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An Exploration of Discoursal Construction of Identity in Academic Writing

Masumeh Rahimivand\textsuperscript{a,*}, Davud Kuhi\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a,b} Department of English Language, Maragheh Branch, Islamic Azad University, Maragheh, Iran

Abstract

This study focused on how second/foreign language writers enact, construct, and invent themselves through writing. Hyland’s model of metadiscourse (2004a) used as the analytical tool for analyzing texts. Based on a corpus of 30 research articles, the overall distribution of evidential markers, hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions were calculated across four rhetorical sections (Abstract, Introduction, Methodology, Discussion, and Conclusion) of the research articles. According to the results, identity is a critical aspect of writing and that it should be brought into the mainstream of second/foreign language writing pedagogy through consciousness raising or the specific teaching of certain features.

Keywords: academic writing; identity; self; metadiscoursal resources; English for academic purposes

1. Introduction

One of the most important social practices in the academy is writing. When social interactions occur in the academic community, text is a place where knowledge and writer’s identities are constructed, negotiated, and created. Accordingly, academic writing is what academics do most, through publishing, communicating, and contributing their knowledge. Traditionally, writing has been viewed as a mental and cognitive activity, with the image of an individual working in a quiet, isolated place. However, this study is not limited to this internal view of writing, but sees a text as historically and socially situated (Canagarajah, 2002).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +989380707930.
E-mail address: m.rahimivand@yahoo.com
Academic writing is a collective social practice in the academic discourse community. When writing papers, academics are expected to produce knowledge, make claims, and reveal epistemic beliefs and institutional structures in ways recognized by the discourse community. That is, social interactions occur through academic writing in the academy.

When people are producing texts, they are not only doing writing-presenting ideas in textual form—but are also being writers-creating a variety of meanings in the writing context. Especially when people enter a new social context (e.g., higher education), they notice that certain styles and practices are identified or preferred, which are different from those they bring with them from the past (Casanave, 2002; Fox, 1994).

2. Literature review

2.1. Identity in academic writing

The abstraction “identity” is rather tricky to define. This is largely because the term can be used in a variety of ways (Casanave, 2002), and because related words such as ‘self,’ person role, persona, position, subject (Ivanič, 1998) are used interchangeably by researchers in diverse disciplinary contexts, and may carry differently nuanced connotations depending on those contexts. The obvious and most straightforward meaning of identity is an individual’s sense of self. However, this implies a somewhat static, ‘singular self’ (Ivanič, 1998, p.15) which does not equate with notions of multiplicity, the importance of context, and change over time. Norton (1997, p. 419), commenting on articles in a 1995 issue of the TESOL Quarterly focusing on language and identity, notes how all the contributors to that publication saw identity as a ‘complex, contradictory and multifaceted’ notion ‘dynamic across time and place’. This understanding of the concept of identity is echoed by researchers such as Angélil-Carter (1997, p. 265), Ivanič (1998, p. 10) and Norton (2000, p. 127). According to Ivanič (1998) identity is a plural, dynamic concept encompassing four interrelated strands of selfhood.

2.1.1 Autobiographical self: What a writer brings into his or her act of writing is “autobiographical self,” which refers to the writer’s self-history—the sense of the writer’s roots that reflect who he or she is in text. It is historically constructed and shaped by the past experiences and literacy practices with which he or she has been familiar (Ivanič, 1998, p. 24).

2.1.2 Discoursal self: Discoursal self is the self-representation in text, which emerges from the text that a writer creates. It is “constructed through the discourse characteristics of a text that reflect values, beliefs and power relations in the social context in which they were written” (Ivanič, 1998, p. 25). It is the persona the student-writer adapts when writing—the ‘voice’ they want their audience to hear (Ivanič, 1998, p.24-29). This is a writer’s voice that he or she conveys consciously or unconsciously in the text. The rhetorical term ethos is related to “autobiographical self” and “discoursal self” because ethos refers to a writer’s credibility and morality, which the audience perceive, and it is a somewhat accurate reflection of a writer’s characteristics, which will influence the writer’s credibility (Cherry, 1988, p. 268).

