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- Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi - IJenali yokuFundisa iiLwimi -
Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta Polelo
- Buka ya Thuto ya Puo - Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo - Ijenali
Yekufundzisa Lulwimi - Jena?a ya u Gudisa Nyambo
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The use of first-person pronouns in argumentative writing of Afrikaans-speaking first-year students: A corpus-based investigation

Abstract

The writing of academic texts in which the voice of the author figures more prominently is actively gaining support among academics. There is an increasing shift towards a more personal style of academic writing where authors, through the use of personal pronouns, are explicitly present in their texts. However, it seems as if many first-year students not only use the first-person pronoun excessively, but also find it difficult to apply the practice appropriately in their argumentative texts. This article focuses on the use of the first-person pronouns ek [I], my [me] and myns insiens [in my opinion] in the writing of Afrikaans-speaking students. A corpus-based investigation was conducted into the frequency and distribution of use throughout the three parts of an argument (introduction, content and conclusion), as well as the functional and objective application of these pronouns in an authentic learner corpus. The analysis gave insight into the use of first-person pronouns as well as potential problems pertaining thereto. In light of the findings in the particular corpus, it is recommended that Afrikaans-speaking first-year students' skills in the use of first-person pronouns, should be further developed at university.

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Keywords: academic argument; academic writing; coherence; conventions; first-person pronouns; metadiscourse

1.   Introduction

The reference to the own persona and its appropriateness in what is written in academic arguments has been a topic of debate for several decades. Tang and John (1999: 24) point out that there has been an increasing move away from earlier traditional views that academic writing ought to be distanced, impersonal and completely removed from the author's presence. The tendency towards a more personal academic writing style in which the author is explicitly present and thus able to stamp onto it his or her own identity, is increasing. In this way, greater interaction between author, text and reader is established (cf. Hyland, 2005: 175; Viete & Le Ha, 2007: 44). The notion of *self* in academic writing, however, is complex, because various roles or identities, according to Tang and John (1999: 26), may be fronted by first-person pronouns. The writer therefore needs to be aware of the ways (how, when and where) in which first-person pronouns may be used in argumentative writing especially.

From the texts that I, as a lecturer in academic literacy, receive for assessment purposes, it seems that many Afrikaans-speaking first-year students do not, upon entering university, have sufficient knowledge of the appropriate use of first-person pronouns in academic writing. As a result, they often find it an intimidating and provocative task to refer to themselves in an appropriate manner in their written arguments.This evidence of uncertainty and lack of knowledge concerning the use of first-person pronouns, directly links to the fact that writing, besides being a structuring, forming and cognitive process, is an interactive and socially contextualised process (cf. Meintjes, 2015: 25). Writing should therefore be handled as literacy practice at university level and form part of the teaching-learning process on a continuous base (cf. Meintjes, 2015: 3,44,78) during which first-year students are orientated with regard to the conventions involved with the *new* social environment they enter (including, among others, written academic discourse) (Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012: 59). This acculturation can only occur if conscious opportunities are created (Butler, 2006:19; Carstens, 2008: 82; Graff & Birkenstein, 2010: xvi). It is therefore important to identify gaps in the academic writing skills of first-year students and to further develop these skills.

Previous research on the use of first-person pronouns in academic writing has focused mainly on their use in assignments written by undergraduate, postgraduate and/or English-speaking L1 and L2 students; their use in languages other than Afrikaans and English; and their use in published research articles (cf. Tang & John, 1999; Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003; Harwood, 2005; Le Ha, 2009; Munoz, 2013). In their research Tang and John (1999) analysed a corpus of 27 essays written by first-year students enrolled for an English language module. According to the percentage of first-person pronouns used, the way in which it was used or the total absence thereof, they suggest that students need to learn how to present themselves in their academic writing by knowing the different identities that can be established by using the first-person pronoun *I*.

