

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU**  
**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES**

**THE USE OF FIRST PERSON PRONOUN IN ACADEMIC TEXTS**

**BA thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

Academic writing has a set of rules that everyone in academia follows. One of these set rules is related to neutrality. In academia *neutrality* means that the author does not make their own presence noticeable in the text. This project was carried out because contemporary studies have shown that the rule of anonymity is not always the best option and an author's stance in the form of self promotion is encouraged.

This thesis focuses on self promotion in academic papers written in the department of English studies in the University of Tartu. The aim of this paper is to analyze the extent to which authors use self-promotion pronouns in their academic papers and what functions do those pronouns hold. In addition, this paper also reports on the differences between gender usage of pronouns and to control the differences between the four fields of the English studies department. This analysis focuses on master dissertations written by students of the English language department between the years 2013-2021. AntConc software was used to analyse a corpus of 36 Master's theses.

Even though current research has shown that self-promotion should be used, because the reader will connect with the ideas better, this research shows that students of English studies have opted for the conventional neutral tone in their writings. When self-promotional pronoun *I* was used the students favoured the role of the describer and the builder to emphasise their own contribution to the field. The gender differences were not in line with previous research that stated that male authors tend to self-promote more. In the department of English studies female writers tend to use self-promotional pronouns more freely than their male counterparts. One reason for that might be the female oriented environment of the department, where the students do not perceive self-promotion as a bad thing.

The key takeaway from the research should be that self-promotion is not forbidden and should start moving towards being an allowed practice in the academic tradition.

No studies have been conducted on the use of self-promotion on Master's theses writing in English in the Estonian context, and more specifically not in the department of English studies in the University of Tartu, where academic writing is an important part of its curriculum. This research filled that specific void.

This dissertation begins with an introduction, which gives an overview of the reasons behind this paper as well as a summary of the main chapters that follow. The introduction is followed by a literature review, where the previous relevant research is discussed. Then methodology is described, which is followed by the results and the analyses based on the gathered data. The thesis ends with a discussion of the main finding of the thesis.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	1
INTRODUCTION	3
1. LITERATURE REVIEW	5
1.1. What is academic writing	5
1.2. Self promotion in academic writing	6
1.2.1. Why is self promotion important	6
1.2.2. Cases where the usage of first-person pronouns in academic texts should be accepted	8
1.2.3. I and the taxonomy of the six roles it carries.	8
1.3. Gender representation in academic writing	10
2. METHODOLOGY	13
3. RESULTS	17
4. DISCUSSION	22
CONCLUSION	27
REFERENCES	29
RESÜMEE	31

## INTRODUCTION

Developing the skills of academic writing is crucial in all academic activities. From a communicative practice, academic writing has a set of rules that everyone follows and if an author wants to be successful in their field they must master the specific writing skill associated with that (Aleksandrov et al. 2021). According to Hall (1998), Hyland (2001, 2002), and John and Tang (1999), academic writing has a set of rules that everyone should follow.

Hall (1998) and Hyland (2001, 2002) highlight that anonymity is a dominant feature of academic writing. According to Hall (1998) the parts of style and tone conventions are just as important as the content itself. Hall (1998: para 2.5) classifies impersonal writing as an object that will help the writer to remove personal bias they might have on the subject. However, contemporary research, for example, conducted by Harwood (2005), John and Tang (1999), Dueñas (2007), and Hyland (2001, 2002) has shown that texts in academia should not be written in a modest and self-excluding way. Their findings all point out that if the author's presence is sensed by the reader the reader will process the text better. In a way, self-promotion highlights the clarity of the message which the author is trying to convey between themselves, the reader and the text (Harwood 2005).

There is a relationship between self-promotion and gender. According to Deschacht and Maes (2017) male authors are more likely to promote themselves in their works than female writers. In addition to that, Berger (1998) highlights that self-promotion favors a more male oriented environment. According to him, female authors, who self-promote are looked down upon and tend to be perceived as not modest. Nevertheless, when a male writer promotes their ideas in their works nobody questions it.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the extent to which authors use self-promotion pronouns in their academic papers and what functions do those pronouns hold. In addition,

this paper reports on the differences between gender usage of pronouns and to control the differences between the three fields of the English studies department. To achieve the aim this thesis examines undergraduate Master's theses from an English language department to determine the use of self-promotion across a period of 8 years. No studies have been conducted on the use of self-promotion on Master's theses writing in English in the Estonian context, and more specifically not in the department of English studies in the University of Tartu, where academic writing is an important part of its curriculum. The three Master's level fields in the department are language and culture, teaching, and translation.

This thesis is divided into four main chapters: 1. Literature Review; 2. Material and Methods, 3. Results, 4. Discussion. The literary review gives an overview of self-promotion in academic writing and the gender differences. The second chapter introduces methodology and is followed by the chapter about results, data analyses. In the last chapter the findings are discussed.

# **1. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Academic texts, such as journal articles, theses, and essays allow the writers of these texts to promote themselves and the ideas which they represent - as serious researchers, team members, and community advocates – and through it further their careers (Levine 2018: para. 3-5). Academic writing has certain rules that must be followed. An important rule is related to neutrality (Hall 1998: para. 2.5). Studies done in recent years have shown that neutrality may not be the best approach (Harwood 2005; Hyland 2001, 2002). One of the reasons being that neutrality makes the text difficult to read. In addition, self-promotion would allow the author to explain their own contribution to their discipline. (Harwood 2005) In addition to the general interest in the use of self-promotion in writing, currently self-promotion has also been linked to studies investigating the differences between genders applying self-promotion in academia. According to Deschacht and Maes (2017), self-promotion is accepted when male authors opt for it but seen as a lowbrow tactic for female authors. In this chapter the theoretical overview of academic writing, self-promotion and the gender differences are provided.

