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Article in Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences · January 2012

DOI: 10.5901/mjss.2012.03.01.157

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## Engagement and Stance in Academic Writing: A Study of English and Persian Research Articles

Saeed Taki

*Shahreza Branch, Islamic Azad University, IRAN*  
Email: [Taki@iaush.ac.ir](mailto:Taki@iaush.ac.ir)

Fatemeh Jafarpour

*Shahreza Branch, Islamic Azad University, IRAN*

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**Abstract** Written texts of any kind embody some interactions between writers and their potential readers. This study focused on academic writing to find about linguistic features used by writers to create such interactions. Following Hyland's (2005) model of interaction in which stance and engagement are introduced as two discoursal features having an effective role in constructing writer-reader interactions, this study aimed at investigating the ways in which English and Persian academics express their position to discover the strategies used to bring readers to their writing. To this end, 120 English and Persian research articles in two disciplines of Chemistry and Sociology were analyzed for the purposes of cross-linguistic and cross-disciplinary comparison. The results demonstrated that the writers of both disciplines, especially the sociologists, considered the expression of stance and engagement markers in their writing important. However, in sociology articles there was a greater effort to interact with readers. Further, in Persian there seemed to be more cases of readers' involvement.

**Keywords:** academic writing, discoursal features, stance, engagement, disciplinary differences:

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### 1. Introduction

Over the last decades, academic writing has undergone a great change such that it is no longer thought of as an objective, faceless and impersonal form of writing, rather it is considered as an endeavor on the part of writers aiming to initiate some interaction with their readers (Hyland, 2005). In other words, producing good academic writing demands not only writers' linguistic ability but also their awareness of rhetorical features accepted by readers. Academic writing is, in fact, seen as transformation of knowledge, a process through which the writer brings the readers to an understanding of his work's value and significance (Tarry, 2005). Academic writing is not just a linguistic process; it is a socio-political process in which writers, as the owners of power, try to be acknowledged and recognized by the social community they write for (Casanave, 2003). To accomplish this task, writers employ different strategies to express their identity in writing.

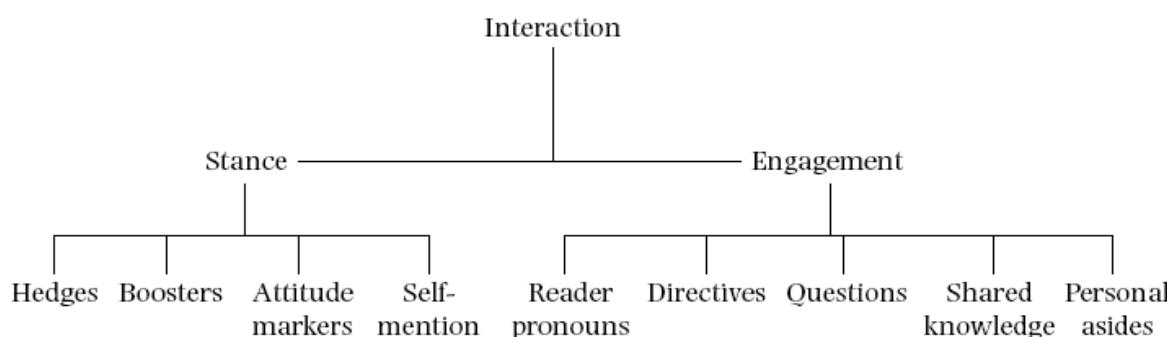
As Hyland (2010) puts it, we are really no more supposed to think of academic writing as completely 'author evacuated', but instead, as consisting of exact evaluations and interactions (p.116). He, furthermore, refers to research articles as 'sites' where writers are not just offering their viewpoints, but also attempting to negotiate some relations with those who will possibly read these products. Looking at the issue from this perspective, Hyland (2010) leads us to the idea of interpersonality in academic writing, which is concerned with the ways through which writers make use of the explicit system of meanings to enter their 'voice' into the texts to be heard by their readers. To achieve this goal, writers should actually be well aware of the norms of the community they are writing for.

