English for Academic Purposes

Keep an "eye" on the text: The Use of Self-mention in the Academic Writing of Experts

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Abstract

One of the most controversial inquiries in academic writing is whether it is admissible to use first person pronouns in a scientific paper or not. Many professors discourage their students from using them, rather favoring a more passive tone, and thus causing novices to avoid inserting themselves into their texts in an expert-like manner. Abundant research, however, has recently attested that negotiation of identity is plausible in academic prose, and there is no need for a paper to be void of an authorial identity. Because in the course of the English Studies Degree we have received opposing prompts in the use of *I*, the aim of this dissertation is to throw some light upon this vexed issue. To this end, I compiled a corpus of 16 Research Articles (RAs) that comprises two sub-corpora, one featuring Linguistics RAs and the other one Literature RAs, and each, in turn, consists of articles written by American and British authors. I then searched for real occurrences of *I, me, my, mine, we, us, our* and *ours*, and studied their frequency, rhetorical functions and distribution along each paper. The results obtained certainly show that academic writing is no longer the faceless prose that it used to be, for *I* is highly used in both disciplines and varieties of English. Concerning functions, the most typically used roles were the use of *I* to take credit for the writer's research process, and also those involving plural forms. With respect to the spatial disposition, all sections welcomed first person pronouns, but the *Method* and the *Results/Discussion* sections seem to stimulate their appearance. On the basis of these findings, I suggest that an L2 writing pedagogy that is mindful not only of the language proficiency, but also of the students' own identity may have a beneficial effect on the composition of their texts.

Keywords: first person pronouns, *I*, expert academic writing, self-mention

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1.   Introduction

Academic discourse could be defined as the way members of the academic community use the language to construct knowledge by means of a complex representation of the world. The fact that we can talk about *academic discourse* implies that disciplines share a number of salient characteristics as a register distinct from everyday speech. Most university students have to grapple with these features in exams, lectures or papers; and are expected to deliver oral presentations and write elaborate assignments determined by a series of academic conventions the learner needs to become familiar with, namely and most importantly, the final year Project[1]. Nevertheless, it is a less common habit to draw the attention of novices to the fact that "academic writing is a means to enter the community and construct for oneself a visible identity as a competent member" (John, 2009:272). This is when specific lexico-grammatical forms such as first person pronouns come to the forefront.

The issue of sensitizing learners to a proper usage of authorial identity is but one of many that must be dealt with. In the course of the English Studies degree, we have occasionally been discouraged to use *I* in academic assignments, with the exception of the conclusion section where we just *might* insinuate our personal opinion. In general, the extent to which learners can make their *persona* explicit remains one of the most vexed and open-to-debate issues at university. This lack of agreement then became the rationale for this TFG. It did raise questions about what it is that experts do, and made me delve into this subject, not only as a student of English Linguistics and Literature, but also as a non-English speaking future researcher, willing to get their scientific publication accepted within the English academic community. Accordingly, I suggest than an immediate problem is that of dealing with equal and valid prompts in class so as to avoid confusion and diversity of opinion, alongside the need to work with experts' writing so as to follow the current trends and conventions.

To this end, the goal of this paper is to contrastively analyze the degree of authorial self of both linguists and literature experts separately, and provide an overall insight into how teachers should approach self-mention instruction in these two fields.

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[1] Along the Project, the Spanish abbreviation TFG will be used so as to comply with space constraints.

The present study will focus solely on the expert academic writing, on the assumption that, with due respect to the obvious differences, the research article (RA) is the closest type of discourse to a final dissertation, thus wishing to contribute to a real necessity to the extent possible. In particular, I intend to examine 1) the frequency of use, 2) the rhetorical functions and 3) the distribution of the first person pronouns *I*, *me*, *my*, *mine*, *we*, *us*, *our* and *ours* across the different sections of the RA genre. To this aim, I compiled a custom-made corpus that comprises, in turn, two sub-corpora, one featuring Linguistics RAs and the other one Literature RAs (cf. Chapter 6). Therefore, the practical ambition of this paper is to meet an individual need to write the TFG, an academic genre *per se*, which does not demand the same degree of expertise as an RA or theses, but does indeed require certain minima. As such, it is hoped that this results gathering would help to develop further understanding of how significant the author behind the scenes is, following the call by such English for Academic Purposes (EAP) scholars as Hyland (2002), John (2009), Tang and John (1999) or Harwood (2005).

The paper is organized as follows: I begin with a general summary of the issue, presenting an overview of how the nature of academic writing is conceived. I then move on to discuss the main features of its realization. Afterwards, I present the results obtained in the analysis carried out, and finally conclude with some implications for the teaching of self-mention.

2.   Self-mention in academic writing

Characterized by a distant, complex and detached tone, academic writing has traditionally been considered a monolithic dimension dictated by formal conventions and an objective description of the external reality. Given that the quest for formality and impersonality seems of utmost importance in the learning process of an undergraduate, teachers would be loath to allow such practices as the use of *I* and *we*. Nevertheless, not few are the authors that green-light this approach. A great deal of research has recently shown that negotiation of identity is conceivable within academic prose, and there is no need for a paper to be void of an authorial identity. For a start, it is worthwhile reviewing how a few subject-matter experts have unraveled some of the misconceptions on this topic.

Broadly, Hyland (2001) analyzed 240 published research articles in eight different disciplines to unveil the uses given to self-mention, and compared the results with previous findings on learner writing. He observed that, while specialists normally use the first person in a self-promotional fashion, students are more prone to underuse them or even use them for uncommon functions. Similarly, Hyland (2002a) contrasted L2 undergraduate essays in various disciplines with expert prose, also arriving at the conclusion that L2 informants used first person pronouns for low-risk functions. These two studies mirror the findings of Thonney (2013), who, after analyzing 25 papers written by U.S. undergraduates, listed a series of rhetorical functions *I* serves in the student manuscripts such as asserting a claim, describing a methodology, expressing doubt and benefits, proving understanding to the teacher, stating the purpose or topic and addressing the reader. Probably, the prompts given by the teachers to write the papers (e.g., urging the students to express their personal opinion or benefits) would have influenced the –arguably mistaken- presence of *I/we* in most of the essays.