## **1.1. What is academic writing**

Academic writing takes place all over the world and over 5.5 million researchers take part in it (Curry and Lillis 2010). Curry and Lillis (2010) highlight that in the modern world academic writing is something that is not isolated from the rest of the world. Yes, it is always related to local practises, but the norms of the Western academia dictate the culture of academic writing. Academic writing includes essays, documents, journal articles and different level theses and dissertations. According to Curry and Lillis (2010: 2) and Harwood (2005: 1208-1209) there are certain rules that will either have the text be evaluated positively

and result in dissemination or be disregarded. According to the University of Sydney academic writing guide (2019) and Harwood (2005: 1209), academic writing cannot be informal, it must be impersonal and technical. The University of Sydney's academic writing guideline (2019) elaborates that academic writing must avoid everyday language and should not persuade the readers in any way. Harwood (2005) highlights that the most important function of an academic text is to convey new information, ideas or facts, not to explain what the consumer should think about that new content.

## **1.2. Self promotion in academic writing**

### **1.2.1. Why is self promotion important**

According to Hyland (2001), Harwood (2005), and Reinsalu (2018), most researchers agree that the current rule of impersonality is not always the best way to write an academic text. However Hyland (2002) points out that the ideal of neutrality is understandable, especially in bachelor's theses. During the writing process the students are just following the provided guidelines and linguistic traditions and the possibility to make the style decisions is small. In other words, when students construct their text, they will do so primarily based on the experience they have with academic writing which has been learned in their previous educational experiences, such as in high school, and the training they have received in their higher education studies. Often, the more conscious process of linguistic and stylistic choices in their text is minimal. According to Hyland's research (2002), readers do not feel as connected to the point of the text as they would with personal pronouns. Hyland (2001) reports that neutrality does not make a text more academic but rather hard to understand, complicated and oftentimes unclear. Reinsalu (2018: 1) interprets the disconnect with the author's attempt to linguistically distance themselves from the ideas and theories presented in

a paper. This disconnect can be one of the reasons why in bachelor's theses the writing style is completely anonymous. Another reason for the anonymity in BA thesis could be because bachelor level students are not used to expressing their ideas on an academic level and therefore follow the guides that advise anonymity. Furthermore, related to the guidelines, the fear of failure could also be a factor why students opt for neutrality. There is a smaller opportunity to lose points if they follow the set guidelines by their professors.

In contrast, Harwood (2005: 2) points out that academic texts are just to convey facts that are proven by science, not describe or promote what the author has done. According to Harwood (2005: 3), one reason for the increase in self-promotion popularity in academic text might be because of the narcissistic traits of the modern world. He points out that the western science wants to create something new and better. Harwood (2015: 3) elaborates, that every author wants to document extremely well their own contributions rather than reinterpret or expand already existing knowledge. Berkenkotter and Huckin's (1995) paper enforces the same theory. They analysed research articles, where the author's need to be at the forefront of their field with their own new contributions was strong. Furthermore, Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) describe the academia world as part of consumerism culture. The more the author promotes themselves the higher the probability of their content being consumed. Building on that theory, Harwood (2005: 4) elaborates that academia is really all about marketing, advertisement and economics. He explains that no author wants their paper to be ignored and the more attractive it is to other scientists the more people read it. In this consumerism theory it is understandable why the popularity of self promotion in academic papers have increased.



### **1.2.2. Cases where the usage of first-person pronouns in academic texts should be accepted**

Even though Hyland's (2002), Li (2021), Harwood (2005) and John and Tang's (1999) highlights the importance of self-promotion the academic writing manual of WordVice (2019) there are some rules that should be kept in mind when using the first person pronoun as a self-promotion tactic. It should be acceptable to use *I* instead of the passive voice because in the passive the meaning can not be as clear (Reinsalu 2018, WordVice 2019). The next case where *I* should be allowed is when the author expresses their interest in the research topic (WordVice, 2019). As previously mentioned, *I* helps the author to connect with the reader and through that encourage the reader to engage more with the text and therefore accomplish ideas behind written text - give the reader a chance to understand new scientific findings (Hyland 2001, 2002; Harwood 2005; WordVice 2019). Lastly, self-promotion should be allowed in the literature review to distinguish the author's ideas and understandings from the already existing literature (John and Tang's 1999, WordVice 2019).

### **1.2.3. *I* and the taxonomy of the six roles it carries.**

According to Li (2021), Harwood (2005), and Hyland (2001) linguistically there are a number of ways the writer can make their voice heard in their text. A few strategies he points out are attitude markers, hedges, evaluative adjectives and epistemic modality. Nevertheless, the most popular way to self promote is through the first person pronoun *I* (Reinsalu 2018, Harwood 2005, John and Tang 1999, Li 2021). Harwood's (2005) research focused on *I* as a way for the authors to promote themselves and their work but he viewed the first-person pronoun as a monolite thing. According to John and Tang's (1992: 26), the first person pronoun is not homogeneous. There are six different roles that can all be highlighted with it. John and Tang (1999) analyzed different academic essays and put the roles into order of the

degree of authority. By authority John and Tang (1999: 26) mean the combination of three things: firstly, the creator of meaning; secondly, expert in their field, and thirdly, a right to command others. The roles of the first person pronouns, beginning with the least powerful, according to John and Tang (1999) are the following:

- 1) *I* as the representative – it takes away the writer's entity and oftentimes *we* is used instead to describe a number of people. For example, *As a result of the war we now know what people in the 1940s felt. We* in this sense refers to people in general not to the author. (John and Tang 1999: 27)
- 2) *I* as the guide – it puts the author into the role of a guide. John and Tang (1999: 26) explain it with a metaphor of the academic paper being a foreign country, where the readers need help navigating. This role is often used to help guide readers' attention to ideas that are not as visible to a non expert. For example, *We can observe that the idea.....* (John and Tang 1999: 27)
- 3) *I* as the builder – it shows the author's process of writing. For example, *In this essay I will analyse how....* This role brings into the limelight the person who wrote, organized, structured and outlined the material in an academic paper. (John and Tang 1999: 28)
- 4) *I* as the describer of the research process – this role usually refers to the work done before the writing process, like searching references, interviewing people, gathering data and so on. A sentence that can be an example here is *The data I collected included seven academic papers and one interview.* (John and Tang 1999: 28)
- 5) *I* as the opinion holder - refers to the author as someone who shares their opinions, views or attitudes. This could mean agreeing with something,

disagreeing with an idea or showing interest. An example of this role is *I think Neil Geiman is an overrated author*. (John and Tang 1999: 29)

- 6) *I* as the owner of ideas - it showcases the author's understanding of ideas or knowledge claims which are advanced in the academic piece. This is considered to be the most powerful of the six but it also requires the ideas to be labelled as 'new'. It is crucial that the writer claims authority over their ideas in their writing. *I hypothesized, based on previous research, that there are more than one role for the first person pronoun*. (John and Tang 1999: 29)

John and Tang (1999: 27) note that using the first person pronoun does not give any information about the author in academic texts. It just highlights facts, opinions or specific choices or discoveries that were made by the author for research purposes.

### **1.3. Gender representation in academic writing**

Most of the research done in 30 years agrees that there are definite gender differences when it comes to academic writing, especially in ways people promote themselves (Berger 1998, Lillis et al. 2018, Chee, Pino and Smith 2005). The common understanding, that findings prove, is that males self-promote more than females (Berger 1998). Berger's findings are replicated by Exley and Kessler's (2021) research results. They highlight that women self-promote distinguishably less than males do. One of their proposals for this reason is that females tend to think that their academic writing has a lower performance rate than their male counterparts do. In order to raise that level, female authors follow the set academic writing rules more closely.

According to Lillis et al. (2018), the research has mostly been done through empirical research – interviews and essay analyses. In their work Lillis et al. (2018) specify that in addition to empirical research, much of the information has come from other disciplines.

Because this aspect is heavily connected to gender psychology and education science, much of the theoretical work and knowledge has come from research carried out in those two fields. Lillis et al. (2018: 1) and Berger (1998) explain that because gender is heavily connected to peoples' minds then scientists that study gender differences in academic writing must work with psychological research to discover the reasons behind the differences.

According to Chee, Pino, and Smith (2005), one reason for the difference might be that female students have higher academic ethical standards and therefore follow the writing rules more closely. In addition, Berger (1998: 7) clarified that females, who self-promote in their works, are always seen in a more negative light than their male counterparts. He explains that this is heavily connected to the fact that if a female author wants to be successful they have to be liked and self-promotion, if done by a woman, it is seen as something unfeminine and immodest. Berger (1998: 4-8) specifies that this might be the reason male authors use self-promotion more freely and without any bad consequences – they want to be perceived as unfeminine and modesty is not considered to be a manly characteristic. Furthermore, Hyland (2001) proposes a hypothesis, that perhaps females do not use self-promotion as much because they think their data appears less real. If they use neutral language or opt for plural pronouns it would make their data more approachable – like more people were involved in the process and therefore the results are more trustworthy (Hyland 2001: 4).

The biggest conflict does not seem to be the fact that there are significant differences in men and women's academic writings; researchers generally agree with the fact that men tend to self-promote more than women (Berger 1998, Lillis et al. 2018, Hyland 2001). There are, however, discussions about the stereotypes it brings (Berger 1998). According to Berger (1998), self-promotion, for example using first person pronouns, is something that both genders can easily use; the difference is between opting to do it or not to do it and the

reasoning behind it - the trustworthiness of the results, coming across as modest and humble or appearing unfeminine (Hyland 2001:5). According to Hyland (1994:240), the most contradictory aspect is that even though academic rules disapprove of the use of personal pronouns, research has shown that first person pronouns help the reader to grasp the idea better. Hyland's (1994) research shows it is actually more efficient for the reader if the academic text is written with interactional elements because it helps the reader to understand the text better when the writer's opinion and input is clearly stated. And if this is what research shows, the question is – why are women still judged more harshly than men while using the same tactics.

