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Research interests: learner language, corpus linguistics, metadiscourse

PERSON MARKERS IN NON-NATIVE STUDENTS' WRITING

The present paper seeks to analyse person markers, which refer to “the use of first person pronouns and possessive adjectives” (Hyland 2014(1999), p. 104), in university learner English. Students are constantly encouraged to aim at academic register, one of the features of which is an attempt at objectivity. While this could be achieved by using an impersonal style, “writers gain credibility by projecting an identity invested with individual authority, displaying confidence in their evaluations and commitment to their ideas” (Hyland 2002, p. 1091). Writers, therefore, have to find the right level of balance between invisibility and visibility in their work. Person markers, as one of the most important linguistic means to create authorial presence (Burneikaitė 2013), being subjected to genre constraints, pose numerous problems to non-native students who have repeatedly been characterised as lacking in awareness of genre conventions and having problems with formal register (Breeze 2007). Though the topic of authorial stance has been researched widely, there has been little analysis of Lithuanian learners’ English data (cf. Burneikaitė 2008, 2013). In addition, no research has been found that analysed genre or institution variables in the use of person markers in Lithuanian undergraduates’ writing. This shows a need for the present study, which focuses on genre, language proficiency, institutional, and L1 variables. The data for the study was retrieved from a number of corpora representing non-native (Lithuanian) and native (English) university students’ language. The results indicate different roles of the variables in the explicit expression of authorial stance by person markers.

KEY WORDS: learner corpora, writer visibility, person markers.

Introduction

During their studies at university, students are required to present a number of written assignments of different genres. Following Ken Hyland’s definition, genre is understood as a group of texts “representing how writers typically use language to respond to recurring situations” (Hyland 2005, p. 87). Since language is primarily used for communicative purposes, it is important to ensure unhindered communication between the writer and the reader, which can be facilitated by observing genre conventions. Metadiscourse is one of the features that could help to differentiate between genres. As non-native students have repeatedly been characterised as lacking in awareness of genre conventions (Breeze 2007) and having problems with formal register (see Lee 2001 for the discussion of differences

between genres and registers), studies of metadiscourse features in learner writing could contribute to the field of university academic literacy.

University genres require the use of academic register (cf. Gardner & Nesi 2013), one of the features of which is an attempt at objectivity, which could be achieved by using an impersonal style. At the same time, writers need to prove their authority and develop a strong voice in their text by the means of citation or metadiscourse (Paul Thompson 2016). The latter helps “writers gain credibility by projecting an identity invested with individual authority, displaying confidence in their evaluations and commitment to their ideas” (Hyland 2002, p. 1091). Since authorial presence depends on the discipline (Gray 2015) as well as genre (Poudat & Loiseau 2005) requirements, writers are faced with a challenging task to find the right level of balance between invisibility and visibility and to express their stance following the genre’s expectations.

The classification of stance proposed by Hyland (2014(1999)) consists of five elements: hedges (possible, might), emphatics (it is obvious, definitely), attitude markers (I agree, should), relational markers (we find here, now turn to), and person markers (we believe, let us consider). Authorial stance, as a part of metadiscourse, has received a considerable amount of attention in linguistic literature. It has been examined from various perspectives: native vs. non-native language (Hyland 2002, Callies 2010, McCrostie 2008, Natsukari 2012, Herriman 2007, Taki & Jafarpour 2012, Lancaster 2011, Neff et al. 2004), spoken vs. written language (Biber 2006), gender variable (Kuhi et al. 2012), discipline variable (Maroko 2013, Dzung Pho 2013), language variable (Carter-Thomas & Chambers 2012), different stance features (Sayah & Hashemi 2014), etc.

Authorial presence in the text is a scalar phenomenon. The present study focuses on person, or self-mentioning, markers, which refer to “the use of first person pronouns and possessive adjectives” (Hyland 2014 (1999), p. 104). They are at one end of the continuum of visibility choices (cf. John 2009) as one of the most important linguistic means to create writer visibility (cf. Burneikaitė 2013). Although extensive research has been carried out on their use by learners with different mother-tongue background (Ädel 2006, Paquot et al. 2013, John 2009, Tang & John 1999, Abbuhl 2012), there has been little analysis of Lithuanian learners’ English data (cf. Burneikaitė 2008, 2013). In addition, no research has been found that analysed genre or institution variables in the use of person markers in Lithuanian undergraduate writing.

