



Matej Bel University, Banská Bystrica, Slovakia  
Has been issued since 2014  
ISSN 1339-6773  
E-ISSN 1339-875X

## **Pragmatic Effects of First-Person Pronouns in Academic Discourse**

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### **Abstract**

The paper deals with the pragmatic effect of first-person pronouns in academic discourse. The paper argues that scholars use personal pronouns pursuing different communicative purposes. Empirical analysis of eight academic papers written in English and Russian has shown that the authors use personal pronouns to create specific pragmatic effects. The frequency of personal pronouns has shown the degree of explicit author presence in academic discourse.

**Keywords:** Pragmatics; pronouns; academic discourse; pragmatic effect.

### **Introduction**

Academic discourse deals not only with conveying scientific data, it also deals with expressing the writer's opinion, emphasizing the writer's personal contributions to the scientific field, and organizing the discourse. Most of these pragmatic functions are performed through the use of personal pronouns.

It is worth noting, however, that the use of 'I' and 'we' are often believed to be contrary to the conventions of academic discourse requiring academic texts to be impersonal and objective. However, some researchers [2; 4; 5; 7; 11] have shown that pronouns can help the writer organize the text and guide the reader through the argument, state arguments, and knowledge claims, recount research procedure and methodology. Personal pronouns make writers visible; help them present their viewpoints to the academic community, emphasize their personal contributions to the field, establish their relations with the academic community. They also help when the writer is describing a project she is working on as it is rather challenging to avoid first-person pronouns.

The present paper seeks to study the functional and pragmatic effects that writers create through the use of first-person pronouns. It reveals functions the personal pronouns have in academic discourse. The paper is also aimed at exploring the rhetorical preferences of scholars in the use of first-person pronouns in their papers. Findings are illustrated with extracts from eight journal papers.

### **Review of Literature**

The nature of personal pronouns has been analyzed and discussed by logicians, linguists, anthropologists and philosophers of language. Benveniste [1] placed personal pronouns at the heart of pragmatic theory by describing them as empty signs that only become full when used in actual discourse.

There have been a number of corpus-based studies of pronouns in academic writing and in political and legal discourse (e.g., Fortanet, 2004; Harwood, 2005, 2006; Hyland, 2001; Kuo, 1999; Tang & John, 1999).

For our research purposes, Tang and John [10] and Vladimirou [11] present interesting studies of personal reference in academic discourse. They proposed the taxonomies for the classification of first-person pronouns employed by writers.

Tang and Jones developed their framework relating to the functionality of first-person pronouns based on the concept of “creating identities”. They proposed a continuum of authorial ‘I’ and the degrees of power embedded in the use of first-person pronouns.

Vladimirou (2006) has modified Tang and John’s taxonomy and distinguished between four categories for first-person singular pronominal reference: ‘I’ as a researcher, ‘I’ indefinite, ‘I’ biographical, and ‘I’ in acknowledgements.

Another issue deemed disputable among linguists, which is relevant to the present study, is the status of the pronoun ‘we’. Taking into consideration the semantic references of ‘we’, most scholars have distinguished between an inclusive and an exclusive ‘we’. Inclusive and exclusive pronoun usage has been the subject of investigation by a number of contemporary researchers [3; 4; 5; 8; 9].

The vagueness of ‘we’ has led Mühlausler and Harre [8] to state that it is usually left to the addressee to infer who is included in the reference. Gragson and Selzer [3] note that some instances of ‘we’ clearly refer to the authors of the text. On the other hand, they note that other cases of ‘we’ are addressing the wider community. Inclusive pronouns like these allow writers to “cast their readers as equals, as colleagues”, they argue. Wales [12] points out that the interpretation of the discourse referents of ‘we’, which are seemingly limitless, depends upon “the particular context of use and the inferences to be drawn on the basis of the mutual knowledge of the speaker and interpreter”. Pennycook [9] argues that ‘we’ is “always simultaneously inclusive and exclusive, a pronoun of solidarity and of rejection.

Thus, there is no consensus among the researchers regarding the status of ‘we’-pronoun. But ‘we’ as well as ‘I’ are by far the efficient tools used by writers to create certain pragmatic effects.

Although previous studies on personal pronouns in academic discourse have examined in detail the pragmatic effects that personal pronouns have, there are still certain issues to be explored further.

