Gender-based Analysis of Interactional Markers in Personal Essays

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the interactional metadiscourse devices and the correlation with gender in personal essays. The data was taken from 20 essays, 10 essays from each respective genders which are published by Chicken Soup for the Soul in several editions. Tokens of interactional metadiscourse devices were obtained by using corpus software Antconc 3.5.9. The occurrence then underwent qualitative examination to sort only items used as interactional devices based on interactional metadiscourse taxonomy proposed by Hyland. This feature have been widely used to identify the interaction and meaning-making in many persuasive and academic writings as well as talks such as TED talks. To fill the gap, this study aimed to see the differences of interactional metadiscourse devices usage by women and men in personal essays. The result shows that women use more interactional discourse markers than men except for hedges category. In general, women use more interactional discourse in personal essays to express themselves and to let their readers feel being engaged in the story through emotive connections. Whereas, men write their stories more directly and attract the reader on the sequence of events.
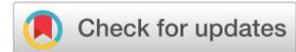
1. Introduction

Language and language use, as a social phenomenon, are influenced by social and situational elements as well as linguistic factors. Social factors, are those such as, social status, education, occupation and gender. Gender, framed as a social category defined on a predetermined set of characteristics and usually represented as independent of other aspects of many societal identities (Angouri & Baxter, 2021). Apart from social indices in determining individual use of language, the situational and the surroundings are also contributing. The different variations of the language used need to look at the context of the situation, the practice community and the social use of the language (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

Several research have discovered gendered language differences in various mediums (e.g., conversation, written narrative, e-mail, social media posts) and situations (e.g., scientific, non-scientific, personal). (Park et al., 2016; Urquhart-Cronish & Otto, 2019). These distinctions include word choice, sentence and item length, and semantics. (Park et al., 2016). These prior research explained that the difference is the result of the influence of differences in the socialization of gender functions, where for example in western society, women are more often said to have relationship orientation and are easy to express feelings, hence women often use social relation language and emotional states such as anxiety or sadness (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). In written language for its text construction, in academic writing women use more conjunctions than men (Urquhart-Cronish & Otto, 2019). Difference characteristic were also found in a research about tweets of municipal members, which shows the characteristics of the city council communication. In delivering their tweets, men reflecting on formal, logical, and hierarchical thought, meanwhile women used more first-person singular pronoun, an informal language, passive voice, and to suggesting an awareness of risk (Stone & Can, 2021).

Even though there have been abundance of studies related to language and gender in the scope language variation and its relation to the communication field. Studies on gender and discourse markers are still limited only on the academic writing, which resulted in less contrast result than those in other scope. Similar pattern of employing more elaborative markers than contrastive markers has been found in an existed study on gender and discourse markers in academic essay. Moreover, the study's findings found no noticeable variations in female and male writers' writing styles, although the qualitative findings reveal small disparity in how writers position themselves in interacting with readers as

writers and the agreement statement expressions from the observation on interactive and interactional markers usage in ESL students' academic essays (Abdul Aziz et al., 2016; Pasaribu, 2017). However, these investigations were restricted to the usage of discourse markers or textual markers by students. While the discourse marker framework elaborates the relationships between sentences, clauses, and phrases. According to Hyland (2005) the concept of metadiscourse markers "is the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community". In addition, it has been elaborated further that the use of metadiscourse markers expressed "communicative engagement between the writers and readers" (Hyland & Tse, 2004). This approach investigates not just interactive markers used to help authors structure their discourse, but also interactional markers that allow writers to highlight certain aspects of the discourse and project their opinions.

This case was indicated in the study interactional metadiscourse used by TED speakers in which showed the evidence of frequency disparity on metadiscourse devices for both genders (Azlia, 2022). Female speakers used more stances and engagement features than male speakers, according to the findings. As to generate an engaging and interactive presentation, female presenters demonstrated their expression in their speech creation. On the other hand, Male speakers using more explicit and direct signals in their speech as a way to captivate the audience and concentrate on conveying the issue and substance. This has been an evidence that interactional markers can reveal the level of engagement between writer or speaker with the readers or the listeners as well as the differences in how women and men communicate their idea in public.

