

International Social Science & Educational Conference 2025

Navigating Change: Rethinking Social Science and Education in the 21st Century"

Virtual Conference, 08 Nov 2025

Organiser: CLM Publishing Resources
Conference Series 2025

Authorial Presence Without 'I' or 'We': Examining First-Person Pronoun Usage in Malaysian Research Abstracts

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Abstract

Authorial presence, often expressed through the use of first-person pronouns, assists writers in claiming stance and ownership. Nonetheless, the lack of first-person pronouns in the journal abstracts indexed by Web of Science (WoS) in Malaysia raised questions on authorial identity development without explicit self-mention. Based on Hyland's framework, we investigated the presence of linguistic means of stance and authorial voice in selected Malaysian journal abstracts with AntConc software. The results help to better understand how the authorial stance is negotiated in the local scholarly setting, as well as inform future pedagogical and editorial decisions for academic visibility.

Keywords: authorial presence; first-person pronouns; stance strategies; journal abstracts

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v10iSI37.7615>

1.0 Introduction

Authorial presence is a highly crucial rhetorical aspect of scholarly writing, as it demonstrates the stance, commitment, and identity of the writer in a scholarly world. It is an expression of the way writers place themselves relative to their assertions, their audience, and the discourse at large (Hyland, 2005). The manifestation of authorial presence is particularly acute in academic abstracts, specifically since the writers must present the relevance and value of their study in a limited number of words. The use of first-person pronouns, for example, I or we, is one of the traditional ways researchers have been claiming this presence by stating their role and point of view in the study (Tang & John, 1999).

Nevertheless, there is an apparent lack of first-person pronouns as evidenced by a preliminary examination of abstracts in high-impact Malaysian journals in the field of education, social sciences, and humanities that were utilized in the course of this research. This topic can be explored by considering the rhetorical strategies that Malaysian researchers use to create the presence and identity without

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overt self-mention. It also represents the potential sociocultural and disciplinary values that influence the practice of academic discourse in the local context, where indirectness or respect might be a more distinguished value (Suhandoko, 2025; Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

This research examines authorial presence in the abstracts of work by Malaysian researchers using the framework of position and voice presented by Hyland (2005) in terms of hedges, boosters, passive constructions, nominalization, and citation. Such schemes are rhetorical and mirror larger disciplinary and cultural norms. In line with this, it is significant to learn how local researchers develop visibility in such texts when they interact with international standards of publication and attempt to make their contribution to the global academic dialogue.

Owing to the application of stance markers, especially hedges and boosters, and the presence or lack of self-mention, this paper will be able to identify tendencies of authorial positioning that may inform us of the way identity is enacted in academic writing in Malaysia. The study, by the corpus-based analysis, makes contributions to scholarly communication, the rhetorical conventions by identifying other linguistic measures of expressing authorial presence, particularly where personal pronouns are not widely applied.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Authorial Presence and the Role of Pronouns

Authorial presence is the linguistic tool with the help of which writers assert their presence in the text to make themselves feel their ownership, responsibility, and stance (Li, 2021). For instance, Hyland (2002) defined stance as including self-mentions (I, we), hedges, boosters, and attitude markers. Of all these, self-mention can probably represent the most obvious sign of authorial identity. In addition, self-mention enables the authors to exercise some power and express their essential presence in the research, especially in qualitative research methods, where reflexivity or personal engagement is prioritized (Hyland, 2002; Hu & Cao, 2015; Işık Taş, 2018).

Nonetheless, studies indicate that researchers use self-mention unequally across cultural and disciplinary situations. To exemplify, Dueñas (2007), Molino (2010), and Işık-Taş (2018) have discovered that non-Anglophone writers, especially second language (L2) writers, tend to suppress personal presence, with passive constructions or nominalizations predominating in written language. Mur-Dueñas (2011) also observed that self-mention is dependent on cultural expectations. Similarly, Li (2021) noted that despite the growing use of I/we over time, disparities still exist across disciplines and journal types.

2.2 Local Context: Malaysian Writers and Authorial Voice

The construction of the authorial voice in Malaysia is indicative of more general sociocultural conventions. Although these two trends have been observed in some studies, Loi et al. (2016) reported that the conclusions of Malay research articles tend to restrict dialogic space, which can be perceived as suggesting a desire for a less overt authorial voice. Such is in line with trends in the wider research of L2 writing studies. In line with this, Almudhaffari Musa et al. (2019) mentioned that the use of the first-person pronoun in academic writing of English as a Second Language (ESL) writers is significantly lower, which leads to the hypothesis that the personal voice can be viewed as less academic.