In line with previous research, Harwood (2005) conducted a qualitative corpus-based study to find out how writers use these pronouns with a self-promotional purpose. His piece of research demonstrates that even apparently "author-evacuated" papers in the hard sciences embrace personal pronouns as a strategy for promotion. Also contributing valuable work in this field is Ivanic (2001), who likewise highlights the inevitable presence of an identity behind the words. The outcome of Ivanic's work is twofold, as not only does she manage to show how language can construct identities, but she also advocates the L2 students' need for a "critical awareness-raising", a questioning or, rather, critical voice when it comes to shaping an academic identity in accordance with their own.

Tang and John (1999) developed a well-articulated framework to work with rhetorical functions. They proposed a classification of six different types of identity first person pronouns can front, and applied them to 27 essays written by first-year undergraduates. Again, they found that the least demanding roles were among the most recurrent ones in the novices' papers and so, echoing Ivanic's view, hearten students to become critical thinkers and not to be carried along by conventions.

For their part, Granville and Dison (2005) studied the progression of a group of African students entering university. What they witnessed is that, by allowing them to

use their own voice, novices are able to transition more easily to their academic competence, thus these scholars call for working on value judgments in the classroom.

A very interesting pedagogical study applicable to the revision process of the final dissertation is that carried out by John (2009). She defends and shows that supervisors can and should guide their students in the construction and exhibition of an academic identity. That way, the would-be graduates have the opportunity to become aware of their authority share and to fix the uncommon uses given to personal pronouns, as Thonney (2013) illustrated.

Viewing text as interaction, Kuo (1999) zooms in on personal pronouns as a whole. He observes that pronouns help to reveal how writers perceive their role in research and the kind of relationship established between the author and the reader-community. On seeing that first person plural pronouns are used far more frequently than any other pronoun, he further analyzes the possible functions *we* can perform, discovering a multiplicity of them.

As conventions may vary along disciplines and genres (Tang and John 1999; Hyland 2001; Ivanic 2001), an alternative approach for a wider scope might be a pedagogical study of the writer's presence in the text, as that carried out by Hyland (2002b). He found differences in self-representation across rhetorical sections and disciplines. Concerned with what pedagogical implications in EAP those differences would have, not to mention the lack of attention to such disparity found in text books, Hyland aptly puts an emphasis on working with field-specific and expert corpora.

Nonetheless, the use made of self-mentions in RAs is not only affected by the discipline, but also by the cultural context, as Mur (2007) demonstrates. She studied the use and distribution of self-mentions in a comparable corpus of RAs written in English by scholars placed at North American universities, and RAs written in Spanish by scholars working at Spanish universities. Her study revealed that the former made greater use of first person pronouns than the latter, and both the distribution and rhetorical functions also differed considerably across the two groups.

As it can be observed, academic language is not a homogeneous entity. University students are expected to master discipline-specific discursive conventions, with its different codes and ways of thinking. In the English Studies degree, students are

expected to become familiar with those pertaining to both Linguistics and Literature, and "to switch their practices between one setting and another, to control a range of genres appropriate to each setting, and to handle the meanings and identities that each evokes. This is, needless to say, no easy task" (Hyland 2009:129). Notwithstanding the great amount of research conducted on this issue, to my knowledge, no contrastive analysis of personal pronouns seems to have been carried out so far between published Linguistics and Literature RAs. In addition, no distinction has been made for this effect between British and American English. Provided that there is any cultural difference in use, frequency or distribution, teachers should avoid bringing to class a homogenous explanation concerning self-mention.

3.   "Who am I?": entering the community

> Learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities—it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person… learning thus implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relation. To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities (Lave et al. 1991:53).

In their pathway along university, novices often need to deal with an impending change into a daunting and alien academic environment which needs to be mastered so as to gain membership into the community. As put forward by Lave et al. (1991), the process of learning implies the assembly of a new identity, for academic writing has not only a linguistic function, but also a social one: building up a dialogue among scholars. The novel way in which students are expected to use language lends itself to a constraint and depreciation of their ideas and identities, leading in many cases to novices losing self-confidence, feigning their *persona* and wearing a temporary mask just for the sake of a grade.

It goes without saying that the above situation can even pose a more challenging task to non-native speakers, who bring with them diverse social and cultural traditions and, as such, different ways of wording their experiences and organizing discourse (Hyland 2005; Mur 2007; John 2009). Hyland (2009) rightly illustrates this panorama

by means of a comparison between western and eastern cultures. While the former fosters the analysis and calling into question of well-founded knowledge, the latter favors the reverence and preservation of existing facts through imitation. As a result, western eyes may look upon that approach as an instance of plagiarism. Similarly, Thonney (2013) and Mur (2007) exemplify different cultural practices such as those that value collectivity over individuality, as in the Spanish culture; or the scarce, if not nonexistent, use of the assumedly aggressive first person pronouns in the case of Chinese writers. In the light of these observations, it seems that, for the academic board, the rules of the game are evident, and tutors will probably label those lost 'cheaters' illiterate. In view of this, the solution given by Granville and Dison (2005) is that, by giving voice to their own experiences, cultures and understandings, students can retain their long-standing identities while moving towards the academic language required at university. Truth be told, this point in question still remains a perennial difficulty for students and teachers alike (Hyland 2002a; Tang et al. 2009).

Hyland (2002:1), who has specifically addressed this issue, contends that, following the positivist stream, learners are often advised to "leave their personalities at the door" in favor of anonymity and objectivity, as the following prompts found in textbooks attest:

> Write your paper with a third person voice that avoids "I believe" or "It is my opinion" (Lester 1993, cited in Hyland 2002b:2).

> 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 and Barrett 1984, cited in Hyland 2002a:1095).

In direct contrast to the above situation, those authors that abide by a more constructivist view maintain that reality is actually inseparable from the individual (Tang & John 1999):

> I herewith ask all young scientists to renounce the false modesty of previous generations of scientists. Do not be afraid to name the agent of the action in a sentence, even when it is "I" or "we" (Day 1994, cited in Hyland 2002a:1095).

