Humble servants of the discipline?  
Self-mention in research articles  

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1. Introduction

Until fairly recently scientific and academic writing was seen as largely objective reporting of an independent and external reality. As long as the researcher used language skilfully and avoided personal bias, then the reader could simply decode the transmitted message to recover the same reality. In contrast to this Shannon and Weaver’s (1963) view of communication, a great deal of research has recently shown how professional writers seek to achieve successful interaction with their readers...
while maintaining the integrity of their data. Hedges (Hyland, 1996, 1998), reporting
conventions (Hyland, 2000; Thomas & Hawes, 1994), and evaluation (Hunston,
1993; Thompson & Ye, 1991) are among the features that have been examined for
the ways such writer–reader interactions are realised in journal articles. Perhaps
surprisingly, the vexed topic of self-mention has received considerably less attention.
This issue remains a perennial problem for students, teachers, and experienced writers
alike, and the extent to which one can reasonably explicitly intrude into one’s dis-
course, or assert one’s personal involvement, remains highly controversial.

In this paper I investigate the extent, forms, and functions of self-mention in a
corpus of 240 research articles in eight disciplines to help unravel some of the myths
and misperceptions about this topic. In particular, I seek to reveal something of how
self-mention is used and perceived as a way of understanding more about writing in
the disciplines and the kinds of options available to our students. I begin with a brief
outline of the issue, presenting an overview of how impersonality is seen among style
manual writers, applied linguists, and composition scholars, then go on to discuss
the main features of its realization, examining patterns of exclusive first person
pronoun use and self-citation.

2. Impersonality and its discontents

The convention of impersonal reporting remains a hallowed concept for many, a
cornerstone of the positivist assumption that academic research is purely empirical
and objective, and therefore best presented as if human agency was not part of the
process. Albert Einstein (1934, p. 113), for example, wrote, “when a man is talking
about scientific subjects, the little word ‘I’ should play no part in his expositions”. A
more rhetorically grounded, but closely related, view is that which stresses the per-
suasive authority of impersonality. Here it is seen as a strategy that maximizes the
credibility of the writer and works to elicit credence from the reader. Lachowicz
(1981, p. 111) for example, argues that impersonality emphasizes “objectivity, open-
mindedness, and the established factual nature of a given activity”, it functions to
underline the “common share of knowledge with the community”, and stresses the
collective responsibility of academic endeavour.

Eradication of the self is therefore seen as demonstrating a grasp of scholarly
persuasion as it allows the research to speak directly to the reader in an unmediated
way. This is a view proposed in many style manuals and textbooks. Rowntree
(1991), for example, advises caution in use of the first person, while Spencer and
Arbon (1996, p. 26) recommend complete abstention. Similar comments are not
hard to find in the pedagogic literature:

Write your paper with a third person voice that avoids ‘I believe’ or ‘It is my
opinion’. (Lester, 1993, p. 144)

In general, academic writing aims at being ‘objective’ in its expression of ideas,
and thus tries to avoid specific reference to personal opinions. Your academic
writing should imitate this style by eliminating first person pronouns . . . as far as possible. (Arnaudet & Barrett, 1984, p. 73)

Since science is concerned primarily with the objective and the impersonal, the passive point of view, though devoid of human interest and color, is ordinarily proper for accounts of scientific processes. (Jones & Keene, 1981, p. 125)

Underlying this view seems to be an assumption that academic persuasion is essentially an issue of accommodation, and that humility, towards one’s peers, one’s reviewers, or the discipline in general, represents the best means of gaining acceptance of one’s claims. The research article is thus regarded as a modest, self-effacing genre in which the writer acts as a humble servant of the discipline. There is, of course, some truth in this. Publishing in academic journals demands that the author displays some degree of disciplinarity, that he or she demonstrates a familiarity with the rhetorical conventions and social understandings of the community, and observes suitable patterns of social and rhetorical interactions (e.g. Hyland, 2000; Myers, 1989). Arguments have to be made in ways that readers find most acceptable and convincing, and research claims framed to project appropriate certainty and maximum plausibility.

However, not all discourse communities employ the same conventions and readers in different fields have different expectations and norms of argument. Thus, because articles are sites of disciplinary engagement, where writers interact with specialist audiences rather than with general readers, admonishments to avoid self-mention are sometimes said to be misguided (e.g. Wilkinson, 1992).