Combining the ‘thin’ metadiscourse approach (Ädel & Mauranen 2010) with variationist and comparative approaches, the paper aims to address the following research questions:

- whether explicit author reference in Lithuanian learners’ writing depends on the text genre,
- whether explicit authorial presence in Lithuanian undergraduates’ texts depends on the learners’ language level,
- whether explicit self-mention in Lithuanian learners’ texts depends on the institution where the texts were written, and
- whether explicit author reference in Lithuanian learners’ writing differs from the one in the comparable texts written by native speakers of English.

Data and methodology

Data for the study consist of English texts written by non-native and native university students. For the non-native part of the material the following texts were selected (Table 1):

- research papers (RPA) and proposals (PRO) collected at Vilnius University as the Lithuanian part of the Corpus of Academic Learner English (CALE);
- argumentative and literary essays written by the third and fourth year students at Vilnius University (VU) and Vytautas Magnus University (VDU) as the Lithuanian subcorpus (LICLE) of the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE);
- first year students' examination essays (AFK) written at Vilnius University (compiled by Juknevičienė).

Table 1. Corpora of non-native (NNS) university students' English writing.

	LICLE-VU	LICLE-VDU	AFK	CALE-RPA-LIT	CALE-PRO-LIT	Total
Number of texts	304	115	226	23	44	712
Number of tokens	177 564	65 755	91 986	166 783	24 202	526 290

In order to analyse the role of the L1 variable, the following comparable native English corpora (Table 2) were chosen:

- the British (Br) and American (Am) parts of the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS);
- proposals (PRO) and research reports (RR) from the British Academic Written English Corpus (BAWE).

Table 2. Corpora of native (NS) university students' English writing.

	LOCNESS-BR	LOCNESS-US	BAWE-PRO	BAWE-RR	Total
Number of texts	90	208	37	40	375
Number of tokens	95 732	169 134	77 659	182 070	524 595

Using variationist and comparative approaches, the present study seeks to analyse genre, language proficiency, institutional, and L1 variables for the use of person markers in university students' writing. Following the 'thin' metadiscourse approach, quantitative analysis was conducted using AntConc3.4.3w (Anthony 2014) software. Log-likelihood and effect size calculator (Rayson 2015) was employed to determine statistical significance at the 95th percentile, with $p < 0.05$, and the critical value at 3.84.

Results

Previous research on the use of first person markers most commonly stressed the role of discipline (Gray 2015). The role of genre (Poudat & Loiseau 2005, Petch-Tyson 1998, Rahimivand & Kuhi 2014, Paquot et al. 2013), language proficiency (Abbuhl 2012, McCrostie 2008) or nativeness (Petch-Tyson 1998, Paquot et al. 2013, Behnam et al. 2014), however, yielded controversial results. Figure 1 presents an overview of quantitative results in the corpora under examination. It shows higher writer visibility in argumentative (LICLE) than in academic-like (CALE proposals and research papers) NNS texts. This confirms the tendencies reported by Paquot & et al. (2013), who studied Norwegian and French EFL learners' writing.

General quantitative results of person markers suggest that Lithuanian learners' visibility in the texts directly correlates with their language proficiency: in the 3rd-4th year of studies, students' overt presence in essays is almost 1.5 times higher than in their first year. The tendency contradicts the one attested in Rebekha Abbuhl's (2012) study, who found lower frequencies in more proficient NNS writing. By contrast, James McCrostie (2008) observed no role played by the language proficiency level. Such variance in the amount of writer visibility in learners' texts signals the need to analyse each learner group separately.

