

Embedding Oral Communication in Law Firm Websites: A Study on Identity Construction through Person Pro-forms in Attorneys' Video FAQs

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Abstract

Given the ever-increasing demand for audiovisual content on the Internet, more and more law firm websites have started to dedicate space to multimodal texts in which oral and visual communication substitutes the written word. This contribution aims to expand knowledge on the linguistic nature of a new audiovisual genre often embedded in law firm websites, i.e. attorneys' video FAQs. In previous research, video FAQs in American law firm websites emerged as an innovative audiovisual genre of legal knowledge popularisation, through which attorneys answer a series of hypothetical questions potential clients may have on crucial points of law. By means of a corpus-assisted approach, this study quantitatively and qualitatively investigates the way in which person pro-forms (i.e. subject and object personal pronouns, possessive adjectives and pronouns) are exploited by attorneys to discursively construct different facets of identity so as to engage with the audience, guide their attention, and promote the credibility of the law firm.

Key-words: legal discourse, identity construction, legal video FAQs, person pro-forms.

1. Introduction

This paper reports on how person pro-forms are used in video FAQs answered by law firm attorneys in an attempt to catch and guide the attention of the recipients. In a world dominated by hyper-digital communications, the benefits of implementing short audiovisual texts to engage the general public in spaces originally conceived for the written word or, marginally, for images, e.g. webpages, have become evident. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that, in professional digital contexts in particular, conveying information verbally, and supported by the visual channel, makes a powerful impression on

interlocutors, and helps build trust and credibility (Finkler and Leon 2019). This is especially true when addressing a lay audience that needs to be guided to fully grasp specialised information. In other words, remote communication through audiovisual contents can mimic and surrogate the dynamics of face-to-face communication by creating more effective emotional connections with the audience. The preference for audiovisual communication is also evident in a survey carried out by the Cisco networking company (2018) which revealed that online videos constitute over 75% of all global Internet traffic, thereby overtaking the consumption of written blog posts and articles. As a consequence, new audiovisual narrative forms have been flourishing on the Web 2.0 over the last two decades (cf. Campagna *et al.* 2012; Garzone *et al.* 2017).

Anglophone law firm websites represent an interesting case in point, as they are progressively turning into multimedia platforms rich in audiovisual contents of different genres (cf. Cavalieri 2018; Vignozzi 2022). Videos in these webpages could broadly be split into the following categories:

- Commercials/Intros: videos that introduce the visitor to the law firm that are similar to television commercials;
- Testimonials: real clients giving a video testimonial of their experience with the law firm;
- Explanations: videos where an attorney working at the law firm discusses topics related to some crucial aspects of law.

According to an analysis conducted by Forbes on American law firm websites (Bland 2017) videos providing educational content tend to receive more viewers than commercial and testimonial ones, perhaps because they typically revolve around specific legal matters that potential clients may look up through online search engines. Explanations typically take the form of short videos in which law firm attorneys answer a set of ideal frequently asked questions (FAQs) concerning legal matters in a simple, straightforward way in order to be accessible to the widest possible audience (Vignozzi 2022).

In answering these questions, not only do attorneys convey legal concepts, but through their choice in register they construct different facets of identity. Recent studies in sociolinguistics and social psychology put forward a constructionist view of identity: rather than being reflected in discourse, identity is inevitably

constructed in discourse (cf. *inter alia* De Fina *et al.* 2006; Benwell and Stokoe 2006). Indeed, as stressed by Crawford Camiciottoli (2020), identity construction is a multi-faceted phenomenon that is revealed through different linguistic choices among which personal pronouns, and more generally person pro-forms, have a key role as they depict and transmit aspects that contribute to “establish[ing] social roles and relationships in socially situated interaction” (2020: 689). Their meaning is therefore intrinsically pragmatic and varies on the basis of the communicative situation.

Against this background, the aim of the present study is to better understand how verbal language is used by attorneys in video FAQs embedded in law firm websites to discursively construct different identities and strategically switch between them. Considering the central role of person pro-forms in the representation and negotiation of identity, the following research questions are addressed:

1. How are person pro-forms used by attorneys to build identities and establish rapport with potential clients in video FAQs?
2. Which linguistic patterns can be identified?

