

**USE OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN THE WRITTEN EXPRESSION:
A CASE STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF COMSAT
INSTITUTE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ISLAMABAD CAMPUS**

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ABSTRACT

A number of studies in the field of language and gender have concluded that females have a tendency of using more personal pronouns in their language. It reflects their more involvement with the readers than males. This paper examines the differences between male and female written expressions in terms of the use of personal pronouns. The study applied the method of corpus linguistics in order to examine the written expressions of males and females in this regard. Personal pronouns I, me, my, we, our, us, you, your, he and she were studied in particular. The study revealed that males and females differed in the use of some personal pronouns but as a whole there was no significant difference in the use of personal pronouns in their written expressions.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'Doing Gender' given by Eckert and McConnell (2003) states that gender is not biological, we are not born with the gender; it is a social trait which we practice and perform. The verbal and non-verbal use of language varies between males and females. There have been a significant number of studies in this direction. Males and females have show varied language behaviors in terms of its uses as the females are seen to be using politer language than males (Holmes, 1992). The eminent scholar Lakoff (2004) has conducted studies in this field; she claims that males and females express themselves in different ways and that the young boys and girls are raised according to their genders. Gender-based language differences in terms of uses of personal pronouns have been studied by Argamon *et.al.*, (2003) and Andersson (2012).

Males and females do not only differ in terms of language but there is inequality between them in every walk of life with women

being discriminated on the basis of their gender. Coates (1998) says that there is inequality in the distribution of salary between male and female professionals and that the later are not taken seriously in the workplaces, and their academic and professional career. The gender-based language differences can be narrowed down to the use of personal pronouns and to lexical/syntactical analysis of the same. Litosseliti (2006) asserts that females use more personal pronouns in their non-verbal language use than the males do, the purpose being the deeper involvement of reader in the written text.

The social significance of gender-based language demands investigation from a feminist point of view. This study is meant to make a contribution by comparing the written language in the expressions of the male and female students on a similar topic specifically in the perspective of the use of personal pronouns. The study also elaborates the ways in which the males and females undergraduate students endeavor to share their opinions, feelings and experiences with a specific focus on the use of personal pronouns.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The specific purpose of this research is:

- a) To explore the influence of gender on students' written expressions in general.
- b) To explore the influence of gender on undergraduate students' written expressions in general.
- c) To explore the phenomenon of the use of personal pronouns in the written expression of male students.
- d) To explore the phenomenon of the use of personal pronouns in the written expression of female students.
- e) To discover the frequency of the use of personal pronouns in the written expressions of male and female students.
- f) To find out the impact of the use of more or less personal pronouns on the written expression of male and female students.
- g) To suggest future guidelines for researchers in the specific area of language and gender studies.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the difference between the written expressions of male and female students in terms of the use of personal pronouns?

Subsidiary Questions

- a) What is the difference in terms of the frequency of the use of personal pronouns between the written expression of male and female students?
- b) Which of the two genders, male or female, uses more personal pronouns in his/her written expression?
- c) Which personal pronoun is used more in the written expression by male and female students?
- d) Which sort of gender reflection is found in the written expression of male and female students at undergraduate level?
- e) What are the major gender-based differences in the written expression of male and female students?
- f) What are the minor gender-based differences in the written expression of male and female students?

JUSTIFICATION

The study is expected to yield the following benefits:

- a) It will enhance the understanding of the research scholars and common readers about the influence of gender in the language of undergraduate level students.
- b) It will highlight the difference in respect of the frequency of the use of personal pronouns in written expression of the male and female students.
- c) It will be an addition to the studies of language and gender in Pakistani context.
- d) It will highlight the positive and negative aspects of the use of more or less personal pronouns in the written expressions of the male and female students.
- e) The study will enhance the theoretical knowledge in the field of language and gender studies.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study is limited to the male and female students of BBA first semester (Spring 2014) at COMSAT Institute of Information Technology, Islamabad.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been different ways to carry out research in language and gender studies. Lakoff (2004) asserts that language use differentiates gender-wise. Women tend to come up with peculiar

forms of language use which is manifested in the choice of their words, especially when they define colors. Coates (2004) indicates that people believe that language use of women is politer than that of men. Coates (1998) also shows that females have a greater tendency to use politeness in language in a negative sense since they happen to be doubtful and insecure most of the times. They differ from men in their use of hedges in language.