In other words, research writing involves writers in a process of both textualizing their work as a contribution to the field, and in constructing themselves as plausible members of the discipline, competent to make such a contribution (e.g. Ervin, 1993; Pare, 1993). But clearly writers have to do more than display legitimacy; they have to say something new (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Kaufer & Geisler, 1989). This means that demonstrating solidarity with the community and showing respect for its common goals is only part of the story, and that writers must carefully balance this with vigorous argument for the originality of their claims and by the display of an authoritative professional persona. While claims have to be warranted by appropriate support and reference to existing knowledge by fitting novelty into a community consensus, success in gaining acceptance for innovation also involves demonstrating an individual contribution to that community and establishing a claim for recognition for academic priority.

So while impersonality may often be institutionally sanctified, it is constantly transgressed. This is generally because the choices which realise explicit writer presence also contribute to a high degree of ego-involvement (Chafe, 1985), and are closely associated with authorial identity and authority. All writing carries information about the writer, and the conventions of personal projection, particularly the use of first person pronouns, are powerful means for self-representation (Ivanic, 1998; Ivanic & Simpson, 1992). Authority, as I noted above, is partly accomplished by speaking as an insider, using the codes and the identity of a community member (e.g. Bartholomae, 1986, p. 156). But it also relates to the writer’s convictions,
engagement with the reader, and personal presentation of ‘self’. Cherry (1988) uses the traditional rhetorical concepts of ethos and persona to represent persuasiveness as a balance between these two dimensions of authority: the credibility gained from representing oneself as a competent member of the discipline, and from rhetorically displaying the personal qualities of a reliable, trustworthy person.

Presenting a discoursal self is central to the writing process, as Ivanic (1998, p. 32) has made clear:

Writing is a particularly salient form of social action for the negotiation of identities, because written text is deliberate, potentially permanent and used as evidence for many social purposes (such as judging academic achievement).

Writers cannot avoid projecting a particular impression of themselves and how they stand in relation to their arguments, their discipline, and their readers, and this can have an important impact on the outcome of their discoursal purposes.

Kuo (1999) points out that the strategic use of personal pronouns allows writers to emphasize their own contribution to the field and to seek agreement for it. Personal reference sends a clear indication to the reader of the perspective from which their statements should be interpreted. For this reason, self-mention is often seen positively in the literature. The Manual on Scientific Writing (1993), for instance, encourages writers to employ the first person, as does the authoritative Council of Biology Editors Style Manual (1978, p. 5), which advises writers to shun ‘the passive of modesty’ and suggests that ‘the first person (I, we) is natural for relating what you did’. Several influential style guides also echo this view:

I herewith ask all young scientists to renounce the false modesty of previous generations of scientists. Do not be afraid to name the agent of the action in a sentence, even when it is ‘I’ or ‘we’. (Day, 1994, p. 166)

... the scientific attitude is not achieved by either the use or the avoidance of a particular pronoun. Rather, is achieved through the qualities mentioned earlier: honesty, care in handling facts, dignity, and restraint in manner. (Mills & Water, 1986, pp. 32–33)

Because of this conflicting advice, the ‘voice’ writers choose to employ, the position they adopt to their claims, their readers, and their communities, is a perennial source of difficulty for both native speaker and second language students (e.g. Cadman, 1997; Connor, 1996). Chang and Swales (1999, p. 164), for instance, observe that “feelings and reactions can be both strong and unpredictable” on the use or avoidance of first person pronouns. They found that a group of 37 graduate students felt decidedly uncomfortable with the first person, and comments like “nobody likes to use it in a formal paper” and “only usable for senior scholars” were typical in their data. Cadman (1997, p. 8) argues that the central problem for international students lies in the gap between the epistemological orientations of different cultures; students are unclear about “who they are expected to be” and are unable to establish their
own position in their writing. The absence of clear direction in their pedagogic texts, and conflicting expectations among their supervisors and teachers, simply exacerbates these difficulties.

In sum, the linguistic choices writers make not only affect the conceptual or ideational meaning that they convey, but can also influence the impression they make on their readers. The decision to adopt an impersonal rhetorical style or to represent oneself explicitly would seem to have significant consequences for how one’s message is received. Indeed, the intrusion of authorial authority to limit claims, enhance plausibility, and promote personal credibility can play an important role in securing acceptance for academic arguments. I will now try to throw some light on the role of personal intrusion in academic writing and to provide an empirical basis for the advice we might wish to give our students.