Helms-Park and Stapleton's (2003) corpus consisted of 63 argumentative essays written by undergraduate non-native English speakers. They compared the overall quality of these students' written arguments against the extent to which they made use, among

other things, of self-identification by using the first-person singular *I*. According to the results, the use of the first-person pronoun *I*, as well as the frequency of use, not necessarily improves the quality of L2 undergraduate writing.Harwood (2005) compared the use of the personal pronouns *I* and inclusive *we* in the journal articles of business and management, computing science, economics and physics. He found that the use of these personal pronouns differed across the four disciplines in degree of frequency. Although the use thereof differed in number, it was used by the various disciplines to create different textual effects; for organizing and structure purposes; to emphasise claims and findings; and to highlight disciplinary problems.

In her article, Le Ha (2009) reflects on her master's degree student Ariantio's conflicts, uncertainty, nervousness and struggles to position himself in his academic writing. Arianto, who has a Chinese background, was unsure of the notion of voice and writer identity and how to obtain it in his English writing. Le Ha helped Arianto to become a member of the English academic discourse community by negotiation, mutual learning and community-building. She found that regular conversations, comments on each other's writing, and keeping of self-reflective journals and notes had a positive impact on Arianto's own voice and identity in academic writing.Munoz (2013) focused on the authorial presence in sixty English and Spanish research articles from linguistics, psychology and education. It was found that English writers intend to use pronominal discourse more often than Spanish writers. English writers make especially use of personal pronouns when they outline steps and procedures, elaborate on their arguments, present their ideas, and emphasise their contribution to the field. Spanish writers, on the other hand, also make use of pronominal discourse, but differ in the use thereof because they intend to be more evaluative of facts and information, and when interpreting the results and outcomes of their research.

In general, there are no studies that deal specifically with the academic use of first-person pronouns by Afrikaans-speaking first-year students. Jordaan (2014), in the only study of relevance that could be found, investigated the use of first-person pronouns as part of a broader investigation of writing by a small sample of 109 Afrikaans L1 first-year students. In her study, Jordaan found that experienced writers can objectively associate with a certain matter because they are more well-read in a field of study than inexperienced writers. The latter's use of the passive construction to improve objectivity often leads to cumbersome writing.

There is thus a lack of data with regard to the way in which many Afrikaans-speaking first-year students, upon entering university, use first-person pronouns in their academic writing. For this reason I drew on a large corpus of authentic texts, in order to obtain insight into the use of such pronouns and to identify potential problem areas that might require attention in teaching-learning.

The aim of this article is to report on a non-recurrent investigation into the type of first-person pronouns generally used by a study population consisting of Afrikaans-speaking first-year students with special regard to the frequency of use and the extent to which their use is functional and objective. Taking into account that the use of first-person

pronouns in this study is solely based on data captured from a single corpus, one has to be cautious not to generalise. It is possible that the data from another corpus will provide additional insight in the use of first-person pronouns by Afrikaans-speaking first-year students. I therefore intend to develop a comparable corpus to verify the data, findings and interpretations given in this article (cf. Section 6).

In the following section, I focus on what writing at university entails, giving specific attention to metadiscourse and its interpersonal category. Thereafter, the research method is described, followed by an analysis and interpretation of the data. The final section offers a conclusion and preliminary pedagogical recommendations based on the insights obtained from the corpus used in the study.

2.   Writing at university

Writing at university involves the presentation of academic knowledge and critical thinking in a specific form and in a specific format (Butler, 2006: 29; Pienaar, 2009: 69; Meintjes, 2015: 46). It is, however, a complex process, because each university genre, with its specific text type(s), not only has its own unique shape, but also has to comply with the conventions of academic discourse in order to communicate subject knowledge and other academic information successfully (Tshotsho, 2006: 53; Garing, 2014: 1; Jabulani, 2014: 1). One of these genres, the academic written document and its text type, the academic argument (Meintjes, 2015: 69), is not only the most common, but also the most difficult university text type that students are expected to master (Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2007: 34; Chandrasegaran, 2008: 238; Carstens, 2009: 88-90; Dastjerdi & Samian, 2011: 76; Van Rooy & Esterhuizen, 2011: 69). It also serves as the foundation for various other types of written assignments at university (Dastjerdi & Samian, 2011: 66).