Lakoff (2004) also pointed out that young girls seem more decent from the young or little boys who are more prone to misbehave, yell or whine when they generally speak. Coates (2004) rejects such propositions by asserting that everyone has his/her own way of using language and she criticized the commonly believed ideas such as men curse more than women, and women gossip more than men do. However, the reality might differ from what people assume but it is certain that we happen to be interested in differences between the language uses of the two genders more than the level of likeness.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative method of study was used in this research. A common topic “to err is human” was decided for the written expression of 40 male and female (20+20) students. They were asked to write an essay of 150-200 words on this topic. The respondents were not informed about the purpose of writing in the beginning. Later on, they were taken into confidence. Their permission to use their responses/data for research purpose was duly sought. All the participants belonged to BBA First Semester batch at COMSAT Institute of Information Technology Islamabad.

All the essays were examined intensively by the researchers to find out the results. The data was analyzed separately in AntConc where the words were counted and calculated in frequency form. The study contained two independent variables male and female, which makes this study limited, in the sense that the analysis remains confined to 20 male and 20 female writers. The study focuses on the usage of personal pronouns in the essays produced by the respondents. It was investigated whether the forms used by the female students vary from those of the male students. Analysis of this aspect highlights variations in the use of personal pronouns by male and female participants.

The personal pronouns “*I, me, my, you, your, our, us, he, she and we*” were focused. The analysis of reflexive pronouns was omitted due to the low number of frequencies. After looking at the pronouns in AntConc the researchers also studied the context in which these pronouns were used. The variation in terms of use of personal pronouns by male participants contrasted to the female participants was minutely investigated. The use of AntConc as a tool made it comparatively easier to find and analyze the words in the manuscripts. Explanation of AntConc is given in the following passage to facilitate the understanding of the readers.

The genre specific terms like *concordances* and *concordance plot* were used in this study. A succinct explanation is furnished in this regard to make this research comprehensible. In accordance with the claim of Lindquist (2009) *corpus linguistics* is an analysis of a language at lexical level to make comparison among different lexical items. According to Lindquist (2009) *concordance* is explained as “a list of all the contents in which a word occurs in a particular text”. For example, the studies of Shakespeare’s literary works by theologians and literary scholars may be referred in this regard which were conducted to observe how different vocabulary items were used in the contemporary and historical perspective; and to determine the change in words at lexical, morphological and syntactical levels as well. The concordance facilitates the work, since it shows how a specific word is used and in what context. Earlier linguist research were done by hand hence they were significantly more time-consuming. On the contrary, AntConc is a useful program to facilitate the task of research in linguistics. It is a freeware, multiplatform tool for carrying out corpus linguistics research and data-driven learning. There is something called *concordance plot* where a comparison can be made between the texts and words used within them. According to Anthony (2012) this facilitates the study in terms of analyzing a plot for locating the word in the text.

DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected through personal visits by the researchers. COMSAT Institute of Information Technology was visited to collect the required data. Students of the first semester of BBA were approached for data collection. Using stratified random sampling method the researchers accessed almost 100 students as participants.

However, due to the lack of attendance of students and lack of willingness of some of the students, the study was limited to 40 students i.e. 20 female and 20 male participants. A common, non gender biased topic “*to err is human*” was given to the respondents to write an essay of 150-200 words.

DATA ANALYSIS

In this section of the study data is analyzed to make the results more comprehensible. It has been further divided into five sections. Two personal pronouns will be discussed in each section. First the data will be shown in the tabulated and bar chart form quantitatively then it will be discussed qualitatively for easy understanding of the readers. Female and male respondents (20 + 20) were given representation through pseudo names (A~T) and (A-1, B-2, C-2, T-20) respectively instead of their original names as per the requirements of research ethics. Original texts of the female and male respondents are attached as appendixes ‘A’ and ‘B’ respectively.

TABLE-1
TOTAL NO OF OCCURRENCES

Gender	Total No of Respondents	Total No of Words	Total No of Pronouns	Use of Pronouns per 1000 words
Male	20	4253	208	48
Female	20	3789	165	43
Total	40	8042	473	91

Source: Field Work.

INTERPRETATION

As is obvious from the abovementioned table, there were total 40 respondents {20 (male) + (female) 20} who were asked to write an essay of 150-200 words each on a non gender biased topic. Both male and female respondents have produced 8042 words in total. Male respondents produced 4253 words and female respondents 3789 words. After a thorough investigation it was found that male respondents used 208 personal pronouns in total and female respondents used 165 personal pronouns in total in their respective written expressions. As the total number of words produced by the male and female respondents was not equal, therefore, the data was further categorized as use of personal pronouns per thousand words in

the last column of the abovementioned table. Male respondents used 48 personal pronouns and female respondents used 43 personal pronouns per thousand words. The figures in the last column of the table show that there was no significant difference in the use of personal pronouns between male and female respondents as a whole. A detailed analysis has been made in the following section to elaborate the differences with respect to different types of personal pronouns:

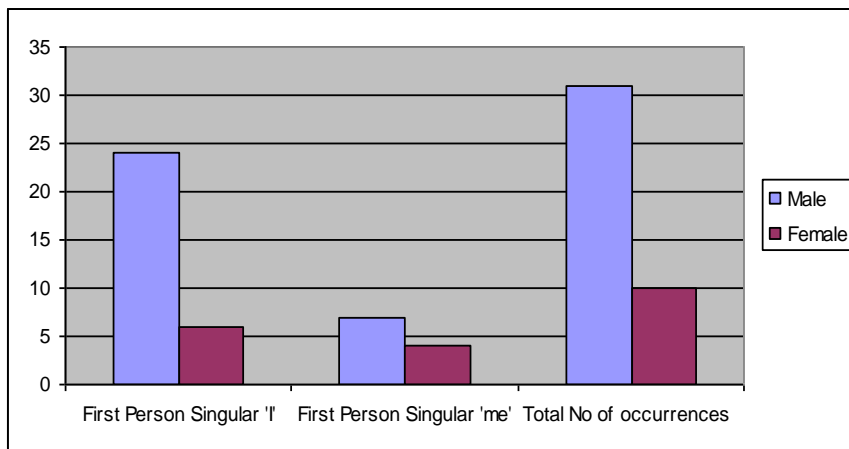
First Person Singular '*I*' and '*Me*'

Use of first person singular '*I*' and '*me*' in the written texts of the respondents, has been analyzed below with the help of following table and bar chart.

TABLE-2
USE OF FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

Gender	First Person Singular ' <i>I</i> '	First Person Singular ' <i>me</i> '	Total No of occurrences
Male	24	7	31
Female	6	4	10

Graphic Presentation # 2 (Use of First Person Singular)



INTERPRETATION

In accordance with the data mentioned in Table 2 male respondents used personal pronoun '*I*' 24 times and female

respondents only 6 times in their overall expression of 4253 and 3789 respectively. The graphic presentation of the data along with tabulated data reflects that there was a significant difference between male and female respondents in the use of personal pronoun '*I*', whereas there is no significant difference in the use of personal pronoun "*Me*" in the overall written expression of male and female students.

Possessive Personal Pronoun '*My*' & '*Our*'

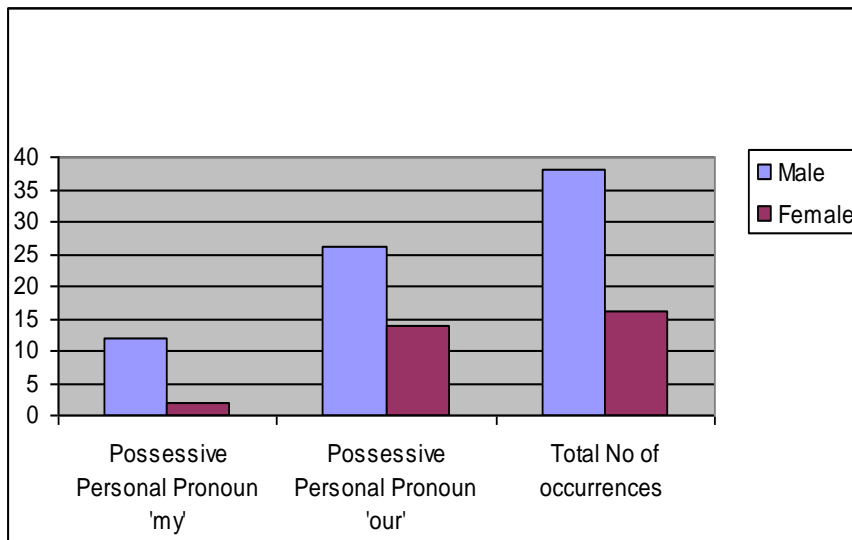
Use of personal pronouns '*my*' and '*our*' in the written texts of the respondents has been analyzed below with the help of following table and bar chart:

TABLE-3
(USE OF '*MY*' & '*OUR*')

Gender	Possessive Personal Pronoun ' <i>my</i> '	Possessive Personal Pronoun ' <i>our</i> '	Total No of occurrences
Male	12	26	38
Female	02	14	16

Source: Field Work.

