



RESEARCH ON SELF-MENTIONS AND AUTHOR IDENTITY IN ACADEMIC ENGLISH WRITING



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ABSTRACT

Article History

Received: 25 June 2018
Revised: 30 July 2018
Accepted: 22 August 2018
Published: 26 October 2018

Keywords

Self-mentions
Author identity
Academic English writing
Postgraduate term paper
International journal
Academic English.

Self-mentions can help second-language learners establish author identity in academic English writing. This study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods, with the help of the search tool Antconc3.2.0 to investigate the characteristics of self-mentions and author identity in postgraduates' academic English writing. The research results show that most postgraduates have the awareness of using self-mentions but cannot use them properly. They tend to use "we" instead of "I" to weaken their author identity and the role of discourse constructor is not well played. This research has some pedagogical implications for academic English writing and teaching of Chinese college students.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes in the existing literature of English teaching. The present study is one of very few studies which have investigated both self-mentions and author identity in academic English writing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing involves the complex relationship between discourse, identity, rights, cultural ideas and values. "It is not just about conveying an ideational 'content'; it is also about the representation of self" (Hyland, 2002). Since the 1980s, the research of academic English writing has gradually established a stable international exchange platform (Tu and Qin, 2011). Zou (2015) pointed out that English Academic Writing (EAW) is a major branch of English for Academic Purpose (EAP). EAW focuses on cultivating students' writing ability in capturing academic trends, expressing academic ideas, and participating in international academic exchanges. There is a strong tendency of explanation and argumentation in terms of language expression, with clear professional direction in content selection and professional standardization in format (Zou, 2015).

Author identity in English academic discourse is a hot research topic of social linguistics (Wang, 2014). For researchers in a certain field, the process of academic writing learning is also the process of identity reconstruction which plays an important role in their successful academic writing in the target discourse community (Yang, 2015; Wang and Lv, 2017). Self-mentions are a powerful rhetorical strategy for emphasizing a writer's contribution and constructing his author identity, which includes the first personal pronouns "I, me", "we, us", possessive pronouns "my, our", nominal subject pronouns "mine, ours", the second personal pronoun "you", possessive pronouns "your,

yours", the third personal noun phrases "the writer/researcher" and non-personal words "the paper/study/article" (Liu, 2011).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Foreign scholars represented by Ivanic and Hyland have studied self-mentions and author identity early and laid the theoretical foundation. Ivanic (1998) constructed a clear and comprehensive theoretical framework for author identity, and proposed four dimensions in which author identities are related to each other: autobiographical self, discursive self, self as author and possibilities for self-hood in the socio-cultural and institutional context. He stated that self-mentions are an important discourse strategy for the author to build identity. In Hyland's metadiscourse model (Hyland, 2002) hedges, boosters, attitude markers and self-mentions are interactive evaluative metadiscourses that indicate the author's propositional ideas to affirm or deny the argument. The proper use of self-mentions and a clear academic identity are very helpful for writers to increase their credibility in the academic field (Hyland, 2002). Therefore, we can see that self-mention expressions help the author to realize various communicative functions, such as expressing attitudes to the argument, maintaining interaction with readers, and highlighting his self-identity and status.

Conventional wisdom holds that academic writing is an objective report and authors should try to avoid subjective self-mentions (Yang, 2015). However, in recent years, the texts of academic papers have shown a diversified trend with widely used self-mentions, which has been confirmed by many studies. Tu and Qin (2011) proposed that the use of self-mentions in academic English papers is mainly influenced by three aspects: disciplines, culture and author authority. Hence most published articles are cross-cultural or interdisciplinary, such as Ouyang and Tang (2006) and Yang (2015). Although the connection between self-mentions and author identity has drawn more and more attention of scholars, domestic research are quite few with three main limitations. First, most of them seldom take into account other forms of self-mentions like "us", "my", "our" (Wu and Pang, 2009). Second, the researchers often tend to illustrate what kind of author identities is applied but ignored in-depth inquiry of each author identity. Those who have done data statistics on author identity either focus on comparative studies in English and Chinese or do not consider the plural form "we" which accounts for a large proportion in academic English paper. Third, most corpus come from English native speakers' academic writing, and Chinese scholars' English writing corpus is rarely systematically studied. As Chinese and western writing styles and thinking patterns are quite different, it is very difficult to reach the writing level of native speakers in the postgraduate stage. However, more and more Chinese students are able to publish articles in foreign journals. Therefore, by studying the characteristics of self-mentions and author identity in their own papers, it will be more informative for postgraduates to change their identity, from the academic writing novices to international journal experts in second language.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1. Research Object

