical, standard, or expected than the original responses ($\alpha$ = .87; Kronrod et al. 2011; see Appendix Table A5), ruling against this alternative.

## *STUDY 4: THE IMPACT OF "I", "WE", AND NO PRONOUNS USING CONTROLLED STIMULI*

While Study 3 demonstrated that firm agent use of "I" pronouns outperforms "we" pronouns in field settings, without a control condition, it is not clear if this result is due to a positive effect of "I" or a negative effect of "we". Using experimenter-controlled stimuli, Study 4 tests the impact of "I" pronouns (e.g. "*I'm* happy to help!") relative to both "we" pronouns (e.g., "*We're* happy to help!") and an implicit, no-pronouns control condition (e.g., "Happy to help!"). Study 4 also seeks initial evidence for our hypothesis that perceptions of firm agent empathy and agency mediate the "I" pronoun effect.

### *Participants, Design and Procedure*

American participants (N = 159) from an online panel completed the study for a small cash payment. Participants were asked to imagine that they had contacted a retailer to inquire about a product they had ordered but had not yet received. Participants saw a firm agent response that either used "I" pronouns, "we" pronouns, or left the speaker implicit (no-pronouns control; see Web Appendix for stimuli).

Participants then rated the firm agent's empathy toward themselves (understanding, empathetic, concerned; $\alpha$ = .90) and agency on their behalf (acts on my behalf, tries hard to help, takes initiative for me; $\alpha$ = .95). All items used seven-point scales (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Presentation order was randomized across the six items. Confirmatory factor analysis supported

empathy and agency as separate factors ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 134.95$, $p < .001$).

*Results*

A one-way ANOVA revealed significant variation in customer satisfaction and purchase intentions by condition ($F(2, 156) = 13.11$, $p < .001$). Firm agent use of "I" pronouns increased customer satisfaction and purchase intentions ($M = 5.19$) relative to the "we" pronoun condition ($M = 4.01$, $F(1, 156) = 24.81$, $p < .001$) and to the no-pronouns control condition ($M = 4.38$, $F(1, 156) = 12.16$, $p < .001$). No difference was found between the "we" pronoun condition and the no-pronouns control condition ($F(1, 156) = 2.38$, $p > .1$).

*Process.* We assessed the firm agent empathy and agency measures as parallel mediators of the impact of the "I" pronoun condition (vs. the other two conditions) on satisfaction and purchase intentions (PROCESS macro, model 4; Preacher and Hayes 2008).

The "I" pronoun condition increased perceptions of firm agent empathy and agency relative to both the "we" ($B_{empathy} = .76$, $t = 3.04$, $p < .01$; ($B_{agency} = .68$ $t = 2.24$, $p = .03$) and the no-pronouns control conditions ($B_{empathy} = .59$, $t = 2.35$, $p = .02$; ($B_{agency} = .95$ $t = 3.25$, $p < .01$). Further, both mediators predicted increased satisfaction and purchase intentions relative to the "we" ($B_{empathy} = .26$, $t = 2.28$, $p = .02$; $B_{agency} = .36$, $t = 3.78$, $p < .001$) and the no-pronouns control conditions ($B_{empathy} = .38$, $t = 4.06$, $p < .001$; $B_{agency} = .24$, $t = 2.97$, $p < .01$). Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples confirmed that these results were mediated by heightened perceptions of agent empathy and agency in the "I" condition relative to the "we" condition (Empathy CI: .04– .49, $p < .05$; Agency CI: .04– .55, $p < .05$) and relative to the no-pronouns control condition (Empathy CI: .06– .50, $p < .05$; Agency CI: .06– .51, $p < .05$).

*Discussion*

The results of Study 4 suggest that a positive effect of "I" pronouns (rather than a negative effect of "we" pronouns) affects customer satisfaction and purchase intentions. Differential perceptions of firm agent agency and empathy underlie the positive effects of "I" pronoun use.

*Alternatives*. As in Study 3, we considered whether language expectations or typicality affected the results (three item $\alpha = .90$). We found no variation in typicality across the three conditions in the present study ($F < 1$). We also tested whether the agent's use of "I" pronouns was seen as more informal, using two seven-point scales (casual, familiar; $r = .37$, $p < .01$). There was no significant variation in these perceptions by condition ($F < 1$) and the mediation results above held when these perceptions were included in the model as covariates. Thus, neither the typicality nor formality of the agent's language can explain these findings.

## *STUDY 5: MANIPULATING THE MEDIATOR OF THE "I" VS. "WE" EFFECT*

Study 5 demonstrates a boundary condition for the positive effect of "I" pronoun use by manipulating our two mediating variables. Specifically, we use a cue other than pronoun use to signal agency and empathy. Explicit cues of a persuasion agent's attributes—for example, prior behavioral or social evidence of their trustworthiness—have a strong impact on customer's attitudes and intentions toward the agent and firm (Kirmani and Zhu 2007; Packard, Gershoff, and Wooten 2016). Since pronouns are a relatively subtle signal of a firm agent's empathy and agency, if an alternate cue of these attributes is available, this should attenuate the benefits of "I" pronoun use. Experimentally manipulating such an alternate cue also provides stronger, more direct evidence for our causal chain (Spencer, Zanna, and Fong 2005) by demonstrating "mediation-via-moderation" (Bullock, Green, and Ha 2010).

Study 5 also further tests the robustness of the "I" effect by using a different context: the

interaction in this study is live (in-store) rather than non-contemporaneous (email), involves sales rather than service, and is initiated by the firm agent (a store employee) rather than the consumer.

*Participants, Design and Procedure*

Canadian undergraduate students (N = 159) completed the study for partial course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (pronoun: I, we) x 2 (empathy and agency cue: no, yes) between-subjects design. They imagined shopping at a favorite store for some new jeans, when they were approached by a salesperson they had used before. In the empathy and agency cue condition, participants also read, "She always seems to understand and have good insights on your personal likes and dislikes, and goes out of her way to assist you."[7] Participants imagined telling the sales agent they were interested in some new jeans, and then received the agent's reply. The pronoun manipulation altered whether the salesperson used "I" or "we" pronouns in their response (e.g., "There's a lot of great stuff I [we] can show you right now. My [Our- favorite from this season's new line should look great on you."; see Web Appendix for full stimuli). We then measured satisfaction, purchase intentions, and language typicality and formality in the same manner as prior studies.

*Results*

A one-way ANOVA on the satisfaction and intentions dependent measure ($\alpha = .90$) revealed the predicted interaction of cue and pronoun use ($F(1, 155) = 4.33$, $p < .05$), with no main effect for cue ($F(1, 155) = 2.36$, $p = .13$) or pronoun use ($F(1, 155) = 1.48$, $p = .23$).

[7] A pre-test using a different sample from the same participant pool (N = 45) confirmed that this cue made the salesperson seem more empathetic and agentic than in the no cue condition (Empathy: $M_{cue} = 5.90$ vs. $M_{no\ cue} = 5.24$, $F(1, 43) = 4.69$, $p < .05$; Agency: $M_{cue} = 5.81$ vs. $M_{no\ cue} = 5.00$, $F(1, 43) = 4.75$, $p < .05$).

Follow-up contrasts confirmed that the positive effect of "I" versus "we" pronoun use replicated in the no cue condition, with "I" pronouns ($M = 6.04$) generating higher satisfaction and intentions than "we" pronouns ($M = 5.57$; $F(1, 155) = 5.48$, $p = .02$). However, when participants had already received an alternate cue that the salesperson was empathetic and agentic, the positive impact of "I" (vs. "we") pronouns was attenuated ($M_I = 5.96$ vs. $M_{we} = 6.09$; $F < 1$).[8]

*Discussion*

Study 5 replicated the positive effects of firm agents' use of "I" pronouns on customer satisfaction and intentions towards the firm, and manipulated the mediators to bolster our contention that perceptions of agent empathy and agency drive this effect. This study also revealed a boundary condition: if customers already have a reason to believe the firm agent is empathetic and agentic, pronoun use may have little effect on customer perceptions of the agent.

*Alternatives*. While "I" pronoun use was not seen as more or less typical in earlier studies, in Study 5, the language in the "I" pronoun condition was seen as less typical ($M = 4.84$) than the language in the "we" pronoun condition ($M = 5.52$; $\alpha = .91$, $F(1, 155) = 12.04$, $p < .01$). When typicality was included as a covariate in the omnibus ANOVA, however, the key interaction of cue and pronoun use on satisfaction and intentions sustained ($F(1, 154) = 4.31$, $p < .05$), and the typicality covariate was not significant ($F < 1$). We also considered the possibility that "I" pronoun use is perceived as more informal than "we" pronoun use. However, perceived formality (casual, familiar; $r = .67$) did not differ by pronoun condition ($F < 1$).

We have presented evidence in three studies that—contrary to conventional wisdom—"I" (the agent) pronouns outperform "we" (the firm) pronouns. We now examine the impact of

[8] We also ran conditions in which we independently manipulated empathy or agency. Results sustain in both conditions, suggesting that each of these social perceptions is a sufficient driver of the effect.

