Self-Promotion and Identity Construction in Graduate Personal Statements

Ghada Haji
University of Sfax, Tunisia
hajjighada89@gmail.com
ORCID https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9357-7074

Abstract
This qualitative corpus-based study investigates the first-person singular pronouns and their possessive determiners in graduate personal statements (PSs) that applicants use to create a self-promotional tenor in their statements. Data consisted on a corpus of 120 English and French PSs collected from four academic disciplines: Linguistics, Sociology, Engineering and Biology. The analysis has shown that the self-promotion strategy employed by the Anglo-American and French applicants shed light on the graduate students' position and strengthen their identity in their statements. Further, the linguistic investigation revealed remarkable variations in using the self-mention signals across moves, disciplines and languages. With these findings, the study offered valuable theoretical and pedagogical implications regarding the linguistic features of the genre of PSs across various cultures, disciplines and institutional contexts. In addition, they underpin pedagogic self-promotional academic writings and shed light on using this genre as a potential pedagogical tool in classroom activities, particularly in ESL and EFL contexts.

Keywords: academic identity, disciplines, personal statements, self-promotion

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Introduction

Throughout the past few years, genre analysis has been predominantly applied by linguists to investigate the rhetorical structure and the linguistic features and strategies in the texts used by community members to achieve specific communicative purposes in their discourse communities. Many genre analysts have examined texts in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) such as research article abstracts, MA theses or PhD dissertations, book reviews etc. (Al-Khasawneh, 2017; Lopez, 2015; Samraj, 2008). Researchers have sufficiently addressed these genres because they are accessible for analysis. Contrarily, university application letters or the PSs have been known as 'occluded', 'typically hidden', 'out of sight' or "occluded from the public gaze by a veil of confidentiality" (Swales, 1990, p. 46). Such documents are generally accessible for public view and scrutiny. It is difficult to find samples of them online, with few exceptions of guiding instructions for novice writers on composing these genres that some commercial websites make available on the internet. However, in most cases, Swales and Feak (2011) argued, these guidelines relate to a particular context and a specific discourse community. For these reasons, they would generally be inappropriate and vague.

It is worth mentioning that a university application letter is a significant common genre that plays a considerable role in determining candidates' selection for admission to university (Brown, 2004). Its main purpose is to highlight the applicants' qualifications and achievements that the school grades and recommendation letters do not usually disclose. Producing a successful personal statement tends to be a challenging task, especially for novice students, as they should be aware of which achievements and qualities they should emphasize. The graduate personal statement is, according to Bekins et al. (2004), a rhetorical task which requires the students' awareness of institutional conventions on the one hand and the appropriate choice of information and details to include on the other, taking into account the rhetorical and disciplinary specificities of this genre.

The personal statement reveals an applicant's interest in a particular program. It also demonstrates how the students' interests meet the target program's requirements and expectations. Such documents help admission committee members to assess the applicants' writing skills, competences and persuasion abilities (Hsaio, 2004). Indeed, university application letters play a central role in the students' application procedure for a particular course or university since presenting a well-written and organized letter will decide whether a candidate is accepted or rejected by the selection committees. It aims to persuade the admissions committee to accept the writer's candidature (Callaghan, 2004).

Although previous genre studies on PSs investigated this genre's rhetorical style and linguistic aspect across different contexts and disciplines (Brown, 2004; Ding, 2007; Samraj & Monk, 2008), various aspects of the PSs genre have remained implicit and hidden, therefore require further investigation. Most of the reviewed studies were based on a limited number of data which ranged from 20 to 35 PSs in the same research project. Such inadequacy of data may inevitably affect the generalizability and reliability of the obtained results. Also, the majority of the authors focused mainly on the rhetorical and discursive features of the genre of university application letters, whereas the investigation of the linguistic features and lexical items across cultures and disciplines has been largely neglected.