### Method and Procedure

The method applied for this study is based on qualitative and quantitative analysis of personal pronoun use. The qualitative approach aims to investigate the pragmatics of personal pronouns in academic discourse. The quantitative method is applied to find out the frequency of ‘I’ and ‘we’ use in academic papers.

The corpus used in this study consists of eight academic journal papers. The papers published for the last three years were selected at random from English language (EL) and Russian language (RL) journals. The length of the texts under investigation is about 7,000–10,000 words. No co-authored texts were included in the corpus. The authors of the papers have been identified as A1, A2, and so on where A stands for *Author*.

### Results

The frequency with which the Russian writers used ‘I’ and ‘we’ is summarized in Table 1 which shows the profile of pronoun usage in the EL and RL corpus.

Table 1: Frequency of ‘I’ and ‘we’ in EL and RL Papers

Writer	Pronoun ‘I’ use		Pronoun ‘we’ use	
	<i>EL</i>	<i>RL</i>	<i>EL</i>	<i>RL</i>
A1	15	0	3	6
A2	0	0	13	0
A3	2	0	3	2
A4	8	0	9	5
Total	25	0	28	13

As can be inferred from Table 1, in the EL papers, the Russian scholars tend to make their personality more visible. The expression of a strong self can be explained by the wish to be seen in a text presenting the extent and importance of their contribution – for instance, “I examine”, “I analyzed”, “I consider”.

Nevertheless, not all the writers in their EL papers used 'I'. As presented in Table 1, two of four authors avoided the "egocentric" pronoun in their writing.

'We'-pronoun is used in both EL and RL prose, but the EL papers feature rather more instances of the first-person plural.

The results of the analysis show that in RL papers, the use of first-person pronouns does not seem to be a predominant feature of writing, while EL papers feature a number of first-person singular and plural pronouns.

The total number of EL papers which show instances of first-person plural pronouns is four (100%). Three of them show instances of 'I'. The total number of RL papers which show instances of first-person plural pronouns is four (80%). At the same time, none of them feature instances of first-person singular pronouns.

The authors used pronouns for different communicative purposes. Expert scholars use them more often than novices do. For instance, A1 being an experienced scholar, an author of more than 50 academic works, used I-pronoun 15 times in one paper. The use of self-mention appears to be the writer's intention to mediate the relationship between her arguments and her discourse communities:

(1) **I begin** by setting out ....

(2) **I then examine** .... Next, **I consider** ....

'I' is used to describe various steps of the study, to indicate that the research process is a decision made by the writer who assumes responsibility for the choices she made when conducting the study.

In examples below, A1 uses 'I' to express her personal views:

(3) As **I see** it, lying and deceiving represent two kinds of falsehood.

(4) **I** treat deception as a phenomenon belonging to the class of phenomena defined by the general notion of insincerity...

Personal attribution indicates that the statements are personal judgment and interpretation rather than facts.

A1 rarely uses 'we' in her paper. The paper shows only three instances of the first-person plural which is always used inclusively calling the readers to participate in the research:

(5) Here **we** can **see** the deceiver, Moll Flanders...

Thus, in her EL paper, A1 presents herself explicitly as the originator of ideas and contributions to the field performing the role of the researcher.

The RL paper by A1 shows no instances of 'я'(I)-pronoun, while the instances of 'мы' (we) is twice the amount of 'we' in her EL prose. In example (6), 'we' performs the function of the representative – she speaks on behalf of all people:

(6) Если **мы** считаем род несущественным, то русские могут удивляться тому, почему **мы** полагаем необходимым каждый раз указывать ... [If **we** consider the gender irrelevant, the Russians might be surprised why **we** think it is necessary to mark it each time]

The example below shows that A1 uses 'мы' (we) to refer to herself. It is an exclusive 'we' functioning as the opinion holder employed instead of 'I'.

(7) **Мы** полагаем, что подобный анализ ситуации является едва ли не единственно возможным. [**We** believe that such case study is the only one possible].

In addition, the RL paper shows two instances of an inclusive 'мы' (we) to draw the reader's attention to certain points of the paper:

(8) **Мы** опять видим, что ... [**We** see again that ...].

