

First-Person Plural Pronouns: An Investigation of Function and Distribution in Academic Writing

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ABSTRACT

This study considers the form and distribution of first-person pronouns (1PPs) used to represent the two female authors of a published academic article. Methods of analysis are presented, and data presented in tables is interpreted. Findings include evidence of the concealment of the contribution and participation of the authors. Moreover, the distributional pattern observed in the abstract is reflected in the construction of the article itself.

この研究は出版された論文において二名の女性の書き手が使用した一人称代名詞の形式とその分布を考察するものである。分析の方法は本論中に提示してあり、また表に提示したデータは解釈が加えられている。本研究によって明らかになったのは各著者たちが論文に対する自分の貢献度や参画の実態を隠そうとする傾向にあるという事である。更に、摘要に観察される代名詞使用の分布パターンは論文自体の構成に反映されていることも明らかである。

For over two decades, I have had an abiding interest in the nature of pronominal expression. Pronouns are those little words that everyone can use for the same function of identifying the speaker, the listener, and others, yet always in relationship to the speaker/writer who is the source of the expression. Pronouns are the relational expressions that function like the three points that define the plane upon which everything else is measured. Pronouns are the empty boxes that can be filled variously by different persons, the identity of which may change. But pronouns are also the black boxes within which revealing details can be hidden. This perhaps was what initially intrigued me: what is hidden within pronouns? How does their use enable a person to be assertive and aggressive, or compliant and adaptive, or manipulative and covertly controlling? What are the standards which we study assiduously or absorb unconsciously, our performance revealing that we are "members of the club" or rebels to be ostracized and silenced? These questions, to me, are the driving force behind inquiry.

This article presents a portion of the results of my analysis of the usage and distribution of the English first-person pronouns (1PPs) appearing in a recently published academic article with dual authorship: Language Policy and Latina Immigrants: An Analysis of Personal Experience and Identity in Interview Talk, by Kendall A. King and Anna de Fina (*Applied Linguistics* 31/5: 651-670, 2010). I was introduced to the article by Saiko Yamamoto, a graduate student of mine who needed my help to read and understand the article, which also includes six "excerpts" (transcribed interviews in Spanish, with provision of English translation).

As mentioned, the article was written by two women, one of whom has a surname of Spanish origin, apparently. The focus of their article was the interpretation of selected dyadic oral interviews: one interviewer one interviewee. Transcription of portions of six interviews (four interviewees) was presented with the interviewees identified by given name, in the following series: Jasmina, Elisa, Lorena, Manuela, Elisa, Jasmina. The corresponding interviewers were identified by number: Int 2, Int 1, Int 2, Int 1, Int 1, Int 2.

Without more information than this, it is clear that the sequential structure of ordering the interviews follows established poetic, rhythmic traditions, and not just "western" ones. American Indian drumbeats, children's poetry, lyrical songs, and visual arts often incorporate elements of repetition and inversion, establishing a base or fundamental rhythm, repeating and reinforcing that rhythm, and then introducing an inversion or shift just prior to the termination of the "message." When I lectured about or taught children's literature, I often demonstrated a range of examples, and did so also in linguistics classes that I taught in the past. But here there is more than simple inversion. The selected sequence of interviews, along with an interpretation presented by the authors of that article, reveals that in terms of adjusting to the social and political conditions of being Spanish speakers in an English-speaking environment, those four women can be categorized as being either compliantly adaptive or assertive and defiant. Therefore, in terms of character or mood of the interviewee, that sequence can be seen as adaptive, assertive, adaptive, assertive, assertive, adaptive: externally 100 percent adaptive, internally 75% assertive. Does this ratio, however, perhaps express the position of the "interviewers" ("researchers") whose identity is undisclosed? Was it they who set the tone or drew out from the interviewees modes of expression that could be considered adaptive or assertive? The fact that it is the interviewees for "interviewer 2" who were identified as conciliatory, and that those for interviewer 1 were presented as more assertive, might suggest that this could be the case.

The authors address this issue point blank in the last sentence of the longest paragraph in the article, in the second of three paragraphs in the subsection "Interviews and analysis":

...interviewers and interviewees deal with circulating images of what it means to be a Latina, or a domestic worker, or alternatively a researcher, and adjust to each other in order to negotiate the self-images that they want to project. (656, emphasis added here)

The very next paragraph, the last paragraph in that subsection, begins as follows. (Note that it opens with a first person plural pronoun in genitive case.)