In order to introduce the study within its communicative context, in the next section I describe video FAQ pages as a new genre, and their function in law firm communication strategy.

2. Attorneys' video FAQs as a popularising genre

Video FAQs represent a relatively new audiovisual genre deriving from monomodal FAQ pages, i.e. website sections in which experts attempt to answer certain recurrent questions on specific topics likely to be asked by a hypothetical ideal target audience in writing (Alessi 2006). A video FAQ is essentially a migration of the genre to the audiovisual medium to answer the growing demand for video content on the Internet (Jewitt 2013). This passage from written to audiovisual communication implies the recording of short videoclips in which the interlocutor provides informative answers to an ideal audience in front of a camera, thus further aided by non-verbal communication affordances (e.g. body and hand gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, background setting, soundtrack). The corresponding questions, instead, are typically embedded in the videoclips in writing and are briefly displayed before the answer.

Vignozzi (2022) analysed some verbal and non-verbal aspects of attorneys' video FAQs by concentrating on their knowledge dissemination intent. The genre emerged as being highly non-expert oriented and featuring many instances of popularisation, both at a verbal (e.g. exemplifications and definitions) and non-verbal (e.g. visual icons, gestures) level. Their general purpose, therefore, is to help their non-expert receivers understand and familiarise themselves with legal concepts that are commonly recognised as being extremely complex for people without a legal background (Williams 2004). This particular attention to transmit specialised knowledge to recipients can be interpreted as the attorneys' intention to promote the law firm while giving proof of their expertise.

Starting from these preliminary inquiries, the study presented in this paper offers further insights into how person pro-forms and their pragmatically determined meanings are exploited by attorneys to modulate their answers and contribute to the promotion of the firm through identity construction. The next section briefly introduces person pro-forms in English and illustrates some of their meaning-making potential.

3. Some notes on person pro-forms in English

According to Crystal (2008), a pro-form is generally intended as an item used in place of another linguistic element. Accordingly, person pro-forms indicate a closed class of function words that anaphorically stand for previously mentioned or understood noun referents. Hence, their meaning is strictly indexical, being determined by the context of usage, and pragmatic as it varies according to the communicative situation (Levinson 1983; Mey 2001).

In English, person pro-forms consist of a confined set of words including subject and object personal pronouns, and possessive adjectives and pronouns. Nevertheless, in virtue of their pragmatic determination, their connotations are often more complex than they may appear. In fact, in some contexts it is problematic to discern who they represent or refer to. For example, De Cock and Kluge (2016) dedicated a whole collection of essays to the referential ambiguity of personal pronouns such as *we* and *us*, especially in terms of inclusiveness vs exclusiveness. Similarly, Crawford Camiciottoli

(2014: 3) provides several examples of the ambiguous meanings of person pro-forms in corporate discourse, which allow for multiple interpretations by the recipient, for instance the personal pronoun *you* “can encode the recipient who may actually be different from the target of the message”. Such a complexity makes person pro-forms crucial elements in interpersonal communication, for their different pragmatic functions and interpretations can establish and determine the social roles of the interlocutors, negotiate relationships (e.g. in terms of solidarity and authority), and create engagement between speakers and hearers (and/or overhearers). Moreover, as suggested by Crawford Camiciottoli (2020), their multiple meanings, usages and functions, especially when patterning with other linguistic elements, represent and construct index identities (e.g. the speaker, the recipient and third referents). Research centred on the use of English person pro-forms in specialised contexts found that speakers often exploit pro-forms to differentiate and alternate between the identity of the institution they represent (e.g. a corporate, an association, a firm) and their personal professional identity (e.g. speaker’s stance and opinions) (cf. Van De Mierop 2007 on the language of engineers; Ho 2010 on professional email discourse; Crawford Camiciottoli 2014, 2020 on corporate discourse).