Moreover, the majority of previous works have investigated authorial voice in extended research articles, and little focus has been placed on the abstract as a short scholarly text form. This gap was first identified by Samraj (2005), and recent research, including Li (2021) and Hyland (2004), also indicated the need to study stance features in abstracts attributed to their distinct rhetorical limitations. As abstracts serve rhetorical purposes with constrained space (Kaya & Yağız, 2020), a more narrow scope of study is needed to comprehend how Malaysian writers reproduce or repress authorial presence in this compressed academic text.

2.3 Stance Features in Academic Writing

Although the stance framework proposed by Hyland (2002) encompassed an extensive collection of linguistic features, the current research concentrates on two of them that are the most pertinent to condensed academic texts, such as abstracts:

- Self-mention (e.g., I, we), which signals explicit author visibility
- Hedges and boosters, which reveal the author's stance through degrees of certainty or caution

Qualitative literature usually enables a more direct taking of a stance compared to quantitative writing, which is more objective and remote or impersonal (Cao & Hu, 2022; Hu & Cao, 2015). These methodological norms determine whether the authors use self-mention or take recourse to hedges and boosters as alternative means of creating stance (Dobakhti & Norizah Hassan, 2017). However, the literature has demonstrated a lack of studies analyzing the emergence of these characters in Malaysian abstracts, especially in both qualitative and quantitative paradigms. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge that gap.

2.4 Authorial Presence Through Metadiscourse Features

The strategic deployment of metadiscourse elements, including hedges, boosters, and self-mentions, can be considered a major part of the process of establishing a stance and negotiating the writer-reader relations in academic writing, especially in writing done by ESL authors. Using the example of Hyland (2005), the author stated that metadiscourse plays a vital role in reader guidance, asserting arguments, and establishing a plausible scholarly identity. Notably, hedges (e.g., might, possibly) enable the writer to convey apprehension and deference to other opinions, and boosters (e.g., clearly, definitely) demonstrate the belief and trust in what they are saying. The decision to use or omit self-mention (e.g., I argue, we believe) also illustrates the varying degrees of authorial identity and epistemological position (Hyland, 2005). Studies have indicated that ESL authors tend to make fewer self-mentions and hedging devices, which may be attributed to linguistic restrictions or cultural contexts that preclude overt authorial presence (Suhandoko et al., 2025; Hu & Cao, 2011). Loi et al. (2016) conducted a comparative research to determine the differences in the conclusions of English and Malay

research articles and noted that local publications were more prone to indirectness and modesty as per the norms of sociocultural humility and group. In essence, these results indicate that linguistic/rhetorical strategies (hedging, boosting, and self-mention) are conditioned by language-related, academic, and cultural influences.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Data Source and Sampling Method

The quantitative design was utilized to determine the frequency of the stance markers in journal abstracts. We employed a purposive sampling method in selecting journal abstracts based on predefined criteria as listed below:

- Published in WoS-indexed Malaysian journals.
- Falls within the fields of education, social sciences, and humanities.
- Published in English language.
- Provide open access to abstracts.

GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies; 3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature; Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction, Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, and Journal of Nusantara Studies (JONUS) are the selected journals that meet all the criteria. We gathered 110 abstracts from these journals published between October and November 2025 to be analysed.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Hyland's (2005) stance framework guides this study to investigate the use of stance markers in the corpus, offering a detailed and widely accepted system for describing how authors project their attitudes in academic prose. Furthermore, its extensive use in recent corpus-based research (e.g., Deng & He, 2023) underscores its relevance for the present study. The abstracts were analyzed using AntConc (Anthony, 2004), a software widely used in linguistic research for corpus-based analysis (Suhandoko et al., 2025). First, all selected abstracts were compiled into a single electronic corpus in plain text (.txt) format and stripped of all the unwanted context, such as names of authors, their affiliation, and keywords. The corpus was then uploaded into AntConc for analysis. Using the Word List and Concordance tools, stance markers were identified based on a predetermined list of stance items adapted from established frameworks (e.g., Hyland, 2005). AntConc was used to generate frequency counts of these stance markers across the corpus. To ensure accuracy, concordance lines were examined to verify the contextual function of each item and to exclude cases where the items did not function as stance markers. The resulting frequency data were then tabulated and used for quantitative analysis. The frequency of stance markers was further analyzed according to their functional categories to identify distributional patterns across the abstracts.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Boosters and Hedges

Hedges are generally words and phrases that are frequently used to soften findings and conclusions, such as *suggest*, *may*, *possible*, *tend to*, and *seem*. Meanwhile, boosters are most often used to justify the research by establishing the gap or need, as well as to emphasize the strength of the findings. Hence, words such as *significant*, *crucial*, *important*, *clear*, *high*, and *strong* fall under this category, which serves to highlight both the gap and the strength of the findings.

Although not quantified, the AntConc analysis of abstracts reveals that nearly every abstract employed boosters and hedges. Table 1 below lists some of the abstracts and their evidence of boosters and hedges.

