

The use of first person pronouns in master's theses written in english by turkish authors

Cemre Isler^{1,*}

¹ English Language Teaching Program, Anadolu University

¹ cemreisler@anadolu.edu.tr

* corresponding author

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate and compare the use of first person pronouns (I, my, me, we, our, us) and their functions in creating authorial self in 20 master's theses written in English by Turkish authors and 20 research articles written in English by non-Turkish authors. Master's theses used in the study were written in the field of English Language Teaching in twelve different Turkish universities and they were selected from the database of Turkish Council of Higher Education. Research articles used in the study were also written in the field of English Language Teaching and they were selected from five different journals: Applied Linguistics, System, TESOL Quarterly, English for Specific Purposes, and ELT Journal. For analyzing the data, each occurrence of first person pronouns in the theses and articles were coded and examined in order to find out the functions they serve. Results revealed a large difference in the use of first person pronouns and the functions they have. Turkish authors used these pronouns quite rarely and generally the use of these pronouns signaled low degree of authorial self; on the other hand, non-Turkish authors used these pronouns more frequently and they mostly preferred to use them for expressing greater degree of authorial self.

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1. Introduction

There is a growing perception among rhetoricians and social theorists that academic writing is not just about researchers' presenting an ideational content, but also their representation of themselves. A number of studies have acknowledged that academic writing need not to be completely devoid of the writers' presence, and suggest that writers should increase their visibility to readers by projecting an authorial identity and make readers recognize their individual contribution through demonstrating confidence in their commitment to their ideas (Hyland, 2002a; 2003). Accordingly, if writers depersonalize their writings, this could cause them to lose their credibility and their presence of authority (Hyland, 2001). Writers should gain a credible ethos to persuade their readers about the validity, novelty and appropriateness of their study being presented (Duenas, 2007). One of the most influential sources of building such an authority is the use of first person pronouns and their corresponding determiners since they foreground the authors' contribution while communicating implications of authority, and unveil how authors portray themselves in academic

communities (Kuo, 1999; Tang & John, 1999; Hyland, 2002a). According to Tang and John (1999), the use of first person pronouns does not only imply a self that a person already has, but also functions as a source creating that self.

A number of corpus-based research on the use of first person pronouns in academic texts (Tang & John, 1999, Kuo, 1999; Hyland, 2001, 2002b; Harwood, 2005) pointed to their use as a powerful strategic source for the construction of an authoritative self and showed an array of functions they serve for in building this self. These studies have displayed that first person pronouns and corresponding determiners can function to create a sense of uniqueness for researchers' writing (Harwood, 2005), ensure readers recognize them as contributors to the study (Harwood, 2005), confirm their aim (Hyland, 2002b), share knowledge assertion (Hyland, 2002b), report methodology (Hyland, 2001), convey individual views (Tang & John, 1999), and build an author identity in relation with their readers (Kuo, 1999). On the other hand, although the use of first person pronoun functions as a strategic resource for emphasizing a contribution and establishes authorial presence, the extent to which academics appropriately use them in their writings is a controversial issue.

Opinions on intruding first person pronouns vary among scholars (Duenas, 2007). While expert research article writers have been found to employ them for a number of discourse functions, mainly to point out the purpose of the study, to outline procedures conducted and to make a knowledge claim (Harwood, 2005; Kuo, 1999), novice writers have been reported to make much less use of them and employ for a narrower range of functions in their writings (Hyland, 2002a). It causes confusion particularly among students because they receive instructions as to how objective and impersonal they are expected to be and therefore, they feel positioned by the dominant institutional discourses they confront in university studies (Hyland, 2002a). This situation can especially be a problem for non-native speaker of English students whose rhetorical identities may be determined by a very different tradition of literacy different cultures may have different rhetorical conventions (Hyland, 2002a). Findings of several studies indicate that expert writers frequently make use of first person pronouns to promote their studies while novice writers either underuse them or use not to establish a strong authorial presence but for other functions rarely preferred by expert writers (Tang & John, 1999; Hyland, 2002a; Hyland, 2004; Hyland & Tse, 2005).