Hyland (2005), classified metadiscourse into interactive and interactional. In his discussion on metadiscourse across discipline, Hyland stated that "Metadiscourse facilitates the social interactions which contribute to knowledge production within disciplines and, because disciplines are different, its use and meaning varies between disciplines." In the context of academic writing, in general, the purpose of interactive metadiscourse is to help the audience, readers or listeners, proceed the text. It suggests that the writer is aware of the audience's presence and seeks to suit its interests, rhetorical expectations, and processing capacities. It also reveals audiences anticipation on argument that the audiences anticipate the argument to comply with certain arrangement to be considered suitable and compelling. Parts of interactive markers are transitions, frame markers, evidentials, endophoric markers, and code glosses. In contrast, interactional metadiscourse is concerned with how writers or speakers manage interaction. It is regarded as the author's or speaker's personality or voice. The addressers get the audiences involved in the text or lectures, influence them, draw their attention to something, and lead them to interpretations through their arguments (Hyland, 2005). Parts of interactional markers are hedges, boosters, engagement markers, attitude markers and self- mention. In consideration to this, the present study would only examine the usage of interactional markers in personal essay because personal essay is a personalized nonfiction containing writers' own experience, written in communicating manner. Readers can gain insights, conclusions, and attachment when they read the essay (Harris, 2017).

The examination or interactional markers in personal essay is expected to yield the pattern of communicative nature of personal essay. Furthermore, this study would seek further the correlation between gender and the usage of interactional markers in personal essay which might be different from those in academic essay due to the nature of the genre. Therefore, the research problem in this study are as follow:

What main interactional markers are being employed by women and men in personal essays published in Chicken Soup for the Soul?

How does the use of interactional markers reflect the different communicative characteristic of women and men's through personal essay?

Table 1 Hyland's Interactional Markers Classification

Interactional Devices	Function	Examples
Hedges	To express the uncertainty of writer's opinion	About, might, maybe, etc.
Boosters	To express the certainty of writer's opinion.	Certainly, must, indeed, etc.
Attitude marker	To express writer's attitude on the idea or proposition.	Amazing, hopefully, etc.

| Self-mention | To show writer's presence | I, my, our, etc. |
| Engagement Markers | To create relationship with the readers. | You, us (inclusive), we (inclusive) |

2. Methodology

This study carried out a mixed method approach (quantitative and qualitative). First, tokens of interactional metadiscourse markers are collected and processed quantitatively. Then the figures and the findings are analyzed to decide the frequently used interactional metadiscourse and its correlation with personal essay based on the writers gender. The corpus for the study consist of twenty personal essays from Chicken Soup for the Souls. The essays sorted for data source were taken from two different series with consideration of their word length. There were total of 9029 words from women's personal essay and 10059 words from men' personal essay.

The concordances of potential interactional metadiscourse, based on Hyland's (2005) classification of hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers, and self-mention, for each gender in personal essay were collected using AntConc 3.5.9, a freeware concordance program created by Laurence Anthtony. The items were carefully examined alongside their co-text to ascertain their function. Afterwards, the items were then carefully examined alongside their co-text to see how they served as metadiscourse. Only those serve the function as metadiscourse device were labeled as such.

Due to the disperancy of the total words for each gender group, to make a valid comparisons the frequency of each category was normalized. The raw frequency was divided by the total words in the corpus and multiplied by a thousand to make the frequency of the occurrence per thousand words.

3. Result and Discussion

Table 2 shows the raw frequency of interactional metadiscourse markers found in personal essay.

Table 2 Raw Frequency of Interactional Metadiscourse Devices in Personal Essay

Interactional Devices	Women	Men
Hedges	18	25
Boosters	18	7
Attitude markers	6	3
Self-mention	753	815
Engagement markers	29	10
TOTAL	824	860

As presented on Table 2, most used interactional markers by both gender is self-mention and the least used is attitude markers. The salient use of self-mention could initially indicate that in personal essays both women and men create personalized writing while at the same time actively engaging with the readers by utilizing frequent self-mentions. In addition on raw frequency result, it can be seen that interactional markers is more salient in personal essays written by men than women. However, due to the imbalance of overall token in both corpus, further calculation is needed in assuring the validity of the findings.

The figures were then being normalized.

The figures were then being normalized. The figures were divided by 9029 for women category and 10059 for those under men category then multiplied by 1000, the normalized scale. The result of normalization is presented on Table 3.

Table 3 Normalized Frequency of Interactional Metadiscourse Devices in Personal Essay

Interactional Devices	Women	Men
Hedges	1.99	2.49

Boosters	1.99	0.7
Attitude markers	0.66	0.3
Self-mention	83.40	81.04
Engagement markers	3.21	0.99
TOTAL	91.26	85.50

As opposed to the result of raw frequency in Table 2, after underwent the normalization stage, women appeared to have employed more interactional markers than men in general. Normalization results showed that women use more interactional markers per 1000 words in personal essays, apart from hedges. It seems that contrary to women's language characteristics which use abundance of hedges (Lakoff, 1975; Holmes, 1990), in personal essay men use more hedges than women.