Two conventions with which written academic arguments have to comply, amongst others, are that they should be written in the formal language register and that they should demonstrate coherence (Meintjes, 2015: 33). This means that writers should be capable, by linguistic means, of stating, supporting and arguing their views in a controlled, objective and logical manner (Ventola, 1996: 155; Van de Poel, 2006: 30; Chandrasegaran, 2008: 240; Belcher, 2009: 82-83). The appropriate use of metadiscourse therefore plays an important role in the presentation of a formal and coherent argument.

Metadiscourse mainly fulfils a pragmatic function in written texts. It links textual components in an explicit manner, reveals the writer's attitude towards the propositional content or the reader, effects textual interpretation, and involves the reader actively in the textual context and the learning process (Crismore *et al*., 1993: 40-41; Hyland, 1998: 438; Jordaan, 2014: 30). This functional category of language use can be effected textually or interpersonally (Crismore, *et al*., 1993: 47; Hyland, 1998: 442; Hyland & Tse, 2004: 157-158).

Hyland (1998: 442) indicates that textual metadiscourse serves to establish specific links in the argument. This involves, amongst other things, the use of words and phrases that demonstrate linking, causal and contrasting links; the purposes and objectives of the text; indications of changes in the topic and conclusions; reference to other sections of the text; acknowledgment of other sources or texts, and provision of any additional information required (cf. also Hyland & Tse, 2004: 158; Meintjes, 2015: 99).

By contrast, interpersonal metadiscourse is used to demonstrate the writer's attitude with regard to specific aspects of the text (Hyland, 1998: 443). This attitude can be assumed towards both the propositional content and the reader. It is brought about by means of words and phrases expressing hesitation, certainty, firm conviction, and feelings of affection. This establishes a specific relationship with the reader and determines the way in which the writer refers to him- or herself (Hyland, 1998: 443-444; Mur Dueãnas, 2007: 146). This article focuses on interpersonal metadiscourse, which indicates the presence of the author, to which Hyland (1998: 442) refers as personal reference markers (i.e. first-person pronouns).

The use of first-person pronouns does not only, according to Hyland and Tse (2004: 172), have an impact on subject discipline identity and the endorsement of specific points of view, but also brings about a relationship between the writer's identity as an individual working in a specific discipline and that of creative creator of a text (cf. Hyland, 2001: 209). Hyland (2005: 173) also points out that the first-person pronoun has a central role to play in the writing of a persuasive argument. Coffin *et al.* (2003: 70) believe that the explicit reference to the writer is also an indication of knowledge that is being mediated within specific historical, cultural and social contexts.

The presence of first-person pronouns indicates the author's personal involvement in a line of argument, and is effected, amongst other things, through the use of the first-person pronouns **I**, **me**, and **we** (Hyland, 2002: 325). The use of these pronouns does not, according to Hyland (2005: 173), undermine the formality of written academic discourse, because academic authors ought to refer to themselves in acceptable and credible ways. Hyland (2005: 175) further points out that interaction in written academic texts, in fact, involves authors having to position themselves clearly in their writing, not only with regard to the issues that they discuss in their texts, but also with regard to the viewpoints that other persons might hold with regard to these issues (cf. also Meintjes, 2015: 36). Mur Dueãnas (2007: 144) argues that this interaction should play a core role in eventually persuading the reader of the validity, originality and appropriateness of the research that the writer is reporting.

The acceptable and credible use of the **I**, to which Hyland (2005: 175) refers, is accompanied by the appropriate and consistent switching between the absent and the visible author (Van de Poel, 2006: 26; Archer, 2008: 263; Craswell & Poore, 2012: 72). Furthermore, this interpersonal reference should also be dealt with objectively throughout (Lourens, 2004: 67-69; Swetnam, 2009: 101; Molino, 2010: 86). This means, according to Ventola (1996: 155), that personal reference is not associated with general impressions about events and viewpoints. It also does not rest on subjective judgement

or involve personal emotion, and it is not of a contesting nature. Coffin *et al*. (2003: 70) are of the opinion that excessive use of first-person pronouns in academic writing can hamper the conceptual development of the text.