In an attempt to contribute to the existing literature on the manifestations of writer identity, the present study focuses on the use and functions of first person pronouns in master's (MA) theses written in English by Turkish authors. Considering the Turkish context, although there are a number of studies examined first person pronouns in MA theses (e.g. Akbas, 2012), they do not provide a detailed analysis of how first person pronouns function for the notion of writer identity. In the present study attention has been paid to master's theses since MA students tend to experience more challenges than PhD students (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Lee & Casal, 2014). Also in this study the writings of the students studying in ELT (English Language Teaching) departments are studied because these students are expected to demonstrate high degree of familiarity and reasonable mastery to pick up the rhetorical and linguistic features for English language. In addition, the present study examines introduction parts of MA theses because they are the parts where the interplay of the student's agency is reported (Işık Taş, 2008). The findings of this study are expected to shed light on how Turkish authors of MA theses present and promote themselves as authorial selves by using first person pronouns; and as a consequence of this, the study was hoped to provide MA theses supervisors and MA education programs insights about the profile of their students in relation to authorial identity in writings. In this regard, the study addresses the following research questions:

(1) What is the frequency of first person pronouns in the introduction parts of (a) MA theses written in English by Turkish authors, and (b) research articles written in English by non-Turkish authors?;

(2) For what discourse functions are the first person pronouns used in (a) MA theses written in English by Turkish authors, and (b) research articles written in English by non-Turkish authors?

Authorial Identity and First Person Pronouns in Academic Writing

Academic writing is not simply a process where findings are reported and ideas are conveyed, it is also an act of identity that projects a representation of the author (Hyland, 2002a). Authors cannot avoid holding a particular impression of themselves in their writings. How they take position in accordance with their arguments, their discipline and their readers has an influence on their

discoursal choice (Hyland, 2001). In order to signal their 'self' in a text, authors have to make a discoursal choice which aligns them with a selection of words for self-representation (Tang & John, 1999).

However, in order to get acceptance for their contribution to the field, authors may sometimes refrain from explicitly intruding their presence as authorial selves. Underlying reason for this may be the assumption that authors consider academic writing as a modest, self-effacing genre where they act "as a humble servant of the discipline" (Hyland, 2001, p.209). According to Hyland (2001), there is some truth in this assumption because publishing in academic journals requires authors' displaying solidarity with the community by demonstrating appropriate patterns of rhetorical interactions. Nevertheless, authors have to do more than conforming social understandings of community, they must highlight their own contribution to the field (Kuo, 1999) because success in getting acceptance from academic community also depends on individuals' novel contribution to that community.

As stated above, academic writing carries information about an author's personal projection through discoursal choices. How authors represent themselves by these choices has been argued by Ivanic (1998) in which author identities are discussed in relation to possibilities of self-hood situated in the socio-cultural context of writing. Ivanic suggests three aspects of identity interacting in writing: (1) autobiographical self (the identity writer brings with through his/her life-history), (2) discoursal self (his/her image projected in the writing), and (3) authorial self (writer as an originator in the text who stands in the writing and claims responsibility for its content). It is the 'authorial self' which is concerned in this study, investigating the degree of self as an authority writers manifested in their writings to personally get behind their assertions. Authorial identity can be particularly achieved through the choice of using of first person pronouns (Kuo, 1999) because their use identifies the author as the source of the given statement and helps him/her by mediating the relationship between his/her arguments and the expectations of the readers (Hyland, 2001). The use of first person pronouns, then, is a powerful means by which authors establish an explicit writer presence and persuade the relevant audience by foregrounding their texts as novel and newsworthy (Hyland, 2002a; Duenas, 2007).

