

'I suggest that we need more research' Personal reference in linguistics journal articles*

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Abstract

The field of English for Academic Purposes (henceforth EAP) "seeks to provide insights into the structures and meanings of academic texts, into the demands placed by academic contexts on communicative behaviours, and into the pedagogic practices by which these behaviours can be developed" (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002: 3). This study, situated within the fields of pragmatics and EAP, investigates the use of personal reference in the academic discipline of Linguistics.

The corpus used in this study consists of 15 linguistics journal articles, including both research and review articles. In this paper I will focus on one feature, namely personal reference. First person singular and first person plural pronouns were coded manually according to their semantic reference and the pragmatic functions they perform.

The main question that I will attempt to address is: What are the semantic referents and the pragmatic functions performed by personal reference in the journal articles examined for this study? A close qualitative study of the pragmatic functions of first person singular pronoun, and *inclusive* or *exclusive we* reveals how writers express their stance and the ways in which they negotiate their relationship with their material and their audience. The findings suggest that the semantic references of first person plural are often ambiguous and that expert writers are surprisingly inconsistent in their use of personal reference. Thus, particular attention will be given to the discussion of the functions of ambiguous references, shifts between first person singular and first person plural inclusive and exclusive references, and, finally, the concept of multifunctionality (Halliday & Hasan 1989, Hyland 2005) - issues relatively neglected in the literature.

* The findings presented in this paper are part of a larger cross-cultural study of Greek-speaking and English-speaking expert linguists' writing. However, this paper only discusses the analysis of English-speaking writers' corpus.

1. Introduction

The role of English as a lingua franca for the dissemination of research in science, industry and technology has had, as Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) suggest, “an enormous impact on the educational experiences of vast numbers of students around the world” (ibid.: xiii). For these students, fluency in the norms of academic discourse, which are dominant in the English-speaking world, determines to a great extent the level of their performance. Indeed, competence in EAP is a prerequisite not only for students, but also for academics who want to have their work published in international journals, in order to become fully-fledged members of the academic community. As a result of this, the need for more EAP pre- and in-session courses based on specialised teaching has increased.

Although there have been considerable changes in the materials and the methods used in EAP courses (see Jordan, 2002), there is demand for more research based on real empirical data, which explores the practices of students or expert writers. The view that academic writing is purely objective, impersonal and informational, which is often reflected in EAP materials, has been criticised by a number of researchers (e.g. Bazerman, 1988; Fløttum *et al.*, 2006; Fortanet, 2004; Harwood, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Hyland, 2001; Myers, 1989, 1990; Swales, 1990; Vassileva, 1998, 2001). Recent research based on empirical evidence has proved that the research article (henceforth RA) does not only fulfil what Brown & Yule (1983) refer to as the transactional function¹. By now, the view of academic writing as embodying interaction among writers, readers and the academic community as a whole has been established (Hyland, 2001, 2005).

This paper is hoping to contribute to this body of research by examining interpersonal aspects in experts’ research articles in the discipline of Linguistics. The linguistic feature under examination for this study is personal reference.² The scope of this paper is twofold: on the one hand it seeks to present results regarding the semantic reference and the pragmatic functions of personal references in the corpus under examination,³ and on the other, to explore 3 problematic issues regarding the use of personal reference in academic writing, namely:

- Ambiguous semantic references of *we*.
- The concept of multifunctionality
- Shifts between first person singular and first person plural inclusive and exclusive references.

¹ According to Brown & Yule (1983: 1) the transactional function can be described as the function in which language serves the purpose of content expression, whereas the interactional function deals with the expression of social relations and personal attitudes.

² The term *personal reference* has been chosen, as the particular functional category is realised linguistically in various ways in different languages. For example, in Greek, personal reference is mainly realised in the verb inflection (for more details see Vladimirova, forthcoming). The term *personal pronouns* has been used with reference to the English corpus. However, as in this paper I am only presenting data from the English corpus, the terms *personal reference* and *personal pronouns* will be used interchangeably.

³ Unless otherwise specified, whenever I refer to ‘corpus’ I mean the English corpus used for the present paper, not the total corpus used for the wider cross-cultural study.

2. Personal reference in academic discourse: Previous studies

Personal pronouns have been acknowledged as one of the main means used by writers in order to express their stance, to communicate with their readers and to establish their relations with the academic community of which they are, or they aspire to be, members. Previous studies on personal reference in academic writing have focused on the semantic referents and pragmatic functions of *I* and *we*.