Our premise is that close examination of how these contexts are entrenched in concrete social interactions potentially yields a deeper understanding of people's reactions to public policies. Such an approach implies considering the role of both interviewer and interviewee in the analysis of sequences of talk and determining to what extent such roles are oriented to and made relevant by participants. (656-7, emphasis added here)

What will be presented here in this brief, and truly unfinished, article of mine are the methods used to enable identification and exposure of a hidden agenda of one, or perhaps both, of the two authors of that article, the hidden agenda being to criticize the local government for an ineffective or counterproductive program of teaching Spanish to bus drivers. A future publication is planned for the purpose of presenting a more expanded and detailed analysis of this article by King and de Fina (hereafter referred to as King/deFina)..

The methods used here are detailed in an earlier publication of mine: First, Which Person, *Journal of Foreign Languages*, Okinawa International University, 10:1 (March) 2007. The study at that time concerned the patterns of distribution of both singular and plural first-person pronouns used for self-reference by the authors of three academic papers published at two universities in Okinawa. That article was structured by the setting of initial observations, then proposing hypotheses and testing them, and finally suggesting areas for future research. However, the complete absence of first-person singular pronouns in the text of King/deFina resulted in the need for modification of methods. Such changes had the consequence of enabling different aspects of analysis and interpretation to be uncovered.

Essentially, the methods involved isolating and categorizing selected lexical items, and then arranging them in a manner that preserved the structure of the encompassing article without the encumbrance of details (see Table 1).. The patterns of occurrence (repetition, sequencing, and absence) provided the basis for determining which areas to explore in more detail. It was much like searching for mineral deposits or archeological remains by means of examining the surface terrain.

The personal pronouns

The first step in the analysis of King/deFina was to locate and categorize the two first-person plural pronouns (1PPs) appearing in the abstract and the 48 appearing in the article itself, the pronouns being then categorized according to grammatical case and positional differences (within a sentence, within a paragraph, within a section of the article, and within the article as a whole). Doing so enabled me to recognize areas of significant absence of those pronouns. This can be seen in Table 1, which presents only the distribution of 1PPs in terms of identification of the sentences in which they appear. Those sentences can be identified according to their location in one of the 40 paragraphs, and the paragraphs (as numbered here) are listed according to section or subsection. Note that there are two 1PPs in the abstract, and 48 in the text of the article. It should be noted that except for the literature review (immediately following the headless introduction), the only section or subsection without at least one 1PP is the subsection that immediately precedes the Conclusion.

The first-person pronouns (1PPs) were tabulated according to grammatical case, as well as positional occurrence. In King/deFina, there are only four kinds of 1PPs: we, our, us, ourselves (respectively NOMinative, GENitive, ACCusative, and REFLEXive). Orthographically, the nominative and genitive occasionally occur with an initial capital letter, corresponding to sentence-initial occurrence. It is quite rare for the other two grammatical cases to occur in sentence-initial position, and in King/deFina they never do. Of those four, normally only the accusative and reflexive forms can occur in sentence-final position, though they do not do so in King/deFina. Similarly, the disjunctive genitive "ours" can occur in sentence-final position, but that form of the genitive does not occur at all in King/deFina.

With regard to the pronouns themselves, only one more distinction needs to be addressed, and that is their semantic reading: in King/deFina, the pronouns we and us can occasionally be interpreted as "inclusive" rather than the more commonly encountered "exclusive." Of course, the categorization of first person plural forms as "inclusive" requires identification of associated lexical items plus reference to the context. The inclusive usage of first person plural pronouns is taken as including the reader/addressee, whereas the exclusive usage refers only to the speaker/writers (excluding the addressee). Recognition of the distinction inclusive/exclusive is not always immediate, and is often inferential rather than precise.

The pronouns can also be distinguished according to their positional occurrence within a paragraph, appearing in initial, medial, or final sentences of the paragraph. Moreover, within sections of the article (labeled or unlabeled, including major sections or subsections), they can also be identified as being in first, internal, or last paragraphs.

TABLE 1: Sections, subsections, paragraphs, and sentences containing IPPs

Section titles are given here in upper case, as in King/deFina; subsections in King/deFina are in bold lower case. Parentheses are used here to indicate that there was no title, as for the abstract and (sub)section introductory paragraphs. Paragraphs are here sequentially numbered after the abstract, which can be considered paragraph zero. The number of each paragraph is given as designated here, followed by a number indicating how many sentences are in that paragraph. The numbers encased in parentheses indicate the number of words in each sentence. Bold italicized numbers indicate that the corresponding sentence contains one or more IPPs. Small font is used to indicate absence of IPPs in that domain, be it section, sub-section, paragraph or sentence. For example, there are no IPPs at all in the literature review (labeled "The Wider Frame..." in King/deFina). **Bold** indicates presence of IPPs.