By developing Ivanic's (1998) idea of 'authorial self', Tang and John (1999) identify six functions of the first person pronouns and order these functions into a continuum with respect to their degree of authorial power, from the least powerful authorial presence ('I' as the representative) to the most powerful authorial presence ('I' as the originator). These categories are labeled with 'I' for the sake of uniformity and ease of reference, but they refer to all various forms of first person pronouns (I, me, my, mine, we, us, our, and ours). To briefly explain each category:

- 'I' as the representative: this function is projected when the authors refer to larger group of people, it is realized by first person plural pronouns, we or us. For example; "The differentiation of British and American English causes us to ponder about the right form of Standard English." (Tang & John, 1999, p. 36).

- 'I' as the guide: this function points to the author as the guide of readers in their journey through the writing. For example, "As we examine the various classes of loan words from French, we can see the different ways French civilisation and culture has influenced English." (Tang & John, 1999, p. 36).

- 'I' as the architect: this function refers to authors' use of first person pronouns to signal who writes and organizes the text. As an example; "I will concentrate on the period Renaissance and its influence on the English language" (Tang & John, 1999, p. 37).

- 'I' as the recounter of the research process: this function is realized while author describes the steps of research process. For example; "I tape recorded a conversation with each co-researcher about the role of literacy in their lives, past and present" (Ivanic, 1998).

- 'I' as the opinion-holder: this is used when authors want to share opinions or attitudes with respect to given statements. For example, "Looking back at Kushwant Singh's words, we can determine from this period that English did indeed absorb the languages it came into contact with" (Tang & John, 1999, p. 37).

- 'I' as the originator: this is the most powerful function, its use displays authors as originators of a claim or ideas in the text as an example, "To me the phrase embodies the whole evolution process of the language to its present day status" (Tang & John, 1999, p.37).

First Person Pronouns in Student Writings

Academic writing is a site where social positioning, the process by which writer identities are constructed through socially available discourses, is established (Hyland, 2002a). The acquisition of academic discourse requires learning how to properly use academic writing conventions (Tang & John, 1999). Although university students are not required to enter an academic community, they may find themselves in a place where they must "appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse" (Bartholomae, 1985, p.135) and they can be evaluated according to this specialized discourse. They are expected to attain "peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing that define the discourse of the community" (Bartholomae, 1986, p.4). However, they are rarely taught explicitly how to do this (Tang & John, 1999) and as a consequence, they approach their assignments as distant and impersonal prose in order to be bestowed approval from academic discourse community. This can be a greater burden for students who have to write in a foreign language and whose identities are often shaped in different epistemologies (Hyland, 2001; 2002a). They may not feel confident enough to represent a strong authorial stance if they come from a culture where the self is more collectively shaped (Hyland, 2002a).

A number of studies focused on non-native novice English writers' use of first person pronouns. Hyland (2002a) explored the use of first person pronouns and attitudes towards their use by investigating both experts' and non-native undergraduate writers' texts. Results showed that expert writers made use of first person pronouns four times as much as novices. In relation to the expert writers' use, Hyland observed that "expert writers were more willing to make a solid personal commitment to the most authorially powerful aspects of their texts, those which carried both the most risks and potentially gained from the most credit" (p.1099). By contrast, with respect to non-native writers, he found that they not only refrained from making use of first person pronouns, they also principally preferred not to use them at points in which their use signals making a commitment to an interpretation or a claim.

Studies also indicate that projecting a strong authorial identity involves risks where authors feel the need of carefully balancing their stance and deciding wisely when to utter a strong authorship to a statement. In relation to taking risks, Martinez (2005) found that non-native English speaking novice authors tended to perform first person pronouns with non-risk functions such as reporting an aim, rather than, high-risk ones such as displaying their study and major findings. Isik Tas (2008) investigated the way first person pronouns were used in research articles written by expert native English speaking authors and PhD dissertations written in English by Turkish novice authors. Results revealed that while experts made use of these pronouns frequently, novice Turkish authors rarely positioned their self in the introduction parts of PhD dissertations. In few examples where they displayed themselves, they referred to themselves as 'the/this researcher' or 'this author' instead of using first person pronouns. However, research article authors used only first person pronouns to refer to themselves. Another difference was observed in that while research article authors used a variety of functions such as self-promotional first person pronouns expressing soundness and uniqueness for the study or personalizing the author's claims. On the other hand, PhD dissertation writers used none of these functions, they used first person pronouns in low-risk occasions such as describing the methodology and guiding the readers through their study.