2.1.3 Authorial self: It represents a sense of self-worth or a writer’s voice in the sense of the writer’s position, opinions, and beliefs that enable him or her to writer with authority, to establish an authorial presence in the text. Relates to the student-writers’ willingness to make claims and/or their reliance on external authorities to support those claims (Ivanič, 1998, p.24-29). In particular, the sense of authoritativeness is an important characteristic of a writers’ discoursal self in academic writing. Authoritativeness in academic writing has been considered with the following questions: How do people establish authority for the content of their writing? To what extent do they present themselves or others as authoritative (Ivanič, 1998, p. 27)?

2.1.4 Possibilities for self-hood in the socio-cultural and institutional contexts: This aspect is a more abstract notion of writer identity concerning the “socially available possibilities for self-hood” within sociocultural and institutional
contexts and how they shape and constrain individual acts of writing. It relates to the circumstances in which students are expected to write. (Ivanič, 1998, p.24-29). A writer can construct the “discoursal self” and the self as author” by choosing one type of possibility that is supported by particular sociocultural and institutional contexts where he or she is writing. A writer may struggle to choose one among many possibilities and eventually learn to use preferred language over time as he or she takes on a particular discoursal identity. For example, ESL writers are exposed to many “possibilities for selfhood,” and eventually they work toward situating themselves in a particular discourse community by adopting appropriate and beneficial writer identities. These four elements or strands are intertwined to make up the concept of a writerly self (Starfield, 2007, p.881; see also Ouellette, 2008).

2.2. Metadiscourse

Overall, the term metadiscourse, defined as “the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community” (Hyland, 2005a, p.37), is an essential element. In other words, metadiscourse in writing helps writers utilize language effectively for their authoritativeness and their communicative purposes when claiming, denying, and synthesizing ideas throughout the paper.

Academic writing is a complex social act that requires use of various discourses that meet academic expectations, and one of the most important things in academic writing is to show academic authority. The metadiscoursal devices are very important in academic writing because the collective and social practice reflects disciplinary culture, and its discourses using these devices helps writers show their awareness of social negotiation of knowledge and their efforts to pursue their claims and gains in the community’s acceptance in the disciplines (Hyland, 2004a, p. 89). Table 1 presents Hyland’s models of metadiscourse (2004a) used for this study, containing the names of categories, functions, and examples of linguistic markers.

In Hyland’s model of metadiscourse (2004a) evidentials are among interactional or textual metadiscourse which refers to writer’s presence in organizing and directing texts. Hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions are interactional or evaluative metadiscourse which refers to writer’s attitude toward propositional ideas or readers in convincing or denying their argument.

2.3 Objectives of the study and Research Questions

The main objective of the present study, hence, was to investigate how writers construct their identities in the English academic discourse community. On the other hand, it examined how the discoursal features of a specific text convey various impressions of the writer in text. In addition, it tended to examine their use of metadiscourse in the development of an academic writer identity in their English academic research papers. To this end, the following three research questions are asked:
1. How do foreign language writers enact, construct, and invent themselves as writers in the English academic discourse community?
2. How do the discoursal features of a specific text convey various impressions of the writer?
3. How do writers use metadiscourse in order to develop academic writer identity in their English papers in terms of the interrelations with the readers?

3. Methods

3.1. Corpus

This study is based on an analysis of a written text corpus of 30 research articles published in international journals. (See Appendix) The disciplinary scope of the corpus is limited to applied linguistics as defined by Wilkins (1999) and as outlined in handbook chapters of applied linguistics(e.g., Davies & Elder, 2004; Kaplan, 2002; Schmitt, 2002). This study focused on four rhetorical sections of research articles, namely Abstract, Introduction, Methodology, Discussion and Conclusion.
For the purpose of the study, only the body part of each article has been included in the search. This means that all footnotes, quotations, bibliographies, linguistic examples, tables and figures which appeared in the research articles were excluded from the data. They are an integral part of the articles and according to Dahl (2004, p.1817),"…they may easily skew the results for this category, as one or a few articles may yield a very high total number of such item."

The corpus of this research was selected and sampled according to accessibility and informant nomination as it is usual in other metadiscourse studies (e.g., Harwood, 2005a, 2005b; Hyland, 1999a, 2001a, 2002a, 2002b, and 2007). Three leading journals in applied linguistics were selected for analysis. Ten articles were chosen from each journal.