While other learner groups were reported to be more overtly present in their argumentative texts (Norwegian and French (Paquot et al. 2013), Swedish (Ädel 2006)), Lithuanian learners' self-mention contradicts the pattern, as their use of person markers corresponds to that of American students', normalised frequency being 124 and 123 per 10,000 words respectively. Due to the different writing traditions, writer visibility in LOCNESS-US more than doubles the one in LOCNESS-BR (normalised frequency being 123 and 57 respectively) (more on the topic in Ädel 2006).

Writer visibility in academic-like text genres, proposals and research reports manifests the opposite tendencies in NS and NNS writing. In Lithuanian learners' texts, writers are 1.5 times more often explicitly visible in research papers than in proposals, while in NS

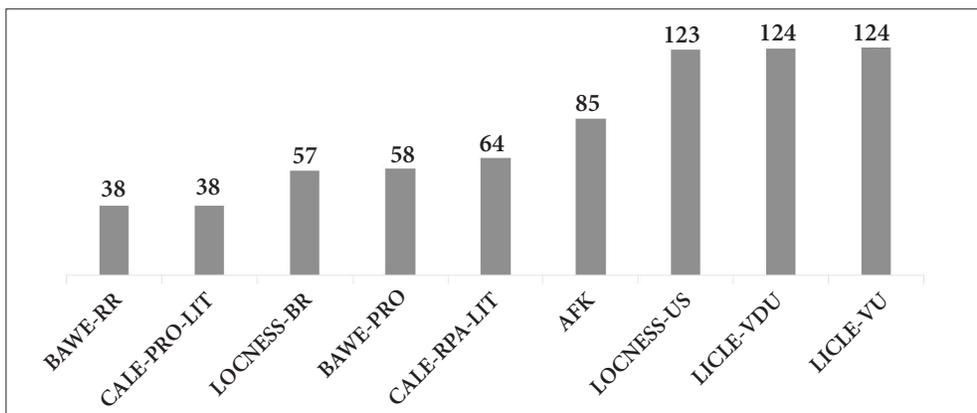


Figure 1. Normalised frequency of person markers per 10,000 words in NNS and NS English corpora.

corpora, person markers are 1.7 times more common in proposals than in research reports. Further analysis into the functions of person markers would be needed in order to check the hypothesis proposed by Ädel (2006) that by a higher number of person markers NNS try to disguise their lack of knowledge on the topic.

A closer look at the use of person markers reveals different preferences across the corpora. Though the use of these self-mentioning devices in Lithuanian learners' writing is governed by different writing tasks, the choice of singular or plural person markers varies across genres (Table 3). Contrary to the general use, singular person markers fail to comply with the tendency of higher usage in more academic-like text types being used to approximately the same extent in argumentative essays and research papers (LL -0.31). A major difference in singular markers, however, can be observed between the two academic text types: research papers and proposals (LL +91.03). In proposals, NNS students try to avoid writer visibility to a greatest extent. In the case of explicit authorial presence, though all the texts were single authored, they tend to use plural markers. The so-called 'mock-solidarity' (Ädel 2006) is particularly common in the least academic text type – argumentative essays, where students rely on plural person markers approximately three times more often than in both types of academic texts, in which no significant difference in use was observed (LL -3.33). Summing the overview of genre variable up, it is possible to hypothesize about Lithuanian learners' attempts to differentiate between different genres and comply with the "notion that academic writing should be distant and impersonal" (Tang & John 1999, p. S35).

Table 3. The genre variable of person markers (normalised frequency per 10,000 words).

	Singular	Plural	Total
LICLE-VU	34	90	124
CALE-RPA-LIT	35	29	64
CALE-PRO-LIT	4	34	38

The proficiency variable is one more analysed factor in the use of person markers. As can be seen from Table 4, the language level directly correlates with language proficiency: the higher the language level, the higher the frequency of person markers in Lithuanian students' English essays. Statistical analysis indicated significant differences in all the groups of person markers, namely, singular, plural and total, LL being -88.99, -30.06, and -87.60 respectively. Whether the increase in writer visibility could be attributed to the increase of students' self-confidence or whether it is stipulated by the instructions should be analysed in further research.

