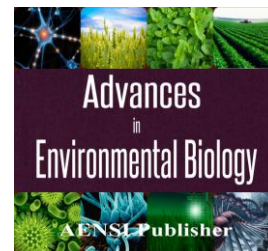




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An analysis of Authorial Presence in the Theses of Master's Students

¹Mostafa Zamanian and ²Shaahin Rahavard

¹Associate Professor, Department of English, Islamic Azad University of Shiraz, Shiraz, Iran

²Ph.D. Candidate, Department of English, Islamic Azad University of Shiraz, Shiraz, Iran

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ABSTRACT

Within the few past decades, an emphasis has been put on academic writing in universities. Since there has been a growing tendency in the world for the students to publish articles and also the style of their writing is significant in writing their theses, a focus has been put on the format and style of academic texts. The current study aimed at investigating whether academic writers from various fields of study show their autonomy and presence in their texts through the use of authorial markers which are first person pronouns or not. For this purpose, three different fields of study are chosen as the samples of the study which are, namely social studies, philosophy, and biology. The data center is Tehran University in Iran which is among the top universities in the world and admits top students through the Wide Entrance Exam each year. First, the pronouns which show the authorial presence in the theses were collected. Next, these fields of studies were compared with one another regarding the power of students to show themselves in the texts. Finally, a comparative study was made between the results of this study and the one conducted by Samraj (2008) to see if Iranian and American students were the same or not. The results indicated that the social studies and biology introductions had the minimum number of first person singular pronoun use while the philosophy introductions had the most. However the difference was not very significant. The results of this study supported those conducted by Samraj (2008), yet not quantitatively.

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INTRODUCTION

The Significance of Academic Writing:

Academic writing plays a key role in higher education, as both a way to help students present their thoughts in the academic atmosphere and also as a method of evaluating students' knowledge. Recent studies have shown that academic instructors and staff are aware that writing plays a significant role in today's modern world and according to a survey which was conducted by Ganobscik- Williams [5], about 90% of the staff admitted that a formal instruction is needed in academic situation as most of the students are not familiar with formal writing. Improving the standards of academic writing has significant impacts on both teaching and learning, especially in postgraduate courses.

Students will be able to express themselves and write scientific articles as they learn writing skills, and the fact is that these skills are transferable, which means they can be transferred from instructors to the students. It is a great success to write the texts vividly and concisely, in a way that readers are totally able to grasp the meaning. The instructors are responsible to teach their students how to write effectively and what style of writing to use. Although the task is not considered simple, it can be really beneficial both for the instructor and the learner.

During the last five years, writing and publishing articles has gained a lot of attention in Iran and Iranian M.A and PhD students have published many articles in various journals with distinct rankings. The reason why many students try to publish articles is that it has become necessary to have some articles published in order to be admitted in PhD courses.

Genre analysis in academic studies has gained a significant role for about two decades. Swales [6] worked on the move structure of research article introductions. Pickard [8] analyzed the citation practices of expert writers. Samraj [2,3] conducted studies on research articles introductions and after that, she studied and analyzed the introductions of master students' theses [1], the results of which were compared with the ones obtained from this study.

Corresponding Author: Shaahin Rahavard, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of English, Islamic Azad University of Shiraz, Shiraz, Iran.
E-mail: shaahin_rahavard@yahoo.com

The Corpus-Based Approach:

Generally, there are two groups of language analysis studies: studies of language structure and studies of language use. Language structure analysis involves identifying structural units, various classes of a language such as words, and describing how these small units join each other and form a larger unit such as clauses and sentences. However, studies of language use investigate the way that writers make actual use of the language. The corpus-based approach to language analysis deals with the natural use of a language and investigates real – made instances and ignores theoretically possible statements. Biber *et al.* [4], notes the characteristics of corpus-based analysis as follows:

1. It is empirical, analyzing the actual patterns of use in natural texts
2. It utilizes a large and principled collection of natural texts, known as a “corpus” (Graduate students’ theses in this study)
3. It makes use of computers for analysis
4. It depends on both quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques

Authorial Presence:

Authors can present their authority and show their presence in their writings by using explicit signals which are first person pronouns such as I, me, and my. These are called markers of “ego-involvement in a text” [4] or they can simply use third person pronouns to present their ideas. It can be the cultural phenomena which determines the power of the writer in showing himself/ herself in the texts through these markers. A seminal influence on the development of more recent taxonomies has been the classification of pronominal discourse functions in academic writing made by Tang and John [7]. The authors developed their framework relating to the functionality of first person pronouns based on the concept of “creating identities”, as proposed by the Systemic Functional Linguistics tradition. Tang and John proposed a continuum of authorial “I” and the degrees of power embedded in the use of first person pronouns [7]. The roles are:

1. I as representative;
2. I as the guide;
3. I as the architect;
4. I as the recounter of the research processes;
5. I as the opinion holder and
6. I as the originator

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The theses were sampled randomly among three fields of studies, namely social studies, biology and philosophy. The factor of time was neglected since Samraj [1] did not take it into consideration. However, the range of the selected theses is between 2001 and 2011. The number of theses and the years are summarized in the table below:

Table 1: The Frequency of the chose these from the corpus.