The departure point for this line of research has been Round's (1987) influential study of personal reference use in spoken academic discourse. Exploring the pragmatic functions of personal pronouns and identifying the semantic referents of first person plural have been the two main foci of research in the literature so far. Several functional taxonomies have been proposed as a basis for the categorisation of mainly the first person singular and first person plural pronouns (Fortanet, 2004; Harwood, 2005a; Harwood 2005b; Harwood 2005c; Hyland, 2002; Kuo, 1999; Rounds, 1987; Tang & John, 1999; Vassileva, 1998).

2.1 Semantic references of *we*

Regarding the semantic references of *we*, most researchers have distinguished between two main categories; inclusive and exclusive *we*. Exclusive *we* may be defined as the writer's use of first person plural to refer to himself/ herself, and inclusive *we* as collectively referring to the writer, the readers and the academic community as a whole. Fortanet (2004) and Kuo (1999) have created the most detailed taxonomies that capture the various references of the first person plural.

Biber *et al.* (1999: 329) suggest that the "meaning of the first person plural is often vague". Similarly, Wales (1996: 163) points out that the interpretation of the discourse referents of *we*, which are seemingly limitless, depends upon "the particular context of use and the inferences to be drawn on the basis of the mutual knowledge of the speaker and interpreter". It seems that the issue of ambiguity in the semantic mapping of personal reference has been largely neglected in the literature, and it is not reflected in the taxonomies that have been proposed so far, apart from Kuo's (1999) taxonomy. Although both Fortanet (2004) and Kuo (1999) touch upon this problematic issue, they do not discuss it further. Harwood (2005c: 345) is the only researcher who takes this issue further by drawing attention to the fact that the fuzzy distinction between the inclusive and exclusive references of pronouns can be strategic.

2.2 Pragmatic functions of personal reference

Most taxonomies proposed for the pragmatic functions of personal reference revolve around the core issue of authorial presence and the relationship of the author with her/his readers and the academic community (e.g. Harwood, 2005c; Hyland, 2002a; Tang & John, 1999). Other studies focus only on one type of pragmatic function, which they explore in detail (see for example Harwood (2005a) for a discussion on the methodological *I*, and Hyland (2001) for an analysis of self-promotion). Tang & John's

(1999) study, which is based on students' use of pronouns, focuses on the degree of authorial presence in their writings. The discourse functions that they identify range from the least face-threatening *I as representative* to the most powerful *I as originator*, which is used by students very rarely. Hyland (2002a), based on a students' and an experts' corpus, identified similar categories such as: *stating a purpose, explaining a procedure, stating results/claims, expressing self-benefits, elaborating an argument*, which he then used for the categorisation of pronouns and the quantitative analysis of his results. Harwood (2005c) elaborates on the functions previously proposed in the literature by adding functions which capture the subtle effects that an author can create, such as: *describing or critiquing disciplinary practices, further research and state-of-the-art-concerns*, as well as the use of shifts between inclusive and exclusive pronouns, an issue which I am going to explore in detail in this paper.

Although previous studies on personal reference in academic writing have identified and examined in detail the referential possibilities and the wide range of pragmatic functions that personal pronouns perform, there are still certain issues that need to be explored further. This paper is hoping to contribute to the body of literature by looking at issues which have been relatively neglected: ambiguity, multifunctionality and shifts among different types of pronouns. The next section discusses the methodology used in the present study.

3. Methodology

3.1 The text corpus

The corpus used for the present study comprises 15 articles by native English-speaking writers (approximately 130,700 words; see Appendix). I acknowledge that the term 'native' is highly problematic. The 'nativeness' of the writers was not always something that could be easily tracked down. Therefore, the writers' affiliation and background was used as a guide. However, as Martín Martín (2004) mentions, even if the writers were not originally from an English-speaking background, the fact that their work had been accepted for publication in international journals means that they conform to the rhetorical traditions of the English-speaking academic community. Table 1 below outlines the criteria used for the selection of papers.⁴

Table 1: Criteria for the selection of papers

Criteria	Dataset
Language	English
Context of production	International context
Genre	JA (research and review articles)
Number of papers	15
Discipline	Linguistics
Year of publication	1990-2004
Authorship	Single-authored. English-speaking (native)

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the criteria used for the selection of papers see Vladimirov (forthcoming).