Table 4. The language proficiency variable of person markers (normalised frequency per 10,000 words).

	Singular	Plural	Total
AFK	15	70	85
LICLE-VU	34	90	124

The analysis of the institutional variable reveals contradicting results (Table 5). While the overall use of person markers does not differ among the two institutions (LL 0.00), preferences for singular and plural markers are institution-dependent (LL -56.05 and +31.08 respectively). Though students at both universities clearly favour plural first person markers, the gap between singular and plural use is much higher in Vilnius University students' essays. The results reiterate Nida Burneikaitė's (2008) findings of different traditions of academic writing in different educational institutions in Lithuania.

Table 5. The institutional variable of person markers (normalised frequency per 10,000 words).

	Singular	Plural	Total
LICLE-VU	34	90	124
LICLE-VDU	57	67	124

The comparison of overt authorial presence with the help of person markers in the Lithuanian learners' and NS texts (Table 6) reveals significantly higher authorial presence in NNS writing (LL +161.29). This result is due to a significant difference in the use of plural markers (LL +249.60). Quantitative results of singular markers, however, are almost identical in the two groups (LL +0.35).

Table 6. The L1 variable of person markers (normalised frequency per 10,000 words).

	Singular	Plural	Total
NNS	33	62	94
NS	32	40	72

Table 6 shows that the Lithuanian learners are more likely to choose self-mentioning in their texts than the native writers. This is especially noticeable in the case of plural markers, which are 1.55 times more common in the texts written by the Lithuanian students. The results correspond to those of Behnam *et al.* (2014), who reported overuse of *our* and *we* in the chemistry research articles by NNS. The Swedish learners, however, while overusing personal metadiscourse in general, tended to rely more on singular than plural markers in their writing (Ädel 2006).

Conclusions

The present study aimed at analysing the role of several variables – genre, proficiency, institutional and L1 – in the use of person markers. The results have indicated the most consistent differences under the proficiency variable. The more proficient the learners are, the more likely they are to be overtly present in their writing.

The research, however, has shown the salience of genre and institutional variables to depend on the groups of person markers. While the overall results have attested the genre to play an important role in the quantitative use of personal metadiscourse, some contradicting results have been noticed in the use of singular and plural markers. A need to

consider the groups separately has been observed in the case of the institutional variable, where the mirror tendencies of the use of singular and plural groups have compensated the differences and yielded identical overall results.

The study has found Lithuanian learners to be considerably more explicitly present in their writing than native speakers. This variable, however, has attested plural markers to be more difficult for Lithuanian learners to use native student-like.

The findings should be seen as one step in the analysis of Lithuanian learners' personal metadiscourse. Further research should be conducted to determine the role of the variables for different functions of person markers.

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PERSON MARKERS IN NON-NATIVE STUDENTS' WRITING

Summary

In recent years, academic discourse has received a considerable amount of attention. It has been addressed from various perspectives: metadiscourse, connectors, lexical bundles, academic vocabulary, syntactic structures, etc. Authorial stance, as a part of metadiscourse, is a wide and controversial topic. The present paper seeks to analyse authorial stance in university learner English. Students are constantly encouraged to aim at academic register, one of the features of which is an attempt at objectivity. While this could be achieved by using an impersonal style, “writers gain credibility by projecting an identity invested with individual authority, displaying confidence in their evaluations and commitment to their ideas” (Hyland 2002, p. 1091). Writers, therefore, have to find the right level of balance between invisibility and visibility in their work as “controlling the level of personality in a text is central to successfully maintaining interaction with readers and building a convincing argument” (Hyland 2014 (1999), p. 99). Non-native writers, however, have repeatedly been characterised as lacking in awareness of genre conventions and having problems with formal register (Breeze 2007).