We chose the postgraduates majoring in Electrical and Electronic Engineering and Energy Power and Mechanical Engineering in North China Electric Power University. Since nominal subject pronouns "mine" and "ours", the second personal pronouns "you" and the third personal terms are not found in the corpus, self-mentions of this study only includes the following six items: "I, we, me, us, my, our".

3.2. Source of Corpus

As a compulsory course, academic English writing class opens the door for most postgraduates to learn academic English. First, we collected the academic English papers of the above two majors of 2017. According to the two textbooks published for postgraduate academic English writing, *A Bridge to Credibility and Authority* and

Writing Research Articles In English, 45 qualified papers were selected from the nine aspects in the examination criteria for a paper's academic value proposed by Perrin (2009): author's credential, appropriate focus, sufficient coverage, reputable publisher or journal, affiliations or sponsorship, currentness, documentation, availability and appropriateness. Then, we made the list of students who scored the top 25% of academic English writing class and their paper writing. If the author of the 45 selected articles is on this list, his or her article will be adopted. If not, the article will be removed. After two rounds of screening, 30 papers were finalized as research objects. At the same time, we indexed IEEE journal papers published in the recent three years with postgraduate authors from the same university. The length of journal paper should be similar to that of postgraduate term paper. The two requirements aim to ensure that all authors of the corpus have the same cultural background and way of thinking. Finally, we converted the papers in WORD or PDF format into TXT papers and used Antconc3.2.0 to search the six items. The corpus statistics are only limited to the body part of the paper, other parts like title, references, acknowledgment, and author profile are all removed. The headings, direct quotations, tables, data, etc. in the text are included in the word count, but not as the object of analysis in order to improve the validity of statistics.

3.3. Research Questions

- (1) What is the overall usage of self-mentions in academic English papers?
- (2) What are the distribution characteristics of self-mentions in postgraduate term paper and journal paper?
- (3) What are the similarities and differences of self-mentions in the construction of author identity in postgraduate term paper and journal paper?

3.4. Research Methods

Based on quantitative method, a corpus of 30 postgraduate term papers and 30 IEEE journal papers is built. According to Hyland's classification model of reporting verbs (Hyland, 2000) and considering the actually appeared author identity in the corpus, we divide author identity into three categories: researcher, discourse constructor and arguer.

The identity of researcher is the core of author's professional identity (Wu, 2013). In academic English papers, self-mentions of researcher identity are often used together with the verbs such as "analyze, examine, calculate, assume, etc." For example:

- (1) "Due to what was said in the traditional control theory, we analyzed the stability of the distributed generation system with the values and..." (one postgraduate term paper)

The role of discourse constructor is to introduce the experimental process or describe charts, aiming to help readers understand the structure or content of the article. Self-mentions of discourse constructor are always followed by the words or phrases like "describe, present, discuss, focus on, etc". For example:

- (2) "We discuss other related aspects such as market clearing and pricing..." (one postgraduate term paper)
- (3) "Hence, we only focus on the policy design of a single SBS and all the SBSs can work in the same way." (one IEEE journal paper)

Arguer means that the authors express their views, opinions and attitudes on the known information and the facts displayed in the discourse. They may question, approve, or oppose, in order to present their "voice" in the text (Tang, 2016). The verbs are those expressing opinions such as "believe, think, expect, etc". For example:

- (4) "... we can think that the pulverized coal does not happen before 25s, so the drying time in this paper is set to 25s..." (one postgraduate term paper)

3.5. Analysis of Research Results

3.5.1. Overall Usage of Self-Mentions

As can be seen from Table 1, self-mentions appear in a total of 41 papers, accounting for 68.3%, more than two thirds. The number of postgraduate term papers using self-mentions is similar to that of journal papers, which indicates that most postgraduates have the awareness of using self-mentions when writing English research articles.