3.2. Procedure

To analyze the corpus, Hyland’s model of metadiscourse (2004a) provided the initial guidelines. Hyland’s framework has been chosen over others, such as Crismore et al’s (1993) and Vande Kopple’s (1985) after a detailed comparison has been carried out. Hyland’s (2004a) framework is seen as the most comprehensive and pragmatically grounded means of investigating the interpersonal resources in texts. It seems that, this model overcomes many of the limitations of other models and tries to move beyond exterior and superficial forms or assays about metadiscourse as a self-sufficient stylistic scheme. This framework however is seen as evolving and opens in the sense that studies into metadiscourse could still contribute to the building up of the metadiscourse categories. As such, metadiscourse features that are considered to be not fitted in the model will definitely be extricated as building upon the model adopted. Considering Ivanič’s (1998) model of identity which is the theoretical framework for this study, adapting some of fitting metadiscoursal features can expand our understanding of the issue. Evidentials, hedges, boosters, self-mentions and attitude markers are those categories of Hyland’s (2004a) model which are analyzed in this study. The selected articles based on three criteria: time span (during 2001-2007), having Abstract, Introduction, Methodology, Discussion and Conclusion, and the number of authors (single-authored texts rather than multiple-authored texts).

Once the research articles were selected, all of them were read carefully. Then the type and frequency of chosen metadiscoursal categories identified manually several times. However, it should be mentioned that it is very difficult to determine all of these metadiscoursal features used by an author in a research article. Because according to Hyland (1996b, p. 437) “the choice of a particular device does not always permit a single, unequivocal pragmatic interpretation”. As one of the universal properties of human language is creativity, it is to be expected that writers have a wide mental list of lexicons to express their thoughts. In other words, each category of metadiscourse can be realized linguistically through a variety of forms. It is also this very characteristic of human language that the analysis of any metadiscourse features needs to be done in context as any linguistic realization can be interpreted as having either propositional or metadiscoursal meaning.

After determining the frequency of mentioned metadiscoursal features in four rhetorical sections of research articles, the total words used in each section were also counted. Since the size of the research articles in each discipline and across four rhetorical sections varied, we decided to calculate the frequency of these categories per 1,000 words (as was the case in in Hyland, 1998, 2002a, 2002b; Harwood 2005a, 2005 b).

4. Results

The results of analysis showed that the overall frequency of metadiscourse resources was 30.4. It appears that academic writers were obviously attentive to setting up their identities through metadiscourse resources in their texts. Table 1 presents the distribution of these metadiscoursal features which is organized in a ranking model.
Table 1. Distribution of metadiscourse categories in the corpus.

| Categories of Analysis | Frequency (Per 1,000 words) | Percent |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|---------|
| Hedges                 | 11.9                          | 39.15   |
| Evidentials            | 8.9                           | 29.28   |
| Boosters               | 3.5                           | 11.51   |
| Self-mentions          | 3.5                           | 11.51   |
| Attitude markers       | 2.6                           | 8.55    |
| Total                  | 30.4                          | 100     |

Among analyzed elements, hedges with the frequency of 11.9 (39.15%) were the most prioritized stance markers while attitude markers with the frequency of 2.6 (8.55%) were the least favored elements used by authors. The first one reveals that writers are thoughtful in preceding the probable contrary outcomes of their assumptions and giving authorization to readers which provides the ground for their identity to be kept safe. The second one indicates that authors did not find attitude markers or sentiment devices stronger tools to be used for identity construction through text. These points are clarified in Figure 1 below.

![Figure 1. Types of metadiscourse categories used in the corpus.](image)

According to the results of the Introduction section in articles has the highest incidence of metadiscoursal resources (56.39 per 1,000 words; 27.38%) followed by Result & Discussion (54.67 per 1,000 words; 26.53%), Abstract (49.58 per 1,000 words; 24.06%) and Method (45.37 per 1,000 words; 22.03%). To better illustrate these findings, the results are shown in Table 2 and Figure 2.

