(*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" by using certain personal pronouns? Customer orientation theory, managerial literature, and surveys of managers, customer service representatives, and consumers suggest that firm agents should emphasize how "we" (the firm) serve "you" (the customer), while de-emphasizing "I" (the agent) in these customer-firm interactions. We find evidence of this language pattern in use at over 40 firms. However, we theorize and demonstrate that these personal pronoun emphases are often sub-optimal. Five studies using lab experiments and field data reveal that firm agents who refer to themselves using "I" rather than "we" pronouns increase customer perceptions that the agent feels and acts on their behalf. In turn, these positive perceptions of empathy and agency lead to increased customer satisfaction, purchase intentions, and purchase behavior. Further, we find that customer-referencing "you" pronouns have little impact on these outcomes, and can sometimes have negative consequences. These findings enhance our understanding of how, when, and why language use impacts social perception and behavior, and provide valuable insights for marketers.

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

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 sales and service contexts. A large literature has examined how adopting a customer orientation (Brady and Cronin 2001) can help optimize firm agent *actions* when interacting with customers (e.g., Chan and Sengupta 2010; Rust and Chung 2006; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996). However, holding firm actions constant, could the *words* firm agents use in these interactions also speak volumes?

This paper examines how, when, and why firm agents' use of a specific category of words—personal pronouns—impacts customers. Prior research has demonstrated that personal pronoun use can reflect a speaker's mental state or traits (Chung and Pennebaker 2007; Pennebaker 2011), as well as the relationship status between conversation parties (Sela, Wheeler, and Sarial-Abi 2012). However, little research has examined what a speaker's use of different personal pronouns might signal to listeners, or how listeners are affected by the use of different pronouns. We predict that consumer responses to customer-firm interactions will depend on how the firm agent uses pronouns to refer to the speaker (the agent or firm) and the listener (the customer). Specifically, we examine how a firm agent's use of "I" (the agent) versus "we" (the firm) pronouns, as well as their use of "you" (the customer)[1] pronouns, affect customer perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. In doing so, this paper makes several contributions to theory and practice.

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[1] These three pronouns are used throughout this paper to refer to first-person singular, first-person plural, and second-person pronouns, respectively. See Web Appendix Table W1 for a list of common use cases of these three categories.

Conceptually, this paper moves beyond linguistic psychology's focus on "I" pronouns as a reflection of the speaker's internal state by exploring how, when, and why a speaker's use of these and other personal pronouns signals to—and affects—the listener. First, while most prior work links a speaker's use of "I" pronouns to negative personality traits or states, we theorize and demonstrate that the use of "I" pronouns can send positive signals about the speaker in the context of customer-firm interactions. The specific interaction context we examine may be critical to enabling these positive effects. Second, we show that these perceptual benefits can spread to an entity the speaker represents: agent use of "I" pronouns increases customers' intended and actual purchases from the firm. Third, we identify a mechanism that underlies these positive effects. We find that "I" pronouns increase customer perceptions that the agent is emotionally and behaviorally involved in the interaction. Fourth, to demonstrate that *how* pronouns are used matters, we identify three theoretically-relevant variables that moderate the positive impact of "I" pronoun use. Finally, we extend our conceptual framework to second-person pronouns. We find that "you" (the customer) pronouns offer little signaling benefit in customer-firm interactions, and identify a boundary condition under which they can have negative effects.

The present research also contributes to marketing practice. In stark contrast to our theoretical framework and empirical results, we find that managers and firm agents believe that they should, and actually do, emphasize linguistic references to the customer ("you") and the firm ("we"), while downplaying references to the agent ("I").

Taken together, this research offers conceptual insight into how personal pronouns function as signals, and challenges conventional wisdom by showing that the linguistic manifestation of a customer orientation 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. Subtle variations in language use have been shown to affect consumers' self-control and motivation (Patrick and Hagtvedt 2012; Senay, Albarracin, and Noguchi 2010), word of mouth (Moore 2012; Schellekens, Verlegh, and Smidts 2010), and responses to persuasion attempts (Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2011; Sela et al. 2012).

We build on this work to examine how variation in a firm agent's personal pronoun use affects consumers. Much research has revealed that a speaker's use of personal pronouns (e.g., I, we, you) can reflect their mental or social status (Chung and Pennebaker 2007; Pennebaker 2011). For example, personal pronoun use has been linked to 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.

Although much is known about personal pronoun use as a reflection of the speaker's mindset, little work has considered the potential effects of these pronouns on listeners (Fitzsimons and Kay 2004; Sela et al. 2012). Specifically, we are unaware of work that considers how a speaker's use of singular self-referencing ("I"), plural self-referencing ("we"), or other-referencing ("you") pronouns might affect listeners' perceptions, attitudes, and behavior.

Our primary hypothesis is that "I" pronouns can act as a signal, allowing listeners to infer the speaker's involvement in a given interaction context. Speech-act theory holds that beyond their literal meaning, the specific words people choose to use in discourse hold performative functions, describing social reality or action (Austin 1975; Searle, Keifer, and Bierwisch 1980). One such function is to implicitly inform the listener of the speaker's beliefs about the people in

his or her utterance (Katz 1989; Pinker 2007). Language scholars argue that conveying this layer of "implicative" meaning is a critical goal in conversation, as it establishes the social order (Streeck 1980), perspective (Austin 1975), or framework (Goffman 1981) through which interactants will engage one another. Since they linguistically represent interaction participants, personal pronouns should be particularly consequential in this regard (Fahnestock 2011, p. 179-180).

To elaborate on this idea, we apply Goffman's (1981) conception of a conversation's "participation framework." Goffman suggested that personal pronouns help establish the roles and responsibilities of interaction participants. For example, consider the 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). Within this participation framework, we propose that the speaker's use of pronouns—either implicitly or explicitly—can signal her cognitions, behavior, or intentions (i.e., "understanding") to the listener. She could say "You're understood.", explicitly referencing the recipient of action ("you") while leaving herself ("I") implicit. Alternately, she could say "I understand.", explicitly 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 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 suggest that within a given participation framework, these subtle variations in pronoun use should send signals about the speaker's involvement with the listener and their needs. Indeed, firms already recognize this idea, and have embraced certain conventions about pronoun

use in customer-firm interactions; we discuss these beliefs and practices below. We then argue—

and show—that this conventional wisdom is misguided.

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM & PRACTICE IN FIRM AGENT PRONOUN USE

At the frontline of customer service interactions, the widely cited and practiced customer

orientation theory (Saxe and Weitz 1982) recommends a heightened demonstration of the "*firm's*

concern for *customers*" and a downplayed "concern for the *self*" (the agent; p. 344, emphases

added). Behaviorally, a customer orientation can manifest, for example, as reduced wait times or

compensation after service failures, and can lead to enhanced customer and firm outcomes

(Homburg, Hoyer, and Fassnacht 2002; Ramani and Kumar 2008).

Linguistically, a customer orientation implies that firm agents should emphasize firm-

referencing "we" pronouns and customer-referencing "you" pronouns, while downplaying self-

referencing "I" pronouns. We find some support for this assertion in the managerial literature.

Direct marketers are encouraged to use the word "you" when communicating with customers to

increase engagement (Hanc 2016). A bestselling book on language use in customer service

(Bacal 2011) recommends adding customer-referencing "you" and firm-referencing "we"

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).

Together, this suggests that customer service managers and firm agents believe that

agents should emphasize "you" (the customer) and "we" (the firm) pronouns, but de-emphasize

"I" (the agent) pronouns in customer-firm interactions. If true, firm agent responses to customers

in the field should conform to this pattern. We tested this idea in three pilot studies, which we report briefly below (see Web Appendix for full details).

Pilot Study 1A. Participants in an American web panel who worked as a customer service manager or agent read a customer email, and were then presented with two versions of an agent response. In one version, the agent referred to the speaker using "we" pronouns (e.g., "We are happy to help answer this question."); in the other, the agent used "I" pronouns (e.g., "I am happy to help answer this question."). Service managers and agents preferred the "we" over the "I" version (managers: 91.8% vs. chance, $\chi^2(1, N = 67) = 55.54$, $p < .001$; agents: 88.3% vs. chance, $\chi^2(1, N = 179) = 118.79$, $p < .001$).