The articles selected are both review and research articles, published between 1997 and 2004 in leading international journals, and they all belong to the discipline of Linguistics. Following Becher's (2001) taxonomy of disciplines, linguistics has been chosen as a field that stands between pure science and humanities. The choice of linguistics articles was also motivated by the fact that relatively little attention has been given to the analysis of writing in the social sciences, as opposed to scientific writing, which has been studied in detail (e.g. Hyland, 1998; Koutsantoni, 2004; Lindeberg, 2004; Myers, 1989; Salager-Meyer, 1994; Varttala, 1999). Every effort was made to make the sample representative of different sub-fields within linguistics. Therefore, the data were drawn from a number of leading journals in the field: *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Applied Linguistics*, *Discourse and Society*, *Journal of Linguistics*, *Lingua*, *Language and Education*, *Linguistic Inquiry*, *Language and Communication*. The articles were studied in their entirety. No co-authored texts were included in the corpus, as one of the main foci of this study is the detailed examination of *editorial we* (see section 4.2).

3.2 Procedures

The study is part of a larger corpus-based cross-cultural study of personal reference, which used both quantitative and qualitative methods. However, this paper employs qualitative methods, namely, close contextual analysis. The term 'contextual' will be defined and discussed in detail in the following section. In Stage 1 of the analysis I coded the results according to their semantic referents and in Stage 2 I examined them according to their pragmatic functions.

4. Co-text, context, text: Criteria for the codification of personal reference

The present section deals with the criteria employed for the classification of my results into the categories which are discussed in sections 4.1 and 4.2. Context, which is a highly elusive notion (e.g. Duranti & Goodwin, 1992), was the most salient factor during the process of this coding. As Levinson (1983) has observed, the phenomenon of deixis and the notion of context are inextricably related: "The single most obvious way in which the relationship between language and context is reflected in the structures of languages themselves, is through the phenomenon of deixis" (Levinson 1983: 54).

Duranti & Goodwin (1992) use the term 'focal event' to identify the phenomenon being contextualised, and they envisage context much the same way as Goffman (1974) does; as a frame that surrounds this event and provides resources for its appropriate interpretation. The above view of context is particularly relevant to this study. In our case, however, pronominal reference is the focal point and the context surrounding it is not a homogeneous entity, but it comprises a number of different layers. Therefore, rather than engaging in a vain effort to define 'context', it seems more feasible for this study to break it down to more manageable and possibly easily definable components. Context (for the purposes of this study) may be viewed as a

multidimensional phenomenon, consisting of different levels, hierarchically organised, rather than as a concrete, strictly defined one-dimensional phenomenon.

The categorisation process starts from the first level, the immediate co-text. Whenever one level of context does not suffice for the interpretation of a pronominal reference and its classification, I move on to the next levels (the wider co-text, the context of situation and the context of culture⁵) which might provide more hints. Finally, cases where even the cultural context was not helpful enough for the categorisation of the data were classified as ambiguous. The different levels of context do not function separately one from the other; they interact, they may overlap, and they may certainly function simultaneously. The analyst will often have to take into consideration several or even all of the levels of context in order to arrive at a particular interpretation, which in our case would be related to the semantic reference of a deictic expression. At this point, I also need to note that by no means am I implying that this methodology necessarily reflects how people process context. This methodology may only be employed as a useful tool for the interpretation of a particular occurrence of pronominal reference.

4.1 Coding of first person singular pronoun⁶

The referents of *I* were not a contentious issue, as they were obviously referring to the writer himself/herself. According to Fasulo & Zucchermaglio (2002: 1122) "the first person singular pronoun, 'I' is in principle the least ambiguous among pronouns from a grammatical point of view: indeed it refers only to one person (unlike *we*, whose members could be vague, and include or not include listeners) and does not risk misidentification".

After a preliminary analysis of a sample from my data, I created the following categories for first person singular pronominal reference:

- *I as researcher*
- *I indefinite*
- *I biographical*
- *I in acknowledgements*

4.1.1 *I as researcher*

This can be defined as the expression of the author's role in the text as the person undertaking the study reported in the journal article, involving different degrees of agency. This is the most overt expression of the researcher's identity and it may include the expression of his/her claims, and the description of his/her arguments, as in (1):

- (1) **My** own position is that **I** would like to see more reference to fathers as central (SUN 268).

⁵ For more details regarding the levels of context see Vladimirou (forthcoming).

⁶ For a detailed discussion of the analytical framework devised for this study, see Vladimirou (forthcoming).

