We, the Fans

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In the early afternoon on a Sunday during the last football season, I sat at my usual barstool in Cubby’s Sports Grill in Brookings, South Dakota, watching my hometeam, the Indianapolis Colts, with a male friend, an Eagles fan. We were discussing the action on the field, and at one point he made a comment in which he employed the first person pronoun we to refer to the Colts. I was touched, and I excitedly pointed it out: “You said ‘we’! You said ‘we’ about my team!” He was embarrassed, and tried to deny it. Later, as I considered the incident, I wondered, why did he say “we”? Why does any sports fan say “we” when talking about her team? What, exactly, is happening in her mind, on a conscious or subconscious level, when she says it? My search for the answer led me through a number of scholarly sources, and finally to conduct my own research.

The first source I reviewed was a book called Popular Culture in Everyday Life by Toby Miller, an Associate Professor of Cinema Studies at New York University, and Alex McHoul, an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Murdoch University. The book contains a chapter on sport, which features a section called “On Doing ‘We’s’: Where Sport Leaks Into Everyday Life,” in which the authors discuss the tendency of sports fans to use first person pronouns. As an example, they point to the success of an Australian Olympic swimmer in the 1988 Games and the mentality in the Australian media and among fans that “this individual swimmer succeeds as an Australian, and I am an Australian, so I have succeeded” (81). To explain this mentality, and the pronoun use that accompanies it, they describe two distinct types of first person plural pronoun: “listed” or “summative” we, and “categorized” we (85). Listed we refers to a specific list of nameable people. For example, I could say, “We are going to the lake this weekend,” in which we refers to Tom, Dick, Harry, and myself. In this case, using listed we to refer to this group, if I said, “We are going to the lake, but I am not going to the lake,” this would create a contradiction.

Categorized we refers to a category of people with nonspecific or indefinite boundaries. When sports fans use we to refer to their teams, they are using categorized we in this manner. As a Colts fan, I can say, “We are playing the Bengals on Sunday, but I am not playing” without creating a contradiction. Miller and McHoul point out that while fans are limited to categorized we, actual players might use either listed we or categorized we to refer to the team’s activities.

The authors also note that few types of affiliations outside of sports fandom enable the use of categorized we. They write, “For instance, even the most loyal fan of, say, the Rolling Stones, will not say ‘We played well tonight’ after a particularly successful gig” (88). Identification with one’s nationality is a notable exception; I can say “We lost the Vietnam War,” though I was not alive when it took place, because I am using categorized we. This exception, interestingly, coheres with the notion of a sports team and its fans as a nation-state; we will discuss this in more detail later.

Miller and McHoul’s description of the two types of we provided a grammatical explanation for the phenomenon I was exploring. It also fits logically with other grammatical examinations of the usage of we in English. Pam Peters points out in The Cambridge Guide to English Usage that a single individual might use we in a number of contexts; for example, a teacher might use we to encourage a particular behavior in a child: “Now we mustn’t poke the person next to us, Stevie” (Peters 573). This usage of what Peters refers to as inclusive we fits with Miller and McHoul’s categorized we. When the
teacher says “we,” she does not necessarily mean only herself and Stevie, but perhaps an indefinitely bounded category of polite people.

The authors of A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language also list a number of different types of we, including RHETORICAL we, which, they explain, “is used in the collective sense of ‘the nation’, ‘the party’” (Quirk et al. 350). The example “We lost the Vietnam War” would qualify as this type of we; the authors describe this as “a special case of the generic use of we” (Quirk et al. 350).

I had, at this point, a grammatical explanation for the function of the first person pronoun as it is used by sports fan, but I wished also to understand the psychological function of we: what is happening in the fan’s brain when she uses it?

The next source I examined addressed this very question, and affected the direction my research took from that point. Through the library’s database I located an article called “Basking in Reflected Glory: Three (Football) Field Studies” from the 1976 Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. The authors proposed that fans use the first person pronoun to “bask in reflected glory” (BIRG) by publicly announcing one’s associations with successful others” (Cialdini et al. 366). They intended to prove this by demonstrating that fans would be more likely to use the first person pronoun after a win than a loss, and that, following a win, fans would be more likely to use the first person when they needed to improve their image in the eyes of others. The authors tested these hypotheses by conducting phone interviews with college students following major football games at these students’ universities. The authors “quizzed” the students on their knowledge of a variety of subjects, then asked them about the results of the recent game. Students were more likely overall to use we if the school’s team had won the game (nearly twice as likely, in fact), and more likely to use we if the team had won and the student had performed poorly on the “quiz” (Cialdini et al. 373). The authors theorized that a poor performance on the “quiz” motivated the students to improve their image in the eyes of the interviewers by associating themselves with their successful sports team (Cialdini et al. 374). They conclude, “Through their simple connections with sports teams, the personal images of fans are at stake when their teams take the field. The team’s victories and defeats are reacted to as personal successes and failures” (Cialdini et al. 374). They describe the wearing of team jerseys or apparel as a similar method of associating oneself with a successful organization (Cialdini et al. 375).

