

## A Functional Investigation of Self-mention in Soft Science Master Theses

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### Abstract

This study is a quantitative and functional corpus-based study of self-mention in soft science Master theses. One important purpose of this study was to find out the functions of self-mention in soft science Master theses. For this purpose, 20 soft science Master theses in four disciplines (Applied linguistics, Psychology, Geography, and Political sciences), were randomly selected out of the library of four American universities. Five Master theses were selected in each discipline, in a period of seven years (2007-2014). The present study analyzed only the discussion section of these Master theses. The quantitative analysis of the corpus showed that the frequency of the various forms of self-mention in soft science Master theses is quite different. Among the analyzed resources, "I" with the frequency of 49 was the most frequently used first person pronouns. Based on Tang and John's (1999) taxonomy of the discourse roles of personal pronouns, self-mentions were functionally analyzed. The findings of the functional dimension of the present study showed that the most frequent discursial role of self-mentions in the corpus was the recounter of research process, whereas the least frequent role was originator.

**Keywords:** interpersonal resource, master thesis, metadiscourse, self-mention,  
soft science

## Introduction

Academic writing is not simply a linguistic practice but also a socio-political one (Casanave, 2003) in which writers strive for acknowledgement in the community they write for. Therefore, academic writing involves indications of identity. In other words, writers do not merely narrate their findings or opinions devoid of personal, context-specific traces. They make use of the rhetorical sources agreed upon for writing in a specific genre and community. The choices an individual makes among the alternatives, when attempting to convince or influence the readers, may indicate who he or she is. Furthermore, in academic writings, authorial identity can be demonstrated by using numerous linguistic markers including, personal pronouns and metadiscourse indicators.

The term metadiscourse, according to Vande Kopple (2002), goes back to the work of linguist Zellig Harris in 1959 to offer a way of understanding language in use, representing a writer's or speaker's attempts to guide a receiver's perception of a text. In discourse literature definitions of metadiscourse have varied. One of them is Vande Kopple's (1985) definition. He defines metadiscourse as "discourse about discourse or communication about communication" (p. 83). Another definition belongs to Hyland (2005; 2004), for him, metadiscourse is an umbrella term including a range of cohesive and interpersonal features which aid to relate a text to its context.

According to Hyland's model (2005) all metadiscourse can contribute to the interpersonal dimension of a text. Nevertheless, he identifies two classes of metadiscourse categories: Interactive resources, which help the writer or speaker organize the information presented in the ways that the audience may find coherent and convincing, and interactional resources, which involve the readers and alert them to the author's perspective on propositional information or on the readers themselves. The interactive resources consist of five categories: Transitions markers, Frame markers, Endophoric markers, Evidentials, and Code glosses. The interactional resources consist of the following categories: Hedges, Boosters, Attitude markers, Engagement markers, and Self-mentions.

Regarding this classification, self-mention is an important feature among interactional resources, whose function is generally signaling the authorial persona of the scholar(s). They can play a significant role in revealing the

writers' relationship with the reader and their discourse community (Kuo, 1999). Kuo also points out that knowing how to use personal pronouns effectively is of great importance as giving them the opportunity to highlight their own contributions to their field and strengthen the unity with their readers. Self-mentions, in fact, help the writers differentiate their voice from the viewpoints of others and communicate the uniqueness of their contribution to establish commitment and credibility and develop connection with audience (Hyland, 2008).

The literature on the use of self-mentions in academic texts has revealed that they are an influential source for building an authorial identity (Kuo, 1999; Tang & John, 1999). A number of academic discourse scholars (e.g., Tang & John, 1999; Hyland, 2001) have underscored the significance of first person pronouns in building the author's identity, since first person pronouns uncover the way in which authors situate themselves in academic communities. They argue that first person pronouns support the construction of the author's identity by highlighting the author's contributions while conveying implications of authority. Tang and John (1999) overtly support this view adding that languages do not function only as a tool to show a self that individuals already have, but function as a source for building that self. Tang and John (1999) present a taxonomy of discursal functions fulfilled by first person pronouns which is illustrated in Figure 1.

