"I'm stating my case"
Overt Authorial Presence in English Argumentative Texts by Students and Professional Writers

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1. Introduction

One of the concerns of writers producing texts is the extent to which they should make their presence visible to their readers by referring to themselves in the text. Some writers may choose not to refer to themselves at all, thus effacing themselves completely; others may choose to establish a strong overt authorial presence in the text by frequent self reference. By making their presence visible to their readers, writers construct a notion of self in the text, a writer persona involved in various types of activities and relations. Seen from a functional point of view, i.e. that language creates rather than reflects meaning, this writer persona is not a fixed, independent aspect of reality which is reflected in the language used. Instead, the writer persona is itself constantly being created by the language used in the text. As "(l)anguage does not serve merely as a tool to express a self that we already have, but serves as a resource for creating that self" (Tang and John 1999), this study is concerned, then, with investigating what kind of writer persona writers construct for themselves by self reference in their texts.

According to Clark and Ivani (1997: 134-160), writers construct their identities through the possibilities of self-hood, the "subject positions" that are available to them in the social-cultural context. Each actual writer's identity is made up of three aspects which are affected by these subject positions: the "Autobiographical Self", the "Self as Author" and the "Discoursal Self". The "Autobiographical Self" is the self constructed by the writers' own actions and experiences in the world outside the text. The "Self as Author" is the self constructed by the writers' comments on the discourse itself either by referring to the writing of the text or by evaluating its content. The "Discoursal Self", finally, is the self which is created by the kinds of discourse conventions writers draw on intertextually as a member of a certain discourse community.

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Language is more than a means of merely conveying information from one person to another; it is also a means of interacting and relating to others in our environment. Texts consist, then, of both a propositional information content level, which refers to objects, actions, events or states of affairs in the world outside the text, and a writer-reader level where the writer evaluates and reacts to the propositional material or comments on the writing and organisation of the text itself (vande Kopple 1985, 1988). Writers may make their presence visible to their readers in varying degrees on either or both of these levels of their texts. On the propositional information content level, writers may refer to their own actions and experiences in the world outside the text. Here their authorial presence constructs the aspect of their writer identity which Clark and Ivanič call "the Autobiographical Self". On the writer-reader level of the text, on the other hand, writers interact with their readers by commenting on the writing process itself, explicitly guiding the reader through its organisation (Crismore 1989 and Crismore et al 1993) or by expressing their opinions and beliefs concerning its content. Here their authorial presence constructs the aspect of their writer identity which Clark and Ivaniç call "Self as Author".

There are, of course, many linguistic means by which writers may create a visible authorial presence in a text. The most obvious and explicit signals are first person reference by pronouns, *I, me, we, us,* etc, which are referred to by Biber (1988: 225) as markers of "ego-involvement in a text". Whereas the singular pronouns *I, me* and *my* refer unambiguously to the writer (unless they are used to refer to the speaker of quoted speech) and are the prototypical index of subjectivity (Wales 1996: 68), the plural pronouns, *we* and *us* etc., typically include others as well as the writer, often the reader.

Earlier studies of first person reference in English have been chiefly concerned with scientific writing (e.g. Vassileva 1998, Kuo 1999, Tang and John 1999, Samson 2004, Hyland 2002, Harwood 2004). Differences have been found both in the frequency in which professional and student writers use first person reference and also in the ways in which these writers refer to themselves in the first person. Hyland (2002), compared first person reference in academic writing by undergraduate students at the university of Hong Kong with first person reference in scientific journal articles by professional writers, and found that the students

used first person reference less frequently than the professional writers. The students also downplayed their authorial identity by restricting their first person reference to guiding their readers through the discourse, whereas the professional writers used first person reference more often to express their own commitment and claims. "Taking a stance and demonstrating confidence clearly implies that the writer is a distinctive, individual creator with a firm position and rights to ownership of his or her perspectives and text." (Hyland 2002: 1110). Similarly, Tang and John (1999) in a study of essays by undergraduate students at the university of Singapore found that the students mainly used first person reference to refer to themselves as representatives of large groups of people or to guide the reader through the essay, but rarely to express their opinions. Harwood (2004), finally, in a comparison of articles on computer science by British undergraduate students with articles by professional experts in the field, found that the students used first person reference more often than the experts and more often to recount their research methodology.