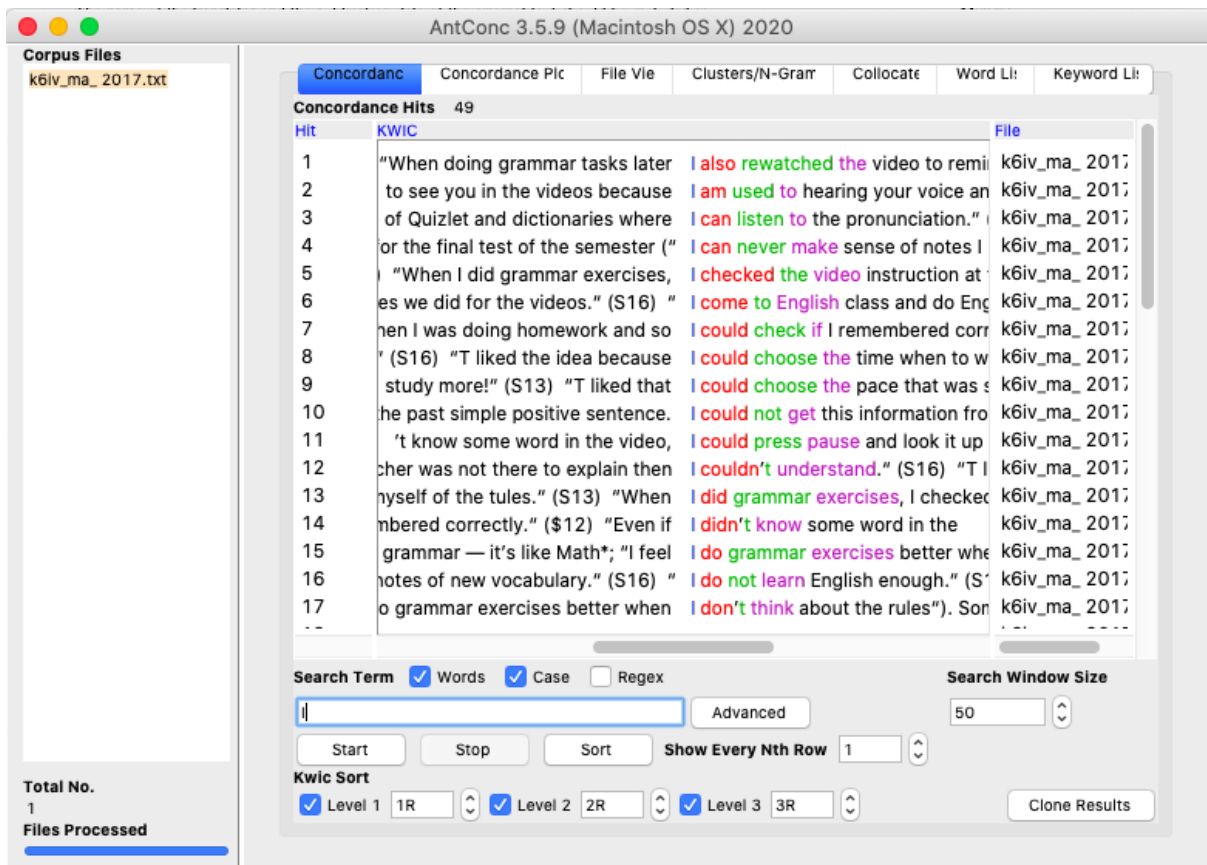
There are some contradictions when it comes to the understanding of what texts to study in order to get informative results on how gender influences academic writing. According to Lillis et al. (2018: 1), much of the research conducted has focused on how academic writing is taught in school-systems. This is done by analysing undergraduate essays. While it is agreed that education does affect one's writing style, it should be clarified that by the time people have written something that is worth the attention of the academic community they have forgotten most of the writing skills they required in school Lillis et al. (2018). Furthermore, Lillis et al. (2018) and Chee, Pino and Smith (2005), works show that this is a compelling reason why Masters or PhD dissertations should be more closely examined, because the style differences, in this case of self-promotion, are more prominent represented in these texts. This is the primary reason why Masters level theses were chosen for the analysis.

The next chapters give an overview of the methodology and the data that was gathered for the analysis.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this paper is to identify (a) how do MA level students use different ways of self promotion in their dissertations. and (b) what is the role of the self promotion tactics. In order to answer the research questions, Master level theses written in the department of English Studies were examined. The English department was chosen because all papers had to be written in English, and the texts needed to be comparable. In other words, the authors of that department followed a similar curriculum throughout their studies. The department's library was contacted and asked to provide an overview of the dissertations publicly available in the library digital repository. The library provided access to 124 papers that were written between the years 2013-2018. An Excel table, provided by the library, was used to pick 32 papers at random. A free random number generator was used for this process. From that period 2013-2018 32 papers were randomly selected. In addition, two master's dissertations from 2019 and 2021 were downloaded from the university's texts repository Universitas Tartuensis's DSpace. The two papers were chosen because they were not included in the file received from the library, but were available on the University's database when the analysis part was in progress/process. So, all in all 36 papers were included in the corpora for this thesis.

After the selection process, the papers were downloaded from Universitas Tartuensis's DSpace and the PDF files were converted into txt. (text) files. The files needed to be changed because the program chosen for this research only operates on txt. files. No parts of the papers were removed before the converting process. Then the specific txt. file was opened in the AntConc program (Anthony 2011) and analysed. The AntConc program is a linguistic software that was developed to analyze different corpuses. The software was chosen because it is the easiest program for the specific *I* word analysis.



**Figure 1.** AntConc Program

The AntConc program is shown on Figure 1. The word *I* was entered into the search bar and the search terms *word* and *case* were activated. *Case* eliminated *Is*, that were not capitalized. *Concordance Hits* refers to the number if *Is* the text file contained. Next thing that was closely examined were the *concordance lines*. This is shown on Figure 2. The colour blue refers to the key word, red, green and purple showcase the word cluster of the right side of the keyword. The column *Hit* identifies the number of the specific keyword.