Abstract	4 sentences (14, 38, 38 , 41)
(Introduction)	1 5 sent. (24, 27, 33, 65, 58)
	2 4 sent. (41, 60, 20 , 40)
	3 5 sent. (49, 43, 32 , 18, 29)
THE WIDER FRAME...(Introduction)	4 7 sent. (30, 25, 28, 28, 54, 12, 42)
	5 7 sent. (38, 18, 34, 23, 33, 19, 31)
	6 5 sent. (17, 10, 30, 33, 22)
	7 5 sent. (23, 39, 23, 26, 45)
THE STUDY (Introduction)	8 3 sent. (39, 30, 28)
	9 7 sent. (11 , 24, 17, 21, 30, 16, 28)
Participants	10 4 sent. (18, 27, 35, 33)
	11 7 sent. (30, 26, 27, 29, 30 , 23, 21)
Interviews and analysis	12 5 sent. (20, 17, 27 , 12, 22)
	13 7 sent. (24, 17, 13, 23, 13, 23, 30)
	14 11 sent. (15, 24, 40, 23 , 27, 20, 42 , 32, 31, 41, 51)
	15 10 sent. (27 , 34, 37 , 24, 7, 18, 34, 31, 16, 43)
FINDINGS...(Introduction)	16 2 sent. (30, 42)
Language policy...	17 7 sent. (46, 30, 24, 52, 40, 31, 25)
	18 5 sent. (24, 26, 48 , 26, 12) <Excerpt 1>
	19 3 sent. (26, 44, 15)
	20 3 sent. (25, 40, 23) <Excerpt 2>
	21 5 sent. (18, 8, 59, 25, 43)
	22 4 sent. (33, 31, 24, 16)
	23 6 sent. (31, 13, 28, 17, 27, 36)
Three frames...	24 4 sent. (38, 20, 42 , 31)
	25 4 sent. (14, 24, 28, 13)
	26 5 sent. (23, 33, 9, 40, 31)
Language policy as racism	27 6 sent. (23, 21, 27, 33, 26, 19) <Excerpt 3>
	28 2 sent. (27, 14)
	29 1 sent. (21) <Excerpt 4>
	30 8 sent. (24, 16, 26, 28, 29, 22, 19, 27)
English language policy...	31 4 sent. (35, 31, 33 , 19) <Excerpt 5>
	32 4 sent. (24, 18, 16, 35)
	33 6 sent. (19, 10, 28, 18, 29, 39)
Language policy as support services...	34 2 sent. (31, 20) <Excerpt 6>
	35 4 sent. (21, 28, 34, 41)
CONCLUSION	36 4 sent. (35, 21, 18, 9)
	37 5 sent. (23 , 26, 51, 15, 27)
	38 5 sent. (29, 29, 29, 34 , 30)
	39 5 sent. (27, 40, 39, 34, 43)
	40 3 sent. (29, 58, 45)

As for collocation, the occurrence of the verb following the nominative is often a clue to the status of the pronoun as inclusive or exclusive. Similarly, the occurrence of the noun following the genitive can effect a difference of reading, though in King/deFina there appear to be no inclusive genitive pronouns.

Example of analysis: the abstract and inclusive/exclusive 1PPs

The formality of academic, professional writing often involves concealment of the labor of the author(s), even though scholarship is established by identification of sources and by display of the historical positioning of the work being presented. This is clearly seen in the abstract of the article that is serving as the corpus for the research being presented here.

The abstract begins with the formality of indirection: "This article examines [something]." What is meant is that the two authors, both women, examine something. That is, the sentence effectively means "In this article, we examine [something]." However, it is also of value to note that in the abstract, the first person plural pronoun we appears only in the second and third of the four sentences of that one-paragraph abstract. The last sentence, like the first, is impersonal: "Data from the study...illustrate [something]" rather than "We use data from the study to illustrate [something]." The authorial we is the twelfth of thirty-eight words in the second sentence, and the twentieth in the thirty-eight-word third sentence. In both cases, the subject is preceded by similarly structured introductory phrases:

[A.S.2] Drawing on interviews...,we illustrate [something].

[A.S.3] Building on recent shifts..., we argue for [something].

The authors have avoided usage of more direct equivalents such as "We draw [something] from interviews in order to illustrate [something]", and "We build on recent shifts in [something] in order to argue for [something]." The important observation is that the authors' contribution is buried within the interior portions of the abstract.