The linguistic strategies, such as the self-promotion and self-mention strategies, employed by the students in their application essays to promote themselves and to enhance their chances of getting admitted to the target discipline or university need to be sufficiently explored. Comparative investigations of students' presence and authority in their application essays remain rare, nor have results been based on a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary analysis. This genre still needs more examination as it significantly reflects the discourse community's epistemological and social assumptions, and such promotional genres are considered a

significant source of interactional linguistic features that mirror how individuals attempt to present themselves as potential members of a certain discourse community (Bekins et al., 2004).

Building on this theoretical and empirical background, this study intends to expand this area of genre analytic research by exploring the major linguistic strategies employed by English and French graduate students applying for the four programs to promote their candidature and gain admittance to the target university. As such, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing investigation of graduate PSs via exploratory corpus-driven research on the genre's potential linguistic, cross-cultural and disciplinary variations. More specifically, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- What are the main linguistic strategies used by the English andFrench applicants in their university application letters?
- What are the major cultural and disciplinary variations observed in the students' use of the self-promotion strategy?

Method

This study employed a descriptive-qualitative approach, based on the techniques of the case study design. This framework offers a thorough and comprehensive description of graduate students' PSs. Since this paper intends primarily to describe, analyze, interpret and evaluate the students' use of self-promotion and identity construction strategies present in their graduate application essays, a qualitative-descriptive approach was deemed appropriate (Creswell, 2003). The selection of this approach was also encouraged by Hyland (2004b) who argued that "information about genre practices is best approached using small-scale research and qualitative methods" (p.125).

Data Collection

The data were samples of graduate university PSs produced by Anglo-American and French students applying for masters in western universities. The corpus consisted of 120 graduate PSs (40 British, 40 American and 40 French) selected from four disciplines: linguistics, sociology, engineering and biology (see Table 1). All the application essays were collected upon contact with students who were already admitted and enrolled in their universities. Hence, the selected sample was authentic and original, written by native British, American and French students. To avoid the influence of exterior factors such as time constraints, uneasiness etc., the researcher found it more appropriate to contact students who wrote and submitted their letters. Hence, the corpus was "naturally occurring data" (Bry-man, 2001).

Table 1. *Description of the Corpus Across Disciplines*

		Linguistics	Sociology	Biology	Engineering
British Corpus	Total PSs	10	10	10	10
	Total words	6. 846	6.263	5.401	6.276
	Average of length	684	626	540	627
	Range	344-1067	473–1117	336-668	372– 828
American Corpus	Total PSs	10	10	10	10
	Total words	9. 014	6.883	7.671	7.227
	Average of length	901	688	767	722
	Range	490-1658	494– 1266	103-1816	362 –1262
	Total PSs	10	10	10	10

French Corpus					
	Total words	2.830	3.322	3.037	3.759
	Average of length	283	332	303	375
	Range	185- 417	174-555	155–369	138 – 969

Procedures

The researcher could not get the data directly from the universities' student admission services as planned due to its confidential nature. Consequently, a personal contact was established with the participants by searching on 'Facebook groups, where the graduate students were enrolled in the required universities and disciplines. Private messages and emails were sent to the graduate university applicants, certainly after contacting the admins and asking their permission to kindly invite them to submit the PSs for research purposes, if adhered to the data criteria needed (that is they are required to be authentic PSs written by English native speakers from the four mentioned disciplines). To ensure the students' privacy and confidentiality, candidates were asked to omit the personal information (name, address, age etc.) unwilling to share. As it was argued by Warren (2003) and Creswell (2008), "it is commonly acknowledged that ethical issues must be considered if the research involves human participants' (Ritchie, 2003, p. 34).

Data Analysis

The computer-driven corpus provides a detailed statistical analysis of the digitized corpora. A much more interesting and comprehensive linguistic analysis can be undertaken that may strengthen and reinforce the overall analysis. Indeed, it builds for each text precise frequency lists of words and even the punctuation marks; however, the analysis focused on using the first-person singular pronoun "I" and its possessive adjective "my". With the help of the University Franche comté, France, laboratory engineer, the TXM program was installed on the researcher's laptop to facilitate the data processing. Then, the PSs, which were saved in "Word" and "Pdf" files, were transformed into TXT files. After that, they were converted from TXT files to XML files using the "Fine Reader" software to be processed and analyzed by the TXM program. Finally, the files were classified according to each country and discipline and were analyzed automatically with the TXM version 0.9 software, as illustrated in figures 1 and 2. This analytical procedure, despite time-consumption, was very advanced and efficient and ended by providing satisfactory results.

