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Learning about author positioning in written academic discourse

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Abstract

Graduate students are usually not sure of the appropriate stance to take in relation to their writing. Even style guides provide little information regarding authorial positioning in academic texts. This paper describes a study in which frequency and usage of features of marking writer stance were compared between selected dissertations in Kenyan Public Universities. It was found that humanities dissertations preferred personal pronouns and the third person while science dissertations mainly chose the 'faceless' agentless passive voice. Suggesting that choices for such features in dissertations are a function of the epistemology and ideology of the disciplines, the paper proposes a genre-based approach to teaching those preparing to write their dissertations.

Keywords: stance; point of view; positioning; disciplinary culture; voice.

Resumen

Los estudiantes graduados generalmente no están seguros de la postura adecuada a adoptar en relación con sus escritos. Las guías de estilo incluso proporcionan poca información sobre posicionamiento autoral en textos académicos. Este artículo describe un estudio en que se compararon frecuencia y uso de características de la postura del escritor entre disertaciones en universidades públicas de Kenia. Se encontró que en las disertaciones de Humanidades existe una preferencia por los pronombres personales y la tercera persona mientras que en las disertaciones de Ciencia principalmente se eligió el punto de vista de agente pasivo 'sin rostro.' Con la sugerencia de que las elecciones por tales características son una función de la epistemología y la ideología de las disciplinas, este artículo propone un enfoque basado en el género para la enseñanza de la escritura académica.

Palabras clave: postura; punto de vista; posicionamiento; cultura disciplinaria.

WRITING IS AN integral activity at university. Hyland (2013) argues that universities are about writing and that specialist forms of academic literacy are the heart of everything done at the university. Postgraduate students and their lecturers must gain fluency in the conventions of academic writing in English to understand their disciplines, to establish their careers or to successfully develop their learning. One such convention is the writer's ability to employ the socially appropriate features of marking *stance* in their discourse communities a term used to describe the process by which identities are produced by socially available discourses (Davies & Harre, 1990).

Literature Review

As graduate students write their dissertations, they are probably not adequately prepared in terms of the protocol of constructing credible representations of themselves in their texts. Hyland (2002b) for instance, points out that writers construct identities that are not supported by the discourses and practices of their disciplines. The assumption here is that writing practices in the disciplines are not the same. Bartholomae captures this well:

> Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion—invent the university, that is, or branch of it, like history or anthropology or economics or English. The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. (Bartholomae 1986, p. 4)

To position themselves appropriately in relation to their work, students should be able to describe the features of stance marking explicitly. This implies trying to understand the practices of real students communicating in real disciplines by describing and analysing relevant texts. Hyland (2013) adds that students can only marshal support, express collegiality, and negotiate agreement by making linguistic features which connect their texts with their disciplines.The present work will be focused on attributive possession. Heine (1997) states that attributive possession appears to present a relatively simple structure: it consists essentially of two NPs linked to one another in a specific way. Accordingly, work on attributive possession has focused mostly on the way the two NPs are linked.

Coming back to writer stance, it is noteworthy that it is accomplished through a range of features. For instance, writers can position themselves very close to their work by using the exclusive personal pronoun (*I*) or distance themselves from their work by using personified point of view constructions or the third person point of view. It

is argued that the stance a writer assumes, reflects the ideology and epistemology of the discipline they come from (Ivanič, 2001; Stapleton 2002; Tang & John 1999). This assumption developed from the view that written academic discourse makes a rhetorical appeal to the reader, seeking to persuade them to accept the writer's viewpoint rather than simply stating neutral facts (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Latour, 1987; Myers, 1990). Yet this area is still under-researched (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999; Charles, 2006; Matsuda & Tardy, 2007; Tang & John, 1999). In fact, Hyland (2005) also testifies that the issue of writer stance is new in writing research.

Writer stance is intertwined with the notions of *averral* and *attribution*. Regarding averral, writers are assumed to aver all the propositions in the text and thus take responsibility for their veracity, unless they are attributed elsewhere (Hunston, 2000). On the other hand, when an attribution is made, a proposition is credited to a source other than the writer and responsibility is assigned to that person or entity (Hunston, 2000). It is the writer who chooses whether, when and to which sources to attribute propositions. But are such choices possible when the writers, arguably, lack adequate exposure to writer stance marking strategies?

