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ACADEMIC WRITING: THE ROLE OF FIRST PERSON PRONOUNS IN READER-WRITER RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract: This article describes the significance of the development of an appropriate relationship between writers and their readers “as the demonstration of absolute truth, empirical evidence, or flawless logic” (Hyland, 2001). According to a number of studies, in order to create an academically convincing identity, writers use a variety of devices in their discourse such as self-mention, hedges and boosters, evaluative commentary, interpersonal meta-discourse, theme selections and stance markers. One of the ways to maintain reader-writer interaction is referring to readers as the participants of the discourse by using inclusive or second person pronouns, interjections, questions, directives and references to shared knowledge. According to Hyland (2001), the usage of inclusive pronouns in the 240 research articles investigated by him comprises 36.5 % of the total features leaving behind imperatives, obligation modal verbs, indefinite pronouns, knowledge references, rhetorical questions, second person pronouns, asides, real questions, and the structure “it is (adjective) to do”. First person pronoun *we* performs a number of important functions in academic prose, for example, it can help the writer to engage readers in academic discourse, address the reader “from a position of confidence”, guide readers “through an argument”, and structure the information within a written text. Nevertheless, first person exclusive pronoun *I* rather than inclusive *we* would be more appropriate in some cases in order to leave an opportunity to the readers to decide whether or not they agree with the view. Hence, it is crucial to choose a pronoun with the appropriate function in each particular case.

Keywords: inclusive pronoun, exclusive pronoun, reader-writer relationship, discourse

АКАДЕМИЯЛЫҚ ЖАЗБА: ОҚЫРМАН МЕН ЖАЗУШЫНЫҢ ҚАРЫМ- ҚАТЫНАСЫНДАҒЫ АЛҒАШҚЫ ТҮЛҒАНЫҢ ЕСІМІ

Аңдатпа: Бұл мақалада жазушылар мен олардың оқырмандары арасындағы «абсолюттік ақиқатты, эмпирикалық дәлелдемелерді немесе мінсіз логиканы көрсету ретінде» (Хайленд, 2001) арасындағы тиісті қарым-қатынастың маңыздылығын сипаттайды. Бірқатар зерттеулерге сүйенсек, жазушылар академиялық тұрғыдан айқын сенімділікті қалыптастыру үшін өзіңе сілтеме жасау, хеджирлеу және көтермелеу, бағалаушы түсініктеме, тұлғааралық мета-дискурс, тақырыптық таңдаулар мен тұрақтылық маркерлері сияқты өздерінің дискурстарында түрлі құралдарды пайдаланады. Оқырман-жазушы өзара қарым-қатынасын орнатудың бір түрі дискурстың инклюзивті немесе екінші адам есімдіктерін, ортақтықтарды, сұрақтарды, директиваларды және жалпы білімге сілтемелерді пайдалану. Хайлендтің (2001) мәліметтері бойынша, зерттеген мақалалардың 240-ында инклюзивті есімдіктерді пайдалану императивтер, міндетті модальдық етістіктер, белгісіз есімдіктер, білімге сілтеме, риторикалық сұрақтар, екінші адам есімдіктер, шегіну, нақты сұрақтар және «Бұл жасау (сын есім)» құрылымы сияқты жалпы қолданылатын әдістердің 36,5% құрайды. Бірінші адамның есімдігі *біз* академиялық прозадағы бірқатар маңызды функцияларды орындайды, мысалы, жазушы оқырманға академиялық дискурсқа қатысуға көмектеседі, оқырманға «сенімділік орнынан» бағыттайды, оқырманды «аргумент арқылы» бағыттайды және ақпаратты жазбаға

мәтінмен құрастырады. Дегенмен, *біз* инклюзивті есімдігінен гөрі, бірінші адамның *мен* эксклюзивті есімдігі, оқырмандарға жазушының көзқарасымен келісе ме, жоқ па деген мәселені шешуге мүмкіндік беру үшін кейбір жағдайларда қолайлы болар еді. Сондықтан, әр нақты жағдайда есімдікті оның функциясына байланысты таңдау өте маңызды.