"you" (the customer) pronouns on customer and firm outcomes.

## *STUDY 6: THE IMPACT OF "YOU" PRONOUN USE VERSUS NO CUSTOMER-REFERENCING*

Study 6 provides the first of three tests that seek to establish our hypothesized null effect for a firm agent's use of "you" pronouns. Given our expectation that managerial beliefs about the benefits of "you" pronoun use are misplaced in this interaction setting, and coupled with longstanding concerns about null hypotheses (Greenwald 1975), we bolster the likelihood of rejecting the null in three ways.

First, we use a participant population and stimuli from a prior study (Study 4) that has already shown significant effects from variation in pronoun use. Second, we use a large sample size to maximize power to detect potential effects. Third, we incorporate a linguistic moderator—verb voice—that should bolster any positive effect of "you" pronoun use by firm agents. Specifically, when attending to "you" the customer, the agent could either say, for example, "I will assist *you* today" (active voice) or "*You* will be assisted by me today" (passive voice). Linguists recommend passive voice when a speaker wishes to call attention to their focus on the recipient of action rather than the actor (i.e., Johnson-Laird 1968) or to emphasize the person or thing being acted upon (Penelope 1990). As such, passive voice should increase the possibility that "you" pronouns signal the firm agent's focus on the customer. Examining this moderator also enhances the generalizability of our results, given that there is likely a great deal of variation in *how* firm agents refer to customers in service encounters.

### *Participants, Design and Procedure*

We recruited a large sample (N = 451) [9] from the same paid online panel used in Study 4. The scenario and stimuli for the no-pronouns control condition was taken from Study 4. We then modified the control stimuli to create two additional conditions where the agent referenced "you" the customer, consistent with our participation framework, using either active or passive voice (see Web Appendix for stimuli). As in prior studies, participants reported their satisfaction and purchase intentions towards the firm ($\alpha$ = .92), and their perceptions of the agent's empathy ($\alpha$ = .93) and agency ($\alpha$ = .95).

*Results*

A one-way ANOVA found no significant differences in customer satisfaction and intentions across the control, active "you", and passive "you" conditions ($M_{\text{control}}$ = 4.19, $M_{\text{passive you}}$ = 4.13, $M_{\text{active you}}$ = 4.13; $F < 1$). Further, the use of "you" pronouns had no effect on perceptions of agent empathy ($F(2, 448) = 1.21$, $p = .3$) or agency ($F < 1$).

*Discussion*

Contrary to manager and consumer beliefs, "you" pronouns did not have an observable effect on customer satisfaction, purchase intentions, or perceptions of the firm agent's empathy or agency. This result obtained even though we (a) used stimuli and a sample that had shown significant effects of pronoun use in a prior study, (b) used large sample sizes, and (c) increased the likelihood of rejecting the null hypothesis by using a conceptually-supported moderator.

[9] G*Power calculations (Faul et al. 2007) suggest that this sample size results in power > .99 assuming effect sizes similar to those observed in Studies 3-5, and power > .8 for any effect sizes above .12.

## *STUDY 7: THE IMPACT OF "YOU" PRONOUN USE OUTSIDE THE DOMINANT PARTICIPATION FRAMEWORK*

Study 7 makes a second attempt to reject our null hypothesis for the effects of "you" pronoun use by using different stimuli and by examining a second moderator. As we have argued and demonstrated (footnote 2), the dominant participation framework in our setting entails a firm agent referring to themselves as the actor (grammatical subject) and to the customer as the recipient of action (object). However, firm agents can occasionally describe "you" the customer as an actor (e.g., "*You* can use a credit card.").

A firm agent that linguistically describes the customer as the actor (vs. recipient of action) may signal that the agent herself is not working or feeling on the customer's behalf (Fahnestock 2011). In doing so, the agent has violated the participation framework by breaking the role expectations of a customer service interaction (Grice 1991; Goffman 1981). Further, prior research suggests that "you" pronouns are emphasized by speakers who seek to attribute blame or responsibility to others (Chung and Pennebaker 2007; Simmons, Gordon and Chambless 2005), and speculates that such language might signal an oppositional approach (Ringberg, Odekerken-Schroder, and Christensen 2007). We therefore predict that "you" pronouns that imply that the customer (rather than the firm agent) should or must take action will have a negative impact on customer satisfaction, purchase intentions, and agent perceptions.

### *Participants, Design and Procedure*

Participants from an online paid panel imagined that they emailed a company about a product return. Participants saw one of three versions of the firm agent's response to their inquiry, which referred to "you" the customer as either (a) the grammatical subject (the actor;

e.g., "you can look into the account"), (b) the grammatical object (the recipient of action; e.g., "your account can be looked into"), or (c) used no "you" pronouns (control; e.g., "the account can be looked into"; see Web Appendix for stimuli). As in Study 6, we used a large sample (N = 451) to increase the likelihood of rejecting our null prediction for effects of "you" use versus the no-pronoun control.

Participants then indicated their satisfaction with the agent and purchase intentions towards the firm ($\alpha$ = .90), agent empathy ($\alpha$ = .93) and agency ($\alpha$ = .95) perceptions, and language typicality ($\alpha$ = .89) and formality ($r$ = .32), as in prior studies.

Finally, to confirm that using "you" pronouns as the subject rather than the object makes the customer feel like they are the actor rather than the reception of action, we measured participant's' perceptions of the amount of action or effort undertaken in the scenario by the agent (very little effort : very much effort; not doing much : doing a lot; not working for me : working for me; seven-point scales; $\alpha$ = .96). Participants indeed perceived that the agent was less responsible for action when the customer was referred to as the subject ($M$ = 3.05) than as the object ($M$ = 3.98; $F(1, 448) = 23.62$, $p < .001$).

*Results*

A one-way ANOVA revealed significant variation in satisfaction and intentions across conditions ($F(2, 448) = 4.37$, $p = .01$). Replicating Study 6, there was no effect of "you" pronouns referencing the customer as the object (i.e., consistent with our participation framework) relative to not using "you" pronouns ($M_{object}$ = 4.88 vs. $M_{control}$ = 4.70; $F(1, 448) = 1.34$, $p = .25$). However, there was a negative effect of "you" pronouns referencing the customer as the subject (i.e., inconsistent with our participation framework) relative to the "you" object

condition ($M_{subject}$ = 4.41 vs. $M_{object}$ = 4.88; $F(1, 448) = 8.60$, $p < .01$) and the no-pronouns control ($M_{subject}$ = 4.41 vs. $M_{control}$ = 4.70; $F(1, 448) = 3.15$, $p = .08$).

Similarly, relative to the no-pronouns control condition, firm agent use of "you" object pronouns had no observable effect on perceptions of the agent (empathy $M_{object}$ = 4.31 vs. $M_{control}$ = 4.30, $F < 1$; agency $M_{object}$ = 4.42 vs. $M_{control}$ = 4.27, $F < 1$). However, relative to the no-pronouns control condition, firm agent use of "you" subject pronouns negatively impacted perceptions (empathy $M_{subject}$ = 3.77 vs. $M_{control}$ = 4.30 ($F(1, 448) = 10.82$, $p < .001$; agency $M_{subject}$ = 3.67 vs. $M_{control}$ = 4.27, $F(1, 488) = 13.94$, $p < .001$). These perceptions mediated the negative effect of "you" subject pronoun use on attitudes and intentions (Empathy indirect effect = -.10, CI: -.23 to - .02, $p < .05$; Agency indirect effect = -.29, CI: -.51 to -.11, $p < .05$).

*Discussion*

The results of Study 7 show that *how* firm agents reference "you" the customer matters, and demonstrates that our paradigm can produce significant—albeit negative—effects for firm agent use of "you" pronouns. While "you" pronoun use consistent with our participation framework (i.e., a customer orientation) again offered no benefit, this study suggests that agents should *avoid* referring to the customer as an actor (grammatical subject) where possible.

*Alternatives.* As in prior studies, language typicality did not vary across the three conditions ($F < 1$), and so is unlikely to explain the results. Participants did find the language in the "you" subject condition more informal ($M$ = 5.28) than the language in the "you" object condition ($M$ = 5.00; $F(1, 448) = 4.53$, $p < .05$) and the no-pronouns control condition ($M$ = 4.97; $F(1, 448) = 5.45$, $p < .05$); however, the pattern of results reported above held when formality was included in the model as a covariate.

## *STUDY 8: THE IMPACT OF PERSONAL PRONOUN USE ON PURCHASES AFTER REAL CUSTOMER SERVICE INTERACTIONS*

Our final study examines the impact of a firm agent's use of self- ("I" or "we") and customer-referencing ("you") pronouns on customer behavior in practice, using over 1,200 real customer service interactions. In addition to assessing external validity, the use of field data allows us to account for linguistic heterogeneity at the individual (e.g., language complexity) and dyadic levels (e.g., interaction topic), a limitation not easily addressed with researcher-produced stimuli in the lab.