Thus, like any other mode of communication, there is a textual interaction between the writer and readers in the process of academic writing. The theoretical foundation informing the explication of such a writer-reader interaction is Halliday's (1978, 1985) classification of three macro-functions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Based on this classification, Vande Kopple (1985) differentiates

between the ideational function, on the one hand, and the interpersonal and textual functions, on the other, with the former being achieved through primary discourse and the latter through metadiscourse. According to Cheng and Steffensen (1996), interpersonal metadiscourse serves the function of developing writer-reader relationship.

## 2. A Model of Interaction in Academic Writing

Hyland (2005) has presented a working model to expound the interaction between writers and readers. He maintains that the purpose of writing is not only producing some texts or explaining an external reality, but also constructing and negotiating social relations with the readers. According to this model, the interaction in academic writing mainly involves two major elements of stance and engagement.



*FIGURE 1. Key resources of academic interaction*

As can be seen in the figure above, writers attempt to project their position in the texts through the following elements:

1. Hedges
2. Boosters
3. Attitude Markers
4. Self- mention

In addition to expressing their positions in what they write, writers are also required to bring the potential readers into their text. As Hyland (2005) explains, writers can involve the readers in their writing by making use of one or more of these five elements:

1. Reader pronouns
2. Personal Asides
3. Appeals to shared knowledge
4. Directives
5. Questions

Over the past years, researchers have referred to the issue of stance using different names such as 'evaluation' (Hunston, 1994; Hunston & Thompson, 2000), 'intensity' (Labov, 1984), 'affect' (Ochs, 1989), 'evidentiality' (Chafe, 1986; Chafe & Nichols, 1986), 'hedging' (Holmes, 1988; Hyland, 1996a&b), and 'stance' (Barton, 1993; Beach & Anson, 1992; Biber & Finegan 1988, 1989; Biber, Johansson, Leech, & Conrad, 1999; Conrad & Biber, 2000). Although researchers have used different names, they all have actually followed the same goal. They aimed to investigate the ways in which writers and speakers project their personal feelings and judgments in what they produce.

Considering the importance of acquiring the skill of writing a good abstract for journal articles, Phuong (2008) has analyzed the 'rhetorical moves' and 'author's stance' in 30 abstracts of journal articles. Together with introducing five major moves present in the abstract section of these articles, Phuong (2008) provides a list of those linguistic features that help the authors indicate their 'stance' in their writing. Grammatical subjects, verb tenses and aspects, voice, modal auxiliaries and semi-modal verbs, self-reference words, attitudinal adjectives, reporting verbs are some items included in this list.

Biber (2006) in a study of stance, as a discoursal element, examined university registers within both speech and writing. This study restricted itself just to grammatical features specifically adverbials and complement clauses aiming to come up with different ways of expression of stance by means of various grammatical features. It was found that adverbials express the attitude or assessment of the speaker or writer with respect to the proposition in the matrix clause while in the complement clauses, the matrix clause verbs express a *stance* with respect to the proposition in the complement clause. Finally, his findings confirm the view, held by previous studies, that *stance* should be necessarily expressed in all university registers. But, when it comes to the comparison between written and spoken registers, the study surprisingly suggests that the expression of *stance* in written registers is rare and more restricted in meaning than in their spoken counterparts. Readers' engagement, with its key role in shaping effective writing, has also been the focus of researchers' attention in recent years. As Hyland (2005) asserts academic research articles are interactive with the authors making their readers actively involved in the communication process. Based on a framework of engagement which he has developed, Hyland (2005) focused on a total corpus of 64 project reports written by a group of final-year Hong Kong undergraduates to explore the ways in which these participants try to show the readers' presence in their writings so as to establish relationship with them. Also, the researcher compared students' products and professional academics' practices to show how these writers' purposes determine the construction of the readers in their works. The findings of the study suggest that contrary to what is often depicted, academic writing is not an impersonal monologue, but it contains many dialogic interactions. Finally, distinguishing such engagement devices as *reader pronouns*, *asides*, and *references to shared knowledge* from *directives* and *questions* Hyland (2005) concludes that the former devices are used to draw on the shared goals between the writers and readers and, thereby to bring the reader into the discourse as a 'fellow disciplinary member'.

