



Use of First-Person Pronouns: A Corpus-Based Study of Academic Writings

1. Introduction

Scientific writing is thought to be impersonal, so it is not surprising for academicians to see the encouragement of the use of impersonal constructions in scientific articles. This article is based on an investigation of the use of first-person pronouns in academic writing by analyzing the corpus-based result and aims to identify if “I” and “we” are seldom used in conveying ideas.

2. Methodology, Results, and Discussion

By using COCA as an online corpus source, the occurrence frequencies of “I” and “we” as pronouns are checked (since “I” might be used in roman numbers or abbreviations). The frequencies of “I” and “we” as pronouns are much lower in academic writings than the average (“I”: 240833 for academic writings, 1777200 for average; “we”: 268850 for academic writings, 647591 for average). However, the frequencies of using “I” and “we” in academic writing is close to news and magazine, so more detailed usage of “I” and “we” should be carried out to identify if the two words are seldom used in conveying ideas. Then the frequencies of certain “subject-verb” combinations are checked. The combinations are the most commonly used according to the ranking from COCA, are listed on the back page of the article with the corresponding frequencies.

Comparing the percentage of average frequencies of all filed and academic writing, the usage of “Think” and its homonym are greatly reduced in academic writings. It’s clear that rather than conveying ideas or stating an opinion (“Think”), an academic writer is more likely to use first-person pronouns to express gratitude (“Thank”) in the acknowledge part, describe processes of experiment or study process (“Will”) and state the background of the research (“Know”). The statistical result shows that though first-person pronouns are not strictly restricted in academic writing, they are rarely used in stating an opinion.

3. Conclusion

According to the simple research, the usage of “I” and “we” as pronouns in stating opinions should be avoided in academic writing.



Table.1 Investigated Combinations and Their Frequencies

Pronoun	Meaning of Verb (Not Exact Word)	Frequency/Percentage (Academic Writing)	Average Percentage (All Fields)
I	“Think”	14017/5.18%	10.09%
	“Thank”	928/0.38%	0.048%
	“Will”	9170/3.81%	2.248%
	“Know”	5231/2.17%	3.24%
	“Want”	3770/1.57%	1.83%
We	“Think”	5132/1.91%	7.95%
	“Thank”	3019/1.12%	0.11%
	“Will”	7032/2.61%	2.26%
	“Know”	7791/2.90%	2.44%
	“Want”	7031/2.61%	2.69%