

## We are what we write: Academic discourse and personal identity

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### Overview

*Disciplinary identities: Individuality and community in academic discourse* aims to demonstrate how corpus research can be used to better understand academic identity both in terms of individuality and membership in a discourse community. The author claims that the book is an exploration into “what academic identity means: how it is constructed by individuals appropriating and shaping the discourses which link them to their disciplines” (p. 1).

Ken Hyland shows through the correlation of theory and corpus evidence how scholars establish and maintain individual and collective identities through field-specific written discourse. This comprehensive nine-chapter book illustrates not only how academics communicate with each other within their distinct disciplines, but how, as individuals, they use the pre-established discourse of their disciplines to express personal identity. In the academic world of publish or perish, how we write, what we write, and for whom we write, is significant in terms of not only how we perform and contribute as individuals within communities of practice, but how we perpetuate the long-term interests of our discipline with novel and community sanctioned contributions.

This book is for a broad academic audience ranging from discourse analysts, applied linguists, academic writing instructors, corpus researchers to identity scholars and culture scholars. It is for academics and students who wish to explore how corpus studies, through its focus on frequency of terms and formulaic utterances, can provide a framework for discipline specific and individualized expression. It is also for those who struggle with incorporating personal epistemic values within the confines of member-accepted academic discourse. Clearly written, logically organized and working from a general theoretical to a highly specific analysis of quantified utterances in written discourse, Hyland makes a strong case for the power of corpus research. He addresses the cross-cultural and feminist struggles of academic writing and disciplinary identity with admirable sensitivity and expertise.

## The theories, definitions and approaches

Hyland begins by laying a foundation of current theories, definitions and discourse analysis approaches. The first two chapters of the book provide an excellent overview of current identity studies theories and the relatively elusive definitions of *discipline*. He draws upon *identity management*, *performance theory*, *identity theory*, and *post-modern studies* as bases upon which corpus research can advance our understanding of academic identity. Here, he introduces his key terms: *proximity* and *positioning*. Reappearing throughout the book, they refer to the constant tension between individual expression and discipline-specific discourse. Corpus research, he argues, can enhance our understanding of how academics, individually and as members of a discourse community, develop a particular framework of global and institutionally sanctioned communication.

The tension between the formulaic and personal expression is exemplified through the notion of the novel idea. Novel ideas not only contribute to the perpetuation of the discipline, but establish individuals as competent members within their given discourse community. It is through the novel idea that the academic links personal identity to the academic group. Novel contributions, thus, reflect the creative tension between the historical perpetuation of a discipline through established discourse and the unique personal motivations of individuals.

Chapter three provides clear descriptions of three main approaches to studying identity through discourse analysis: Conversational Analysis (CA), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Narrative Analysis (NA). The author articulately explores how each contributes to, and where each falls short in the field of identity studies, providing even the novice reader a clear map through this complex field. This chapter persuades how corpus studies, through frequency counts, concordances and keyword analysis, can enhance our understanding of how individuals construct themselves through discipline specific language.

## Studies using corpus research: genres, biographies, culture and gender

Chapters four through eight provide more specific accounts of how corpus research may be utilized in understanding, teaching and evaluating academic discourse. These chapters investigate: *representational genres*; *academic biographies*; *cultural issues in teaching academic writing to non-native English speaking students*; *comparing opposing rhetorical strategies in discipline-specific discourse*; and *gender*. In these chapters, Hyland draws from his and other research to assert the extent that corpus research can contribute to discourse analysis, pedagogy, and identity studies. Beginning with the least controversial and most accessible form of academic self expression (i.e. representational genres), he progressively and proficiently guides the reader into the more controversial, complex and sensitive issues of culture and gender. This stylistic and structural approach reflects Hyland's large repertoire of writing knowledge and highlights his empathy for those who struggle to learn to write in an academic genre.