Pilot Study 1B. A second set of customer service manager and agent participants from the same panel were presented with a different pair of agent responses to a customer email. The responses varied only in whether the agent explicitly referenced "you" the customer (e.g., "Happy to answer your question.") or not (e.g., "Happy to answer this question."). Managers and agents preferred the response using explicit "you" pronouns (managers: 83.8% vs. chance, $\chi^2(1, N = 68) = 37.12$, $p < .001$; agents: 87.4% vs. chance, $\chi^2(1, N = 175) = 780.05$, $p < .001$).

Pilot Studies 1A and 1B suggest that customer service managers and agents believe that firm agents responding to customers should: (1) refer to themselves using "we" rather than "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 Pilot Study 1C in the Web Appendix).

Pilot Study 2. To test whether these managerial beliefs were observable in practice, we sent bogus customer emails to a random selection of 40 of the top 100 online retailers (per *Internet Retailer* magazine) and examined personal pronoun use in their responses.

One hundred percent of the responses used at least one "we" pronoun, and 97.5% used at least one "you" pronoun. In contrast, "I" pronouns appeared in fewer than half (45%) of the 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. $M_{you} = 6.04$; $t(39) = 12.35$, $p < .001$). Corroborating Pilot Studies 1A and 1B, these results indicate that customer service agents speak in a manner consistent with the belief that they should use more "we" and "you" pronouns, but fewer "I" pronouns, when interacting with customers.

Notably, these results are not consistent with how people speak normally. The pronoun use pattern observed across these 40 firms is inconsistent with three large samples of natural language use, including (a) global English speakers, (b) unstructured oral conversations, and (c) online written contexts (Samples A, B, C in Appendix Table A1). Our 40-firm sample featured a significantly higher incidence of "we" and "you" pronouns and a significantly lower incidence of "I" pronouns than these natural language samples[2], highlighting the potential uniqueness of this language pattern to professional customer service or "care" contexts. We consider the importance of context below to argue that, despite its endorsement and use in practice, the pattern of pronoun use observed in customer-firm interactions is suboptimal.

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[2] The same "unnatural" pattern of pronoun use sustained in over 1,200 emails analyzed for Study 1 (see Web Appendix Table W2), in a sample of oral (telephone) service interactions, and in responses to consumer requests for help from professional advice columnists (Appendix Table A1, Samples D and E). In contrast, consumer (i.e., non-professional) responses to requests for advice or information from other consumers showed a pronoun use pattern closer to natural language (Appendix Table A1, Sample F), suggesting that this pattern may be specific to professional or paid customer service agents.

IS CONVENTIONAL WISDOM WRONG?

As discussed, our primary hypothesis is that first person pronouns can act as a signal. We further posit that the speaker's role in the interaction will serve a critical function in determining the signal's meaning (Austin 1975; Fahnestock 2011; Goffman 1981). Specifically, in a customer-firm interaction where a consumer is receiving sales or service assistance, linguistic (Fahnestock 2011) and managerial 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 (e.g., *We* have exactly what *you're* looking for). Grammatically, this participation framework implies that the firm or agent is an actor (grammatical subject) responding to the recipient of action (grammatical object), the customer.[3] Given this dominant participation framework, what impact might variation in a firm agent's pronoun use have on customers? Because speakers can independently vary the extent to which they explicitly reference the actor ("we" or "I") and the recipient of action ("you"), we consider these pronoun categories separately below.

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

Contrary to managerial conventions of emphasizing "we" pronouns, given the participation framework of customer-firm interactions, we theorize that firm agents should emphasize "I" pronouns. Although "I" pronouns have been linked to a speaker's egotistical self-focus (Pennebaker 2011) or self-interest (e.g., Ickes, Reidhead and Pattterson 1986), the participation framework of a firm agent serving a customer renders such negative perceptions of "I" pronoun

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[3] To confirm this, two independent judges coded the 40 firm emails we collected for Pilot Study 2. 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.

use unlikely. Assuming that firm agents follow conversational norms (Grice 1991), their self-references in this context should be relevant to their role as a customer-oriented—rather than a self-interested—actor. Indeed, speaker self-references in this context may indicate that they are "centering" their attention on the listener (Fahnestock 2011; Gordon, Grosz, and Gilliom 1993). Rather than signaling self-focus, then, "I" pronoun use 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 the emotional and behavioral 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, while it is predominantly associated with negative traits or states, "I" pronoun use has been linked to the speaker's personal concern about a situation (Scherwitz, Berton, and Leventhal 1978) and attempts to understand their interaction partner (Ickes et al. 1990; Wales 1996). Prior research does not consider whether such internal states are conveyed to the listener. We suggest that "I" pronouns will signal a more personal, one-on-one actor (e.g., "I totally understand your issue."), which should increase listener perceptions of the speaker's empathy (Kogut and Ritov 2005; Small and Verrochi 2009). This effect should obtain relative to no pronouns (i.e., leaving the speaker implicit: "Totally understand your issue.") and to "we" pronouns (i.e., the exclusive "we"[4]: "We totally understand your issue."), which may signal a more impersonal, many-to-one conversation (Fahnestock 2011). In fact, firm agent use of exclusive "we" pronouns, where "we" refers to the firm and the agent, could relationally distance the agent from the customer (Fitzsimons and Kay

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[4] 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 Pilot Study 2 field data and 98% of the time in a sample (N = 100) of the Study 1 field data. Our conceptual and empirical focus is therefore on the agent's use of the exclusive "we."

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. Overall, then, firm agent use of "I" pronouns should increase customer perceptions of the agent's empathy.

Further, we expect that firm agent use of "I" pronouns will signal 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 pronouns, which may imply an anonymous, disembodied actor (e.g., "That will be taken care of right away."), and to exclusive "we" pronouns (e.g., "We will take care of that right away."), which may imply a nebulous, distant actor, "I" pronouns should enhance perceptions of firm agent agency (e.g., "I will take care of that right away."). Supporting this argument, service employees who visually present themselves as part of the larger firm entity (rather than as an individual) are seen as less personally responsible by the customer (Smith, Chandler, and Schwarz 2017). We predict, in sum, that firm agent use of "I" pronouns should increase customer perceptions of the agent's agency.

Finally, we expect increased perceptions of firm agent empathy and agency to have a positive impact on customers. Because empathy is a key dimension of service quality (Bolton and Drew 1991; Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml 1988) and 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 signals empathy, this should have positive consequences for customer satisfaction, purchase intentions, and purchase behavior. 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 signals agency, this should have

similar positive consequences.

>**H1:** Relative to no pronoun use and to "we" pronoun use, firm agent "I" pronoun use will positively affect customer satisfaction, purchase intentions, and purchase behavior.

>**H2:** The positive impact of firm agent "I" pronoun use on customers will be mediated by increased perceptions of firm agent empathy and agency.

We note that we expect empathy and agency to act as parallel, independent mediators of

the positive impact of "I" pronoun use. Prior work suggests that, similar to emotion and action

more broadly, empathy and agency are related but distinct constructs (Akitsuki and Decety 2009;

Frijda, Kuipers, and Schure 1989; Kwak et al. 2013). Likewise, in the context of customer

service, empathy and agency are critically related but separate determinants of outcomes such as

customer satisfaction (Parasuraman et al. 1988). We confirm the independence of these

constructs empirically prior to testing for mediation in our studies, and consider alternative

process models that examine them independently.

Should Firm Agents Refer to "You" the Customer?

While "you" pronouns are widely endorsed and used in practice, we suggest that this

emphasis may be misguided because of the participation framework of customer-firm

interactions. Customers who engage a firm agent for assistance have, by definition, already

established the roles in the interaction (Goffman 1981): the firm agent's role is that of an actor

focused on addressing the customer's needs (Fahnestock 2011). While the agent can choose

whether to 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 or "your,"

the customer's, needs. Because there is nobody but "you" (the customer) to receive the agent's

attention, we suggest that "you" pronoun use will provide little signaling value in this context, and is unlikely to affect customer perceptions of the agent's empathy or agency. The agent's customer orientation will be 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").

Consistent with our view, research in advertising has found signaling effects of "you" pronouns only under specific circumstances. "You" pronouns have positive effects in ads only when customers are not involved in the firm's message (Burnkrant and Unnava 1995), which is unlikely when customers engage a firm agent. Further, for "you" pronouns to be effective in ads, 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). Given this, it is not surprising that "you" pronoun use in ads commonly 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 its frequent null effects in advertising, suggests that managerial beliefs about the importance and positive effects of "you" pronouns may be misguided. Relative to a firm agent using no "you" pronouns or implicit "you" pronouns, we expect the use of explicit "you" pronouns to have no positive effect on customer satisfaction, purchase intentions, and purchase behavior.