4. Methodology: the corpus and analytical steps

4.1. The corpus: *Legal video FAQs*

The node corpus used in this study (hereafter *Legal video FAQs*) of person pro-forms consists of the written transcripts¹ of the video FAQs present in the webpages of eleven American law firms.

According to #*LancsBox* (Brezina *et al.* 2020), the corpus analysis tool used for the corpus compilation and for part of the analysis, *Legal video FAQs* contains 53,132 tokens and 4,133 types spread across 413 texts. Table 1 provides an overview of the dataset.

¹ The written transcripts of the videos were already present on the websites, perhaps as a strategy to improve their accessibility for deaf people or non-proficient speakers of English. The question being answered in the video, together with the name of the law firm, were used as labels to identify the files (e.g. “What are Miranda rights? Florida law 1”).

TABLE I
Legal video FAQs corpus

<i>Law firm</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Practice areas</i>	<i>N. video FAQs</i>	<i>Tokens</i>
Florida law 1 ²	Florida	criminal law	72	8,034
Florida law 2	Florida	DUI law and drugs	23	3,897
New York law	New York	personal injuries	35	5,000
Colorado law	Colorado	property law, personal injuries	14	2,439
California law	California	criminal law, white collar crimes	69	6,646
Illinois law 1	Illinois	medical malpractice, employment discrimination, business law	20	3,097
Maine law	Maine	elder law, family law, litigation	24	3,171
Massachusetts law	Massachusetts	bankruptcy, personal injury, real estate	44	6,156
Texas law	Texas	administrative law, criminal law, federal law	61	6,021
Mississippi law	Mississippi	personal injuries, family law	26	4,706
Illinois law 2	Illinois	class actions, non-profit organizations, administrative law	25	3,582
			413	53,132

The video FAQs included in the study come from law firms specialised in various areas of law and located in different US states. This selection is meant to be as representative as possible of the

² The real names of the law firms have been omitted for privacy reasons.

genre under investigation and should prevent the results from being influenced by the discussion of a particular practice area or by the location of the law firm.

4.2. The analytical steps

The analysis combined quantitative and qualitative operations by integrating a corpus-driven and inductive data analysis with corpus-based and more in-depth considerations (cf. *inter alia* Stubbs 1996; Baker 2006; Partington *et al.* 2013 for an introduction to corpus-assisted linguistic analysis). As for the preliminary data-driven phase, a keyword analysis was carried out in *Wmatrix* corpus software (Rayson 2009) to test the relevance of person pro-forms in the corpus; further information about the concept of keyword and the criteria for their extraction were added where relevant. In order to ascertain the aboutness of person-pro forms and how they reflect different aspects of identity, the analysis continued with the appraisal of their patterning. Two-word clusters involving person pro-forms were automatically retrieved by means of *#LancsBox*, which also generated graphs showing all right and left collocates of the queried forms. Finally, to gain further insight into their usage and functions in context, relevant clusters were assessed from a qualitative point of view resorting to concordance evaluation.

5. Analysis of person pro-forms

5.1. Keyword analysis

A preliminary keyword analysis was performed with the aim of testing whether the use of person pro-forms was relevant in law firm video FAQs. Keywords, i.e. statistically significant words in a selected corpus as compared to another corpus used as a benchmark (cf. Scott and Tribble 2006), were extracted by uploading the corpus to the *Wmatrix*³ analysis platform. More

³ The saliency of keywords is calculated by *Wmatrix* resorting to the log-likelihood (LL) statistic measure. As of the corpus-tool manual, items with an LL value over +7 are to be considered statistically significant, i.e. they are overused in the corpus

in detail, *Legal video FAQs* was set as the focus corpus and a 1-million-word sampler of the spoken component of the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (Davis 2008-2020) as the reference corpus representing contemporary spontaneous spoken American English.

