

Will I, won't I? Personal pronouns, grades, and changes over semesters in student academic writing

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Abstract

This paper uses a corpus of first-year undergraduate Philosophy essays collected in a third level university in Ireland from the same group of students over two semesters to examine the relationship between the language used by these students and the grade received from the assessor. The corpus consists of 60 essays. The personal pronoun *I* within the argument and within the text as a whole is examined and compared across grades and across semesters. A number of reasons for the students choosing to use personal pronouns are identified and the correlation between these functions and the grade received is then explored. Furthermore, the change in the linguistic realization of these functions over the course of time is demonstrated. This data is used to argue that research into academic writing needs to be carried out over time, and that students need to be enabled to express their opinions and organize their texts in an appropriate manner.

Introduction

Essays, reports, oral presentations, and exams are a common form of assessment in most third level institutions, and students are expected to make evident the transition from second level to third level education in their writing. In an empirical study of pass grade third-level student essays, O'Keeffe (2000) has identified deficiencies in terms of syntax, lexis, and style. She points out that in addition to writing skills, students 'also need to become accustomed to the "culture" of this genre of writing. Some students intuitively sense this "culture", picking up implicit tacit knowledge as they progress but ... some do not' (2000: 167). Part of this 'culture' that students are expected to become part of involves the mastery of the required register, or the relationship between language features and their context (McCarthy 1998: 26). In academic writing, the level of

language is formal and certain lexical items and syntactic structures are more frequently used (see Carter and McCarthy 1997: 115 and Biber et al. 1998: 135). The expected formality of academic writing limits the student in terms of the words, expressions, and structures appropriate for use. In addition, students are limited by the expectations of the particular discipline in which they are writing. Barrass (1995: 1) states that many students perform below their ability not because of low motivation or lack of effort, but because they do not pay enough attention to improving their competence in communicating their thoughts through writing. It could possibly be argued that while students may not consciously try to improve their writing skills, in general, teachers and institutions do not pay enough attention to helping the students improve this competence. The ability to replicate the communicative norms of the individual discipline is central to this competence.

Previous Research

Genre

The concept of 'genre' is often written about and has been defined in different ways for different purposes; not surprisingly, therefore, it has been referred to as a 'fuzzy concept' (Swales 1990: 33). Within this paper, 'genres' are defined as collaboratively-constructed and socially-ratified prototypes of interaction in speech and writing. This definition puts forward a socially-rooted model, where any interaction in speech and writing is subject to generic behaviour. Let us take an example from everyday: when buying something over a counter in a shop, we orient our behaviour towards socially-expected norms for that interaction. These norms can vary across cultures and are relative to social conditions of the interaction, such as the speaker relationship and context, giving rise to 'register variation' (see Biber 1988, 1995; Binchy 2000 provides a detailed empirical study of shop encounters in an Irish context.). In writing, the case is similar; for example, when writing a letter, one conforms to the social expectations in a given context, giving rise to the lexical and structural difference between a personal and a business letter, and so on. As social beings, it is in our interest to abstract schematic or prototypical structures from most recurring human interactions so that we have precedents for interaction rather than

having to face each new written or spoken encounter as novel, unfolding, and without recognizable structure to orient towards.

In disciplines of study of which students have no prior academic experience, they have no discourse expectations, even at a lexical level, when they begin the course in first year. With time, as the students are exposed to lectures, tutorials, readings, and lecture handouts, they develop some expectations and use these when producing their own writing for assessment. In a micro-analysis of A-grade, C-grade, and core reference texts in undergraduate history, O'Keeffe and Binchy (2003) noted that the A-grade essays conformed to the generic norms of style found in the core reference texts while the C-grade essays did not. Furthermore, Ball, Dice, and Bartholomae (1990: 357) argue that:

The student who is asked to write like a sociologist must find a way to insert himself into a discourse defined by this complex and diffuse conjunction of objects, methods, rules, definitions, techniques and tools. ... In addition he must be in control of specific field conventions, a set of rules and methods which marks the discourse as belonging to a certain discipline. These vary even within disciplines: a reader response critic will emphasize one set of textual elements, a literary historian another, and the essays produced will contain these differences.