> **H3:** Firm agent use of "you" pronouns referencing the customer as the recipient of the agent's attention will not affect customer satisfaction, purchase intentions, or purchase behavior.

Empirical Investigation

Six studies use field data and laboratory experiments to test our predictions. Study 1 reveals a positive impact of firm agent "I"—but not "we" or "you"—pronoun use on purchase

behavior in the field, examining over 1,200 customer-firm email interactions (H1). Using

experiments, Studies 2-4 show that, contrary to conventional beliefs and practice, firm agent "I"

pronoun use enhances customer satisfaction and purchase intentions relative to "we" pronoun use

and to no pronoun use (H1). Via mediation and moderation, Studies 3 and 4 test perceptions of

empathy and agency as underlying drivers of these effects (H2). Studies 5A-D examine whether

managerial beliefs about the importance of customer-referencing "you" pronouns are misguided.

As predicted, we find no positive effects of "you" pronoun use on customer satisfaction or

purchase intentions in our customer-firm interaction context (H3), despite concerted efforts to

reject the null (e.g., large samples, use of a moderator that should enhance the impact of "you").

However, in Study 5A, we identify a boundary condition that leads to negative effects of "you"

pronouns: when the dominant participation framework in this context is violated, "you" pronoun

use decreases customer satisfaction and purchase intentions.

STUDY 1: THE IMPACT OF PERSONAL PRONOUN USE ON PURCHASES AFTER REAL CUSTOMER SERVICE INTERACTIONS

Study 1 provides an additional assessment of firm agents' personal pronoun use in practice,

and an initial examination of the impact of such pronoun use on customer purchase behavior

analyzing over 1,200 customer-firm email interactions. Using field data allows us to establish

external validity for the potential importance of pronoun use, and to account for limitations not

easily addressed in our subsequent experiments. First, compared to our controlled experimental

stimuli, our field data show heterogeneity in language use (beyond personal pronouns) at the

individual (e.g., language complexity) and dyadic levels (e.g., interaction topic). Second, while

our experiments hold the customer's initial inquiry fixed, since personal pronouns may help

establish the participation framework in an interaction, the pronouns used by the customer in

their initial email (e.g., "*I'd* like the bill please?" vs. "Can *you* bring the bill please?") are likely

to affect the pronouns used by the agent in reply (Goffman 1981; Gordon et al. 1993). Study 1

addresses this issue by accounting for the interaction between the customer's pronoun use (e.g.,

"I" pronouns) in their initial inquiry to the firm and the firm agent's use of the same personal

pronoun category in reply. As in our hypothesizing and our subsequent experiments, we analyze

the effects of firm agents' pronoun use independently for each pronoun category ("I", "we",

"you").

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.[5] 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). This content was not removed as it was 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.

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[5] 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.

We used Linguistic Inquire and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker et al. 2007) to measure the customer and the firm agent's pronoun use. For analysis, we considered only the initial customer email and the agent's response. This replicates the interactions examined in our experiments 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 email 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.

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

Results

Pronoun Use. Similar to the pronoun use pattern observed across the 40 firms in Pilot Study 2, firm agents in this study used "I" pronouns significantly less often as a proportion of words than "we" or "you" pronouns ($M_I = 1.83$ vs. $M_{we} = 3.11$; $t(1277) = 8.21$, $p < .001$; $M_I = 1.83$ vs. $M_{you} = 6.28$; $t(1277) = 26.01$, $p < .001$). See Web Appendix Table W2 for further details.

Impact of Pronoun Use on Purchases. We report the results for each pronoun category below, 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, ts > 15.30, ps < .001).

"I" Model. We found the predicted positive effect of the firm agent's use of "I" pronouns (B = 1245.76, t = 4.86, p < .001) 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 < .001) and the expected interaction between customer and agent use of "I" pronouns (B = 210.00, t = 4.63, p < .001). To sum, firm agent use of "I" pronouns was linked to increased customer purchase volume.

"We" Model. We observed a null effect for the firm agent's use of "we" pronouns (B = -201.75, t = -1.34, p = .18) on customer purchases, after controlling for a non-significant effect of customer use of "we" pronouns (B = -377.83, t = 1.37, p = .17) and a null interaction between customer and firm "we" pronoun use (B = 87.41, t = .87, p = .39). Firm agent use of "we" pronouns had no observable relationship with customer purchases.

"You" Model. We found a null effect of the firm agent's use of "you" pronouns (B = 108.54, t = 0.98, p = .33) on customer purchases, 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). To sum, controlling for the customer's prior pronoun use, the firm agent's use of pronouns had no affect on customer purchase volume. While outside the scope of the present research, we consider the potentially interesting main effect and interaction for *customer* use of "you" pronouns in the future research section of the general discussion.

Discussion

Contrary to conventional wisdom, these results show that greater firm agent use of self-referencing "I" pronouns during a customer-firm interaction predict increased customer purchases after the interaction. In contrast, firm agent use of self-referencing "we" pronouns and of customer-referencing "you" pronouns had null effects on customer purchases.

As in most field data studies, we cannot assert causality as customers are not randomly assigned to treatment. However, several factors support a causal relationship. First, the temporal sequence of the independent variable (pronoun use during the interaction) and the dependent variable (post-interaction purchases) rules out reverse causality. Second, our use of panel data before and after the interaction helps control for selection issues related to purchase behavior (Manchanda, Packard, and Pattabhiramaiah 2013). Third, supplementary analysis presented in the Web Appendix shows the effect is robust to several covariates, reducing the likelihood that other factors explain these results. However, it remains possible that other, unobservable variables are driving these effects. Thus, our next four studies use experiments to establish causality and to explore the process underlying the impact of firm agent pronoun use.

STUDY 2: THE IMPACT OF "I" VS. "WE" PRONOUNS USING REAL AGENT RESPONSES

Study 2 uses an experiment to explore the effects of firm agents' personal pronoun use. We examine whether firm agents' use of "I" versus "we" pronouns affects customer satisfaction with the agent, as well as their purchase intentions towards the firm (H1). Using email responses from six of the companies in Pilot Study 2, we test the impact of replacing "we" with "I" pronouns.

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 70 participants per interaction.

Our stimuli used the real firm agent responses from six of the firms in Pilot Study 2. The six firm responses were chosen to represent a cross-section of industries and the pronoun use patterns observed across the original 40 firms (see Table 1 and Web Appendix Table W5). 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 response, where "we" pronouns predominated, or a modified response, where "we" pronouns were replaced with "I" pronouns when this did not change the meaning of the sentence. For example, "We are happy to help answer your question (…). We thank you for understanding" was changed to "I am happy to help answer your question (…). I thank you for understanding."[6] Sample stimuli is 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 ("I" or "we") 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" (reverse item), "How satisfied are you with

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[6] In contrast, phrases such as, "We do not offer international shipping" were 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 constraint further in the General Discussion.

the quality of service provided by this person?"; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; α = .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" (reverse item); 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; α = .80). When

combined, the satisfaction and intentions items also showed high reliability (six-item α = .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.[7]

Results

A one-way ANOVA supported the predicted main effect across the six firm replicates.

Compared to firm agent responses using "we" pronouns, responses using "I" pronouns increased

satisfaction (M_{We} = 4.48 vs. M_I = 5.32; $F(1, 405)$ = 39.95, $p < .001$) and purchase intentions

(M_{We} = 4.40 vs. M_I = 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 ($Fs < 1$). We also found no effects for

interaction type (i.e., inquiry or complaint; $Fs < 1.3$, $ps > .25$), so we discuss it no further. Means

and statistical tests for each firm independently are presented in Table 1.

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[7] We also considered a model following the "spreading activation" paradigm (Collins and Loftus 1975) in which pronoun use impacts satisfaction with the agent, which subsequently drives intentions towards the firm. However, model comparison using SEM revealed inferior fit for the sequential model relative to our simpler model combining satisfaction and intentions for each of the five experimental tests of our main hypothesis (H1). Web Appendix Table W6 summarizes these results.