Despite a wide variety of software programs used for the linguistic investigation of the present research, the TXM program was chosen because it is considered one of the most advanced, most reliable and widely employed text analysis tools in corpus-based research studies. It also provides various options which help identify the prominent linguistic features found in the analyzed corpus, as illustrated in the figures below. In addition, it is very efficient and accurate in terms of statistical analysis.
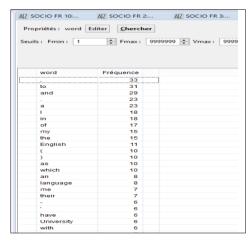

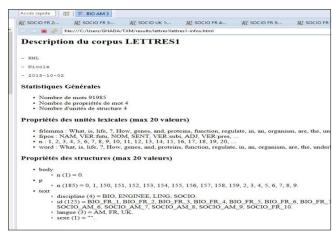Figure 1. Sample of the TXM Linguist Statistics of the Data

Figure 2. TXM Program Screenshot Illustrating Description of the Data

After processing the corpus through this program, the lexical features *"I"* and *"my"* were identified, calculated and analyzed in relation to the discipline and the three groups of applicants. By comparatively analyzing the statistics, the use of the self-mention strategy by the three groups of candidates was explored, as it was affirmed by Hyland (2002b) *"we can learn a lot more about authorial identity by exploring the rhetorical functions the first-person singular is used to perform"*, Thus, the main linguistic, cultural and disciplinary variations and similarities were inferred in the investigated corpus. Further, a deeper analysis was made at the move level, where the researcher identified the moves where these linguistic features are most frequent.

Results and Discussion

The starting level of the linguistic investigation focuses mainly on the identification of the first personal pronoun "I" in the collected British, American and French PSs in the four disciplines, followed by the examination of the distribution of this linguistic feature through the different moves of the application letters and the consideration of the role of disciplinary variations in the use of this item. As well, the frequency of using the possessive determiner "my" was tagged, calculated and analyzed as the frequency of occurrence is a key element in discerning the relative relevance of the self-promotion elements in academic genres. The linguistic features were analyzed and counted using the TXM software version 0.9. 2.3.TXM Software This software is currently used in research projects in various humanities fields such as history, geography, sociology and linguistics. It employs various and efficient techniques for analyzing a large scale of data and any digitized textual corpora.

The linguistic analysis was initiated by exploring the first person singular "I", in line with its possessive adjective "my" and their significance in reinforcing the applicant's authorial presence in the statements. Considering the use of first personal pronouns and their possessive adjectives, the most frequent lexical items and key features were identified using the software TXM version 0.8. The use of this program has pointed out the top frequently recurrent linguistic features in the English corpus under investigation namely the first personal pronoun *"I"* and its possessive adjective *"My"* and the French corpus the first personal pronoun *"Je"/ "J"* as well as its possessive forms *"mon", "ma"* and *"mes"*. These linguistic elements were used by both English and French applicants for the self-promotion strategy.

Table 2. Frequencies of the Personal Pronouns and their Possessive Adjectives in the Anglo-American and French PSs

		Linguistics	Sociology	Biology	Engineering
British PSs	I	260	238	179	257
	My	142	128	118	112
American PSs	I	304	321	257	270
	My	167	181	172	150
	Je/ J'	84	83	47	101
French PSs	Mon, Ma, Mes	78	50	54	71