Apparently, writer stance in academic writing remains a poorly understood field. It is not clear how writers should incorporate their own personal feelings, attitudes, value judgements, or assessments in the texts that they produce. Yet the process of writing involves creating a text that we assume the reader will recognise and expect, and the process of reading involves drawing on assumptions about what the writer is trying to do (Hyland, 2013). In fact Hoey (2001) likens this to dancers following each other's steps, each building sense from a text by anticipating what the other is likely to do. This paper makes an effort to unpack the notion of writer positioning in dissertations. Accordingly, it provides initial answers to the following questions: What are the features that writers use to position themselves in relation to their work? What patterns emerge in the application of those features in humanities and science dissertations?

Methodology

Six dissertations were analysed in this study; three were drawn from the humanities field while the other three were drawn from the science disciplines. Becher's (1989) taxonomy that categorises disciplines into soft and hard respectively was used in the stratification and selection. The following table gives a summary of the selected dissertations.

Soft disciplines				Hard disciplines			
Discipline	Institution	Code	# of copies	Discipline	Institution	Code	# of copies
History	Kenyatta University	AHT	1	Chemistry	Moi University	SCH	1
English	Maseno University	AEN	1	Botany	Egerton University	SBT	1
Sociology	University of Nairobi	ASC	1	Agricultural Engineering	Jomo Kenyatta University	SAE	1

Table 1: Sample of dissertations

The sampling procedure used for the selection of the six dissertations was based on the population of all the MA dissertations produced at Kenyatta, Maseno and Nairobi universities, and all the MSc dissertations produced at Moi, Egerton and Jomo Kenyatta universities during the 2007/2008 academic year. Only 2007/2008 academic year was considered in order to avoid the possible influence(s) of generational and diachronic changes in the nature of this genre. But one critical decision that was made was how to draw a sample of six dissertations from a large 'universe'. In line with the purposes of the study, non-probability sampling, which comprises a series of non-random procedures for selecting the elements of the sample, seemed to be appropriate (Ary, Jacob & Rzavieh, 1996). To be more specific, a convenience sampling procedure, which includes picking the required sample from available cases, was used to select the six texts for this study. Obviously, the success of such procedures depends on the knowledge, expertise, and sound judgement of the expert (Ary et al., 1996).

It should, however, be noted that the selected dissertation from each of the six universities may not be typical of dissertations in the particular university and/or disciplinary culture. Each discipline in a university must still have 'integrity' of its own though the study showed that disciplines belonging to the same disciplinary culture displayed certain common ways of expressing writer stance. As such, the selected MA dissertations, for example, were not radically different from one another. According to Becher (1989) and Belcher (1994), such an approach simplifies what are, in fact, innumerable disciplinary differences. Therefore, there was need to uncover these general tendencies. Accordingly, as Hyland (2005, p. 181) argues, 'a large corpus does not necessarily represent a genre better than a small one, particularly if it is used to study high frequency items.'

All writer stance-marking features were extracted from the six dissertations following three types of reporting clauses based on the notions of *averral* and *attribution* according to Sinclair (1987), Hunston (2000) and Charles (2006). The three types are distinguished according to grammatical subject. In the first clause type, the reporting clause has a grammatical subject made up of a noun group with human reference. In the selected dissertations, reporting clauses with the *first person singular* (*I*), the f*irst person plural* (*We*) and the *third person with human reference* (*e.g. the researcher*) as subject

belonged to this category. In the second clause type, the grammatical subject is made up of a noun group with non-human reference from which becomes the personified point of view—in which the writer's work is *personified* (*e.g. The study* investigated…). The third clause type has no agent in the subject position. This is the *agentless passive* point of view (*e.g. It was established that…*). This process of elicitation came up with five features of marking author stance namely: First person singular (*I*), first person plural (*We*), third person (with a human subject), personified, and agentless passive points of view. These are illustrated as follows (note that the features in question are italicised)

a) First person singular (*I*) point of view: *I* am deeply indebted to many people without whom this research work could not have been possible. (SCH)

b) First person plural (*We*) point of view: In this study, *we* seek to examine the linguistic means that Ogola uses in addressing the social issue of gender. (AEN)

c) Third person (with a human subject) point of view: This was a very sensitive variable and *the researcher* could not go about asking whether they participated in the unrest or not. (ASC)

d) Personified point of view: *The study investigates* the contribution of factors such as colonialism and the level of education to the political participation of women. (AHT)

e) Agentless passive point of view: The cuticles of the female nematodes near the neck *were ruptured* and the body tissues *pushed* out gently. (SBT)