2. Method

The data of the study were derived from two genre-specific corpora: the introduction parts of 20 master's (MA) theses written in English by Turkish authors (28.352 word corpus), and the introduction parts of 20 research articles written in English by non-Turkish authors (7.618 word corpus). All the MA theses used in this study had been written between the years of 2010 and 2015 by students enrolled in English Language Teaching (ELT) MA programs at 12 different Turkish universities, and they were downloaded from the database of Turkish Council of Higher Education. The research article corpus of was compiled as the reference corpus. Only single authorship articles

were included in the corpus which contained 20 research articles published between the years of 2010 and 2015 by ELT scholars in five academic language teaching journals (Applied Linguistics, System, TESOL Quarterly, English for Specific Purposes, ELT Journal).

This study adopts both qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods, including frequency counts and text analyses of the MA theses and the research article. Before the analyses, the corpora were compiled and saved electronically. Then, the corpora were analyzed in two stages: the first stage was a web program supported analysis of frequency counts for both the MA theses and the research articles, and the second stage was a hand-tagged analysis of the functions of first person pronouns.

The web program called WordSmith Tools (Scott, 2004) was used for the data analysis in the first stage. This program helps find out how words behave in texts. It presents six tools for analysis, two of them were utilized in this study: Wordlist and Concord. Wordlist provides word lists by bringing words either in alphabetical or in frequency order. Concord generates concordances, identifies collocates of the word, and shows a graphical map addressing where the word appears in the corpus. Only the cases of first person pronouns; I, my, me, us, we, our, us were examined. Although both corpora were of single authorship, plural pronouns were also included in the analysis since authors may prefer using plural pronouns to reduce their authorial presence in their texts (Hyland, 2002).

In relation to the analysis of the first research question, the cases of first person pronouns were calculated for frequency counts for each corpus text. To ensure direct comparison of findings, the frequency counts were normalized at 1,000 words. The functions of first person pronouns were classified by using Tang and John's (1999) categorization framework of the functions of authorial identities. The functions were determined by analyzing the context of the occurrences. Identified functions were coded manually and outlined with frequency counts in each corpus.

3. Findings and discussion

Comparison of the Use of First Person Pronouns

Table 1 presents the results related to the use of first person pronouns in the master's (MA) theses and the research articles (RA).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the use of first person pronouns in the two corpora

Pro.	MA Thesis		Research Articles	
	Freq. (raw)	Normalized (1000 words)	Freq. (raw)	Normalized (1000 words)
I	7	0.2	92	12.2
My	6	0.2	22	2.9
Me	-	-	1	0.1
We	22	0.8	9	1.2
Our	13	0.5	3	0.4

3.1 Authors and Affiliations

As Table 1 reveals, first person pronouns were comparatively more frequent in RA than MA theses. Overall frequency of use per 1000 words is 16.8 in RA and 1.8 in MA theses. This finding indicates that expert RA authors presented themselves approximately 10 times more than the authors of MA theses. A possible explanation for this difference may lie in novice authors' belief that academic writing should be objective, impersonal and distant, and depersonalization by avoiding the use of first person pronouns is a direct way to ensure the so-called convention of academic writing. Tang and John (1999) state that the devoid of presence of first person pronouns by students shows something significant about how they perceive themselves at the university and in their writings. In this sense, small incidence of the personal pronouns may show Turkish novice authors' desire to gain credibility by adopting the impersonal nature of academic writing. Hyland (2001) calls this as