According to Meintjes (2015: 77), conceptual development implies that the argument being presented must be logical, not only with regard to the rational conviction that it conveys, but also with regard to the way in which language is used when presenting organized and fluent arguments. Objective and correct personal references can be embodied within university faculties in different ways (Hyland, 2005: 181; Lorés-Sanz, 2011: 174). This embodiment can be linked to a continuum from one end where the reference to **I** does not occur in the text at all, to where it is used more prominently together with specific verbs to indicate the structuring process, and/or to describe the research and cognitive processes involved (Tang & John, 1999: 26; De Jong, 2010: 209).

The objective reference to the **I** in academic writing can only be appropriate and effective when the text satisfies the generally accepted criteria for academic writing, such as:

- the purposes of the text are outlined;

- looking-ahead and looking-back process are effected;

- research methods and steps are outlined and discussed;

- specific points of view are advanced and supported;

- logical deductions are made with regard to specific viewpoints;

- results are discussed and interpreted;

- the limitations and the contribution of the study are considered; and

- the writer takes ownership with regard to new information and ideas that he or she is introducing.

    (Tang & John, 1999: 27-29; Harwood, 2005: 344; Hyland, 2005: 181; Mur Dueãnas, 2007: 144, 151-153; Blanpain, 2008: 42-43; De Wachter & Van Soom, 2008: 79).

3.   Method of research

The empirical investigation involved a corpus-based analysis of 731 argumentative texts written by Afrikaans-speaking first-year students entering university, directly after completing their school studies. The corpus consisted of 437 580 words.

The students, both male and female, were enrolled in different faculties. The topics for the essays dealt about a subject of general interest that had recently been covered in the media. The topics were generally of the same level of difficulty, and could be argued from a positive or a negative perspective. The writing assignments were completed at home over a period of two weeks, giving students the opportunity to read about the topics, to choose a specific one and to reflect on it, to plan the argument, write it and edit it. The completed manuscripts were submitted via e-mail.

WordSmith 5.0 was used to quantitatively study the frequency of use of the first-person pronouns occurring in the texts, the distribution in the three sections of the argument (introduction, content and conclusion), and the functional and objective application of each. The results of this quantitative analysis were then interpreted by following a qualitative approach.

In this study the term *functional* refers to the exclusive use of the first-person pronoun to refer to the writer of the text. This reference creates coherent organisation on the main level of the argument (i.e. the introduction, content and conclusion). This means that the first-person pronoun is applicable (functional) (cf. Section 2) when the writer uses it to give his/her own viewpoint on the topic; expound the aim of the text; give a preview or review of the main points to be discussed or that have already been discussed; and to introduce the research methods and procedures. Furthermore the use thereof is also functional (cf. Section 2) when the writer supports or disproves viewpoints; makes logical deductions with regard to certain viewpoints; expounds the limitations and/or contributions of the study; and when he/she takes ownership of new information/ ideas that are introduced.

The functional use of the first-person pronoun also implies the *objective* application thereof. This means that the mentioned aspects are handled and reasoned out in an acceptable and credible manner by, for example, alternating the present and absent author and by not linking it with personal experience, emotions, judgement, beliefs, etc. (cf. Section2).

As individual arguments and not group tasks were analysed, the first-person pronoun **we** was not included in the study. The focus was only on the use of the first-person pronouns **ek** [**I**], **my** [**my]** and **myns insiens** [**in my opinion]**.

4.   Data analysis

WordSmith 5.0 was used to identify the first-person pronouns **ek**, **my** and **myns insiens** in the corpus. First, the introduction, content and conclusions of all the argumentative texts were selected through the Tag-function of the program. After this, the number of times that each of the first-person pronouns occurred in the three sections of the total corpus was determined with the aid of the Concord function (Table 1).