Following the abstract, the article opens with three paragraphs of nearly the same length (21, 16, and 16 lines). Authorial we is entirely absent from the first paragraph, which briefly summarizes the history of language planning and policy (LPP) in three stages since the 1950s. The second paragraph, which indicates that the research being reported is positioned within the current phase of LPP work, is four sentences in length and as in the abstract, the first and last sentences are without a first-person pronoun. In the lengthy (61-word) second sentence, we appears as the thirteenth word, but it is clearly an *inclusive first person plural pronoun*, inviting inclusion of the reader: "This greater focus...is essential if we are...to answer the...question." The third sentence also presents an inclusive first person

plural pronoun, this time in the accusative form: "Such a focus...moves us beyond [something]." Introduction of the authorial we/our is thus delayed until the final paragraph of the introduction, and there it appears in four of the five sentences. In the first sentence of that paragraph, however, the pronoun we is subordinated within a relative clause, the paragraph having opened with the expression "The present article builds on this" rather than "We build on this." On the other hand, the second sentence begins directly with "We take language policy to be [something]." The third and fifth sentences, separated by a pronoun-less fourth sentence, soften this directness by beginning with the genitive rather than nominative form of the first person plural pronoun: "Our aim is..." and "Our approach differs." That fifth and last sentence is the shortest paragraph-terminal sentence in the three-paragraph introduction, and it is laden with three authorial pronouns (quoted here in its entirety):

Our approach differs in that we center our analysis on women's reported experiences and understanding of language policy and politics, not on the merit or effectiveness of specific language policies. (562, emphasis added here)

Of importance here is the recognition that although the authors have taken center stage by self-acknowledgement (through the presence of self-referential pronouns), the object of study has actually been subordinated: The noun phrase "women's reported experiences and understandings of [something]" is governed by a preposition. That NP is also semantically equivalent to "experiences and understandings which are reported by women." In other words, the value and validity of any results or interpretations presented by the authors of that article rest on the circumstances of the interviews.

A meticulous reading of this three-paragraph introduction, therefore, invites the question, "How was the data (which was analyzed) obtained?" Although King/deFina addresses the topic of obtaining subjects for the research, it fails to provide revealing information about the "researchers." More troubling is the lack of clarity in their usage of the expression "participants." At times, that word means "interviewees" but it is also used (inclusively) to indicate interviewers and interviewees.

Example of analysis: the expression participants and the absence of 1PPs

Other than the literature review, the only section/subsection of King/deFina that is without 1PPs is the last subsection before the Conclusion. That subsection is titled "Language policy as support services for Spanish speakers." The topic under discussion there is the participants' awareness of and attitude towards Spanish language courses being offered to city bus drivers. In paragraph 35, the final paragraph before the Conclusion, the authors indicate that even Jasmina, one of the "few" participants to give a positive interpretation of the city government's efforts

in this regard, also "judges the policy negatively..[for] limit[ing] her opportunities to practice her English" (p.666).

Though the researcher/authors present themselves as neutral and impartial, as is usually considered proper in academic research, investigation of the occurrence of the expression "participants," along with analysis of the presence of 1PPs, suggests that the fundamental position of the researchers/authors is also negative towards such seemingly supportive language policies. It is my claim that the authors conceal their personal political alignment, in sympathy with those of the Latinas interviewed, by hiding behind the more aggressive of their "participants."

In analyzing the distribution of 1PPs in King/deFina, I found it intriguing that there were none whatsoever in the labeled subsection immediately preceding the Conclusion. The Conclusion itself was interesting for the attenuation of 1PPs (underlining added here): "we/We/Our analysis" in the last three sentences of the first paragraph; "our data" in the opening sentence of the second paragraph, "we saw in our data" in the third of five sentences in the third paragraph, and "The present analysis reminds us," with an inclusive 1PP, in the last sentence of the fourth paragraph. The final, closing paragraph is entirely without any direct reference to the authors themselves, not even pronominally.

The fact that the subsection before the conclusion opened with the following words caused me to give greater attention to the expression "participants":

As mentioned above, most participants had limited knowledge of particular language legislation....(665, emphasis added here).

The expression "as mentioned above" is doubly interesting. For one, it is a passive substitute for "as we (the authors) mentioned previously." That is, use of the passive hides and obscures the agent, the authors themselves. Moreover, use of the expression "above," rather than "previously," subordinates the authors to a lower position.