	Philosophy	Biology	Social Studies	Total
2001	XX	X		3
2002	X			0
2003	X	XX	X	5
2004	X	X	XX	4
2005	X	XX	XX	5
2006		X		1
2007	X		XXX	4
2008	X			1
2009				0
2010				0
2011		X		1
Total	8	8	8	24

Since Samraj [1] had chosen San Diego University (a high ranking university in the U.S), the sample for this study was taken from Tehran University which is among the best ones in the world and was an appropriate data center for this study.

The steps in this study are as what follows:

- 1) The number of authorial markers (I, my, myself) were counted and checked.
- 2) The results from the three various fields of study were compared with each other at a local perspective
- 3) Finally the results obtained from this study were compared with the results provided by Samraj (2008) to find out the similarities and differences between Iran Graduate Students and American ones.

Results:

The frequency of first person singular pronoun in master's introductions varied among the three disciplines. As students acculturate in a new environment, they use the language differently and therefore, the frequency of first person pronoun varies. Students mostly preferred to use passive structures rather than showing their own ideas through the use of first person pronouns.

Philosophy Introductions:

Philosophy students applied most of the first person pronouns, compared to other disciplines.

In the first move, one of the theses introductions contained a first person subject pronoun.

Persian Statement	English Translation
<p>بحثهای جان لاک پیرامون جوهر مادی و غیر مادی حائز اهمیت بوده اما گاهی دستخوش تفاسیر متفاوتی نیز شده که راجع به آنها بحث خواهد کرد.</p>	<p>John Locke's arguments related to material and non-material substance are significant but sometimes, they have been subjected to various interpretations about which <u>I</u> am going to discuss.</p>

In the second move, two of the theses introductions included a first person pronoun. The first one is a subject pronoun and the second is possessive pronoun.

Persian Statement	English Translation
<p>1. درک عمیق از مفاهیم اخلاقی قرآن از جمله مطالبیست که تفسیر موشکافانه آن میتواند مخاطب را به سوی درک حکمت سوق دهد که در رابطه با این موضوع به تفصیل سخن خواهد گفت.</p> <p>2. <u>بحث من</u> پیرامون همترازی دو عالم می باشد که در فلسفه نوین کمتر بدان پرداخته شده است.</p>	<p>1. A deep understanding of ethical implications of Quran is a topic whose scrutinizing explanation can lead the reader to the meaning of tragedy and <u>I</u> will discuss the topic in details later.</p> <p>2. <u>My</u> argument is about the alignment of the two worlds, and fewer topics have been related to this issue in modern philosophy.</p>

Two of the introductions contained the first person pronoun in the third move.

The first one is a possessive pronoun and the second is a subject pronoun.

Persian Statement	English Translation
<p>1. هدف <u>من</u> از این تحقیق بررسی نقش اسطوره ها در فلسفه یونان و بررسی دیدگاههای نوین پیرامون این موضوع می باشد.</p> <p>2. در فصل بعدی, در رابطه با نظریات اسپینوزا بیشتر شرح خواهد داد.</p>	<p>1. <u>My</u> aim of research is to investigate the role of myths in the philosophy of Greece and also modern viewpoints related to this issue.</p> <p>2. In the next chapter, <u>I</u> will explain the theories of Spinoza more.</p>

Biology Introductions:

Biology and Biotechnology students were the ones who applied the minimum number of first person pronoun in their own writings.

The first move of none of the theses introductions contained a pronoun. However, the second move of only one of the introductions included one subject pronoun.

Persian Statement	English Translation
<p>تولید برنج با این روش خاص می تواند تأثیری شگرف در افزایش کیفی محصول برنج داشته باشد که راجع به جزئیات آن بحث خواهد کرد.</p>	<p>Producing rice through this method can have a great impact on the increase of the rice product quality, the details of which <u>I</u> will argue.</p>

Also in the third move, one of the theses included a first person subject pronoun.

Persian Statement	English Translation
<p>در فصل آتی, محدوده زیستی این گونه حرچنگ را توصیف خواهد کرد تا بتوان شرایط آن را متصور شد.</p>	<p>In the following chapter, <u>I</u> will explain the environment of this kind of crab so that the situation of this so that it would be possible to grasp the circumstances.</p>

Social Studies Introductions:

Social studies theses introductions were again the ones in moderation with regard to the usage of first person pronoun.

In the first move, one of the introductions contained a first person possessive pronoun.

