SELF-MENTION METADISCOURSE MARKERS IN ENGLISH DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS IN KENYAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

Academic writers use self-mention metadiscourse markers to express authorial identity, foster a strong relationship with readers, and convey their beliefs and conclusion. This study evaluates the extent to which English doctoral students in Kenya use self–mentions in their dissertations. This study classified these markers based on their usage in the introduction discussion and conclusion chapters. A mixed method approach was adopted, analyzing the introduction, discussion and conclusion chapters of 20 English doctoral dissertations through manual and concordance analysis. Hyland's (2005) framework of metadiscourse features was used to identify and code the self-mention markers. AntConc 4.1.4 software facilitated the examination of the frequency and occurrence of Self-mention markers within the corpus. The findings of this study reveal that English writers used most self-mention markers. The inclusive "we" was used to create a sense of detachment, allowing authors to distance themselves from the text and the reader. Additionally, English writers presented their individual selves by assuming roles such as discourse constructors, arguers and evaluators. While there were no significant cases of overuse or underuse, the overall frequency of self-mention markers was notably low. The results have important implications for dissertation writing and highlight the need for teaching self-mention markers to effectively convey authorial positioning in doctoral dissertation in Kenya.

Key words: Second Language Writing, Academic discourse, Doctoral dissertations Metadiscourse, Interpersonal metadiscourse, Self-mention Markers.

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a type of writing that engages the use of precise word choice, certain grammatical structures, particular devices and expressions in order to fulfil the academic purposes of writing. It also focuses on communicating ideas logically and clearly for a specific audience (Fathy, 2020). Academic writing has transformed from the old traditional tag of being an objective, flawless and impersonal type of discourse to a persuasive type of discourse that enhances interaction between the writer and the reader. Academic writers do not just produce texts to demonstrate external realities; they write to acknowledge, construct and negotiate social relations, (Hyland, 2005). This means that, writers ensure that they maintain credible representations of themselves and their work which they achieve by displaying solidarity with their readers, criticizing their materials and giving credit to alternative views so that their arguments can convince their readers.

Most countries in the world including Kenya use English language, so much that one's knowledge in English is considered very important in these countries. As a result, academic writers must competently write in English. In Kenya this is important because, academic writers, use English language to represent external reality and also to offer clear representations of the studies they have done. They also use English language to show their presence in their work and to create social relationships with their readers (Hyland, 2004). Therefore, doctoral students writing in a second language not only require the necessary linguistic competence, but also particular writing skills pertinent to thesis writing, such skills enable them to write and produce specific writing genres in order to communicate ideas and information effectively.

Unfortunately, according to Fathy (2020), theorists and researchers are in agreement that second language writers have challenges in academic writing. Competence in academic writing can be achieved if the second language writers can creatively use MMs. The importance of writing is much more essential for second language learners in university setting in Kenya and all over the world. Students studying in English and Kiswahili require enough knowledge to write and produce specific writing genres in order to communicate ideas and information effectively.

This study was based on textual analysis. English doctoral dissertations (EDD) were selected as texts for analysis. Doctoral dissertations writers were chosen because they are at the highest level of academic writing and it was expected that they used these markers in the best possible way, compared to the other academic writers. The choice of doctoral dissertations enabled the study to be part of the sub-category of academic discourse analysis.

There are two functions of academic discourse according to Sultan (2011). The first function is the primary discourse which shows the facts that add up to the truth of the study. The second function is the secondary discourse also referred to as metadiscourse, which guides the readers to understand what is said and what is meant in the primary discourse. This study looked at how metadiscourse is used in EDD in Kenya. MMs are words used to build up meaning in the larger communicative rather than grammatical units of an academic discourse. Therefore, this study analysed self-mention markers a subcategory of interactional MMs used in academic writing. Interactional MMs is one of the two categories of metadiscourse which enables writers to interact with their readers, by engaging them in the discourse, by displaying their certainty and uncertainty in the proposition and by displaying their presence in their work. The self-mention markers reveal the author presence in the text. They help to show the writers' decision in standing behind assertions or avoiding such commitments. They include words like *we, I, our, the writer*. The first objective of this study was to identify the self-mention markers used in English doctoral dissertation written by Kenyans. The second objective was to compare the use of self-mention metadiscourse markers across the three chapters.