Түйінді сөздер: инклюзивті есім, эксклюзивті есім, оқырман мен жазушы арасындағы қарым-қатынас, дискурс

АКАДЕМИЧЕСКОЕ ПИСЬМО: РОЛЬ МЕСТОИМЕНИЙ ПЕРВОГО ЛИЦА В ОТНОШЕНИЯХ ЧИТАТЕЛЯ И ПИСАТЕЛЯ

Аннотация: В данной статье описывается важность развития соответствующих отношений между писателями и их читателями «как демонстрация абсолютной истины, эмпирических доказательств или безупречной логики» (Хайленд, 2001). Согласно ряду исследований, чтобы создать академически убедительную идентичность, авторы используют различные приемы в своем дискурсе, такие как упоминание себя, хеджирование и бустеры, оценочный комментарий, межличностный метадискурс, выбор темы и маркеры позиции. Одним из способов поддержания взаимодействия читателя и писателя является обращение к читателям как к участникам дискурса, чему способствуют включительные местоимения или местоимения второго лица, междометия, вопросы, директивы и ссылки на общие знания. Согласно Хайленду (2001), использование включительных местоимений в 240 исследованных им статьях составляет 36,5% от общего числа использованных приемов, таких как императивы, обязательные модальные глаголы, неопределенные местоимения, ссылки на знания, риторические вопросы, местоимения второго лица, отступления, настоящие вопросы, и структура «Это (наречие) сделать». Местоимение первого лица *мы* выполняет ряд важных функций в академической прозе, например, оно может помочь писателю вовлечь читателей в академический дискурс, обратиться к читателю «с позиции доверия», вести читателя «через аргумент» и структурировать информацию в письменном тексте. Тем не менее, эксклюзивное местоимение *я* в некоторых случаях было бы более уместным по сравнению с инклюзивным *мы*, чтобы предоставить читателям возможность решить, согласны ли они с точкой зрения писателя или нет. Следовательно, очень важно выбрать местоимение с соответствующей функцией в каждом конкретном случае.

Ключевые слова: инклюзивное местоимение, эксклюзивное местоимение, отношения между читателем и писателем, дискурс

INTRODUCTION

With the development of science, the ability of researchers to write effectively has become essentially important. This is because their research and the results of the research should not only be presented in a proper academic style but should also be persuasive.

A number of studies have shown that in order to create an academically convincing identity, writers use a variety of devices in their discourse such as self-mention, hedges and boosters, evaluative commentary, interpersonal meta-discourse, theme selections and stance markers. However, according to Hyland (2001), while most of the devices are mainly directed at revealing the writer's positions, less attention is given to the ways readers are engaged into the

dialogue. Nevertheless, it is argued that the text oriented solely on the writer rather than the writer and the reader together may cause a lack of trust, lack of interest and lack of attention amongst the audience. Contrariwise, once the reader feels that he or she is involved in discussion, for example, asked questions, this piece of academic writing is likely to achieve its main objective, i.e. to convince the reader of the writer's views and claim for the originality, significance and trustworthiness of the work. Thus, it is significant to develop "an appropriate relationship with his or her readers as the demonstration of absolute truth, empirical evidence, or flawless logic" (Hyland, 2001).

BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE READER

Predicting the potential readers, their interests and needs can help to achieve interaction between the reader and the writer in academic discourse. However, since academic texts may be read by diverse audiences, for example, “specialists, students, practitioners, lay people, and interested members of the discipline”, it is not always possible to predict the potential audience (Hyland, 2001). Nevertheless, in order to build “an appropriate relationship” with their readers, writers have to count on readers’ previous knowledge of the subject and other related works in the field, and their capability to comprehend the “intertextuality between texts” (Hyland, 2001).