The findings of this exploratory analysis revealed that the second person pro-forms *you* and *your*, the third person plural *they*, and the first person plural *we* occurred among the top-25 unusually frequent items in the corpus (positive keywords). By contrast, the singular first person pronoun *I* and the possessive *my* featured among the top-10 unusually infrequent items (negative keywords, i.e. they are considerably underused in the focus corpus in comparison to spontaneous spoken American English). On account of these results, it was decided to further explore both first, second and third person pro-forms in their singular and plural declinations. In fact, statistically overused and underused items are equally interesting, since a significantly lower use could be telling of a speaker's deliberate and meaningful linguistic and pragmatic choice (cf. Xiao and McEnery 2005).

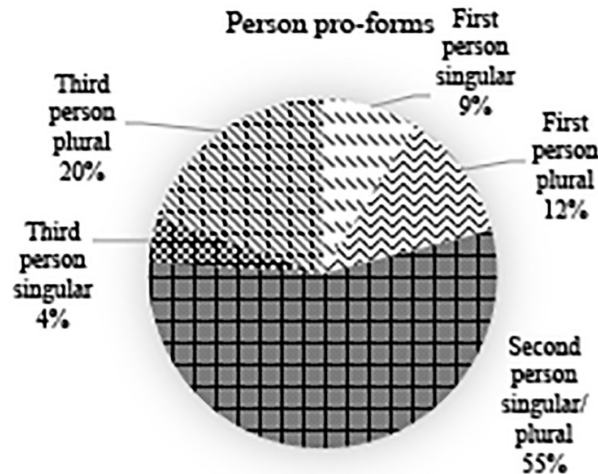
5.2. Quantitative analysis of person pro-forms

Starting from the classes of person pro-forms described in Section 3, *Legal video FAQs* was queried to establish the frequency of each item. Table 2 collects the raw occurrences and the range of dispersion (i.e. the distribution in the corpus) of person pro-forms retrieved in #*Lansbox* software⁴. Furthermore, Figure 1 illustrates the percentages of first, second and third person pro-forms out of all person pro-forms in *Legal video FAQs*.

under analysis. On the contrary, items with an LL below -7 represent a statistical underuse in the focus corpus. More information can be found at: <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/wmatrix/>, last accessed 13/12/21.

⁴ The pro-forms *yours*, *hers* and *theirs* do not occur in the dataset and are therefore not included in the table.

FIGURE 1
Distribution of person pro-forms in *Legal video FAQs*



Overall, *Legal video FAQs* contains 3,719 person pro-forms that constitute 7% of all the tokens in the corpus, a result that seems to confirm the high presence of personal pronouns, which, according to Biber *et al.* (1999), is typical of impromptu speech. Second person forms are by far the most frequent and widely dispersed category, representing 55% of all person pro-forms, with a dispersion range spanning from 81.2% for *you* to 54% for *yours*. These figures point to the interactional inclination of video FAQs and to the pivotal importance given to the hearer, as *you* is generally the most frequent pronoun in dialogic encounters (Chafe 1985; Biber *et al.* 1999). Since a video FAQ is a monologic communicative genre, the preponderance of second person pro-forms reveals the intention to engage as much as possible with the imagined audience, thus constructing the webpage visitors as the real protagonists of the interaction. Third person pro-forms are slightly more frequent and better dispersed than first person forms, with a peak of 425 occurrences for *they*, the third person plural pronoun generally used to refer to the *others* (i.e. those who are not included in the identity of the speaker). For what concerns first person forms, it is interesting to note that plural forms, and in particular the personal pronoun *we*, are slightly more frequent

(331 occurrences vs 237 for *I*) and better dispersed than singular ones, thus indicating a preference for the expression of collective identities and for linguistically marking group membership (Clark 2013).