Table 2. Frequency of metadiscoursal resources across Four Rhetorical Sections of Research Articles.

| Rhetorical Sections       | Frequency (Per 1,000 words) | Percent |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|---------|
| Abstract                  | 49.58                       | 24.06   |
| Introduction              | 56.39                       | 27.38   |
| Method                    | 45.37                       | 22.03   |
| Result & Discussion       | 54.67                       | 26.53   |
5. Discussion

The present study focused on how second/foreign language writers enact, construct, and invent themselves through writing. The findings of the study revealed that identity in academic writing transpires through social interaction in the academy. This verification is in line with Spivey (1997), who claimed that in addition to cognitive factors social and affective factors are indispensable parts of identity construction in academic writing. Considering from this prospect, writing is an act of identity construction in which “discourse-as-carrier-of-social values” and “discourse-as-social interaction” (Ivanic, 1998, p. 104) both play a part.

Present research reveals that one of the most salient ways of achieving such an interaction is using strategies on an interpersonal level through special metadiscoursal features. Text is a place where writers construct their discoursal identities through textual and rhetorical choices. The role of metadiscourse in discoursal construction of identity resides in its intermediary nature in the sense that with special use of its elements like evidentials, hedges, boosters, self-mentions and attitude markers writers can reflect their ideologies and identities. Metadiscourse has a perceptible significance in academic writing. It carries a needed social meaning by displaying the author’s disposition and identity and by marking how s/he anticipates his/her readers to react to the ideational material. This finding is in line with Hyland’s (2005) study who claimed that writers create authority, integrity and credibility through choices from stance markers.

The general findings from this study reveal that metadiscourse markers play a key impact in the discoursal construction of identity in academic writing. The augmentation of metadiscoursal features can lead to exposing of writers’ identity in the sense that such categories equip them with adequate metalinguistic supplements and cues for constructing, exhibition and securing their identities. The results of this study demonstrated that writer identity is mainly constructed in introduction sections of research articles in which social interaction happens through metalinguistic manipulation. Because of the critical characteristics and purposes of introduction sections in research articles, writers try to make best use of metadiscoursal resources in order to present the writer's acceptable academic picture in their disciplinary community. Thanks to managing metadiscoursal devices, this atmosphere is a pleasant place for authors to show their authority, self-promotion, and persuasion. For example in providing the gap for stating the novelty of a work, using evidential markers in introduction section support identity by stamping others’ theories. In such a case, writer is not the isolated person whose identity is constructed in a social vacuum; rather his/her academic identity is strengthened through statements of elite members of this discourse community.

As mentioned in the findings section, in regard to the frequency of metadiscoursal features, hedges or markers of uncertainty stood out as the most dominant category, confirming their decisive role in construction of identity, where the writer needs to strike a difficult balance between commitment to his/her ideas, respect and dialogue with the reader. In other words, by means of this feature writers can anticipate possible opposition to their claims (by expressing statements with precision but also with caution and modesty), while simultaneously, enabling the reader...
to follow the writer’s stance without the writer appearing too assertive. These quantitative results correspond with other studies where hedges also hold a supreme position, irrespective of the genre and the languages analyzed. Hedging, for example, has come to be seen as a key characteristic of academic discourse (Hyland, 1998), be it in economic texts (Moreno, 1998), biology research articles (Hyland, 1996a), linguistics research articles (Vassileva, 2001), medical research papers (Salager-Meyer, 1994), and Fallahati’s (2006) study on hedging in three disciplines where indirectness is highly valued for different reasons. These examples are taken from our corpus:

(Example1): They suggested that the meaningfulness of the context and the degree of similarity between the form of the L1 and L2 may affect acquisition.

(Example2): This offers support to the view that the expression of stance in the natural sciences may be more extensive than is frequently supposed.

Using evidential markers in papers seems overwhelming, but it seems writers insist that quotations and in-text citations make their papers stronger as they provide their knowledge and evidence in them. This was one way of showing their academic authoritativeness and identity. As elite members of academic discourse community, writers establish or rebut claims to prove their academic identity and then support their claims with using evidential markers. Using evidentials is a criterion for making their assertions picturesque and it is a discursive feature which strengthens writers’ discoursal identity. Writers’ identity gains credibility with appropriate utilizing of a ‘highly valued convention’ (Ivanič, 1998, p.48) like evidentials. As the following examples from the corpus show:

(Example3): According to Brown and Levinson (1987), social and interpersonal factors, namely interlocutors’ power difference, the social distance between them, and the degree of imposition, influence the directness levels of speech act expressions.