In the EL paper by A2, on the contrary, it has been found no instances of 'I'. The occurrences of 'we' are not too frequent. However, there are some interesting examples of 'we' use – the shifts between exclusive and inclusive 'we'. According to Harwood [4], it helps the author achieve a number of effects. Let us consider an extract from her paper:

(9) Further on, **we** would like to focus our attention on one more technology...

(10) So, as far as **we** can see the implicit assumption is becoming a necessary part of political discourse...

The first instance of 'we' is unambiguously exclusive. It expresses the writer's intention to draw readers' attention to a certain point. In example (10), 'we' is rather inclusive. The author includes readers in one tandem with her. This inclusive pronoun makes readers feel involved.

Thus, A2 avoids personal reference too much in her EL paper, varying personal constructions with impersonal ones. Those 13 'we' uses in her paper aim 1) to signal the writer's intentions, 2) to organize the discourse, 3) to present the writer's claims, 4) to describe the research procedure used, 5) to express what the writer has gained.

In her RL paper, there are no instances of personal reference at all.

Let us now analyze the papers by A3. In her EL prose, there are two occurrences of 'I' used to mark the steps of the research:

(11) In this article, **I** would like to describe several cyber events that can be considered as an evolutionary line...

'We' occurs thrice in her prose to share her view on the cyberwar with the reader:

(12) **We** can suggest that this cyberwar was a turning point in changing the mentality.

The RL paper by A3 shows no instances of the first-person singular pronoun – a typical feature of the Russian academic discourse. Personal reference is realized by the use of first-person plural which she uses twice:

(13) В первую очередь **мы** говорим о полноценных сформировавшихся обществах... [First of all, we speak about healthy, developed societies].

It should be noted that A3 as well as A2 are novice scholars. Despite this fact, A3 does use 'I'-pronoun. However, she uses it only to organize the discourse, and mainly in the Introduction. In her RL paper, personal reference is used twice in the form of 'мы'(we)-pronoun.

Let us now turn to the papers by A4, an expert scholar having a doctorate degree and more than 60 published works in her field. Her EL paper has 17 occurrences of personal pronouns, among which the instances of 'I' are eight.

'I' is mainly used to draw the reader's attention to certain points of the paper:

(14) **I should like to** note that in this scene ...

'We' is mainly used in the role of the researcher:

(15) **We** have to go back to the very first scene.

(16) Before **we** proceed, **I** should like to remind the reader that ...

In extract (16), we can see two pronouns – 'I' and 'we'. 'I' features the intention of the author to restrict it to herself, while 'we' means the writer and her audience and is used to encourage the readers to maintain belief in the integrity of the text and its arguments, and by association, in the author herself.

In the RL paper by A4, there are only five instances of 'мы' (we), and there are not any occurrences of 'я' (I). So, A4 is prone to express a stronger "voice" in her EL papers, while in Russian writing, she prefers being less visible.

## Conclusion

The current study has explored the frequency of personal reference and different pragmatic functions first-person pronouns perform in EL and RL academic papers. The frequency of personal pronouns has shown the degree of explicit author presence in academic discourse.

We have seen that all the writers used first-person pronouns in a different way. Our analysis has shown that 'we' in academic discourse can be used to reflect different choices such as: 1) The author as a proxy of the academic community (exclusive 'we'); 2) The author as the representative of all people (non-referential 'we'); 3) The author and the readers (inclusive 'we'); 4) The author him/herself (ego-identical 'we').

The first person-singular pronoun 'I' in academic writing performs the functions as follows: 1) To remind the audience that discourse comes from a necessarily subjective point of view; to invite readers into the individual world of the writer; 2) To make a dry subject seem more engaging, and a complicated argument seem less intimidating; 3) To develop writer's voice or to claim his/her unique perspective or argument; 4) To emphasize writer's agency (who is doing what) if she needs to point out how valuable his/her particular project is to an academic discipline; 5) To claim some kind of authority on the topic; 6) To describe a project the writer is working on.

It has been found that in EL papers, novice scholars underuse or avoid 'I'-pronoun. Expert scholars use 'I'-pronoun much in their EL papers. They use it not only to organize the discourse but to signal their intentions, give opinions, and express what they have personally gained. It has also been found that RL papers lack first-person singular pronouns.

Hence, the pronominal choice depends heavily on the conventions of the academic community. The writer's level of experience in research field appears to be one more factor determining the pronominal choice.

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