Arab World English Journal
INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEWED JOURNAL ISSN: 2229-9327

Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Volume 15. Number 3, September 2024 Pp.283-296
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol15no3.17

Visualization Analysis of Research on Self-mention *WE*: Current Status and Future Trends (2008-2022)

Yaru Zhou
School of Foreign Studies
Northwestern Polytechnical University, China
yaruzhou@mail.nwpu.edu.cn

Yi Zhang
School of Foreign Studies
Northwestern Polytechnical University, China
Corresponding Author: yizhang@nwpu.edu.cn

Received: 04/17/2024 Accepted:09/06/2024 Published: 09/24/2024

Abstract
This study examines the significance and trends of *WE* as the most frequently used self-mention in academic writing, highlighting its role in identity construction and academic discourse within English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The main research question addresses the current usage patterns and future directions of *WE* in scholarly articles. Drawing from the Web of Science Core Collection, 117 papers published between 2008 and 2022 were analyzed using VOSviewer. The findings reveal evolving patterns in the use of *WE*, offering new insights into self-mention practices in international academic contexts.

Keywords: Academic discourse, self-mention we, visualization analysis, VOSviewer, English for Specific Purposes

Cite as: Zhou,Y., & Zhang, Y. (2024). Visualization Analysis of Research on Self-mention WE: Current Status and Future Trends (2008-2022). *Arab World English Journal*, *15*(3): 283-296. https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol15no3.17

Introduction

In recent years, academic discourse has received extensive attention from experts and scholars in the field of linguistics (Hyland, 2012; Jaworska, 2015; Cai, 2015; Wei, 2016). Among them, the construction of identity in academic discourse has become the focus of hot debate in the academic community (Flowerdew & Wang, 2015; Sun, 2015). As a significant way of highlighting authorship and negotiating discourse persuasion, self-mention is one of the most prominent ways of authorship construction in academic discourse (Jiang &Wang, 2021; Danis, 2022). Considering that few studies have been conducted to systematically describe the study of *WE* in academic discourse to date, this study aims to explore the trends and dynamics of the research on *WE* i as a self-mention in academic discourse, providing a comprehensive understanding of its role in author identity construction and persuasion. Through analyzing core literature databases, this research seeks to identify major scholars, prominent keywords, and influential literature to map out the current state and future direction of this field.

To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following questions:

- What are the current development trends of research on *WE* in academic discourse?
- Who are the major scholars in research on *WE* in academic discourse?
- What hotspots are involved in research on *WE* in academic discourse?
- Which articles on *WE* in academic contexts have had the highest academic impact, and what makes them significant?

Literature Review

Academic discourse, defined as "the ways of thinking and using language in a specific academic context," is shaped by complex social activities (Hyland, 2009: 21). A key component of academic discourse is *self-mention*, a pragmatic act where authors construct their identity by strategically using language to project self-identity, engage with readers, and achieve persuasive discourse (Hyland, 2005; Maňáková, 2021). Self-mention encompasses various forms, including first-person pronouns (I, me, we, us, my, our), third-person noun phrases (the writer, the author), and inanimate subjects (the paper, the article, this study). Among these, the first-person pronoun *WE* is the most frequently employed by authors across different types of self-mention in academic texts (McGrath & Kuteeva, 2012; Xu, 2013; Akbaş et al., 2024).

WE is not a single referent; its meaning varies based on the context (Tang & John, 1999). Semantically, it can function as both exclusive and inclusive (Harwood, 2005). "Exclusive *WE*" refers to instances where *WE* excludes the reader, whereas "inclusive *WE* " involves the reader (Hyland, 2001). Initial studies on *WE* in academic discourse, starting in the 1990s, primarily focused on its semantic and interpersonal functions. Recently, research has shifted towards micro-level analysis, examining lexical and grammatical aspects (Dong & Buckingham, 2022). For example, Chen (2019) analyzed 20 PhD theses, highlighting thematic changes from draft to publication to guide academic writing. Jiang and Wang (2021) explored differences in *WE* usage between student and expert writers, while Dong and Buckingham (2022) conducted a cross-register analysis in finance, examining its collocation patterns. Additionally, research in this field has often taken the form of comparative studies in recent years, comparing aspects such as corpus selection. For example, Dong and Buckingham (2022) compared the use of self-mention in academic discourse and workplace discourse, as well as different languages. For instance, Dalal Al-Zubi and Shehdeh Fareh (2023) compared the use of self-mention in English and Arabic within academic discourse. However, the *WE* research in academic discourse is mostly empirical

investigation and there are few studies have been conducted to systematically describe the study of *WE* in academic discourse to date. Therefore, the study examines the trends and dynamics of research on the self-mention *WE* in academic discourse on core literature databases.