Both linguistic elements *"I"* and *"My"* proved to be among the highly ranked linguistic elements found in the British and American graduate application letters. Hyland (2005) argued that *"the degree of explicit authorial presence in the text is measured by the frequency of first-person pronouns and possessive adjectives"* (p. 53). They were present in all the PSs and in all the disciplines but with variant frequencies. Indeed, Table 2 indicates that the first personal pronoun *"I"* appears to be more recurrent than the possessive determiner *"my"* within both British and American application letters. Besides, the average of frequency of *"I"* in each

application essay was roughly 23 in the British corpus and 28 in the American one, whereas the average of occurrence of *"my"* was only 12 in the British PSsand 16 in the American PSs. With regards to the French corpus, the average of frequency was lower compared to the English corpus. In fact, the personal pronoun *"Je"* occurred in all the letters and in the four disciplines with average of 7 occurrences per letter and its possessive forms *"mon"*, *"ma"* and *"mes"* appeared with average of six times per letter. Thus, it seems clear that the frequencies of the linguistic items used for the self-promotion strategy found in the French application letters are clearly less than those found in the English letters, which is totally normal as the French PSs appeared to be shorter and more concise than the English ones.

Use of the first pronoun "I"/ "Je", "J'"

As it was shown in Table 2, the first singular personal pronoun was deployed in the three corpora with different frequencies in the four disciplines, which could be expected as the PSs are mainly based on the self-appraisal and self-glorification that is emphasizingthe *"I"*. In this issue, Hsaio (2004) averred that in the genre of application letters the subject is the writer himself, therefore promoting the applicant's relevant self is the purpose of this genre. Regarding the British PSs, the frequency of the use of *"I"* ranged from five in Biology (PS 7) to 41 occurrences in Sociology (PS 3). In addition, the linguistic analysis revealed noticeable statistical differences as far as the disciplines are concerned, as the frequency of *"I"* ranged from 171 occurrences in British Biology to 244 in British Engineering. Another remarkable variation appeared at the level of moves. In fact, the linguistic investigation of these features across the moves of the PSs indicated that the element *"I"* was most frequent in Move 2 *Background* in the four disciplines.

This may be explained by the rhetorical paradigm of the promotional genres, namely the genre of PSs. Indeed, Move 2 *Background*, with its five steps, represents the backbone of the students' statements as it is the space where the applicants tend to praise and glorify their achievements by emphasizing the *"I*. Interestingly, despite the dissimilarities observed in the corpus at the rhetorical and disciplinary levels, the linguistic function of *"I"* did not differ in any of them, as it served mainly to present the graduate students as suitable, qualified as well as well determined potential applicants. This can be illustrated in the following samples.

Extract 1

I am very hardworking, with a methodical, synthetic and rigorous approach to my work and studies...I also have a strong experience in second language acquisition and a good working knowledge of the mechanics of learning... I am extremely motivated... **[PS9, British Sociology]**

Moving to the American data, the obtained findings proved certain statistical variations regarding the frequency of *"I"* in the U.S PSs. In fact, it reported higher occurrence in the graduate application essays except in the Engineering discipline. Nonetheless, similarly to the U.K graduate essays, the pronoun *"I"* in the American graduate application letters was centering mainly in Move 2 *Background* except the Sociology discipline. Indeed, Sociology students opted to emphasize the *"I"* in the second and third moves of the PS, namely the *Background* move and the *Reasons for applying move*, with approximately the same rate. Concerning the other moves, Moves four and five, they did not feature high frequency of the personal pronoun *"I"* as these moves themselves were not very frequent in the American corpus like Move 4 which was present only once in Sociology (PS 2) and twice in Biology. Thus, the frequency of *"I"* would not be as frequent as in the other obligatory moves.

Extract 2

I believe I have the commitment and base knowledge to complete this degree to

a high standard...The high quality of education I have received from Heriot-Watt has aspired me to continue my research through these masters. **[PS1, American Biology]**

With respect to the French corpus, the linguistic analysis revealed approximately the same results. The first personal pronoun "*Je*" appeared mostly in Move 2 *Background* where the French students try to talk mainly about their academic career, experiences related to the field of study to portray a distinguished identity and show "an explicit authorial presence in the text" (Hyland, 2005, p. 51) to get admitted in the target field.