Studies in Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis (CIA), which compare non-native speakers and native speaker's language production in similar situations (Granger 1998), have found differences in first person reference by native and non-native writers of English. Petch-Tyson (1998) compared argumentative essays by American, Swedish, Finnish, Dutch and French students and found that the Swedish, Finnish, Dutch and French students used first person reference more often than the American students. Furthermore, the Swedish, Dutch and French students used first person reference to express their opinions and refer to the writing of the text more frequently than the American and Finnish students who used first person reference more often to recount personal experiences. Similarly, Ädel (2006) found that Swedish advanced learners writing argumentative essays used first person reference to refer to their writing of the text more often than American students and even more often than British students.

It is clear, then, that there is a great deal of variation in the degree and ways in which writers establish an overt authorial presence by self reference in their writing. This appears to be related to a number of contextual features such as the writers' status, e.g. as professionals in the field or learners, native or non-native speakers of English, etc., the status of their intended readers, e.g. as other professionals in the field or teachers, etc., the situational context in which the text is written, e.g. in the

public sphere or in an educational setting, etc., the cultural context, e.g. Britain, Sweden, France etc. and the topic and purpose of the text, e.g. presenting academic results or arguing for a point of view, etc.

This study is a comparison of self reference in argumentative texts by three categories of writers: native (British and American) and non-native (Swedish) speakers of English writing in an educational setting and professional native speakers of English writing in the public sphere. I will examine the strongest, most explicit kind of authorial presence in a text, that is when writers refer to themselves as the first person subjects "*I*" of finite verbs. The subject of a finite verb is the participant held responsible for the validity of the proposition being advanced (Thompson 2004:52). When writers represent themselves as the subjects of the finite verb in the clause, then, they themselves unambiguously take responsibility for the activity that the verb represents. Thus, by writing, e.g. *In this essay I discuss the pros and cons of* [...], writers place themselves at the centre of their writing, exerting control over it and establishing a strong overt presence in it. On the other hand, by writing*, e.g. This essay discusses the pros and cons of* [...], the writer relinquishes control of the text to the product of the writing itself, *the essay*. Furthermore, as Hyland points out, subjects in English typically occur in thematic position in the clause. This position for *I* foregrounds the writer as the source of the associated statement. "First person subject, then, is the most powerful means by which writers express an identity by asserting their claim to speak as an authority [...]" (2002:1093).

My aim is to compare what kind of writer identity these three categories of writers construct by reference to themselves as first person subjects of finite verbs. These first person subjects will be referred to as *I*-references from now on. I will pose the following three questions, looking at *I*-reference from both a quantitative and qualitative point of view:

1. How frequently do the writers use *I*-references?
2. How do they use their *I*-references on the content level of the text to construct the "Autobiographical Self" aspect of their identity?
3. How do they use their *I*-references on the writer-reader level of the text to construct the "Self as Author" aspect of their identity?

2. The Corpus Study

The text types I will investigate are opinionated texts where the writers' purpose is to argue the case for their personal point of view on a controversial issue, and therefore their aim is to convince readers of the validity of their viewpoint in preference to any possible alternative viewpoints. I have compared three corpora of argumentative texts. Two of these are components of the *International Corpus of Learner English* project (ICLE, 2002): the Swedish component (SWICLE) which consists of 350 essays written by Swedish students in the second year of university studies of English, and the *Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays* (LOCNESS), which consists of 293 essays by American and British university students and some British A-level students. The third corpus consists of 213 "Comment" or "Opinion" articles downloaded from the Internet versions of four British broadsheet newspapers *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, and *The Independent* during a period of 6 months from November 2003 to March 2004.1 I will refer to this from now on as the COMMENT corpus. Each corpus consists of approximately 200 000 – 250 000 words discussing controversial issues such as immigration, gender equality, education, conservation, the Eur-opean Union, euthanasia, fox hunting, police brutality, to mention just a few.