Table 1. Examples of boosters and hedges in abstracts

| No | Abstract ID | Boosters and Hedges |
|----|-------------|--|
| 1 | CBS-001 | notoriously 1, often 2 |
| 2 | GII-002 | can also be 666 |
| 3 | AER-003 | seem to 9 |
| 4 | ARL-004 | often 13, generally 14, great 15 |
| 5 | CHP-005 | generally 18, significantly 19 |
| 6 | CLA-006 | usually 22, suggest 2323, can include 24 |
| 7 | APP-009 | seem to have 35, might 3636, suggest 37, would have 38 |
| 8 | ADM-010 | commendable 4040, predominantly 41, significant 42 |
| 9 | ESU-011 | should, numerous |
| 10 | DPT-012 | can, paramount, scanty, crucial, most challenging |
| 11 | EIM-013 | suggests, may have, unique, does not mean |
| 12 | EMA-015 | suggest, may be, slightly |
| 13 | ELM-017 | tended to, can, could |
| 14 | CMH-020 | should be, scant, dominantly, must be, largely |
| 15 | ETS-021 | generally, vital, could be |
| 16 | EPP-024 | important, quite, successfully |
| 17 | ERA-026 | prevalent, not many |
| 18 | ICE-031 | most significantly 1, ironically 22, potential 33 |
| 19 | IMT-032 | almost always 777, almost never 88, mainly 9, significantly 10 |
| 20 | GPP-033 | notoriously 13, likely 14, almost missing 15, almost overlooked 16 |

4.2 Self-Mention

4.2.1 Frequency of Self-Mention in Abstracts

Self-mentions in all abstracts are present, though they are rarely observed. Only 15.5% (17 abstracts) used any form of direct self-mention such as "we," "the authors," "the researcher," or "our". When it did appear, it was often used to state a direct claim ("We argue..."), describe a specific methodological choice ("The researcher taught..."), or position the authors ("The authors adopt..."). Note that the overwhelming majority (84.5%) avoided it entirely, preferring to use agents such as "This study," "The findings," or "This paper." Table 2 below outlines the abstracts and the evidence of self-mentions.

Table 2. Examples of self-mention in abstracts

| No | Abstract ID | Self-Mention |
|----|-------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | ARL-004 | "used by our EFL advanced students" |
| 2 | CSB-007 | "We argue that" |
| 3 | ESU-011 | 'leading us to claim' |
| 4 | EAA-019 | 'Our' |
| 5 | CMH-020 | "We argue" and "We also assert" |
| 6 | ELR-022 | "the author argues" |
| 7 | TCP-029 | "Our study" |
| 8 | PRE-052 | "The authors adopt" |
| 9 | SDL-068 | "the researchers intend" |
| 10 | TIC-090 | "the researcher selected" |
| 11 | TAA-101 | "The authors focused" |
| 12 | UGG-103 | "The researcher taught" |

4.2.2 Locations of Self-Mention in Abstracts

It is also interesting to note that self-mentions can be observed in different parts of abstracts. For instance, a few abstracts reveal the use of first-person pronouns in their findings.

"The WordSmith Tools, Version 4.0, were used for the purpose of this research. It was found that there were some discrepancies in the frequency of modals used by native speakers and the ones used by our EFL advanced students."

"The results indicated that the participants in the strategic planning group (STPG) significantly outperformed the participants in unpressured within-task planning (UWPG), leading us to claim that strategic planning was more effective than unpressured within-task planning in improving oral production."

One Malaysian journal selected for analysis in this study has its own style of abstract format, dividing it into separate sections: background/purpose, methodology, findings, and contributions. In one of its abstracts, first-person pronouns were used twice in its contribution section.

"Contributions: We argue that writing instruction must be socially situated and multimodal, and teacher education must prepare practitioners to empower learners to become critical and effective writers. We also assert that examination-oriented practices make writing in the classroom inauthentic and largely incomprehensible, despite the belief that the opposite is true."

However, not all first-person pronouns signal the use of self-mention or authorial presence. The authors of an abstract used "us," which is noted in their problem statement, that is neither editorial nor authorial, yet simply a generic "us" that refers to a collective group of people or community.

"However, little attention has been given to teaching of English to young learners (TEYL) teachers' metaphorical expressions, and what these expressions might tell us about their identities and experiences."