Extract 3

Je voudrai poursuivre mes connaissances dans le monde éducatif...J'ai eu l'opportunité d'avoir des cours liées à l'enseignement...J'ai découvert que la formation que vous offrez m'aidera à acquérir toutes les compétences. **[PS1,**

French Linguistics]-

At the level of disciplines, there is a clear disparity in the use of the first personal pronoun. Indeed, this item seems to be more present in the soft disciplines (Linguistics and Sociology) more than the hard disciplines (Biology and Engineering). Chen and Nassagi (2015) found in his article entitled "Self-mention and Identity Construction in Statement of Purpose" that the use of the first personal pronoun is discipline specific, that is the humanities had the highest frequency. Although the three groups of graduate students differed in the use of the personal pronoun "*I*" at both levels, moves and disciplines, they united in using this linguistic element to present an authorial identity with a strong determination to continually gain knowledge.

Use of the possessive adjectives "My" and "Mon"/" Ma" "Mes"

The possessive determiner "*my*" was predominately employed by Anglo-American students for praising and promoting themselves. It serves to demonstrate the student's valuable qualifications, related, most relevant experiences and motivating reasons to study the target program. Table 2 proves that this item was present in all the English corpus with some variations at the move level, but with lower average when compared to the first-person singular pronoun "*I*". Its occurrence ranged from 5 (PS 8 Sociology) to 27 (PS 5) Sociology in the British corpus and from 10 (PS 2 Linguistics) to 31 (PS 1 Biology) in the American corpus.

Both tables indicate that although the determiner "*my*" was more occurring in the American data, in both corpora it was intensively concentrated in Move 2 *Background* and with lesser degree in Move 1 and Move 3. Indeed, in the four disciplines, the linguistic item "*I*" was mainly frequent in Move 2 to not only enumerate the student's skills and achievements but also to convey a strong sense of commitment to the purposed discipline.

With regards to the French corpus, Table 2 revealed certain statistical variations. Indeed, the linguistic analysis proved that the possessive adjectives "*Mon*", "*Ma*" and "*Mes*" appeared to be less used by the French students than the English groups. Further, concerning the distribution of this element all through the disciplines, the table indicates that, contrary to the English corpus where the possessive adjective was concentrated mainly in Move 2 *Background*, in the French corpus the possessive adjectives were highly present in both Moves 2 and 3 especially in the hard disciplines. Indeed, the French students applying for masters in Biology and Engineering tend to give approximately an equal significance to both moves as far as the self-promotion strategy is concerned. Additionally, the analysis revealed that this element was totally absent in some moves in the French corpus such as Moves four and five in Biology and Move 5 in Engineering.

Based on these results, the linguistic exploration of the processed data reported a high proportion of appearance self-promotion features employed by both English and French writers to present a positive image of themselves by portraying an authorial self firmly established in the norms of the discipline and an appropriate degree of confidence and self-determination (Hyland, 2002). Arguably, the presence of self-promotional strategies is evident in persuasive rhetoric in general. It is a central pragmatic feature of authorial identity that promotes both writers and their achievements (Hyland, 2002). Indeed, as it was argued by Hyland (2005), "the degree of explicit authorial presence in the text is measured by the frequency of first-person pronouns and possessive adjectives" (p. 53).

The linguistic analysis revealed an intensive use of the self-promotional element "I", whose main function is to enhance the applicants' stance and support their academic and research activities. Hyland (2005) refers to the word "stance" whereby writers present their voice or personality and convey their judgments, opinions and commitments. In other words, it concerns how the candidates' position and project themselves in their application essays. In this respect, Gosden (1993) pointed out that first-person references could be considered to form a progressive cline of writer visibility, i.e., a means by which writers seek to present themselves and their viewpoints in the research community, with both very obvious and very subtle means of realization" (p. 62). Indeed, as suggested by growing data of research on voice and stance in academic genres (e.g., Hyland, 2002; Invanic & Camps, 2001; Mastuda & Tardy, 2007; Zareva, 2013), the use of the personal pronoun is on the one hand discipline-specific (with higher frequency in some disciplines than the others) and, on the other hand, a valuable linguistic strategy that can help text producers construct and text receivers decode the presented identity.