The analysis of features of marking stance involved a manual count of the distributions of each type of feature per dissertation. The emerging patterns were tabulated and, where applicable, converted into percentages. This process was complemented by a qualitative analysis of how each feature was actually used in the study corpora. In this analysis, I was able to establish the general tendencies characterising the use of stance marking features in the selected dissertations. Consequently, deductions were made, followed by discussion.

Results and Discussion

The selected dissertations were closely read to identify all features of marking writer stance. A manual count of the features was done and their frequencies determined. The results are summarised in Table 2.

N = 1399	Science dissertations					Humanities dissertations				
	SCH	SBT	SAE			AEN	ASC	AHT		
	Frequency			Total	%	Frequency			Total	%
1st Pesron (I)	6	17	9	32	2.29	9	89	16	114	8.15
1st Person (We)	2	-	1	3	0.21	37	20	14	71	5.08
3rd Person	2	1	1	4	0.29	10	37	6	53	3.79
Personified	14	8	38	60	4.29	53	41	30	124	8.86
Ag. passive	104	163	301	566	40.46	59	203	110	372	26.59

Table 2. Distribution of stance signals in the study corpora

Table 2 reveals that the agentless passive was the most frequently used form with a frequency of 67.05% in both disciplinary cultures followed by the personified point of view with a combined incidence of 13.15% across the cultures. The preponderance of the agentless passive can be expected given that writing within the sciences discourse community requires the writer to maintain a detached stance (Ivanič, 1998; Lester, 1993). Hyland (2002b) further argues that style guides and textbooks commonly portray scholarly writing as a kind of impersonal, faceless discourse, and that EAP teachers direct students to remove themselves from their texts. This follows from the fact that this advice is easily found in numerous textbooks and style guides for both L1 and L2 writers:

> The total paper is considered to be the work of the writer. You don't have to say 'I think' or 'my opinion is' in the paper. Traditional formal writing does not use *I* or *we* in the body of the paper. (Spencer & Arbon, 1996, p. 26).

> To the scientist it is unimportant who observed the chemical reaction: only the observation itself is vital. Thus the active voice sentence is inappropriate. In this situation, passive voice and the omission of the agent of action are justified. (Gong & Dragga, 1995)

> 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 & Barett, 1984, p. 73)

Propositions with human agents (i.e. first person singular (*I*), first person plural (*we*), and third person) recorded less frequent occurrences with I being the third most frequently used form at a combined incidence of 10.44%, while the third person and first person plural form (*we*) had a combined frequency of 9.37%. However, across the two disciplinary cultures, text ASC recorded the highest incidence of first person pronoun (*I*) at 89 occurrences. This may be partly attributed to the narrative schema adopted in her *Methodology* section which finds the pronoun *I* the most natural option to use. This further shows that the writer is confident to align herself with the procedures she had adopted in her study. Similar views are expressed by Hyland (2002b) where it is noted that author prominence is a way of displaying disciplinary competence and emphasising the writer's unique role in making fine qualitative judgements. An argument can be made to the effect that the choice of *I* is a demonstration to the readers that personal choices have been made and that other researchers could have done or may do things differently.

The following examples show how the three points of view were actually expressed in the study corpora.

> *I* would like to thank my course mates …, and … for their encouragement during the study. (SBT)

> In this study *I* employed two main methods of data analysis … (ASC).

> *We* may also view social movements then, as a more or less persistent and organised effort on the part of a relatively large number of people to bring or resist social change. (ASC).

> *The researcher* opted for an exploratory in order to have the flexibility to report on an array of issues concerning the unrest at the Mwea scheme.

Table 2.0 also indicates that science dissertations recorded the highest incidence of the agentless passive at 40.46% of all occurrences. This means that within the sciences, there is a tendency for authors to detach themselves from the propositions they make. This trend emphasises the action and obscures the agent. The table also shows that first person (I) and (we) and the third person narrator points of view are the least preferred in both disciplinary cultures though the patterns in the science disciplines are markedly low. There seems to be an even distribution of the features of marking stance within the humanities domain though the first person plural (we) and third person points of view appear to be the least preferred.