### 3. The Present Study

Following Hyland's (2005) model of interaction, the present study has focused on a detailed analysis of linguistic features occurring in two different Persian academic disciplines to find out to what extent they are similar to their English counterparts. To put it simply, this study aimed to investigate whether or not Persian and English academics make use of the same discoursal elements for creating interaction with their readers. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed:

1. Do Persian as well as English writers of *Sociology* and *Chemistry* articles make use of stance and engagement markers to interact with their readers?
2. Do academic writing practices in two disciplines of *Sociology* and *Chemistry* show any differences in these two languages?

### 4. Method

#### 4.1. Corpus

A total number of 120 research articles from two broad fields of Chemistry and Sociology in two languages of Persian and English constituted the corpus of this study. Chemistry and Sociology were chosen as representatives of two different fields of Natural and Social Sciences. The idea was to study possible cross-

disciplinary differences in terms of writer-reader interactions in the domain of academic writing. For English articles, two leading international publications, SAGE, and SCIENCE DIRECT, with a quite large number of journals, were referred to. From among online journals existing in the fields of Chemistry and Sociology, *European Polymer Journal*, *Arabian Journal of Chemistry*, and *Polymer* together with journals of *Sociology*, *Cultural Sociology*, and *Teaching Sociology* were used as the source of research articles.

As for the Persian language, data was collected from four Iranian journals: from *Quarterly Journal of Communication Research* and *Quarterly Journal of Cultural Research* 30 Persian research articles in the field of Sociology were selected and from *Journal of Science and Polymer Technology* and *Journal of SIAU* 30 Persian articles in the field of Chemistry were chosen (See Table 1).

Table 1. General Information about the English and Persian Corpus

Corpus	Discipline	No. of Articles	No. of Words	Publication Date
English	Sociology	30	122000	2008-2010
	Chemistry	30	88033	
Persian	Sociology	30	121261	2009-2011
	Chemistry	30	92038	

As shown in Table 1, both Persian and English materials of the study were chosen from articles published recently and over a short period of time. Considering that research articles as academic genres would undergo changes through longer periods of time (Kim, 2009), this decision was made.

Another issue of concern is the choice of the topics of research articles. The corpus of the study covered a variety of issues in both Sociology and Chemistry, and no specific topics were selected. This was based on the fact that the conventions of the register as some interpersonal aspects of the discourse are not directly influenced by the topics of the texts (Kim, 2009).

#### 4.2. Procedure

First, a list of potentially interactive markers in both Persian and English was prepared. In providing such a list, the researcher heavily relied on the previous research into interactive features (e.g. Biber & Finegan, 1989; Hyland, 1999/ 2000; Hyland, 2005; Hyland, 2008; Lewin, 2005; Abdi, 2002; Kim, 2009).

Regarding the text analysis of both English and Persian articles, one considerable point needs to be mentioned. Unlike some previous studies focusing their analysis on just one section of the articles like Brenton's (1996) study of conference abstracts or Swales' (1990) project on introductions in this study all parts of the articles were examined. As Hyland (2005) observes, just considering the happening of *stance* and *engagement* markers in just Introduction and Discussion as subjective and author-centered sections of the article seems unwise. In the next stage, Wordsmith 2003, a text analysis and concordance program, was used to find the exact number of the occurrence of each item of stance and engagement markers in the articles based on the two lists produced in the previous section. 30% of the corpus was also double-checked by a scholar in the field to guarantee the reliability of the results. The results were found to have a correlation coefficient of 0.86 in the case of English and Persian articles of chemistry while this figure was 0.88 for their counterparts in the field of sociology.