A chi-square test was performed to identify the occurrence significance. The result p value 0.012 and chi-square value of 12.84 showed the significance of interactional markers and gender differences because the p value is less than 0.05 (x_4^2 = 17.92 p value 0.0012, p < 0.05).

The result of quantitative examination indicates that women used slightly more interactional markers than men. In both groups self-mention made up the majority of the data while attitude markers were used the least. Interestingly, in this study men relatively used hedges more frequently than women. This result is in contrast with existed studies in interactional discourse marker, which shows higher result of hedges in men writings (Abdul Aziz et al., 2016; AlJazrawi & AlJazrawi, 2019; Alqahtani & Abdelhalim, 2020; Azlia, 2022; Pasaribu, 2017) and widely believed characterization of women's language which one of them is the abundant use of hedges (Lakoff, 1975).

3.1. Hedges

Generally, studies on gender and hedging, presupposed that women use more hedging than men as it is one of women's language features presented by Lakoff (1973) in her work Language and Women's Place that showed the tentativeness of women stance and the nature of being less dominant in interactions. However, later studies showed that hedging does not simply being used to state the uncertainty, but rather perceived as a way to hinder the assertiveness, allow the writers or speakers to soften their argument and allow listeners or speakers to interpret the propositions (Alghazo et al., 2021; Hyland, 2005).

Furthermore, Holmes (1989, 1990) divided hedging by its discursive function between epistemic and affective function. This differentiation seems to have impact on gender. Women use hedges as an affective function to express desire and emotional function. Meanwhile, men use hedges to deal with degrees of hesitancy and uncertainty in epistemic roles.

In this study despite less number in finding, the hedging in women writing act as the said function. Even though several instances function as epistemic role.

> "A safe home has little to do with physical elements, even though we judge other people's homes by the craftsmanship of the woodwork or the quality of the drapes. I'm referring to the "atmosphere" of a home — or **maybe** "soul" is the definitive word." (Dancing for fireflies)

> "But I remember the importance of my own father's hugs, and **I feel that if I** can pass along to future generations this simple act of love and acceptance, our family will be blessed indeed." (What color is a hug)

Form the example above, both taken from the women corpus, use hedging with different roles. Hedges **maybe** in number (1) indicates the uncertainty of idea. Meanwhile the expression **I feel that if I** in number (2) is employed to deliver to emotion of the writer rather than to underline her undecided opinion.

Similarly, both roles of hedging were also found in men corpus with epistemic roles being more salient than affective roles. Such as in expression like "**about** a quarter of a mile" "**about** halfway through eleven-day stay" "**perhaps** three times a year", "**maybe** 15 inches". These hedges are used to state the uncertainty of a condition and does not have the meaning to make the idea less certain. Although men shown more usage of hedges, which in contrast to other previous studies, the use of the hedges is to made them appear less assertive which is the likely women characteristics.

This could mean that men attempt to mime women characteristic personal essay context, which highly dominated by women. Their hedges, were mostly used to lessen men characteristics, as shown in example 2. Men pertains their characteristics in putting themselves as the focus of their story while at the same time try not to appear prideful and to self-centered.

3.2. Boosters

In contrast to hedges, boosters are attributed to show the certainty or involvement in the topic (Hyland, 2005). Boosters are often used by speakers or writers to stress or amplify their arguments or stances. The result of boosters usage in previous studies on boosters and genders varied, however in this study women used more boosters than men in their personal essay. Similarly, women tend to use more boosters than men in presentation and academic writing (Abdul Aziz et al., 2016; Azlia, 2022). The instance of boosters found in this study are actually, always, certainly, must, found, in fact, indeed, think, undeniable, clearly, and surely. Out of eleven boosters found only four of them appeared in the men corpus and the most used one was "always". The word always in both sentences below strengthen author's argument on ubiquitous value held in by society about men and boys that underpins his argument on fatherhood.

> "I had become a champion jock dad because I set aside the macho images of manhood that a boy **always** has to grow up with, and simply learned to enjoy watching my daughter do what she loves to do" (Becoming a Jock Dad, Andy Smith).