(Example4): As Kasper (2001) states, pragmatic competence refer to the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge and to gaining automatic control in processing it in real time.

Boosters or certainty markers can create solidarity in text and engagement with readers and construct an authoritative persona. They are complex devices with a variety of functions, and they are central to the negotiation of claims and effective argumentation in academic writing. Professional using of boosters is one the common metalinguistic tools, which reinforce construction of identity with the impact of argument and evaluation of academic competence of the writer by members of academic discourse community. As the following examples from the corpus clarify the point:

(Example5): Communicative tasks are always socially constructed.

(Example6): Although in the 1980s writing process researchers demonstrated strong support for examining journal writing in classroom-based studies, this method needs to be conceptualized as a discursive research tool and as a teaching practice.

The finding of this investigation distinctly illustrates that self-mentions or promotional devices are the most visible indications of authorial identity which promote both writers and their works. The findings of the study conducted by Harwood (2005) support the use of self-mentions as promotional devices and thus, is consistent with the upshot of the present study. The outcomes of the study conducted by Hyland (2002) also support this result with indicating the point that "self-mention constitutes a central pragmatic feature of academic discourse since it contributes not only to the writer’s construction of a text, but also of a rhetorical self. The authorial pronoun is a significant means of promoting a competent scholarly identity and gaining acceptance for one’s ideas." (Hyland, 2002, p.1110). These examples are chosen from our corpus:

(Example7): Nevertheless, treating interpreter-mediated police interview discourse as interaction among three parties allowed the researcher to address relatively underexplored aspects of problems related to interpreting in such a context.

(Example8): My article shows problems with transplanting Lakoff and Johnson’s discourse-level approach to a CDA register-level one.

(Example9): First, let us examine an extract from the Melbourne case.
The underuse of attitude markers or sentiment devices reveals the dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception in academy. It appears that writers regard themselves as sophisticated, savant and users of reason. These discourse markers yield a less authoritative voice and less personal involvement because it indicates that writers have a “lack of confidence, reluctance to express opinion, poor/no tradition of critical evaluation” (Burneikaite, 2008). It seems that writers did not feel comfortable using some affective attitude markers (surprisingly) that might have interfered with establishing their objective voice in their papers. This identity doesn't signify that feelings or sensual stimuli are absent from academic writing. Rather it indicates that highly sensual experience in a context of the relevant experiences of others and of the history of academic analysis of the topic. In the academic world the emotions and sentiments must always be subject to control by reason. Controlling emotions by reason means avoiding "impressionism": merely expressing "feelings" or opinions. It could be construed, thus, that the key to an effectively persuasive text is the artful combination of weakening expressions (i.e. hedges) and strengthening ones (i.e. certainty markers and/or attitudinal markers) with the final intention of producing a discourse that is neither too assertive nor too vague. These points are better illustrated in the following examples:

(Example10): Having appropriate background knowledge may have helped learners to more efficiently direct attention to input while reading the more familiar story.
(Example11): The results consistently demonstrated that as passage sight vocabulary increased so did ability to correctly infer TW meanings.

6. Conclusion

In second/foreign language writing classroom, writing educators need to provide explicit discussion and teaching of academic discourse in class so that students who hold myths associated with academic discourse or poor writer identities change their attitudes and become aware of a wide range of its characteristics. Writing teachers should help students to be acculturated into the academic community and be participating members in their disciplines, with a broad understanding of academic discourse and with strong rhetorical confidence.

The role of the researcher in qualitative research as the primary tool, the small number of data, focusing on construction of identity in only expert writers’ texts, and the concept of validity in qualitative research which appears weak according to some scholars’ ideas like Gee (1999), are some limitations of this study.

We are suggesting that various natural inquires on qualitative approach and a large amount of corpus in qualitative and quantitative metadiscourse analysis would bring a rich understanding about construction of writer identities. Both students and teachers can benefit from genre analysis that provides more knowledge of discourse, rhetorical preferences, and a world view in a particular genre of writing. Consideration of diversity in participants’ backgrounds and technologically infused education in the academic discourse community might expand our knowledge of students’ writer identities in multicultural and multifaceted learning environments.

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Appendix. Bibliographical Information of Texts Used in the Analysis

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