Method

Data Source

This study draws on data from the Web of Science (WoS) core collection database, one of the most recognized databases for scholars (Yang et al., 2013) with the time from 2008 to 2022, 15 years in total. Searching in the WoS Core Collection with the subject term "self-mention," "self-reference" and "first personal pronoun," etc., the retrieved data from the WOS were then screened to remove irrelevant articles in other languages (e.g., Chinese and Spanish) and other discourse(e.g., political discourse or presidential speeches), selected research targeting self-mention *WE* in academic settings, and a total of 117 valid papers were obtained.

Research Instruments

VOSviewer 1.6.19, a visual analytics software that relies on a JAVA environment is adopted as the research tool for the present article. The mapping created by the tool reveals the research dynamics of a specific field by the color of the categories, the size and density of the nodes, and the distance between each node, which in turn reflects the relevance of the literature in the field and its inter-citation relationships.

Results

Number of Publications and Distribution of Journals

The output quantity of journal articles is a crucial indicator to measure the development level of knowledge in specific domain knowledge and research passion (Liu et al., 2020). The search revealed 117 articles in the core literature in this field from 2008-2022.

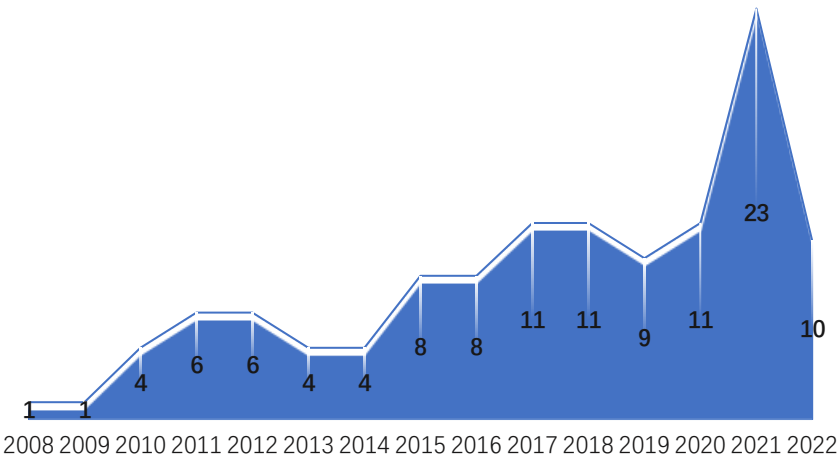


Figure 1. The number of published articles of research on *WE* in academic discourse from 2008 to 2022

Figure One shows that except for a slight decline in some years, including 2013, 2019, and 2022, the number of published articles has shown a primary upward trend. Its peak appeared in 2021 with 23 articles, followed by 2020, 2017, and 2018 with 11 articles, respectively.

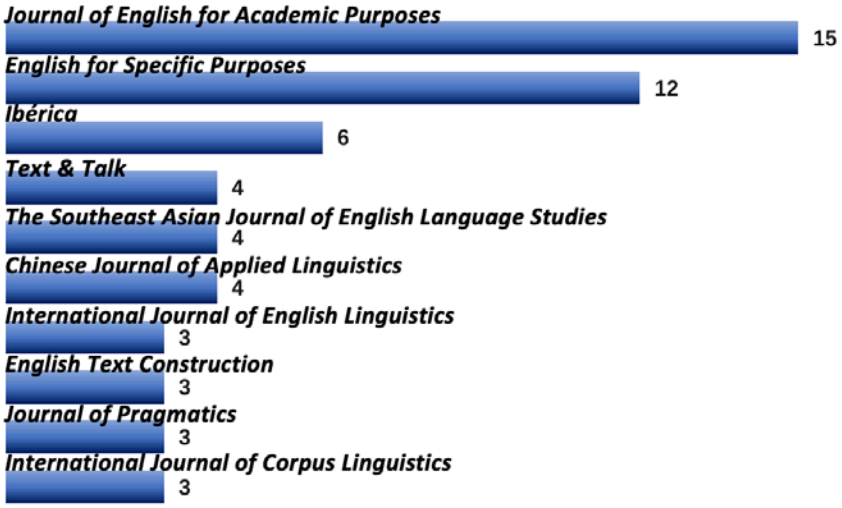


Figure 2. Journal distribution of research on *WE* in academic discourse from 2008 to 2022 (Top 10)

Figure Two indicates that further analysis shows that there are a total of 10 journals that have published more than three papers (including three) related to the research of *WE* in academic discourse, with J*ournal of English for Academic Purposes* and *English for Specific Purposes* having the most published papers, 15 and 12 respectively, followed by *Ibérica* (6). The research focus of these top 10 journals could be broadly classified into three categories, including Language and Linguistics, Education, and Communication.