> "Being a man, there is **always** that dreaded macho stigma hanging over you that a real man never shows his true emotions." (Becoming a Jock Dad, Andy Smith)

Meanwhile in wom(Holmes, 1995).en writings boosters might as well act as the instrument which allow readers to be present on the story while the author emphasizing and elaborating their opinion and view more than merely showing confidence in their argument Therefore, instances for booster in fact were found in the corpus. In this excerpt,

> "Not understanding the slow course of the disease, they always pictured the worst and were surprised and reassured when I told them that my mother did indeed still recognize me. **In fact**, I told them, her humor surfaced frequently, like when she coyly introduced me as her mother." (Step on the crack, Sandra Rockman)

The prepositional construction booster in fact add more tone to the story instead of as additional part of the sentence to only justify previous argument. Readers are invited to relate the judgement with their own condition.

3.3. Attitude Markers

In telling story, attitude markers as well as any emotive devices are being used to show their emotional involvement of the topic (Hyland, 2005) and to elicit audience or readers' affirmation (Qiu & (Kevin) Jiang, 2021; Scotto di Carlo, 2014). Attitude markers are conveyed in the utterance with adjectives such as, important, surprising, amazing, and good. There are only four attitude markers found in the data source, amazingly, important, importantly, and even. Women recorded as much as twice attitude markers than men.

One of the example of how women use attitude markers is shown in the excerpt below.

> "Now, my husband flirts with me, and our kids think we act weird because we're so happy together. Plus, I'm able to be the active mom with my sons the way I'd always dreamed. We fish, play ball or just hang out together, and **amazingly**, I have the energy to keep up." (Low Fat and Happy, Teresa Collins).

It equipped attitude marker "**amazingly**" in the middle of sentence to involve the readers emotionally while the author embraced her achievement in finally able to keep up with her family energy. The adverb "**amazingly**" often uses to highlight surprising events, however in this context, not only that the author wanted to express her surprise, but also invited the readers to share the same feeling.

By employing more attitude markers in their writing, personal essays written by women bring forth the emotion than those of men.

3.4. Self-mention

Self-mention is the most frequently used interactional markers in this study with 753 and 815 instances in women's and men's personal essays respectively. Self-mention found in the data included first person pronoun both

singular and plural such as I, me , myself, mine, we, our, and us. The normalization figure results indicate that women use slightly more self-mention markers than men per thousand words, with 83.40 and 81.04. In addition, first person pronouns and possessive adjectives allow writers' to demonstrate their presence in the text while at the same time represent their view on judgement, society and readers (Hyland, 2005). Being written in main purpose to tell writers' personal experiences (Harris, 2017) it is understandable self-mention appears to be the most yielded interactional marker in personal essay. In addition, according to Chicken Soup's writing guidance on their website, all essay submitted should based on writers' personal experience. Therefore, all personal essays published by Chicken Soup will be written from first person point of view, even if the main topic or the main character of the story is not the author. This writing guide accommodates the extensive use of self-mention more.

The higher result of self-mention in women data suggests that women's personal essays are slightly more personalized than men's. Even though personal essay itself essentially aims to allow an individual perception, ideas, and stories, the way women and men craft the pieces of writing shows disparity in the language that they use. Similarly, other studies about language and gender in several context and culture, such as in making apology, politeness strategy, social media interaction, and formal writing have also shown distinct characteristics (Alhabuobi, 2021; Holmes, 1989; Park et al., 2016; Stone & Can, 2021).

The noticeable different distribution in the data is the use of plural first person pronoun us, in women personal essay this pronoun appeared about three times than on men personal essay, with the exclusion of inclusive us. Therefore, this indicates that not only that women personal essay is more personalized, it also align with the proposition that women are more sociable. The use of plural first pronoun express the affiliate talk (Fivush & Grysman, 2022; Stone & Can, 2021). The stories are theirs, but in the stories they are actively include others who shares the experiences. For

> "**Our** furniture was the cast-offs our relatives were glad to unload, we guarded the thermostat with a frugal eye, and tomato soup was a common meal staple. Yet the two of us created a mansion with our passion" (Dancing for Fireflies, Sarah Benson).

example, in this excerpt

The author starts the story with her realization of change shift in their home. However, further in elaborating problems and solutions, she used plural first pronouns our, we and us, referring to her and her husband, or her family as one. Instead of drawing the attention solely on her problem and how she managed to overcome it, she include her family in the narrative and present the condition as something that they faced together as a family.