3. Method and corpus

The study employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches, comprising frequency counts and text analysis of a corpus of published articles and a series of interviews with academics from the relevant discourse communities. The text corpus of 240 research articles consists of three papers from each of 10 leading journals in eight disciplines selected to represent a broad cross-section of academic practice. These are mechanical engineering (ME), electrical engineering (EE), marketing (Mk), philosophy (Phil), sociology (Soc), applied linguistics (AL), physics (Phy) and microbiology (Bio). The journals were nominated by expert informants as among the leading publications in their fields, and the articles chosen at random from 1997 and 1998 issues.

The texts were scanned to produce an electronic corpus of 1,400,000 words and searched for expressions of self-mention using Word Pilot, a text analysis programme. The search items were the first person pronouns I, me, my, we, us, and our, cases of self-citation and references to work conducted elsewhere by the same authors, and examples of self-mention terms such as this writer or the research team. All cases were examined in context to ensure they were exclusive first person uses and to determine their syntactic position and pragmatic function. All forms of we, us and our which referred to participants other than the writers were eliminated. The interviews were conducted with experienced researcher/writers from the target disciplines using a semi-structured format of open-ended interview prompts which focused on their own and others’ writing, but allowed subjects to raise other relevant issues (cf. Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 293). Subjects could therefore respond to texts as readers with insider community understandings of rhetorical effectiveness, while also discussing their own discoursal preferences and practices.

4. Frequencies and forms of self-mention

The two most striking features of the corpus are the saliency of self-mention in the articles and the variety of its disciplinary and formal expression. Table 1, which
gives the frequencies for each figure normalised to a text length of 10,000 words, clearly shows that academic writing is not the faceless, formal prose it is often depicted to be. While research articles may well be characterised by abstraction and high informational production (Biber, 1988), human agents are integral to their meaning. There are sufficient cases of author-reference to suggest that writers have conspicuous promotional and interactional purposes, with every article containing at least one first person reference. Overall, there were roughly 28 expressions of self-mention in each paper; 81% of these were pronouns, 16% were self-citations, and 2% were other mentions to the authors of the paper. The pronouns we and I were the most commonly used devices for self-representation in these texts.

Although the overall frequencies per 10,000 words show no obvious correlation with the traditional distinction of hard-soft knowledge domains (sciences/engineering and social sciences/humanities) (Becher, 1989; Kolb, 1981), there are considerable differences between the disciplines represented here (Table 2). At one extreme, there was an average of 44 cases per article in marketing, and only seven in

Table 1
Frequency of self-mention forms per discipline (per 10,000 words)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Citation</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>Me</th>
<th>My</th>
<th>We</th>
<th>Us</th>
<th>Our</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>56.2</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>App ling</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
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<td>6.8</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic eng</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical eng</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Average frequency of self-mention per paper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>Self-citations</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic eng</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical eng</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average hard fields</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>App ling</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average soft fields</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
mechanical engineering. Self-mention was particularly dense per 10,000 words in physics, marketing, and biology, and while mechanical engineers referred to themselves far less often than writers in other fields, they relied quite heavily on self-citation in linking their work into the disciplinary fabric. More generally, when we ignore text length and look at the raw scores, we find that some 69% of all cases of self-mention occurred in the humanities and social science papers, with an average of 38 per article, compared with only 17 in science and engineering. This difference was largely due to the much greater use of first person pronouns in the soft disciplines.

These broad differences in the use of first person and self-citation suggest that self-mention might vary with different assumptions about the effects of authorial presence and rhetorical intrusion in different knowledge-making communities. I will outline some of the ways it is expressed and used below.

5. Self-citation, disciplinary identity, and knowledge making

Perhaps the most obvious form of self-mention is to refer to one’s earlier research, either as an element within the sentence or as a superscript note. The extent of self-citation in these papers was surprising. As Table 3 shows, about 70% of the papers in the study contained a reference to the author and these comprised 8% of all references. Self-citation was particularly frequent in biology, with an average of 11 citations per paper, but was also common in sociology and marketing. Overall, self-citation appears to be a prominent feature of academic writing in the sciences and engineering where it made up almost 11% of all references, compared with only 5% in the soft fields, and constituted 60% of all expressions of self-mention. The ‘cases per paper’ columns in Table 4 indicates the dispersal of items, with about a third of all papers containing four or more references to the authors.