Discourse Community

Genre analyst John Swales discusses and refines the notion of 'discourse communities', which he distinguishes from 'speech communities' (see Swales 1988). Speech communities are centripetal (they pull people in), while discourse communities are centrifugal (they set people, or parts of people, apart) (Swales 1988: 212). A discourse community, apart from comprising defining components such as commonality of interest, public goals, purposeful interchange of information, and feedback, also has a *forum*. *Fora* can consist of bulletins, meetings, conferences, telephone calls, emails and websites, and so on. Via these *fora*, discourse communities develop and continue to develop discourse expectations: 'these may involve the appropriacy of topics, the form, function and positioning of discursal elements' (Swales 1988: 212). These discursal expectations, according to Swales, *create* the genres that articulate

the operations of the discourse community. Essentially, he sees the resultant genres as properties of discourse communities and, as such, they serve as social binding agents to hold together a critical mass of members, via a forum or fora. To draw again on the Newtonian metaphor, we can say that the centripetal force of academic discourse sets it apart from everyday discourses, and the generic writing and speaking norms that have evolved over the centuries in academia (i.e. the fora) need to be intuited in order to succeed in third level education.

Pronouns in academic writing

Tang and John (1999) examined 27 first-year undergraduate essays collected from students studying English Language at the National University of Singapore. They investigated how the identities of the writers are revealed through the use of the first person pronoun (*I, my, we, us, our*). Building on the work of Ivanic (1995, 1998), they order their possible roles along a continuum ranging from least powerful authorial presence to most powerful authorial presence. The six steps along the continuum, ranging from least to most powerful authorial presence, are representative, guide, architect, re-counter of research process, opinion-holder, and originator.

The first role Tang and John (1999) identify for the writer's voice is that of the representative. This is when the first person pronoun is used to represent a larger group of people. Tang and John note that this role is usually represented in the plural form and can range from people in general (*the English we know today*) to a more specific discourse community (*We know that all dialects are ...*). They also argue that this is the least powerful role that an individual can front as it 'effectively reduces the reader to a non-entity' (1999: 27). The next role outlined by Tang and John (1999: 27) is that of guide through the essay. This is when the writer

shows the reader through the essay ... locates the reader and 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 ... and arrives at a conclusion (destination) that he or she presumes is shared by the reader.

Here they argue that this particular role is usually realized through the plural as it intends to bring the writer and reader together through the essay.

The next role of the writer's voice in an essay, according to Tang and John (1999), is that of the architect of the essay. In many respects this is close to the guide, as the architect voice 'foregrounds the person who writes, organizes, structures, and outlines the material in the essay' (1999: 28). The main difference, they argue, is that this is a more powerful voice and does not state the obvious. The fourth role identified by Tang and John (1999) is that of recounter of the research process. This is when the writer explains actions they undertook. Although this is not expected in an essay of this nature, as it is more associated with research projects that involve the collection of data, interviewing subjects etc., there are some instances of this in the current data:

- (1) On my first reading of the apology, it didn't look as though Socrates really said anything that would lead me to believe that he was trying to commit suicide. Then however, *I* remembered that it was Plato that wrote this book so obviously there would be a biased opinion present. Therefore on my second reading *I* looked deeper into the text and *I* found some of Socrates' faults during the trial. (Semester 1, B3 grade essay)

The fifth role is that of opinion-holder. This is when the writer 'shares an opinion, view or attitude (for example, by expressing agreement, disagreement or interest) with regard to known information or established facts' (Tang and John 1999: 28). The final role they outline, that of originator, is similar to the opinion-holder, but it is stronger in some ways. In this role, the writer advances knowledge claims in the essay and signals these as new.

Hyland (2002) categorizes the use of personal pronouns in professional academic writing into discourse functions. These are, in order of frequency in Hyland's data, stating a goal/purpose, explaining a procedure, stating results/claims, expressing self benefits, and elaborating an argument. He then compares this to student writing and concludes that students significantly under-use authorial pronouns.