Table 1: *Number of times each first-person pronoun (ek, my and myns insiens) occurred in the total corpus*

First-person pronouns	Number of times used functionally
ek	1 352
my	741
myns insiens	11
Total of first-person pronouns used in the total corpus	2104

The use of each first-person pronoun was then studied within its context with the aid of concordance lines to determine its function. Pronouns that did not refer pertinently to the writer of the text, but derived from a direct quotation from another source used to support a specific point of view, or where it was used in a general sense, were not included in the analysis. The quotations below are presented as examples[1] of where the use of the first-person pronouns **ek** and **my** were not included in the analysis:

[1]   Denis Beckett van The Star het op 20 Januarie 1994 gesê: "Dis eienaardig - Ek kry nooit kans om Afrikaans te praat nie ..."

         [Denis Beckett of The Star said on 20 January 1994: "It is funny - I never get the opportunity to speak Afrikaans ..."]

[2]   Die sangeres Amanda Strydom sing nie verniet die volgende oor ons taal nie "Ek kan sing in my taal ... E**k** kan rock in **my** taal ... **Ek** maak amok in **my** taal."

         [The singer Amanda Strydom does not for nothing sing the following about our language ... **I** can rock in **my** language ... **I** can run wild in **my** language."]

[3]   Ons gun onsself nie meer "**ek**" tyd nie.

         [We do not grant ourselves anymore "**I**" (me) time.]

[4]   Meeste mense dink altyd siektes soos kanker en vigs sal hulle nooit raak nie, "sulke dinge sal mos nooit met **my** gebeur nie."

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1   All examples from the corpus were adjusted only for correction of spelling errors, to facilitate readability.

> [Most people do not think that diseases such as cancer and AIDS will ever affect them – "such things do not happen to **me**."]

Also, instances when the first-person pronoun did not affect coherent linkages in the sentence were excluded from the analysis. Only the following three examples, all within the phrase **myns insiens**, were found:

[5]   **Myn**s insiens wil dus 'n punt bewys met die skryf van die opstel...

    [In my opinion wants to prove a point with the writing of the essay...]

[6]   Myns insiens dink daarom eerlik dat die probleem begin by die ouerhuis...

    [In my opinion thinks therefore honestly that the problem begins in the parental home…]

[7]   Myns insiens die rede vir die verswakking van ons Afrikaanse taal is weens die ontwikkeling van moderne tegnologie ...

    [My opinion the reason for the weakening of our Afrikaans language is the result of the development of modern technology…]

In total, a number of 228 first-person pronouns were excluded from the analysis. The remaining 1 876 first-person pronouns were then organized by means of an Excel pivot table in accordance with the number and percentage, as it occurred in the introduction, content and conclusion of all the arguments (Table 2).

Table 2: *Incidence (number and percentage) of the different first-person pronouns (***ek, my***,* **myns insiens***) by section (introduction, content, conclusion)*

Introduction		Content section		Conclusion		Total
Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	
374	20	1 067	57	435	23	1 876

In the next section the correctness of the functional and objective use (cf. Section 3) of the first-person pronouns used in the analysis is discussed, and where necessary, illustrated by examples drawn from the corpus.

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5. Data interpretation

The data indicate that the study population used first-person pronouns on a readily basis (cf. Table 2). The pronouns **ek**, **my**, and **myns insiens** were functionally used 1 876 times in the corpus, i.e. they occurred more than twice per essay (1876 ÷ 731 = 2,57). Of these, an average of 20% of the pronouns was used in the introductory sections, 57% in the content sections and 23% in the conclusions (Table 2). All 731 writers, therefore, used **ek**, **my** and **myns insiens** to refer explicitly to themselves in one way or another.