## Representational genres and biographies

Chapters four and five focus on two forms of academic self-representation: *representational genres* and *academic biographies*. *Representational genres* refer to academics' expression of him or herself as a competent member of a discipline. Examples of these can be found in these acknowledgements, web pages, or grant applications. In web page design, for example, content links and register are just two means by which academics form a discourse that connects them to others, both within and outside of their discipline. Communication strategies used in such instances can be better understood through systematic corpus research.

Academic biographies, on the other hand, reflect a more disciplinary-aligned presence. Hyland's focus on this neglected academic genre emphasizes corpus studies' weight as a means of understanding the academic 'self' through analysis of systematic rhetorical choices. It is in this chapter where Hyland makes his argument most convincingly. By comparing academic identities using corpus studies, biographies revealed how academics "present themselves as an authentic academic persona" (p. 99) using formulaic language, linking the personal to the communal. Hyland analyzes and codes 600 biographies from three distinct disciplines using a quantitative analysis program, investigating verb choice categories as signs of identity performance (p 102).

## Culture, opposing positions and gender

Chapters six, seven and eight deal with three main areas in which the tension between personal identity and academic identity is most prevalent: cross-cultural issues, opposing epistemic stances and gender. Chapter six addresses how culture and prior learning experiences may contribute to the construction of academic identity. The author focuses on Creole and Hong Kong students' experiences learning 'self-mentioning' academic conventions. The select students, though motivated to produce academic writing, were at odds with the pre-established conventions in English academic disciplines. Hyland illustrates that among Creole students "the impersonality of academic writing [...] frustrated the expression of personal views and left no space for a sense of self in the writing" (p. 127). On the other hand, non-Western students "feel uncomfortable using the construction precisely *because* of its connotations of personal authority" (p. 129). Hyland outlines a corpus-based approach by which students can become aware of disciplinary discourse 'practices' and strategies that address their identity concerns. He shows how the use of corpus research can contribute to academic writing instruction. This chapter sensitively addresses the tensions felt by non-native English speaking students in their attempts to integrate themselves within academic discourse while maintaining their allegiance to prior learning experiences and cultural affiliation. However, this tension is not exclusive to non-native English speaking students and academics, as is demonstrated in chapter seven.

One's repertoire of academic discourse experience and personal values are reflected in one's writing. Despite specific discourse constraints, academics can find a range of rhetorical devices through which to express personal identity *and* academic legitimacy. In chapter seven Hyland compares the works of two leading but opposing academic figures to illustrate how

corpus based approaches can reflect distinct but related uses of discipline-specific rhetorical devices. He demonstrates how applied linguists, Debbie Cameron and John Swales, are able to create distinct orientations using an established set of discourse specific rhetorical devices. This is particularly significant in terms of providing young scholars an opportunity to explore the use of individual voice through a seemingly impersonal means of communication.

The cautious discussion of gender in chapter eight elaborates how corpus research reveals that distinctions between male and female writing are, seemingly, less significant than those between epistemic stances. Corpus studies, thus, has a great contribution to make in the field of gender, feminist, and related studies, particularly in relation to written discourse. An inherently complex topic, this chapter would prove particularly interesting for those scholars interested in the distinct discourse and rhetorical strategies significant to gender issues.

### **In sum**

Hyland sums up his argument for corpus based approaches in the final chapter. By reviewing the significant contribution corpus research can make to our understanding of academic genres and the individuals who partake in them, he successfully contributes a new perspective on words, discourses and writing. *Disciplinary identities: Individuality and community in academic discourse* represents a valuable accomplishment by establishing the significant contribution corpus studies can make to understanding academic genre, understanding academic identity and the teaching academic writing to aspiring academics. Hyland clearly demonstrates that the manner in which we communicate can reflect not only our membership in academic communities but also our individual identities while perpetuating the common interests of their discipline. Overall, Hyland has achieved his aim. This book provides an excellent, almost didactic, introduction into the topic but, in parts, lacks detail or in-depth illustration. In his attempt to repeatedly illustrate his point and address a broad audience, some of his chapters skim the surface of highly complex fields. This may leave a specialist looking for detail feeling somewhat dissatisfied. This book would prove particularly valuable to academic writing instructors working with novice scholars struggling to find their own 'academic' language and voice.