Graphic Presentation # 3 (use of '*my*' & '*our*')



INTERPRETATION

As per the data mentioned in Table 3 male respondents have used personal pronoun '*my*' 12 times and female respondents only 2

times in their overall expression of 4253 and 3789 respectively. In the similar context male respondents have used '*our*' personal pronoun 26 times and female respondents 14 times. The graphic presentation of the data along with tabulated data reflects that there is a significant difference between male and female respondents in the use of personal pronoun '*my*' and '*our*'.

The Use of '*We*' & '*Us*'

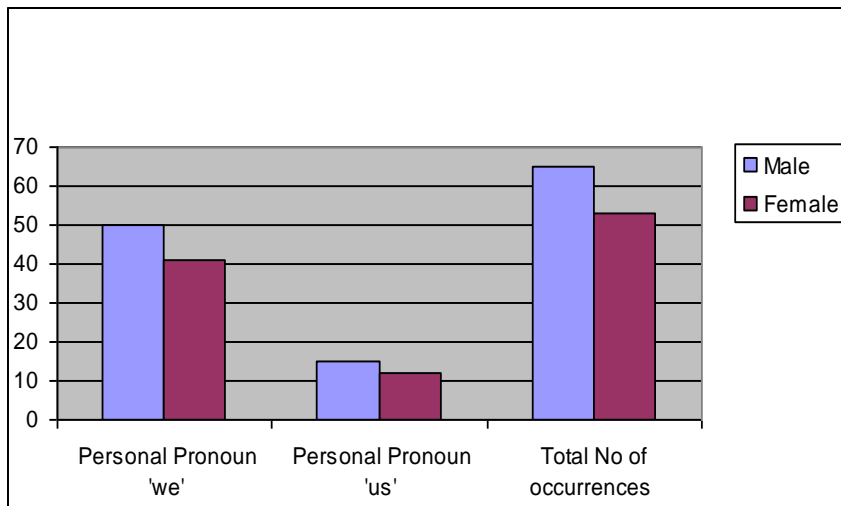
Use of first person plural '*we*' and '*us*' in the written texts of the respondents has been analyzed below with the help of following table and bar chart:

TABLE-4
(USE OF '*WE*' & '*US*')

Gender	Personal Pronoun ' <i>we</i> '	Personal Pronoun ' <i>us</i> '	Total No of occurrences
Male	50	15	65
Female	41	12	53

Source: Field Work.

Graphic Presentation # 4 (Use of '*we*' & '*us*')



INTERPRETATION

According to the data tabulated in Table 4 male respondents have used personal pronoun '*we*' 50 times and female respondents 41

times in their overall expression of 4253 and 3789 respectively. In the similar context male respondents have used **'us'** personal pronoun 15 times and female respondents 12 times. The graphic presentation of the data along with tabulated data reflects that there was no significant difference between male and female respondents in the use of personal pronoun **'we'** and **'us'**.

Second Person Pronoun **'You'** & **'Your'**

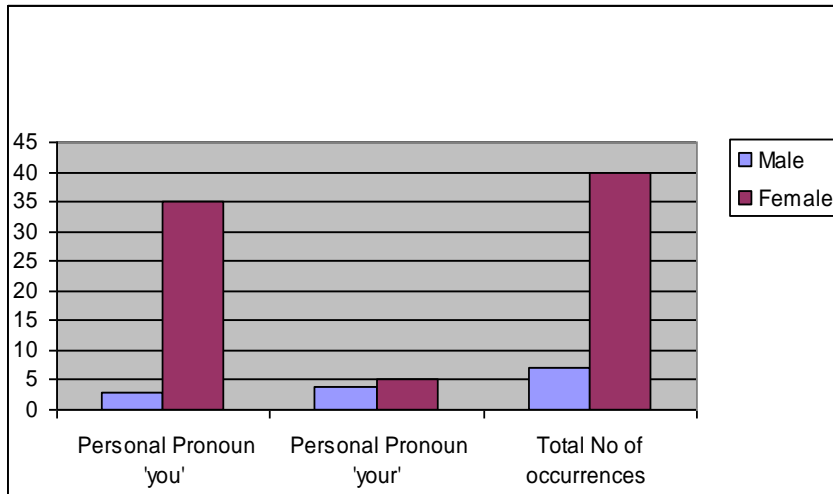
Use of second person singular **'you'** and **'your'** in the written texts of the respondents has been analyzed below with the help of following table and bar chart:

TABLE-5
(USE OF **'YOU'** & **'YOUR'**)

Gender	Personal Pronoun 'you'	Personal Pronoun 'your'	Total No of occurrences
Male	3	4	7
Female	35	5	40

Source: Field Work.