This is the most common category of first person singular pronoun usage found in my data. This type of authorial *I* is by no means a homogeneous entity, as it encapsulates all possible degrees of authorial presence. It ranges from the writer's display of a strong authorial identity to cases where the writer simply guides the reader through the course of his/her work and, therefore, it also has the function of signposting. *I as a researcher* roughly corresponds to three of Tang & John's (1999) categories: *I as guide*, *I as architect* and *I as opinion-holder* and *originator*.

4.1.2 *I indefinite*

This use of *I* can be defined as a generic reference to people. This category corresponds to Tang and John's (1999) *I as representative*. Although according to Tang & John (1999) this type of reference is usually realised by use of the plural *we*, I had examples in my data in which the first singular referred to people in general and could be substituted by *one*. The following example (2) illustrates how the *indefinite I* was used in my data:

- (2) Just as **I** have purchased several different coloured sweaters from which **I** chose one to wear each day (quite randomly, **I** believe, although, this requires systematic study!) (EL 470).⁷

4.1.3 *I biographical*

This category is defined as the expression of a writer's role as a person, not as a researcher. It seems that in the previously proposed typologies of pronouns in academic writing (e.g. Tang & John 1999) the expression of identity of the author not as a researcher or member of the academic community, but as a person, has been ignored. Although the genre under examination determines that, in the majority of cases, the pronoun *I* will express the identity of the writer as a researcher, in my data we do find instances of what I have termed *biographical I*, which refers to the author as a person. Example (3) below is illustrative of this category:

- (3) **I became a mother** some 5 years ago, and hence found myself in a good position to conduct a small-scale study of what parentcraft literature has to say to, and about, fathers and mothers (SUN 251).

4.1.4 *I acknowledgements*

Although the expression of gratitude from the writer is, or rather has become, part of the *I as a researcher* identity, it seems that *I in acknowledgements* bears a somehow unique status, standing between *I as a researcher* and *personal I*. This is actually the expression of the personal, social as well as the scholarly self of the writer. This category, I think, deserves to be treated separately, as it constitutes one of the strongest expressions of the interpersonal function in academic writing, which is the focus of this study. As Hyland (2003: 244) suggests, "acknowledgements are much more than a simple

⁷ Contextual note: this is an example that the writer provides, in order to illustrate his point.

catalogue of indebtedness. They offer insights into the persona of the writer, the patterns of engagement that define collaboration and interdependence among scholars, and the practices of expectation and etiquette that are involved". The instances of *I* belonging to the present category occurred at the beginning, or sometimes at the end of journal articles, often as a separate note. They were unambiguous and therefore easily recognised and codified and they usually took the following form:

- (4) **I would like to take the opportunity to express my sincere appreciation** to Martin Hewings, Karen Hodder, Dan Malt and Peter Skehan for their support and valuable comments. **I would also like to thank** the anonymous reviewers for their constructive suggestions (LIT 258).

4.2 Coding of first person plural pronoun

The vagueness associated with first person plural reference has been pointed out before in the literature (e.g. Biber *et al.* 1999; Mühlausler & Harre 1990). As Mühlausler & Harre (1990: 169) point out, "simplistic statements such as that *we* stands for a group of people including the speaker (Leech & Svartvik 1978: 57) are not borne out in all instances". This vagueness has led these authors to state that it is usually left to the addressee to infer who is included in the reference (Biber *et al.*, 1999). Following Fortanet (2004), Inigo-Mora (2004) and Kuo (1999), I have coded *we* according to its semantic referents. The two main categories that were identified are the following:

- '*we*'-inclusive
- '*we*'- exclusive

These categories were further divided in the following sub-categories:

4.2.1 Exclusive *we*: *We for I*

This type of pronominal reference may be defined as the writer's exclusive use of first person plural in order to refer to himself/ herself:

- (5) Here, and throughout, **we** use 'grammar' in the traditional technical sense which includes morphology (the structure of words) and syntax (the uses of words as and in sentences) but NOT phonology (HOC 151).

The choice of verb in example 5 determines that it is primarily, if not exclusively, the author who assumes responsibility for the actions described in the text, for the claims being made, or the ideas that are being put forward. The instances of *we* classified under *we for I* vary in terms of the author's exclusive involvement. This reminds us that although most of the first person pronoun instances classified as *we for I* were rather clear cut, the categories of this taxonomy are relational. If it was doubtful whether the involvement of the writer exclusively or the writer and the reader was prioritised the particular instance was classified as ambiguous (see section 5).

4.2.2 *Exclusive we: Writer and other people*

This type of exclusive *we* includes the writer and another group of people (who may belong to the academic community), however it excludes the readers and the academic community as a whole.