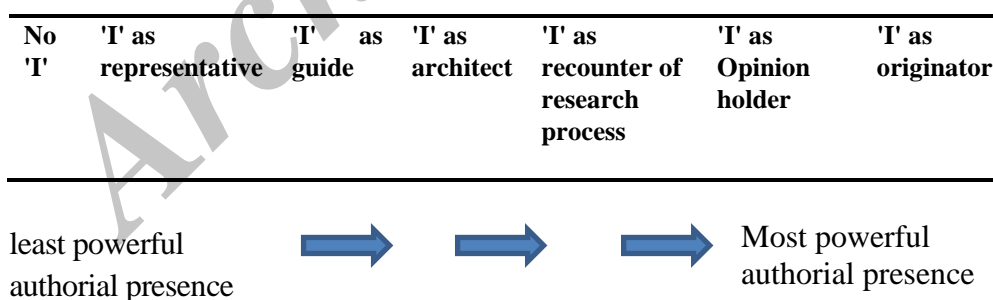


Figure 1. Tang & John's Taxonomy (1999)

As for the studies focusing on student's use of personal pronouns in their writing, Ken Hyland (2001) focused on the use of self-citation and exclusive

first person pronouns in a corpus of 240 research articles in eight disciplines. These were mechanical engineering (ME), electronical engineering (EE), marketing (MK), philosophy (Phil), sociology (soc), applied linguistic (AL), physics (Phy), and microbiology (Bio). He argued that self-mention is important because it plays a crucial role in mediating the relationship between writers' arguments and their discourse communities.

Building on Hyland's findings, Harwood (2005) focused on the self-promotional functions of the personal pronouns I and we in published academic writing. Harwood examined ten articles from leading journals representing four different disciplines, giving a total of forty articles. He found that personal pronouns served a number of purposes but that, ultimately, they served as way for the author to promote themselves. In another study, Martinez (2005) compared the use of first person in articles written by non-native English experts in biology. The study mainly focused on the distribution and functions of first person pronoun in different sections. The results revealed underuse, overuse, and phraseological problems in the NNES corpus.

Although much work has been done to date (e.g., Kuo, 1999; Hyland, 2001; Harwood, 2005), more studies are needed to reveal the role of self-mention in academic writing. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no research has been recorded on the use of self-mention in soft science Master theses. This study intends to investigate the frequency and functions of the self-mention in soft science Master theses due to the significance of this genre in the academic life of postgraduate students.

## Method

### Corpus

The corpus of the study consists of 20 soft science Master theses. For this purpose, 20 soft science (MA) theses were randomly selected out of Master theses available in the online library of four top universities: Pennsylvania University, Brock University, Ohio University, and University of Iowa. This study only investigated soft science Master theses written by native writers of four American Universities, in order to give a model for non-native writers and EFL learners in the use of self-mention references in their texts.

Furthermore, this study focused on the corpus in four different disciplines: Applied linguistics, Psychology, Geography, and Political sciences. Five Master theses were selected in each discipline, in a period of seven years (2007-

2014). This study analyzed the discussion section of the Master theses. The selected corpus was converted to text format. The corpus ran to approximately 60309 words.

### Procedure

In order to meet the objective of this study, the corpus was scanned with an expert researcher of PDF reader to find all occurrences of all the various forms of the self-mention (I, me, my, mine, we, us, our, ours, the researcher, and the author). Frequency analysis was conducted to provide quantitative data for the analysis of the self-mention in soft science MA theses. Since it was not possible to have texts with exactly the same length, the results were standardized to a common basis by applying 1000-word approach (elements per 1000 words) to compare the frequency of occurrence.

$$F \text{ per } 1000 \text{ words} = \frac{\text{number of self-mention}}{\text{word count in discussion section}} \times 1000 \quad (1)$$

Also, the researcher took advantage of percentage figures by means of the following formula

$$\text{percent} = \frac{\text{number of self-mention}}{\text{word count in discussion section}} \times 100 \quad (2)$$

Secondly, self-mention references used in the discussion sections of these Master theses were analyzed functionally. To do so, Tang and John's (1999) taxonomy of the functions of self-mention was used:

- a) The "representative": "A generic first-person pronoun, usually realized as the plural "we" or "us" that writers use as a proxy for a larger group of people" (Tang & John, 1999, 27);
- b) The "guide": "The person who shows the reader through the essay (...), locates the reader and the writer together in the time and place of the essay, draws the reader's attention to points which are plainly visible or obvious within the essay" (Tang & John, 1999, 27);
- c) The "architect": A manifestation of the writer as a textual level, which "foregrounds the person who writes, organizes, structures, and outlines the material in the essay" (Tang & John, 1999, 28);
- d) The "recounters of the research process": A writer "who describes or recounts the various steps of the research process" (Tang & John, 1999, 28);

- e) The “opinion holder”: A “person who shares an opinion, view or attitude (e.g., by expressing agreement, disagreement or interest) with regard to known information or established facts” (Tang & John, 1999, 28);
- f) The “originator”: Involving “the writer’s conception of the ideas or knowledge claims which are advanced in the essay”, which “calls for the writer to present or signal these as new” (Tang & John, 1999, 29).