Upon closer examination it emerges, however, that most writers did not use the first-person pronomi nal words correctly, as these words were not linked to the aim of the text, the modus operandi (anticipation of the text), the writer's association with different points of view, or his/her attempt to acknowledge the views of others. Furthermore, the pronouns were also not used when the writer wanted to come to conclusions after specific aspects were investigated and argued, or to work towards a conclusion by looking back at what was argued[2]. Most writers did not demonstrate an ability to vary the present or absent author functionally correctly and consistently in their arguments. They also generally found it difficult to make use of the objective **ek**, because reasoning about the topic was mostly based on personal experience, feeling, judgment and personal conviction (cf. Section 3).

The quotations below serve as examples of functionally correct uses of the first-person pronoun in introductory sections:

[8]   Alhoewel Suid-Afrika se wetgewing oor voedselveiligheid op internasionale standaarde baseer word, is daar talle bymiddels wat gesondheidsprobleme vir Suid-Afrikaners inhou. My argument is dat alle bymiddels in Suid-Afrikaanse voedsel nie veilig is vir menslike gebruik nie… Ek gaan my argument bewys deur… Tweedens gaan ek verwys na… Laastens gaan ek…

[Although South African legislation about food safety is based on international standards, there are many additives that are potentially harmful for South Africans. My argument is that all additives in South African food are not safe for human consumption ... I will prove my argument by... Secondly I will ... Finally I will ...]

[9]   Mense dink dikwels as hulle net gevoelens van depressie het vir 'n kort tydperk het hulle depressie. Hierdie is die rede dat mense dikwels dink dat depressie net 'n teken van menslike swakheid is. Ek sal hierdie argument gebruik om te bewys dat depressie werklikwaar 'n ernstige siekte is … Ek sal dit bewys deur …

[People often think that they only have feelings of depression for a brief period when they have depression. This is why people often think that depression is simply a sign of human weakness. **I** will use this argument to prove that depression is really a serious illness ... **I** will prove this by ...]

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2   Refer to Section 2 on the specific uses of first-person pronouns in academic writing.

[10]   In hierdie skryfstuk gaan ek ... Die bespreking sal geskied deurdat ... en daarna gaan ek ... Ek gaan ook kortliks paar voor- en nadele noem van die verskillende media om my argument te staaf.

       [In this essay I ... The discussion will be done through ... and subsequently I will ... I will also briefly discuss a few advantages and disadvantages of both forms of media to support **my** argument.]

The first-person pronouns **ek** and **my** were used here in an objective manner, in the sense that all the writers used them to associate themselves with a specific viewpoint; they were subsequently used for overall textual organisation. Although the formulations of the above introductions are somewhat verbose, and some of the first-person pronouns are repeated unnecessarily, their form is fairly consistently used without prejudice or personal partiality.

The examples that follow show the participants' functionally correct use of first-person pronouns in concluding sections:

[11]   Depressie word dus deur oneffektiewe verspreiding van chemikalieë in die brein, asook teleurstellende gebeurtenisse in 'n potensiële lyer se lewe veroorsaak ... kom **ek** dus tot die gevolgtrekking dat...

       [Depression is thus caused by ineffective distribution of chemicals in the brain as well as disappointing events in the life of a potential sufferer ... I come to the conclusion that ...]

[12]   Na al die bogenoemde feite en ingeligte stellings ... Dus kan ek met volle oortuiging sê ons moderne kommunikasietegnologie voorwaar die oorsaak is van die mens se antisosiale gedrag in hierdie era.

       [In the light of all the above facts and informed views ... Thus **I** can say with full conviction that our modern communication technology is indubitably the cause of people's anti-social behaviour in this era.]

It is clear that the writers of the above examples positioned themselves in an objective manner in the closing section of their arguments. Writers came to a final conclusion only after different opinions and facts, as reflected in the content, were compared with each other, as it emerges from the reflection in the concluding section.

Of all the first-person pronouns used in the essays, 57% occurred in the content sections (Table 2). Their use was mainly subjective because most writers were unable to distance themselves from personal experience, feelings, judgment and conviction.