#### 4.3. Data Analysis

##### 4.3.1. Stance Markers

In the following sentences some examples of stance markers are presented to illustrate the interaction between the writer and readers. The examples show how academic writers make use of *hedges* in order to

manage their uncertainty towards a proposition in a text:

English: While it may still be used in art theory, it is almost absent in the human and social sciences.

Persian: Shaayad zamaani een tafaavothaa ma'ni-ye xod raa az dast bedahand. (Maybe sometime these differences lose their meaning)

On the contrary, the next following examples show how English and Persian writers, through *boosters*, create some opportunities to express both their certainty in what they say and their solidarity with the audience:

English: In short, whatever the quality of our article might have been, we certainly seemed to have touched a nerve.

Persian: Qat'an modiraan-e raadio baraay-e bahregiree az een emkaanaat.....(Definitely, for the radio managers to exploit these opportunities..... )

By incorporating into their writing some *attitude markers* carrying with themselves different meanings of surprise, agreement, importance, and frustration, academic writers make use of another discoursal element to show the stance they take towards some proposition. Also, by referring to some shared values, these writers attempt to bring their readers to an agreement with themselves. Consider these examples:

English: It is to some extent surprising that someone who has been critical of the exclusive use of survey evidence in the sociology of stratification (Crompton, 2008) should now be so keen to endorse its centrality.

Persian: az aanjaa ke motaesefaaane barnaame saazaan-e raadio saalhaast.....(since unfortunately radio program developers for years.....)

The technique of using first person pronouns and possessive adjectives, *self-mention*, is another device through which academics can project themselves in their texts. The following sentences will clarify the point:

English: In order to functionalize the P1-core, we have followed the literature procedures

Persian: Dar een pazhoohesh pazhooheshgar dar naqsh-e modeer talaash mikonad.....(In this study, the researcher as a manager is trying.....)

#### 4.3.2. Engagement Markers

The first and, perhaps, the most explicit device through which writers can accompany the readers in the process of writing and create a dialogue with them is *reader pronouns*. Here are some examples to show how writers give their audiences *a sense of membership*:

English: Let us take a well-known example: nowadays, no Anglo-American bibliography in our disciplines.....

Persian: az een roo laazem ast be estefaadee az raveshhaay-e keifeetaree rooy aavarim taa een emkaan raa biyaabeem.....(so it is necessary that we seek more qualitative approaches so that we can.....)

Sometimes, writers make very brief interruptions to offer a comment on assertions they have made. These intentional interruptions are referred to as *personal asides*.

English: Conversely, the variously bonded variants of ODPA give a rather complex signal pattern in mostly linear polymers (showing that all possibilities of reacting are probably used) whereas one group of signals (17, 19, 20) and thus one bonding form gets prominence under higher branching.

Persian: .....az sooye resaanehaay-e raqeeb naagozeer be estefaadeh az hameen resaanehaa baraaye afzayesh-e kaaraayee va moxaatab ast (ke xod no'ee forsat-e tallayee beshomaar miravad). ( due to the rival media there is no other choice but to use the same media to increase productivity and viewers (which is a golden opportunity itself)

Presupposing that their potential readers *share some certain values and ideas* with them, writers of academic texts make use of some explicit markers to focus their readers' attention on those shared knowledge, and thereby bring them to an agreement with themselves (see examples 1 through 3, for more clarification):

English: We know the structuralist trend of the 1960s, developed by the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss, the psychoanalyst Lacan, the philosopher Foucault.....

Persian: sargozasht-e keshvar-e zhaapon shaayad mesaal-e xoobee baashad. Hamegaan baavar daaran zhaapon ke emrooz-e be yekee az keshvarhaaye.....(the history of Japan is a good example. People all believe that Japan today is one of the countries.....)