TABLE 2
Person pro-forms in *Legal video FAQs*

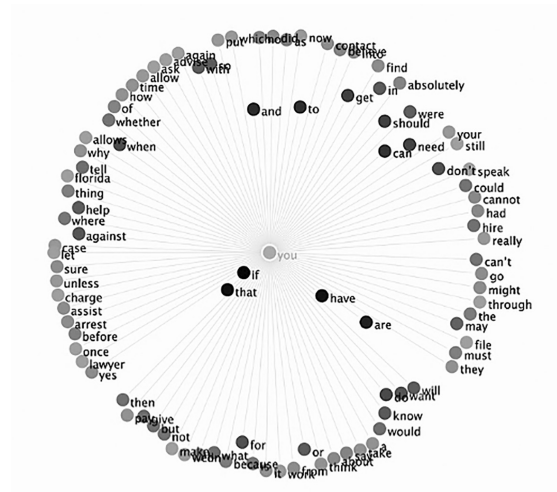
	<i>pro-form</i>	<i>raw occurrences</i>	<i>range</i> ⁵
FIRST PERSON SINGULAR	I	237	26.6%
	me	41	10.4%
	my	53	11.9%
	mine	1	0.2%
TOTAL		332	
FIRST PERSON PLURAL	we	331	39.8%
	us ⁶	41	9.3%
	our	74	13.5%
	ours	1	0.2%
TOTAL		447	
TOTAL FIRST PERSON		779	
SECOND PERSON SINGULAR/PLURAL	you	1,498	81.2%
	your	551	54%
TOTAL SECOND PERSON		2,049	
THIRD PERSON SINGULAR	he	69	5.7%
	she	13	2.5%
	him	21	1.8%
	her	6	0.9%
	his	44	5.8%
TOTAL		153	
THIRD PERSON PLURAL	they	425	49.9%
	them	144	22.8%
	their	169	26.6%
TOTAL		738	
TOTAL THIRD PERSON		891	
TOTAL PRO-FORMS		3,719	

⁵ Range percentages are calculated against the total number of texts in the corpus (e.g. 26.6% corresponds to the occurrence of the queried item in 110 texts out of 413).

⁶ Occurrences of US as the acronym for United States were left out of this count.

5.3. The second person pro-form *you*

FIGURE 2
Collocates graph for *you* in *Legal video FAQs*



⁷ Collocates were calculated based on the frequency of the two-word pattern by setting the threshold to a minimum of 10 co-occurrences.

TABLE 3
Top-20 two word clusters of *you* in *Legal video FAQs*

<i>two-word cluster</i>	<i>frequency</i>
if you	210
you that	184
have you	171
are you	114
you and	88
to you	83
can you	76
you know	53
should you	53
need you	50
do you	43
you when	41
don't you	36
you for	36
want you	33
you against	32
you so	29
in you	28
get you	28
you help	28

As can be observed in Figure 2, some words (e.g. *if*, *that*, *have*, *are*) are particularly close to the node word *you*, meaning that they co-occur with a certain regularity and form particularly significant combinations. Through an attentive evaluation of the concordances of the bigrams in Table 3, some recurrent usages that help us understand the identity built around *you* could be singled out. Clusters such as *if you*, *and you*, *you to*, *you get*, *you do*, *when you*, *you don't*, *against you* are used in sentences where attorneys describe some possible scenarios the clients may be facing. Generally speaking, they are hypothetical situations of distress that result in someone breaking the law. Figure 3 shows an emblematic sample taken from the concordances of the cluster *if you*, which in 179 cases out of 210 occurs in contexts similar to those displayed below.

FIGURE 3
Sample of the concordances of *if you*

is not drink and drive, but if	you	do drink and drive, it's my opinion
domestic violence is a big deal. If	you	are convicted, you will be unemployable by
so avoid it at all costs. If	you	get in a domestic dispute with someone,
is not on the street. Because if	you	irritate law enforcement in the street, you're
not likely to be convicted. But if	you	fight in the street with law enforcement,
federal government, that limited access, and if	you	have those drugs in your possession, you
could be charged with that. Consent. If	you	consent to an actual search, then of

The concordances provide considerable insights into how the would-be client is depicted as being in a precarious position and at risk of getting into serious litigation if s/he makes a mistake.

Another large group of clusters, i.e. *you have*, *you can*, *you need*, *you should*, *you don't*, *you want*, *help you* testify to the attorneys' intention to display their support by offering advice and clearly stating what action the potentially endangered client needs to take in order to avoid stressful legal battles. Examples (1) and (2) show these dynamics in action:

- 1) The best thing *you can* do is, when you initially get stopped, is try and plead for a notice of appearance.
- 2) It's my position that *you should* never take a sobriety test.