Major Scholars

According to statistical results, among the authors who published articles on *WE* in academic discourse within the international arena, a total of 13 authors have published more than two papers.

Table 1. *Major scholars of research on WE in academic discourse from 2008 to 2022*

No.	Author	No. of articles	Citation Freq.
1	Hyland Ken	4	79
2	Jiang Kevin	4	79
3	Cao Feng	3	63
4	Swales, John	2	57
5	Lorés-Sanz	2	53
6	Crosthwaite, Peter	2	40
7	El-Dakhs, Dina	2	19
8	Qiu, Xuyan	2	11
9	Khedri, Mohsen	2	8
10	Gao Xia	2	4

Table One demonstrates that the authors with the highest number of published papers are Hyland Ken and Jiang Kevin, who have published four papers, of which two studies were co-authored by both authors. Their research, based on different academic discourses, such as student writing, graduation thesis, journal articles, and academic homepages, examines the author's stance and engagement and the author or disciplinary identity construction through *WE* (Hyalnd, 2008; Hyalnd, 2011; Crosthwaite, et, al., 2017; Hyland &Jiang, 2017; 2020; Qiu & Jiang,2021). Cao

Feng, from Nanyang Polytechnic University in Singapore, has three articles in this field. His studies focus on using *WE* in research articles and EFL (English as a foreign language) learner writing to analyze metadiscourse in academic discourse (Hong & Cao, 2014; Hu & Cao, 2015; Gong et al., 2021). Among all the scholars who have published two relevant papers in this field, two have more than 50 citations in a single article, including Swales John, and Lorés-Sanz, Rosa. Swales's research involves comparing academic abstracts in different languages, such as Spanish and English (Escudero & Swales, 2011), as well as Arabic and English(Alharbi & Swales, 2011). In comparison, Lorés-Sanz (2011) aims to reveal the social factors in the construction of the authors' voice through *WE* in various academic settings(Lorés, 2011, 2018).

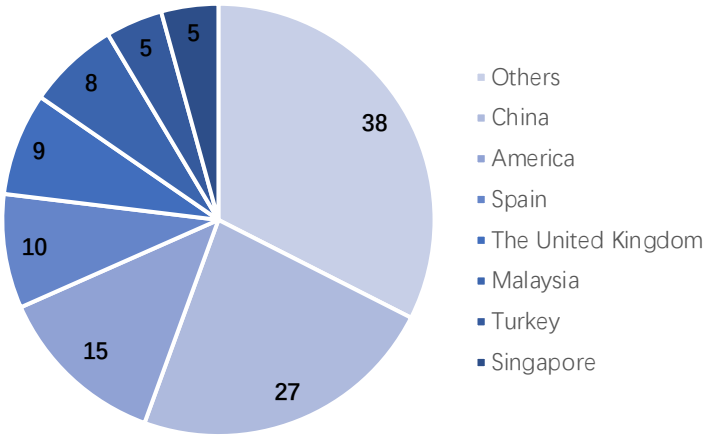


Figure 3. Country distribution of research on *WE* in academic discourse from 2008 to 2022

In addition, as shown in *Figure three*, the authors who study *WE* in academic discourse in international journals are mainly from China (27 articles), America (15 articles), Spain (10 articles), the United Kingdom (9 articles), Malaysia (8 articles), Singapore (5 articles), and Turkey (5 articles), accounting for nearly 67% of the total number of articles published, while the remaining countries have less than five articles.

Keywords of Studies on WE in Academic Discourse

Keywords could accurately reflect the theme and focus of the article. Hence, the analysis and exploration of the keywords for several articles in a particular field within a limited period could reveal the development pulse and trend of this research area (Niu et al., 2013). With the help of VOSviewer 1.6.19, the present study set the co-occurrence frequency of keywords to be larger than three times (including three times). It used the fractal counting method recommended by software developers (Van Eck & Waltman, 2014).