Doubtless the circumstances which motivate writers to cite their own work are varied and complex, involving psychological, rhetorical, and social factors that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>Per paper</th>
<th>Cases per paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>% of all</td>
<td>Max</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>324</td>
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<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical eng</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic eng</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>App ling</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
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<td>11.0</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>1096</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>4.6</td>
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</table>
Table 4
Frequency of first person pronouns (cases per paper)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>Me</th>
<th>My</th>
<th>We</th>
<th>Us</th>
<th>Our</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic eng</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical eng</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average hard fields</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>13.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
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<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>12.7</td>
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<td>1.0</td>
<td>5.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average soft fields</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>0.6</td>
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<td>Overall</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

contain elements of confidence, experience and self-promotion. Self-citation is obviously an important means of demonstrating one’s disciplinary credentials and credibility. Quite clearly, no research occurs in a social vacuum and always has to be contextualized by grounding it in the issues which engage the discipline. Self-citation can help to emphasize these links one has to one’s colleagues through an engagement in a common literature and the professional intimacy one shares with a set of current disciplinary problems. This is part of what it means to display disciplinarity (Sullivan, 1996).

Participation in published research is perhaps the strongest demonstration a writer can make to establish his or her claim to be seen as an important player in a field and to have work taken seriously. This was highlighted by a number of my informants in the interviews:

Everyone has to fit their research into a framework to make sense. I always cite my own work because people are more likely to listen if you are part of that framework. (Soc)

Citing yourself is an important way of showing your familiarity with an issue. It shows you know what you are talking about and have something worth saying. (Bio)

In other words, situating research within the wider narratives of their community can enhance a writer’s credibility. Constructing a solid disciplinary identity increases the likelihood that their work will be read and perhaps accepted.

The broad variations in the frequency of self-citation however also indicate differences in genre conventions which suggest underlying differences in the research practices of these academic communities. Issues in the humanities and social sciences, for instance, tend to be relatively diverse, range over a wide academic territory, and are
detached from immediately prior developments (Becher, 1989). This means that references are relatively diffuse and there is comparatively little opportunity for self-citation.

References in sciences and engineering, on the other hand, tend to be tightly bound to a particular research topic. References here closely define a specific context and contribute to the sense of linear progression which is often said to characterize hard knowledge (Kolb, 1981; Kuhn, 1970). This is partly a consequence of the fact that scientists tend to participate in highly discrete and specialized areas of research, largely because of the heavy investments in procedural capability and technical equipment that hard knowledge production often requires. It is also related to the sheer volume of knowledge and its rapid expansion. These factors coerce scientists into a niche of expertise from where they can follow defined paths and make precise contributions. Research on particular issues is therefore often conducted at a restricted number of sites and by a limited number of researchers, allowing writers to draw on their own work to a considerable extent:

We aren’t just blowing our own trumpets here. There just aren’t that many people doing work in this particular field. (Phy)

A paper in biology is not just a one off bit of isolated research. Projects tend to be expensive and may take a long time to set up and produce anything important. What we write up probably reports a piece of research that may be going on for years. We are continuously building on what we’ve done. (Bio)

Clearly these kinds of self-reports underplay the possible promotional role of self-mention, but their credence as candidate explanations are given some plausibility by the social practices of disciplinary communities. I now turn to examine the part played by first person pronouns in academic writing and the management of interpersonal rhetoric.

6. First person and authorial presence

Pronouns are clearly the most salient forms of self-mention in the corpus and, once again, there are substantial differences in how they are employed in different disciplines, both in overall frequency and in preferred patterns of use. Table 4 shows that 3/4 of all first person pronouns occurred in the humanities and social science papers and that they were rarely used in mechanical engineering. The subjective cases (I and we) comprise 70% of all pronouns.

Once again, this distinction in the frequency of first person use reflects the fact that writers in these broad domains of knowledge have very different ways of conducting research and persuading readers to accept their results. Generally speaking, the writer in the hard sciences is seeking to establish empirical uniformities through research activities that involve precise measurement and systematic scrutiny of a limited number of controlled variables. Hard knowledge tends to be universalistic
and to be motivated by conceptual issues. Research therefore usually consists of conducting experiments to propose solutions to specific disciplinary problems and typically involves familiar procedures, broadly predictable outcomes, and relatively clear criteria of acceptability (e.g. Becher, 1989; Whitley, 1984).