Using self-mentions like first-person pronouns (for example: *we, I*), possessive determiners (for example: *our*, *my*), and third-person nominal phrases (for example: *the present author*), writers can fulfil different interpersonal functions in their writing, ranging from discourse organization, to negotiating knowledge claims, to marking the writer's role in the research (e.g., Hyland, 2002; Lafuente-Millán, 2010). According to Wu and Zhu (2014) there are three types of self-mentions devises that the writer actually employed, the detached self, the individual self and the collective self. The detached self refers to the writer's presentation of himself as an academic researcher who tries to sound unemotional and distances himself from readers. The writer's detached self is usually realized by third person noun as self-mention, like the writer and the researcher in English. The individual self refers to the writer's individual traits exhibited in the research article. This self is mainly realized by the writer's use of the first-person singular pronoun like 'I' to express his opinions, attitudes and emotions in performing the act of 'telling' and 'arguing'. The writer's purpose in showing his individual characteristics is to emphasize his contribution and take individual credit for his achievement in the research. The collective self refers to the writer's presentation of himself as a member of a particular discourse community. Apart from displaying his individual traits, the writer tries to affiliate and identify with other researchers sharing the same practices and experiences. In other words, the writer does not merely behave as an individual writer or researcher. Rather, he creates an allegiance as a co-researcher. The collective self is mainly realized by first person plural pronouns like 'we', 'our'. These three selves work together in writing to perform the interpersonal function and thereby help construct a credible authorial identity of the writer.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a mixed-method approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis. Quantitative analysis was used to assess the frequency of occurrence of each attitude feature, explore differences and similarities, and evaluate the statistical significance of the self-mentions in the corpora. On the other hand, qualitative analysis was applied to scrutinize the content in-depth, identify self-mention markers, and verify their functions within academic discourse.

Hyland's (2005) model of interpersonal metadiscourse markers was applied to guide the identification and classification of self-mention markers. Additionally, Antconc 4.1.4, a corpus analysis tool, was used to systematically detect and classify these markers. The corpus consisted of 20 doctoral dissertations in English, written between 2013 and 2022, and sourced from eleven universities across Kenya. These dissertations were chosen as they represent the most recent academic work in the 21st century, providing relevant insights into contemporary use of metadiscourse markers in Kenya.

A random sampling technique was employed to ensure an unbiased selection of dissertations for analysis. This sampling method allowed for a broad and representative view of the use of self-mentions in Kenyan academic discourse across various institutions. The combination of both quantitative and qualitative analyses ensured a comprehensive understanding of the patterns and functions of self-mention markers in academic writing.

THE CORPUS

A corpus is a large collection of naturally occurring authentic spoken or written texts stored in an electronic data base of millions of words that have occurred in real life (Cuttings, 2015). A corpus displays a writer's use of language in a specific domain, showing an alternative to intuition, by checking on the frequencies with which words or patterns occur and how these elements associate with one another, these are portrayed in collocational patterns that show similar usage in a genre (Hyland, 2016). In this study, a written corpus was created from dissertations written in English languages and used in academic writing in Kenya.

Doctoral dissertations were chosen as the source of data in this study because it is expected that doctoral students are able to use MMs. A doctoral dissertation is considered the most valuable document a student can write at the summit of his or her academic accomplishment, (Hyland, 2004).

This characteristic demands conscious structuring of the texts in order to create a bond between the writer and the readers. Moreover, studies have shown that doctoral students use more MMs than the master's students and the other students in academic writing (Livytska, 2019). The doctoral students present more determined and sophisticated attempts to engage with their readers and to present themselves as competent and credible academics rooted in the ideologies and practices of their disciplines (Hyland, 2005).

The selected dissertations were chosen because they satisfied both institutional and disciplinary requirements and have passed the disciplinary gatekeepers (internal and external supervisors) and the respective post graduate schools. The introduction, discussion and conclusion chapters of doctorate dissertations were chosen because they were also considered sufficient sections of academic writing by other scholars like Ebadi, Salman and Ebrahim (2015) Ondondo (2020) and Kawase (2015). They state that introduction, discussion and conclusion sections of a dissertation are the main sections in which the interpersonal aspects of an academic manuscript are more prevalent that can be used for creating the corpus. This is because they represent the writer's introduction of the topic of discussion, the interpretation of the findings, the conclusions of the study and finally, they link the chapters with the current literature in a logical and clear form.

This study analyzed the introduction, discussion and conclusion sections of a corpus of 20 doctoral dissertations written by English linguistics students in Kenyan universities. Having selected the chosen dissertations in the university repositories open access, each dissertation was electronically downloaded, labelled, converted and saved in a text file (TXT) format. The following sections of the dissertations were removed, title page, sub-titles, abstract, images, figures, tables, content page, acknowledgement page, and footnotes. This was because there is a probability that the sentences or the phrases found in them could also be found in the three chapters. A total of 20 introduction chapters, 20 discussion chapters and 20 conclusion chapters were selected to be compared and contrasted regarding self-mention metadiscourse markers in English. Finally, a sub-corpus was developed.