…the scientific attitude is not achieved by either the use or the avoidance of a particular pronoun. Rather, it is achieved through the qualities mentioned earlier: honesty, care in handling facts, dignity, and restraint in manner (Mills and Water 1986, cited in Hyland 2002a:1095).

On the basis of this conflicting advice, it is small wonder that undergraduates usually opt for downplaying their presence in the text and taking refuge in the anonymity of impersonal forms in order to stay on the safe side:

I try to not use it. It is too strong. Too powerful. It means I am firm about my belief but often I am not sure. It is better to use passive sentence (Biology student, cited in Hyland 2002a:1108).

The picture, anyhow, is not as simple as it may seem. Scientific writing is not a homogeneous mass whose norms can be lamped together and transmitted to the student of medicine and that of linguistics alike, but a range of disciplinary-specific literacies with its own perceptions of reality and hence different ways of shaping it (Hyland 2002b).

Bearing in mind the previous point, in the event that academic writing is generalized as "impersonal", chances are that students will not be able to come to terms with their disciplinary requirements. Writers need to align themselves with a particular identity so that their message can be optimally deciphered by their peers. What is more, as put forward by Hyland (2002a), such a preexisting disciplinary identity always leaves room for the writer's own, the two blending into a new one. The decision of using a personal or impersonal style would appear to have consequences on the way the reader receives the message and on the acceptance for scholarly statements (Hyland 2001). In other words, the use or absence of the author's self in the text says something about the kind of reader-writer relationship and the discipline they are both immersed in (Ivanic et al. 2001, Kuo 1999), (cf. Chapter 4).

In short, academic literacy is what Hyland (2002:1108) terms a "foreign culture", which brings about a foreign language with the subsequent feeling of powerlessness and incertitude in those who dare to learn it. A foreign culture, though, may encompass more than one language, each with their own rules; in just the same way, disciplines demand different conventions that students should be made aware of and eventually master.

The next section attempts to throw some light on the significance of the authorial voice and on some of the most powerful roles identity plays in the text.

4. "Why should I use first person pronouns?": the importance of selfhood

As I noted earlier (cf. Chapter 3), the concept of *impersonality* still remains a hallowed cornerstone in academic writing, but considerable evidence suggests that individuality is gaining ground by leaps and bounds. To better capture the gist of what is at hand, let me begin with a definition of identity by John (2009:275), for whom "who the writer *is* in the text is defined by what the writer *does* in the text" (emphasis in original). This definition allows materializing a concept into linguistic features in such a way that writers will be able to choose among a number of linguistic items to give voice to their academic *persona*. The most noticeable of these features is the first person pronouns (John, ibid.). For their part, Tang and John (1999:25) describe the author as the "maker of meaning", which maps largely onto the most powerful authorial presence and the most justified reason to use *I* in a text, as will be further discussed below (cf. Chapter 5). In a more general sense, Harwood (2005) perceives identity in every single human act: in the way we dress or speak, in our nonverbal language, the kinds of relationships we have, the way we look in the eye, even in the way we design the formal style of our manuscripts such as font and point size, use of space, illustrations, etc. The act of writing then doubtless reveals something of our selves, of our stance on the point at issue; be it in the form of adjectives, pronouns, evaluative lexis, syntax (passives, for example, suppress the human agency), reference to researchers rather than their work, and other such choices. At this point, one may wonder what being individual or expressing an identity in a paper consists of. In her study, John (2009) differentiates two main identities: that of Person (autobiographical information about the writer) and Academic (the wording of their stance, all those actions of research and contributions). It is the notion of *Academic identity* that this TFG will mainly focus on, for I am far more interested in what a writer does as a scholar rather than as a person.

Turning now to the formal aspect, Kuo (1999) went back in time to analyze the development of the academic article from its outset, and what he observed is that early

papers were usually in the form of letters that peers wrote to each other. Surprisingly, writers used the first person pronoun when putting their discoveries into words, in such a manner that the center of attention lied on the human actor. After the nineteenth century, the focus shifted to the methodology, results and findings leaving the scientist in the background. Description and narration were replaced by explanation and analysis, the article was split into sections, references to other studies abounded and impersonality became the hallmark of the scientific article. Moving on into the twentieth century, this prose adopted a more diverse style responding to disciplinary demands; information was structured from general to specific to frame the study within a context, and then from specific to general to position the author's contributions back into the discipline.

In light of this, it seems reasonable to suggest that the academic prose has traditionally been bound up with an impersonal and author-evacuated view allowing humans, as it were, to step back so as to foreground and objectify their discoveries. Nevertheless, new needs emerge and so do the writing habits. According to Harwood (2005:1209), "more research is being conducted now than at any time previously and it is harder to get people's attention in this crowded environment". Hence he underscores that, in this age of competitiveness and consumerism, academic writing appears to be infused with novelty and uniqueness. Articles are now turned into products; procedures are sacrificed in support of marketing and, on condition that they stand out from the bulk, papers will inevitably suffer the so feared fate of being disregarded.

Because authors search for renown in the disciplinary community they write for and need to differentiate their own work from that of others, they draw on first person pronouns and possessive determiners to promote themselves and take credit for their own contributions (Harwood 2005; Hyland 2002b; Isik Tas 2010; Ivanic 2001). All things considered, the most powerful illustration for the scholar to be regarded as a respectable player in a field is self-citation, that is, the reference to previous research they have conducted: *As I demonstrate in my earlier work (Neumann, 2000)* (Harwood 2005). Actually, the study carried out by Hyland (2001) reveals that the vast majority of instances of self-reference were in fact cases of self-citation. Besides, Mur (2007) shows that self-citations are especially abundant in the opening and closing sections which can be considered, as indicated earlier, the author's cover letter.

Due to the fact that the usage of self-citation requires "confidence, experience and self-promotion" (Hyland 2001:214), it is not the aim of this article to instruct the students in the practice of this habit. First person pronouns, on the other hand, do serve a vast array of purposes other than promotion, all of them under the justification of taking responsibility for one's own actions and beliefs. As Brockbank and Mcgill (1998) explain:

> The learner is able to be critical in relation to the domains of knowledge, self and the world, where the learner is able, not only to embrace knowledge, but also to bring self, including emotion and action into the learning process (cited in Granville et al. 2005:112).