According to Figure Four, academic writing is the most frequently used term in academic discourse, followed by research articles, indicating that they are the most popular research topic in the field of *WE* in academic discourse. The frequency difference between the two is insignificant ($p>0.1$), showing that the research topics in this field are relatively balanced. Further observation revealed that the materials selected for research using the academic discourse, as the keyword were

mostly journal articles of various discourse, and EFL writing, including Ph.D. thesis as well as students' writing, which also proves that academic writing and research articles are often used as the research corpus in this field.

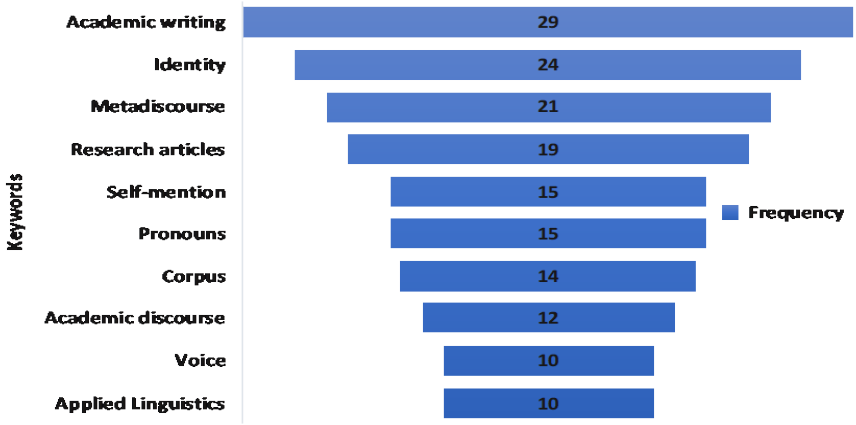


Figure 4. High-frequency keywords for research on *WE* in academic discourse (Top 10)

Scholars tend to take *WE* as the (the first personal) pronoun or self-mention language in the discourse into consideration. Meanwhile, identity (construction), metadiscourse, and voice are the most popular research focuses on *WE* in academic discourse. Besides, corpus, as the only keyword related to the research method, enjoys supremacy in the research on *WE* in academic discourse. Also, Applied Linguistics, as the only keyword related to the discipline, has attracted much attention in this field.

To explore the core issue of studies on *WE* in academic discourse in more detail, with the help of VOSviewer, the present paper further analyzes high-frequency keywords. In the visualization graph of keywords, nodes of the same color are clusters, and each cluster refers to a highly correlated and relatively independent research field (Chen, 2006). The timeline in the lower right corner represents the development process of the research.

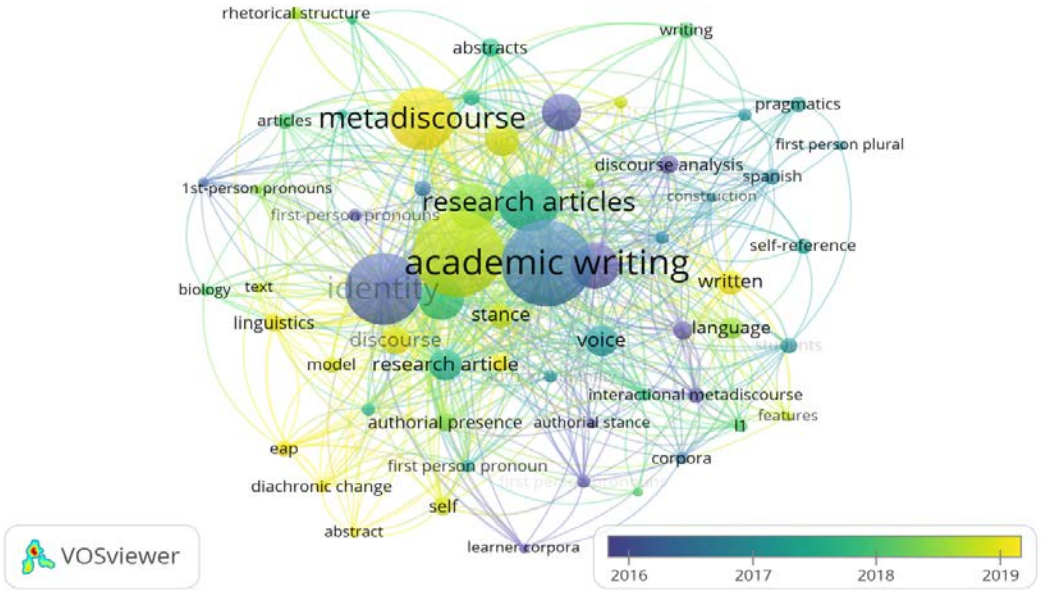


Figure 5. Keyword clustering mapping of international research on WE in academic discourse