The data

This paper uses a corpus of undergraduate Philosophy essays collected in a third level academic institution in Ireland from the same cohort of students in the first and second semesters of first year to examine the relationship between the language used by these students and the grade received from the corrector. The corpus consists of 60 essays (approximately 106,300 words), 30 from each semester. The same 30 students are represented in both semesters. In each semester, there are 15 higher-grade essays and 15 lower-grade essays. In this case, higher grade is when the student received an A1, an A2, or a B1. Lower grade is when the student received either a B3 or a C1 (in the current sample, there is no grade less than a C1. This may be due to the fact that students who received less than a C1 were not willing to give permission for their essays to be used for this study). B2 grades are not included in the present sample as B2 is the average grade and it was decided to look at the essays both above and below the average mark.

In each semester, the students were given a choice of essays and had to select one. They were told that the essay was to be approximately 1,500 words in length. The titles for the first semester are as follows: 'Socrates Committed Suicide. Discuss.', 'Socrates Was a Martyr for the Truth. Discuss.', and 'Socrates Was a Clever Orator. Discuss.'.

The students were also given the choice of writing on a title of their own creation if they discussed this with the lecturer. No students in the current sample did this. From the titles, it can be clearly seen that the students are expected to create a discussion in their essay and argue for a position. In the second semester, the essay titles were as follows: 'Friedrich Nietzsche as a Prophet of the Modern World', 'Søren Kierkegaard: The Dialectic of the Either/or', and 'Freud's Theories of the Unconscious, of Infantile Sexuality and of the Structure of the Mind'.

Although there is no 'discuss' imperative after each question, the students did discuss each title in a tutorial and were given verbal guidelines as to what was expected. These included creating a discussion on the merits and criticisms of the philosopher chosen by the student.

It should be noted here that some of the students in the sample undertook a 9-hour general academic writing course during the course of their first year in the institution. In this course, the use of

the first pronoun was discussed, but it was not stated whether the students should or should not use the pronoun. There is, however, a Study Skills Handbook (Brosnan et al. 2002) given to all first-year students and this book advises checking with the lecturer concerned whether or not the use of the first person personal pronoun is suitable for the particular assignment. Furthermore, it should also be noted that students submit two copies of their essays to the Philosophy Department and one is retained by the department as a record with a grade recorded on it. The other is returned to the student with the grade recorded on it as well as comments by the assessor. These comments vary in detail but usually include advice on what was good and what was not so good in the essay. They cover content and language and range from roughly 100 words to 500 words. There are also comments written in the margins of the essay at relevant points. From this written feedback on their work, students can judge the appropriacy of their knowledge and writing skills and improve if necessary¹.

This paper uses undergraduate essays instead of professionally written articles. There are some major differences in the circumstances of the writings of students and the writing of professionals. The audience differs as students are writing for one particular assessor while the professional academic article is aimed at those of the discourse community. There are also obvious differences in terms of motivation and goal between professional academic articles and undergraduate essays. Evaluation, which is of particular concern here, differs also. Students have their essays graded by an assessor and get a specific grade for their work. They are made aware of this grade while professional articles are not graded but may be assessed by peers.

Results

Distribution of I across Semesters

A count of the total distribution of *I* over two semesters gives the results found in Table 1 below. The figures of Table 1, however, include *I* which is both the voice of the student and *I* in direct quotation. We do not want to take the *I* in direct quotation into account in this study as we are looking at the student *I* only. For this reason,

in Table 2, we will take out the quoted *I* and count the student *I* only. The results are as follows.

Table 1: Total distribution of *I*

	Semester 1	Semester 2
Lower	229	41
Higher	161	56

Table 2: Distribution of student *I*

	Semester 1	Semester 2	Total
Lower	89	33	122
Higher	56	31	87
Total	145	64	209

Here we can see the difference in number between the frequency of writer *I* in the lower grade essays and that in the higher grade ones. At a glance, it is evident that in the first semester there are more *I* in the lower grade essays than the higher grade ones. In the second semester, there are still more in the lower grade essays but the margin of the difference has decreased dramatically. In fact, in the second semester the occurrences of *I* in both higher grade and lower grade essays is almost identical in number. Furthermore, the amount of *I* uses in the second semester is less than half that of the first semester. This raises the question of why this is the case. It is necessary to investigate the function of these personal pronouns before making any judgements about the possible reasons for differences between lower and higher grade and between first and second semesters.