With this intention, the whole texts were carefully read word by word to identify the discursual functions of the self-mention references several times. Due to the subjectivity of this stage of analysis, the findings were double-checked by the second researcher to make certain that the functional roles were investigated properly in the corpus. After the functional analysis of the data, a quantitative analysis was conducted to determine the frequency of different types of the functional roles in soft science Master theses.

## Results

### Quantitative Analysis

Each occurrence of self-mention including, first person pronouns and possessive pronouns (I, we, my, our, me, us, mine, ours, the researcher, and the author) was manually counted by the researcher in the 20 Master theses. Results of this analysis are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

*Frequency of Self-mention References in Discussion Section of Soft Science Master Theses*

Soft science	I	we	my	our	me	us	mine	ours	the researcher	the author	total
Applied linguistics	31	9	30	4	5	1	3	0	3	0	86
Psychology	1	4	2	18	0	0	0	0	0	1	26
Geography	18	3	6	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	30
Political science	1	6	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	14
Total	49	22	42	25	5	1	3	0	3	4	156
Percent	31.41	14.10	26.92	16.02	3.20	0.64	1.92	0	1.92	2.56	100%

These findings are also illustrated in Figure 2.

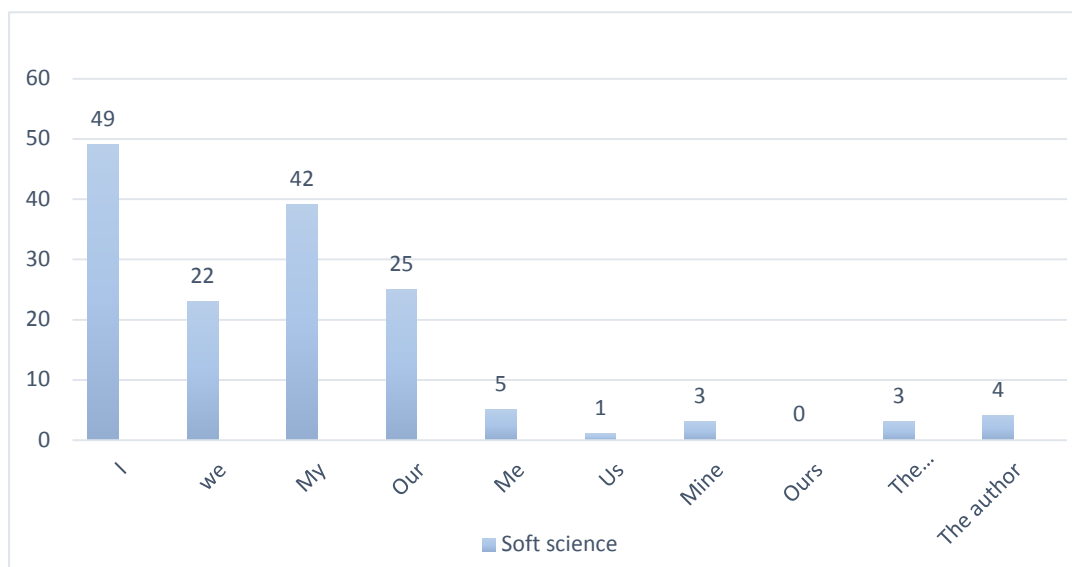


Figure 2. Frequency of Self-mention in Discussion Section of Soft Science Master Theses

As the figure clearly demonstrates, all forms of first person pronouns and possessive pronouns occurred in the corpora except the 'ours', but their frequencies were quite different. Table 2 shows the number of words and frequency of self-mention in discussion section of the soft science Master theses.

Table 2  
Number of Words in Each Categories and Frequency of Self-mention in Discussion Section of Soft Science Master Theses.

Soft science Disciplines	texts	words	Self-mention row number	Percent of self-mention	Per 1000 words
Applied linguistics	5	17861	86	0.48	4.81
Psychology	5	16889	26	0.15	1.53
Geography	5	10798	30	0.27	2.77
Political sciences	5	14761	14	0.09	0.94

overall	20	60309	156	0.25	2.58
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It can be clearly seen in Table 1 that the overall frequency of self-mention in the discussion section of these corpus is 156 (0.25%; 2.58 in per 1000 words). Among analysis element, applied linguistics with the frequency of 86 (0.48%; 4.81 per 1000 words) has the more frequency and Political sciences with the frequency of 14 (0.09%; 0.94 per 1000 words) has the low frequency in the corpus.