As a result the writer can downplay his or her personal role in the research in order to highlight the phenomena under study, the replicability of research activities, and the generality of the findings. By electing to adopt a less intrusive or personal style, writers can strengthen the objectivity of their interpretations and subordinate their own voice to that of unmediated nature. Such a strategy subtly conveys an empiricist ideology that suggests research outcomes would be the same irrespective of the individual conducting it. One of my respondents expressed this view clearly:

I feel a paper is stronger if we are allowed to see what was done without ‘we did this’ and ’we think that’. Of course we know there are researchers there, making interpretations and so on, but this is just assumed. It’s part of the background. I’m looking for something interesting in the study and it shouldn’t really matter who did what in any case. (Bio interview)

In theory anyone should be able to follow the same procedures and get the same results. Of course reputation is important and I often look at the writer before I look at a paper, but the important thing is whether the results seem right. (Bio interview)

The high proportion of personal pronouns in the soft RAs, on the other hand, suggests a quite different rhetorical stance. Establishing an appropriately authorial persona and maintaining an effective degree of personal engagement with one’s audience are valuable strategies for probing relationships and connections between entities that are generally more particular, less precisely measurable, and less clear-cut than in the hard sciences. Variables are often more heterogeneous and causal connections more tenuous. As a result, successful communication depends to a larger extent on the author’s ability to invoke a real writer in the text. Self-mention can help construct an intelligent, credible, and engaging colleague, by presenting an authorial self firmly established in the norms of the discipline and reflecting an appropriate degree of confidence and authority. Examples abound in the corpus:

(1) I argue that their treatment is superficial because, despite appearances, it relies solely on a sociological, as opposed to an ethical, orientation to develop a response. (Soc)

... in short, we demonstrate that what consumers know about a company can influence their evaluations of products introduced by the company. (Mkt)

I bring to bear on the problem my own experience. This experience contains ideas derived from reading I have done which might be relevant to my puzzlement as well as my personal contacts with teaching contexts. (AL)
The decision to employ a first person pronoun by writers in these fields appears to be closely related to authorial stance, and with the desire to both strongly identify oneself with a particular argument and to gain credit for one’s individual perspective or research decisions:

Using ‘I’ emphasizes what you have done. What is yours in any piece of research. I notice it in papers and use it a lot myself. (Soc interview)

The personal pronoun ‘I’ is very important in philosophy. It not only tells people that it is your own unique point of view, but that you believe what you are saying. It shows your colleagues where you stand in relation to the issues and in relation to where they stand on them. It marks out the differences. (Phil interview)

The first person therefore assists authors to make a personal standing in their texts and to demarcate their own work from that of others. It helps them distinguish who they are and what they have to say.

While writers in the hard sciences were less explicitly present in their texts, they were not invisible. Table 4 above shows that first person singular pronouns were virtually absent from the science and engineering articles and were very low in marketing. Although papers in these five fields were overwhelmingly multiple-authored, use of the plural is only partly explained by patterns of authorship. The decision to use we by writers of single-authored articles is often said to indicate an intention to reduce personal attributions, but it is not always the self-effacing device it is sometimes thought to be. Pennycook (1994, p. 176), for example, observes that “there is an instant claiming of authority and communality in the use of we”.

The distancing which attends the plural meaning also seems to create a temporary dominance by giving the writer the right to speak with authority. These examples from single-authored papers suggest how writers can simultaneously reduce their personal intrusion and yet emphasise the importance that should be given to their unique procedural choices or views:

(2) We do not agree with this statement, … (EE)

Some years ago we proposed a new evaluation method providing an automatic and … (EE)

In this section, we give detailed information about Canada’s energy resources, … (ME)

We believe that, when used in this manner, the word “degree” is simply a numerical suffix whose value is 27π/360 (not 27π rad/360′). (Phy)

This appears to be predominantly a feature of scientific writing, as the 16 single authored papers in the hard knowledge corpora yielded only a handful of singular forms but contained 80 plural first person pronouns. In contrast, the 75 single
authored papers in the humanities and social sciences included only eight plural first person forms. Commenting on his understanding of this usage, a professor of physics observed that:

I suppose we are generally encouraged to keep ourselves in the background in our writing, to give prominence to objective physical events, but of course we are involved in research and using ‘we’ emphasizes this. It avoids generalities and focuses on specifics without being too aggressively personal. (Phy interview)

Another interesting remark was made by an electronic engineer, who suggested that this usage was less a means of withdrawing from the claims made in the paper than a reminder of the collaborative nature of the research activity itself:

In terms of what it refers to, I often think that ‘we’ is right to some extent. I am always reporting research that I’ve done as part of a team, even if I am writing a solo paper. It’s a kind of shorthand acknowledgement of the part played by my colleagues. (EE interview)

In sum, rhetorical conventions of pronoun self-mention contribute to the kind of relationship that the writer establishes with the reader and these rhetorical preferences are at least partly influenced by a disciplinary community’s epistemological beliefs and social practices. But while writers in the softer disciplines projected a more prominent identity, scientists did not entirely subordinate their discoursal selves to their research activities.