Table-1. Overall usage of self-mentions

	Postgraduate term paper	Journal paper	number	percentage
Use	20	21	41	68.3%
No use	10	9	19	31.7%
Total	30	31	60	100%

Source: Survey findings by the researchers themselves

3.5.2. Overall Distribution of Self-Mentions

Table-2. Overall distribution of self-mentions

Self-mentions	Postgraduate term paper		Journal paper	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
I	1	0.5%	0	0
my	0	0	0	0
me	0	0	0	0
we	161	80.90%	258	82.97%
our	31	15.6%	41	13.18%
us	6	3%	12	3.85%
Total	199	100%	311	100%

Source: Survey findings by the researchers themselves

Horizontally, a total of 199 self-mentions are used in 30 postgraduate term papers, with an average of 6.5 self-mentions in one paper, and self-mentions are used 311 times in 30 journal papers, with an average of 10.4 self-mentions. The former is nearly double the latter. The result testifies that journal authors make use of self-mentions more frequently. Postgraduates have the awareness to use self-mention expressions when writing academic research paper but not strong enough.

Longitudinally, the distribution of the six forms of self-mentions manifests a significant difference. The plural form of self-mentions takes up the largest part in journal paper and postgraduate term paper, which far exceeds the singular self-mention with the percentage of less than 1. Among the plural self-mentions, “we” is used 161 times and 258 times, accounting for 80.90% and 82.97%, which is more than three quarters. It is followed by “our” with the number of 31 and 41. The object case “us” is also applied with a small percentage of 3 and 3.8 respectively.

One possible reason for not using singular form of self-mentions in journal paper is that the authors are often composed of a group of postgraduates with their mentors, or a project team, so they can only use plural self-mentions. However, we can see that although the authors of postgraduate term paper are all individuals, the singular self-mention is also close to zero. This shows that postgraduates are more inclined to express themselves in the plural form of self-mentions in order to hide their author identity due to the strong collective concept of the Chinese. On one hand, they think the use of singular self-mentions such as “I”, “my” and “me” would be too subjective and lack the sense of humility and prudence. On the other hand, the plural form of self-mentions is more suitable for verbal communication and interaction. When “we” is used to refer to the author and his peers, it can minimize personal factors and reduce the likelihood of being questioned. When “we” is used to refer to authors and readers (including the experts and general readers), it seems to be weaker in individual identity but actually

stronger to express ideas by “standing on the reader’s point of view and engaging the readers” to increase the reader's probability of accepting the authors’ opinions.

Compared with the other five self-mentions, “we” shows author identity more directly, and its frequency of occurrence is also the highest. Therefore, when discussing author identity, we only count the plural form of self-mentions “we”. Hong and Gao (2015) pointed out that corpus-driven research shows that the meaning of sentences is determined together by the phrase sequence formed by word collocation, word class connection and lexical grammatical sequence rather than a single node word. Therefore, when we divide author identity with “we”, we combine the collocation behind “we” and the context and overall meaning of the whole sentence. Here we take an example of the word “get” in the following two sentences.

(1) “And through market research, we get the user’s electricity satisfaction curve in Fig.3. “ (one IEEE journal paper)

(2) In this case, the true meaning of “get” is equivalent to "find", so “we” here belongs to the identity of researcher.

(3) “By solving the equilibrium equation $\pi = \pi PC$, where $\pi = (\pi_{C_{thr}-1}, \pi_{C_{thr}})$, $\pi_i = \Pr(C_k = i)$, $i = C_{thr} - 1$, C_{thr} are the stationary probabilities of push state, we can get $\Pr(u_k = 2) = \pi_{C_{thr}-1} = \dots$ ” (one IEEE journal paper)

The verb "get" in this sentence appears in the introduction of a formula and only plays the role of constructing content, so “we” here shows discourse constructor identity. Other words like "have" and "find" are dealt with the same method, and the statistical results are as follows.