So, talking of identity seems unavoidable on seeing that authors mold their creation on the basis of their personal interests, opinions and inclinations. In building their texts authors build themselves.

The most crucial point made so far is that the RA is viewed as a humble genre where the author is expected to write with modesty, follow the code and show discipline, the minimum requirement for a paper to be published. A scientific article, however, is not only about validity, but also about saying something new, resorting to groundbreaking tools such as the display of the authorial individuality. Therefore, *impersonality* may be a hallowed concept, but it is continually violated. At any rate, all writing says something about the writer.

Why is it so important that novices take the step of intruding into their discourse? Quite clearly, one cannot intend fourth-year students to write as if we were experts and much less so with a promotional end, but teachers need to *acculturate* us and raise our sense of belonging to a disciplinary community. The final dissertation is a requirement for undergraduates to graduate, but also an opportunity for us to show our emerging academic self, so it could be a way of connecting expert with apprentice. This effect is accomplished by means of the observation and imitation of what experienced scholars do in their papers. To this end, the following section will be devoted to looking through these practices so as to determine the possible roles *I/we* can take as well as the sections of a RA where they can be found.

5. "When and where can I use them?": first person pronouns in expert academic prose

One small but crucial aspect of personal pronouns is that they are not used homogeneously. In other words, in no way are all cases of I^2 completely identical:

> There is a continuum from not using "I" at all, through using "I" with verbs associated with the process of structuring the writing, to using "I" in association with the research process, and finally to using "I" with verbs associated with cognitive acts" (Ivanic 1998, cited in Tang and John 1999:26).

Taking Ivanic's comment as a starting point, Tang and John (1999:27) set up a number of categories fulfilled by first person pronouns in expert writing, and ordered them along a continuum. From the least to the most powerful authorial presence:

1. "*I* as the representative": they include in this class those first person plural pronouns referring to a larger group of people[3].

2. "*I* as the guide through the essay": first person plural pronouns which associate the writer with a guide.

3. A similar function is that of "*I* as the architect of the essay": first person singular pronouns to outline the article structure and state the goal of the paper.

4. "*I* as the recounter of the research process": the first person pronoun is used to describe the steps followed during the research process.

5. "*I* as the opinion-holder": using first person to give an opinion.

6. The most powerful role is "*I* as the originator" or, as indicated above, the "maker of meaning": when the first person pronouns associate the author with the origin of an idea, thus showing the value and novelty of their study within the discipline as well as its limitations.

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[2] Henceforth, and to avoid repetition, *I* will be used in representation of all the other forms of the first person pronoun: *I, me, my, mine, we, us, our, ours.*

[3] Tang and John (1999) refer here to both members of the disciplinary community and people in general, in which case *we* would serve the purpose of including the reader, reducing the distance, and bringing closeness to the text.

In sum, what previous research has attested is that experts writing in English use first person pronouns to take credit for formulating hypotheses, gathering and analyzing data and, most importantly, to draw their own conclusions; to put it another way, to foster their authority (Thonney 2013, Hyland 2001, Hyland 2002a, Harwood 2005, Ivanic et al. 2001, Mur 2007):

> Using "I" emphasizes what you've done. What is yours in any piece of research. I notice it in papers and use it a lot myself (Interview with Sociology researcher, cited in Hyland 2001:217).

> If there are good reasons for a particular interpretation, all the data point the same way to the same conclusion, then I´m happy to pin my colours to the mast. You have to make sure that what you've done gets noticed so that you get recognized for it (Interview with Marketing researcher, cited in Hyland 2001:222).

On their part, the novices' use of first person pronouns correlates with the experts' one for low-risk functions, namely, to describe research procedures, to announce the purpose or to address the reader. Reversely, Thonney (2013), Mur (2007) and Hyland (2002a) observe that students often tend to use *I* in such a manner that it diminishes rather than enhance the authorial identity, as when they use it to express doubt, personal benefits or to demonstrate understanding to the teacher. To this we can add the general underuse on the part of students when compared to experts who, as Hyland found, are "four times more likely to explicitly intervene with the first person" (2002a:1098); not to mention the absence of the most powerful role attributable to the author: the originator. By using the pronoun for this purpose the writer clearly jeopardizes their chances of being criticized, leading students to remove themselves from their claims and seek refuge in a more impersonal voice, for they do not feel entitled to own an opinion:

> We have to be objective in reporting our results. I don't like to be definite because my idea may be wrong and not what my supervisor believes. He might have a different idea. I think it is better to be quiet and not use "I" but just tell what the experiment shows (Information Systems student, cited in Hyland 2002a:1105).

> I don't want to make myself important. Of course it is my project and my result, but I am just ordinary student. Not an academic scholar with lots of knowledge and confident for myself (TESOL student, cited in Hyland, ibid.).

Regarding distribution, there are some specific sections in the paper where the academic identity has more room for its realization. As indicated in the previous chapter, the opening and closing paragraphs are of significant value for self-promotion. Law and Williams (1982) noted that the introductory paragraph is "a vital part of the packaging, designed to alert potential users, to persuade them that this is a valuable product, one which they cannot do without" (cited in Harwood 2005:1210). By detecting gaps which need filling, *I* and *we* can be inserted in the text to highlight the originality of the work.

In *Method* sections we find the most common rhetorical function *I* fronts in both student and scholar articles, that is, the reporting and justification of the selected methodology as well as the explanation of the data gathering and research procedures. As John (2009) contends, given that this section involves the author's preference for one choice or another, this move can pave the way for the writer's visibility.

The *Results* and/or *Discussion* sections are probably less eye-catching than the *Introduction* and *Conclusion* ones, but more relevant if possible. The latter ones market the paper, but the former sections hold the gist, the results, the strengths and limitations, the value and novelty of the work in question. Thus the ""I" as the originator" function is materialized here.

Nevertheless, the only section in which the appearance of *I* does not seem to be stigmatized is the *Conclusion*. It is broadly assumed that this is the place where the writer can be more evaluative and opinionated, so students do not usually have difficulty expressing their view in this category. Besides, the fact that claims have already been presented at the start of the RA does not mean that the writer cannot summarize the results at the close too (Harwood 2005).

