

Number Variation of the Personal Pronoun We in American Spoken English

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Abstract : Language variation signals the newest usage of language community, which might become the developmental trend of that language. The personal pronoun we is prescribed as a plural pronoun in grammar, but its number value is more flexible in actual use. Based on the homemade Friends corpus, the present research explores the number value of the first person pronoun we in nowadays American spoken English. With consideration of the subjectivity of we, this paper used 'we+ PCU (Perception-cognition-utterance) verbs' collocations and 'we+ plural categories' as the parameters. Results from corpus data and manual annotation show that: 1) the overall frequency of we has been increasing; 2) we has been increasingly used with other plural categories, indicating a weakening of its plural reference; and 3) we has been increasingly used with PCU (perception-cognition-utterance) verbs of strong subjectivity, indicating a strengthening of its singular reference. All these seem to support our hypothesis that we is undergoing the process of further grammaticalization towards a singular reference, though future evidence is needed to attest the bold prediction.

Keywords : number, PCU verbs, personal pronoun we,

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