7. Theme and personal prominence

In addition to selecting a first person pronoun to construct a more engaged and committed presence in their texts, writers also have syntactic options, and in particular the decision to thematize (Halliday, 1994). The concept of theme is controversial (e.g. Huddleston, 1988), but the choice of initial position, what we are asked to attend to first, can contextualize the sentence by providing the reader with an interpretive framework for the newsworthy information that follows. The decision to front a clause with a first person pronoun gives it special focus, representing it as a significant aspect of the message and signaling the overt presence of the writer as a visible participant in the research process. The persuasive impact of such choices has been discussed by Gosden (1993) who found that this highlighting of the author’s role occurs most frequently in Introduction and Discussion sections, the most rhetorically charged parts of research papers.

Thematisation of first person pronouns is therefore an additional element of self-presence in academic discourse, and writers made considerable use of this powerful strategy in my corpus. Some 45% of all exclusive first person pronouns were clause initial, and although the soft fields generally had higher percentages than the sciences, first person themes were frequent in all disciplines:
(3) We believe that an achievable performance goal for a commercial system under optimum conditions should be 10 kg kW h. (ME)

I argue both accounts are unacceptable. (Phil)

Our method allows a more accurate identification of such defects in the assembly. (EE)

... my own experience suggests that it is more feasible to achieve multi-disciplinary than truly integrated, inter-disciplinary research. (AL)

But while theme choices which gave writers maximum visibility were more common in the soft papers, they also had a powerful impact in scientific contexts where author mention is more often subordinated to research processes. In the science and engineering disciplines the thematic selection of writers represents an important departure and clearly signals a more authoritative stance. In (4), for example, the writers emphasize the importance and scale of their contribution through a series of personal theme choices, while in (5) the writers simultaneously open a gap for their research and highlight their study by a theme choice which contrasts their own role with earlier activities:

(4) In this study, we demonstrate that the SIE DNA-binding site of the c-fos promoter, which is a target for STAT1/STAT3 in EGF-treated cells (17, 65), is specifically bound by a STAT3-containing protein in ES cells maintained in the presence of LIF. *We examine* the expression and phosphorylation of the STAT3 protein in these cells in response to LIF treatment or withdrawal. *We show* that the c-fos promoter is LIF responsive in ES cells, and that the multimerized SIE element confers LIF-dependent transcription to the minimal TK promoter. *We demonstrate* that STAT3 mutants, which behave as dominant negative factors in the IL-6 pathway (38), can repress LIF-dependent transcription. *We also show* that stable expression of one of these mutants leads to morphological differentiation of the ES cells. (Bio)

(5) A problem that has not been studied in any detail is the nonuniformity of the longitudinal magnetic field of a z-gradient coil in the transverse (x and y) directions, which is associated with the elliptical geometry. *We address this issue* in the present paper by expanding, in ascending powers of x and y, the magnetic field associated with an azimuthal current. (Phy)

8. Self-mention and discourse purposes

So far in this paper I have mainly focused on the issue of author visibility and the role of self-mention in constructing a credible authorial identity. In this section I want to briefly examine some of the main ways that writers use self-mention in their
texts, combining collocational analysis and the comments of informants to identify the points at which writers choose to intrude most explicitly.

In all disciplines writers’ principal use of first person was to explain the work that they had carried out; representing their unique role in constructing a plausible interpretation for a phenomenon. In the hard knowledge corpus, and in the more practical and quantitatively focused papers in the soft fields, this mainly involved setting out the procedures they had performed. Author prominence here serves to reassure us of the writer’s professional credentials through a demonstrable familiarity with disciplinary research practices. But in addition, it also acts to highlight the part the writer has played in a process that is often represented as having no agents at all. By inserting themselves into their research activities then, writers inject an element of qualitative judgement that reminds us that, in other hands, things could have been done differently and that personal choices have been made:

(6) I also examined the linguistic process of nominalization. (AL)

We acid-shocked cells in the presence of the nonspecific Ca\(^2\)+ channel inhibitor La3\(^+\). (Bio)

We used a measure based on interlaced batches to compute an unbiased estimate S2 of the variance of the performance characteristic within a single run, … (EE)

I reviewed the case material and found solid grounds for these activities. (Mkt)

In 1995 I went to Mexico and Chiapas to better understand the Zapatista movement. I visited many people, men and women, from and around the movement, and discussed with them the questions treated in this article. I am formulating them as “questions to Ramona”. (Soc)

