

PRONOMINAL FUNCTIONS IN FEMALE SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSE: COWITE AND THE CORUÑA CORPUS*

Isabel Moskowich
Universidade da Coruña

ABSTRACT

The study of *stance* gained popularity from the early 2000s with the many works by Hyland and has been applied to different pragmatic phenomena such as authorial voice. Stemming from the idea that specialised registers are not completely objective, this paper aims at analysing some nineteenth-century texts by women. In particular, it aims at studying first-person pronouns (both singular and plural subject forms) and the functions they perform beyond the merely referential one according to a classification previously proposed in an earlier paper (Moskowich, 2020). To this end, some texts from two corpora (The Corpus of English Chemistry Texts, CEChET (Moskowich et al., 2022) and the Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts, COWITE (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2025) will be scrutinised by close reading to provide a qualitative analysis of the voice of the authors in them and the functions they perform.

KEYWORDS: Stance, Authorial Voice, First-Person Pronouns, Women's Writing, Nineteenth-Century English, Instructive Texts, Corpus Linguistics

FUNCIONES PRONOMINALES EN EL DISCURSO CIENTÍFICO FEMENINO: COWITE Y EL CORUÑA CORPUS

RESUMEN

El estudio de la *stance* alcanzó mucha popularidad a partir de los primeros años de 2000 gracias a los numerosos trabajos de Hyland. Se han llevado a cabo estudios de distintos fenómenos pragmáticos, entre otros, el de la presencia de la voz autoral. Partiendo de la idea de que los registros especializados no son completamente objetivos, este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar algunos textos del siglo XIX escritos por mujeres. En concreto, se propone estudiar los pronombres de primera persona (las formas de sujeto tanto en singular como en plural) y las funciones que desempeñan más allá de la meramente referencial. Este estudio seguirá una clasificación de dichas funciones previamente propuesta en un trabajo anterior (Moskowich, 2020). Para ello, se examinarán detenidamente algunos textos procedentes de dos corpus (el Corpus of English Chemistry Texts, CEChET (Moskowich *et al.*, 2022) y el Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts, COWITE (Alonso-Almeida *et al.*, 2025) con el fin de ofrecer un análisis cualitativo de la voz de las autoras en dichos textos y de las funciones que desempeñan.

PALABRAS CLAVE: perspectiva, voz autoral, pronombres de primera persona, escritura femenina, inglés del siglo XIX, textos instructivos, lingüística de corpus.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Stance in English texts has been used as an umbrella term for several pragmatic phenomena (Alonso-Almeida and González-Cruz, 2012) and has also become a very popular topic in the last decades thanks to the works by Hyland (1995, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2004). It has been studied also in its diachronic aspects (Hyland and Jiang, 2016, 2017) even when referring to registers apparently “devoid of linguistic and rhetorical flourishes, used to achieve an impersonal, objective style” (Moskowich, 2020: 56). Aspects such as the presence of the self (Hyland, 2008, 2011; Mele-Marrero, 2017) and engagement in academic writing have been relevant too. Therefore, stemming from the now widely accepted idea that academic and scientific registers are not as aseptic as initially thought of, the present paper aims at applying the same methodology as in Moskowich (2020) to texts that are not purely academic or scientific although they have been described as instructive (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2025). Since one of the clues to consider that such texts are not impersonal and are, on the contrary, full of indicators of stance such as the use of pronouns (Biber, 1988; Atkinson, 1999), the presence and functions of first-person pronouns will be analysed on this occasion. Since they are central pronouns (Quirk et al., 1985; Chamonikolasová, 1991), they are especially indicative of the author’s presence, voice and position regarding the contents they convey. Other papers (Moskowich, 2017, 2020, 2024) have already demonstrated that scientific English is not as detached and impersonal as initially thought (Atkinson, 1999).

My aim here is to analyse the use that women writers make of self-reference by comparing texts on Chemistry and recipes written both at the beginning and at the end of the nineteenth century. The first set of data will be taken from the *Coruña Corpus of English Scientific Writing* whereas the second will be extracted from the *Corpus of Women Instructive Texts* (COWITE). Both corpora contain texts relating to similar fields as Chemistry and recipes are not that different in the period under study as they are today when describing procedures.