- (6) A vital clue to the answer is to be found in the classroom. When, seven decades ago, **I started** learning Latin (**my** first foreign language). **I was taught** to PARSE and CONSTRUE. (...)

Also, in some cases only parsing - that is, identification - was necessary: if **we recognized** the whole phrase *de bello Gallico* from earlier exposure, **we didn't have to dismember it** and deal separately with its constituents. Be that as it may, when everything in a sentence had been parsed and all had been construed, **we knew** what the sentence meant. (The meaning might itself be turgid or incomprehensible, but that is quite another matter.) Why did **our** Latin teacher **make us** parse and construe?

Because that is how **we understand**. In the elementary classroom **we perform** these operations slowly, laboriously, and with the assistance - or hindrance! - of a complicated technical terminology.

(HOC 164)

The immediate co-text of these instances of personal reference were usually not adequate for me to determine how they could be classified. Usually, the wider co-text (at the level of the paragraph) and/or the individual text had to be taken into consideration as cues. In the following examples, contextual cues (marked in bold) make it obvious that the author is referring to himself and a specific group of people, excluding the audience. Interestingly, in example 6, the first 5 instances of first person plural are classified as *we-writer and others*, whereas the rest as *generic/indefinite we*, as they refer to people in general.

4.2.3 *Inclusive we: We-writer and audience*

We-writer and audience may be defined as the type of reference which includes the writer of the journal article under examination and the immediate readership of the text:

- (7) Transcriptions of recorded oral narratives exhibit these discourse marker functions and related ones for both *well* and *but*, as **we will see** below (NOR 850).

This category of personal reference was found to collocate almost exclusively with verbs of perception (see, observe) and was usually associated with the function of signposting. Once more, the co-text and, in particular, the following verb were indicators of the category in which an example belongs. However, the basic criterion used for this coding was whether the action in which the writer and the readers were

urged to engage in (to observe something for example) referred to a point made in the text or to more general issues outside of the particular journal article.

4.2.4 *Inclusive we: We-academic community*

This category is defined as the first person plural reference which includes the writer and the linguistics community as a whole:

- (8) These entail an analytic engagement, during both learning and use, without which **we** would have no more than a list of alterable phrases heard, memorise and reproduced. **We** must, in short, look for both analyticity and formulaicity (WRA 483).

As opposed to the examples cited above, the occurrences of *we* in excerpt 8 refer to the academic community as a whole, which in our case would be the disciplinary community of linguists, as the data under examination are linguistics articles. Here, the writer discusses issues which are potentially of interest to the wider disciplinary community, especially to the researchers and academics involved in second language learning and teaching, for example, the way attrition works or the way we analyse data from L2 speakers. In this case, we see that, when multiple audiences are involved, pinning down the tenor of academic prose proves to be a complex issue.

4.2.5 *We-indefinite*

This category will be defined as a generic first person plural reference which includes people in general:

- (9) When **we** hear someone say something in a language **we** know, how do **we** know what is said? What is the nature of the collusion between what in **our** heads and what is heard by virtue of which **we** can understand? (HOC: 163-4).

In the above example, the immediate co-text reveals that *we* does not refer to the academic community, but to people in general. The writer could well have used 'one' or 'people' instead of *we*. This type of generalised reference foregrounds neither the writer nor the reader (Hewings & Coffin 2007: 7), as it was the case with the categories previously identified.

The previous section dealt with the presentation of the analytical framework and illustrative results for each of the categories devised. The following sections will examine in detail interesting complexities that have arisen in the process of analyzing the various instances of pronominal reference in my data; namely ambiguity, multifunctionality and shifts between different pronouns.

5. Semantic references of *we*: The issue of ambiguity

The distinction between ambiguity and vagueness has been confusing in the literature (e.g. Myers, 1996). This view is also shared by Channell (1994), who sees ambiguity as a case of two or more competing distinct meanings, and vagueness as a case in which no meaning can be clearly identified. It is clear from the above that the problematic semantic references of *we* appearing in my data need to be tackled as ambiguity issues. Here our main concern is not the lack of identifiable semantic referents, but the existence of too many, and the fact that none of the levels of context described above assist us in choosing one possible referent. Difficulty in identifying the exact referent of first person pronouns may create problems for the analyst when categorising the use of *we*, but at the same time *we* can function as a useful rhetorical tool for the writer. Harwood (2005c) makes a clear case about the relation between strategic ambiguity and the first person plural pronoun: “The reason the exclusive/ inclusive ambivalence can be politically advantageous for the writer is that they can move between exclusive and inclusive uses, sometimes even in the same sentence to achieve a number of effects” (Harwood 2005c: 345-6). According to Harwood (2005c), writers can potentially exploit the exclusive/ inclusive ambiguity in order to achieve their rhetorical purposes. Let us look at the following examples in order to get a clearer picture of how this might work:

- (10) A successful statement of relevance can hardly contrast on any higher level of meaning with the preceding discourse, though **we might well expect** contrasts and/or cancellations on lower levels. Thus, one might say that *but* marks a contrast between the detail level in the foregoing turn to the general level of the final turn. But even in this formulation **we perceive** an orientation to the function of *but* in relation to the organization of the ongoing narrative (NOR 862).

In (10), several references are at work simultaneously, resulting in semantic ambiguity. The first questions that one may ask when dealing with this example are ‘Who expects contrasts?’ and ‘Who perceives an orientation?’. The immediate as well as the wider context cannot resolve the ambiguity, as both writer and reader can potentially ‘expect contrasts or cancellations’ at lower levels and both can ‘perceive an orientation to the function of *but*’. The point of view expressed in the text is obviously that of the author; thus, one could claim that this is a clear instance of *we for I*. This interpretation proves to be oversimplified if we examine the wider context, at the level of the individual text. The examples below seem to prove that the writer does use the first person singular elsewhere in the research article, therefore, the question regarding the semantic reference of the particular instance of *we* remains open. A closer look at the following examples offers some hints. We notice that the writer mainly prefers *I* where the function of the pronoun is to organise the discourse:

- (11) **In this section, I will first illustrate** some typical ‘core’ cases of *but* in its connective and contrastive uses, in order to set the stage for **my** description of its specifically narrative functions (NOR 857).

- (12) **In this section, I will present examples** of *well* in spoken narratives which go beyond the descriptions of *well* as a lexical item or DM or the non-narrative types described so far. For present purposes, **we can assume** that storytellers and their audiences orient themselves to a narrative framework like that proposed by Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972), according to which a narrative consists of six principal parts (...) (NOR 853).

To emphasise his contribution to the field:

- (13) **My own recent work** (Norrick 1998a,b) shows that oral storytellers strategically deploy disfluencies, repetition and formulaicity to mark specific narrative elements and transitions (NOR 850).

To present his claim:

- (14) **I hope to show** that *well* and *but* fulfil particular functions in oral narrative which follow neither from the lexical senses of these two words nor from their usual discourse marker functions. Instead, the functions of both *well* and *but* in oral narrative reflect expectations about the structures and conventions of storytelling (NOR 849).

Interestingly, in (10) the writer is in the process of developing his argument; thus, the main function of the pronominal reference is to put forward his point as clearly as possible and to convince the reader. It is primarily the writer who expects contrasts and perceives an orientation, but by using *we* he takes the readers along. The effect is to make the readers feel that they actively participate in the argument, and ultimately to convince them of the validity of the claims presented. Thus, “the writer is using inclusive pronouns to make the reader feel involved” (Harwood 2005c: 346). At this point, I need to emphasise that I am not suggesting that the writer has used the ambiguous *we* intentionally. This issue needs further research and is beyond the scope of this paper. What I am interested in is not the writer’s intentions, but the potential effect that the text will have on the reader, and how the insights gained from these observations can inform EAP teaching materials.

6. Multifunctionality and pronominal reference

Moving on from the level of semantic reference to the level of pragmatic functions, in this section I will deal with the concept of multifunctionality in personal reference. The concept of multifunctionality is drawn from Halliday & Hasan’s (1989: 23) original proposal:

Every sentence in a text is multifunctional; but not in such a way that you can point to one particular constituent or segment and say this segment has just this function. The meanings are woven together in a very dense fabric in such a way that, to understand them, we do not look separately at its different parts; rather we look at the whole thing simultaneously from a number of different angles, each perspective contributing towards the total interpretation. This is the essential nature of a functional approach.