TABLE 1: REPLACING "WE" WITH "I" PRONOUNS ACROSS
SIX REAL AGENT RESPONSES ENHANCES FIRM OUTCOMES

Firm	Product Category	Interaction	Satisfaction with Firm Agent			Purchase Intention		
			"We"	"I"	t-stat	"We"	"I"	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

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

Alternative Explanations. If "I" pronoun use by firm agents is unexpected or atypical, these results might be explained by expectancy violations (Kronrod et al. 2011). To assess this, we conducted a post-test using a separate sample from the same participant pool. Firm agent "I" responses were not perceived to be less typical, standard, or expected than "we" responses (α = .87; Kronrod et al. 2011; see Web Appendix Table W7), ruling against this alternative.

Discussion

Using an experiment, Study 2 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 responses from six firms across different product categories, and held despite other variation in linguistic content across these responses.

STUDY 3: THE IMPACT OF "I", "WE", AND NO PRONOUNS USING CONTROLLED STIMULI

While Study 2 demonstrated that firm agent use of "I" pronouns outperforms "we" pronouns, 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 3 tests the impact of

"I" pronouns (e.g. "I'm happy to help!") relative to "we" pronouns (e.g., "We're happy to help!")

and relative to an implicit, no-pronouns control condition (e.g., "Happy to help!"). Study 3 also

seeks initial evidence for our hypothesis (H2) 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 not yet received. Participants saw a firm agent response that used

either "I" pronouns, "we" pronouns, or no pronouns. For example, the agent said, "I (We) found

that the order is leaving the warehouse" or simply said, "The order is leaving the warehouse."

Full stimuli are presented in the Appendix.

Participants indicated their satisfaction and purchase intentions using the same six items as

Study 2 (α = .92). They were next asked to rate the firm agent's empathy toward themselves

(understanding, empathetic, concerned; α = .90) and agency on their behalf (acts on my behalf,

tries hard to help, takes initiative for me; α = .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 examining empathy and agency as distinct 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 ($M = 4.38$, $F(1,$

$156) = 12.16$, $p < .001$), which did not differ from one another ($F(1, 156) = 2.38$, $p = .12$).

FIGURE 1: FIRM AGENT "I" PRONOUN USE INCREASES CUSTOMER
SATISFACTION AND PURCHASE INTENTIONS
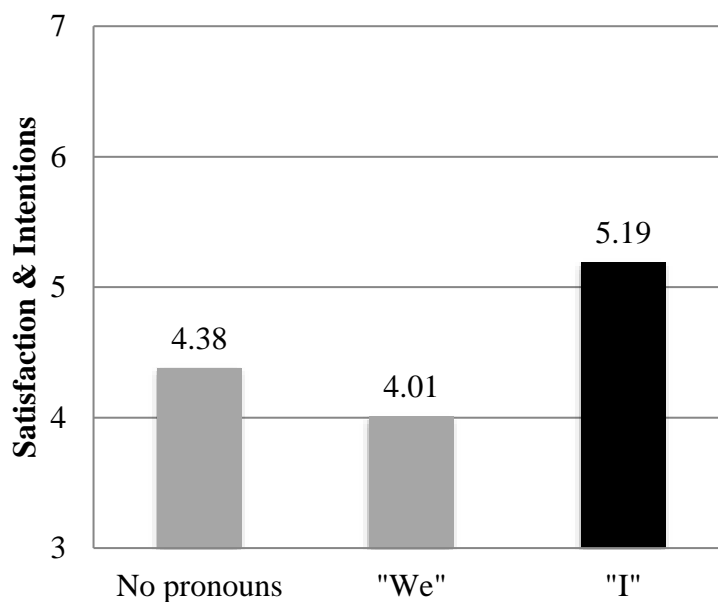
Process. We assessed the firm agent empathy and agency measures as parallel mediators of

the impact of firm agent "I" pronoun use (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" relative to the "we" condition (Empathy CI: .04–.49, $p < .05$; Agency CI: .04–.55, $p < .05$) and to the no-pronouns control condition (Empathy CI: .06–.50, $p < .05$; Agency CI: .06–.51, $p < .05$).[8]

Alternative Explanations. As in Study 2, we considered whether language expectations or typicality affected the results (three item $\alpha = .90$). We found no variation in typicality across conditions in the present study ($F < 1$). We also tested whether the agent's use of "I" pronouns was seen as more casual or familiar than their use of "we" pronouns or no pronouns (seven point scales). There was no significant variation in these perceptions by condition ($F < 1$) and the results above held when these perceptions were included in the model as covariates.

Discussion

By employing a no-pronouns control condition, Study 3 shows that our findings stem from positive effects of "I" pronoun use on customer satisfaction and purchase intentions rather than negative effects of "we" pronoun use. Differential perceptions of firm agent agency and empathy underlie the positive effects of "I" pronoun use.

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[8] While prior literature and CFA support our process model, we also considered several alternatives (empathy or agency only, empathy or agency combined, sequential empathy and agency). Alternatives provide either reduced fit or no change in fit relative to our conceptually and statistically supported model. Further details are available from the authors.

STUDY 4: MANIPULATING THE MEDIATOR OF THE "I" VS. "WE" EFFECT

Study 4 provides further evidence for our underlying process and demonstrates a boundary condition for the positive effect of "I" pronoun use by manipulating our mediating variables. Specifically, we provide a cue other than pronoun use to signal agency and empathy. Explicit cues of an agent's attributes—for example, prior evidence of their trustworthiness—have a strong impact on customer's attitudes and intentions toward the persuasion 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 signaling these attributes is available, this should attenuate the benefits of "I" pronoun use. Manipulating 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).

In addition, Study 4 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 customer.

Participants, Design, and Procedure

Canadian undergraduate students (N = 159) completed the study for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (pronoun use: I, we) x 2 (empathy and agency cue: no, yes) between-subjects design. They imagined they were shopping at a favorite store for new jeans, when they were approached by a salesperson they had interacted with 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."[9] Participants imagined telling the sales agent they were interested in new jeans; the salesperson responded using "I" or "we" pronouns (e.g., "There's a lot of great stuff I (we) can show you right now." See Web Appendix for stimuli.).

We then measured satisfaction and purchase intentions ($\alpha = .90$), language typicality ($\alpha = .91$), formality, and familiarity as in prior studies.

Results

A one-way ANOVA on the satisfaction and intentions dependent measure revealed the predicted interaction of cue and pronoun use ($F(1, 155) = 4.33$, $p < .05$), with no main effect of cue ($F(1, 155) = 2.36$, $p = .13$) or pronoun use ($F(1, 155) = 1.48$, $p = .23$). 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 purchase intentions than "we" pronouns ($M = 5.57$; $F(1, 155) = 5.48$, $p = .02$). However, when participants received an alternate cue that the salesperson was empathetic and agentic, the positive impact of "I" (vs. "we") pronouns was attenuated ($M_\text{I} = 5.96$ vs. $M_\text{we} = 6.09$; $F < 1$).[10]

Alternative Explanations. Although language typicality did not vary across conditions in earlier studies, in Study 4, the language in the "I" pronoun condition was seen as less typical ($M = 4.84$) than the language in the "we" pronoun condition ($M = 5.52$; $F(1, 155) = 12.04$, $p < .01$). When typicality was included as a covariate in the omnibus ANOVA, however, the key

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[9] A pre-test using a different sample from the same participant pool ($N = 45$) confirmed that this cue increased perceptions of the salesperson's empathy and agency compared to the no cue condition (Empathy: $M_\text{cue} = 5.90$ vs. $M_\text{no cue} = 5.24$, $F(1, 43) = 4.69$, $p < .05$; Agency: $M_\text{cue} = 5.81$ vs. $M_\text{no cue} = 5.00$, $F(1, 43) = 4.75$, $p < .05$).
[10] We replicated these results in a version of Study 4 in which we attempted to manipulate agency and empathy independently (Web Appendix Study 4B). Although manipulation checks found crossover effects between the independent agency and empathy cues, each of the cues alone were sufficient to attenuate the positive effect of "I" pronoun use. We observed no differences in the extent to which either cue attenuated the effect, and no apparent bolstering of the attenuation effect due to the simultaneous presence of both cues.

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 ($F < 1$). Further, neither perceived casualness nor familiarity of the agent's language differed by pronoun condition ($Fs < 1$).

Discussion

Study 4 replicated the positive effects of firm agents' use of "I" pronouns on customer satisfaction and purchase intentions, 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 for the positive effects of "I" pronouns: if customers have an alternate cue of a firm agent's empathy and agency, pronoun use may have little effect on perceptions of the agent.