With this aim, the present paper has been organised in sections so that section 2 will describe pronouns, and their functions as proposed in previous works. Section 3 presents the corpus material under analysis and the methodology employed for the study to then proceed to the analysis of the data from my material in section 4. Finally, section 5 will draw some conclusions.

2. PRONOUNS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

Already from the late twentieth century, English for Specific Purposes, Academic English and similar fields arose the interest of scholars following the

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theoretical tenets of Functionalism (Halliday, 1989, 2004), which considers language as an instrument of metaphor and power. Under a Hallidayan perspective, one could affirm that scientific, technical language can be considered as an excellent example of grammatical metaphor and this is so as this language is often used to refer to theoretical and abstract constructs. However, the expression of such complex, abstract thoughts is not always as detached and object-centred as considered by some scholars (Atkinson, 1999). Early works by Hyland (2001, 2005) in fact show that stance is contained in this type of writing and it can be detected in the use of different linguistic elements. Thus, appraisal, as an extension of the interpersonal metafunction described in systemic-functional grammar, pays especial attention to this “in terms of three basic systems known as “attitude”, “engagement” and “graduation”.” (Banks, 2019). There are many features in which one can recognise these three systems of interpersonal communication (Biber and Finegan, 1989), although pronouns may be said to be at the core in that they may be viewed both as a manifestation of involvement (Herriman and Aronsson, 2009) and interaction (Hyland, 2002).

Interpersonal communication or even stance in general are not the only questions that must be taken into account for the study of pronouns in specialised registers. On the contrary, it is also important to bear in mind that first-person pronouns are multifaceted (in the sense that they may be attributed more than a mere referential function). Similarly, we cannot forget that we are focusing on women’s writing and gender may shape language use. If we accept that women use a less detached language than men (Argamon et al., 2003) in general, maybe as a linguistic outcome of what Lakoff (1990) terms power asymmetry, we can also accept that such involvement is to be found in scientific writing as well (Moskowich, 2017). Involvement can be manifested through personal pronouns. Many scholars admit that personal pronouns in academic, scientific texts must have a function, although there is no agreement as to what that function is. Some authors claim that the singular form *I* is a mark of confrontation in academic prose (Martín-Martín, 2003; Zohar, 2015) which could be interpreted as interaction (Moskowich, 2020) as shown in example (1) below from my material:

- (1) Having thus described the various degrees of refining sugar, *I* shall now point out the method of preparing those colours with which they may be tinged, according to the fancy, and the different purposes for which they are to be used. (1814, Haslehurst Priscilla, COWITE)

Other authors (Hyland, 2001: 217) consider that writers use the first person as a way to set their work apart from that of other authors. Example (2) from my material illustrates this point:

- (2) When *we* find the skin of the fish is cracking, *we* shall know that it is sufficiently boiled. Take it carefully out, place on a hot dish, and serve with melted butter or egg-sauce. (1885, Clarke Edith, COWITE)



TABLE 1. FUNCTION OF 1ST P PRONOUNS IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

FORM	FUNCTION	FUNCTION CODE
sg	mark of confrontation (Martín-Martín 2003), dialogue, interaction	1
	set one's work apart (Hyland 2001), identify author's main claims (Myers 1992; Harwood 2005), give sense of novelty to work	2
pl	express modesty (Myers 1989), mitigation	3
	claim authority and commonality (Pennycook 1994)	4
Sg./pl.	Description/narration of facts	0

Another position yet is that of Myers (1992) and Harwood (2005) concerning present-day specialised English. They support that the use of the first-person pronouns helps readers identify the writers' main tenets. These forms are also said to provide the text with a touch of novelty.