Finally, apart from these well-defined parts, we can also encounter fragments within sections used to outline the structure of the article or the following section or paragraph. The organization of a paper is unarguably a matter of the writer's convenience, so the usage of the first person in this section can be seen as a mere

technical device to guide the reader at the same time the writer takes responsibility for their ordering of discourse.

Taking all this into consideration, it is key to flag up, and I reiterate the idea mentioned above, that academic writing in English (especially American English) has been described as increasingly individualistic, placing the responsibility on the writer, contrary to what once seemed to be the norm (Swales and Feak 2000, cited in Hyland 2002a:295; Thonney 2013; Ivanic et al. 2001). What is more, many EAP scholars are now turning their heads to the growing tendency towards a less formal academic expression materialized in contractions, reader pronouns, direct questions, imperatives, initial *but* or *and*, boosters[4], attitude markers, personal asides and self-mentions among others (Hyland 2009). I would daresay that this mold-breaking habits might arise outright criticism among many conservative scholars, but we cannot refuse to acknowledge that new times bring about new needs and with them, new ways of shaping the language.

So far in this paper I have mainly centered on a general state of affairs concerning self-mention. The remaining half of the Project will be geared towards observing what it is that scholars do presently in such disciplines as Linguistics and Literature, aiming at future teaching applications in the English Studies Degree. While I cannot at this early stage of the TFG make large demands, I may conjecture on the basis of the above mentioned findings and expanding fashion, that what we might find in the corpora is a marked use of *I* (even more than *we*) chiefly in Linguistics RAs.

6. Methodology

This section explains the case study I have carried out to observe whether scholars do resort to first person pronouns, and if so, how and what for. I will comment on the method followed and discuss the results of the study undertaken.

6.1 Corpus linguistics

Before delving into the research process itself, a succinct comment is called for with regard to what *corpus linguistics* is and why I have adopted it as the most

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[4] Devices which allow writers to communicate their conviction on what they say; e.g., *definitely, of course, nobody…*

appropriate methodological framework for my research. *Corpus linguistics* can be defined as the study of authentic language use by means of large collections of digitalized samples. This procedure allows the extraction of rules and guidelines that account for how to use language in a given context for a specific communicative purpose. The reason behind this choice lies in the fact that in order to have access to actual expert writing and describe first person pronouns usage, I required specialized software that would take into account the frequency and the environment of the phenomena under scrutiny.

6.2   Building the corpus

In this TFG, I provide examples of real writers creating real texts, and I wished to analyze the scope of their authorship when it comes to subject-positioning. Bearing this in mind, the primary concern of this study was threefold: (1) to check whether experts actually use first person pronouns in their RAs; (2) to ascertain the different rhetorical functions these pronouns perform; and (3) to determine in which sections of the RA authors are more prone to show their *persona*. To his end, I compiled an *ad-hoc* corpus of 16 RAs consisting of two sub-corpora, one featuring Linguistics RAs and the other one Literature RAs (Appendix 1). Among the eight articles that compose each sub-corpus, four of them were written by North American authors and the other four by British authors. All the published articles selected are single-authored to enable the emergence of first person singular pronouns and try to account for the presence of the first person plural. The corpus runs to approximately 111,792 words. While converting the papers into txt format, all abstracts, footnotes, endnotes, and bibliography were deleted to avoid noise. All instances of *I* were examined in context to guarantee that they were being employed by the author and not by any other sources. In consequence, interviews and quotations were deemed irrelevant for the purposes of this study.

6.3   The procedure

The 16 research papers were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively using the AntConc (3.4.1.0) concordancer which let me browse the whole corpus at once, retrieving all the occurrences of first person pronouns, which were later analyzed in context. Afterwards, I conducted a frequency analysis so as to offer quantitative data for the accurate description of how many occurrences of pronouns there were, prior to their subsequent interpretation. Additionally, I qualitatively examined and manually coded the roles that first person pronouns serve in the scholar papers on the basis of Tang and

John's above-mentioned taxonomy (cf. Chapter 5). Further, a painstaking examination of the co-text of each occurrence was carried out to determine what follows or precedes the tokens and in which sections of the RA self-mentions are more likely to come into view.

7. Data analysis and results

In this section my purpose is to extract, describe and analyze the data observed in the corpus with the aim of drawing some generalizations on the expert usage of personal pronouns.

7.1 Description

First, an account of the frequency of pronouns will be provided, followed by their categorization into rhetorical functions, to finish with their disposition in the different sections of the RA.

7.1.1 Frequency

Concerning frequency, the sample includes 311 occurrences of first person pronouns. On the whole, the differences among all pronouns are substantial as can be observed in table 1, which indicates the frequency and functions of first person pronouns *I*, *me*, *my*, *mine*, *we*, *us*, *our*, *ours* in American and British English Linguistics and Literature RA.

Table 1.Number of occurrences of personal pronoun per rhetorical function in American and British English Linguistics and Literature RA

FUNCTIONS	I				me				My				mine				we				us				our				ours				Total
	Ling		Lit		Ling		Lit		Ling		Lit		Ling		Lit		Ling		Lit		Ling		Lit		Ling		Lit		Ling		Lit		
	Am[5]	Br	Am	Br	Am	Br	Am	Br	Am	Br	Am	Br	Am	Br	Am	Br	Am	Br	Am	Br	Am	Br	Am	Br	Am	Br	Am	Br	Am	Br	Am	Br	
I as the representative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	14	34	8	5	4	15	4	4	5	8	4	0	0	0	0	109
I as the guide through the essay	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	18	3	5	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	29
I as the architect of the essay	2	10	8	5	0	0	0	0	0	11	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	43
I as the recounter of the research process	38	6	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	51
I as the opinion-holder	1	6	2	3	0	0	3	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	17
I as the originator	3	6	10	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	7	4	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	42
Others	0	6	3	5	0	1	0	0	0	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	20
Total	**44**	**34**	**25**	**20**	**0**	**1**	**3**	**0**	**2**	**18**	**1**	**4**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**5**	**43**	**41**	**17**	**6**	**4**	**16**	**4**	**4**	**7**	**8**	**4**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	
	78		**45**		**1**		**3**		**20**		**5**		**0**		**0**		**48**		**58**		**10**		**20**		**11**		**12**		**0**		**0**		**311**
	123 (39.5%)				**4 (1.3%)**				**25 (8%)**				**0 (0%)**				**106 (34.1%)**				**30 (9.6%)**				**23 (7.4%)**				**0 (0%)**				

[5] *Am* and *Br* are abbreviated forms for *American* and *British English* respectively.