On examination, *I* seems to perform four macro functions in the essays:

Interpersonal. In the interpersonal use of *I*, the student refers to themselves as a person existing outside the essay but still refers to something within the essay. This includes reporting what the student has done or giving their opinion on something mentioned within the text, For example '*I* personally feel if he were

such a defiant martyr, he would ...'. This would include the roles of recounter of the research process, opinion-holder, and originator (Tang and John 1999), or, in Hyland's (2002) discourse functions, explaining a procedure, stating results/claims, expressing self benefits, and elaborating an argument.

Organizational. In the organizational use of *I*, the student refers to themselves within the essay and uses this voice to organize the text and outline to the reader the layout of the essay, what is to be discussed now, or what has been discussed already, for example, 'I will begin by examining Socrates rejection of the lifeline offered to ...'. This would include the roles of guide and architect (Tang and John 1999), or, in Hyland's (2002) discourse functions, stating a goal/purpose.

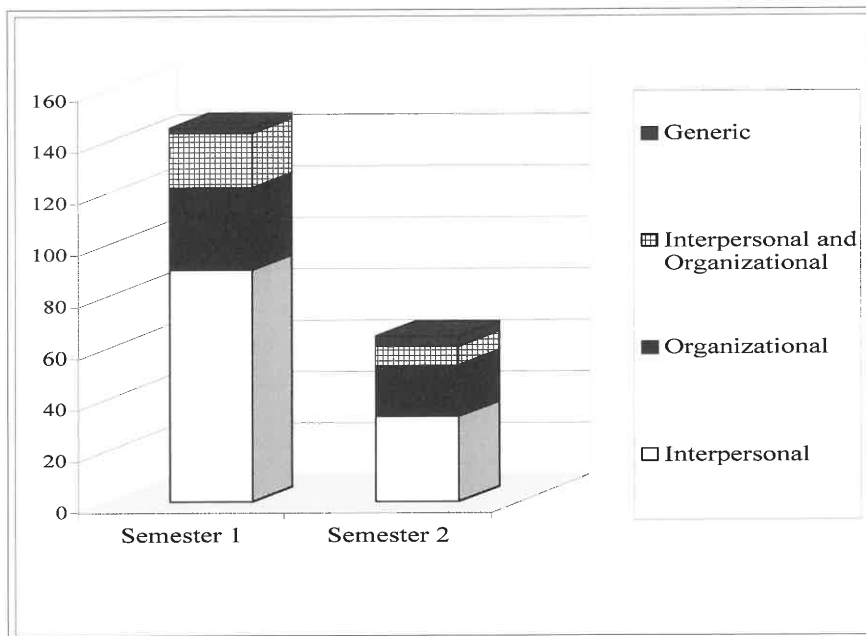
Interpersonal and Organizational. There seem to be uses of *I* by the students that are at the same time both interpersonal and organizational. In these cases, the writer is organizing the text and referring to other parts but does this in an interpersonal way, for example, 'In conclusion, I believe I have proved to the best of my abilities that Socrates did not, in fact, commit suicide, as was requested of me by the question'. In the example above, 'I believe' is interpersonal in that it refers to the author outside the text but 'I have proved' seems to be organizational in that it refers back to the essay and what has been written within. It would seem amiss to count each instance of *I* as interpersonal and organizational respectively. Instead, it may be more acceptable to take them together as one example and count it as one instance of organizational and interpersonal combined.

Generic: The student seems to call on the generic use of *I* when they want to refer to people in general, for example, '...it takes on a machiavellian role- whatever I want, I want it now and I don't care what it takes'.

In Figure 1 is the distribution of the four different functions of *I* across the semesters. The first thing of note is that the interpersonal function is the most common in both semesters. This is followed by the organizational, then the interpersonal and organizational and finally the generic. There is no change in the order of occurrences but

there is a change in the ratio of occurrences. In the first semester, there are almost three times as many interpersonal *I* as organizational *I*. In the second semester, this has changed to one and a half times as many interpersonal as organizational. In the second semester, the organizational and interpersonal, the interpersonal, and the organizational functions decrease from the first to second semester, but the decrease in the interpersonal is the most dramatic. In fact, there is a decrease from 90 instances in the first semester to 33 in the second semester, which is significant. The organizational function does not drop as dramatically, but there is a slight decrease in its occurrence.