In the COMMENT corpus of professional writing, the writers are journalists, authors and public figures, as well as regular columnists employed by the newspapers. These writers are thus confident of their status as writers and many of them have positions of prestige and power in society. In the SWICLE and LOCNESS corpora of student writing, on the other hand, the writers are constrained to a subordinate role as here it is their readers, i.e. their teachers, who have institutional power to assess their writing and award grades. Student writers may therefore have a different sense of responsibility and commitment from "real writers".

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1 I have used "Comment" articles rather than editorials in order to collect texts by as many different writers as possible. The COMMENT corpus includes no more than 3 texts by the same author.

They may assume that they have very little to contribute to their readers' knowledge and therefore feel very little personal involvement in the topic they are writing about (Clark and Ivanič 1997: 177). For student writers, then, there is "a fine line between sounding appropriately authoritative and overstepping the limits of authority" (Clark and Ivani 1997: 156).

In each of the three corpora, I have collected all the occurrences of *I*-reference and sorted them into two categories, depending on whether they refer to the writers' actions and experiences in the world outside the discourse, thereby constructing the "Autobiographical Self" aspect of their identity on the content level of the text or whether they comment on the writing of the text or evaluate its content, thereby constructing the "The Self as Author" aspect of their identity on the writer-reader level of the text. I further sorted the "Self as Author" *I*-references into two subcategories, those which are evaluative comments on the content of the text, and those which are comments on the writing process itself. I will refer to these as stance and metalinguistic *I*-references, respectively. In the following section I will compare the overall frequency of *I* references in the corpora and the proportional distributions of these three chief kinds of *I*-references: the "Autobiographical Self" *I*-references, and the "Self as Author" (stance and metalinguistic) *I*-references.

3. Results

Table 1 compares the overall frequency of *I*-references in the three corpora and the proportional distributions of "Autobiographical Self" and "Self as Author" *I*-references.

Table 1. *I*-references in SWICLE, LOCNESS and COMMENT

	"Autobiographical Self"		"Self as Author"		TOTAL
	N	%	N	%	
SWICLE	557	31	1257	69	1814
LOCNESS	344	39	541	61	885
COMMENT	487	52	452	48	939

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The frequency of *I*-references is highest in the SWICLE corpus where they occur about 9 times per 1000 words of text. This is twice as high as the frequency of *I*-references in both LOCNESS and COMMENT, where they occur approximately 4 times per 1000 words of text, respectively. It appears, then, that the Swedish students are quantitatively more than twice as visible in their texts as native speaker students and professional writers, thus creating the strongest overt authorial presence in their texts.

As for the rank order distribution of the proportions of the three different types of *I*-references in the corpora, the proportion of "Autobiographical Self" *I*-references is largest in COMMENT (52%), smallest in SWICLE (31%), with LOCNESS in-between (39%). In contrast, the proportion of "Self as Author" *I*-references, (both stance and metalinguistic *I*-references) is largest in SWICLE (69%), smallest in COMMENT (48%) with LOCNESS, again, in-between (61%). There appears, then, to be a cline here between the professional writers who construct the "Autobiographical Self" aspect of their identity most and the "Self as Author" aspect least, and, conversely, the Swedish students who construct the "Self as Author" aspect of their identity most and the "Autobiographical Self" aspect least, with the native speaker students somewhat in-between these two.

The distribution of stance and metalinguistic *I*-references making up the "Self as Author" aspect of the writers' identity is given in Table 2. Here we find similar proportions of stance *I*-references in the Swedish and native speaker students' writing (50% and 48%, respectively) and a smaller proportion in the professional writing (39%). The most striking difference is, however, in the metalinguistic *I*-references, with the largest proportion in the Swedish students' writing (19%) and the smallest in the professional writing (9%).