Therefore, in terms of identity, the ideal client is portrayed as someone in constant need of help and guidance by a reassuring professional.

A further interesting pattern is *you know*, which, in 39 cases out of 53, is used as a discourse marker, as the following example (5) illustrates:

- 5) You need to have your own attorney. *You know*, you are facing the potential for jail, for prison, for a lifetime conviction.

In this case, the pattern is resorted to with the intent of establishing a friendly and informal atmosphere with the interlocutor and smoothing out the tone of the interaction, especially when tackling unpleasant situations for the receiver (cf. on discourse markers Carter and McCarty 2006).

TABLE 4
Top-20 two-word clusters of *they* in *Legal video FAQs*

<i>two-word cluster</i>	<i>frequency</i>
that they	74
they are	65
they have	53
and they	38
if they	38
they can	37
they don't	18
they will	18
because they	13
they were	13
when they	12
whether they	12
but they	9
they know	9
they may	9
what they	9
they can't	7
they want	7
they did	7
they do	7

Different combinations, e.g. *that they*, *they are*, *they have*, and *they*, *they don't* refer to situations in which *they* is clearly used to separate and distinguish the identity of the speaker and of his/her group (i.e. the team of attorneys working at the law firm) from that of the police (6) or of the components of the American justice system (7). In other words, they consist in the so-called others that website visitors/potential clients are strategically warned against:

- 6) If you have some physical impairment [...] and you don't think you can physically do the things *that they* want you to do, always decline to take a sobriety test. *They want* you to fail it.
- 7) I'm sure you want to make sure your interests are protected, you want to talk to someone who actually knows the law, what do *they have* to prove in order for you to be convicted.

In sum, the person pronoun *they* clearly indicates those who are not part of the group the speaker represents by excluding them from it and, sometimes, by also skilfully framing them as a dangerous threat. In fact, very often *they*, and the two other person pro-forms *their* and *them*, occurs in contexts in which it has a clear oppositional value surrounding the referent (i.e. the police and the American justice system) with negativity so as to demonstrate to the potential client that law firm attorneys are the only ones to be trusted. This is especially the case when referring to the actions and behaviours described for the group of *others* and clearly emerges when assessing the concordances of the clusters *if they*, *they can*, *they will*, *when they*, *they may* (8) in which the personal pronoun is frequently followed by a verb of capacity or by auxiliary verbs.

- 8) If you believe they believe that you have been involved in criminal activity, you shouldn't speak. Although we can all say it in our sleep, *they will* use your statements against you.

Interestingly, in (8), and in numerous other excerpts, the pro-form *they* is not used as an anaphoric reference to a precedent noun (e.g. the police, the prosecutor) but it generically alludes to another entity whose identity is implied and constructed in the mind of the visitor thanks to the context and is not made explicit.

5.5. The first person pro-forms *I* and *we*

The last group of person pro-forms under analysis are those indicating first persons, i.e. the attorney who is speaking and his/her group. As found in the initial inductive analysis, the singular personal pronoun *I*, despite being well represented in *Legal video FAQs*, appears to be statistically infrequent if comparing the corpus to impromptu speech, where it is by far the most widespread personal pronoun (Biber *et al.* 1999). This makes the usage of *I* in video FAQs worth further attention, as its statistical infrequency could imply that when it occurs it is used with a particular communicative intent. Figure 5 and Table 5 present the patterning around *I* in *Legal video FAQs*.