The writers' identity in academic texts, and especially in the university application letters, is realized by and revealed through the use of different linguistic choices, chief among them is the use of the possessive adjective "my". Hyland (2001) assumed that this item, considered a self-promotional device, is a salient feature of the stance that is strongly recommended to be used when presenting one's authorial identity, especially when dealing with persuasive writing in the case of the genre under study.

Implications

From a linguistic perspective, this study offers significant theoretical implications for corpus-assisted genre analysis in various cultural and institutional contexts. Additionally, the findings of this study offered valuable insights regarding the linguistic strategies that could be employed in a successful PS. In fact, prospective graduate applicants will consciously consider the importance of using personal pronouns to strengthen their authorial presence in the letters. Being aware of the use of the major linguistic strategies in the genre of PSs, which is a less studied genre, potential graduates will be able to produce effective letters that can appropriately meet the standard and the requirements of their target discourse community. Besides, this research helps prospective applicants from all over the world to adapt themselves to the norms and expectations of the target cultures, and thus, they become more proficient in achieving the communicative purpose in a graduate application letter for western universities. On the other hand, the current research demonstrated the writing style specificities of each culture and language. It provided further empirical evidence for the argument that genre is dynamic and a PS is socially and culturally dependent (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). In other words, this work offered significant insights into the production of texts in their socio-cultural context.

From a pedagogical perspective, the study findings provide teachers/ instructors with valuable instructions on including the genre-based studies of such academic and self-promotional genres and contrastive research as a potential pedagogical tool in classroom activities, particularly in ESL and EFL contexts. As argued by Nassaji (2015), promotional writing has become a vital

component in today's competitive academia and throughout one's academic career. Hence, people, in general, and students in particular, need to learn how to deal with academic and self-promotional genres such as a university or job application letters, grant proposals, application letters for promotion etc. Accordingly, the present work invites specialists to pay more attention to these genres and why they incorporate them in the secondary and university courses for native and non-native English and French speakers. Indeed, including this type of writing activities different pedagogical contexts may help to enhance the learner's "rhetorical and genre consciousness" (Swales, 1993, cited in Bhatia, 2002) to be more efficient in their writing. As such, this will help graduate and undergraduate students applying to western universities and universities to understand the audiences' expectations and master the complex but often implicit rhetorical, linguistic and disciplinary aspects of the genre of PSs. Thus, this would enhance admission to the target institution.

Conclusion

The self-promotion strategy employed by British, American and French applicants consisted mainly in the intensive use of the first person singular "*I*"/ "*Je*" and its possessive adjective "*my*" or "*mon*", "*ma*", "*mes*" in the French corpus. The key lexical features were calculated using the TXM software version 0.8. The linguistic investigation of the English PSs revealed that both "*I*" and "*my*" proved to be among the most highly ranked lexical features in the collected PSs as they were frequently occurring in all the statements and in both the soft and hard disciplines but with variant rates, especially at the level of moves. This is highly expected as the genre under investigation is a self-promotional genre based essentially on self-appraisal and self-glorification, emphasizing the "*I*". However, concerning the French data, the frequency of the linguistic items used for the self-promotion strategy seems less frequent than those identified in the English application essays. This could be expected as the French letters appeared more straightforward than the English ones.

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I hereby declare that research ethics and citing rules have been considered in all the sections of this paper. I assume full responsibility in case of disagreement.

Conflict of interest:

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Author:

Ghada Haji has a doctorate degree in English Applied Linguistics. Her interests lie in academic writing and rhetorical analysis. She is currently teaching English at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Sfax and the Higher Institute of Business Administration of Sfax (Tunisia). She graduated from the University of Social and Human Sciences of Tunis. She got her B.A. in English literature, linguistics and civilization in 2011. In 2014, she was awarded her master's in applied linguistics and genre analysis. She has participated in several national and international conferences on modern linguistics at the faculties of Tunis and Sfax.