ISSN: 2229-9327

Table Five shows that there are 6 clusters of studies in this category. The main topic includes disciplinary differences, the comparison of EFL's use with native English learners, the author's stance, engagement, and voice, authorial identity and presence, as well as corpus. With the strength of a larger sample size and broader operability, the corpus plays a significantly important role in the studies of *WE*. Among them, some studies have compared the features of *WE* in journal articles of various disciplines, and such studies have revealed differences in the specific implementation of *WE* in disciplines and provided insights for teaching academic English. Representative studies, for instance, Millán (2010) compared the frequency of *WE* across four different disciplines and discussed the identities it constructs, showing significant differences in its use across the four disciplines. In addition, comparative research on *WE* in academic discourse between EFL and native English speakers is also a hot topic in academic English for academic purposes. Focusing on the use of *WE*, Işık-Taş (2018) selected 130 Sociology research articles in Turkish and English published in national and international journals to explore the role of publication context in shaping academic writers' linguistic choices in establishing authorial identity in different writing cultures. Except for identity, other linguistic features like voice, stance, and so on are also under the attention of scholars. Lorés-Sanz (2011) summarized the differences in the author's voice structure across languages (English and Spanish) by exploring the use of *WE* in research articles written by Spanish scholars in English L1, English L2, and Spanish in Business Management.

What is more, the timeline in *Figure 5* shows that the latest research (light-colored part) pays much attention to "metadiscourse," "diachronic change," "English for academic purposes," "written," as well as "abstract." Self-mention is one of the metadiscourse markers. As the most frequently used language in self-mention, *WE* is a highly discussed topic in metadiscourse research (McGrath & Kuteeva 2012). Such studies that combine metadiscourse and writing served the academic purpose of English learning and teaching. For example, Salas (2015) compared the deployment of reflexive metadiscourse in research articles from three disciplines and gave further analysis to examine disciplinary and paradigmatic influences on the use of *WE*. The diachronic development of *WE* has also attracted the attention of scholars. Hyland & Jiang (2017) talked about the informality change in academic discourse through *WE* and pointed out the importance of interpersonal interactions in formal academic settings. Li (2021) and Tocalo et, al. (2022) also examined the dynamic changes in *WE* in research articles to stress the authorial presence and stance in academic exchanges.

Based on the above keyword analysis, the present study found the common proposition of research on *WE* is to aim at English for academic purposes, regarding *WE* as a language used for self-mention, and studying its construction of identity in different disciplines, as well as its diachronic changes in various academic settings.

Co-citation Analysis of the Literature

According to Li and Hale (2015), co-citation analysis can help us understand the core literature and principal authors in specific fields. The higher the frequency of literature co-citation, the closer the connection between them. Figure 6 shows the knowledge network of international studies on *WE* in academic discourse co-cited.