In line with previous research (Thonney, 2013; Hyland 2002a; Hyland 2001), the most typically used pronoun is *I* (123 tokens), representing 39.5% of the total, followed closely by *we* (106 tokens), with 34.1% share of usage. Almost four times less frequent we find *us* (30 tokens, or 9.6%). *My* and *our* rank fourth and fifth respectively (25 tokens or 8% and 23 tokens or 7.4%), and *me* represents only 4% of all first person pronouns across the 16 papers. In strong contrast, the possessive pronouns *mine* and *ours* do not occur at all in the corpus.

If we now turn our attention to disciplines, Table 1 shows that the use of *I* in Linguistics (78 instances) almost doubles that of Literature (45 instances) which slightly favors *we* (58 instances). Similarly, *my* is more common in Linguistics (20 instances) than in Literature (5 instances), while *us* is preferred by Literature scholars (20 instances) as opposed to Linguists (10 instances). As for the rest of the pronouns, the differences are not salient enough to be worth commenting upon.

With regard to the varieties of English observed, there seems to be no relevant differences across disciplines, with the exception of *my*, more commonly used by British Linguists; noticeably *I* is to some extent preferred by Americans in both disciplines; and *us* by American Literature scholars. The most striking difference lies in *we*, much more frequent in Linguistics papers written by British scholars, but preferred for Literature RAs by American scholars.

7.1.2 Rhetorical functions

While frequency of occurrence is key to discern the relative prominence of self-mentions in expert writing, we can grasp a lot more about the author's representation in the text by digging into the discursive functions these pronouns usually perform. Examples of all these functions abound in the corpus. From most to least frequent, the roles are ranked as follows:

1. "*I* as the representative" (35%): the highest frequency is found in the form of *we* in Literature papers by North American authors, e.g.: "…exploiting just the kind of rhetoric which we have been accustomed to hearing from politicians".

2. "*I* as the recounter of the research process" (16.4%): Typical of the *Method* section, this function is carried out mostly by *I* or singular

forms in Linguistics RAs, e.g.: "Therefore, I gathered a collection of suitable studies and analyzed them with the transfer taxonomy" (BrE Linguistics RA).

3. "*I* as the architect of the essay" (13.8%): it seems that linguists favor both *my* and *I* over other pronouns when it comes to structuring the article, e.g.: "In my data analysis below, then, I begin by discussing extracts from my corpus where it seems that the promotional effect is achieved predominantly by means of a personal pronoun" (AmE Linguistics RA).

4. "*I* as the originator" (13.5%): as shown in Table 1, the most powerful role in terms of authorship mainly takes the shape of *I,* followed by *we,* e.g.: "I argue that contemporary queer readings of the nineteenth-century Gothic monster can be usefully illuminated by postcolonial approaches to the texts." (BrE Literature RA).

5. "*I* as the guide through the essay" (9.3%): the vast majority of instances taking on this function appears in Linguistics RAs by British authors, and is realized as *we,* e.g.: "However, this is actually problematic, because as we see in example (48) below, the conjunction is not actually required between each conjunct…".

6. Others[6] (6.4%): whereas no regular pattern is found in this category, the pronouns tend to collocate with verbs of desire, convey personal comments or preferences, relate to the author's profession, etc. These pronouns appear unevenly spread throughout the RA. E.g.: "However, I do not want to give the impression that any promotional effect is always entirely due to the pronouns" (BrE Linguistics RA).

7. "*I* as the opinion-holder" (5.5%): this is the least frequent role found in the corpus and, as one might expect, it is performed by first person singular pronouns, e.g.: "By relating this anxiety to Coleridge's views of personification, the Bible, and his own public image, I believe we can see that his late poems confess what his defense of free authorial

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[6] In this label I have included those instances of *I* that did not fall into any of the other categories.

and readerly agency in his prose had already implied" (AmE Literature RA).

Another interesting aspect of the data extracted from the corpus is the co-text, that is, the items that immediately precede and follow a word. Following Harwood (2005), the co-text has been highly considered, for it is this rather than the pronoun itself that shows the purposes for which an affirmation is claimed. As can be seen in Table 2, the majority of the collocates surrounding first person pronouns associates the author with their work; the possessive forms are a clear example of this. The most frequent collocates of possessive pronouns are *corpus*, *data*, *analysis*, *focus*, *study*, etc. These constructions underscore the author's hallmark and engagement in research procedures. In like manner, first person singular pronoun *I* also serves this purpose lucidly, while the plural forms sacrifice authorship in favor of shortening the distance between writers and readers, through resources such as *lead us*, *all of us*, *we assume*, *our understanding*, etc., as can be noted in "So *let us* return to the conjunction of 'Bartleby' and 'Fergusson', and ask a different question." (AmE Literature RA).

Table 2. Co-text of first person pronoun per rhetorical function

First person pronouns	Rhetorical function					
	I as the representative	*I* as the guide	*I* as the architect	*I* as the recounter	*I* as the opinion-holder	*I* as the originator
I	-[7]	-	Begin, move on, offer, discuss	Suggest, raise, discuss	Support, believe, know, think	Argue, assume, claim, show
me	-	-	-	-	Lead, inspire, allow	-
my	-	-	Analysis, data, corpus, study	Corpus, intention, focus	Knowledge, understanding	Analysis, emphasis
mine	-	-	-	-	-	-
we	Have, call, hear, know, read, see	Need, know, consider, examine	Turn, reveal	-	-	Call, say, adopt, propose, show
us	Those of, persuade, help, tell	Let	-	-	-	-
our	Attention, knowledge, understanding, focus	-	-	Starting point	-	Proposal
ours	-	-	-	-	-	-

7.1.3 Distribution

The disposition of first person pronouns across the corpora is also worthy of attention, not without first mentioning that, when collecting the corpus, I observed that in Literature the boundaries are not so clear cut as in Linguistics with regard to sections. Some of them contain no titles whatsoever, and some others do include them, but follow no such a scheme as *Introduction*, *Methodology*, *Results*, *Discussion* or *Conclusion*, so typically found in research works. Consequently, not only did it become troublesome to

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[7] No instances were found.

place each occurrence of personal pronouns into a specific section, but also to establish sections and hence, to draw accurate contrasts across the two disciplines. Over and above the difficulties, I broadly managed to achieve a balance which let me compare like with like. The two figures below give a general glimpse of the overall distribution of pronouns per sections within disciplinary research articles.