FIGURE 5
Collocates graph for *I* in *Legal video FAQs*

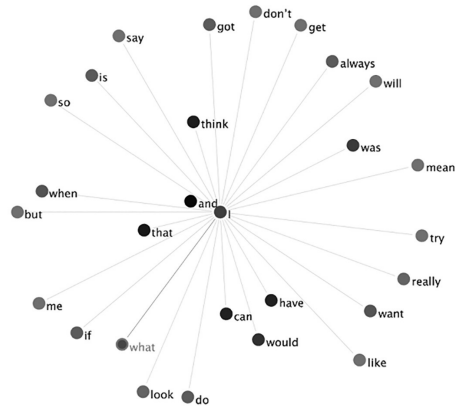


TABLE 5
Top-20 two-word clusters of *I* in *Legal video FAQs*

<i>two-word cluster</i>	<i>frequency</i>
and I	37
that I	31
I think	29
I can	28
I have	28
I would	24
I was	22
what I	20
I want	19
when I	18
I always	16
I do	16
I got	15
If I	13
is I	12
I look	11
I really	10
but I	10
I don't	7
I get	6

The most recurrent bigrams with *I*, i.e. *and I* and *that I*, signal that most commonly the first person singular pronoun is not used at the beginning of utterances, but as a stance-taking marker (Biber and Conrad 2001) in relative and coordinate clauses to switch to the personal and professional perspective of the attorney when answering the FAQ (9) to add a touch of subjectivity and solidarity to the previously described painful facts:

- 9) If you are in what is called custodial detention [...] At that point, it is vital to bring in an attorney to invoke your right to a lawyer. *And I* think that, in some cases, police may try to convince you to talk to them in spite of your Miranda rights.

Another relevant combination is *I think*, which is often associated with uncertainty and hesitancy in the literature (Baumgarten and House 2010), but also with certainty and decisiveness (Aijmer 1997), and, in some cases, with a hedging function (Ariel 2010). The examination of the concordances, supported by an evaluation of the prosody that can influence pragmatic meaning (Crawford Camiciottioli 2014), indicates a preponderance of cases (17 out of 29 occurrences) where *I think* has a deliberative sense and reinforces the self-confidence in what is said about the legal case (10, 11):

- 10) That's something that a lot of lawyers won't do [...], but that's something, again, where *I think* I can provide some value beyond just pushing the paper.
 11) I combine the CPA side, which is sort of how you manage this thing going forward, with the legal side, which gives me, *I think*, a different perspective from most lawyers.

A similar decisive and reassuring stance is traceable in sentences featuring the bigrams *I can*, *I want*, *I always*, *I do*, through which attorneys present themselves as capable problem-solvers strongly committed in helping the client (12, 13):

- 12) I've said many, many times, *I can* easily beat the roadside sobriety test and *I can* beat the breath and blood test.
 13) Well, the first thing we do, if you hire us to be your attorney, is we start gathering information. *I want* to know everything that they've got on you. *I want* to know all the video evidence [...].

Interestingly, in example (13) *I want* is employed to mark the passage from the collective *we* to the individual *I* to convince potential clients of the special care and personal involvement in their case that the attorney would demonstrate if hired.

The pattern *I would* is frequently used for giving recommendations and personal suggestions that contribute to reinforcing the positive identity of the attorney (14):

- 14) They'll be able to get all of your medical records [...] anything that they could later argue to try to diminish the value of your claim. There are exceptions, and *I would* recommend consulting with the attorneys at our firm.

The evaluation of the concordances of the bigrams *when I*, *I was* and *If I* denotes that they are repeatedly employed in narrative sequences in which the attorneys talk about their personal successful experiences in previous cases to make their answers more subjective, engaging, and convincing (15):

- 15) we find many times [...] that there is another party who's responsible for the maintenance and actually controls the premises, and we've been successful in many instances where *I was* able to uncover that, even though at first blush we thought there was no case [...].

The example above shows how the switch to *I was* identifies the attorney who is speaking as the one who holds the personal merit of the success in the case so as to create a stronger interpersonal bond with the receiver.

The personal pronoun *we* emerged as a positive keyword in the initial inductive analysis. In line with studies on corporate discourse (Van De Mieroop 2007) and political discourse (Beard 2000), the inclusive pronoun is both more frequent and better dispersed than the singular one. This could be interpreted as the manifestation of group membership on the part of the attorney answering the question, whose voice conflates with the collective one of the law firm he/she represents. Figure 6 and Table 6 display the most frequent associations of *we* in *Legal video FAQs*.