These experiments had a significant impact on the study of fan behavior; I found the article cited in a number of other sources. Following in Cialdini’s footsteps, Robbie Sutton investigated the effects on listeners of first person pronoun usage, both when criticizing and praising a team. He found that, regardless of the speaker’s motivation in using the first person, its presence or absence does not affect the listener’s perception of the speaker (Sutton 22). Nurit Tal-Or used Cialdini’s study as a starting point for his experiments, in which he examined the use of the second person pronoun when speaking to sports fans about their teams. He hypothesized, based on Cialdini’s results, that associating fans with their successful teams by using the second person pronoun, what we might call categorized you, to address them would ingratiating the fans to the speaker, and his results supported this hypothesis (Tal-Or 183).

As a devoted fan, I must confess that I found Cialdini’s results rather insulting. We have a name for fans who only support their team when the team is successful: fair-weather. I took issue with the implication that a reduced tendency to use the first person when the team loses is typical fan behavior. I decided to conduct my own research.

Since my exploration of this issue stems from my NFL fandom, I focused my research on other NFL fans. The official Facebook pages of the thirty-two NFL teams are a rich source of fan language, and I gathered comments from these public pages to analyze the frequency of the first and third person pronoun usage among the fans. I collected a total of 577 comments from four teams following both a
significant win and a significant loss. I chose teams that represented different NFL divisions and a variety of regions, and teams with both winning records and losing records. The teams I chose were as follows: the Atlanta Falcons (NFC South, losing record), the San Diego Chargers (AFC West, winning record), the Detroit Lions (NFC North, winning record), and the Tennessee Titans (AFC South, losing record). I collected only comments that were posted the day of or immediately following the game in question, and only comments that used either we, they, or both to refer to the team.

The results were fascinating. Each team’s fans tended to use the first person more frequently than the third person overall, but the Falcons, Chargers, and Titans fans did indeed use the first person less frequently following a loss, consistent with Cialdini’s results. For example, 73.8% of Falcons fans’ comments used the first person following a win, but only 61% following a loss.

The Lions fans were a surprising exception. As I reviewed their comments, I acquired the distinct impression that they were more negative as a whole than the fan comments on the other pages, even following a win. The Lions fans also proved to be the only fan base of the four teams I examined that used the first person less frequently after a win than a loss. 58.9% of the fans’ comments used the first person following a win, while 68.5% used it following a loss. Of course, examining only four teams out of thirty-two, and only two games out of a sixteen-game season is not a significant sample size, and I hope to continue this research to determine whether other fans’ pronoun usage follows these patterns. However, I found it quite fascinating that my small analysis strongly supported Cialdini’s conclusions.

I found other experts who had also studied fan behavior and had relevant things to say about my question. The most authoritative of these was Cornel Sandvoss, who received his PhD from the London School of Economics and is currently a senior lecturer in the Department of Linguistic, Cultural, and International Studies at the University of Surrey. Sandvoss has researched and written about the behavior of sports fans as well as a number of other types of fans, such as fans of movies and television shows, musicians and bands, and celebrities. His 2005 book Fans proved to be a crucial element in my own research.

In this book Sandvoss points out early on that studying one’s own culture has implications: one cannot step outside and view it from the exterior. When studying fandom, the researcher must acknowledge her own position: is she studying fandom as a fan, or is she studying it as an outsider (Sandvoss Fans 5)? Before reading this book, I had not considered this. As a devoted Colts fan, I cannot study NFL fandom from the outside, thus my position as a fan will necessarily affect my methodology, possibly in ways of which I am not even aware. My reaction of offense to Cialdini’s study, for example, spurred me to gather and analyze my own data. In this case I believe the effect was a positive one, but Sandvoss’s point made clear to me the importance of acknowledging my position as a fan studying fandom from within.

Sandvoss also points out the need for a clear definition of fan when discussing fan behavior. He defines fandom as “the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text in the form of books, television shows, films or music, as well as popular texts in a broader sense such as sports teams and popular icons and stars ranging from athletes and musicians to actors” (8). Using this definition, the behavior of fans of texts as diverse as Martha Stewart, the New York Knicks, Rachmaninoff, Shakespeare, and the Harry Potter series would all qualify for a similar method of analysis, and, as Sandvoss demonstrates throughout the book, they do.

Like Cialdini, Sandvoss sees a connection between sports fans’ use of we and “fan performances of impersonation and imitation,” such as wearing team jerseys (96). He writes that these “performances” are intended “to eradicate the visual distinctions between fan and object of fandom, and to function ‘as a sign of itself’ to the fan community” (96). In other words, wearing a team jersey is a
sign of your affiliation both to yourself and to other fans. To anyone who has watched or attended an NFL game, the sight of tens of thousands of screaming fans attired in team jerseys, suited up as if they’re ready to take the field at a nod from the coach, is familiar. However, Sandvoss presents such “impersonation and imitation” in the context of the behavior of fans of other types of texts as well. For the first time I realized that my choice to wear a team jersey on game days differs little from my choice to don Vulcan ears and a Starfleet uniform to attend a Star Trek convention: both are signs of my chosen affiliation; both serve to “eradicate the visual distinctions” between myself and my object of admiration. One sees similar parallels in many genres of fandom: fans who wear wizard robes and round glasses to stand in line to purchase the newest Harry Potter book or see the newest film; celebrities with clothing and perfume labels who invite their fans to dress and smell like them; fans who wear costumes of all sorts to conventions such as Comic Con; even fans who simply sport T-shirts bearing the names or likenesses of musicians.