Persian Statement	English Translation
تحقیق من با توجه به اهمیت و رواج این نوع جراحی در سطح شهر تهران صورت گرفته است.	<u>My</u> research has been conducted with regard to the significance of this kind of surgery in Tehran.

One thesis contained two first person possessive pronouns in the second move.

Persian Statement	English Translation
اهمیت تحقیق اینجانب بدلیل گسترش روز افزون بیگانگی اجتماعی جوانان در جامعه بوده که به شرح و بسط دلایل آن خواه م پرداخت.	The significance of <u>my</u> research is due to the daily increase of the social alienation of the youth in society, which I will elaborate on the reasons.

Finally, one thesis included a first person subject pronoun in the third move.

Persian Statement	English Translation
در فصلهای آتی به شرح این نابرابری های اجتماعی و طبقات آنها در جامعه خواه م پرداخت.	In the following chapters, <u>I</u> will explain these social inequalities and their consequences in the society.

The results are summarized in the following table:

Table 2: The Frequency of First Person Pronouns.

	Move 1	Move 2	Move 3	Total
Philosophy	1	2	2	5
Biology	0	1	1	2
Social Studies	1	2	1	4

As it can be understood from the above table, philosophy students were the community who used first person pronoun in their writings the most. With a slight difference, social studies students ranked the second and finally, biology and biotechnology students used first person singular pronoun the least. There was no sign of a reflexive pronouns in the theses investigated.

Discussion:

Authorial Presence: A Local Perspective:

The number of first person singular pronouns used in the body of the thesis introductions was not generally really high. Humanities students had highest (in fact not very high) number of such pronouns in their introductions and the social sciences students ranked the second in this survey. The science students were the least first person singular pronoun users. All of the participants in this research preferred to use passive structures and third person statements rather than presenting their authority. The first moves contained the fewest numbers of first person singular pronoun usage (=2) and the second and the third moves contained the same numbers of first person singular pronoun usage (=5).

Authorial Presence: A Global Perspective:

Samraj [1] also investigated the frequency of first person singular pronoun to determine the extent to which the students preferred to show themselves and present their authority in their writings as agents making scientific decisions. She reported that the first person singular pronoun varied significantly across the three master's theses. Students theses selected from humanities discourse community had the maximum number of first person pronoun whereas the theses selected from the science discourse community contained the minimum number of this pronoun.

The frequency of the first person singular pronoun from Samraj's research [1] is presented in the table below:

Table 3: The Frequency of First Person Singular pronoun from Samraj's Study [1].

	Move 1	Move 2	Move 3	Total
Humanities	1	16	47	64
Science	1	0	8	9
Social Sciences	0	1	18	19

Regarding the authorial presence, American and Iranian students were alike (if not quantitatively) as in both situations, humanities students had the most frequent number of first person singular pronouns in their introductions which shows that they tended to present their authority and show their agentive roles as scientific decision makers, while science students were mostly like those who prefer to follow the third person pronouns and hide their authority. The social science students were the conservatives who positioned themselves between the other two disciplines. The reason might be due to the cultures of people but was not proved in this study. It would be an appropriate topic of inquiry for other researchers.

Generally speaking (and surprisingly speaking), both research studies concluded that humanities students used more first person singular pronouns of all, social science students ranked the second and science students found to be less in favor of authorial presence. Although both of the studies had the same result from this aspect, the number of such pronouns used by the American students was far higher compared to the number of first person singular pronouns used by Iranian students. Another major difference observed is that in American Theses, move 3 contained the highest number of first person pronoun usage and the first move had the lowest frequency of first person pronoun use. The differences between the moves were really notable whereas in Iranian students' theses, the second and the third moves had the same number of first person singular pronouns and their difference with the first move was not very considerable.

Conclusion:

The purpose of this study was to conduct a research on a realm of genre study which had not been done much previously in Iran. Needless to say, academic writing portrays the level of students' knowledge and skills in producing texts which are formal, structured, sequenced and follow an organization. Since M.A students experience theses writing for the first time and their texts are not flawless, it is crucial to analyze their texts and find ways to ameliorate their writing conditions. As provided by Samraj [1], humanities students in America were radically higher in statistics in presenting their ideas in their texts through first person markers whereas science students had the minimum use of first person markers. Comparatively, the case was the same among Iranian students. However, the difference between the number of markers applied by them was not very divergent. An after-study interview was conducted with random students, since the ones whose texts were used in this study were not available, from the same disciplines to know how their professors had guided them in writing their theses. Most of them stated that they had been asked to follow the third person pronoun in their texts since the language of theses is third person. However, additional research is required to gather more information regarding the issue.

Therefore, such study can pave the ground for further research and argument in the domain of genre analysis and cultural differences among higher education students and the way they structure their theses and dissertations; also the techniques and methods which can be applied in order to help students have better organization and find the courage to prove their identities in their texts can be investigated.

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