Thus far, in contrast to conventional wisdom, field data and three experiments have shown that "I" (the agent) pronouns enhance customer outcomes over "we" (the firm) pronouns. We now examine how "you" (the customer) pronouns impact these outcomes.

STUDIES 5A-D: NULL (AND SOMETIMES NEGATIVE) EFFECTS OF "YOU" PRONOUN USE

Study 5A provides a first experimental test of our hypothesized null effect for a firm agent's use of "you" pronouns, following initial evidence from the field study (Study 1).

We also examine a moderator that we predict may lead to detrimental effects for "you" pronoun use. Specifically, we consider a case in which "you" pronoun use does not conform to the participation framework of a customer-firm interaction: when a firm agent uses "you" pronouns to refer to the customer as the grammatical subject or actor (e.g., "If you have your

username, you can look into the account.") rather than as the grammatical object or recipient of action (e.g., "If your username is available, your account can be looked into.").

This pronoun use pattern would break the dominant participation framework of a customer service interaction (Grice 1991; Goffman 1981), shifting responsibility from the agent to the customer and suggesting that the agent does not care about the customer (Fahnestock 2011; Ringberg, Odekerken-Schroder, and Christensen 2007). Thus, we predict that firm agents who use subject "you" pronouns will be perceived as less agentic and empathetic. In turn, these negative perceptions of agent empathy and agency should have a negative impact on customer satisfaction and purchase intentions.

Participants, Design, and Procedure

To increase our power in testing for null effects, we recruited a large sample of Americans (N = 451) from a paid online panel. Participants imagined that they had emailed a company about a product return. They then 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; "If you have your username, you can look into the account…"), (b) the grammatical object (the recipient of action; "If your username is available, your account can be looked into…"), or (c) used no "you" pronouns (control; "If the username is available, the account can be looked into…"; see Web Appendix for full stimuli).

Participants then indicated their satisfaction and purchase intentions ($\alpha = .90$), agent empathy ($\alpha = .93$) and agency ($\alpha = .95$) perceptions, language typicality ($\alpha = .89$), casualness, and familiarity, as in prior studies.

Results

A one-way ANOVA revealed significant variation in satisfaction and intentions across conditions ($F(2, 448) = 4.37$, $p = .01$). As predicted (H3), there was no effect of using "you" pronouns to refer to the customer as the object (i.e., consistent with our participation framework), relative to the no-pronouns control condition ($M_{object} = 4.88$ vs. $M_{control} = 4.70$; $F(1, 448) = 1.34$, $p = .25$). However, we observed the predicted negative effect of using "you" pronouns to refer to 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 to the no-pronouns control condition ($M_{subject} = 4.41$ 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 effect on perceptions of the agent's empathy or agency (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, $p < .05$).

Alternative Explanations. As in prior studies, neither language typicality nor familiarity varied across conditions ($Fs < 1.25$, $ps > .25$). Participants did find the language in the "you" subject condition more casual ($M = 5.26$) than the language in the "you" object condition ($M = 4.79$; $F(1, 448) = 7.72$, $p < .01$) and the no-pronouns control condition ($M = 4.89$; $F(1, 448) =$

4.89, $p < .05$). However, the pattern of results reported above held when language casualness was included in the model as a covariate.

Discussion

Contrary to manager and consumer beliefs, "you" pronouns used in a manner consistent with our participation framework (object use) did not have a beneficial effect on customer satisfaction, purchase intentions, or on perceptions of the firm agent's empathy or agency.

Further, Study 5A shows 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, suggesting that agents should *avoid* referring to the customer as an actor (subject) where possible.[12] Using "you" pronouns in a manner that violates the dominant participation framework negatively impacts customer satisfaction and purchase intentions because it decreases perceptions of firm agent empathy and agency.

Replications: Studies 5B-D

Given concerns about empirical support for null hypotheses (Greenwald 1975), we conducted three additional studies that attempted to reject our null prediction for "you" pronouns when they are used in a manner consistent with the dominant customer-firm participant framework. Full study descriptions, methods, analyses, and discussions for these replications are presented in the Web Appendix.

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[12] As noted in footnote 3, this "violation" occurred for roughly 25% of "you" uses in a sample from Study 1 data.

Study 5B examined "you" pronouns using new language stimuli and a different customer service context (garment alterations rather than a product return). Results wholly replicated Study 5A in terms of the dependent measures and the underlying process.

Study 5C used language stimuli that had shown positive effects of pronoun use in Study 3, and employed a third context (order status). To provide an even more robust test of our null prediction, it also incorporated a linguistic moderator—verb voice—that should bolster any potential positive effects of "you" pronouns (Johnson-Laird 1968; Penelope 1990). Results again showed no differences in satisfaction, purchase intentions, or perceived empathy or agency for "you" pronoun use across conditions.

Study 5D independently manipulated both firm agent use of "you" customer-referencing and "I" agent self-referencing pronouns to assess their impact on customer satisfaction and intentions within the same experiment. This study fully replicated our prior findings for both "you" (null or negative effect) and "I" pronouns (positive effect).

Taken together, in field data including over 1,200 customer service interactions and in four experiments including over 1,600 participants, we observed null—and sometimes negative— effects for firm agents' use of "you" (the customer) pronouns.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Prevailing managerial theory holds that in customer service interactions, frontline sales and service agents should emphasize how "we" (the firm) can serve "you" (the customer). This intuition was confirmed in surveys of firm agents and managers (Pilot Studies 1A and 1B, Web Appendix Pilot Study 1C), and its practice was verified in the field (Pilot Study 2, Study 1). 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. In contrast, we showed that firm agents' use of "I" pronouns positively impacts customer satisfaction, purchase intentions, and purchase behavior (Studies 1, 3, and 4; Web Appendix Studies 3B and 4B).[11] 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 (email vs. in-person), and in lab and field settings, attesting to their generalizability.

Contributions and Implications

This research makes several contributions. Most centrally, it contributes to linguistic psychology by revealing the signaling potential of a speaker's "I" pronoun use. While researchers have extensively considered "I" pronouns for their reflective potential (Pennebaker 2011), we demonstrate that a speaker's use of pronouns can send important signals to listeners. Importantly, this work also reveals that social perceptions generated from personal pronoun use can spill over to a larger social entity that the speaker represents (e.g., the firm).

Second, we demonstrate the psychological process underlying these effects, showing that they stem from perceptions that the speaker feels (empathy) and acts (agency) on the listener's behalf. In doing so, we reveal that social cognitions central to both interpersonal relationships (Ahearn 2001; Davis 1994) and customer-firm relationships (Parasuraman et al. 1991, 1998; Singh and Sirdeshmukh 2000) are driven not only by actions, but also by subtle variations in whether and how interactants-- here, a speaker and listener-- are referenced through words.

Third, we identify linguistic and situated factors that moderate the signaling effects of firm agent personal pronoun use. We argue that by carefully considering the interaction context (i.e.,

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[11]We 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 5D).

participation framework), a word category that is generally associated with negative traits or states (first person singular "I" pronouns; Pennebaker 2011) can be predicted to actually help, rather than hurt, perceptions of the speaker. Furthermore, we consider whether other cues of the speaker's attributes and linguistic cues that accompany pronoun use (e.g., "you" as subject vs. object, verb voice) shift their effects. While we find robust effects for "I" pronoun use in our participation framework overall, the present research demonstrates the importance of contextual factors in personal pronoun signaling.

Taken together, these insights expand our understanding of the impact of language in social cognition and persuasion, and add to a growing literature on the impact of language in consumer settings (Moore 2012, 2015; Packard and Berger 2017; Sela et al. 2012).

Beyond its contributions to psychology and marketing, the present research offers clear managerial implications. Given the gap between managerial practices and the current findings, marketers should consider how they might improve the "speaking terms" their employees use when referring to themselves and to customers. Specifically, firms should train customer-facing employees to emphasize the self ("I") over the firm ("we") where feasible, and to exercise caution in their use of "you" (the customer) pronouns (see Appendix Table A2).

Indeed, firms might benefit substantially from re-training employees: analysis of our field data (Study 1) shows 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 use "I" rather than "we" pronouns, our field data indicates that this shift could be achieved in nearly 90% of "we" pronoun cases (see footnote 6), suggesting a potential gain in revenue of up to 7% simply by altering agent language use. How might firms alter their agent's language? Beyond updating formal training guidelines, firm agent "I" pronoun use might increase if, for

example, agents are encouraged to think of themselves as personally involved in the customer's

needs, rather than acting as impersonal agents of the firm.