As was mentioned in Section 2.2, in previous studies, various taxonomies of the pragmatic functions of personal reference have been devised. Some of them have examined this issue in quantitative terms, by placing particular instances of pronouns under rigid functional categories. (Harwood 2005b, Hyland 2002a). A preliminary analysis of my data revealed that the quantification of personal references according to their pragmatic functions proved a highly problematic task. Although most of the times a particular pragmatic reference fulfilled one (primary) function, I found instances where personal references seemed to perform more than one function at the same time. Harwood (2005c: 363) is, to the best of my knowledge, the only researcher who brings up the issue of multifunctionality in relation to pronominal reference. Let me illustrate this point by examining the following example from my corpus:

- (15) I am regarding the grammar and vocabulary in these texts as systems of choices from which writers can select. I am also assuming that these choices have non-equivalent meanings (...) In doing so **I hope to show** that these 11 texts, through their language, realise a range of gendered discourses, in the Foucauldian sense of discourses as ‘different ways of structuring knowledge and social practice’ (Fairclough, 1992: 3) (SUN 254).

The author here is making the claim that the 11 texts she is examining ‘through their language realise a range of gendered discourses’. The use of hedging (*hope*) suggests that the author here is a cautious claim maker, seeking to achieve solidarity with the readers and the disciplinary community, and leaves space for alternative interpretations by projecting a more modest self-image. On the other hand, the mere choice of the first person singular pronoun instead of *we*, gives a glimpse of the self-promotional tenor of the text, as it highlights the contribution of the author. If we look at the co-text in which the pronominal reference I am examining appears, we observe that it constitutes the final part of an argument. The author first makes clarifications by defining the use of the terms ‘grammar’ and ‘vocabulary’ for the purposes of her study, and finally, based on these, she is making her claim. Thus, the pronominal reference here also seems to function as the final part in the elaboration of the author’s argument. Hyland (2002a) and Harwood (2005b) distinguish between the two functions ‘stating results and claims’ and ‘elaborating an argument’, but in this case the distinction between the two is not clear-cut. Finally, the author here seems to act as a discourse guide for the readers. She organises the discourse for them by announcing what is going to follow and what the outcome of her analysis is going to be. In effect, she also states her purpose, which is a function also identified by Harwood (2005b: 252). Finally, she makes a claim, expresses her stance and constructs her relationship with the readers and the academic community.

I hope I have demonstrated how a particular instance of pronominal reference can perform more than one function. It is possible that not all the readers will agree with all the potential interpretations proposed above, which are highly context-sensitive anyway. However, the acknowledgement of multifunctional pronominal references can have important methodological implications for studies which are looking at personal pronouns in academic discourse. The classification of pronominal

references under one category according to the function they perform cannot be considered unproblematic. Although, such classifications may be considered useful as a starting point, there are examples which cannot be placed under one functional category, although very often one function seems to be prioritised. In effect, quantitative functional analyses based on this type of categorisation, such as the one that Harwood (2005b) undertakes, may prove to be problematic. A possible solution to this problem would be either the creation of a separate category which would include multifunctional pronominal references, or the treatment of these types of functional analyses in qualitative terms. Finally, if a quantitative analysis is judged to be necessary, one needs to acknowledge that several categories often overlap, and to categorise the various pronominal references according to their primary functions.

7. Shifts

Having looked at the potential functions of ambiguous pronominal references, in this section I will explore the functions of shifts between inclusive and exclusive pronouns. Harwood (2005: 366) reports that, in his study of 21 EAP textbooks, all but one provide misleading or no information regarding the use of pronouns in academic writing. Most of them advise students to avoid the use of personal pronouns, or to restrict their use to “suggest a rare and exceptional emphasis” (Watson 1987: 68). Corpus-based studies (e.g. Harwood 2005c), on the other hand, have proved that pronouns are not only extensively used in experts’ writing, but that very often writers alternate between the use of exclusive and inclusive references in the same text. My findings support this, as in all the research articles analysed for the present study [individual] authors used both first person plural and first person singular inclusive and exclusive references. Indeed, expert writers in my corpus are not consistent in their use of pronouns. These shifts in the use of pronouns have, I am suggesting, a number of rhetorical effects. Let me illustrate my point with example (16).

- (16) (...) constraints to do with the linguistic environment are examined. **My study showed** that learners are more likely to delete copula when it is preceded by a subject containing a noun than when the subject is a pronoun. There is, in fact, plenty of evidence to show that interlanguages, like fully formed natural languages, are rule governed, although the rules do not always correspond to the rules found in the target language (see Tarone 1988 for a review).