authors' wish to get 'persuasive authority' by highlighting the objective side of the research process. Also, Turkish novice authors' possible view that academic writing is necessarily objective may in fact be part of a strategic attempt to reduce individual responsibility for their commitments. As Millan (2010) suggests because there appears potential threat inherent in a writer's presenting his/her stance in the text, writers can attempt to limit their responsibility for their statements. In contrast, high relative frequency of occurrence for the use of first person pronouns in RA may be taken to indicate that expert RA authors are likely to be aware of the importance of employing these pronouns in order to project a strong authorial presence and take credit for strengthening their personal claims, statements or findings. According to Kuo (1999), this seems reasonable since the main communicative goal of journal article authors is to signal the merit of their own research claims and findings.

Table 1 also indicates that the use of singular pronouns is very different from the plural ones among the two corpora. Notably, first person singular pronouns, including the subjective, possessive and objective cases (i.e. I, my, and me) occur far more frequently than plural pronouns (i.e. we, our, and us) in RA. However, in MA theses, first person plural pronouns occur more frequently than singular pronouns. This finding shows us that as opposed to the authors of RA, the authors of the MA theses did not tend to mark their presence as solely in their introductions. The tendency of Turkish novice authors to project their identities in their writings with the plural person may be due to the fact that explicitly bringing their presence with singular pronouns is more daunting since it means the author himself/herself is responsible for the propositions raised. As Tang and John (1999) states students may be 'operating with a safety in numbers mentality' (p.32) and therefore, not prefer to present their individuality in their texts. The greater frequency of the use of singular pronouns in single authored RA in this study can be explained with regards to the competitive environment of journals where they market their studies by persuading the readers for their novel contribution and this can demand the use of singular pronouns in order to make claims stronger. As Harwood (2005) explains, by heavily marketing their research, RA authors seek to gain agreement of other members of their academic community and this is a difficult task where writers need to flag up their own contribution. As a good way of displaying novel contribution, first person singular pronouns can be preferred (Harwood, 2005; Hyland, 2002a).

According to the findings related to the use of singular person pronouns, there is a large difference between the two corpora in terms of the use of subject pronoun I. It was much more frequent in RA than MA theses. Also, possessive adjective form of I, my, was more common in the RA corpus than the MA theses corpus. Unlike the pronouns I and my, the objective pronoun me occurred very rarely in RA. According to the results, no occurrence of me was detected in MA theses. The occurrence of I as the mostly used first person pronouns in RA may stem from that using it is a powerful means by which authors display an identity by enabling their claim to utter as an authority. Accordingly, the absence or the presence of it is a conscious choice by authors to adopt a particular identity and a 'contextually situated authorial stance' (Hyland, 2001).

As for the use of first person plural pronouns in the two corpora, among first person pronouns, we was the most frequently used pronoun in MA theses. The fact that the writer of a single-authored thesis mostly uses we, instead of I while addressing himself/herself may refer to an intention to 'reduce personal attributions' (Kuo, 1999). As Tang and John (1999) state, by using we, students show their reluctance to 'assert their individuality in writing'. This result can also be explained by the fact that theses are expected to be the result of the joint effort of the student and the supervisor. This may lead students to use we to indicate a teamwork.

To summarize, the results indicate that the use of first person pronouns is highly more frequent in RA than MA theses. Unlike first person singular pronouns, the plural pronouns, especially we with the most occurrences, are relatively common in MA theses. As for the RA, on the other hand, unlike first person plural pronouns, the singular pronouns, especially I with the most occurrences, occurred very frequently.

Discourse Functions Served by First Person Pronouns

According to the results, the two corpora showed a large difference in terms of the functions served by the first person pronouns used in them. Table 2 presents the functions served by the first person pronouns in the two corpora (functions are defined according to Tang & John, 1999).