In turn, several different viewpoints can be observed when referring to the plural pronominal form. Thus, they are sometimes interpreted either as a sign of modesty (Myers, 1989; Hyland, 2001) or as a claim of authority or as an expression of commonality as with inclusive *we* (Pennycook, 1994):

- (3) HAVING completed *our* examination of the simple or elementary bodies, *we* are now to proceed to those of a compound nature; but before *we* enter on this extensive subject, it will be necessary to make you acquainted with the laws by which chemical combinations are governed. (Jane Marcet, 1706: 1 - CEChET)

In a previous work (Moskowich, 2020) I tried to describe and delimit these functions more clearly, although conscious that all these pronominal forms share the primary function of signalling the author. I then proposed a classification of the pronominal functions in the literature into five categories which are the ones represented in table 1.

The following sections of this paper will provide a qualitative analysis of the use of first-person pronouns and their functions in the writings of several nineteenth-century women. More specifically, the analysis will focus on writings on comparable fields in different genres so that both genre and date will be taken as variables for comparison.

3. CORPUS MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

The material here studied has been obtained from two different corpora. On the one hand, I have resorted to the texts in the COWITE Database, Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts in English (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2025). On the other, I have selected samples written by women in one of the subcorpora of the Coruña Corpus of English Scientific Writing, namely, the Corpus of English Chemistry Texts (CEChET) (Moskowich et al., 2022).



TABLE 2. TEXTS BY WOMEN IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY CECHET			
YEAR	AUTHOR	TITLE	WORDS
1806	Marcet, Jane Haldimand	Conversations on chemistry. In which elements of that science are familiarly explained and illustrated by experiments in two volumes. Vol II. On Compound Bodies.	10081
1882	Richards, Ellen H. Swallow	The chemistry of cooking and cleaning. A manual for housekeepers	10042
TOTAL			20123

TABLE 3. TEXTS BY WOMEN IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY COWITE 19			
YEAR	AUTHOR	TITLE	WORDS
1806	Rundell María	A New System of Domestic Cookery	20614
1880	Pye Julie	Home Notes and Household Hints: A Book of Domestic Economy and Recipes	10019
1883	Hooper Mary	Little Dinners: How to Serve Them with Elegance and Economy	10453
1885	Clarke Edith	High-Class Cookery Recipes: As Taught in the School	10090
1885	Edden Helen	Recipes of Old England	10142
1886	Clarke Edith	A Year's Cookery. Giving Dishes for Breakfast, Luncheon, and Dinner for Every Day in the Year	14776
1886	Lees-Dods Matilda	Handbook of Practical Cookery. New and Enlarged Edition	8281
TOTAL			84375

CEChET contains English texts dealing with chemistry and alchemy matters in late Modern English (1700-1900), and it can be used to describe such traditions both from a synchronic and a diachronic perspective. Samples in the Coruña Corpus are compiled so that there are always two 10,000-word text extracts per decade and this applies here too. All texts are encoded to be XML-TEI compliant and accompanied by metadata files with information both about the author and the text. In Chemistry, as well as in all the other disciplines compiled in the Coruña Corpus, text samples belong to different genres within the scientific register.

Only two women have been recorded in the nineteenth-century section of the Corpus of English Chemistry Texts, Jane Marcet and Ellen Richards, one at each end of the century as set out in table 2. As regards the genres used, the book by Marcet is a dialogue (in fact, a conversation among Mrs B., Caroline and Emily) and the one by Richards is a textbook.



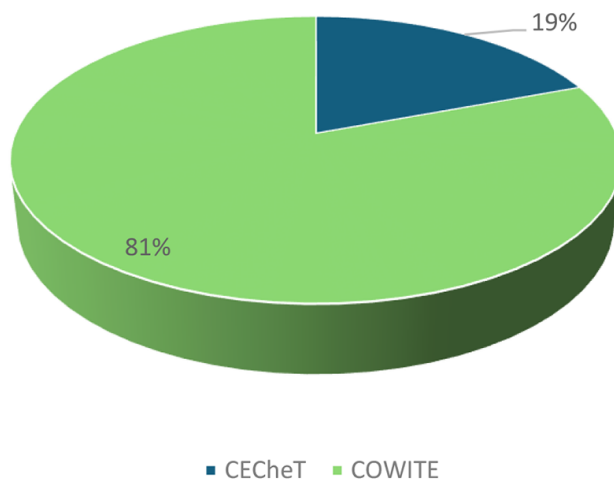


Figure 1. Distribution of words per subcorpus.