Hit	KWIC
1	"When doing grammar tasks later I also rewatched the video to remind myself
2	to see you in the videos because I am used to hearing your voice and
3	of Quizlet and dictionaries where I can listen to the pronunciation." (S22) ,»..Leami
4	or the final test of the semester (" I can never make sense of notes I

**Figure 2.** Concordance lines

The data gathered from the AntConc program was moved to an excel table for further analysis (Figures 3 and 4). The features which were included to highlight the data analysis

included the following headings - name of the student, sex, name of supervisor, year, length (pg.), number of I's, number of important I's, number of unimportant I's, previous sentence, concordance, place, major, file name - and the information was organized accordingly. The heading were chosen to further investigate any features that might further explain the observed data and to control for specific variables which might influence the results, such as the supervisor or the length of the paper

1	Name of Student	Gender	Supervisor	Year	Lenght (pgs.)	Number of Is	Number of important I-s	Number of unimportant I-s
1	X	M	Reeli Torn-Leesik	2013	64	16	0	16
2	X	M						
3	X	M						
4	X	M						
5	X	M						

**Figure 3.** Excel format I

Previous sentence	Concordanc	Place		Major
24,590 tokens and deletes single letters (except "	I" and "a"), which yields forms like "		x file	language and culture
Second Language Teaching and Learning. Volume	I, 364-380. New York, UK: Routledge. Paquot, Magal		x file	
mental processes via phrases such as ' "	I think', and conversational monitoring of informat		x file	
cannot be provided by other means,	I would reply "information about frequency". Leech		x file	
Previous sentence	Concordanc	Place		Major
third part of the subchapter	I agree and elaborate on Cranton'	theory (pg. 30)	x file	teahcing
Taylor's view, with which	I agree, our identity is in	conclusion (pg. 37)	x file	
does our Self comprise of.	I agree with the previously mentioned	theory	x file	
isn't easy. And sometimes	I also feel that I'm		x file	
in the classroom, but sometimes	I also feel that this is		x file	
to keep it that way.	I also give a comfortable feeling		x file	

**Figure 4.** Excel format II

The most important data was under the heading *concordance*. The sentences that ended up in that section of the table were colour coded; pink was used if the sentence included some form of self promotion and yellow was used for sentences that lacked self promotion, but included the key words entered in the search bar (Figure 4). The colours were picked at random by an excel colour program. The semantic measures were determined by the colours and then matched with the corresponding pronoun function(s). Furthermore, if the sentence was important, aka pink, the place of that sentence was marked down (for example,



introduction, methodology *etc.*), as seen in Figure 4. Lastly, the page number was added for easier location findings if something was needed to be double checked.

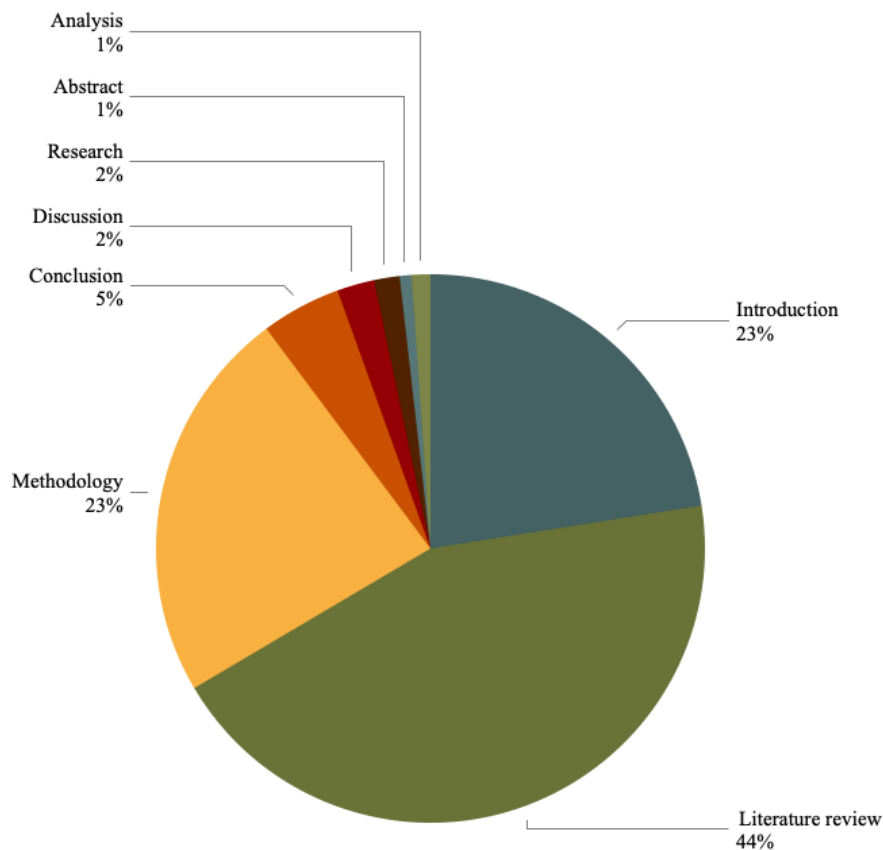
### 3. RESULTS

The 36 papers analysed produced 275 self promotional *I*'s out of 1539, as shown on Table 1. That is about 18% of the total number of *I*s.

Number of <i>I</i> 's	1539	100%
Number of important <i>I</i> 's	275	18%
Number of unimportant <i>I</i> 's	1264	82%