Having presented the overall patterns of the options of projecting stance in the entire study corpora, I now present the distributions of the stance-marking features across the rhetorical divisions of the selected dissertations.

N=1399	Prelims	Introduction	Literature	Methods	Findings	Conclusions	Total
1st Person (I)							
Science	31	1	-	-	-	-	32
Humanities	48	2	2	52	9	1	114
1nd Person (We)							
Science	2	-	-	-	-	1	3
Humanities	3	8	9	-	51	10	71
3rd Person							
Science	1	1	-	-	1	1	4
Humanities	1	4	13	6	23	6	53
Personified							
Science	6	9	18	7	17	3	60
Humanities	17	45	23	16	13	10	124
Ag. Passive							
Science	36	29	100	249	101	51	566
Humanities	22	41	54	32	158	65	372

Table 3. Distribution of stance features in the rhetorical sections of dissertations

Table 3 shows that all rhetorical sections recorded occurrences of stance-marking features with *Methods*, and *Findings* rhetorical moves recording the highest cases. It is also notable that the science dissertations recorded few or no occurrence of the first person (*I*) and (*we*) and the third person in all rhetorical moves except *Prelims*. This is in contrast with humanities dissertations which had higher incidences of the features in the same rhetorical sections. An example of first person narrator point of view drawn from the study data is presented below:

I declare that this is my original work and has not been presented for the award of a degree in any other university. (AHT).

Atkinson (1990) presents a strong case for the first-person writing style in clinical case studies and scientific writing in general. He offers the following reasons to support his case:

(a) Writing in a first person invites the reader into the room and makes him/her feel more engaged in the process.
(b) The first-person emphasises agency (who is doing what). It is used when the writer needs to point out how valuable his/her project is to an academic discipline or to claim a unique perspective or argument.
(c) The first-person is used for clarity because trying to avoid the first person can lead to room and makes him/her feel more engaged in the process.

(d) The first-person reflects the writer's world-views, beliefs and values as a human being, therapist and writer.

(e) The first-person positions the writer in the text. In some cases, one needs to explain how research builds on or departs from the work of others.

(f) Case studies are often written and read as narratives.

(Atkinson, 1990, p. 102)

There appears to be a preponderance for the personified and agentless passive points of view in both disciplinary cultures in virtually all rhetorical sections. While humanities dissertations generally recorded higher distributions of the personified point of view across the rhetorical sections, the science dissertations display a predominance of the agentless passive. The following examples demonstrate agentless passive and personified points of view respectively.

In the preparation of the research design, *helpful advice was received from Mr* …. (SCH). (Agentless passive)

My sincere thanks also go to their leaders especially Hon. … and Dr … who were very resourceful. (ASC). (Personified)

It is evident from the table that the agentless passive had the highest incidence at 249 occurrences in the *Method* rhetorical section. This trend has support in the literature. Hyland (2001) for instance points out that many style guides advise academic writers to use the agentless passive in recounting the procedures involved in research.

The five stance marking features have been variously commented upon in the literature. For instance, the first person point of view is generally used in writing acknowledgements in a research genre. This is where writers thank supervisors, cited authors, classmates, friends and the family, roughly in that order of occurrence. As Hyland (2002b, p. 1106) argues, '*Acknowledgements* is obviously one of the most explicitly interactional genres of the academy, whose communicative purpose virtually obliges writers to present themselves and their views unreservedly.' To achieve this goal, he recommends the use of personal pronouns. But Kuo (1999) warns that when *I* and *we* are used to make a claim, they carry much greater threat to face, and are potentially points at which the writer exposes themselves to attack by the readership. Perhaps that explains why these personal pronouns were sparingly employed in the six dissertations in this study. However, such conflicting views suggest the need for more research in this area.

The preference for the agentless passive and personified points of view suggests that academic writing requires a high level of objectivity which the third person and the personal pronouns *I* and *we* may not achieve. As Harold (2007, p. 25) points out, such impersonal forms of expression 'allow an author to strategically retreat to the background in order to foreground the findings.' On his part, Harwood (2005) notes that the agentless passive point of view may be adopted to criticise existing knowledge or practice, a strategy which he calls 'negative politeness.' He adds that using the personified, agentless passive, and third person points of view may be seen as modesty and caution exercised by inexperienced writers in pointing out gaps in existing knowledge and practice.