Table 2. *Stance and Metalinguistic I-references in SWICLE, LOCNESS and COMMENT (% of total numbers of I-references in each corpus)*

	Stance *I*-references		Metalinguistic *I*-references	
	N	%	N	%
SWICLE	904	50	353	19
LOCNESS	423	48	118	13
COMMENT	366	39	86	9

In the following sections I will discuss and exemplify each of these three main types of *I*-references; the autobiographical, stance and meta-linguistic *I*-references, respectively

3.1 *"Autobiographical Self"* I-*references*

According to Lauer et al (1991:137-143), there is a set of strategies by which writers of persuasive texts effect cooperation and identification with their readers. These comprise rational, credibility and affective appeals (each corresponding to logos, ethos and pathos, respectively). The "Autobiographical Self" *I*-references in the corpora can, in most cases, be seen in terms of their functions as rational and credibility appeals, respectively. Examples (1) and (2), for instance, function as rational appeals by providing descriptive and narrative examples from the writers' own experience:

(1) Computers have definitely effected peoples lives. I have a computer and my life has change because of it. (ICLE US-MICH-0037.1)2

(2) I remember driving to northern Wisconsin with my Father when I was twelve. On the way there he told me he wanted to explain the bird's and the bee's to me. (ICLE-US-MRQ-0028.1)

Examples (3)–(11) function as credibility appeals by establishing the writers' power to speak as an authority on the issue at hand. Examples

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[2] The codes following each example refer to the corpora and the numbers of the texts in which they occur. Examples from the Swedish students' corpus are marked SWICLE, examples from the LOCNESS native speaker students' corpus are marked ICLE, and examples from the professional writing are marked COMMENT. No corrections have been made to any language errors in the students' examples.

(3) and (4) do this by claiming the writers' first hand experience of what they are saying; examples (5) and (6) by establishing the writers' socio-cultural identity as a member of a social, political, religious group, etc. or a group with shared interests, point of view, etc. and examples (7)–(10) by establishing the writers' good character, intelligence and judgment, personal capacity or expertise because of some kind of occupational status, etc.

(3)   I saw for myself how the judge was able to call for both the civil and criminal files to be before him and to make pre-trial orders which ensured that the proceedings ran smoothly together. (COMMENTf60)

(4)   There have been various situations in which I have seen a stay home wife viewed as inferior. (ICLE-US-SCU-0014.2)

(5)   I am a product of the just say no age. (ICLE-US-SCU-0013.2)

(6)   I am pro-EEC when it comes to education, naturally since I'm a student. (SWICLE-LND 002.9)

(7)   I come from a family of aeroplane nutters. (COMMENTm66)

(8)   In defence, the field about which I am best informed, Europe shows a boundless appetite for creating common structures and bureaucracies, yet lacks the slightest willingness to provide forces to give them substance. (COMMENTm60)

(9)   I work in Zambia for a relief and development agency, and we know that because survival has become so fragile, our strongest hope lies with our children. (COMMENTf41)

(10)   As a British student of modern languages, having lived and worked in Paris for a year, and become acquainted with the French culture, I might be expected to have a more "European" perspective than the average British person. (ICLE-L1ESEE21)

The high proportion of "Autobiographical Self" *I*-references made by the professional writers (52% of their total number of *I*-references) in comparison with the native speakers and Swedish students (39% and 31% of their total number of *I*-references, respectively) suggests, then, that the professional writers tend to use more of their personal experience to make rational and credibility appeals in their argumentation, thereby

constructing more of their "Autobiographical Self" in their writing than the student writers.

3.2 *"Self as Author" Stance* I-*references*

Using Appraisal theory (Martin 2000, White 2003), I divided the stance *I*-references into two subcategories: Affect and Engagement. Affect *I*-references express the writer's emotive response to relations or events, as exemplified in (11)–(13). According to Lauer et al's set of persuasive strategies (1991), these function as affective appeals.

(11)   I am always astounded by how little English-speaking people know of their own language. (COMMENTf185)

(12)   Perhaps the privatisation of British Rail will produce a more competitive service but I fear that it will will result in the closure of smaller less profitable lines and only a better service on the main routes. (ICLE-Transport 08)

(13)   Well, mostly because I do not like it when people use terror as a way of getting their will trough. (SWICLE-UG-0013.2)