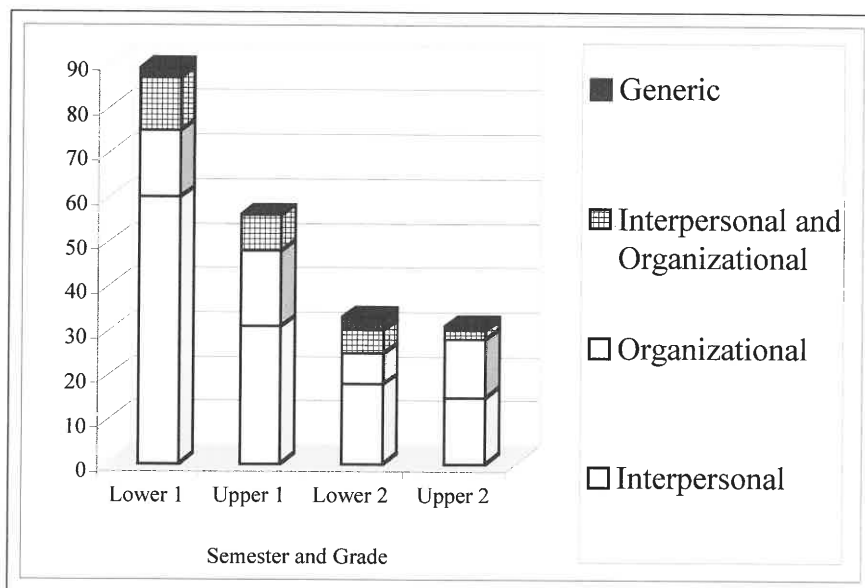
Figure 1: Distribution of I across semesters



This, however, does not provide the full picture. In order to look at how the use of *I* correlates with the grade awarded, we can also look at the distribution across the semesters according to grade, as shown in Figure 2. Here the quantitative results demonstrate differences between upper and lower grade essays as well as differences between semesters. In semester 1, the lower grade essays have almost twice as many interpersonal *I* as the higher grade essays. However, the higher grade essays have slightly more

organizational *I* than the lower ones. Interpersonal and organizational at the same time feature more often in the lower grade essays.

Figure 2: Distribution of I across grades



This trend continues into the second semester. Again, the interpersonal *I* is more common in the lower grade essays, but the difference is not as great as in the first semester. However, the difference between the organizational *I* in the second semester is larger than the first, with this function occurring almost twice as often in the higher grade essays than the lower grade essays.

The overall trend is that the lower grade essays have more *I* than the higher grade essays, but this difference is dramatically reduced in the second semester. Interpersonal pronoun usage is more common in the lower grade essays in both semesters, but the extent is reduced in the second semester. Organizational pronouns are more common in the higher grade essays in both semesters and the margin of the difference increases in the second semester.

Interpersonal

Table 3 gives the breakdown of the interpersonal *I* in the data. The most common function of the interpersonal pronoun is to give the writer's opinion. In these cases, *I* collocates with verbs such as

think, believe, and feel, and can also include an intensifier such as *firmly* or *personally*.

Table 3: *Interpersonal I across grades*

<i>Lower-grade essays</i>			<i>Upper-grade essays</i>		
<u>Semester 1</u>	<u>Semester 2</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Semester 1</u>	<u>Semester 2</u>	<u>Total</u>
61	16	78	32	12	44

Interpersonal: opinion-giving

Table 4 shows the amount of opinion-giving with *I* across both semesters:

Table 4: *I for opinion-giving*

	<u>Number of opinion I</u>	<u>Number of essays</u>
Lower Semester 1	42	8
Upper Semester 1	28	6
Lower Semester 2	15	6
Upper Semester 2	10	3

Here, we see a drop in both the number of opinion-giving *I* and the number of essays they occur in from semester 1 to semester 2. This clearly demonstrates the advantage of looking at student essays across time instead of a single snapshot, as this shows that for the students, academic writing is not a stable, stagnant construct but a dynamic creation that can change over time as the students go through their course of study. We can also see a change in the collocates of *I* from the first semester to the second semester. Collocates of *I* for opinion in Semester 1 (given as main verb, with total occurrences in parenthesis) are given in Table 5.