The expression "participants" appears to refer to the interviewees whose "talk" was the subject of King/deFina. However, in a few instances the expression "participants" actually included the researchers/interviewers along with the interviewees. This is apparent when the collection of usages of the various forms of "participants" is tabulated. First, however, it should be noted that there is only one heading/sub-heading that is given as a single word: "Participants," given in bold in King/deFina for the first subsection under the main section (titled in all capital letters, "The Study"). That heading "Participants" is also the first usage of bold face in King/deFina, and the first occurrence of that word.

As can be seen in Table 2, the appearance of the word "participants" in nominative form is usually syntactically subordinated, and overall the oblique cases (genitive and accusative) more than double the number of the nominative cases. In King/

TABLE 2. Occurrences and categorization of the expression participants.

Subheadings are given in King/deFina in bold, but in this table only the subheading "Participants" is given in bold. The other subheadings are encased here in angle brackets. The number at the left is the paragraph number (see Table 1) and the number at the right is the sentence number. The specific form of the targeted word is then presented, usually along with preceding or following words for clarification of function. Capitalization is given here as in King/deFina. The column at the right designates the grammatical form of the targeted expression in the indicated location. In a number of instances the greater context of the target expression is provided.. **Bold** is added here to highlight the IPP; bold italic indicates inclusion of author/researcher/interviewer in the expression participants.

THE STUDY

	Participants	(heading in bold in King/deFina)	(includes interviewer??)	
10	1	Participants...were 15 women		NOM
	11	Most of our participants...	(bold added here)	ACC
		<Interviews and analysis>		
12	1	on gaining participants' perspectives		GEN
	2	of our participants	(bold added here)	ACC
13	1	on participants' personal history		GEN
	2	Participants were encouraged to expand on topics, experience, and sentiments of interest and importance to them.		NOM
		(Note: this word not only begins a sentence, it also appears prominently at the very top of page 656 because the sentence is the first sentence on that page, though it is the second sentence in the paragraph.)		
	3	including participants		ACC
	5	to the participants		ACC
	6	of the participants' choosing...		GEN
		in the participant's place of work		GEN
14	5	between the participants	(includes interviewer)	ACC
	6	we...align[ed] ourselves with participants		ACC
	8	between the participants	(includes interviewer)	ACC
	10	between participants	(includes interviewer)	ACC
15	2	by participants.	(includes interviewer??)	ACC
	3	in which participants share [s.t.](includes interviewer) (subordinated)		NOM
	8	in which participants...negotiated [s.t.] (subordinated)		NOM
		<Language policy and immigrant identity>		
20	1	of participants		ACC
23	3	While the participants ...had...met...(includes int.) (sub.clause)		NOM
		...the participants ...had had...interactions...(includes interviewer)		NOM
	6	...difference in participants' positions,(includes interviewer??)		GEN
		...between the interview participants .	(includes interviewer)	ACC
24	1	...these accounts, and the participants' roles within them, were shaped		GEN
	3	Given our participants' social isolation	(bold added here)	GEN
25	1	As suggested above, participants readily described [s.t.]		NOM
27	1	All participants were quick to note [s.t.]		NOM
		<English language policy as deception>		
31	3	among some of our participants	(bold added here)	ACC
		<Language policy as support services for Spanish speakers>		
34	1	As mentioned above, most participants had limited knowledge		NOM

deFina, other expressions are used instead of participants: women, individuals, people. The distribution of those alternatives may be worth investigating; however, their usage does not so recognizably include reference to the authors/researchers/interviewers.

CONCLUSION

In this article, the focus has been on the form, function, and distribution of first-person plural pronouns (1PPs) and it has been shown that there are instances when the usage includes the readers. Investigation here of the usage and distribution of the expression participants also reveals instances where the authors/researchers/interviewers are included in that expression. The distribution of 1PPs revealed recurrent patterns which could be interpreted as suggesting that the authors are attempting to conceal their contribution or full involvement in the research they have presented. Patterns of distribution of participants support that interpretation. On the other hand, such concealment is traditionally common in academic writing. What is needed is a more detailed analysis of 1PPs in terms of case and syntactic occurrence, as well as detailed analysis of alternative expressions for "participants". The difficulty of unraveling the uncertainty of meaning of researcher/interviewer and knowing when such expressions include the author is beyond the reach of the reader, but should motivate writers to be more precise in their usage of self-referential expressions.

FINAL REMARKS

A close reading of an article, such as I have given here, in selected parts, can reveal a great deal about the unidentified stance of the authors. It should be kept in mind that the authors of King/deFina, like myself, are women. Perhaps one of those women, like myself, has been or is currently experiencing and struggling with subordination to others, not only for reasons of being a woman, but for issues of the dominance of language.

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