However, the discovery that interlanguage variability is systematic does not eliminate the possibility that it may also be in parts, non-systematic. Labov (1971), in his discussion of the notion of 'system' in pidgins and creoles, argues that 'important and significant linguistic behaviour can be non-systematic' (p. 449). Labov asserts that 'it would be meaningless to say that linguistic relations are systematic if there were not also forms of communication that were unsystematic' (p. 451). He suggests that pidgins, which, as we know have many of the characteristics of early interlanguage, may be so unsystematic as to cast doubt on their 'full

linguistic status' (p. 454). He points out, quite rightly, that the amount of systematicity in a linguistic system must be determined empirically. As **we shall shortly see**, this requires the use of rigorous quantitative analyses.

Again, **we find** that some L2 researchers have recognized that learner-language is non-systematic (see below). However, other researchers have been reluctant to acknowledge this. Preston (1996), for example, comments 'I am suspicious that language variation which is influenced by nothing at all is a chimera' (p. 25). Schachter (1986) argues that learners need to keep linguistic forms apart in order to use them for specific purposes and that this precludes extensive free variation in learner-language. In effect, Schachter dismisses non-systematic variation because she finds it of no theoretical interest in accounting for how L2 learners construct their interlanguages. In one respect, Schachter is surely right; non-systematic variability is only of interest if it can be shown to be important for a theory of L2 acquisition. In earlier articles (Ellis 1985, 1989) this is precisely what **I attempted to do**; to develop a theory in which free variation plays a constitutive role.

Developments in both the methodology for studying variability in learner language (for example, the use of VARBRUL to carry out multivariate analyses of factors influencing language use - see Young and Bayley 1996) and in theories of L2 acquisition (for example, Ellis's (1996) arguments in support of sequence learning as a subsequent basis for grammar learning) make it opportune to revisit the issue of free variation in SLA. To this end, wish to consider three interrelated questions:

Does free variation in L2 learner-language exist?

If it does exist, is it of any general theoretical interest in SLA?

Assuming that it is of theoretical interest, what role does free variation play in interlanguage development?

First, though, **I will consider** what is meant by the term free variation.

(EL 462)

At the beginning, the writer chooses to use a self-promotional *I* ('**My study** showed...'), to refer to his own study, a choice which is obvious for English-speaking writers, but not writers working within different academic traditions, who could have preferred to use the editorial *we* (cf. Fløttum *et al.*, 2006; Vassileva, 1998; Vladimirova, forthcoming). Next, he appeals to the common knowledge that the academic community shares (**as we know**). Later on, he moves on to an inclusive *we*, which has been coded as *we-writer and reader* (see section 4.2.2 for more details):

- (17) ...as **we shall shortly see**, this requires the use of rigorous quantitative analyses...

This type of inclusive *we* collocates with a verb of perception (see), makes a strictly textual reference and, thus, addresses the immediate readership of the journal article. This *we* occurs in the process of the writer elaborating his argument, which, as Harwood (2005c: 357) suggests, could be considered as self-serving rather than as an indicator of positive politeness. Similarly, the writer shifts to a more ambiguous pronominal reference, which could be interpreted as referring to the writer, the writer

and the reader, or the writer and the academic community, and which serves a similar rhetorical purpose:

- (18) ... again **we find** that some L2 researchers have recognised that learner-language is non-systematic ...

The writer now shifts to first person singular again:

- (19) ... this is precisely what **I attempted to do**; to develop a theory in which free variation plays a constitutive role, ...

This highlights his contribution on the one hand and is interestingly hedged on the other (attempted). Finally, the writer shifts to two uses of *I* which performs the function of organising the discourse:

- (20) To this end, **I wish to consider** three interrelated questions' and 'first though **I will consider**.

The focus of this section was on the shifts among different types of personal pronouns and not their functions. I hope I have demonstrated how writers shift among first person singular and first person plural inclusive and exclusive personal pronouns in order to achieve their purposes, whether these are rhetorical or manipulative.

8. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have argued that ambiguous semantic references of *we* need to be implemented in future functional taxonomies of personal pronouns in academic writing. Also, on pragmatic functional grounds, I have argued that personal pronouns are more effectively discussed through a qualitative analysis, and that the concept of multifunctionality proves particularly useful, as we very often see pragmatic functions overlapping. As expert writers appear to be inconsistent in their use of personal reference, I am suggesting that shifts can be potentially used strategically by writers. One of the potential practical outputs of this study relates to the design of courses and materials that address the needs of advanced EAP students or professional writers. EAP courses can concentrate more on teaching the different ways writers may use to communicate with their audience and to construct their own identity (for example with interpersonal metadiscourse). This will contribute to the achievement of the writers' ultimate purpose, which is convincing the audience of the validity of their claims.

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Appendix: Journal articles analysed

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