3.5. Engagement Markers

Engagement markers occurred roughly higher than boosters with 29 and 10 instances or 3.21 and 0.99 per thousand words in women and men personal essay. Engagement markers are used to implicitly get readers attention by the use of pronouns (you, inclusive we, inclusive us, your, and our) directives and questions (Hyland, 2005). Both groups in this study share frequently use of pronouns to engage with the readers. The other type of engagement markers occurring in both groups is suggestive modal must. Engagement markers occurred relatively three times in women's personal essay rather that in men's. Pronouns inclusive we, us, you, and your, were all found in the personal essay written by women. Meanwhile, both inclusive we and inclusive us were absent in personal essay written by men. Only second person pronouns were found. This implies that women writers care more on acknowledging their readers whether to seek for solidarity or to share their view and insist their reader to follow their proposition as they use both pronouns and directives. As for men writers, by only utilizing second person pronouns to engage with the readers, they focus more on presenting the readers in the writing and underpin shared idea or condition. Pronouns we and us, the inclusive pronouns, are usually applied to show writer's credibility and allow reader to be receptive (Qiu & (Kevin) Jiang, 2021; Scotto di Carlo, 2014). Unlike second person pronouns, inclusive pronouns build alignment between speakers or writers with their audiences, letting them to be united as one. In this case, the writers put themselves as the part of readers who also shared the same states, circumstances or idea.

The utilization of pronouns more than directives support the baseline of Chicken Soup for the Soul series. Jack Canfiled and Mark Victor Hansen created this more than 40-year-series for people to inspire others through heartfelt stories without explicitly giving instructions ("'Chicken Soup for Soul' Series: 30 Years of Inspiring Stories: [1]," 2008). Even though both genders used more pronouns than directives, women were found to use engagement markers than men did, indicates their inclusivity. In addition, according to previous study on women's and men's storytelling conducted within the America's culture, it is more common for men to draw the focus on themselves rather than others (Johnstone,

1990, 1993), meaning they may use less inclusive pronouns or even in engaging with their readers. Their focus in their storytelling is more on the series of events rather than the emotive takeaways. Therefore, taken its similarity of personal essay's characteristic and verbal storytelling it is understandable that in writing a personal essay, men possibly follow the same strategy in verbal storytelling. Men use language to achieve goals and express their autonomy, whereas women use language to build relationships, interpersonal ties, and emotional understanding (Fivush & Grysman, 2022).

Example from the data:

"Uncontrollable hardships may plague a home's well-being: the loss of a job, a serious illness or even death. But it's the circumstances many of us encounter on a day-to-day basis that often wear us down and more often contribute to the breakup of a home." (Dancing for Fireflies, Sarah Benson)

"It is one thing to grieve for a parent gone; quite another to have to learn to love one you still have but no longer know." (Step on a Crack, Bring Your Mother Back, Sandra Rockman)

"But there's been a change in the flight plan. They've landed in Holland and there you must stay. The important thing is that they haven't taken you to a horrible, disgusting, filthy place, full of pestilence, famine and disease. It's just a different place. So you must go out and buy new guidebooks. And you must learn a whole new language." (Welcome to Holland, Emily Perl Kingsley)

"It was now or never, and a parent haters the emotional volcano rumbling inside, as you stand on the sidelines, unable to do anything but watch." (Becoming a Jock Dad, Andy Smith)

4. Conclusion

Form the study, it can be concluded that women and men show similarity and differences in utilizing interactional metadiscourse markers as stance and engagement markers. Both groups share the same markers in hedges and boosters, such as maybe, always, certainly, although show disparity in frequency and functions. Men has higher frequency in the use of hedges, but majority of the hedge function as their epistemic role rather than lesser the intensity of an argument or condition. Meanwhile women, broadly use hedges to hinder the assertiveness of their idea. Women and men are also shows similarity in employing self-mention more than other interactional markers category. Both of group appear to care about including and addressing themselves and other parties related to the story. Moreover, in both corpus of personal essay, author's pronoun were not found, only grammatical pronoun were utilized. Women create more space for the reader to feel included in the writing by employing more engagement markers. At the same time, they are able to keep their personal voice through self-mention. In other words it can be said that women's personal essay is more interactive without being too persuasive or merely self-centered. On the contrary, with moderate differences in the number frequency, men's personal essay are more detailed and event oriented. They focus on the series of event, allow less opportunity for the reader to dive into the emotion of the story but rather being invited to together evaluate the event conclusion. Even though women's personal essay also allow readers to be evaluative, it is more on the emotive side and to emphasize with the writers. It suggested to conduct a study in persuasiveness of personal essay to enhance, if not support, this study since self-mention and engagement markers are often being used to observe the persuasiveness.

Furthermore, with the limited data of this study, future research on the correlation of discourse markers and writer gender or gender identity in writing, particularly personal essay can pay more attention on personal essay outside Chicken Soup for Soul series.

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