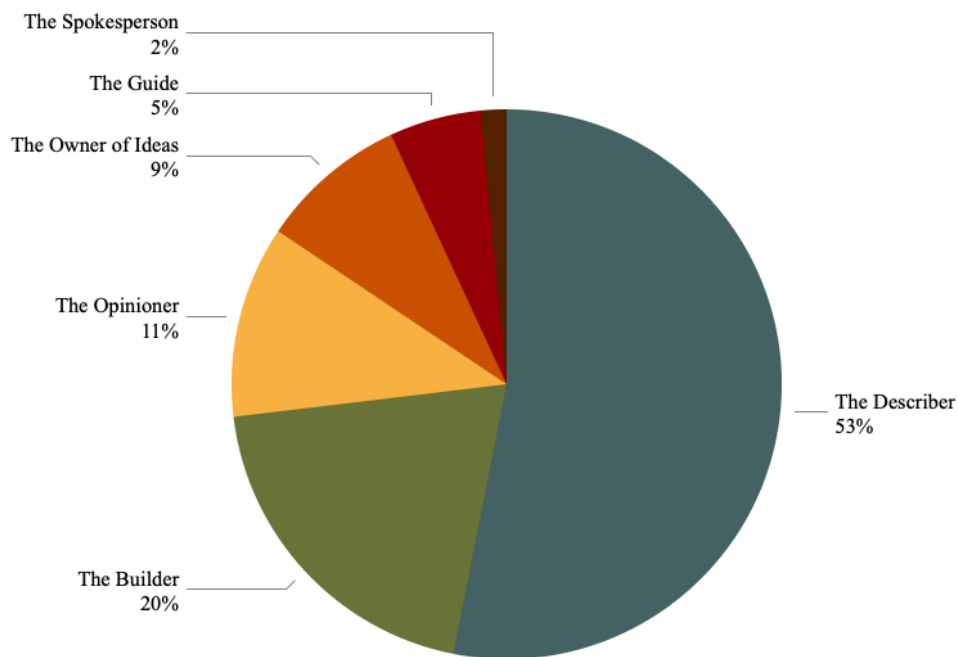
**Table 1.** The proportion of the first person pronouns in masters dissertations

Furthermore, placement was looked at during the analyses and it is portrayed in Figure 5. The most placement for a first person pronoun were literature reviews with 121, that makes about 44% of the total number of *I*'s. Next in line were methodology sections with 64 and the percentage of 25.5%. That was followed by the introductions. Authors used 62 *I*'s, which is about 23% of the total number of self-promotional *I*'s. Conclusions hold the fourth place with 13 pronouns that make 4.7% of the complete number of self-promotional *I*'s. The latter was followed by discussions where six *I*'s were used, about 2% of the total number of self-promotional *I*'s, and research, where four pronouns were found, about 1.5% of the cases. The two least popular places where *I* was used were the analysis and abstracts. Only three self-promotional pronouns were used in the analysis, about 1% of the total number of self-promotional *I*'s. Authors collectively only used 2 pronouns in their abstracts, about 0.7% of the total number of self-promotional *I*'s.



**Figure 5.** First person pronoun usage in masters dissertation sections

The next thing that was analyzed were the roles of the first person pronoun. The results are presented on Figure 6. The most popular role was *the describer*; 146 words were used out of 275, about 53% of the total number of self-promotional *I*'s. The following role was *the builder*. 55 pronouns, 20% of the complete number of self-promotional pronouns, were used by the authors. After the role of a builder came *the opinioner* with 31 uses, which made up about 11% of the total number of pronouns. In fourth place came *the owner of ideas* with 24 uses that was 8.7% of the total number of self-promotional *I*'s. That was followed by *the guide* with 15 uses and that made up about 5% of the total number of self promotional pronouns. The least popular role was *the spokesperson*. That was used only four times out of 275, which made up about 1% of the complete number of self-promotional *I*'s.



**Figure 6.** The popularity of the six roles of the first-person pronouns in masters dissertations

Another aspect analyzed were the gender differences. The calculated results can be seen on Tabel 2. In the 36 papers analyzed 26 were written by female authors and 10 by male students. The male authors used *I* 451 times, and out of those 58 of them were self promotional *I*'s, about 13%. In contrast, female authors used all in all 1088 *I*'s and 217 of those *I*'s were self promotional, which were about 20%. The distribution between male and female is according to the results more female.

	I's in general	Self promotional I's	%
Female I's	1088	217	19,9%
Male I's	451	58	12,9%

**Table 2.** The differences between gender usage of self-promotional first person pronouns in masters dissertations

Then the first-person pronoun role preferences of the two genders. The results are highlighted in Table 3. The most popular role was the describer. Female authors used it 114 times, which was 53% and male authors opted for it 32 times, which was 55%. The role of the builder was used by females 48 times, which was 22%, and males opted for it seven times, about 12% of the time. First person pronouns as an opinioner were used accordingly 27 times by female writers, which was about 12% and four times by their male counterparts, which made 7% of the time, as demonstrated in Table 3. The role of the owner was used 23 times, about 11%, by female authors and one time, about 2% by male writers. *I* as the guide was used five times, which was about 2% of the cases, by female writers and 10 times, about 17%, by male students. Female authors did not use *I* in the spokesperson role, but male authors used it in four cases, about 7% in total.

	Female	%	Male	%
The Describer	114	53	32	55
The Builder	48	22	7	12
The Opinioner	27	12	4	7
The Owner of Ideas	23	11	1	2
The Guide	5	2	10	17
The Spokesperson	0	0	4	7
	217	100%	58	100%

**Table 3.** The most popular roles of the first person pronoun between genders.

To control for additional variables which may describe some of the general trends reported, the last aspect looked at was the distribution between language and culture, teaching and translation presented in Table 4. There were ten language and culture papers included in this research and out of the 275 they produced 48 self-promotional *I*'s. The most self-promotional pronoun was used by teaching majors, who opted for *I* 224 times in the 25

papers analyzed. In addition, one translation major's thesis was included and that work produced three self-promotional *I's*

	Papers	<i>I's</i>
Language and culture	10	48
Teaching	25	224
Translation	1	3

**Table 4.** The distribution of *I's* in the majors of the Masters program in the Department of English Studies.

## 4. DISCUSSION

The previous research of Hall (1998), Hyland (2001, 2002) and Harwood (2005) has shown that self-promotion should be an important aspect of academic writing. The findings of this study do not confirm this as the analysis only gives an overview of the traditions the Master's level students seem to follow in the department of English Studies in University of Tartu.