To reduce the risk of subjectivity in data collection and enhance the reliability of the results, both a manual analysis and a concordance analysis were conducted. The manual analysis involved a context-based sensitive analysis, since some items held different meanings and belong to various word classes. This process aligns with previous research in discourse studies, such as Ahmed & Maros (2017), who outlined a four-step procedure for analyzing data. The first step involved thoroughly reading the data to ensure a deep understanding of the topics being presented. The second step, the data was manually scrutinized word-by-word and sentence-by-sentence, with particular attention to occurrences of self-mention markers. The third step was to confirm that the identified self-mention markers adhered to Hyland's (2005) taxonomy and criteria. Finally, the identified markers were documented in three Microsoft Excel workbooks, each corresponding to different sections of the research (i.e., the introduction, discussion chapter and h conclusion chapters of the English text). This systematic approach helped minimize bias and ensured that the analysis adhered to established guidelines in discourse studies.

A concordance program is a tool used in linguistics to analyze and report instances of a specific word or phrase within a corpus. It displays these words in lists of unconnected lines of texts, providing examples of real language usage (Hyland 2016). In this study, a corpus-based procedure was employed, using a pre-selected list of potential productive self-mention markers. Investigations into their frequencies and usage within the corpus were carried out. From the recorded markers, a wordlist was generated, and AntConc 4.1.4 concordance software (Antony 2022) was used to perform the concordance analysis. Once all markers were identified and recorded, a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis, was applied. The quantitative analysis involved descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, to quantify the occurrences of metadiscourse markers. These occurrences were then analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively, focusing on the linguistic meaning and functions achieved by their use within the dissertations. This comprehensive approach ensured a detailed understanding of the self-mention markers, integrating statistical insights with contextual interpretations of their roles in the text.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Self-Mention Markers in Academic Writing

Academic writers employ self-mention markers to identify themselves and show the relationship between the reader and the proposition the writer intends to make (Hyland, 2005; Hyland & Tse, 2004). Academic writers also employ self-mention markers to help create an image and expose their character (Gholami *et al.*, 2014a). The writer's presence in a dissertation is expressed using first-person pronouns and possessives. The first-person pronouns include *I* and *we,* while the possessives include *my, mine, ours* and *our*. This is seen in some examples from the EDD.

1. CE1: I 23 This study chose Whatsapp because of a number of reasons that **I** will point out, but not before the information on the origin and the founder of this application is given.

In example 1, the self-mention marker *I* is used in the sentence to show the writer's presence in the text and to own the choice of WhatsApp as his personal decision. The use of this self-mention marker in the dissertations is important because it shows that the author is self-confident; as a result, it gives the reader an impression that the author is directly addressing them.

2. PE1: I87-88 The new dimension of varied socio-cultural settings emanating from the same writer allowed the writer to become imaginative and do so convincingly since there was no prior exposure to these far-flung and diverse places. This was one of the main factors **I considered as the researcher**: fiction at the most realistic level.

In example 2, the writer refers to himself two times, *I* and *researcher*. This could be for purposes of adding emphasis that this is the writer's position or it could also be as a result of the Kenyan English style of writing.

3. PE2: D85 Having looked at the Luwanga consonant system, **we** turn our attention to the vowel system.

In example 3, inclusive *"we"* is used to show the writer's presence in the discussion; it also invites the reader to continue, though on a different topic.

4. EE1:C90 From the focus group discussions, **the researcher** identified the following intervention strategies used by teachers to help the learners learn English as a second language.

In example 4, the self mention marker *the researcher* is used to enable the reader to understand who identified the intervention strategies used by the teachers. According to the APA manual (2020), academic writers should avoid the third person pronoun *'the researcher or the author'* when referring to themselves. This means that the dissertation writer EE1 has misused the noun phrase *the researcher.*

Frequency of Occurrence of Self-mention Markers in English Doctoral Dissertations

The results of this study revealed varying frequencies of self-mention markers across the three chapters. For example, the conclusion chapter featured 21.2 self-mention markers per 1,000 words which was notably less frequent compared to the introduction chapter, where 44.2 self-mention markers per 1,000 words were identified. Table 1 presents a detailed comparison of the frequency of self-mention markers across three chapters and their occurrences per 1,000 words in the corpus.

Table 1: Self-Mention Markers in English Doctoral Dissertations

Chapter	Overall words	Hits	Per 1000 words	First five frequent self-mention markers
Introduction	51511	180	44.2	I, we, my, our, the researcher
Discussion	58477	141	34.6	I, we, our, the writer, us
Conclusion	37304	86	21.2	I, the researcher, we, my, the writer
Total	147291	407	100	

The findings of this study showed that the introduction chapter contains the highest frequency of self-mention markers. This may be because in this chapter writers introduce their areas of research, with the primary goal of convincing the readers of the importance of the study. The frequent use of these markers in the introduction highlights the writer's active presence in the research process. Additionally, self-mention markers help convey the writer's position, emphasizing the research gaps they aim to address and their commitment to contributing to the field.