Overall, the recommendation that employees should emphasize the self over the firm may

seem counterintuitive, particularly in light of work illustrating the dangers that close customer-

employee relationships present for firms (Palmatier, Scheer, and Steenkamp 2007). However,

our results show that the positive effects of firm agent "I" pronoun use affect not only customer

perceptions of and satisfaction with the agent, but that these effects spill over to intended and

actual purchases from the firm.

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, our results should 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 1 found a pronoun use pattern similar to that

observed in email interactions (Appendix Table A1, 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 also opens the door to a variety of further examinations of language use—and 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 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). We also expect some contexts could moderate whether perceived agency or empathy is the principal underlying driver of "I" pronoun effects. For example, there are likely contexts in which an agent is expected or constrained to little or no action beyond listening to and empathetically appreciating the customer's situation.

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 2017; Moore and McFerran 2017). Researchers may also fruitfully examine how the use of explicit versus implicit pronouns impacts the listener's processing effort. While hearing "I am glad to help you" requires the processing of 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) action is taken by a

group/entity rather than an individual. Independent judges examined a sample (N = 200) from the Study 1 field data and found that this boundary occurred in approximately one in five (17.7%) of the "we" pronoun use occasions.[12] Regardless, given firm agent's infrequent use of "I" pronouns and the ease of substituting "I" for "we" pronouns, at a minimum, firms should encourage agents to refer to the self more 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 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 1 and 5A-D[13] suggest that the probability of a null effect for "you" use is over 100 times more likely than the alternative that there is an effect of "you" pronoun use across these studies, indicating extreme evidence for the null. We hope future research seeks to identify instances where "you" use achieves the positive outcomes endorsed 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 2011; Rudick and O'Flahavan 2002) suggest that this may be strategic,[14] 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

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

[13] We excluded Study 5's and Web Appendix Study 5C's "you" as grammatical subject condition from this analysis as it is inconsistent with the dominant participation framework we examine.

[14] See also Pilot 1C in the Web Appendix.

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 customers' personal pronoun use may indicate their mindset. Specifically, the finding that customer "you" pronoun use negatively moderates the effect of firm agent "you" pronoun use (Study 1) 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—offers a prime avenue for future research. While firms are increasingly interested in assessing consumer sentiment through the emotional tone of online chatter (Henschen 2012), measures of customer pronoun use were stronger predictors of purchase outcomes in the Study 1 field data than LIWC's positive and negative emotion measures,[15] which are similar to measures used in sentiment analysis.

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

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[15] See Study 1 Robustness and Supplementary Analyses in the Web Appendix.

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APPENDIX

STIMULI: STUDY 2

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:

Pronoun condition	Firm Agent Response
We	Hi [Participant first name], Thank you for contacting Shopsite.com regarding international shipping and returns. We are glad to review this matter for you. 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], we 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
I	Hi [Participant first name], Thank you for contacting Shopsite.com regarding international shipping and returns. I am glad to review this matter for you.

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

STIMULI: STUDY 3

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--

Pronoun condition	Firm Agent Response
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.

[Stimuli for all remaining studies are presented in the Web Appendix.]

TABLE A1: FIRM AGENT PRONOUN USE DIFFERS FROM 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" "You" "We"	0.94 6.04 4.83		
Comparison Samples					
A. English language global mean (N = 721,726)	Pennebaker et al. (2007)	"I" "You" "We"	5.72 1.18 0.76	17.99 -14.57 -9.06	*** *** ***
B. Oral conversation in un-structured real world settings (N = 2,014)	Pennebaker et al. (2007)	"I" "You" "We"	6.30 3.94 1.09	-- -- --	^ ^ ^
C. Writing by Internet-based bloggers and posters (N = 9,537)	Pennebaker et al. (2007)	"I" "You" "We"	6.42 1.23 0.88	-- -- --	^ ^ ^
D. Oral firm agent responses to real customer telephone inquiries (N = 95)	Firm used in Study 1	"I" "You" "We"	3.78 7.03 1.09	9.54 17.57 0.54	*** ***
E. Written responses to questions asked of syndicated advice columnists (N = 80)[#]	Four syndicated advice columns	"I" "You" "We"	1.59 5.67 0.20	1.99 11.91 -2.67	* *** **
F. Written responses to questions posted on Internet-based forums (N = 108)	Online parenting forum	"I" "You" "We"	5.21 2.51 0.82	5.85 3.97 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 A2: EXAMPLES OF COMMON VERSUS RECOMMENDED PRONOUN
USE IN CUSTOMER SERVICE INTERACTIONS

CURRENT: How people think firm agents should speak to customers (Pilot studies) and how they actually tend to speak to customers (Pilot 2, Study 1).		**RECOMMENDED: How the present research suggests firm agents should speak to customers (Studies 2-5)**
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 "you" pronoun use even when referring 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, since the null effect suggests that customer referencing is unlikely to negatively impact outcomes under the given participation framework, it may be used where doing so seems natural (e.g., *"I will find that product for you."*).

WEB APPENDIX

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. STIMULI FOR PILOT STUDIES 1A & 1B

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?

[Pilot Study 1A ("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.

[Pilot Study 1B ("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.

2. STUDY 1 ROBUSTNESS AND SUPPLEMENTARY ANALYSIS

This section assesses the robustness of the results of Study 1 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 1, 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 ($P_{i,post}$) 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

$$P_{i,post} = \alpha Cust\_Pronoun_{ic} + \beta Firm\_Pronoun_{ic} + \alpha\beta + z_i + \varepsilon_i \qquad (1)$$

where Cust_Pronoun$_{ic}$ and Firm_Pronoun$_{ic}$ represent the LIWC pronoun categories (see table W1) 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 ε_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.[16]

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).

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[16] 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.

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 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 W2. 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 W3. 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 W4 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 (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 again 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 1, 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. 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.

TABLE W1: 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 W2: SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR
REGRESSION MODEL TERMS (STUDY 1)

	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 W3: CORRELATIONS IN PRONOUN USE
IN REAL CUSTOMER SERVICE INTERACTIONS (STUDY 1)

		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 W4: ROBUSTNESS MODEL RESULTS INCLUDING COVARIATES (STUDY 1)

	(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)	+
αCust_pronoun$_{c = "I"}$	692.5	(117.3)	***						
βFirm_pronoun$_{c = "I"}$	1236.3	(267.1)	***						
$\alpha\beta_{c = "I"}$	226.1	(49.4)	***						
αCust_pronoun$_{c = "You"}$				-483.4	(139.2)	***			
βFirm_pronoun$_{c = "You"}$				68.3	(127.6)				
$\alpha\beta_{c = "You"}$				-68.6	(38.5)	+			
αCust_pronoun$_{c = "We"}$							-387.8	(312.0)	
βFirm_pronoun$_{c = "We"}$							-129.8	(181.6)	
$\alpha\beta_{c = "We"}$							79.8	(114.0)	
Covariates									
$P_{i,pre}$	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.

3. *STUDY 2 ADDITIONAL TABLES*

TABLE W5: SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR REAL AND
MODIFIED FIRM AGENT RESPONSES (STUDY 2)

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 2 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 (Pilot 2) and reduced (Study 2) samples. Panel B of the 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 in Tables A1 and W2.