The agentless passive and the personified points of view indicate avoidance of what Hyland (2002b, p. 1103) identifies as a 'potentially problematic role of writer – as – thinker', a role which carries accountability for the propositions expressed. This is expressed in the examples that follow.

> The goodness of fit between the observed and the simulated streamflow *was found* to be better for larger basins. This *is thought* to be as a result of the nature of the model. (SAE).

> *This work proved* conclusively the importance of Co deficiency in ruminants and showed that the resulting disorders were in fact, due to a deficiency in vitamin B$_{12}$. (SCH)

However, Tang and John (1999) and Clark, Cottey, Constantinou, and Yeoh (1990) argue that where the agent is left out or where a non-human subject is personified, the power wielded by the authorial presence is very little. Hence, students are in a position of weakness relative to those who assess their work. Thus, feeling that they do not have the expertise to enable them to assert their identities in a discourse community, the writers adopt roles which carry the least information about themselves as individuals.

The use of *we* suggests the need to diminish writer responsibility in propositions that may be amenable to attacks by other scholars. Indeed, Harwood (2005) notes that the use of inclusive *we* minimises the threat to the face of the readership when making a claim or criticism because of implied objectivity. It should be used to describe the practices or beliefs of the community as a whole. With the *we* including the writer and the readers (in this case, the dissertation supervisor), it is as if it can describe propositions and hypotheses the writer would expect the readers (who are supposedly members of a discourse community) to endorse. According to Tang and John (1999), the assumption is that the audience is sufficiently competent and well versed in the literature to be able

to follow the argument and arrive at the same conclusions. Similar views are expressed by Ivanič (2001, p. 15). He points out, "when someone uses a particular discourse type, they identify themselves with the interests, values, beliefs and power relations which are associated with it."

Conclusions

This paper has indicated that propositions may range from being assertive and authoritative to being tentative and faceless depending on the point of view adopted by the writer. The rhetorical section of the dissertation also has a role in the choice of stance-marking feature.

Secondly, writer stance is apparently a socially constructed feature. The influence of a community of practice in which the writing takes place is evident. Patterns of use do not exist in isolation but are part of the communicative routines of academic disciplines. This means that stance marking is apparently intimately connected to the different epistemological frameworks of the disciplines and the way they understand the world.

Thirdly, the various stance marking features discussed above are purposeful in the dissertation genre. Thus, cultivating the best stance signaling practices will entail an understanding of the communicative functions associated with each feature and the relevant propositions where it occurs.

Also, given the disparities even within the same disciplinary culture, stance marking options are not only influenced by the conventions of a disciplinary culture in which the dissertation is being written, but also are creations of the writer. Writers make personal choices deviating from disciplinary norms to probably meet their 'private' rhetorical purposes.

Lastly, stance marking is highly versatile. Several levels can be established that give writer stance its character. For instance, at the disciplinary cultural level, there are a number of common practices regarding stance marking. Narrowing the focus, a dissertation produced in a particular discipline reveals peculiar stance signaling characteristics. This means that to understand the stance marking feature, the various levels must be included in the picture.

Implications of the study

This paper proposes a genre-based approach to those writing or preparing to write their dissertations. The categories of author positioning emerging in the present analysis can be used by supervisors and their supervisees to inform themselves of the options characteristic of their disciplinary culture and/or disciplines. In other words, they will be able to understand the choices one can draw from to most effectively express their intended meanings. In a follow-up activity, the supervisees could take partial or

complete authentic texts from their own disciplines and identify the categories of the feature, occurrences, and rhetorical functions. Through this exercise, the supervisees will be able to determine the variation, in usage, of the stance marking feature. For practice, learners may rewrite propositions in an article, term paper, or section of a dissertation from another discipline so that it reflects the style in their field of expertise. This exercise will raise the consciousness of the students to the stance-marking types appropriate to their communities of practice.

For further research, there is a need to generate more empirical evidence to not only specify stance marking features but show how they should be exploited in disciplinary academic writing. More data drawn from theses in a variety of disciplines should be subjected to further analysis including interviewing writers and their supervisors on their stance preferences.

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