For example, while our lab studies fixed the customer's initial inquiry through experimental design, since personal pronouns establish the participation framework in an interaction, the pronouns used by the customer (e.g., "*I'd* like the bill please?" vs. "Can *you* bring the bill please?") are likely to interact with the pronouns used by the agent in reply (Goffman 1981; Gordon et al. 1993). Study 8 controls for this possibility by accounting for the customer's pronoun use (e.g., "I" pronouns) in their initial email inquiry to the firm as a moderator that should affect the focus of the present research—the firm agent's use of the same personal pronoun category (e.g., "I" pronouns) in his or her response. As in prior studies, we examine the effects of each pronoun category independently, resulting in three separate analysis models (one for each of "I," "we," and "you" pronouns).

### *Data and Method*

A large multi-category and multi-national online retailer of entertainment and information products provided a random (*n*th select) sample of customer service interactions (N = 2,098) in

2004.[10] The interactions were initiated by customers using a "contact us" link that appeared throughout the firm's website. The firm linked 1,277 (60.9%) of these interactions to a purchase account, and provided the date and dollar amount of purchases before and after the interactions.

The textual content of the interactions was "cleaned" to remove generic headers and footers. As is common in marketing contact centers, the firm's managers provided its agents with a selection of "boilerplate" content they could adapt in response to the most common inquiries (e.g., order status). Boilerplate content was not removed as it was usually heavily integrated into the agent's personalized response. While any boilerplate language the agent elected to use would not have been written by that agent, it was written by another agent of the same firm (i.e., a more senior marketing or customer service agent). A robustness analysis presented in the Web Appendix suggests that minor deviations from boilerplate are unlikely to account for the results.

We used LIWC to measure the customer and the firm agent's pronoun use. For analysis, we considered only the initial customer email and the firm agent's email response to the customer. This replicates the interactions examined in prior studies and describes the modal interaction length (77% of cases). Further, the third email was most often a simple "thank you" from the customer (64% of remaining interactions).

For a given interaction, we regressed the customer's total purchases in dollars for 90 days after the interaction on (a) the customer's use of each of the three personal pronoun categories ("I," "we," or "you" models), (b) the firm agent's use of the same pronouns, (c) the interactive effect of the customer's pronoun use on the firm agent's pronoun use, and (d) the customer's purchase volume for the 90 days prior to the interaction, to control for heterogeneity in baseline purchase volume. The pronoun use statistics were mean-centered.

[10] The age of the data is driven by the firm's decision to outsource its customer contact center in 2005. The firm was not able to obtain complete customer-firm interaction transcripts from the third-party provider.

In the Web Appendix, we present summary statistics, an assessment of multicollearity, and the results of a model that incorporates eight covariates controlling for interaction-level heterogeneity (e.g., topic, difficulty, complexity, severity) and customer demographics. The results below wholly replicate after accounting for these factors.

*Results*

We report the results for each pronoun category after accounting for the customer's purchases in the 90 days prior to the interaction, which was highly significant in all three models (Bs = .32 - .34, *t*s > 15.30, *p*s < .0001).

*"I" Model.* We found the predicted positive effect for firm agent use of "I" pronouns (B = 1245.76, $t = 4.86$, $p < .0001$) on customer purchases after accounting for the customer's use of the same pronoun category in their initial email (B = 615.54, $t = 6.06$, $p < .0001$) and the expected interaction between customer and agent use of "I" pronouns (B = 210.00, $t = 4.63$, $p < .0001$).

*"We" Model.* We observed a null effect for firm agent use of "we" pronouns (B = -201.75, $t = -1.34$, $p = .18$) on customer purchases, after controlling for non-significant effects of customer use of "we" pronouns (B = -377.83, $t = 1.37$, $p = .17$) and a null interactive effect of customer and firm "we" pronoun use (B = 87.41, $t = .87$, $p = .39$).

*"You" Model.* We found a null effect of the firm agent's use of "you" pronouns (B = 108.54, $t = 0.98$, $p = .33$), but a significant negative effect for the customer's use of "you" pronouns (B = -405.99, $t = -3.42$, $p < .001$) and a significant negative interaction of customer and firm agent use of "you" pronouns (B = -84.56, $t = -2.47$, $p = .01$) on customer purchases.

*Discussion*

These results replicate our laboratory findings. Increased firm agent use of self-referencing "I" pronouns had a positive effect on the customer's purchases with the firm after the focal interaction. In contrast to manager and consumer beliefs and behaviors, we again found null or negative effects for firm agent use of customer-referencing "you" pronouns.

How important is the firm agent's use of "I" pronouns to the firm? While estimating conditional values for purchase volume outcomes is untenable in the multiple regression models above, a simple regression of firm agent "I" pronoun use on purchase volumes after accounting for pre-interaction purchases[11] revealed that a 10% increase in "I" pronoun use by firm agents corresponds to a 0.8% increase in customer purchase volume. While we do not argue that firm agents can always refer to themselves using "I" rather than "we" pronouns, analysis of the field data in Studies 2 and 8 by independent judges suggests this shift could be achieved in over 80% of "we" pronoun use cases (see footnote 6 and general discussion).

A limitation of this study is that, as in most field data studies, we cannot assert causality as customers are not randomly assigned to treatment. However, several factors support the causal relationship demonstrated in the lab experiments. First, the temporal sequence of the independent variable (pronoun use during the interaction) and dependent variable (post-interaction purchases) rules out reverse causality. Second, our use of panel data before and after the service interaction helps control for selection issues related to purchase behavior (Manchanda, Packard, and Pattabhiramaiah 2013). Third, analysis presented in the Web Appendix shows the effect is robust to numerous covariates, reducing the likelihood that factors such as interaction difficulty or deviations from boilerplate language explain the effect. However, it remains possible that there are other unobservable drivers of the effect (e.g., behavioral correlates).

[11] This simplified model also finds a significant effect for agent use of "I" pronouns (B = 237.74, $t = 3.69$, $p < .001$).

## *GENERAL DISCUSSION*

Prevailing managerial theory holds that in customer service interactions, frontline sales and service agents should emphasize how "we" (the firm) focus on "you" (the customer). This intuition was confirmed in two surveys of managers and consumers (Study 1 and Web Appendix Study A), and its practice was verified in the field (Studies 2 and 8). Despite these beliefs and behaviors, we found null or negative effects for firm agent use of "you" and "we" pronouns in the laboratory and the field (Studies 4, 6, 7 and 8). In contrast, four studies (Studies 3, 4, 5, and 8) supported our theory-driven prediction that firm agents' use of "I" pronouns would have a positive impact on customer attitudes, intentions, and purchase behavior.[12] These results were robust: they persisted despite other (non-pronoun) variation in firm agent language, and held across interaction types (e.g., complaints, inquiries), interaction modes (customer service email vs. live salesperson interactions), and in lab and field settings, attesting to their generalizability.

In addition to these contributions to the marketing literature, our findings extend linguistic psychology research by revealing the signaling potential of a speaker's pronoun use (Studies 4-7). We demonstrate that "I" pronouns not only describe the speaker's internal state, but can also communicate information about the speaker to his or her audience. In addition, we theorize and show the psychological processes driving the "I" effect, which flow from enhanced perceptions that the speaker feels (empathy) and acts (agency) on the listener's behalf (Studies 4 and 5).

Beyond its theoretical contributions, the present research sheds light on how marketers can improve their literal "speaking terms" with customers. In contrast to prevailing managerial philosophies, firms should train customer-facing employees to place more emphasis on the

[12]We also report the results of an additional study that replicates the significant "I" effect and the null "you" effect within a single experimental design in the Web Appendix (Study B).

singular self. This might arise naturally if, for example, agents are encouraged to think of themselves as being personally involved in the customer's needs ("I"), rather than acting as an impersonal agent of the firm ("we"). Language use recommendations for firms, along with examples, are summarized in Appendix Table A6.

*Limitations and Future Research*

The present research primarily focused on customer service interactions via email or other text-based communication; such channels are offered by over 90% of U.S. firms (Dutta 2012), and they are the preferred means of engaging with firms for nearly 50% of U.S. consumers (Charlton 2011). However, we expect our results to sustain across different modes of communication. Communication goal (e.g., addressing customer inquiries or complaints) is generally a stronger predictor of linguistic content than communication format (e.g., email or phone; Halliday 1985). Consistent with this idea, a sample of telephone-based customer service interactions (N = 95) from the company that provided the data for Study 8 found a pronoun use pattern similar to that observed in email interactions (Appendix Table A2, Sample D). Thus, while there may be baseline differences in pronoun use across channels, increased use of "I" pronouns should have similar positive effects. Beyond the sales and service settings we examined, it is also plausible that increased "I" pronoun use by other marketing agents of the firm, such as celebrity endorsers or spokespeople, may enhance persuasion or other marketing-relevant communication goals. Future research could test these possibilities directly.