### Functional Analysis

This section presents a detailed analysis of self-mention references based on the model proposed by Tang and John (1999) –i.e. “representative”, “guide”, “architect”, “recounter of the research process”, “opinion-holder”, and “originator”. Table 3 shows the frequency of use of these roles in each corpora as well as their frequencies.

Table 3.  
*Frequency of Use of the Roles in Discussion Section of Soft Science Master Theses*

Category	Roles						Overall
	Representative	Guide	Architect	recounter of research process	Opinion- holder	Originator	
Applied linguistics	8	17	11	37	12	1	86
Psychology	6	2	0	12	5	1	26
Geography	6	6	2	9	6	1	30
Political sciences	0	2	1	9	1	1	14
Total per role	20	27	14	67	24	4	156
Percent	12.82%	17.30%	8.97%	42.94%	15.38%	2.56%	100 %

Among the analyzed elements, recounter of research process with the frequency of 67 (42.94%) in discussion sections of these soft science Master theses was the most frequent role while originator with the frequency of 4



(2.56%) was the least favored role that Master theses writers used. To better illustrate these findings, the results are shown in figure 3.

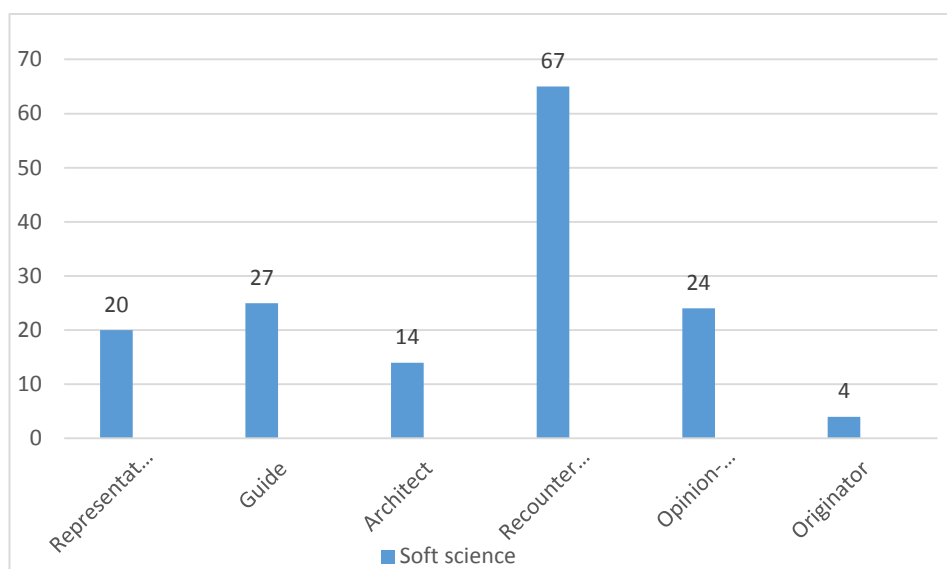


Figure 3. Frequency of Use of the Roles in Discussion Section of Soft Science Master Theses.

## Discussion

This study attempted to investigate the frequency and functions of self-mention – as an interpersonal resource – in discussion section of soft science Master theses. The results of this study demonstrated that the frequency of the various forms of self-mention in soft science Master theses is quite different. Among the analyzed resources, “I” with the frequency of 49 was the most frequently used first person pronouns. This might suggest that general tendency in the use of first person pronoun by soft science writers of Master theses is toward ‘I’. This study is parallel to the findings of Hyland (2001), Harwood (2005b), and Basel and Bada (2012). Hyland (2001) claimed that the pronouns “I” and “We” were the most commonly used devices for self-representation in academic writing (p. 212). And Harwood (2005b) also, stated that “how ‘I’ and ‘We’ can help writers create a sense of newsworthiness and novelty about their work, showing how they are plugging disciplinary knowledge gaps” (p. 365).

As mentioned in the finding section, the overall frequency of self-mention in soft science was 156 (0.25%; 2.58 per 1000 words). Among the analyzed elements, applied linguistics with the frequency of 86 (0.48%; 4.81 per 1000 words) has the more frequency and Political sciences with the frequency of 14 (0.09%; 0.94 per 1000 words) has the low frequency in the corpus. It suggests that the writers of all disciplines in soft science Master theses were obviously attentive to setting up their identities through the use of self-mention in their text. In other words, soft disciplines tend to use more self-mention references and textual directives to guide readers through discussions.