COWITE, the Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts in English, is also divided in several sections. The one under study here is COWITE19, corresponding to the nineteenth-century as it covers from 1800 to 1899. It comprises 33 texts by women, all of them of instructive prose, "encompassing cookery books, domestic guides, medical handbooks, and other forms of didactic writing addressed to a female audience or authored from a woman's perspective" (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2025). The beta version of the corpus used here has been prepared in plain text format. Of the total thirty-three texts in COWITE19, I have selected those published in the same decades as the ones found in CEChET to provide a reasonable comparison in the use of pronouns. This implies repeating one of the authors (Edith Clarke 1885 and 1886) which is a practice not to be found in the Coruña Corpus as the compilation principles of both corpora are different. Since COWITE is a monogeneric corpus, all the samples here belong to the genre recipe. The total word-count is set out in table 3.

An overview of the overall distribution of the 104,498 tokens in my material can be seen in Figure 1, where the word-count in COWITE, with more than 84,000 words, by large outnumbers that of CEChET (20,123 words).

As regards the method used, I have partly replicated the one in Moskowich (2020). Thus, to deal with the Corpus of English Chemistry Texts (CEChET), the Coruña Corpus Tool was used to first select the texts under scrutiny and then search for all the pronominal forms of interest, that is, nominative (subject) pronominal forms, both singular (*I*) and plural (*we*). Oblique cases were discarded as pronominal functions are not easy to assign in these cases. The same forms were searched for in COWITE19 with AntConc 4.3.1. All results were saved to broadsheets in Excel (version 16.96.1 /25042021). A time-consuming process of close reading of each occurrence ensued in order to ascribe each pronoun to one of the five functions already described in Moskowich (2020) and set out in table 1 above.



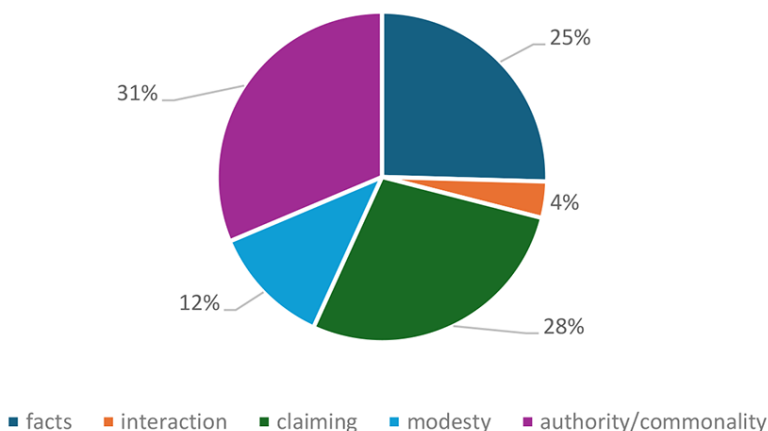


Figure 2. Overall distribution of pronominal functions in the material.

In the following paragraphs, the outcome of the analysis of these pronominal forms will be dealt with in some detail.

4. ANALYSIS OF DATA

Of the total 104,498 words in my material, only 169 correspond to first-person subject pronouns, which is less than 16% of the total. This may not be surprising as scientific writing is *a priori* not thought of as containing many of such forms. Besides, we must consider that most texts in the material under analysis are recipes, and these are usually characterised by the use of large numbers of imperative forms with no pronouns at all, which accounts for the general findings.

When considering singular and plural subject forms separately, we observe a very regular distribution as the 169 forms contain 83 instances of the singular *I* and 86 of *we*. What is surprising, however, is the fact that all pronominal forms are to be found in the texts on CEChET except for 3 cases that occur in the recipes of COWITE. One could expect a more detached style in texts on Chemistry than in recipes, but genre is playing an important role here: the book by Jane Marcet is a dialogue and the one by Ellen Richards a textbook. Any of these two imply a close relation with the expected readership and consequently both a direct address to them and an open manifestation of the author's voice can be expected.