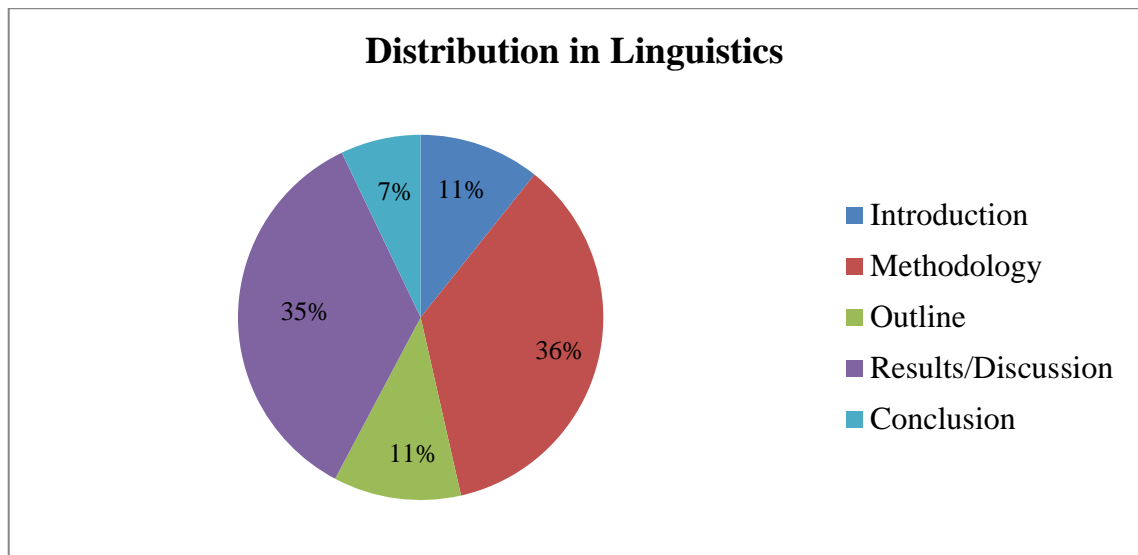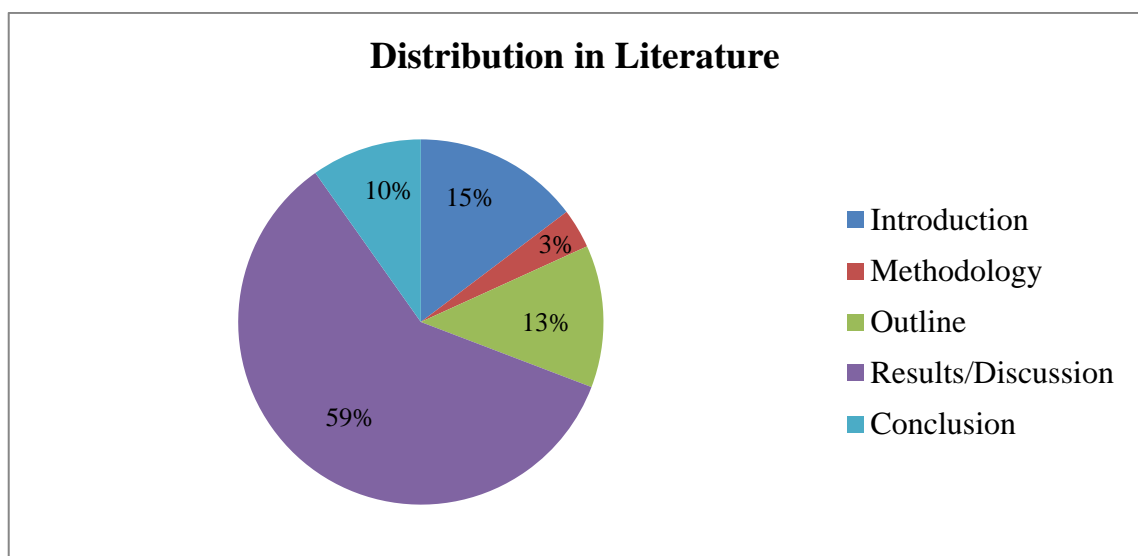*Figure 1. Distribution of first person pronouns across Linguistics RAs*

Distribution in Linguistics

- Introduction: 11%
- Methodology: 36%
- Outline: 11%
- Results/Discussion: 35%
- Conclusion: 7%

Figure 2. Distribution of first person pronouns across Literature RAs

Distribution in Literature

- Introduction: 15%
- Methodology: 3%
- Outline: 13%
- Results/Discussion: 59%
- Conclusion: 10%

Remarkably, Figure 1 and 2 show a very similar distribution of first person pronouns in both disciplines, the only divergence residing in the *Methodology* (36% in Linguistics, 3% in Literature) and the *Results/Discussion* (35%, 59%) sections.

Concerning the *Methodology*, the lack of a clear-cut rhetorical structure where the different sections are clearly marked is likely to account for the low percentage of *I* used for this aim in Literature RAs, thus placing the preponderance of the work in the *Results/Discussion* section. On the contrary, the relevance of a thorough methodology in scientific papers justifies the equitable importance given to both the *Methodology* and the *Results/Discussion* sections.

7.2 Discussion

Some concluding remarks are now presented in the light of the results obtained. First and foremost, Table 1 certainly confirms that academic writing is not the conventionally ceremonious prose it is often portrayed to be, for *I* is by far at the head of all first person pronouns usage.