The use of self-mention markers in academic writing, particularly in introductory sections, is well supported by literature. Hyland (2005) argues that self-mention markers allow writers to present their identity and stance, establishing their authority and engaging readers from the outset. In introduction chapters, writers often need to assert the importance of their research, positioning themselves as credible contributors to the field. This aligns with Hyland and Jiang's (2016) observation that self-mention markers not only project the writer's presence but also help them signal their contributions and perspectives in their research. Further, Gholami *et al*. (2014b) emphasize that self-mention markers play a crucial role in shaping the interaction between the writer and the reader, as they allow the author to clarify their role in filling specific research gaps. This presence enhances the persuasive aspect of the text, making it easier for readers to follow the author's arguments and understand their motivations, particularly in the early stages of a study. These findings align with Adel's (2006) argument that persuasive sections, such as the introduction, necessitate the writer's presence to emphasize their propositions and motivate readers to engage with the material.

It was evident from this study that EDD writers used very few self-mention markers, with only 407 markers from a total of 147,291 words studied. The limited use of self-mentions markers could stem from the belief among novice writers that self-mentions conflict with the traditional expectations of objectivity and formality in academic writing (Mwansoko 2003; Hyland 2004). Many early-career researchers may avoid using self-mention markers, fearing that doing so would undermine the perceived neutrality of their work. However, the APA Publication Manual (2020), a widely recognized international guide for academic writing, explicitly encourages the use of first-person self-mention markers allow writers to assert their authority and take responsibility for their work. Recent research also supports this shift in academic writing conventions. Hyland and Jiang (2017) argue that using self-mention markers is becoming more accepted, as it allows writers to effectively position themselves within their research. Similarly, Tang and John (2020) highlight that first-person

marker contribute to creating a more engaged and credible academic voice, which can enhance the clarity and impact of the argument. Despite this, it seems that EDD dissertation writers may not have fully embraced these guidelines, possibly due to inadequate training or a reluctance to deviate from traditional notions of academic writing. Thus, it appears that while the APA (2020) encourages this practice, there may be a gap between what is recommended in global academic standards and what is commonly taught or adopted by EDD writers.

The APA Publication Manual (2020) permits the use of personal pronouns in academic writing, encouraging writers to take ownership of their claims and assert their authority, rather than relying on external authorities that may not have contributed significantly. Specifically, the manual advocates for the use of the first-person self-mention pronoun 'I' rather than the inclusive 'we', to emphasize the individual author's role in the research. In this study, the results revealed that although students frequently used the first-person pronoun, they also often used the inclusive 'we', likely to reduce the perception of subjectivity in their arguments. This tendency may be influenced by cultural norms in Kenyan, where there is a preference for objectivity over subjectivity in formal contexts (Mwansoko, 2003).

The use of "we" could reflect an effort to maintain a sense of collective or communal authority, which resonates with cultural values of humility and deference in academic settings (Bunyi, 2006). However, Hyland (2016) notes that in academic writing, using first-person pronouns can enhance clarity and make arguments more direct, suggesting that the students' avoidance of "I" may hinder their ability to fully assert their scholarly voice. This cultural influence on academic writing has been discussed in recent studies. For instance, Salifu and Adegbite (2020) observe that students in African contexts may avoid direct self-mention to align with local academic conventions, which favor modesty and shared responsibility. While the APA's guidelines encourage more personal and assertive academic writing, this cultural inclination toward objectivity and inclusiveness could explain the prevalent use of "we" instead of "I" among Kenyan students.

Hyland (2016) also notes that the introduction chapter is a critical space for establishing the writer's credibility and positioning their research within the broader academic discourse. Similarly, Lee and Swales (2020) emphasize that the use of self-mention markers in the introduction helps to create a more personal and engaging narrative, which can enhance the persuasive impact of the text. The presence of self-mention markers thus serves as a strategic tool in the introduction, allowing writers to effectively communicate their authority and the relevance of their work.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study revealed that English doctoral dissertation (EDD) writers used self-mention markers in line with Hyland's (2005) definition of the functions of self-mention markers in the interpersonal taxonomy. Despite their relatively low frequency, self-mention markers such as 'I', 'we' 'us' 'my', 'our', 'us', 'the writer' and 'the researcher' were evident across all three chapters of the dissertations analysed. These markers, although few, successfully conveyed the writers' authorial stance. The low frequency of self-mention markers can be attributed to the Kenyan academic writing tradition, where students are often encouraged avoid the first-person pronouns and to favour the passive voice. This practice may be rooted in cultural preferences, as many Kenyans writers seek to avoid subjective language that might elicit opposing views from readers. Based on these findings, I recommend that EDD writers consider using more self-mention markers to assert their authorial presence in their work. Doing so would not only strengthen their stance but also engage readers more effectively by making the writers' presence and ownership of the propositions clearer. Increasing the use of these markers can enhance the persuasive power of the text and encourage readers to identify more closely with the writer's arguments.

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