When I began my research, I also began watching for and recording instances of sports fans using we in unsolicited, casual speech. To that end, I recorded the following conversation from the November 14, 2014 episode of the ESPN Football Today podcast. In it, producer Daniel Dopp, a Lions fan, and host Robert Flores discuss which teams they believe will win on the approaching Sunday. Note that neither has ever played for an NFL team.

Daniel: We’re gonna break that streak and I’m definitely taking the Lions this week.
Robert: I like that he throws in “we.”
Daniel: Oh yeah. I am definitely part of the team. Have been, always will be.
Robert: If you’ve rooted for the Lions this long, I think you’re allowed to say yes, I am part of this team. (ESPN)

Sandvoss argues that behavior such as using first person pronouns, wearing team jerseys, and other forms of cosplay, indicates that fandom constitutes part of the fan’s identity, and that the object of fandom itself becomes part of the fan. He writes, “Rather than as a transitional realm between the self and an external world, the object of fandom forms part of the self, and hence functions as its extension” (100). In other words, I am part of the team, and the team is part of me. Cialdini claims that fans react to victories and defeats as “personal successes and failures” (374), but Sandvoss takes this claim a step further and contends that for the fan, the team’s victories and defeats are personal successes and failures.

Sandvoss’s theory explains a myriad of fan behaviors, from soccer riots in Great Britain to tattoos in Elvish languages to teenage girls sobbing at their first glimpse of the Beatles. We see a powerful example in the bitterness that remains strong to this day at former Baltimore Colts owner Bob Irsay’s decision to secretly move the team to Indianapolis in the middle of the night in March of 1984. Nearly thirty years later, in a 2013 article in USA Today, Baltimore fans described the move as “a crime,” and “a slap in the face.” One said, “It still hurts... we’re never going to forget.” Another, “We hated Irsay. We hated Indianapolis. We hated [Indianapolis mayor Bill] Hudnut... Together, we hated them. There's no two ways about it. They took something away from us that belonged to us and they had no right to do that. No right at all... The scar will always be there.” Yet another said, “It always hits my heart when these teams play... It's still a day that breaks my heart. People say I need to get over it. I'm over it, but that day I will never forget.” One declares, “Robert Irsay, to me, was garbage. I wouldn't speak to him today if I saw him.” And perhaps the most extreme reaction: “I pretty much quit the NFL after that. I know the Ravens are in town and they have done well and everybody gets excited about them, but I quit the NFL” (Wilson). Even now, when the Indianapolis Colts play the Ravens in Baltimore, the scoreboard reads, not “Ravens vs. Colts,” but “Ravens vs. Indy.” The city of Baltimore still symbolically refuses to concede ownership of the Colts team to Indianapolis.
Sandvoss, interestingly, in his article “Toward an Understanding of Political Enthusiasm as Media Fandom: Blogging, Fan Productivity and Affect in American Politics,” draws parallels between political activists and various fan cultures. Regarding rivalry in sports and politics, he writes, “As much as in sports the self-reflective construction of a fan’s favourite team is reaffirmed through the simultaneous construction of a rival team as anti-fan object (Theodoropoulou 2007), political opponents are important markers of meaning constructions in political enthusiasts’ identity” (“Toward” 266). He also notes that political fans use sporting metaphors as well as metaphors shared with sports fans, such as comparisons between sports or politics and war (“Toward” 264).

The metaphor FOOTBALL IS WAR appears in many facets of the game, such as describing a deep pass as a bomb, a game as a fight, and the opposite end zone as the opponent’s territory. Less obvious than these common terms, however, is the idea of a team and its fan as a nation-state. Sports teams tend to be centered around a specific geographic location, whether it is a city, a state, or a region, such as the Indianapolis Colts, the Tennessee Titans, the Carolina Panthers, and the New England Patriots. Even fans who are not literally citizens of the location in question often view themselves as such in relation to the team. Thus, we see terms such as Colts Nation and Broncos Country used to refer to the team, the fans, and their affiliates. In fact, after investigating Facebook and Twitter, I found evidence for the A TEAM AND ITS FANS ARE A NATION-STATE metaphor for twenty-six of the thirty-two NFL teams.

Our discussion of this metaphor brings us back to our starting point, listed and categorized we. I noted that categorized we is limited in its usefulness; one exception, other than references to sports teams, is identification with one’s nationality. Of course, if the Indianapolis Colts are a nation-state, and I am a citizen of that nation as much as I am a citizen of the United States, then these really do not constitute two distinct exceptions; they are merely two different examples of a single exception.

My examination of this question has given me new insight into what it means to be a fan, regarding both my own fandom and that of others. While sports analysts both professional and amateur dispute whether sports fans should use the first person to talk about their team, I hope my research will help fans understand why they do it and, as a result, better understand their own fandom and their relationship to their team.

Go Colts!

Works Cited