The general findings from this study reveal that self-mention is an important feature in soft discipline. Soft science domain emphasizes interpretation, diversity, and mutual understanding, and also allows for more tolerance on the part of readers. The reason for this is that the strategic use of self-mention allows writers to claim authority by expressing their convictions, emphasizing their contribution to the field, and seeking recognition for their work (Kuo, 1999; Hyland, 2001). It sends a clear indication to the reader of the perspective from which statements should be interpreted and distinguishes the writer's own work from that of others. The use of first person provides an opportunity for writers to accentuate and to seek agreement for their own contributions. Hence, it is widely acknowledged that using first person is a powerful means by which writers express an identity by allowing their claim to speak as an authority, and this is at the heart of successful academic writing. These findings are in line with Hyland (2009) who stated that "Presenting a discursive self is central to the writing process, and we cannot avoid projecting an impression of ourselves and how we stand in relation to our arguments, discipline, and readers" (p.14).

This is also in line with the findings of Hyland (2001). The high frequency of self-mention in the soft science master theses, suggest a quite different rhetorical stance, establishing an appropriately authorial persona and maintaining an effective degree of personal engagement with one's audience as valuable strategies for probing relationships and connections between entities that are generally more particular, less precisely measurable and less clear-cut. Variables are often more heterogeneous and casual 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 texts, emphasizing their own contribution to

the field while seeking agreement for it. In general, the results of the study lead to the conclusion that self-mention can help construct an intelligent, credible, and engaging colleague by presenting an authorial self firmly established in the norm of discipline and reflecting an appropriate degree of confidence and authority. The findings of the study conducted by Harwood (2005a) support the use of self-mentions as promotional devices, and thus, are consistent with the upshot of the present study.

Regarding the discursual functions of self-mention in soft science Master theses, this study showed that the most frequent role in Master theses was the recounter of research process (42.94 %) and the least frequent role was originator (2.56%). This finding is in line with Hyland's (2001; 2002), Harwood's (2005a), and Chavez Munoz's (2013) studies. According to Hyland (2001), in soft and hard science research reports, writer's principal use of first person was to explain the work that they had carried out; this mainly involved setting out the procedures they had performed. He argued that "this is not a simple reporting of results or procedure, but on expression of the participants, custody and personal ownership of what they report. It is a rhetorical strategy of promotion" (Hyland, 2001.p.220).

The outcomes of the study conducted by Chavez Munoz (2013) also support this finding: They suggest that "recounter of research process was the most frequent main role in all sections of research article in both Spanish and English languages". He argued that "these writers overtly present themselves in terms of the steps and procedures followed in their research process" (p.55). Harwood (2005a) also stated that "I and we used in describing procedure and they can help to construct a research methodology of diligence and rigour, and an image of a researcher who is prepared to go the extra mile in the quest for sound data" (p. 19).

The second high frequency of occurrence after the recounter of research process belongs to the guide (17.30%) role, whereas the present study revealed the low occurrences of originator role. These findings suggest that student-researchers (as writers of master theses) consciously avoid the most authoritative functions and seek to deny ownership and responsibility for their views. There are several possible reasons why student-researchers might choose to avoid opinion-holder and originator functions of self-mention in their

reports: This avoidance may be due to factors such as recommendations from style manuals, uncertainties about disciplinary conventions, culturally shaped epistemologies, culture specific views of authority, or personal preferences (Hyland, 2002a). All these may play a part. Furthermore, some students see the use of the first person as closely linked to a subjectivity which they might consider inappropriate for academic discourse.

According to the obtained results of the study, it can be claimed that the authorial pronoun is a significant means of promoting a competent scholarly identity and gaining acceptance for one's ideas, and while these students were sensitive to its rhetorical effects, they were reluctant to accept its clear connotations of authority and personal commitment. These results correspond with Hyland (2002a, p. 1110), who claimed 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 findings of this study also have certain implications for both teachers of academic writing and postgraduate students. For postgraduate students, an understanding of the choices available to them may help them decide how best to present themselves in their writing. At present some students may be avoiding the use of the self-mention simply because of some vague preconceived notion that academic writing should be distant and impersonal. For teachers of academic writing, the results of this study imply the need to recognize that the question is not simply whether or not the self-mention should be allowed or encouraged in academic writing. Rather, the issue becomes which specific type of the self-mention, if any, writers should use, when, and for what purpose.

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## Appendix

### *Soft Science Master Theses:*

#### *Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

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