In more theoretically-oriented articles writers sought less to figure as practical agents than as builders of coherent theories of reality. Explicit self-mention here does not collapse personal credibility into a demonstration of specific procedural competencies, but establishes a more personal authority based on confidence and command of one’s arguments:

I’m very much aware that I’m building a façade of authority when I write, I really like to get behind my work and get it out there. Strong. Committed. That’s the voice I’m trying to promote, even when I’m uncertain I want to be behind what I say. (Soc interview)

You have to be seen to believe what you say. That they are your arguments. It’s what gives you credibility. It’s the whole point. (Phil interview)

In the soft fields, and in philosophy in particular, a writer’s style is a significant element of both his or her immediate credibility in the paper and wider reputation in
the discipline. An effective argument here depends in no small way on writers’ success in convincing readers of their reasonableness, seriousness, and sincerity, and this is, in part, achieved by balancing caution with commitment. Writers must display appropriate respect for alternatives, but back their views with a personal warrant where necessary. The personal voice here works to address readers directly through a firm alignment with their views, pledging certainty and an interpersonal assurance of conviction. Inevitably, this often shades into explicit claim making:

(7) However, I believe that this is a one dimensional view, in that sensations may well be necessary components of emotion while not being the defining feature. I also think that sensations and perceptions are not simply natural phenomena that are closed off from cultural conditioning, ... (Soc)

I suggest then that beyond reporting what research has taught us about the researched situation, we might also address what research has taught us about research. (AL)

Much as I hate to admit it, mathematicians may have good grounds for rejecting PDP. (Phil)

Self-mention of this kind seems to help bind the writer and the reader together as co-participants in an ongoing debate; portraying them as interactants engaged in a disciplinary dialogue.

One function of the first person in argument is as an exemplification device. Largely confined to philosophy, in this usage the I pronoun becomes not only an instrument of self-mention for the writer as scholar, but a device for inserting him or her as the main protagonist in illustrative examples:

(8) For instance, suppose that I think up a whole bunch of possible paths through the graph and then verify that none of them is an HP.

E.g., if the amount in my envelope is $10, then by swapping I stand to gain $10 whereas I only stand to lose $5.

What I believe, for example, or what I feel, makes a difference to what I do.

For, Forbes maintains, the skeptic can evade Putnam’s argument and achieve all she has ever wanted by switching to the hypothesis that I am ‘relevantly like a brain in a vat’.

More commonly, writers in the discursive soft knowledge disciplines used self-mention to provide an overt structure for their discourse. Often however, such framing did more than clarify the schematic structure of the argument, it explicitly stated the goal or purpose of the paper, providing an opportunity for the writer to promote both themselves and their stance. Interestingly, this personal claim-staking
also occurred in the physical sciences, often considered to be free from such personal agendas:

(9) *We shall prove*, however, that this is not the case. (Mkt)

*We argue that* a ‘zero-sum’ formulation of power dynamics is simplistic and misleading. (Soc)

In this paper, *we clearly demonstrate that* Tax can activate transcription of the CQB promoter through the NF-Y element. (Bio)

First and foremost, one could claim that the model is too oversimplified to produce physically meaningful results. *We argue against this claim* on the basis of the model’s ability to produce results consistent with experiment. (Phy)

This explicitly persuasive use of self-mention is perhaps clearer, and more widely used, where writers employ *I/we* to summarise a viewpoint or make a knowledge claim. This use not only serves to metadiscursively guide the reader through the discussion, but once again explicitly foregrounds the writer’s distinctive contribution and commitment to his or her position. With this use the writer and the claim are strongly coupled, soliciting recognition for both.

(10) *We have demonstrated that* MCP can be used to form single- and multiple-helical microcoils by printing lines on all objects. (ME)

*We have now discovered that* the Byr2 kinase catalytic domain can also bind to the regulatory domain of Byr2. *We have determined* the minimum binding domain for each of these interactions by characterizing the binding profile of a series of Byr2 deletion mutants. (Bio)

Likewise, *I have offered evidence that* some critical thinking practices may marginalize subcultural groups, such as women, within US society itself. (AL)

Perhaps in more than any other function, this use suggests the conscious exploitation of a strategy to manage the reader’s awareness of the writer’s role; his or her attempt to take a position in relation to the community and to seek credit for that position.