TABLE W6: MODEL FIT FOR COMBINED SATISFACTION AND INTENTIONS
DEPENDENT MEASURE VERSUS A SEQUENTIAL MODEL

Study	N	Model Description	IV	Chi-Square	DF	p	NFI	CFI
2	418	IV -> Sat/Intent	I vs. we	49.80	2	<.001	0.973	0.973
2	418	IV -> Sat -> Intent	I vs. we	378.92	9	<.001	0.791	0.793
2		**Difference Test**		**329.11**	**7**	<.001		
3	104	IV -> Sat/Intent	I vs. we	35.77	2	<.001	0.940	0.941
3	104	IV -> Sat -> Intent	I vs. we	120.72	9	<.001	0.797	0.805
3		**Difference Test**		**84.95**	**7**	<.001		
3	109	IV -> Sat/Intent	I vs. control	37.08	2	<.001	0.940	0.941
3	109	IV -> Sat -> Intent	I vs. control	147.97	9	<.001	0.762	0.766
3		**Difference Test**		**110.89**	**7**	<.001		
4	80	IV -> Sat/Intent	I vs. we (no cue)	16.92	2	<.001	0.955	0.958
4	80	IV -> Sat -> Intent	I vs. we (no cue)	73.80	9	<.001	0.803	0.817
4		**Difference Test**		**56.88**	**7**	<.001		
5D	211	IV -> Sat/Intent	I vs. control	86.10	2	<.001	0.936	0.936
5D	211	IV -> Sat -> Intent	I vs. control	280.44	9	<.001	0.791	0.794
5D		**Difference Test**		**194.34**	**7**	<.001		
Meta	922	IV -> Sat/Intent	I vs. we or control	212.46	2	<.001	0.952	0.952
Meta	922	IV -> Sat -> Intent	I vs. we or control	870.93	9	<.001	0.803	0.804
Meta		**Difference Test**		**658.47**	**7**	<.001		

Note: "IV -> Sat/Intent" represents the main model as examined in the paper, where pronoun use impacts customer satisfaction and purchase intentions as a combined six-item index. "IV -> Sat -> Intent" represents a spreading activation model in which pronoun use impacts customer satisfaction (three-item measure), which subsequently impacts purchase intentions (three-item measure). Smaller Chi-Square statistic and larger NFI and CFI values indicate a better fitting model.

TABLE W7: LANGUAGE TYPICALITY MEANS
AND STATISTICAL TESTS (STUDY 2)

Firm email	"I" condition typicality	"We" condition 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.

4. STIMULI FOR STUDIES 4 AND 5

Study 4 Stimuli

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--

Pronoun condition	Firm Agent Response
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 5 Stimuli

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--

You pronoun condition	Firm Agent Response
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.

5. PILOT STUDY 1C: REPLICATING BELIEFS ABOUT FIRM AGENT PRONOUN USE WITH SCALE MEASURES

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 Tables W8 and W9.

TABLE W8: MANAGERS, SERVICE REPS AND CONSUMERS ALL THINK AGENTS *SHOULD* REFERENCE "YOU" (THE CUSTOMER) AND "WE" (THE FIRM) MORE THAN "I" (THE AGENT (PILOT 1C)

| Sample | N | Firm agents SHOULD talk about… | | |
		…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 W9: MANAGERS, SERVICE REPS AND CONSUMERS ALL THINK AGENTS *DO* REFERENCE "YOU" (THE CUSTOMER) AND "WE" (THE FIRM) MORE THAN "I" (THE AGENT (PILOT 1C)

| Sample | n | Firm agents DO talk about… | | |
		…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.

6. STUDY 4B: REPLICATION ATTEMPTING TO INDEPENDENTLY MANIPULATE THE MEDIATORS OF THE "I" EFFECT

Study 4B replicates our test of a boundary condition for the positive effect of "I" pronoun use while manipulating our two mediating variables independently, in addition to simultaneously (as in Study 4). While Study 3 demonstrated that agency and empathy both simultaneously mediate the relationship between "I" pronoun use and customer attitudes and intentions using scale measures, adding conditions to the Study 4 design in which we cue either agency or empathy (but not both) provides an additional test of whether one cue differentially drives the effect. Similar to Study 4, we predict that the presence of an alternate cue of agency and (or) empathy should attenuate the benefits of "I" pronoun use relative to "we" pronouns.

Participants, Design, and Procedure

American participants (N = 413) from an online panel completed the study for a small cash payment. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (pronoun: I, we) x 4 (cue: agency, empathy, both, none) between-subjects design. As in Study 4, participants imagined they were approached by a salesperson at a jeans store they've had before. Participants imagined telling the sales agent they were interested in some new jeans, and then received the agent's reply. Stimuli was identical to the conditions described in Study 4 with the exception of the new independent cue conditions. In the empathy cue conditions, participants also read the following about the agent-- "She always seems to understand you and genuinely care about you." In the agency cue conditions, participants read, "She always seems to go out of her way to assist you and really takes the initiative to help you."

We measured customer satisfaction, purchase intentions, and perceptions of firm agency and empathy in the same manner as prior studies.

Results

Manipulation checks. Confirmatory factor analysis again supported treating empathy (α = .89) and agency (α = .86) as separate factors ($\Delta\chi^2(1)$ = 100.56, p < .001).

In the agency cue condition, the salesperson was seen as more agentic (Agency: $M_{agency\ cue}$ = 5.99 vs. $M_{no\ cue}$ = 5.65, $F(1, 405)$ = 6.12, p = .01) and more empathetic (Empathy: $M_{agency\ cue}$ = 5.58 vs. $M_{no\ cue}$ = 5.17, $F(1, 405)$ = 8.98, p < .01) than in the no cue condition.

In the empathy cue condition, the salesperson was seen as more empathetic (Empathy: $M_{empathy\ cue}$ = 5.63 vs. $M_{no\ cue}$ = 5.17, $F(1, 405)$ = 11.42, p < .001) and also more agentic (Agency: $M_{empathy\ cue}$ = 6.06 vs. $M_{no\ cue}$ = 5.65, $F(1, 405)$ = 8.83, p < .01) than in the no cue conditions, suggesting that the empathy cue.

In the both cues conditions, the salesperson was seen as more empathetic and agentic than in the no cue condition (Empathy: $M_{both\ cues}$ = 5.61 vs. $M_{no\ cue}$ = 5.17, $F(1, 405)$ = 10.39, p = .001; Agency: $M_{both\ cue}$ = 5.96 vs. $M_{no\ cue}$ = 5.65, $F(1, 405)$ = 5.37, p = .02).

Taken together, the manipulation check results reveal that although our empathy and agency measures load on different factors, independent cues for empathy and agency produce significant crossover in perceptions of the salesperson on these two dimensions. This result is consistent with Bandura's (1989) notion that people believe others think in a manner consistent with their behavior. In this light, it is not surprising that a salesperson who cares about customers would also be perceived to be more likely to act on their behalf (and vice versa; Akitsuki and Decety 2009; Frijda, Kuipers, and Schure 1989; Kwak et al. 2013), suggesting it may be difficult

to independently manipulate these factors without drawing attention to poor performance on the other dimension (e.g., "the salesperson was very empathetic but not agentic.").

Main results. A one-way ANOVA on the satisfaction and intentions dependent measure (α = .93) revealed the predicted interaction of cue and pronoun use ($F(3, 405) = 4.48$, $p < .01$), with no main effect for pronoun use ($F < 1$) and a main effect for the presence of a cue ($F(3, 405) = 10.53$, $p < .001$). Follow-up contrasts confirmed that the positive effect of "I" versus "we" pronoun use replicated in the no cue condition, with "I" pronouns ($M = 5.98$) generating higher satisfaction and intentions than "we" pronouns ($M = 5.40$; $F(1, 405) = 11.50$, $p < .001$).

However, when participants already had an alternate cue about the salesperson, the effect was attenuated to non-significance whether only agency was cued ($M_I = 6.16$ vs. $M_{we} = 6.20$; $F < 1$), only empathy was cued ($M_I = 6.26$ vs. $M_{we} = 6.37$; $F < 1$), or both agency and empathy were cued simultaneously ($M_I = 6.11$ vs. $M_{we} = 6.35$; $F(1, 405) = 1.91$, $p = .17$). There was also no significant variation in the relative effect of "I" versus "we" pronoun use across the three cue conditions (pronoun use by cue condition interaction; $F < 1$), suggesting that the presence of one or both cues equivalently attenuated the positive effects of "I" pronoun use.

Discussion

Study 4B again replicated the positive effects of firm agents' use of "I" pronouns on customer satisfaction and intentions towards the firm, independently manipulating the mediators to bolster our contention that perceptions of agent empathy and/or agency drive this effect. We also found no compounding effect for the simultaneous presence of both cues.

*7. STUDY 5B: REPLICATION OF THE NULL "YOU" EFFECT USING DIFFERENT STIMULI
AND THE NEGATIVE EFFECT OF VIOLATING THE PARTICIPATION FRAMEWORK*

Study 5B presents a second attempt to reject our null hypotheses for "you" pronoun use in
our participation framework (H3) using a different interaction context and language stimuli. This
study also attempts to replicate the negative effect of "you" pronoun use in a manner that violates
our dominant participation framework.

Participants, Design, and Procedure

Participants from a paid online panel imagined that they had purchased a new work outfit
that needed some alterations. After completing the measurements, the employee spoke about the
costs and pick-up arrangements, referring to "you" the customer as either (a) the grammatical
subject (the actor; "You'll pick it up when it's ready …"), (b) the grammatical object (the
recipient of action; "It'll be ready for you for pick-up…"), or (c) used no "you" pronouns
(control; "It'll be ready for pick-up …"; see Web Appendix Table W10 for full stimuli).