This research opens the door to a variety of further examinations of language use—and personal pronoun use specifically—in customer service and other marketing interactions. Researchers could identify additional moderator and boundary conditions for the effects of self-referencing ("I" and "we") pronoun use that we observe. We do not argue that firm agents should

use more "I" pronouns in all participation frameworks and contexts. For example, work on pronouns and relationships (Fitzsimons and Kay 2004; Sela et al. 2012) suggests that increased firm agent "we" pronoun use may be beneficial if it refers to the agent and the customer (inclusive "we": agent + customer), rather than to the agent and the firm (exclusive "we": agent + firm). Alternately, "I" pronoun use could be examined in consumer-to-consumer interactions, such as online forums where consumers seek information from one another (Hamilton, Schlosser, and Chen in press). Researchers may also fruitfully examine how the presence versus absence (i.e., where the interaction parties are implicit) of pronouns impacts processing effort. While hearing "I am glad to help you" requires processing more words, hearing "Glad to help" may increase processing demands on the listener as she must determine the subject and object.

Also, as noted, "we" pronouns cannot and should not always be replaced by singular self-references to "I" the firm agent. This boundary is likely to occur in cases where (a) the firm agent asserts a policy arising from a group/entity (i.e., the firm), or (b) when action taken by a group/entity rather than an individual. Independent judges examined a sample (N = 200) from the Study 8 field data and found that this boundary occurred in approximately one in five (17.7%) of the "we" pronoun use occasions.[13] Regardless, given firm agent's infrequent use of "I" (relative to natural language) and the ease of its substitution into the interaction language we observed, at a minimum, firms should encourage agents to refer to the singular self with a greater frequency than they do at present.

Further, given the limitations of null hypothesis tests (Greenwald 1975) and variation in the ways "you" pronouns may be used, we do not claim that customer-referencing can never positively impact consumer attitudes and intentions. To provide an approximation of the

[13] Judge analysis of the field data from from Study 2 indicated a similarly low rate of 13.9% of cases where "we" could not be substituted for "I".

expected frequency of null effects, we used the Bayes factor approach (Kass and Raftery 1995) to assess the weight of evidence in *favor* of the null effect for firm agent use of "you" pronouns in our participation framework. Bayesian meta-analysis of the results of Studies 6, 7 and 8[14] suggest that the probability of a null effect for "you" use is at least 99.7 times more likely than the alternative that there is an effect of "you" pronoun use across these studies, indicating strong evidence for the null. We hope future research seeks to identify instances where "you" use may achieve the positive outcomes predicted by managers, firm agents, and consumers.

Having examined the consequences of firm agent use of personal pronouns, new research might examine why firm agents avoid referring to the singular self ("I") in the first place. Although the results of our studies and managerial publications (e.g., Bacal 2012; Rudick and O'Flahavan 2002) suggest that this may be strategic,[15] we did not empirically demonstrate the source of such a strategy. The firm agent's tendency to refer to "we" the firm rather than "I" may be driven by the strength of the agent's own organizational identification (Smidts, Pruyn, and Riel 2001), a desire to evince the firm's customer orientation (Saxe and Weitz 1982), or a sense of commitment to the employer (Fitzsimons and Kay 2004).

In addition, the present research suggests that customer personal pronoun use may be used as an indicator of their mindset. Specifically, the finding that customer "you" pronoun use negatively moderates the effect of firm agent "you" pronoun use (Study 8) might indicate a negative "blame game" between the customer and agent (e.g., "*Your* website doesn't work" vs. "*You* need to use the right browser"). More broadly, examining customer pronoun use as an attitudinal or behavioral signal—or as a consequence of marketing mix elements—may offer a prime avenue for future research. While firms are increasingly interested in assessing consumer

[14] We excluded Study 7's "you" as grammatical subject condition from this analysis as it is inconsistent with the dominant participation framework we examine.
[15] See also Study A2 in the Web Appendix.

sentiment through the emotional tone of online chatter (Henschen 2012), measures of customer pronoun use were stronger predictors of purchase outcomes in the Study 8 data than LIWC's positive and negative emotion measures,[16] which are similar to measures used in sentiment analysis.

Finally, while our effects were robust to natural variation in the language that accompanied the personal pronoun categories we consider, explaining language (Moore 2012; 2015), temporal focus (Chen and Lurie 2013), or specific emotion word use (e.g., anger, anxiety; Yin, Bond, and Zhang 2014), could play an important role in moderating these effects in customer service interactions or other marketing communications.

[16] See Study 8 Robustness and Supplementary Analyses in the Web Appendix.

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# APPENDIX

## STIMULI FOR STUDIES 1 - 3

### STUDY 1

Imagine you are a customer service employee for an online retailer called Shopsite.com. Below is an email from a customer.

> *Hello, I am wondering about Shopsite.com's international shipping policies. Can I buy something on my credit card and have it shipped to a person in a different country as a gift? How would returns work in that case?*

Which of the following responses would be most appropriate to write to the customer in reply?

[Condition 1 ("you" vs. "no you") response options]

[ ] Happy to help answer this question. Unfortunately, international shipping and returns aren't offered at this time. Thanks for understanding.

[ ] Happy to help answer your question. Unfortunately, international shipping and returns aren't offered at this time. Thank you for understanding.

[Condition 2 ("I" vs. "we") response options]

[ ] I am happy to help answer this question. Unfortunately, international shipping and returns aren't offered at this time. My thanks for understanding.

[ ] We are happy to help answer this question. Unfortunately, international shipping and returns aren't offered at this time. Our thanks for understanding.

### STUDY 2

*Inquiry Email*
Hello, I am wondering about your return policy. Can I buy something on my credit card and have you ship it to a person in a different country as a gift? If so, how would you handle the return if she doesn't like it? She shouldn't have to pay to return it. If it's not free, can return shipping go on my credit card so she doesn't have to pay? Thanks in advance for the help. --Bob

*Complaint Email*
Hello, I'm having trouble finding a product at your website. I never write letters like this but your site interface is clunky and hard to navigate on a touchscreen tablet. I think you should also consider changing the fonts to something easier to read. The links were hard to find and took me several tries to click on. The search engine doesn't seem to work, so I have to use the category links to find anything. --Bob

STUDY 3

*One of six stimuli sets (Firm D) is presented below. All six sets of stimuli are available from the authors on request.*

While shopping at the website of Shopsite.com, a well-known online retailer, you realize you have a question. You submit your question to the company by email. Later on, you find the response that follows it in your inbox.

Your email:

> Hello, I am wondering about your return policy. Can I buy something on my credit card and have you ship it to a person in a different country as a gift? If so, how would you handle the return if she doesn't like it? She shouldn't have to pay to return it. If it's not free, can return shipping go on my credit card so she doesn't have to pay?
>
> Thanks in advance for the help,
> [Participant first name inserted here]

The response you receive:

| Condition | Firm Agent Email Stimuli |
|---|---|
| Original | Hi [Participant first name],<br><br>Thank you for contacting Shopsite.com regarding international shipping and returns. We are glad to review this matter for you.<br><br>Currently, we do not offer international shipping and returns. Shopsite.com can only ship to locations in Canada. Any additional restrictions are listed in the detailed description for each item on Shopsite.com.<br><br>[Participant first name inserted here], we thank you for your understanding and cooperation on this matter. If you have additional questions, please reply to this email.<br><br>Best regards,<br>Chris<br>Shopsite.com |
| Modified | Hi [Participant first name],<br><br>Thank you for contacting Shopsite.com regarding international shipping and returns. I am glad to review this matter for you.<br><br>Currently, we do not offer international shipping and returns. Shopsite.com can only ship to locations in Canada. Any additional restrictions are listed in the |

detailed description for each item on Shopsite.com.

[Participant first name inserted here], I thank you for your understanding and cooperation on this matter. If you have additional questions, please reply to this email.