Of course you have to recognise what other people have said and take care not to tread on toes, but it is important to leave your readers in no doubt about your own view. (Soc interview)

If there are good reasons for a particular interpretation, all the data point the same way to the same conclusion, then I’m happy to pin my colours to the mast. You have to make sure that what you’ve done gets noticed so that you get recognised for it. (Mkt interview)
It’s conventional to use these formulas to keep yourself out of the picture. They are just conventional ways of expressing inference. Sometimes though you need to be explicit about what you think, that the contribution is your own. (ME interview)

In addition to the subjective first person, the possessive forms are also used to promote the writer’s contribution by associating them closely with their work. The most common collocations were *analysis, approach, research, argument, results, study*, etc. (cf. Kuo, 1999, p. 135). These constructions worked to highlight the author’s close involvement in research outcomes or activities

(11) As demonstrated through *my analysis*, a significant rhetorical task in this process . . . (AL)

*Our method* allows a more accurate identification of such defects in the assembly. (EE)

The benefit of *my account* is that the application of Davidson’s paratactic machinery enables us to circumvent this problem. (Phil)

Lastly, *our model* offers insights into consumer behavior and clientele effects. (Mkt)

It is in this spirit that I offer *my own contribution* to the debate. I want to set out a slightly different approach to those taken in the above articles . . . (Soc)

*Our results* demonstrate that flagellar RNA accumulations are . . . (Bio)

Once again then, this is not a simple reporting of results or procedures, but an expression of the participants’ custody and personal ownership of what they report. It is a rhetorical strategy of promotion.

9. Some conclusions and teaching implications

I have argued that first person pronouns and self-citation are not just stylistic optional extras but significant ingredients for promoting a competent scholarly identity and gaining accreditation for research claims. Self-mention is important because it plays a crucial role in mediating the relationship between writers’ arguments and their discourse communities, allowing writers to create an identity as both disciplinary servant and persuasive originator. The points at which writers choose to announce their presence in the discourse are those where they are best able to promote themselves and their individual contributions. Their intrusion helps to strengthen both their credibility and their role in the research, and to help them gain acceptance and credit for their claims.
The distribution of these features shows that not all disciplines sanction the same degree of authorial presence. Writers’ decisions are closely related to the social and epistemological practices of their disciplines and represent an important way of signaling membership and honoring what is accepted as professional engagement, appropriate intrusion, and persuasive conviction. But disciplinary conventions are enabling rather than deterministic, and typical patterns of self-mention only provide broad perimeters of choice. In constructing their texts writers also construct themselves, and self-reference represents the confidence to speak authoritatively rather than concealing authorship behind the impersonality options the genre provides. Issues of seniority, experience, relationship to the community, and general sense of self are also likely to influence these decisions. What is essentially involved however is an author’s desire to be seen in his or her text and to affirm a commitment to his or her work. This expression of self is an important way of creating one’s own voice, of speaking with authority, and of securing reader support.

Academic writers have rhetorical options then, and the effects of manipulating these options suggest that there are considerable advantages for our students in being aware of them. The whole issue of consciousness raising is crucial in EAP and is central to learning to write confidently. For teachers this means helping students to move beyond the conservative prescriptions of the style guides and into the rhetorical contexts of their disciplines, investigating the preferred patterns of expression in different communities. This kind of inquiry can take a variety of forms, but most simply it involves training students to read rhetorically and to reflect, perhaps through diaries, on the practices they observe and use themselves (e.g. Johns, 1990, 1997). What, for example, is an author’s purpose in using a personal pronoun here? Why has she chosen to cite herself at this point? What is achieved by him using we in this paper? When do writers typically move to self-mention?

We might also allow data to drive learning more directly by guiding students’ exploration of authentic models, asking small groups to collect frequency counts of these forms and discuss typical collocations in a computer corpus, perhaps comparing the practices found in articles and theses. Students can also interview faculty experts on their own writing practices or their reactions to the practices of others in the discipline. The findings from these are likely to provide a useful basis for group feedback discussions and further consideration on the decisions behind certain forms and the impressions one can make in employing them. Finally, students should be encouraged to experiment with their academic writing. By employing a personal voice in their texts they will be able to get feedback on their practices and perhaps be able to evaluate the impact of their decisions more clearly.

To close, it has to be said that the relationships between knowledge, the linguistic conventions of different disciplines, and personal identity, are fuzzy and complex. Yet it is equally true that these are issues worth addressing and exploring further with our students. Only by developing a rhetorical consciousness of the kinds of features I have discussed in this paper can we help them gain control over their writing and meet the challenges of academic writing in either a first or second language.
References


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