Engagement, on the other hand, is the expression of the writer's position with respect to heteroglossic diversity, i.e. whether they ignore the existence of possible alternative propositions or proposals altogether or acknowledge the possibility of alternatives and negotiate an interpersonal space for themselves within that diversity. Engagement is thus concerned with types of evaluative meanings which have elsewhere been treated as modality, polarity, evidentiality, hedging, attribution and so on. Engagement *I*-references such as *I think, I believe, I suppose, I imagine, I was told*, etc are heteroglossic in that they acknowledge possible alternatives. They can either leave this possibility open by merely acknowledging its existence, as in example (14) or by attributing it to another source as in (15), or they can close down negotiation by using these *I*-references in a deliberative sense (Aijmer 2001) and categorically proclaiming the writer's standpoint, as in examples (16) and (17). The distribution of Affect and Engagement *I*-references is given in Table 3 below.

(14)   Think globally, act locally. I think John Lennon said that, or perhaps he borrowed it from somewhere (SWICLE-UG -0035.2)

(15)   I have even been told that it is written in the constitution and I wouldn't be surprised if it were so. (SWICLE-LND-0013.7

(16)   Well, I think that to force someone to do something against his or her will is the worst thing you can do. I do not think that this is a good solution.(SWICLE-UG-0005.2)

(17)   I feel very strongly that the concept of a balanced parliament is essential for British liberties. (COMMENTm26)

Table 3. *Stance I-references expressing Affect and Engagement in SWICLE, LOCNESS and COMMENT (% of total numbers of I-references in each corpus)*

	AFFECT		ENGAGEMENT	
	N	%	N	%
SWICLE	252	14	652	35
LOCNESS	91	10	332	37
COMMENT	214	23	152	16

The largest proportion of Affect *I*-references is in the professional writing (23% of their total number of *I*-references). This is much larger than the proportions of Affect *I*-references in the students' writing (14% in SWICLE and 10% in LOCNESS). This suggests, then, that the professional writers are making more use of affective appeals as persuasive strategies in their argumentation. Shared feelings and opinions tend to draw people together and negotiate a familiar, intimate relationship between equals. By revealing their emotions, likes and dislikes, etc. the professional writers establish a personal intimate relationship with their readers of the type normally held between equals. The proportions of Affect *I*-references by students are probably much lower because of their unequal relationship with their reader and the consequent lack of intimacy. Another reason may be the educational conventions of academic writing in Britain and the USA, which require students to be impersonal and to avoid familiarity with their readers.

By far the largest proportions of *I*-references expressing Engagement are found in the students' writing, both Swedish and native speakers (35%, and 37% of their total number of *I*-references, respect-ively). In contrast, this kind of *I*-reference is less usual in the professional writ-ers' texts (only 16% of their total number of *I*-references). A com-

parison of the open and closed types of heteroglossic *I*-references, given in Table 4 below, shows, not surprisingly, that it is the latter type of Engagement, where the writers close down argumentation by "proclaiming" their viewpoint, that is altogether the most usual in argumentative texts. It is also by far the most predominant in the students' writing, both by Swedish and native speaker students (33% and 35%, respectively). This tendency for student writers to "proclaim" their opinions and to be somewhat overemphatic in their writing has been found in earlier studies of student writers. Ringbom (1998) found that Swedish students tend to overuse *I think* and similarly Granger and Rayson (1998) found a similar tendency among French students. Aronsson (2005) found that Swedish students tend to overuse cleft constructions, which typically have a contrastive, emphasizing function. Finally, Lorenz (1998) found that German students use a great deal of adjective intensification. Lorenz puts this down to the students' insecurity which makes them feel the need to attract the reader's attention in order to make an impression.

Table 4. *I-references expressing open and closed Engagement in SWICLE, LOCNESS and COMMENT (% of total numbers of I-references in each corpus)*

	OPEN		CLOSED	
	N	%	N	%
SWICLE	44	2	608	33
LOCNESS	21	2	311	35
COMMENT	56	6	96	10

3.3 *"Self as Author" Metalinguistic* I-*references*

In their metalinguistic *I*-references, writers make explicit reference to themselves as responsible for the ongoing text, thereby constructing their identity as the writer in charge of the evolving discourse. In very broad terms, they make explicit their intentions, manage the topic and signal its organisation, refer to other parts of the text, and guide the reader through the argumentation, as exemplified in (18)–(23).