One of the ways to maintain reader-writer interaction is referring to readers as the participants of the discourse by using inclusive or second person pronouns, interjections, questions, directives and references to shared knowledge (Hyland, 2001).

In one of his studies, Professor Ken Hyland (2001) investigates 240 research articles in eight different disciplines and conducts interviews with experienced researchers from the same fields in order to examine the ways readers are positioned in the published academic texts and identify the features researchers prefer to use to address their audience.

The data analysis shows that the usage of inclusive pronouns in the selected research articles comprises 36.5 % of the total features, leaving behind imperatives (21.3 %), obligation modal verbs (9.4 %), indefinite pronouns (9.2 %), knowledge references (8.2 %), rhetorical questions (6.6%), second person pronouns (3.4%), asides (1.9%), real questions (1.9 %), and the structure *it is (adjective) to do* (1.6%). Thus, the research findings demonstrate that one of the most common reader-oriented features exploited in academic writing is inclusive personal pronouns.

FIRST PERSON PRONOUNS

It is claimed that first person inclusive pronoun *we* is most helpful in engaging readers

in academic discourse, and, therefore, most often selected by writers whereas pronoun *you* appears to be a rarely used reader feature (Hyland, 2001). But why does this happen? Hyland (2001) suggests that this might be because writers deliberately attempt to avoid the usage of *you* so as to minimize “any implication that the writer and reader are not closely linked as members of the same disciplinary community”. In the meanwhile, inclusive pronoun *we* invites the readers into discussion and makes them the participants of the debate.

Pronoun *we* performs a number of important functions in academic prose. Particularly, Hyland (2001) names such functions as “appeal to scholarly solidarity”, addressing the reader “from a position of confidence”, and “guiding readers through an argument”. Some of the researchers interviewed by Hyland claim that although it is not seen as a specific strategy, they use *we* in their writing in order to engage readers, “lead readers along with me”, locate the writer in a network, and show that “you are just doing and thinking what they might do and think”.

Harwood (2005) mentions that first person pronouns *I* and *we* can help the writer to structure the information within a written text by, for example, enumerating some significant points, express personal views, explain employed methods (e.g. in a research article), acknowledge funding individuals or organizations and etc.

The choice of personal pronouns in academic writing can also demonstrate how writers build their relationship with the audience and may help to control the level of authorial presence in an academic text. Hence, it is crucial to choose a pronoun with the appropriate function in each particular case.

While some uses of *I* and *we* “carry much greater threat to face”, and, therefore, expose the writer “to attack by the audience”, inclusive pronouns are argued to be “low-risk examples of intervention” from the side of the writer (Harwood, 2005).

Before looking into the usage of inclusive pronoun *we* in detail, we have to mention the

difference between the types of first person pronoun *we*. The personal pronoun *we* can be inclusive or exclusive. While inclusive pronoun *we* involves both the writer and the reader, exclusive pronoun *we* implies the writer or writers only. Being aware of their difference, we also need to mention that, comparing to some other languages, there is no formal differentiation between exclusive and inclusive *we* in English. The exception is the imperative *let's* which is inclusive. However, *let us* is mostly exclusive. While this lack of formal differentiation can harden the analysis of academic prose, researchers claim that it can be used by writers in a beneficial way. Harwood (2005) explains that possibility to subtly move from inclusive to exclusive uses of personal pronoun, and vice versa, sometimes even in the same sentence, can help to reach certain effects, which makes “the inclusive/ exclusive ambivalence <...> politically advantageous for the writer”. For instance, the phrase *We can see* includes both the reader and the writer. However, the phrase *We can conclude* implies the writer as the only participant because the writer alone, not the reader, can give a conclusion. Yet this movement between exclusive and inclusive functions can occur within the same sentence. In fact, *we* in the phrase *We can conclude* is exclusive, but it is obvious that researchers sometimes intentionally choose to use personal pronoun *we* rather than *I* to make the reader feel involved. Harwood (2005) points out that “this simulated involvement will hopefully make the reader more receptive to the writer’s claims for rhetorical effect”.