The classification of stance proposed by Hyland (2014 (1999)) consists of five elements; this study, however, focuses on person markers, which refer to “the use of first person pronouns and possessive adjectives” (Hyland 2014 (1999), p. 104), since they belong to a group of the most important linguistic means to create authorial presence (Burneikaitė 2013). Although authorial stance has been examined from various perspectives: native vs. non-native language (Hyland 2002, Callies 2010, McCrostie 2008, Natsukari 2012, Herriman 2007, Taki & Jafarpour 2012, Lancaster 2011, Neff et al. 2004), spoken vs. written language (Biber 2006), gender variable (Kuhi et al. 2012), discipline variable (Maroko 2013, Dzung Pho 2013), language variable (Carter-Thomas & Chambers 2012), different stance features (Sayah & Hashemi 2014), there has been little analysis of Lithuanian learner English data (cf. Burneikaitė 2008, 2013). In addition, no research has been found that analysed genre or institution variables in the use of person markers in Lithuanian undergraduate writing. This indicates a need for the present study.

Using variationist and comparative approaches, this paper aims to analyse the role of four variables – genre, proficiency, institution, and L1 – in written English texts by NNS (Lithuanian) and NS university students. The results indicate different roles of the variables in the explicit expression of authorial stance by person markers.

KEY WORDS: learner corpora, writer visibility, person markers.

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Moksliniai interesai: besimokančiųjų kalba, tekstynų lingvistika, metadiskursas

ASMENS ŽYMIKLIAI NEGIMTAKALBIŲ STUDENTŲ RAŠTO DARBUOSE

Santrauka

Autoriaus pozicijos raiška gana plati ir kontroversiška tema tirta skirtingais aspektais. Buvo analizuota gimtakalbių ir negimtakalbių vartoseną (Hyland 2002, Callies 2010, McCrostie 2008, Natsukari 2012, Herriman 2007, Taki & Jafarpour 2012, Lancaster 2011, Neff et al. 2004), sakytinė ir rašytinė kalba (Biber 2006), aptartas disciplininis (Maroko 2013, Dzung Pho 2013) ir kalbos kintamasis (Carter-Thomas and Chambers 2012), skirtingi autoriaus raiškos būdai (Sayah & Hashemi 2014), tačiau mažai dėmesio skirta Lietuvos studentų anglų kalba rašytų tekstų tyrimui (žr. Burneikaitė 2008, 2013). Bandymų apžvelgti žanro ar institucinio kintamojo svarbą autoriaus pozicijos raiškai lietuvių studentų rašytuose tekstuose anglų kalba trūkumas paskatino atlikti šį tyrimą. Straipsnyje siekiama aptarti vieną iš svarbiausių lingvistinių priemonių autoriaus pozicijos raiškai (Burneikaitė 2013:154), asmens žymiklius, universiteto studentų anglų kalboje. Vienas iš reikalavimų studentų rašto darbams – akademinio registro vartojimas. Nors akademiniam registrui būdingas objektyvumas tradiciškai būdavo pasiekiamas autoriui tarsi atsiribojant nuo teksto ir 'pasislepiančiam' už beasmenių ar pasyvių konstrukcijų, šiuolaikinėje literatūroje pabrėžiama, kad norėdamas įgyti skaitytojo pasitikėjimą, autorius turi vertinti tekstą, prisiimti atsakomybę ir tapti matomu (Hyland 2002). Literatūroje dažnai minima negimtakalbiams studentams būdinga skirtingiems anrams būdingų normų nepaisymo problema (Breeze 2007) gali lemti gimtakalbiams nebūdingą asmens raiškos vartoseną.

Tekstynų tyrimui naudoti skirtingų žanrų (rašinys, pasiūlymas, kursinis darbas), kalbos lygio (pirmas ir trečias/ ketvirtas kursai) ir skirtingose institucijose (Vilniaus ir Vytauto didžiojo universitetai) anglų kalba parašyti lietuvių studentų darbai. Gimtosios kalbos kintamojo reikšmingumui nustatyti naudotasi lygintiniais gimtakalbių anglų studentų tekstynais. Kiekybinio tyrimo rezultatai atskleidžia skirtingą kintamųjų svarbą ir tolesnės analizės poreikį.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: besimokančiųjų tekstynai, autoriaus 'matomumas' tekste, asmens žymikliai.

Įteikta 2016 metų liepos 15 d.