When possible, academic writers take the role of a teacher to *give their readers some instructions* enabling them to perform an action in the way they suggest. Through such *directives*, writers invite their audiences to either refer to some other part in the same article or take some moments thinking about what they are asked so as to finally come up with a certain outcome:

English: Consider, for instance, why you are turning the pages of this book at all – why you have decided to study sociology... .

Persian: tavajoh dashte basheed ke besyaari az film haay-e toleed shod-e.....(be aware that most movies produced.....)

Academics can also think of *questions* so as to both arouse their audiences' curiosity and encourage them to follow the argument to the end:

English: Should the sociologist focus on 'major' arts, because they are considered as such by the actors and as a result of such perceptions play important roles in society?

Persian: Aayaa resaanehaa baa modiriyat-e bohraan hamraah xaahand shod? (Will the media accompany the management of crisis?)

## 5. Results

The analysis of 120 research articles demonstrated that the expression of stance and engagement features was of great importance in academic writing, with 110 occurrences in each English sociology article, 23 cases in each English chemistry article, 112 ones in each Persian sociology article, and finally 32 occurrences in each Persian chemistry article. Put differently, there was one case in every 37 words in English sociology articles; one in every 125 words in English chemistry papers; one in every 35 words in Persian sociology articles and one in every 94 words in Persian chemistry papers.

Considering this outcome, the present study is in line with findings of the previous projects on the issue (e.g. Hyland, 2005a; Hyland, 2005b; Abdi, 2002; Hyland, 2010), all emphasizing the inclusion of stance and engagement markers in research articles of different academic fields of study.

As long as the comparison between the two disciplines is concerned, in both languages, the Sociology rather than Chemistry academics were found to attempt more to interact with their potential readers by including a greater number of stance and engagement markers mostly through *hedges* and *attitude markers* (see Table 2). This is due to the fact that, as Abdi (2002), Hyland (2005), and Hyland (2010) observe, in

producing writing of social sciences, writers have more freedom to accompany the texts with their personal feelings and emotions than in natural sciences where the writers are only reporting some scientific facts.

Table 2. Stance and Engagement Features in Persian and English Research Articles of Chemistry and Sociology (Per 1000 word).

Features	Chemistry		Sociology	
	English	Persian	English	Persian
Stance	6	9.1	18.7	23.6
Hedges	2.4	2.5	11.5	5.7
Boosters	0.9	1.2	1.9	1.6
Attitude mkrs	1.8	5.3	3.7	16.2
Self – mention	0.9	0.1	1.6	0.1
Engagement	1.5	1.1	7.9	3.9
Reader ref	0.3	0.1	2.9	1.1
Asides	1	0.9	2.4	2
Directives	0.9	0.1	1.1	0.2
Question	0	0.04	1	0.5
Shared knowledge	0.2	0	0.5	0.1
Total	7.5	10.2	26.6	27.5

Among the nine elements under the study, *hedge* was found as the most frequently occurring item in all English articles, especially Sociology, which is in line with the findings of Bank (1994), Mayer (1994) and Lewin (2005). This outcome reflects the necessity of distinguishing facts from opinions in social sciences on the part of English academics when talking about their achieved outcome. Regarding this element, we can refer to Abdi's (2002) study of interpersonal metadiscourse in which he found writers of social rather than natural sciences to make use of *hedges* more frequently. The fewer occurrences of *hedges* in Chemistry articles can be justified considering the nature of natural academic writing which allows more certainty on the part of writers reporting some empirical phenomena. However, in Persian, *attitude markers* were found to be employed most frequently in both Chemistry and Sociology with the latter showing a greater frequency.