Best regards,
Chris
Shopsite.com

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(STIMULI FOR STUDIES 4 - 7 APPEAR IN THE WEB APPENDIX)

## APPPENDIX: TABLES

TABLE A1: LIWC PERSONAL PRONOUN CATEGORIES

| "I" | "you" | "we" |
|---|---|---|
| I | You | Lets |
| Id | Youd | Let's |
| I'd | You'd | Our |
| I'll | Youll | Ours |
| Im | You'll | Ourselves |
| I'm | Your | Us |
| Ive | Youre | We |
| I've | You're | We'd |
| Me | Yours | We'll |
| Mine | Youve | We're |
| My | You've | Weve |
| Myself | | We've |

TABLE A2: FIRM AGENT PRONOUN USE VS. COMPARISON SAMPLES (STUDY 2)

| | Corpus | Source | LIWC Personal Pronoun Group | LIWC Statistic Mean | Welch t-stat (Focal vs. Comparison Sample) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Focal Sample* | | | | | | |
| | Firm agent responses to bogus customer emails (N = 40) | Study 2 | "I" | 0.94 | | |
| | | | "You" | 6.04 | | |
| | | | "We" | 4.83 | | |
| *Comparison Samples* | | | | | | |
| A. | English language global mean (N = 721,726) | Pennebaker et al. (2007) | "I" | 5.72 | 17.99 | *** |
| | | | "You" | 1.18 | -14.57 | *** |
| | | | "We" | 0.76 | -9.06 | *** |
| B. | Oral conversation in un-structured real world settings (N = 2,014) | Pennebaker et al. (2007) | "I" | 6.30 | -- | ^ |
| | | | "You" | 3.94 | -- | ^ |
| | | | "We" | 1.09 | -- | ^ |
| C. | Writing by Internet-based bloggers and posters (N = 9,537) | Pennebaker et al. (2007) | "I" | 6.42 | -- | ^ |
| | | | "You" | 1.23 | -- | ^ |
| | | | "We" | 0.88 | -- | ^ |
| D. | Oral firm agent responses to real customer telephone inquiries (N = 95) | Firm used in Study 4 | "I" | 3.78 | 9.54 | *** |
| | | | "You" | 7.03 | 17.57 | *** |
| | | | "We" | 1.09 | 0.54 | |
| E. | Written responses to questions asked of syndicated advice columnists (N = 80)[#] | Four syndicated advice columns | "I" | 1.59 | 1.99 | * |
| | | | "You" | 5.67 | 11.91 | *** |
| | | | "We" | 0.20 | -2.67 | ** |
| F. | Written responses to questions posted on Internet-based forums (N = 108) | Online parenting forum | "I" | 5.21 | 5.85 | *** |
| | | | "You" | 2.51 | 3.97 | *** |
| | | | "We" | 0.82 | 1.74 | + |

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, + $p < .1$

^*Standard deviations were not reported for corpus sub-groups in Pennebaker et al (2007).*

[#]*20 random samples from each of Ask E. Jean (Elle magazine), Miss Manners (Washington Post), Dear Prudence (Slate), and Ask a Dude (Hairpin.com). Pronoun use means did not vary significantly across these advice columns.*

TABLE A3: SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR REAL AND MODIFIED FIRM AGENT RESPONSES (STUDY 3)

**A**

| LIWC Personal Pronouns Category | Full Sample (N = 40) | Sub-sample (N = 6) | Welch's t-stat |
|---|---|---|---|
| "I" | 0.94 (1.68) | 1.07 (1.73) | 0.17 |
| "You" | 6.04 (2.11) | 7.23 (1.75) | 1.51 |
| "We" | 4.83 (2.84) | 5.73 (2.39) | 0.84 |

**B**

| | Firm agent response condition | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| LIWC Personal Pronouns Category | Original (N = 6) | Modified (N = 6) | t-stat | |
| "I" | 1.07 (1.73) | 5.32 (3.03) | 2.39 | * |
| "You" | 7.23 (1.75) | 7.23 (1.75) | 0.00 | |
| "We" | 5.73 (2.39) | 1.49 (0.80) | -3.00 | * |

*Standard deviations reported in parentheses.*
*** p < .01, * p < .05, + p < .10*

A comparison of personal pronoun use by firm agents from the six firm responses selected for Study 3 from the full sample of 40 is presented in panel A above, which shows no significant differences in the rate of use of these pronouns between the full (Study 2) and reduced (Study 3) samples. Panel B of the same table shows the impact on LIWC statistics of increasing "I" (relative to "we") pronoun use in the modified firm response condition, where there is a significant increase in "I" pronouns (5.32 vs. 1.07; $t(12) = 2.39$, $p < .05$) and a significant reduction in "we" pronouns relative to the original response (1.49 vs. 5.73; $t(12) = -3.00$, $p < .05$). Note also that the LIWC statistics for the modified versions remain within the distribution of pronoun use in natural language reported earlier in Table A2, and indeed appear closer to these distributions than the original firm response versions.

TABLE A4: IMPACT OF REPLACING "WE" WITH "I" PRONOUNS
IN REAL AGENT RESPONSES FOR EACH FIRM REPLICATE (STUDY 3)

| | | | Satisfaction with Firm Agent | | | Purchase Intention | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Firm | Product Category | Interaction | Original | Modified | t-stat | Original | Modified | t-stat |
| A | Apparel, lifestyle | Complaint | 4.33 | 5.23 | 2.50 * | 4.38 | 5.05 | 2.25 * |
| B | Media, travel | Complaint | 4.26 | 5.13 | 2.68 ** | 4.05 | 4.68 | 1.71 + |
| C | Women's apparel | Complaint | 4.79 | 5.59 | 2.37 * | 4.51 | 5.21 | 2.33 * |
| D | Mass merchant | Inquiry | 4.42 | 5.51 | 3.50 ** | 4.56 | 5.34 | 2.22 * |
| E | Apparel, outdoor | Inquiry | 4.79 | 5.50 | 2.31 * | 4.52 | 5.40 | 3.05 ** |
| F | Automotive | Inquiry | 4.28 | 4.96 | 2.15 * | 4.36 | 4.76 | 1.19 |

*** p < .01, * p < .05, + p < .10*

TABLE A5: LANGUAGE TYPICALITY MEANS
AND STATISTICAL TESTS (STUDY 3)

| Firm email | Original Email Typicality | Modified Email Typicality | t-stat (row contrasts) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | 4.95 | 5.84 | 0.39 | |
| B | 5.74 | 5.94 | -0.08 | |
| C | 5.74 | 5.48 | 0.95 | |
| D | 6.33 | 6.03 | 1.58 | |
| E | 5.84 | 6.20 | -1.68 | + |
| F | 5.85 | 5.56 | 1.30 | |

Contrasts of original versus modified stimuli found no differences in typicality with one exception, for which the modified stimuli (which used "I" rather than "we" self-references) was marginally more typical than the original firm agent response, suggesting that novelty or expectancy violations for our modified email condition ("I" self-referencing by firm agents) are unlikely to explain the results.

TABLE A6: EXAMPLES OF COMMON VERSUS RECOMMENDED PRONOUN USE IN CUSTOMER SERVICE INTERACTIONS

| **CURRENT: How people think firm agents should speak to customers (Study 1) and how they actually tend to speak to customers (Studies 2 & 8).** | | **RECOMMENDED: How the present research suggests firm agents should speak to customers (Studies 3-8)** |
|---|---|---|
| Refer to the actor (grammatical subject) using "we" pronouns. | Refer to the recipient of action (grammatical object) using "you" pronouns. | Refer to the actor (grammatical subject) using "I" pronouns.* |
| *We can find that product.* | *We can find that product for you.* | *I can find that product.* |
| *Our manager handles the returns.* | *Our manager can handle your return.* | *My manager handles the returns.* |
| *We're glad that this purchase…* | *We're glad that your purchase…* | *I'm glad that this purchase…* |
| *If we can provide assistance…* | *If we can provide you with assistance…* | *If I can provide assistance…* |
| *We can offer a discount today.* | *We can offer you a discount today.* | *I can offer a discount today.* |

* As we found null effects for the use of "you" pronouns even when used to refer to the customer as the recipient of the agent's actions (i.e., dominant participation framework), we exclude it from the "ideal" case examples. However, given the null effect suggests that customer referencing is unlikely to negatively impact outcomes under the dominant participation framework, it may be used where doing so seems natural (e.g., "*I will find that product for you.")*

# WEB APPENDIX

## STIMULI FOR STUDIES 4 - 7

### STUDY 4

A few days after you ordered a product online from Shopsite.com, you realize it hasn't arrived. You email them to ask about the status of your order. Here is the email response you receive from an employee of the company--

| Self-referencing pronoun condition | Firm Agent Email Stimuli |
|---|---|
| No pronoun control | The order is leaving the warehouse. It will arrive in 3-5 days. Apologies for the unacceptable delay experienced. For further assistance, just reply to this email. |
| We | We found that the order is leaving the warehouse. It will arrive in 3-5 days. Our apologies for the unacceptable delay experienced. If we can provide further assistance, just reply to this email. |
| I | I found that the order is leaving the warehouse. It will arrive in 3-5 days. My apologies for the unacceptable delay experienced. If I can provide further assistance, just reply to this email. |

### STUDY 5

Imagine you're going to your favorite store to shop for some new jeans. You are approached by a salesperson you've had before. [empathy and agency cue: She always seems to understand you and have good insights on your personal likes and dislikes, and goes out of her way to assist you.] You tell her you're interested in some new jeans. She replies--

| Self-referencing pronoun condition | Firm Agent Response Stimuli |
|---|---|
| We | OK. There's a lot of great stuff we can show you right now. Our favorite from this season's new line should look great on you. We also have a new straight leg that is really in style. And if not those, we have a couple other classic options we can show you. |
| I | OK. There's a lot of great stuff I can show you right now. My favorite from this season's new line should look great on you. I also have a new straight leg that is really in style. And if not those, I have a couple other classic options I can show you. |