The first aspect looked at were the general number of *I's*. The findings do go with the studies of Harwood (2005), Hyland (2001), where they state that self-promotion through first person pronouns is not very common in academia. The Writing Center of University of North Carolina (2021) hypothesises that the idea of only promoting impersonal style in academia comes from different teachers through academic history and is simply good advice turned into set-in-stone like rules. Only 18% (275 out of 1539) of *I's* were used as self-promotional. One reason for this could be the curriculum the students have to follow. In the masters

Introduction to the course: course requirements. Academic writing vs other kinds of writing. The writing process or writing processes?							
16.09.2020	seminar		What is research? The grammar of definitions				
23.09.2020	seminar		Thinking, reading and writing critically. Locating and evaluating sources				
30.09.2020	seminar		Reading scholarly articles and keeping track of your readings				
07.10.2020	seminar		Writing different types of summaries. Providing feedback on writing				
14.10.2020	seminar		Avoiding plagiarism. Citing sources				
21.10.2020	seminar		Writing critically: arguing and discussing				
28.10.2020	seminar		Writing argumentative essays. Coherence and cohesion in academic texts				
04.11.2020	seminar		Critiquing a scholarly article. Hedging in academic texts				
11.11.2020	seminar		Editing written texts. Punctuation				
18.11.2020	seminar		Annotated bibliographies: writing annotations				
25.11.2020	e-learning		Annotated bibliographies: writing the preface (Seminar in BBB)				
02.12.2020	e-learning		Concluding the course (Seminar in BBB)				
09.12.2020	e-learning		No face-to-face meeting; work on your annotated bibliography				

**Figure 7.** Writing Research Papers and Making Academic Presentations in English II

program there are many courses that focus on academic writing and self expression in the academic context. One of such courses is demonstrated in Figure 7. Most of the students have probably learnt academic writing in their High School programs, because at the end of the

third year, in grade 12, a compulsory Estonian exam is taken that requires neutrality and the usage of passive voice. There the academic language is closely examined to determine the grade and for using incorrect language can lower the author's score by 11 points (Innove, 2019). Furthermore, if it is assumed that most of the MA students started their education at the BA level in the same department then the writing course *Writing up Research in English*, that all of the department's students have to take, could have affected usage of *I* as well. In the course seminar the idea of impersonality is an important factor that is often highlighted. For example, in the introductory lecture of that course it is stated “ Language = academic English: /.../ objective, impersonal tone” (Türk & Tammekänd, 2021: slide 8). This has shown that the writing classes throughout a student's academic life shape their writing habits and their understanding of what academic writing should look like.

Another reason for the low number of self-promotion might be the examples. Often it is hard to start writing a texts and to make it an easier process to begin other students' texts are looked at for examples. If these are written in neutral impersonal style the chances of other students opting for it as well, instead of using self-promotional tactics is far greater. If there were some papers filled with self-promotion and the student chose them for examples on how to write, the chances of self-promotion might have been higher.

In addition, the different style guidelines the students have received for their works, might have affected the low self-promotion as well. The department's dissertation guidelines (Department of English Studies 2018, 2016) strongly advise to use neutrality as the writing style. In the MA grading guideline (The Department of English Studies *n.d.*) there is a section where the question “*Is this paper written in good academic English?*” is present. And the same idea is presented in the BA grading guideline (The Department of English Studies *n.d.*) but the semantics of the sentence is different. *The thesis adheres to commonly accepted conventions for academic writing in English* - if the MA question leaves more room for the



freedom of choice, the BA instruction requires the common academic writing - which include a neutral tone - and if it is assumed that the students started their higher education in the department's BA level, that must have affected their unconscious decisions in their MA level writing habits.

The second thing looked at was the placement of *Is*. According to The Writing Center of University of North Carolina's manual for academic writing (2021) it is acceptable to use self promotional pronouns in the introduction and in the conclusion. The analysis done for this paper did not support this theory. In the papers included the most *I*'s were used in the literature reviews. This could be because the students emphasized their own job in finding the material. For example, the phrase *I found a new theory that cooperates....*, was used in multiple papers. In addition, some authors gave their own opinions in the literature analysis as well. Phrases like *According to the previous research I believe....*, were common in the MA theses. The percentage of *I*'s in the introduction is coherent with the Writing Center of University of North Carolina's (2021) hypothesis that students feel comfortable using self-promotion in the introduction. One reason for this could be the knowledge that there should not be any self-promotion in any other part of the text. So, the authors want to make sure that their contribution is noted from the very beginning. Or it could be because the introduction is oftentimes read to discover if the text is even worth the reading; and if it is the part that people focus on it is the perfect place to highlight the author's contribution.

According to Hyland's (2001, 2002), and Berkenkotter and Huckin's (1995) research authors feel the need to make their contribution noticed in their papers. Methodology is the best place for self promotion, because there they can explain the choices they made and the reasons behind it. In the MA theses the self promotional cases were related to the authors' research choices, for example the phrase *I interviewed the students....* One of the reasons for it could be the need to show the reader that everything was decided by the author themselves

and done by themselves. This connects to the need to highlight their own contribution to the discipline.

This is in line with John and Tang's (1999) research. Related to methodology the most popular pronoun role across all papers was the describer. The authors referred back to their decisions before the writing process.

The results of the analysis show that there were gender differences. According to Berger (1998) Chee, Pino and Smith (2005), Exley Kessler (2021) male authors self-promote more than female authors, nevertheless that is not the case in the department of English studies of University of Tartu. The results show that female writers opted for more usage of *I* than male students. One reason for that could be because in the department of English Studies there are more female than male students, so the concept of self-promoting to a male-oriented environment is not common. Another factor could be the professors and lecturers in the department that are mostly female. Therefore the students are familiar with self-promotional tactics used by the professors in their lectures and thus do not see it as something that should be acceptable for only males or unacceptable for females.