The subject pronouns under study are used to fulfil the five different functions described both in Moskowich (2020) and in this paper. As set out in table 1, only one of the five functions attributed to first-person pronouns can be found to operate in both the singular and the plural. The other four correspond two to the singular form *I* and the other two to the plural form *we*. However, their overall distribution is very irregular as illustrated in figure 2.



Thus, the most abundant function with 53 instances is the one denoting either authority or commonality, a function exclusive of the plural form, although we have already seen that plural pronouns do not outnumber singular ones. Examples (4) and (5) illustrate the first function:

- (4) *We* find it also in the products of their decomposition, hence *we* reason that if the wear and tear of the muscles causes the liberation of nitrogenous compounds, which pass out of the system as such, this loss must be supplied by the use of some kind of food which contains nitrogen. (Hellen Richards, 1882: 37-38 - CEChET)
- (5) Our daily bread is so common a thing that *we* accept it with almost as little inquiry as thankfulness. (1883 Hooper, Mary - COWITE)

The second occurrence of the pronoun in example (4) is used by Ellen Richards to claim her authority in the subject she is dealing with as posited by Pennycook (1994). On the other hand, when Mary Hooper uses *we* in example (5) she is providing a sense of commonality or belonging together with her readers.

The second most abundant function with 47 hits is the one we find for singular *I* by which authors make claims, set their work apart or try to give a sense of novelty to their work. The samples in COWITE contain not a single instance of this use probably as a result not only of genre but also of content restrictions. Recipes are passed on from one generation to the following as part of the folklore or common knowledge and there is nothing to make claims about. Example (6) corresponds, therefore, to the text by Marcet contained in the Corpus of English Chemistry Texts (CEChET). As already noted, this is an instructive text in the form of a dialogue between a lady and two young girls, which favours the large number of self-references in the sample:

- (6) all the combinations that we have hitherto seen, one of the constituents has, *I* believe, been either liquid or aeriform. (Jane Marcet, 1806: 3 - CEChET)

The function *I* have labelled 0 in table 1 above is the only one to be found both in the singular and in the plural subject forms of the pronoun. With 43 cases (30 corresponding to the singular and 13 to the plural), it is the third most frequent function recorded in my material. It occurs when pronouns are used for the mere description or narration of facts, which is a function expected to be often used in both scientific and instructive texts. However, there are only two uses in COWITE, both found in the sample by Edith Clarke containing the recipe for “Fish Soup (white)” written in 1885:

- (7) When *we* find the skin of the fish is cracking, *we* shall know that it is sufficiently boiled. (1885, Edith Clarke - COWITE)



The other single use of *we* I have detected in COWITE is representing function 4, which is the one used express commonality (Pennycook 1994) This is found in in example (8) below:

- (8) Our daily bread is so common a thing that *we* accept it with almost as little inquiry as thankfulness. (1883 Hooper, Mary COWITE)

At a distance and with 20 cases, the fourth place is occupied by the use of plural *we* when expressing modesty (function 3 in my classification). This low number of tokens, as compared with the other three analysed so far, seems to indicate that these texts do not conform to the portrait Szymańska (2013) or Gil-Salom & Soler-Monreal (2014) make of women's writing in that those pronominal functions claiming authority or setting the writer's work apart are notably more abundant than those mitigating their claims. No examples of this function of modesty were found in COWITE, perhaps due to the fact that modesty is not needed when dealing with recipes but it is so when conveying knowledge typically attributed to men. Example (9) below has been taken from Hellen Richards' book *The chemistry of cooking and cleaning. A manual for housekeepers* published in 1882. and included in the Corpus of English Chemistry Texts (CEChET):

- (9) The nourishment is carried to them by the blood corpuscles. *We* find in these, as well as in muscular tissue, an element which *we* have not heretofore considered, nitrogen. (Hellen Richards, 1882: 37 - CEChET)

Finally, the least frequent function in the texts under scrutiny (with 6 occurrences) is number 1, identified with that of dialogue or interaction although Martín-Martín (2003) refers to this interaction in the sense of confrontation with the reader. Thus, it is no surprise that the pronoun *I* is only seldom used with this function in this particular dataset as the fact that women wish to present their own ideas or express a sense of commonality does not necessarily imply that they want to react against their readership. Example (10) has been taken from the chemistry corpus, the only field where it has been found.