3.5.3. Author Identity in Academic Papers

Table-3. Author identity in academic papers

Author identity	Postgraduate term paper		Journal paper	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Researcher	110	68.32%	138	53.49%
Discourse constructor	48	29.82%	116	44.96%
Arguer	3	1.86%	4	1.55%
Total	161	100%	258	100%

Source: Survey findings by the researchers themselves

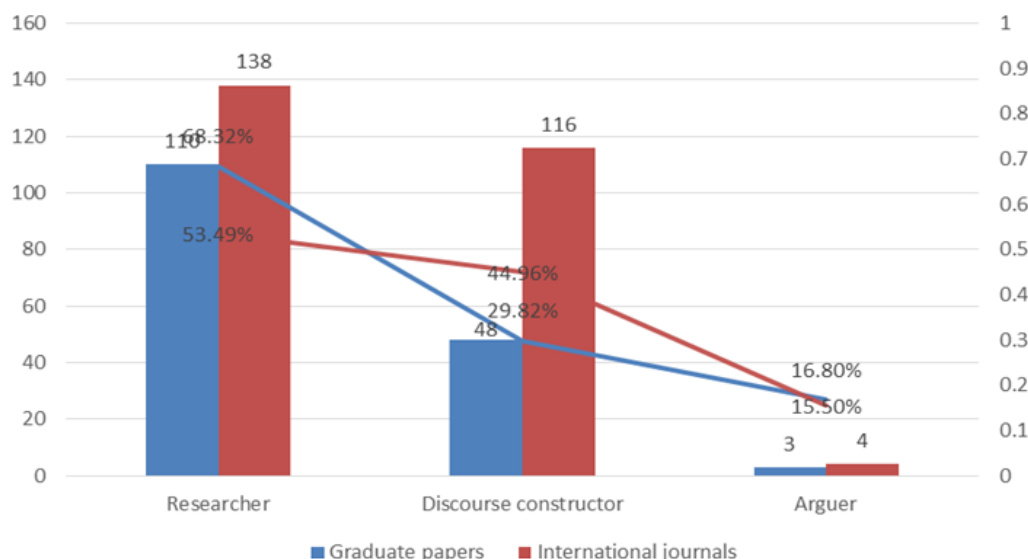


Chart-1. Author identity in academic papers

On the whole, the identity of researcher has appeared 248 times and ranked the first place, accounting for 59.18%, more than a half. Secondly, discourse constructor is used 164 times, accounting for 39.14%, nearly one-third, and arguer appears the least, only 7 times, accounting for 1.67%. The above data tell us that the main function

of plural self-mention "we" is to express researcher identity, followed by discourse constructor. Arguer identity is seldom applied in academic English papers.

It is worth noting that researcher is very similar in the proportion of journal paper and postgraduate term paper which means this identity has been well used. However, the identity of discourse constructor needs more attention. In postgraduate term paper, discourse constructor only appears 48 times, accounting for 29.82%, far less than that in journal paper with 116 times, 44.96%. One reason is that postgraduates often use "it" instead of "we" and think "it" to be more objective. But this practice will make readers become a passive information receiver rather than a paper participant, which will widen the distance between the author and the reader. In contrast, journal authors highly value the role of discourse constructor by often using "we" to enhance communication and interaction with readers. Moreover, various language strategies are used together with "we" in the language organization when introducing theory, formula, graphics and data in journal papers.

4. CONCLUSION

Through the above analysis, we can draw the following conclusions:

For overall usage, self-mentions have appeared in most papers. Postgraduates have the awareness of using self-mentions but the frequency is much lower than that of journal paper, indicating that they have not enough confidence to use more self-mentions in academic English papers;

In the distribution of self-mentions, the plural form of self-mentions is used far more frequently than the singular form. Postgraduates tend to use "we" instead of "I" under the influence of Chinese culture such as collectivism and self-effacing psychology due to the target readers who are usually knowledgeable experts and their teachers.

In terms of author identity, postgraduates are on the margins of English academic writing discourse community. Most of "we" are used as researcher. The identity of discourse constructor is quite weak which needs great efforts to achieve in postgraduate term paper. And the use of arguer identity is largely limited by discrepancies.

The above research results manifest that in academic English writing teaching, teachers should encourage students to appropriately increase the use of self-mentions, and more importantly, how to use them properly to show author identity especially discourse constructor identity.

Funding: This study is financially supported by HeBei Education Department Project (Grant No. 2018YYGJ086): Action Research: Exploration and Practice of Teaching Mode of College Academic English Writing.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Contributors/Acknowledgement: Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study.

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