Another aspect that was looked at was the differences in the *I* roles through the prism of gender. The most popular role was the describer, which goes according to the overall statistics. The most drastic differences were between the spokesperson role. One theory why men might use it more is because of stereotypes. According to Hentschel, Heilman and Peus (2019) men are often seen as taking on the leading role in society and they have gotten used to that and therefore see it as something natural and it is showcased in their language. The reason why females opted for the builder role might be because it helps to make their process of writing more understandable and therefore research is seen as more trustworthy. Berger's (1998) research confirms this idea that female authors take the extra steps that their

counterparts do not have to, to have their work valued at the same level with their male co writers.

The question remains - why do students self-promote? There are many contributing factors; one of which might be the freedom of choice. The grading guide does not require MA level thesis to have the commonly acceptable features of academic writing, which it does on BA level. Master's theses authors have to make their text clear and sometimes the best option for it is to use self-promotion. Another factor might be the major choices. Because the three majors in the department of English share the same guideline there should not be a difference between the usage. Nevertheless, from the research the results showed that the authors who have picked teaching as their major use self-promotional pronouns more freely. One reason for that might be that according to Kirsch (2021) teachers are better when they are self aware. Maybe the department's teaching curriculum is built up in an encouraging way that allows the soon-to-become teachers to learn how to be more sure of themselves and therefore educate better teachers. And if the future teachers are sure of themselves the students they impact will through that have more self-confidence because their teachers were well equipped. Therefore, the teaching majors are not as reluctant to self-promote their work.

## CONCLUSION

The ability to self-promote is an important part of succeeding in a highly competitive environment. Academic writing has been considered to be its best when it is neutral but research has shown that that is not always the best approach. This research aimed to identify the extent to which authors use self-promotion pronouns in their academic papers and what functions do those pronouns hold. In addition, take note of the differences between gender usage of pronouns and to control the differences between the three majors of the English studies department. The aims were met with the results being the following - even though current research has shown that self-promotion should be used, because the reader will connect with the ideas better, the corpus representing students of English studies between the years 2013 - 2020 have opted for the conventional neutral tone in their writings. When self-promotional pronoun *I* was used the students favoured the role of the describer and the builder to emphasise their own contribution to the field. The gender differences were not in line with the previous research that stated that male authors self-promote more. In the department of English studies female writers tend to use self-promotional pronouns more freely than their male counterparts. One reason for that might be the female oriented environment of the department, where the students do not perceive self-promotion as a bad thing.

The key takeaway from the research should be that self-promotion is not forbidden in academic writing and should start moving towards being an allowed practice in the academic tradition. Either in the form of making writers aware what self promotion is and what its function is when writing or to actively promote and encourage it when students are asked to write.

No studies have been conducted on the use of self-promotion on Master's theses writing in English in the Estonian context, and more specifically not in the department of

English studies in the University of Tartu, where academic writing is an important part of its curriculum. This research filled that specific void.

This study has potential limitations. Firstly, the gender definitions; the gender of the author had to be assumed by their name, therefore gender and sex became synonyms. Secondly, the sample could have been more diverse. In this research the majority of papers chosen were from the teaching major. If all of the papers would have been analyzed the outcome might have been affected. The third limitation was the focus on Anglo-American writing traditions.

Further research should be done on different disciplines to understand the differences more deeply and to include a larger sample of students, maybe an entire course. In addition, gender could be questioned more and looked into transgendered authors' academic writings. Furthermore a closer analysis of PhD dissertations and the ratio between self-promotion and gender there should be made. Lastly, an interesting viewpoint to address would be Anglo-American versus non Anglo-America academic writing traditions.

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# RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Anna Vaher**

**The Use of First Person Pronoun in Academic Texts,**

**Esimese isiku asesõna kasutamine akadeemilistes tekstides**

bakalaureusetöö

2021

Lehekülgede arv: 30

Annatsioon:

Käesolev bakalaureusetöö peamine eesmärk oli uurida eneseesitlust akadeemilistes töödes. Lähemalt vaadati esimese isiku asesõna rolle ning eneseesitluse asukohta magistrütöodes. Lisaks uuriti soolisi erinevusi seoses eneseesitlusega anglistika osakonnas ning kontrolliti õppekava mõjutusi eneseesitlusele.

Bakalaureusetöö jaguneb kolmeks osaks. Esimene peatükk annab ülevaate eelnevast kirjandusest. Selles defineeritakse akadeemiline kirjaoskus, eneseesitlus, sobilikud kohad, kus oma panust välja tuuakse ning soolised erinevused akadeemilises eneseesitluse kontekstis. Järgmises osas kirjeldatakse metoodikat, milleks oli korpuse analüüs. Analüüis uuriti 36-te anglistika osakonna magistrütööd, mis oli kirjutatud ajavahemikus 2013-2020. Anslüüsile järgneb arutelu tulemuste üle.

Kuigi varasem kirjandus viitas sellele, et mehed eelistavad rohkem kasutada eneseesitlust, kuid Tartu Ülikooli anglistika osakonnas ei ole seda märgata. Rohkem kasutavad eneseesitluse võtet naised. Kõige rohkem oli esimest asesõna kasutatud kirjanduse ülevaates ning metoodika peatükis. Selle põhjused võisid olla soov eristada iseenda ideid eelnevatest uuringutest ning välja tuua iseenda panus teadusesse. Sellest lähtudes oli kõige populaarsem esimese isiku asesõna roll kirjeldaja ning õppekavadel ning varasemad kokkupuuted akadeemilise kirjaoskusega võivad samuti mõjutada eneseesitluse valikuid.

Märksõnad: Inglise keel, sugu, akadeemiline tekst, esimese isiku asesõna, eneseesitlus.



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