- (10) What an amazing heat is disengaged. –*I* thought you said that cold was produced by the melting of salts? (Jane Marcet, 1806: 41 - CEChET)

This overview seems to have shown that the use of pronouns by women is a way to individualise themselves from male writers but only in those dominions where such thing is needed. Thus, there seems to be some kind of restriction imposed on the use of pronouns denoting self-mention and such restriction may not be only limited to the topic that is being dealt with (cooking vs. chemical formulae) but also to the rhetorical limitations of each genre (recipe vs. dialogue or textbook). In general, this means that women adapt their style when writing to the dominions and formats they are dealing with.



5. CONCLUSIONS

Stance in registers with an apparently detached style such as instructive and academic prose has been extensively dealt with from the last years of the twentieth century (Grabe, 1984; Hyland, 1998, 2005b; White, 2003; Halliday, 2004; Alonso Almeida, 2015). Certain linguistic manifestations have been identified as typical of stance (Hyland and Jiang 2016) among which self-mentions must be included. Personal pronouns, in particular those referring to the first person but also references to the readership, have deserved attention. Their behaviour in texts on different disciplines has been looked into (Crespo and Moskowich, 2015, 2024) so that both quantitative and qualitative studies have been carried out.

The analysis of the nine nineteenth-century texts written by women here presented is of a qualitative nature and has exclusively focused on the subject pronominal forms *I* and *we*. It demanded careful close reading of every single use of such forms detected as the method of analysis employed involved classifying every use as performing one of the five possible functions previously described (Moskowich, 2020). This is so as I consider that the use of pronouns goes beyond mere reference. Contrariwise, it includes the expression of authorial stance, the negotiation of interpersonal relationships, and the structuring of discourse.

I have examined the use and distribution of these first-person subject pronouns with a particular focus on how genre and rhetorical purpose may shape authors' linguistic choices. As on other occasions, my findings reveal a nuanced and context-sensitive use of pronouns, suggesting that women writers adapted their linguistic strategies according to the domain they were writing about and the format of their texts.

Despite the relatively low frequency of first-person pronouns found –only 169 instances in a corpus of over 104,000 words–, their functional diversity is notable. The seven recipes from COWITE, the Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts in English, only contain three uses of first-person pronouns and the three of them in the plural. This scarcity can be easily explained by the nature of the genre itself which is mainly characterised by the abundance of verbs in the imperative and a simple syntax, the one required to give directions. We could also see that the functions performed by these pronouns were similarly in agreement with the style of recipes so that pronouns were used either to describe facts or to provide a sense of commonality among the writer and the reader, perhaps to avoid sounding patronising. In addition, the presence and distribution of subject pronouns in scientific texts, particularly those in the Corpus of English Chemistry Texts, underscores the importance of genre in modelling authorial voice.

In my analysis I could identify the five distinct functions of first-person pronouns proposed, with the most frequent one being the expression of commonality, exclusively realised through the plural form *we*. This suggests that women writers often positioned themselves as part of a shared community with their readers (mostly other women). The second most frequent function, associated with the singular *I*, reflects claims of novelty or distinction, indicating moments where authors assert their intellectual contributions. Again, this is mostly found in the Chemistry texts,



probably to mark a contrast with men writers in the androcentric universe of science. Interestingly, the function of modesty, often linked to traditional portrayals of women's writing, was comparatively rare. This challenges existing assumptions and points to a more assertive rhetorical stance in texts dealing with scientific knowledge. The least frequent function –that of interaction– was limited to the text by Jane Marcet with conversational format, reinforcing the idea that rhetorical structure constrains pronominal use.

In general, my findings suggest that women's use of first-person pronouns in late Modern English specialised registers was not merely a reflection of grammatical convention but a strategic tool for negotiating identity and authority. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of gendered discourse practices and highlight the importance of considering genre, domain and rhetorical context in historical linguistic analyses.

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