Regarding other stance and engagement markers, no case of *questions* and *shared knowledge* was found in both English and Persian Chemistry articles, while Sociology academics made use of, at least, a few number of these engagement features. Academics of both fields of study, however, did not show considerable differences in their use of *directives*, and sociologists used only a few cases of such engagement devices in their articles. It should be mentioned that, generally, the frequency of *directives* was not that great in the whole corpus of the study.

Also, writers of both fields of study were found to employ almost an equal number of *boosters*, as another stance marker, in their articles. Finally, as for *personal asides* both fields of study showed a very close number of occurrences in the research articles (see Table 2).

With regard to the total number of occurrences of both stance and engagement markers in the English and Persian articles of Sociology and Chemistry (see Table 2), it can be concluded that in the field of Chemistry, Persian academics' use of interactive features (10.2) overwhelms their English counterparts' (7.5), while in Sociology writings, the two groups of writers were found to attempt almost equally in order to interact with their readers (26.6 in Persian and 27.5 in English).

As for cross-linguistic comparison, in the case of *reader pronouns* and *self-mentions* English and

Persian languages showed some differences. For the purpose of involving the readers in their writing, unlike English writers who confined themselves to the use of subject and object pronouns together with possessive adjectives, Persian academics were found to show their commitment with the readers through both reader pronouns and verb inflections. *Self-mentions*, as a stance marker, were not found to be used in the Persian articles in the same way as their English counterparts. While English writers' mention of themselves was through their use of first person pronouns (subject or object) and sometimes possessive adjectives, Persian academics were found to talk about themselves only in few cases and through words with the meaning of 'the researcher'. However, all in all, confirming findings of the previous studies (Hyland, 2002; Kuo, 1999; Tang & John, 1999), here English academics of both fields of study were found to consider the use of *self-mentions* important. This difference indicates that unlike English writers aiming to make an argument stronger through their use of first person pronouns, Persian academics seek to highlight the phenomena under discussion rather than themselves.

In order to see whether the two disciplines or the two languages were different in terms of stance and engagement and whether the difference was significant, the Chi-square was employed. Tables 3 through 6 show the results:

Table 3. Chi-Square Results in English and Persian Chemistry Research Articles

Language	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
English	8	9.0	-1.0
Persian	10	9.0	1.0
Total	18		

$\chi^2$	df	p
.222	1	.637

As shown in Table 3, the Chi-square ( $\chi^2 = .222$ ) is not statistically significant ( $p=0.637$ ) which indicates that English and Iranian academics' writing practices are not different from each other in the field of Chemistry.

Table 4. Chi-Square Results in English and Persian Sociology Research Articles

Language	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
English	27	27.5	-0.5
Persian	28	27.5	.5
Total	55		

$\chi^2$	df	p
.018	1	.893

Again the Chi-square in Table 4 is not statistically significant ( $\chi^2=.018$ ,  $p=0.893$ ). Then, in the field of Sociology, too, the two groups of academic writers do not show significant differences.

Table 5. Chi-Square Results in English Sociology and Chemistry Research Articles

Disciplines	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Chemistry	8	17.5	-9.5
Sociology	27	17.5	9.5
Total	35		

$\chi^2$	df	p
10.314	1	.001

According to Table 5, English writers have shown a significant difference in terms of their use of stance and engagement markers in two fields of Sociology and Chemistry ( $\chi^2= 10.31$ ,  $p= .001$ ).

Table 6. Chi-Square Results in Persian Sociology and Chemistry Research Articles

Disciplines	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Chemistry	10	19.0	-9.0
Sociology	28	19.0	9.0
Total	38		

$\chi^2$	df	p
8.526	1	.004

As Table 6 shows, in the case of Persian corpus, academic writers also were found to show significant differences when writing research articles in two fields of Sociology and Chemistry ( $\chi^2=8.52$ ,  $p=.004$ ). All in all, in both languages, it was the sociologists who made a greater use of interactive features in their academic writing. In sum, according to Table 7, in all cases reported, stance markers show a greater percentage of occurrence (89.2% as the highest in Persian Chemistry articles) as compared with engagement markers which have their highest figure of 29.7% in English Sociology articles.