It is interesting to notice that the most common bigram with a verb is with *have*, which, in the majority of cases, is used to exhibit and foreground the assets and the reliability of the law firm (33 out of 47 cases); hence, it encodes its institutional identity (16):

- 16) *We have* experts at our firm that can handle everything that comes up.

However, in some cases *we have* also refers to the social identity of the attorneys, who occasionally identify themselves as citizens, thus involving potential clients as well to create solidarity and build rapport with them (17):

- 17) In New York State, *we have* a law that says you can't sue your own employer.

If *I* is most commonly associated with the verb *think*, *we* is often used in combination with the epistemic verb *know* in passages in which the speaker promotes the know-how of the firm (18):

- 18) [...] if he's not gonna show up in court, *we know* 100% the case will get dismissed.

To conclude, a large group of bigrams, e.g. *we are*, *we see*, *we take*, *we care* point to the collective views and shared values of the law firm attorneys, of whom the attorney answering the FAQ stands as the reassuring spokesperson (19):

- 19) We are very serious about our job. *We take* that to heart, and we make sure that everybody does.

6. Final remarks

This corpus-assisted study attempted to cast light on the usage of person pro-forms in attorneys' video FAQs, an innovative Web-mediated genre for legal knowledge dissemination and popularisation. More specifically, the focus was on the primary role covered by person pro-forms, and especially personal pronouns, in the construction and negotiation of identities and identity traits.

After empirically confirming a significant overuse (or underuse) of different categories of personal pronouns in the corpus when compared to spoken American English, the analysis of their frequencies showed a marked preference for the second person pronoun *you*, which is a marker of interactional involvement (Chafe 1985) signalling that the hearer, i.e. the law firm website visitor, is in the spotlight in attorneys' video FAQs. By qualitatively assessing the most frequent two-word clusters around the pronoun and their concordance lines, it was established that *you* most typically refers to a general audience of law firm prospective clients, i.e. citizens that could possibly be in need of a lawyer. The evaluation of *you*-bigrams in their context disclosed some recurring identity traits attached to the ideal client (client identity). A wide range of patterns (e.g. *if you*, *when you*) showed that attorneys advertise their services by discursively constructing clients as being in constant danger of getting involved with the law and its occasional unreliability. Consequently, they foreground their helpfulness by offering advice on how to overcome difficult situations (e.g. *you should*, *you can*). An interesting case consisted in the cluster *you know* which was frequently employed as a discourse marker that sets an informal tone and contributes to making the hearer feel at ease.

Third person pro-forms were the second most recurrent category. The analysis of the concordances of the personal pronoun *they*, the most typical item within this class, showed that it commonly referred to the police or to the justice system, i.e. the so-called others that the attorneys claim to face for the benefit of their clients. By scrutinising the bigrams, it was possible to assess the construction of this group's identity (other identity). Hence, attorneys' use of combinations such as *they are*, *they have* or *they don't* repeatedly encodes a negative portrayal of the referent by also listing the possibly treacherous deeds they are capable of (e.g. *they can*, *they may*). In different passages, this subsumed negative portrayal seemed to be skilfully exploited to render, by opposition, a positive identity of the law firm attorneys and their teams, who side and sympathise with the clients at the risk of becoming naïve victims of the justice system.

This tendency is often reinforced by the frequent switches from *they* to *we*, the first person plural pronoun employed by the professionals to assert the identity of the law firm (i.e. the institutional law firm identity). As for political and corporate discourse (Beard

2000; Van De Mierop 2007), the first person plural *we* occurred more frequently than the singular *I*, thus indicating a preference for the expression of a collective law firm identity, with its visions, shared values and assets. Notwithstanding that, self-references (especially through the pronoun *I*) were also present and strategically used to assert the expert and authoritative perspective. In different cases strands of individual professional identity were used to create involvement and engagement with the clients (e.g. *I think, I can*) and to establish a more intimate tone through personal narrations of past successful experiences (e.g. *when I, I was*).

In conclusion, the findings of this small-scale study showed some tendencies in the discursive construction and transmission of identities that are skilfully exploited to build a relationship with the audience, pilot their attention, and promote the credibility of the law firm.

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