STUDY 6

A few days after you ordered a product online from Shopsite.com, you realize it hasn't arrived. You email them to ask about the status of your order. Here is the email response you receive from an employee of the company--

| Verb Voice of "you" pronoun | Firm Agent Response Stimuli |
|---|---|
| No pronoun control | The order is leaving the warehouse. It will arrive in 3-5 days. Apologies for the unacceptable delay experienced. For further assistance, just reply to this email. |
| Active | Your order is leaving the warehouse. It will arrive in 3-5 days. Apologies for the unacceptable delay you've experienced. If you need further assistance, just reply to this email. |
| Passive | Your order was found to be leaving the warehouse. It will arrive in 3-5 days. The delay you experienced is unacceptable. Apologies. If further assistance can be provided to you, just reply to this email. |

STUDY 7

A few weeks after receiving a product you ordered online from Shopsite.com, you realize it isn't working properly. You send them an email using the "Contact us" link at their website. You say that you'd like to return the product but can't find the receipt that had the order information and return policy. Here is the email response you receive from an employee of the company--

| Grammatical use of "you" pronoun | Firm Agent Response Stimuli |
|---|---|
| No pronoun control | If the username is available, the account can be looked into to find the order and return options through the website. Once this is done, the product should be able to be returned right away. |
| Object | If your username is available, your account can be looked into to find your order and return options through the website. Once this is done for you, the product should be able to be returned for you right away. |
| Subject | If you have your username, you can look into the account to find the order and return options through the website. Once you've done this, you should be able to return the product right away. |

## *STUDY A: REPLICATING BELIEFS ABOUT FIRM AGENT PRONOUN USE WITH SCALED RESPONSES*

American participants (N = 498) in a paid online panel were asked what a firm employee (agent) should talk about in response to customer inquiries or complaints for each of the three personal pronoun categories ("I", "we", and "you"). Participants rated the extent to which firm employees (a) should, and (b) do talk about: (1) "your" (the customer's) question or complaint, (2) how "we" (the firm) can address the question or complaint, and (3) how "I" (the employee) can address the question or complaint (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much; question order randomized). Participants then indicated whether they had currently or previously been employed as (a) managers of other people, (b) managers of customer sales or service representatives, and/or (c) customer sales or service representatives themselves, either in-person or remotely (e.g., internet, phone). Finally, participants reported their tenure in these roles in years and the maximum number of people they had supervised in that role.

Results indicated that for the full sample and for each employment history sub-category, participants believed firm agents should (and do) focus more on "you" (the customer) and "we" (the firm) than "I" (the firm agent). There were no differences in the extent to which firm agents should focus on "you" (the customer) versus "we" (the firm). Neither the number of years of experience in a managerial or front-line service role, nor the number of people they had managed, were related to these beliefs. Detailed results are presented in Web Appendix Tables W1 and W2.

## *STUDY B: INCREASED "I" OR "YOU" PRONOUN USE BY FIRM AGENTS*

In Study B, we independently manipulated both firm agent use of "I" self-referencing and "you" customer-referencing to independently assess their impact on customer satisfaction and intentions within the same stimuli context. Study B also replicates the active versus passive verb voice manipulation previously examined in Study 7 as a moderator that linguistics suggests should bolster the impact of "you" use to enhance conservatism for our test of this expected null effect. Finally, we again include measures of empathy and agency to provide another test of their role as parallel mediators of the "I" pronoun effect.

### *Participants, Design and Procedure*

American participants (N = 326) from an online panel completed the study for a small cash payment. Participants were asked to imagine themselves in one of six versions of a hypothetical customer service interaction adapting the stimuli from Study 4 (see Web Appendix Stimuli). Participants saw a firm agent response that either had no personal pronoun references, "I" pronouns referencing the firm agent as the actor (grammatical subject), or "you" pronouns referencing the customer as the recipient of action (grammatical object). This design allows us to independently test the two effects of interest, (1) firm agent "I" (subject) references versus a control, and (2) customer "you" (object) references versus a control. We also manipulated verb voice across these conditions, resulting in a 3 (pronoun use: None, "I," "You") x 2 (verb voice: active, passive) between-subjects design.

After reading the firm agent's response, participants reported their satisfaction with the person who responded to their inquiry ($\alpha$ = .86), their purchase intentions towards the firm ($\alpha$ = .92), and perceptions of agent empathy ($\alpha$ = .94) and agency ($\alpha$ = .96) using the same measures

as prior studies (see Table W3). Lastly, we collected and tested the same language typicality items used in earlier studies.

*Results and Discussion*

An omnibus ANOVA for the satisfaction dependent measure revealed a main effect for pronoun use condition ($F(2, 320) = 18.19$, $p < .001$), but no effect for verb voice ($F(1, 320) = .89$, $p = .35$) and no interaction of pronoun use and verb voice ($F(2, 320) = .78$, $p = .69$). The same pattern of results held for purchase intentions, with a main effect for pronoun use condition ($F(2, 320) = 17.25$, $p < .001$) and null effects for verb voice ($F(1, 320) = .47$, $p = .49$) and the interaction of pronoun use and verb voice ($F(2, 320) = .50$, $p = .61$). Verb voice had no impact on our dependent variables. We thus collapse the verb voice conditions in the analysis below.

*"I" pronouns.* Replicating prior studies, the addition of "I" pronouns referencing the firm agent significantly increased customer satisfaction ($M_{None} = 4.28$ vs. $M_{I} = 5.17$; $F(1, 209) = 19.33$, $p < .001$) and purchase intentions ($M_{None} = 4.08$ vs. $M_{I} = 4.76$; $F(1, 209) = 9.97$, $p < .01$).

*"You" pronouns.* Replicating prior studies, addition of "you" pronouns referencing the customer in the firm agent's email had non-significant effects on customer satisfaction ($M_{None} = 4.28$ vs. $M_{You} = 3.97$; $F(1, 205) = 2.43$, $p = .12$) and purchase intentions ($M_{None} = 4.08$ vs. $M_{You} = 3.94$; $F(1, 205) = .44$, $p = .51$).

*Process*. The firm agent empathy ($\alpha = .94$) and agency ($\alpha = .96$) measures were assessed as mediators of the relationship between the firm agent's use of "I" pronouns and each of the dependent measures (satisfaction with the firm agent, purchase intentions). Confirmatory factor analysis supported empathy and agency as separate factors ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 205.87$, $p < .001$). We used Preacher and Hayes' (2008) PROCESS macro (model 4) to assess the two predicted mediators in parallel, contrasting the effect of "I" pronoun use by the firm agent versus its absence (in the no

pronouns control) as our independent variable and satisfaction and purchase intentions as dependent measures.

The presence of "I" pronouns by the firm agent (vs. their absence) increased perceptions of firm agent empathy (B = .89, $t = 4.33$, $p < .001$) and agency (B = 1.22 $t = 5.29$, $p < .001$). Further, both mediators significantly predicted increased satisfaction with the firm agent ($B_{empathy} = .17$, $t = 2.12$, $p < .05$; $B_{agency} = .51$, $t = 7.03$, $p < .001$) and increased purchase intentions ($B_{empathy} = .19$, $t = 2.18$, $p < .05$; $B_{agency} = .50$, $t = 6.36$, $p < .001$). Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples showed that the effect of "I" pronouns by the firm agent on customer satisfaction was mediated by both empathy and agency (Empathy CI: .01 – .37, $p < .05$; Agency CI: .34 – .97, $p < .05$). Bootstrap confidence intervals also supported mediation by both mediators (Empathy CI: .03 – .39, $p < .05$; Agency CI: .35 – .97, $p < .05$) for the purchase intentions dependent measure.

*Discussion*

Study B provided an additional replication test of the positive consequences of firm agent use of "I" pronoun use. Process analysis replicated findings in Studies 4 and 5 of the main paper that perceptions of both empathy and agency drive the positive impact of "I" pronoun use by firm agents.

In contrast, separate tests examining references to the customer as the recipient of the firm agent's actions replicated Studies 6 and 7 findings that the presence (versus absence) of "you" pronouns did not enhance satisfaction or purchase intentions.

## *STUDY 8 ROBUSTNESS AND SUPPLEMENTARY ANALYSIS*

This section assesses the robustness of the results of Study 8 by incorporating seven covariates intended to control for the difficulty, complexity, or severity of the interaction topic as well as demographics. It also provides all summary statistics for the data used in Study 8, and an assessment of multicollinearity. Finally, we examine the possibility that the effects are driven by idiosyncratic deviations from boilerplate language provided by firm agent management.