**Table 7. Stance and Engagement Frequency of Occurrences in English and Persian Academic Writing (Chemistry and Sociology)**

Interactive Features	Chemistry				Sociology			
	English		Persian		English		Persian	
	Item Per 1000	% of total						
Stance	6	80	9.1	89.2	18.7	70.3	23.6	85.8
Engagement	1.5	20	1.1	10.8	7.9	29.7	3.9	14.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>10.2</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>26.6</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>27.5</b>	<b>100</b>

## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

The results of the study, as related to the use of engagement and stance markers in English and Persian in both Chemistry and Sociology, are in line with findings of the previous projects on the issue (Hyland, 2005a; Hyland, 2005b; Abdi, 2002; Hyland, 2010). The results show the importance of stance and engagement expressions in academic writings. The importance of including these interaction markers, in comparison with other common discoursal features, is well understood, especially when we look at Biber et al.'s (1999) in which passive voice constructions were reported to be used less frequently than stance and engagement markers.

In line with Hyland's (2005) model of interaction, it was also observed that stance markers occurred five times more frequently than engagement markers. Both Sociology and Chemistry articles in the two languages have shown greater frequency of stance rather than engagement features.

As for cross-linguistic differences, among the nine elements under the study, *hedges* were found as the most frequently occurring item (similar to Bank, 1994; Salager-Mayer, 1994; and Lewin, 2005) in all English articles, especially Sociology. This outcome reflects the necessity of distinguishing facts from opinion on the part of English academics when discussing their achieved outcome. Regarding this element, we can refer to Abdi's (2002) study of interpersonal metadiscourse, in which he found writers of Social rather than Natural sciences to make use of *hedges* more frequently. This fewer occurrences of *hedges* in *Chemistry* articles can be justified considering the nature of natural academic writing which allows more certainty on the part of writers reporting some empirical phenomena.

In the Persian research articles again stance markers, but this time *attitude marker*, were found to show themselves most of all, suggesting that Persian academic writers let a great deal of feeling (emotion, surprise, importance, frustration, etc) in their writing.

Another interesting outcome is the case of *reader pronouns*, as an engagement feature, for which English and Persian languages showed some differences. Unlike English which confines its references to the subject and object pronouns together with possessive adjectives, the Persian language makes it possible for its users to show their committeemen with the readers through verb inflections. It should be mentioned that

regarding references in the English corpus, the present study found the highest frequency in the case of inclusive pronouns *we* and *our* rather than *you* and *your*. This finding is also in line with Hyland's (2005) study which reports the appearance of *You* pronouns only in philosophy but *We* in almost all other fields of study.

The results related to *self-mentions*, as a stance marker, as reported above suggest that unlike English writers aiming to make an argument stronger through their use of first person pronouns, Persian academics seek to highlight the phenomena under discussion rather than themselves. However, all in all, confirming findings of the previous studies(Hyland, 2002; Kuo, 1999; Tang & John, 1999), here English academics of both fields of study were found to consider the use of *self-mentions* as an important stance marker.

As for cross-disciplinary comparison, in both languages it was the Sociology rather than Chemistry academics that attempted more to interact with their potential readers by including a greater number of stance and engagement markers. This is due to the fact that as Abdi (2002), Hyland (2005), and Hyland (2010) maintain, in *Social* sciences writers have more freedom to incorporate into the texts their personal feelings and emotions than in *Natural* sciences in which its writers are only reporting some scientific facts.

The findings of the study can help the Persian academic writers who need to publish their articles in English journals. Being aware of similarities and differences between English and Persian research articles, Persian academic writers would produce better articles which meet the standards of English journals. This implication of the study reminds us of Kaplan's(1987) belief that foreign students of a language are required to form standards of judgment according to the system of a target language.

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