Table 5: Collocates of I for opinion in Semester 1

<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>
Believe (18)	Believe (22)
Feel (5)	Feel (3)
Think (5)	Agree (2)
Agree (3)	Have no doubt that (1)
Admire (2)	
Am sure (2)	
Must admit (1)	
Comply (1)	
Say (1)	
Know (1)	
Hold (1)	
Suppose (1)	
Get the impression (1)	

Collocates of *I* for opinion in Semester 2 (given as main verb, with total occurrences in parenthesis) are given in Table 6.

Table 6: Collocates of I for opinion in Semester 2

<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>
Agree (7)	Think (3)
Feel (2)	Feel (2)
Find (1)	Believe (1)
Offer (1)	Am in no doubt (1)
Am saying (1)	Find (1)
Am of this opinion (1)	Have problems accepting (1)
Believe (1)	Regard (1)
Am sure (1)	

What can be seen here is that the range of opinion-giving of the lower grade essays is greater than the higher grade ones. Overall, the lower grade essays use 17 different verbs for giving opinions while the higher grade essays use 9. Interestingly, in this case, in the higher grade essays there is an increase in the number of collocates as they move to semester 2 but the number of students using them decreases. Three students use 7 different ways of giving opinions using *I*. On the other hand, for the lower grade essays, the amount

of students using the pronoun *I* decreases and so does the range of choices.

Believe is the most common verb used in the first semester for giving opinions. It is used 40 times in total (18 lower and 22 higher). Even though there are more opinions given with *I* by the lower grade essays, *believe* is more common in the higher grade ones. Both of these dramatically decrease in the second semester. However, there are qualitative differences between the grades also. In the upper grade essays, *I believe* is used 20 times and both *I choose to believe* and *I firmly believe* are used once each. In the lower grade essays, *I believe* is used 10 times and *I firmly believe* used 3 times. Furthermore, there is a range of intensifiers used in addition to *firmly*: *most definitely*, *undoubtedly*, and *also* are used by the students with *believe*. The lower-grade essays tend to intensify opinions with other verbs besides *believe*: *personally feel*, *do hold*, *completely agree*, and *fully agree*. Possible reasons for this are that either the students are not fully sure of their opinions and want to strengthen their conviction or the students are trying to reinforce the fact that what comes after the *believe* is fully their own opinion and not something gathered from reading material or lectures and passed off as their own.

Overall, what is most significant here is that there are differences between both higher and lower grade essays and between first and second semesters in terms of the use of the personal pronoun *I*. Tutors provide feedback to the students, but this does not contain comments on the use of pronouns. Somehow, the students have intuited that it is better not to use personal pronouns in their essays. It could be argued that this is because they are converging towards the norms of philosophy as intuited from their lectures and readings.

There are other ways of expressing opinion. Students can use verbs, adverbs, and adjectives to give their own opinion. Some examples are given below from the corpus:

Verbs:

- (2) Certainly, the success of capitalism and the failure of communism *could* be cited as proof that the will to individual power is, at least, one of the most important impulses driving human behaviour.

- (3) It may very well be that Socrates felt he was a prophet sent by what he considered to be a divine God.
- (4) There *seems* to be a touch of sarcasm and humour in this line.
- (5) Socrates *appears* to be implying his superiority.
- (6) These plentiful and convincing arguments *suggest* that Socrates did kill himself.

Adverbs:

- (7) ... and so he *definitely* did not corrupt their minds.
- (8) He *apparently* died with honour and is renowned and respected for doing so.
- (9) He *undoubtedly* influenced a new method of thinking.

Adjectives:

- (10) His use of the horse analogy is *invalid*.
- (11) This is a *clever* way to begin.
- (12) That Socrates did not commit suicide is *obvious* given that doing so would itself be opposed to his principles.

This shows that the student is choosing to use the personal pronoun *I* when there are other choices available. Although Hyland argues that 'the authorial pronoun is a significant means of promoting a competent scholarly identity and gaining acceptance for one's ideas' (2002: 1110), it would seem here that the students who chose not to use the personal pronoun but another strategy of conveying opinion get a better grade. In both semesters, the higher grade essays have fewer personal pronoun *I* functioning to give opinion than the lower grade essays. This does not suggest that the reason for the better grade is simply the avoidance of the personal pronoun *I*. This in itself is not sufficient for better grades, as evidenced by the fact that some students do not use *I* in their essays and still receive low grades. It simply indicates that a negative correlation exists.