The first person singular (*I*) and plural (*we*) pronouns were the most commonly used devices for self-mention in all sixteen RAs (73.6%). The reason why the writer of a single-authored paper would use *we*, instead of *I*, might stem from the fact that plural forms are far less intrusive and downplay personal contributions (Hyland 2001).

Although first person pronoun *I* in Linguistics has been proven to surpass by far that of Literature, we find that some 54% (168 occurrences) of all cases of authorial identity occurred in Linguistics and 46% (148 occurrences) in Literature, so on the basis of these data, we may assert that *I* is most commonly used in Linguistics, but we cannot claim that first person pronouns are much more representative of only one discipline over the other, for the results are quite balanced.

As regards the varieties of English compared, the general conclusion we may draw from the data is that North American authors seem to be a bit more willing, as it were, to use first person singular pronouns than their British counterparts, who conform to a more conservative stance. So, this assumption, along with the fact that Linguistics appears to favor *I* over *we,* would explain why British linguists employ first person singular pronouns sparingly, often leaning towards the use of *we*, while in Literature plural forms seem to be preferred in both varieties. In any case, it is essential to mention that the use of *I* on the part of the British writers is remarkably high in the two disciplines. All things considered, it would be interesting to conduct the same type of research in the near future to see whether the British will come to use first person singular pronouns with the same frequency as North Americans do. Such being the case,

it may be inferred that the groundbreaking tendency of using first person pronouns in written academic English would be of North American influence.

All in all, it is therefore important for non-native English writers to bear in mind to whom, in which variety, and about what we are writing so as to comply with the current trends as faithfully as possible.

As far as rhetorical functions are concerned, out of a total of 311 instances of the first person pronoun used, 109 fall into the category of *"I as the representative",* which comes as no surprise, since it is the function involving the lowest risk. Moreover, this role is mostly found in Literature published articles, presumably because in the humanities, the inclusion of the reader is usually more marked, and thus the writer-reader relationship becomes more salient. At the other side of the ranking we find "*I as the opinion-holder*" and "*I* as the originator". Giving an opinion or, what is more, stating new claims are the most powerful and authorship-laden roles, typically presented at the close of the RA. In consequence, we might expect that authors refrain themselves from making statements heedlessly, and earmark them for the right time and the right place. Also worthy of mention is the second most common function or "*I* as the recounter*",* used almost only by North American linguists and realized in its vast majority as *I*. As commented above, this panorama can be ascribed to the fact that Linguistics RAs seem to adhere to a highly conventionalized macrostructure where a *Methodology* section is a must, and also to the fact that North American writers seem to opt for first person singular pronouns.

In terms of distribution, we have seen that personal pronouns were present in all five sections, but two of them received special attention, namely, the *Methodology* and the *Results/Discussion* sections. Certainly, in accordance with previous research (Harwood 2005; Ivanic 2001; John 2009; Mur 2007; Thonney 2013), it is in these two parts of the RA that the author can/should most project an authoritative self both to take credit for gathering and analyzing data and, most importantly, to draw their own conclusions.

8.   Conclusion and pedagogical implications

On balance, previous research has already shown that the impersonality and objectivity that once characterized academic writing is no longer held, at least at the same level. Although the concreteness and small size of the corpus analyzed here calls for more investigation that corroborates the outcomes extracted, I can tentatively conclude that English academic writing is not the invariably anonymous prose it is often depicted to be, but occasionally exhibits substantial differences across disciplines. On the basis that expert prose is a *bona fide* resource on which make generalizations about first person pronouns usage, I browsed 16 RAs for real occurrences of *I*, and studied their frequency, rhetorical functions and distribution along each paper, establishing a comparison between Linguistics and Literature, American and British English. The results obtained show that *I* was highly used in both pairs, especially in Linguistics and American English. Concerning functions, the most frequently used roles were those involving plural forms (and so including the reader), for they are less threatening, and also the use of *I* to take credit for the writer's research process. Reversely, some of the least used were those that demand a genuine contribution from the author. With respect to the spatial disposition, all sections were susceptible to embrace first person pronouns, but the *Method* (in Linguistics) and the *Results/Discussion* sections seem to stimulate their appearance, for these places best let the authorial voice out. It is crucial for would-be graduates to be conscious of these dissimilarities, since these will help them use discipline-specific conventions competently as well as develop their writing skills. As heretical as these notions might appear to those scholars with deeply held beliefs about the essence of academic prose, I argue that new times bring about new necessities and, thereby, new habits.

The intentional focus of this research project was to better understand to what extent a writer can intrude into the academic text by using first person pronouns. However, the personal ambition of wishing to contribute in a small way to the writing habits at university made me go beyond and provide a comparative study of the two main branches of knowledge operating in the English Studies Degree. For a better pedagogical application, however, it would also be interesting to examine the academic writing of Spanish scholars in comparison with that of English experts. That way we could ascertain the value that Spanish scholars give to a collective identity, and whether there exists cross-linguistic influence when it comes to writing in English. Due to space

and time constraints, this study was not carried out, and thereby it remains a subject for future research.

Having all these factors in mind might help teachers bring into line a suitable pedagogical approach in relation to self-mention. Successful academic writing rests on convenient language selections, but teachers often find difficulties with language proficiency to be of a higher priority than those that elaborate on the nature of the writer's uniqueness. I consider that an L2 writing pedagogy that is mindful of the student's own identity may have a beneficial effect on the composition of their texts. Forging an identity in an unknown and strict community helps raise critical awareness and prevents students from assuming that academic discourse conventions are a set of rigidly impersonal rules. To this end, Hyland (2002b) proposes some approaches such as observing and evaluating the student's own writing habits, analyzing expert practices, classifying each instance of first person pronouns in terms of rhetorical functions, etc. On her part, John (2009) defends that it is in the revision process of the final dissertation where the supervisor can gradually motivate the emergence of the writers' *persona*. Certainly, the TFG is a high stake genre for undergraduates, and it is not the aim of this dissertation to expect an immaculately expert-like writing from us, but to bring us closer to expressing our own voice. Considering everything, the election is now left in your hands: for those of you belonging to Linguistics, it is a question of deciding between *I* and *it*; for those who are made for Literature, it is "to be or not to be". That is the question.

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Appendix 1. List of research articles in the corpus

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