### *Model*

To carry out the robustness analysis including covariates, we regress total purchases for the customer in a given customer service interaction *i* for a defined time period after the interaction ($P_{\text{i,post}}$) on both the customer and firm agent's use of one of the three personal pronoun categories ("I," "you," or "we) and the set of interaction-level covariates. This can be specified as

$$P_{\text{i,post}} = \alpha \text{Cust\_Pronoun}_{ic} + \beta \text{Firm\_Pronoun}_{ic} + \alpha\beta + z_{\text{i}} + \varepsilon_{\text{i}} \qquad (1)$$

where $\text{Cust\_Pronoun}_{ic}$ and $\text{Firm\_Pronoun}_{ic}$ represent the LIWC pronoun category statistic for the customer's initial communication and firm agent reply, respectively, in interaction *i*, for LIWC pronoun category *c* (*c* = "I," "you," or "we"). The expected interactive effect of the customer's pronoun use on the use of the same pronoun by the firm agent (Gordon et al. 1993) is captured by $\alpha\beta$. We mean-center the personal pronoun statistics and model the pronoun categories independently, resulting in three separate models (one for each of the three pronoun categories). For example, the first model considers (a) the simple effect of the customer's use of "I" pronouns in their initial email to the firm, (b) the simple effect of the firm agent's use of "I" pronouns in his or her reply, and (c) the interactive effect of the customer's and the firm agent's use of "I"

pronouns.

As for the remaining model terms, $z_i$ is a vector of interaction-specific covariates, and $\varepsilon_i$ captures idiosyncratic error. The interaction-specific covariates are as follows:

*Purchase volume prior to the interaction*. This covariate addresses omitted variable bias (e.g., self-selection) by capturing customer heterogeneity in baseline purchase volume for customer *i* for the same time period prior to the interaction ($P_{i,pre}$) as the time period observed for the dependent measure ($P_{i,post}$). We report a 90-day purchase observation window before and after the customer service interaction for our dependent measure and its (pre-period) control. This offered the tightest observation window to the interaction event before purchase data becomes exceedingly sparse.[17]

Several covariates help assess whether the difficulty, complexity, or severity of the interaction topic explain pronoun use during the interaction and/or the customer's purchase behavior after the interaction.

*Number of emails*. We include the total number of emails (turns) in the interaction as an indicator of more complex interactions (Honeycutt and Herring 2009).

*Customer posemo* and *Customer negemo*. LIWC's two measures of positive and negative emotion in language were captured as controls for the customer's emotional tone, which could indicate the severity of an interaction and drive the personal pronouns used in the agent's response (Chung and Pennebaker 2007).

*Resolution*. Two independent judges scored the extent to which they perceived the reason for the customer's initial email to the firm as resolved (1 = not at all resolved, 7 = very much

[17] Model results are fully replicated using a 180-day window, and fall to non-significance at one year (365 days). This result may be due to sparse purchase data beyond a 90 day period (average annual purchase frequency is slightly less than every 90 days (1.99 purchases / year), or (b) the effects of personal pronoun use on customer purchases are moderated by other interaction events over time.

resolved). We used the mean score of the two judges ($r = .43$, $p < .001$).

*Complaint*. Two independent judges coded the customer's initial communication in each interaction as either a complaint or inquiry (inter-rater agreement = 91%, disagreement resolved by a third judge) to replicate the two main categories of customer-initiated interactions assessed in the lab studies. This is incorporated in the model as a dummy for complaints.

*Compensation.* This dummy variable captured whether the customer was offered a financial incentive or compensation as a consequence of the interaction. Compensation always entailed a $5 online coupon for a future purchase as a customer service gesture.

*Reason*. We include the firm's four-level categorization of the customer's reason for initiating the interaction (order-related, website-related, multiple reason, or "other"). The agent identifies each interaction reason based on the customer's initial email. This provides another control for the specific nature of the interaction (i.e., its difficulty, complexity, severity).

*Region* and *Gender*. We were able to produce two demographic covariates with the firm's data. We used ZIP and postal code data to produce a four-level geographic variable that captures the firm's major operating regions. This was done in order to manage the number of geographic covariate terms in the model, since a large number of cities (N = 373) and states or provinces (N = 32) were represented in the data. To produce a gender covariate, we used "genderizer" software that codes first names as male (e.g., Samuel), female (e.g., Samantha) or unknown (e.g., Sam) using over 100,000 common first names. The customer was identified as either male or female for 1,119 (87.6%) of the customer service interactions linked to transactional accounts. We included a dummy term for female customers.

Summary statistics for all independent variables and covariates are provided in Table W4. Notably, personal pronoun use means for firm agents in this data set were similar to those observed in Study 2's 40-firm sample, with firm agents de-emphasizing "I" pronouns relative to

natural language use.

Covariance between the personal pronoun use independent variables and covariates was modest, alleviating endogeneity concerns (all r values < |.25|). Correlation among the predictors is presented in Table W5. All predictors and covariates fell below the Variance Inflation Factor threshold of 10 (Kutner et al. 2004), suggesting that the variance of model coefficients was not substantially increased due to collinearity.

*Results*

Table W6 presents the results of models assessing the effect of firm agent use of "I" (Model 1), "you" (Model 2) and "we" (Model 3) pronouns on post-interaction purchase behavior in real customer service interactions. For the covariates, all three models revealed a significant positive relationship between post-interaction purchases ($P_{i,\text{post}}$) and pre-interaction purchases ($P_{i,\text{pre}}$) and a negative effect on post-interaction purchases for the customer's use of negative emotion words (*Customer negemo*). All other covariates were non-significant.

After accounting for the customer's use of the same pronoun category in their initial email ($\text{Cust\_Pronoun}_{ic}$) and the expected interaction between the customer and firm agent's personal pronoun use, we found a significant positive effect for firm agent use of "I" pronouns ($\beta$ = 1236.35, $t = 4.63$, $p < .001$; Model 1). In the "you" model, we replicate the null effect for agent references to the customer ($\beta$ = 68.34, $t = 0.54$, $p = .59$; Model 2). We also find a null effect for firm agent use of "we" pronouns ($\beta$ = -129.80, $t = -0.70$, $p = .47$; Model 3). There was also significant and positive interaction of the customer and firm agent's use of "I" pronouns ($\alpha\beta$ = 226.13, $t = 4.58$, $p < .001$; Model 1) and a marginal negative interaction of customer and firm agent use of "you" pronouns ($\alpha\beta$ = -68.59, $t = -1.78$, $p = .08$; Model 2).

*Discussion*

Replicating the results reported in the main paper's Study 8, increased firm agent use of "I" pronouns had a positive effect on customer purchases with the firm after this interaction. In contrast to manager and consumer beliefs and behaviors, we again found null or negative effects for firm agent use of customer-referencing "you" pronouns.

*Alternative.* A plausible alternative explanation for these results is that the use of "I" pronouns represents idiosyncratic deviations from boilerplate language written by senior firm agents. That is, managers who write the boilerplate might use fewer "I" pronouns than do the more junior firm agents who sometimes use it. As boilerplate language is heavily integrated into the firm agents' own language in the data, it is not feasible to directly test this possibility at the interaction level. However, boilerplate language should be less common in longer, more complex interactions that demand more personalized responses. Thus, we used the number of emails in a given interaction as a proxy for such complexity. If the idiosyncratic deviation from boilerplate explanation holds, we would expect to find an interaction between firm agent "I" pronoun use and the number of emails in a given customer service agent interaction. However, when this interaction term was added to the "I" model, the positive effect of firm agent "I" pronoun use was replicated (B = 1226.00, $t = 3.63$, $p < .001$), while the interaction term was non-significant (B = 20.77, $t = .42$, $p = .67$). This provides evidence that idiosyncratic deviations from boilerplate are unlikely to explain the results. That said, even if this factor partly explained the results, it merely suggests that more senior firm agents should also modify their personal pronoun use in boilerplate language.

## WEB APPENDIX REFERENCES

Honeycutt, Courtenay and Susan C. Herring (2009), "Beyond Microblogging: Conversation and Collaboration via Twitter," *Proceeedings of the Forty-Second Hawaii International Conference on System Science (HICSS-42)*, Los Alamitos, CA: IEEE Press.

Kutner, Michael, Christopher Nachtsheim, John Neter, and William Li (2004). *Applied Linear Regression Models*, 4th edition. New York, NY: McGraw-Hil

## WEB APPENDIX STIMULI

STUDY B STIMULI

| Pronoun Condition | Verb Voice | Firm Agent Email Stimuli |
|---|---|---|
| None | Active | The order is leaving the warehouse. It will arrive in 3-5 days. Apologies for the unacceptable delay experienced. For further assistance, just reply to this email. |
| I | Active | I found that the order is leaving the warehouse. It will arrive in 3-5 days. My apologies for the unacceptable delay experienced. If I can provide further assistance, just reply to this email. |
| You | Active | Your order is leaving the warehouse. It will arrive in 3-5 days. Apologies for the unacceptable delay you've experienced. If you need further assistance, just reply to this email. |
| None | Passive | The order was found to be leaving the warehouse. It will arrive in 3-5 days. The delay experienced is unacceptable. Apologies. If further assistance can be provided, just reply to this email. |
| I | Passive | The order was found by me to be leaving the warehouse. It will arrive in 3-5 days. The delay experienced is unacceptable. My apologies. If further assistance can be provided by me, just reply to this email. |
| You | Passive | Your order was found to be leaving the warehouse. It will arrive in 3-5 days. The delay you experienced is unacceptable. Apologies. If further assistance can be provided to you, just reply to this email. |

## WEB APPENDIX TABLES

TABLE W1: DESIRED PRONOUN EMPHASIS IN CUSTOMER SERVICE INTERACTIONS (STUDY A)

| | | Firm agents SHOULD talk about… | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sample | N | …how "I" (the firm agent) can address the subject.* | …"your" (the customer's) subject.* | ...how "we" (the firm) can address the subject.* |
| Managers (excl. customer service) | 122 | 5.20 $^{A}$ | 6.09 $^{B}$ | 5.98 $^{B}$ |
| Customer service managers | 94 | 5.35 $^{A}$ | 5.83 $^{B}$ | 5.98 $^{B}$ |
| In-person service representatives | 226 | 5.22 $^{A}$ | 5.96 $^{B}$ | 6.08 $^{B}$ |
| Remote service representatives | 113 | 5.19 $^{A}$ | 6.01 $^{B}$ | 5.97 $^{B}$ |
| None of the above ("consumers") | 154 | 5.10 $^{A}$ | 5.86 $^{B}$ | 5.84 $^{B}$ |
| Full sample | 498 | 5.17 $^{A}$ | 5.94 $^{B}$ | 5.96 $^{B}$ |

*Row differences $p < .05$ are indicated by different alphabetical superscripts.*
*See text for exact question wording. All means are on a seven-point scale; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much.