Interpersonal: non-opinion-giving

In the higher grade essays in the first semester, there are two interpersonal *I* which do not give an opinion as such. Instead, they relate to the reader what the writer has done during the preparation of the essay:

(13) *I* have read 'The Apology' and it is...

(14) ...eight points which *I* have noted in my research.

In the second semester, there are three instances of *I* used interpersonally that do not give an opinion. Two of these establish the writer's prior stance and come from the same sentence:

(15) Although *I* myself am a firm believer in Christianity, *I* can see where Nietzsche is coming from...'

The other instance gives the writer's reaction to some information but does not quite express an opinion:

(16) *I* found it amazing that so many ideas now held in modern society stem from his theories.

In the lower grade semester 1 essays, there are 18 interpersonal *I* that do not give an opinion directly. One of these actually avoids giving an opinion and instead indicates a personal state:

(17) Socrates was a person for the truth and whether his truthfulness proved to be an advantage or disadvantage during his trial *I* do not know.

The other 17 occurrences in some way relate the research process carried out by the student. This is done in three ways. The first relates the thought process involved:

(18) Socrates says small things that at first made me feel that Socrates was guilty as charged, but then *I* began to feel that he was slipping these words in intentionally.

The second relates the actual reading process undertaken by the student:

(19) From what *I* have read in the Apology by Plato ...

The third identifies the writer as the person who has chosen one title over another:

(20) The title *I* have chosen for my essay is ...

In the second semester lower grade essays there are 3 instances of interpersonal *I* that are not used as opinion. These give the writer's stance and seem to be used to reinforce a view:

(21) As a woman, *I* feel uncomfortable with the idea that ...

Organizational

Table 7 illustrates the breakdown of the organizational *I* in the data:

Table 7: I for organization

<i>Lower-grade essays</i>			<i>Upper-grade essays</i>		
<u>Semester 1</u>	<u>Semester 2</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Semester 1</u>	<u>Semester 2</u>	<u>Total</u>
12	7	19	17	13	30

Immediately we can see that there are more instances of organizational *I* in the higher grade essays than the lower grade essays in each semester and overall. This contrasts to the interpersonal *I* where there are more occurrences in the lower grade essays in each semester. This is important to note, and it suggests something about the difference between the lower grade and higher grade essays. It would seem that the higher grade essays put more emphasis on organization than the lower grade ones using this technique. However, in both upper grade and higher grade essays there is a decrease in the number of occurrences from the first semester to the second semester.

There seem to be four different functions of *I* in its organizational role. They are shown here with examples from the corpus:

1. Outlining forthcoming argument (*I* will begin by discussing Then I will examine ...)
2. Referring to other point in essay (As *I* stated earlier, he ...)
3. Indicating what is next (At this stage *I* would like to make the point that ...)
4. Summarizing stance (*I* have proved through examining Kierkagaard's ...).

The most common function in both the upper and lower grade essays in semester 1 is the outlining of the forthcoming argument. This remains the most common in the second semester also, but drops significantly (from 23 in semester 1 to eight in semester 2).

These functions can all be performed without using the pronoun *I*. Examples from the corpus are below:

1. Outlining forthcoming argument (This essay will firstly endeavour to ...)
2. Referring to other point in essay (... behaviour in adulthood (already discussed above). It is ...)
3. Indicating what is next (To begin with, Socrates never ...)
4. Summarizing stance (In conclusion, it has been shown that Freud...).

Similar to giving opinion, it would seem that students, in some cases, are choosing to use the personal pronoun *I* to help to organize and structure their essays. They could choose to use other devices as shown above. Unlike the interpersonal *I*, there are more instances of the organizational *I* in the higher grade essays in both semesters although this decreases in the second semester.

Organizational and Interpersonal mixed

Table 8 below gives the breakdown of the organizational and interpersonal mixed *I* in the data. What we immediately see is that there are more occurrences of *I* in the lower grade essays than the higher grade essays, and that in both grades there is a drop in the second semester.