As in Study 5, 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 ($\alpha = .87$), agent empathy ($\alpha = .91$) and agency ($\alpha = .93$) perceptions, and language
typicality ($\alpha = .90$), casualness, and familiarity, as in prior studies.

Results

A one-way ANOVA revealed significant variation in satisfaction and intentions across
conditions ($F(2, 448) = 16.64$, $p < .001$). Replicating Study 5, there was no effect of using "you"

pronouns to refer to the customer as the object (i.e., consistent with our participation framework), relative to the no-pronouns control condition (M_{object} = 5.46 vs. $M_{control}$ = 5.35; $F(1, 448)$ = .61, p = .44). However, using "you" pronouns to refer to the customer as the subject (i.e., inconsistent with our participation framework) had a negative effect on customer satisfaction and intentions relative to the "you" object condition ($M_{subject}$ = 4.69 vs. M_{object} = 5.46; $F(1, 448)$ = 28.56, $p <$ .001) and to the no-pronouns control condition ($M_{subject}$ = 4.69 vs. $M_{control}$ = 5.35; $F(1, 448)$ = 21.03, $p < .001$).

There was similar variation in empathy and agency perceptions across conditions (omnibus empathy $F(2, 448)$ = 41.82, $p < .001$; omnibus agency $F(2, 448)$ = 46.40, $p < .001$). Firm agent use of "you" subject pronouns had negative effects on perceptions of the agent relative to object "you" pronouns (empathy $M_{subject}$ = 3.97 vs. M_{object} = 5.24, $F(1, 448)$ = 73.60 p < .001; agency $M_{subject}$ = 4.33 vs. M_{object} = 5.74, $F(1, 448)$ = 88.06, $p < .001$) and the no-pronouns control (empathy $M_{subject}$ = 3.97 vs. $M_{control}$ = 5.02, $F(1, 448)$ = 50.26, $p < .001$; agency $M_{subject}$ = 4.33 vs. $M_{control}$ = 5.32, $F(1, 448)$ = 44.10, $p < .001$). Bootstrap analysis confirms that the negative effects of subject "you" pronoun use on satisfaction and intentions are mediated by agency and empathy (Agency indirect effect = -.32, CI: -.43 to - .22, $p < .05$; Empathy indirect effect = -.11, CI: -.19 to -.04, $p < .05$).

Alternative Explanations. While perceived language typicality did not significantly vary by condition ($F(2, 466)$ = 1.73, p = .18), language casualness and familiarity did (casual $F(2, 446)$ = 8.29, $p < .001$; familiar $F(2, 446)$ = 28.15, $p < .001$). Contrasts reveal that the salesperson's language in the "you" as subject condition was perceived as significantly less casual (M = 4.35) than either the object condition (M = 4.93; $F(1, 448)$ = 11.86, $p < .001$) or control (M = 4.95; $F(1, 448)$ = 12.92, $p < .001$). Language familiarity followed a similar pattern, with the "you" as

subject condition's language seen as less familiar ($M = 4.93$) than the object condition ($M = 5.80$, $F(1, 448) = 32.04$, $p < .001$) and control ($M = 5.37$, $F(1, 448) = 8.28$, $p < .01$). These results are consistent with our expectation that using "you" pronouns referencing the customer as the principal actor (subject) violates the dominant participation framework (i.e., they are not as familiar as "you" object pronouns in this context). Nonetheless, our focal pronoun condition predictor remained significant after including language casualness and familiarity as covariates ($F(2, 448) = 8.24$, $p < .001$).

TABLE W9: STUDY 5B STIMULI

You found a new outfit for work at a clothing store, but some alternations need to be made so that it fits properly. After doing the measurements, the store employee says--

You pronoun condition	Firm Agent Response
No pronoun control	The alterations will cost $24, including tax. It will be sent out to the tailors, and then it'll be ready for pick-up in about a week. Hope it's a perfect fit! The outfit will be waiting at the special order desk on the first floor.
Object	The alterations will cost $24, including tax. It will be sent out to the tailors, and then it'll be ready for you to pick-up in about a week. Hope it's a perfect fit! The outfit will be waiting for you at the special order desk on the first floor.
Subject	The alterations will cost $24, including tax. It will be sent out to the tailors, and then you'll pick it up when it's ready in about a week. Hope it's a perfect fit! You'll find the outfit waiting at the special order desk on the first floor.

8. STUDY 5C: REPLICATION OF THE NULL "YOU" EFFECT ADAPTING STUDY 3 STIMULI AND MANIPULATING A LINGUISTIC MODERATOR

Study 5C provides an additional replication test of our hypothesized null effect for a firm agent's use of "you" pronouns following initial evidence observed in the field study (Study 1) and Studies 5 and 5B.

First, we used stimuli from a prior study (Study 3) that have shown significant effects. Second, we again used a large sample size to maximize our power to detect any potential effects. Third, we incorporated a linguistic moderator—verb voice—that should bolster any potential positive effects of "you" pronouns. When attending to customers, the firm agent could say either "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. Given that there is likely a great deal of variation in *how* firm agents refer to customers in service encounters, examining this moderator also enhances the generalizability of our results.

Participants, Design, and Procedure

Participants (N = 451) from a paid online panel were presented with either the no-pronouns control condition taken from Study 3 or one of two new conditions where the agent referenced "you" the customer using either active or passive voice (active: "Your order is leaving the warehouse"; passive: "Your order was found to be leaving the warehouse"). Full stimuli are

presented in Table W10. As in prior studies, participants reported their satisfaction and intentions

(α = .92), and perceptions of the agent's empathy (α = .93) and agency (α = .95).

Results

A one-way ANOVA found no significant differences in customer satisfaction and

intentions across the control, active "you", or passive "you" conditions ($M_{control}$ = 4.19, $M_{passive\ you}$

= 4.13, $M_{active\ you}$ = 4.13; $F < 1$). Further, there was no variation across conditions in perceptions

of agent empathy ($F(2, 448)$ = 1.21, p = .3) or agency ($F < 1$).

Replicating prior studies, "you" pronouns used in a manner consistent with the dominant

participation framework of customer-firm agent interactions 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 including a conceptually-supported moderator.

TABLE W10: STUDY 5C STIMULI

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--

You pronoun condition	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 voice	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 voice	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.

9. STUDY 5D: REPLICATION OF THE NULL "YOU" EFFECT AND THE POSITIVE "I" EFFECT WITHIN A SINGLE STUDY

In Study 5D, we independently manipulated both firm agent use of "I" self-referencing and "you" customer-referencing to assess their independent impact on customer satisfaction and intentions within the same stimuli. Study 5D also utilizes the active versus passive verb voice manipulation previously examined in Study 5C as a moderator that linguistics suggests should bolster the impact of "you" use to enhance conservatism for our test of the predicted null effect (H3). Finally, we again include measures of empathy and agency to provide yet another test of their role as parallel mediators of the positive "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 3. 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. Full stimuli are presented in Table W9.

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. Lastly, we collected and tested the same language typicality items used in prior 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 ($F(2, 320) = .50$, $p = .61$). As verb voice had no impact on our dependent variables, we 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 satisfaction ($M_I = 5.17$ vs. $M_{control} = 4.28$ vs.; $F(1, 209) = 19.33$, $p < .001$) and purchase intentions ($M_I = 4.76$ vs. $M_{control} = 4.08$; $F(1, 209) = 9.97$, $p < .01$).

"You" pronouns. Replicating prior studies, addition of "you" pronouns referencing the customer in the firm agent's email had non-significant effects on satisfaction ($M_{You} = 3.97$ vs. $M_{control} = 4.28$; $F(1, 205) = 2.43$, $p = .12$) and purchase intentions ($M_{You} = 3.94$ vs. $M_{control} = 4.08$; $F(1, 205) = .44$, $p = .51$).

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 5D provides an additional replication of the positive consequences of firm agent use of "I" pronoun use. Process analysis replicated findings in Studies 3, 4, and 4B 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 5, 5B, and 5C's findings that the presence (versus absence) of "you" pronouns did not enhance satisfaction or purchase intentions when used in a manner consistent with our focal participation framework.

TABLE W9: STIMULI FOR STUDY 5D

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.

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