The first-person pronoun **ek** was readily used with words and phrases such as *weet* [know], *glo* [believe], *verstaan* [understand], *voel* [feel], *dink* [think], *twyfel* [doubt], *haat* [hate], *persoonlik* [personally], *is van mening* [am of the opinion]. By contrast, words

and phrases containing **my** included *opinie* [opinion], *punt* [point], *standpunt* [viewpoint], *oogpunt* [view], *persoonlike opinie* [personal opinion], *beskeie mening* [humble opinion], *volgens* [according to], *beste advies* [best advice], *reg* [right], *raad* [counsel].

Ek and **my** were also used in many cases to present a narrative of the writers' personal lives, in contexts such as, for example, *skootrekenaar* [laptop], *Sondagmiddag* [Sunday afternoon], *rugprobleme* [back problems], *koerant* [newspaper], *spaargeld* [savings], *Afrikaanse onderwyser* [Afrikaans teacher], *selfoon* [cell phone], *motor* [car], *medikasie* [medication], *vriende* [friends], *ouers* [parents], *voorvaders* [ancestors], *lewe* [life], *pa* [father] and *buurman* [neighbour].

The examples below illustrate some ways in which the subjective, narrative and excessive use of the first-person pronouns occurred in the content sections of the essays.

[13]   **E**k persoonlik dink daar word nog te min in ons land gedoen om entrepreneurskap aan te wakker ... (subjektief)

[I personally think that too little is still being done in this country to promote entrepreneurship ...] (subjective)

[14]   My lewe is vir my baie kosbaar, en ek voel ek sal liewer elke maand 'n sekere bedrag aan 'n mediesefonds betaal sodat ek weet as ek mediese kostes moet aangaan dat hulle my sal help om daai kostes te kan nakom. (subjektief en oordrewe)

[My life is very precious to me, and I feel that I would rather pay an amount every month to the medical fund so that I know that when I have to incur medical expenses this will help me to cover those costs.] (subjective and excessive)

[15]   Ek onthou toe ek tien jaar oud was ... My pa het toe oorweeg om 'n erf te koop ..., my pa het toe nie die erf gekoop nie. Vandag bly my ouers nog steeds in Hoedspruit … (narratief en oordrewe) subjective and excessive)

[I remember when I was ten years old ... My dad considered buying an erf ..., my dad then did not buy the erf. Today my parents still live in Hoedspruit ...] (narrative and excessive)

[16]   As ek kan verwys na my eie lewe kan ek getuig dat ... Indien ek al my mediese kostes met **my** rugprobleme self sou moes dek sou **ek** teen die tyd bankrot gewees het. (subjektief, narratief en oordrewe)

[If **I** can refer to **my** own life, **I** can testify that ... If **I** had had to cover all **my** medical expenses with regard to **my** back problems, **I** would have been bankrupt by this time.] (subjective, narrative and excessive)

Since many of the writers approached the topics mainly from their own points of view and were emotionally invested in them, no linkage with the outside world (external sources of information) occurred in these arguments. This in itself left a gap in the coherence of the texts, revealing that most writers did not have the skill to position themselves objectively in terms of their texts. In this set of texts the style resembled that of informal, spoken discourse.

The quotations below are examples illustrating excessive subjective use of first-person pronouns in the bodies of the essays.

[17]   **Ek** voel uiters sterk oor hierdie onderwerp ... daarom wil **ek** dit op almal se aandag vestig dat dit mettertyd 'n krisis kan word wat nie gesmoor kan word nie.

      [I feel very strongly about this topic ... For that reason **I** would like to direct everybody's attention to this matter and that it can become a crisis that cannot be stopped.]

[18]   Persoonlik dink **ek** dat as jy 'n sterk en positiewe selfbeeld het en 'n sterk mens is, sal jy nie sommer aan depressie ly nie of toelaat dat enige iemand jou afbreek en verkleineer nie, en sodoende jou as mens aftakel.

      [Personally **I** think that if you have a strong and positive self-image and if you are a strong person, you will not easily suffer from depression or allow anybody to break down your self-image and humiliate you as a human being.]