In the lower grade first semester there are 15 occurrences. They serve four different functions:

1. To set the argument (In my essay *I* set out to prove how *I* feel Socrates defended himself.)
2. To conclude the argument (To conclude *I* hope that from the above points ...)
3. To refer back (*I* say this as he told us already ...)
4. To move from one argument to another (If my own arguments have not been convincing, *I* will show you something that is.).

In the lower grade second semester essays, types 1 and 2 are repeated but types 3 and 4 are not. In the higher grade semester 1 essays, types 1 to 3 are used and in the second semester, types 2 and 4 are used.

Table 8: *I* for organizational and interpersonal mixed

<i>Lower-grade essays</i>			<i>Upper-grade essays</i>		
<u>Semester 1</u>	<u>Semester 2</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Semester 1</u>	<u>Semester 2</u>	<u>Total</u>
15	5	20	9	2	11

Generic

The generic use of the personal pronoun *I* is the least common of the four in the data. This is the case for both the higher grade and the lower grade essays. Below is the breakdown of the generic *I* in the data:

Table 9: *Generic I*

<i>Lower-grade essays</i>			<i>Upper-grade essays</i>		
<u>Semester 1</u>	<u>Semester 2</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Semester 1</u>	<u>Semester 2</u>	<u>Total</u>
2	3	5	0	1	1

In all cases, the student seems to call on the generic use of *I* when they want to refer to people in general, as in, for example, 'it takes on a machiavellian role- whatever *I* want, *I* want it now and *I* don't care what it takes'. This can also be done with the use of collective nouns, such as *people* or *we*:

- (22) People are now beginning to live for the moment and enjoy life.

Conclusion

Personal pronouns within the argument and within the text as a whole were examined and compared across grades and across semesters. A number of functions for the students choosing to use personal pronouns were identified and the correlation between these functions and the grade received was then explored. Furthermore, the change in the linguistic realisation of these functions over the course of time was demonstrated.

It would seem that the presence of interpersonal and organizational features in the text to give personal reaction and architectural coherence are generic norms in student essays. However, this data suggests that a student essay is better received if the organization and opinion-giving is done without the personal pronoun *I*. For the teaching of English for Academic Purposes and the provision of learner support to native speaker students, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds, this is highly relevant and points to the need to enable students to organize their texts and give their opinions in a variety of ways, especially ways that do not include the use of *I*. Furthermore, as this data shows that students can change their writing style during the course of their third level education, research into academic writing needs to be carried out longitudinally.

Note

1. In a survey of 225 undergraduate students, when asked 'What advice would you give your lecturers as to how assignments could be improved?', the respondents raised two clear issues. The first was that there should be a feedback mechanism (not all departments do as the Philosophy Department) and the second that samples of acceptable work should be made available to students (Brosnan, O'Keeffe, and Binchy 2003).

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Not a study of English! A corpus analysis of discourse features in spoken Burmese

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Abstract

This paper is part of a larger research project on the 'Comparative analysis of discourse markers in Burmese and in English', and the product of my attempt to identify so-called particles in Burmese in terms of their discourse functions. Particles are bound morphemes, many of which do not have one-to-one equivalents in English. In traditional grammars, these lexical items are usually described in terms of their syntactic distribution: these studies present different kinds of sentential environments, but often fall short of a systematic generalization describing their semantic or pragmatic properties. A corpus-based study of spoken Burmese in different genres, within the framework of Discourse Analysis, suggests that particles often have prominent discourse functions, and many are in fact used primarily for their discourse functions in natural spoken discourse, in which propositional meaning remains the same with or without the particles.

Introduction

This study examines naturally-occurring spoken language in Burmese with an aim to understand the discourse functions of particles. Burmese particles share many characteristics of discourse markers, as described in the literature on discourse studies to date. However, discourse markers have been mostly studied in English, using models for English, which depend on the notion of discourse markers as freestanding morphemes such as words or phrases. Corpus-based approaches use the 'word' as their unit of analysis, but the notion of word is problematic for Burmese. If relatively little research has been done on the Burmese language, discourse studies on spoken Burmese are as yet almost non-existent. While findings from previous work on discourse studies in English have contributed many valuable insights that are potentially applicable to