Table 2. Functions of first person pronouns in the two corpora

	MA Thesis Reserch Articles			
	raw	norm.	raw	norm.
'I' as the representative	21	0.8	15	1.9
'I' as the guide	-	-	4	0.5
'I' as the architect	20	0.8	57	7.5
'I' as the recounter of the research process	1	0.1	8	1.1
'I' as the opinion holder	1	0.1	6	0.8
'I' as the originator	5	0.3	23	3
Total	48	2.1	113	14.8

According to Table 2, in RA, there occurred a degree of variation in the use of functions but in MA theses two functions ('I' as the architect and 'I' as the representative) were used mostly and the rest were not preferred much. The next mostly used function in MA theses appeared as "'I' as the originator"; and "'I' as the recounter of the research process" and "'I' as the opinion holder" occurred with the lowest number of use.

Authors of MA theses mostly use functions that are related to the identities of 'architect' and 'representative' and this may stem from the fact that these functions manifest a less authorial stance than other functions. As Millan (2010) states in the use of these functions, the threat to the writer's face is much smaller when they are used. In order to be perceived as appropriate by the discourse community, writers can project an image of humility by employing functions with lower degree of authorial self. Authors of MA theses seldom used functions for strong authorial self and this might be because of their feeling of weakness in the field. According to Tang and John (1999), it is not surprising for students to feel as if they do not have the right to stand in academic writing and as a consequence to adopt a position that carries the least functional identities in their writings as individuals. Therefore, MA theses authors in this study may have avoided the other functions constituting imposing and face threatening risks which can make them vulnerable to criticism by their discourse community.

As for the RA, "'I' as the architect" had the most frequency of occurrence. Only the use of this function was three times more than overall use of functions in MA theses. "'I' as the guide" occurred with the lowest amount of normalized frequency in RA. However, although it was the lowest used function in RA, its frequency was much more than the use of functions in MA theses, except the first two functions with 0.8 normalized frequencies.

These results indicate that rather than neutrally presenting self, expert RA authors also make use of functions showing greater degree of authorial presence (recounter, opinion holder and originator). They are likely to use these functions as a strategy to promote their work by demonstrating that their study can be regarded as a significant work. As Harwood (2005) suggests, the functions showing strong identity play a significant role in constructing self-promotional effect and make writers' authority as experts on a topic. Since the journals with highest impact expect the writer to adopt a strong authorial identity (Millan, 2010), the RA authors in this study might have mostly made use of these functions, especially as compared to MA theses authors.

4. Conclusion

This study was an attempt to investigate and compare the use of first person pronouns (I, my, me, we, our, us) and their functions in creating authorial self in 20 master's theses written in English by Turkish authors and 20 research articles written in English by non-Turkish authors. The findings revealed that in MA theses first person pronouns were quite less frequent and were used for a narrower range of functions, which signal a low authorial identity. The lower number of first person pronouns and their usage with limited functions in the MA theses corpus can be explained by their

authors' avoiding these pronouns due to some vague preconceived notion of impersonal and distant academic writing. The message derived from the results of the study implies the need to recognize that the issue is not simply whether or not the use of first person pronouns should be encouraged in academic writing, rather which specific function of the first person pronouns, if any, authors should employ, when and for what reason. In this sense, supervisors' explicitly drawing attention of students to strategic use of first person pronouns can be a way of making these students consciously aware of various functional employments of these pronouns in making their authorial self visible while staying true to the conventions of their academic community. This will consequently affect students' linguistic choice not only as graduate students but also authors who would like to re-contextualize their MA theses as research articles. I believe that MA education programs should involve issues of writer identity and shift their expectations from 'novices writing for admission to the academy' to 'experts writing for experts' (Dong, 1998). The present study only investigates the introduction parts in MA theses. Future research can be conducted to examine each section of theses where the use and functions of first person pronouns may change. Also, further research can include interview protocols in order to gain a deeper understanding of how MA students perceive their identity as writers in relation to conventions of academic writing because only examining academic writings with corpus based studies may overlook some important factors and variables which may help us account for the underlying reasons in terms of presence or absence of first person pronouns in these texts.

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