Graphic Presentation # 5 (Use of **'you' & **'your'**)**



INTERPRETATION

According to the data tabulated in Table 4, male respondents used personal pronoun **'you'** 3 times and female respondents 35 times

in their overall expression of 4253 and 3789 respectively. In the similar context male respondents used **'your'** personal pronoun 4 times and female respondents 5 times. The graphic presentation of the data along with tabulated data reflects that there was a significant difference between male and female respondents in the use of personal pronoun **'you'** and no significant difference in the use of second person pronoun **'your'**.

Third Person 'He' and 'She'

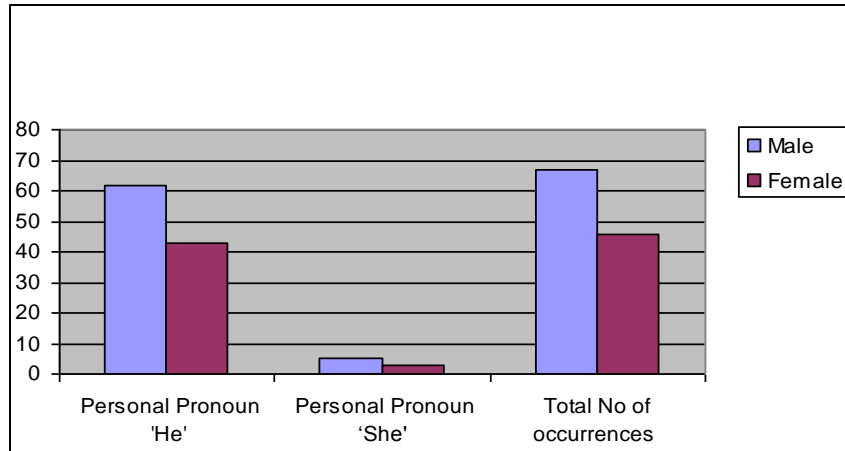
Use of third person singular **'He'** and **'She'** in the written texts of the respondents has been analyzed below with the help of following table and bar chart:

TABLE-6
(USE OF 'HE' & 'SHE')

Gender	Personal Pronoun 'He'	Personal Pronoun 'She'	Total No of occurrences
Male	62	5	67
Female	43	3	46

Source: Field Work.

Graphic Presentation # 6



INTERPRETATION

As per the information given in Table 4 male respondents have used personal pronoun **'He'** 62 times and female respondents 43

times in their overall expression of 4253 and 3789 respectively. In the similar context male respondents have used '**She**' personal pronoun 5 times and female respondents 3 times. The graphic presentation of the data along with tabulated data reflects that there is no significant difference between male and female respondents in the use of personal pronoun '**He**' and '**She**'.

CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study was to investigate whether there was any difference in use of personal pronouns between males and females in their written expression. The frequency of the use of personal pronouns was taken on the basis of previous studies conducted in this field to indicate involvement. This study verifies the findings of the previous studies, that there is a variation in the written expressions of males and females. Nonetheless, the specific finding of the previous research that females were inclined to show more involvement with the reader by using more personal pronouns was not confirmed by this study.

The outcomes of the study also reflect that the uses of the personal pronoun '*I*' is contrary to the results of earlier studies. It was concluded in the study carried out by Argamon *et.al.*, (2003) and Aries (1996) that females have a greater tendency to use more personal pronouns '*I*' and '*me*' than males. Whereas Table 2, shows that male respondents used more personal pronouns than female respondents and there was no significant difference in the use of '*me*' in the similar context. This study is only a modest contribution to the field of language and gender studies which requires further exploration. As this research focused only on a small sample, therefore, no generalization in terms of the difference in the usage of personal pronouns between girls and boys outside the immediate social context should be made. It is pertinent to note that third person singular '**He**' was used extensively by both males and females in their written expressions on a non-gender biased topic as compared to other pronouns, which reflects male dominance in the use of language.

FINDINGS

Findings of this study are:

- a) There was no significant difference in terms of the use of personal pronouns in the written expressions of males and females as a

- whole.
- b) There was a significant difference between male and female written expressions in terms of the use of personal pronoun **'I'**.
 - c) There was no significant difference among male and female written expressions in the use of personal pronoun **"Me"**.
 - d) There was a significant difference between male and female written expressions in the use of personal pronoun **'my'** and **'our'**.
 - e) There was no significant difference between male and female written expressions in the use of personal pronoun **'we'** and **'us'**.
 - f) There was significant difference between male and female written expressions in the use of personal pronoun **'you'**.
 - g) There was no significant difference among male and female written expressions in the use of second person pronoun **'your'**.
 - h) There was no significant difference between male and female written expressions in the use of personal pronoun **'He'** and **'She'**.

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