(18)   I plan first to define affirmative action, then to show how proponents defend its legality. (ICLE -US-MRQ-0004.1)

(19)   Looking beyond the political implications, I would like to discuss the relationship between animals and people on an ethical basis. (SWICLE-UG-0034.2)

(20)   As I've mentioned before, there is a strong prejudice against immigrants and foreigners in general in this country. (SWICLE-LND 0009.1)

(21)   The final reason that I'm going to refute is that capital punishment is a better deterent for future criminals. (ICLE US-SCU-0011.4)

The proportions of "Self as Author" metalinguistic *I*-references in the Swedish and native speaker students' writing (19% and 13%, respectively) is much larger than that in the texts by the professional writers (9%), see Table 2, above. A similar tendency for student writers to frequently use *I*-reference to guide their readers through their texts was also found in the studies by Hyland (2002), Tang and John (1999) and Ädel (2006). In contrast, the professional writers not only make much fewer metalinguistic *I*-references altogether, when they do, they often do this to contextualise and personalise their writing process in order to create an effect of spontaneity, and to dramatise the argumentation as in (22) and (23).

(22)   There will, of course, be hell to pay. The East Anglian Daily Times - the first refuge of the apoplectic, the angry and the merely pissed off - is, as I write, probably allocating extra space on its letters' page for the deluge of disgruntlement that will surely follow. (COMMENTf102)

(23)   I type these words in a haunted, nervous fashion, as if I were trying to play a not very amusing practical joke on you. (COMMENTm72)

This is probably because professional writers are more confident than student writers that their readers will follow their text and feel therefore that there is less need to make explicit reference to their intentions and organisation of the topic.

4. Conclusion

This comparison of argumentative writing by Swedish and native speaker students writing in an educational setting and professional writers writing in the public sphere has shown that the Swedish students use *I*-references twice as frequently as the native speaker students and professional writers. The Swedish students tend thus to construct a very strong overt authorial presence in their writing. The comparison has also revealed qualitative differences in the way professional writers, on the one hand, and student writers, both Swedish and native speakers, on the other, use *I*-reference to construct their writer identity in their texts. First, the student writers are more often present on the writer-reader level of the text constructing their "Self as Author" identity, especially by categorically proclaiming their arguments with *I think* and *I feel*, etc, and by making metalinguistic comments which guide the reader through the text, manage the topic and signpost its development. On the other hand, the student writers use less *I*-reference to express Affect than professional writers. Second, the student writers are less often present on the content level of the text, using less *I*-reference to construct the "Autobiographical Self" aspect of their writer identity. It is clear, then, that the student and professional writers establish different types of authorial presence by self reference in their texts. The students' presence tends to be that of the opinionated writer relying on emphasis as their chief means of persuasion. The professional writers' presence is more complex and varied, bringing more personal experience and emotive involvement into their argumentation.

There are a number of possible explanations for these differences. One is, of course, that professional writers have greater freedom to choose their own topics than student writers, who are writing about topics assigned to them and who may not have any personal experience of their own which they wish to contribute. Another is the student writers' unequal relationship and lack of intimacy with their readers, and, as a consequence, their insecurity as writers and opinion holders. A further explanation, at least as far as the native speakers of English are concerned, may also be the conventions of academic writing which require students to be impersonal.

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What, then, are the pedagogical implications of these findings? Here we must, of course, take into account the fact that the student writers' argumentative essay has evolved for the purpose of teaching and assessing learners in education and therefore what we are dealing with here is, in many respects, a genre of its own which does not exist anywhere else in the public sphere. It is therefore, by no means, self-evident to what extent professional writers' texts should be treated as the ideal model for student writers. Nevertheless, these findings do suggest that Swedish student writers overuse self reference in their argumentative writing and that both Swedish and native speaker student writers overuse the type of *I*-references which are redundant proclamations of themselves as opinionholders and writers of the text. Clearly, student writers should be advised to be more restrictive in this kind of self reference. On the other hand, the findings here also suggest that student writers may underuse some types of self reference. More research is, however, needed into what these other types of self reference are and how they are best used as a successful persuasive strategy.

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