TABLE W2: PERCEIVED PRONOUN EMPHASIS IN CUSTOMER SERVICE INTERACTIONS (STUDY A)

| | | Firm agents DO talk about… | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sample | n | …how "I" (the firm agent) can address the subject. | …"your" (the customer's) subject. | ...how "we" (the firm) can address the subject. |
| Managers (excl. customer service) | 122 | 5.20 A | 6.09 B | 5.98 B |
| Customer service managers | 94 | 5.17 A | 5.86 B | 6.14 B |
| In-person service representatives | 226 | 4.81 A | 5.68 B | 5.86 B |
| Remote service representatives | 113 | 4.52 A | 5.44 B | 5.86 B |
| None of the above ("consumers") | 154 | 4.72 A | 5.61 B | 5.58 B |
| Full | 498 | 4.73 A | 5.59 B | 5.73 B |

*Row differences $p < .05$ are indicated by different alphabetical superscripts.*

TABLE W3: LANGUAGE TYPICALITY MEANS AND STATISTICAL TEST (STUDY B)

| Pronouns | Verb voice | Typicality | F-test (omnibus) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| None | Active | 5.41 | 7.06 | ** |
| I | Active | 5.03 | | |
| You | Active | 5.32 | | |
| None | Passive | 4.79 | | |
| I | Passive | 4.71 | | |
| You | Passive | 4.85 | | |

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, + $p < .10$

TABLE W4: SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR REGRESSION MODEL TERMS (STUDY 8)

| | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Full sample Pronoun Use (N = 2,098) | | | | |
| Customer | | | | |
| "I" | 5.38 | 4.86 | 0 | 30.00 |
| "You" | 3.63 | 3.01 | 0 | 25.00 |
| "We" | 0.94 | 1.65 | 0 | 14.29 |
| Firm agent | | | | |
| "I" | 1.93 | 3.85 | 0 | 26.32 |
| "You" | 6.19 | 3.30 | 0 | 19.30 |
| "We" | 3.12 | 3.25 | 0 | 10.00 |
| Transactional account sample Pronoun Use (N = 1,277) | | | | |
| Customer | | | | |
| "I" | 5.68 | 4.95 | 0 | 30.00 |
| "You" | 3.55 | 2.94 | 0 | 25.00 |
| "We" | 0.90 | 1.64 | 0 | 14.29 |
| Firm agent | | | | |
| "I" | 1.83 | 3.78 | 0 | 26.32 |
| "You" | 6.28 | 3.27 | 0 | 19.15 |
| "We" | 3.11 | 2.44 | 0 | 11.76 |
| Model covariates | | | | |
| Purchase volume$_{i,pre}$ | 559.10* | 1536.53 | 0 | 35850.00 |
| # of emails | 3.00 | 1.92 | 2 | 22.00 |
| Customer posemo | 3.83 | 2.64 | 0 | 25.00 |
| Customer negemo | 1.07 | 1.46 | 0 | 16.67 |
| Complaint | 5.75 | 1.52 | 1 | 7 |
| Resolution | 0.12 | | 0 | 1 |
| Compensation | 0.01 | | 0 | 1 |
| Order reason | 0.60 | | 0 | 1 |
| Website reason | 0.24 | | 0 | 1 |
| Multi reason | 0.04 | | 0 | 1 |
| Region 1 | 0.53 | | 0 | 1 |
| Region 2 | 0.29 | | 0 | 1 |
| Region 3 | 0.08 | | 0 | 1 |
| Female | 0.65 | | 0 | 1 |

*Mean shifted to obscure actual purchase volume at the request of the firm

TABLE W5: CORRELATIONS IN PRONOUN USE
IN REAL CUSTOMER SERVICE INTERACTIONS (STUDY 8)

| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Customer "I: | 1.00 | | | | |
| 2 | Customer "You" | -0.50 | 1.00 | | | |
| 3 | Customer "We" | -0.56 | 0.53 | 1.00 | | |
| 4 | Firm agent "I" | -0.52 | 0.51 | 0.57 | 1.00 | |
| 5 | Firm agent "You" | 0.45 | -0.37 | -0.44 | -0.51 | 1.00 |
| 6 | Firm agent "We" | 0.43 | -0.40 | -0.49 | -0.59 | 0.43 |

All correlations are significant at $p < .01$.

TABLE W6: STUDY 8 ROBUSTNESS MODEL RESULTS INCLUDING COVARIATES

| | (1) "I" Model | | | (2) "You" Model | | | (3) "We" Model | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Estimate | SE | | Estimate | SE | | Estimate | SE | |
| Intercept | 3720.9 | (2339.0) | | 525.5 | (2305.4) | | 1654.0 | (2328.0) | + |
| $\alpha$Cust_pronoun$_{c = \text{"I"}}$ | 692.5 | (117.3) | *** | | | | | | |
| $\beta$Firm_pronoun$_{c = \text{"I"}}$ | 1236.3 | (267.1) | *** | | | | | | |
| $\alpha\beta_{c = \text{"I"}}$ | 226.1 | (49.4) | *** | | | | | | |
| $\alpha$Cust_pronoun$_{c = \text{"You"}}$ | | | | -483.4 | (139.2) | *** | | | |
| $\beta$Firm_pronoun$_{c = \text{"You"}}$ | | | | 68.3 | (127.6) | | | | |
| $\alpha\beta_{c = \text{"You"}}$ | | | | -68.6 | (38.5) | + | | | |
| $\alpha$Cust_pronoun$_{c = \text{"We"}}$ | | | | | | | -387.8 | (312.0) | |
| $\beta$Firm_pronoun$_{c = \text{"We"}}$ | | | | | | | -129.8 | (181.6) | |
| $\alpha\beta_{c = \text{"We"}}$ | | | | | | | 79.8 | (114.0) | |
| Covariates | | | | | | | | | |
| $P_{i,\text{pre}}$ | 0.3 | (.0) | *** | 0.3 | (.0) | *** | 0.3 | (.0) | *** |
| # of emails | 175.5 | (198.9) | | 222.4 | (199.4) | | 147.7 | (202.2) | |
| Customer posemo | -192.8 | (133.6) | | -41.4 | (1157.7) | | -187.5 | (135.8) | |
| Customer negemo | -629.7 | (238.6) | ** | 364.2 | (265.2) | * | -571.7 | (242.2) | * |
| Complaint | -307.0 | (1147.2) | | -82.5 | (137.6) | | -44.9 | (1164.0) | |
| Resolution | 305.2 | (263.2) | | -155.7 | (3463.9) | | 344.2 | (268.3) | |
| Compensation | -157.0 | (3437.9) | | -550.5 | (240.6) | | -171.6 | (3485.0) | |
| Order reason | -672.9 | (1035.2) | | -917.9 | (1048.1) | | -1036.0 | (1042.0) | |
| Website reason | -985.6 | (1168.3) | | -807.2 | (1192.6) | | -1034.0 | (1198.0) | |
| Multi reason | -955.5 | (1993.2) | | -999.9 | (2007.0) | | -668.0 | (2024.0) | |
| Region 1 | -578.6 | (1188.9) | | -981.5 | (1203.9) | | -613.0 | (1207.0) | |
| Region 2 | 2296.8 | (1640.8) | | 1843.4 | (1654.6) | | 2075.0 | (1663.0) | |
| Region 3 | -618.4 | (1279.6) | | -913.6 | (1291.1) | | -642.9 | (1298.0) | |
| Female | -171.9 | (758.4) | | -58.8 | (758.1) | | -45.8 | (765.4) | |
| R-squared | 0.19 | | | 0.18 | | | 0.17 | | |

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, + $p < .10$

Other reason and Region 4 are baselines for respective dummy sets.