The employment of inclusive pronoun *we* may have some positive effects on academic prose. First, the reader’s feeling of involvement into an academic dialogue which comes from the use of inclusive pronoun *we* can reveal writer’s delicate and thoughtful attitude towards his or her readers and set a friendly and polite tone within the writing (e.g. *As we can see, ...*). This also demonstrates that the academic debate is being constructed by the efforts of both the reader and the writer (Wales, 1980). Second, since inclusive *we* refers to both the reader and the writer, it helps to establish the presence of the author in the text

on the one hand, and, engage the reader into the discourse on the other. Third, once the message is transmitted (with the help of inclusive pronoun *we*) that the writer and the reader “think alike”, and then accepted by the readership, the writer gets an opportunity to “speak on the audience’s behalf” (Harwood, 2005).

According to Hyland (2001), writers can use inclusive personal pronouns to add a positively polite element to their written discourse by responding to imaginary questions and objections from the imaginary audience. By doing so, apart from demonstrating polite attitude to the readership, writers also pursue the aim to make their texts more convincing for the readers. Thus, they make all efforts to persuade readers of their views and explain their hypotheses.

In the previous paragraph we regarded personal pronouns as positive politeness devices. However, in some cases they can also be used as negative politeness devices. For instance, inclusive pronoun *we* can sometimes be employed for its effect to reduce the writer’s responsibility “for an imperfect state of affairs” (Harwood, 2005). This appears to be a necessary measure if there are, for example, certain limitations to mention or a lack of knowledge or a lack of understanding on the part of the writer (e.g. *We have not fully understood...*). In this case, as Harwood (2005) claims “inclusive *we* spreads any culpability for the lack of knowledge across the entire discourse community”.

Inclusive pronouns also serve as negative politeness devices while making a criticism so that they could minimize the face-threatening act (FTA) to the readership. According to Harwood (2005), writers attempt to reduce the threat in order to secure ratification for their claims.

One of the ways to mitigate the FTA is avoiding specificity of the criticism. Myers (1989) argues that mentioning specific researchers in a criticism would increase face-threatening risks. Although inclusive pronoun *we* is considered to be a relevant way to minimize the risks, researchers suggest that using first person exclusive pronoun *I* rather than inclusive *we* (e.g. *I think..., I feel...*) would be more appropriate in some cases (see, for example, Markkanen and

Schröder, 1992) because by using *I* the writer who has a certain view leaves an opportunity to the readers to decide whether or not they agree with the view (Harwood, 2005). The use of *we* in these cases can be regarded as more face-threatening as it considers the reader's attitude towards the discussed issue equivalent to that of the writer.

In one of his corpus-based studies, Harwood (2005) investigates forty research articles in order to examine how academic writers use the personal pronouns *I* and *we* in their discourse. Because multiple-authored articles cannot use the personal pronoun *I* due to the number of authors, for this research only single-authored articles were chosen to ensure the possibility of the use of both first person pronouns *I* and *we*. The results of the research show that almost all instances of *we* in the selected research articles from soft disciplines such as Business and Management and Economics are inclusive rather than exclusive whereas in hard disciplines such as Physics and Computing Science most

of the instances of *we* are exclusive. This appears to occur because writers from soft fields mostly prefer using *I* rather than *we* to refer to themselves. At the same time, writers from hard disciplines choose to use exclusive *we* rather than *I* to refer to themselves. As a result, first person pronoun *I* is rarely used in the hard disciplines.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, researchers claim that many writers from both soft and hard disciplines tend to move between exclusive and inclusive first person pronouns in their academic prose. While exclusive pronouns *I* and *we* are often used to present novelty, inclusive personal pronoun *we* may help to involve the readership into the reader-writer dialogue and, thus, make the academic texts more persuasive. *We* can also be employed in order to share responsibility with the audience for “an imperfect state of affairs” (Harwood, 2005).

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