[19]   As **ek** kan verwys na **my** eie lewe kan ek getuig dat 'n mediese fonds verseker nie 'n mors van geld is nie. Indien **ek** al **my** mediese kostes met **my** rugprobleme self sou moes dek sou **ek** teen die tyd bankrot gewees het.

      [If **I** can refer to **my** own life **I** can testify that a medical fund is definitely not a waste of money. If **I** had had to carry all **my** medical expenses because of **my** back problems **I** would have been bankrupt by now.]

[20]   **My** beskeie opinie is dat dit as gevolg van ons moderne lewensstyl is. Alles is 'n gejaag na wind en niemand fokus meer op sy/haar medemens se geestestoestand nie. Niemand maak meer tyd om...

      [**My** modest opinion is that it is the result of our modern style. Everyone is just chasing after wind and nobody focuses any longer on the emotional state of his/her fellow human beings. Nobody makes time any more for...]

Some writers attempted to use first-person pronouns objectively rather than subjectively, as shown in the selection of statements below.

[21]   Mense is trots daarop om afrikaners te wees! ... Ons het nie net rede om trots te wees op ons taal nie, maar ook op ons land. **Ek** kan hierdie argument staaf aan die hand van voorbeelde … **Ek** sal **my** argument verder voer deur gebruik te maak van die volgende standpunte …

[People are proud of being Afrikaners! ... We not only have reason to be proud of our language, but also of our country. I can support this argument by way of examples ... I will expand my argument further by using the following viewpoints.]

[22]   Ter aanvang verduidelik ek eers wat kliniese depressie is ... Kliniese depressie is ...

[By way of starting **I** first explain what clinical depression is. Clinical depression is ...]

The above examples show that **ek** and **my** were mostly used for over-arching textual organization (although generalization and personal emotion emerge in the first example). The writers made use of first-person pronouns to indicate that an effort will be made to prove the preceding points of view, to show in what ways the argument will be presented, and to indicate that an explanation of specific aspects will be provided.

The study population seldom used the phrase **myns insiens**. In total it was used only eleven times by eight writers and from these only eight uses were included in the analysis (cf. Section 4). The low incidence of this pronoun in the corpus can be an indication that most of these students do not yet have sufficient knowledge of the second case of the noun **insien(s)** which carries the meaning of **mening** and **opvatting [opinion** and **view]**, and which occurs only in some expressions such as **myns insiens** (cf. HAT, 2005: 468).

6.   Conclusion and recommendations

The aim of this study was to research the use of first-person pronouns in the argumentative writing of a group of Afrikaans-speaking first-year students. It emerged from the results that this group of students' arguments are generally characterized by a high level of personal involvement, but that the first-person pronouns **ek**, **my** and **myns insiens** are, in most cases, not used in a functionally correct way. Although many of the students had a good sense of where they should position themselves in an argument, they did not have sufficient knowledge and skill to position themselves by using these pronouns in an appropriate manner. The result is that the presentation of their written arguments was not always logical and coherent, and therefore did not always comply with the conventions of the academic discourse community.

Writing is a dynamic process that should form part of the teaching-learning process on a continuous base. One cannot assume that all first-year students have the skills

to deal with first-person pronouns in an academically acceptable manner upon entering university. They should therefore be given the opportunity to understand and master the conventions associated with the use of first-person pronouns in academic writing. From the insights gained during this study, it is recommended that more attention should be given to the teaching of the correct use (functional and objective) of first-person pronouns at university level – especially in Afrikaans academic literacy modules. Such instruction should be characterised by practical writing assignments in which first-year students are not only exposed to the correct use of first-person pronouns, but are also explicitly taught how to use these forms in their specific faculties and disciplines.

Since this study made use of only one corpus, the data, findings and conclusions cannot be generalised until further comparison with a comparable corpus (see Section 1, second last paragraph). In lieu hereof, the pedagogic recommendations presented here should be regarded as preliminary recommendations only.

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