

# THE I'S HAVE IT

**WORDS SPEAK VOLUMES** about what's going on in our heads—and pronouns, in particular, reveal where our attention is aimed. “You can be focused on yourself for many reasons,” says James Pennebaker, a psychologist at the University of Texas at Austin and the author of *The Secret Life of Pronouns*, on sale in August. “Once you appreciate that ‘I’ tracks attention, you see it’s a powerful marker of a speaker’s psychological state.” Here are a few ways the tiny pronoun reveals big truths. —Andrea Bartz

“I think there’s more to life than fashion, and I don’t want to be stuck in that bubble of ‘This is what I do.’ ...I’m still Alexander McQueen after I shut the [office] door. I’ve got to go home with myself.”

—Alexander McQueen

## DEPRESSED PEOPLE USE MORE “I” WORDS.

Chronic sadness brings with it an inward focus that translates to high “I,” “me,” and “my” usage. In fact, the poet who overuses the word “I” in his poetry is at higher risk of suicide, Pennebaker says.

## LOWER-STATUS PEOPLE RELY ON “I”.

“We” words don’t just indicate “you and me”—they can hold many other meanings (e.g., “my friends and I”). Using them lets the more powerful speaker dictate what group the listener falls into.

“When we create stuff, we do it because we listen to customers, get their inputs, and also throw in what we’d like to see, too.”

—Steve Jobs

“I live a bold life, and I’m a happy mother because of that. I think the bigger question is, Am I living the life that I want my kids to see? If something happened to me doing something I believed in, then I suppose that’s the legacy I would leave as a mother.”

—Angelina Jolie

## WOMEN OPEN UP AND SAY “I”.

About 14.2 percent of women’s words are personal pronouns compared to 12.7 percent for men. “This is a huge statistical difference,” Pennebaker says. Women are generally more self-reflective and self-aware than men, and in addition, they’re likelier to suffer from depression or low status.

“I’m sending a series of specific proposals to the United States Congress, my own blueprint for reform.”

—George W. Bush, January 23, 2001

“When I’m there, I get sucked into the competitive culture. Normally I’m pretty low-key, but when I’m at the store, it’s all sell, sell, sell.”

—anonymous Apple employee

## AFTER SEPTEMBER 11, “I” TALK PLUMMETED.

Analysis of thousands of blogs showed a big drop in “I” words after the attacks; use of first person plural “we” words jumped at an even higher rate. “A temporary reaction to acute pain is to turn to others,” Pennebaker says. “It’s not a coincidence that disasters bring people together.”

“Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done.”

—George W. Bush, September 20, 2001

“Around the globe, we’re standing with those who take responsibility—helping farmers grow more food, supporting doctors who care for the sick, and combating the corruption that can rot a society and rob people of opportunity.”

—Barack Obama

## CONFIDENT PEOPLE DON’T TALK ABOUT ME, ME, ME.

Early in his presidency, Obama had the lowest “I”-word usage of the last 12 presidents, a sign of self-assurance. Less confident people use hedging phrases (“I think...”).

## LIARS SHUN “I”.

Pinocchios use oddly stiff, impersonal language while spinning their tales. “When you’re lying, you almost distance yourself from the words,” Pennebaker says. “You’re not owning your statements.”

“In today’s regulatory environment, it’s virtually impossible to violate rules... it’s impossible for a violation to go undetected.”

—Bernie Madoff