The data indicate a clear and consistent pattern: authorial presence in these abstracts is constructed impersonally, though direct self-mention is actively avoided by the vast majority. Instead, authors express their stance and assert the value of their work indirectly through strategic boosters to highlight importance and hedges to moderate claims.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Strategic Use of Boosters and Hedges

The findings confirm that Malaysian academic writers deliberately use both hedges and boosters to shape their stance. For instance, hedges such as *suggest*, *may*, and *tend* to allow writers to soften claims, while boosters such as *significant*, *important*, and *crucial* highlight the strength of findings or research gaps. This is in line with the opinion of Hyland (2005) that stance markers play a critical role in reflecting the commitment and position of the researchers within the conventions of their academic field. In addition, the fact that these markers are present in almost all the abstracts is an indication that there is a rhetorical awareness that helps to justify what Hu and Cao (2011) referred to as a strategy of coping with uncertainty and responsibility. These decisions also resonate with the findings of Loi et al. (2016) regarding the prevalence of indirectness and moderation among the Malaysian writers and imply an organizational culture of writing where the focus is on the cautious presentation of ideas (Suhandoko et al., 2025) rather than the desire to self-promote.

5.2 Authorial Presence and the Avoidance of Self-Mention

The minimal use of first-person reference in the abstracts, where only 15.5% of the abstracts included some self-mention, indicates a steady preference to use an impersonal authorial voice in the abstracts by the Malaysian writers. The authors did not apply expressions such as we, our, or the authors. Instead, they utilized neutral phrases such as this study or the findings, which demonstrates their tendency to take an impersonal position and remain out of the text. This trend is consistent with Hyland (2002, 2004), who stated that self-mention serves as an important mark of identity that writers in group-oriented cultures tend to avoid, as well as with Loi et al. (2016), who noted that Malaysian academic writers tend to be indirect. Though self-mention was frequently observed in abstracts, which mainly described methodological choices or made contributions, it was rather uncommon and was usually observed in particular sections of the abstract, especially the methodology or contributions section. In general, the results indicate that Malaysian authors tend to convey the stance and identity more using the content-based approach of identifying the importance of research, highlighting main findings, and citing previous literature.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The study of 110 abstracts of high-indexed Malaysian journals indicates that preference is given to an impersonal writer stance, and the authors extensively use stance markers to express attitude, assess results, and establish a scholarly stance. Concurrently, claims are always moderated using hedges, and strategically boosters highlight the importance and contribution of research. Explicit self-mention, conversely, occurs in an insignificant portion of abstracts and is often performed to be clear about methods or to directly frame arguments. Overall, these tendencies highlight a high level of disciplinary tendencies in terms of indirect authorially, where authors reinforce their claims by using lexical expressions as opposed to direct first-person reference. However, the findings should be interpreted considering several limitations. First, the corpus was restricted to 110 abstracts from a small set of WoS-indexed Malaysian journals in education, social sciences and humanities, which may not represent stance practices in other disciplines or publication tiers. Second, the analysis prioritised boosters, hedges and self-mentions using keyword-based retrieval in AntConc, so some context-dependent or multifunctional uses of stance resources may have been missed or misclassified.

Based on the findings, academic writers and novice scholars are advised to undergo special instructions on how to effectively utilize stance markers to make their work clear, credible, and rhetorical. For example, author training programs (e.g., workshops or writing clinics) might assist writers to familiarize themselves with the purposeful use of hedges, boosters, and selective self-mention to form the purposeful construction of an abstract. At the same time, the journals can also offer explicit examples or brief style notes of the preferred style of practices to apply in the journal, promoting uniformity across submissions. As such, these would assist writers in finding a clear scholarly voice and keeping their abstracts aligned with accepted disciplinary practices. Future research could expand the corpus across additional disciplines, journal tiers and time periods, and conduct cross-cultural comparisons with regional and international journals to test the stability of these patterns. Methodologically, combining corpus analysis with manual discourse annotation, move analysis, and interviews with authors and editors would clarify why self-mention is suppressed and how journal guidelines shape stance choices. Finally, analysing full research articles and linking abstract-level stance patterns to review outcomes or citation visibility would strengthen the pedagogical and editorial implications of this work.

Acknowledgements

The authors convey their deepest thanks to all the individuals and institutions that ensured this publication could be completed. We particularly acknowledge the UiTM Kedah Branch and Maths Proofread, as they have granted us the research grant (File No.100-TNCPI/PRI 16/6/2 (041/2024), provided continued support, and supplied essential resources. They have been of great use in this project. The authors are responsible for any lingering mistakes. Any remaining errors are solely the responsibility of the authors.

Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

The study is valuable to the increasing literature on academic writing and authorial stance by providing empirical evidence on the construction of presence and location in abstract writing by Malaysian scholars. The study reveals the existence of unique rhetorical strategies that define scholarly discourse in Malaysian academic settings by analyzing the distribution of hedges, boosters, and self-mentions in a large body of high-indexed journal abstracts. Not only are the findings important in furthering the insight into the practice of stance-taking in non-Western academic discourse, but they also offer useful pedagogical information to improve the process of research writing instruction. This study, therefore, reinforces the knowledge of the field concerning the linguistic options in abstract construction and is a valuable resource that can be used by scholars and educators alike in helping to support more successful and confident academic writing.

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