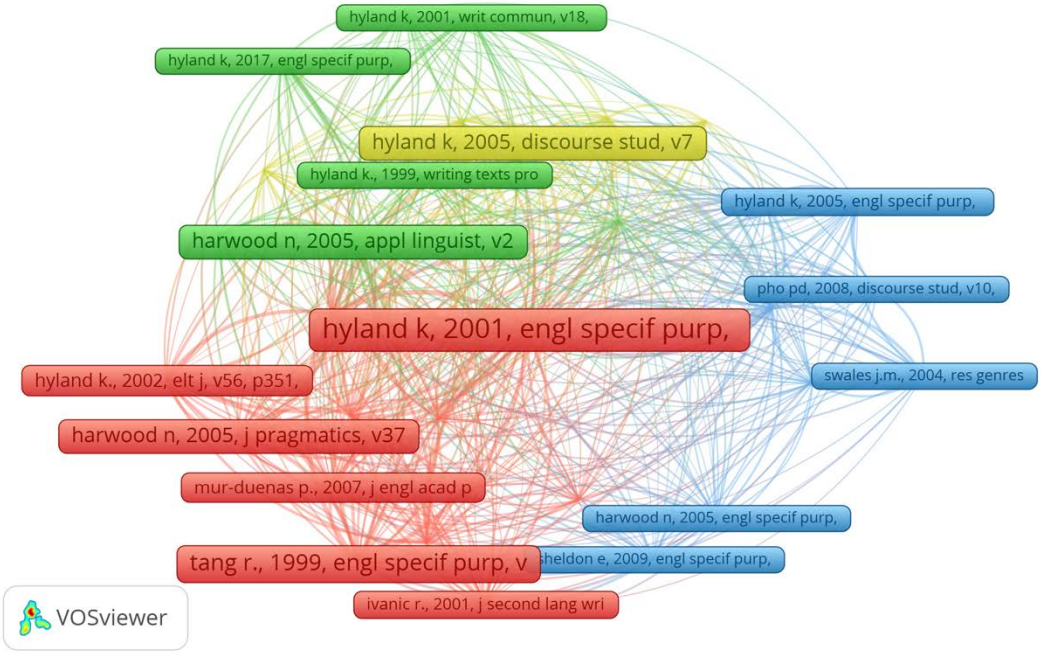


Figure 6. Knowledge network mapping of international studies co-cited

It can be inferred from the above picture that the research that plays a vital role in the development of research on *WE* in academic discourse includes Hyland (2001), Hyland (2005), Harwood (2005), Swales (2004), Tang and John (1999), and so on. Hyland (2001) adopted a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods; this research selected a total of 240 research papers from eight disciplines to verify that *WE* is the most frequently used strategy among all self-mention languages. Besides, the study analyzed the rhetorical strategies of *WE* in academic discourse through interviews. Hyland (2005) proposed a model of stance and engagement to elucidate a context for interpretation, showing how writers and readers connect with their disciplinary cultures through texts. The works from Hyland are no doubt the milestone for the achievement in the study of *WE*. The previous work first confirms the predominant status of *WE* among all self-mentions and provides an insight to analyze its function from the identity construction perspective. The latter established a relationship between self-mention and interaction from the perspective of stance and engagement. Harwood (2005) revealed the similarities and differences in the use and functionality of *WE* between soft and hard disciplines from the perspectives of different semantics, namely inclusiveness, and exclusivity. His work sheds light on the inclusive and exclusive pronouns of academic English textbooks for students and provides suggestions for academic English classroom activities. Swales's (2004) work mainly covered the classic CARS(Creating A Research Space) model, focusing on cross-cultural and interdisciplinary comparative research, and corpus linguistics. This book has significant implications for analyzing specific parts of the text (such as abstracts), analyzing different cultures or languages (such as contrastive learning between English and Chinese), and expanding corpus methods. The work of Tang and John (1999) taking the other pronoun I as an example discussed the writer's identity through students' academic writings. This framework divided the identity into five types: representative, guide, architect recounter of the research process, and opinion-holder originator. The model is recognized by academic scholars as a frequent theoretical support in identity studies research.

In a word, the key literature citations show that the current research finds that classic research focuses more on analyzing the function of *WE* from various perspectives.

Discussion

Using the Web of Science Core Collection as the data source, a total of 117 papers published in journals in the last 15 years (2008-2022) were reviewed and analyzed visually with the help of VOSviewer. Based on the development stages, disciplinary involvement, main source countries and regions, primary research topics, and emerging research trends of *WE* research in academic discourse, it provided a clear current pattern and future development trends of research in this arena.

Firstly, by counting the number of *WE* research publications and citations between 2008 and 2022, a graph was generated to present the development stages of *WE* research visually. Over the past 15 years, the trend in published research on the use of *WE* in academic discourse has generally been upward, reaching a peak in 2021 with 23 articles, indicating a growing interest in this area. Although there were slight declines in some years, such as 2013, 2019, and 2022, the overall growth suggests a sustained focus on this topic. Additionally, research on *WE* is predominantly published in journals focused on Language and Linguistics, Education, and Communication, with the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes (15)* and *English for Specific Purposes (12)* being the most active in this domain.

Secondly, the findings indicate that Hyland Ken and Jiang Kevin are the leading figures, with multiple co-authored studies focusing on the construction of authorial stance and identity across varied contexts such as student writing and journal articles. Other scholars, such as Cao Feng and Swales John, further extend this research into EFL contexts and cross-linguistic comparisons, supporting the interdisciplinary scope and evolving understanding of *WE* in academic communication. These findings align with existing literature that highlights *WE* as a critical element in self-mention practices for shaping academic identity (Flowerdew & Wang, 2015).

Thirdly, in the discussion of research on the use of *WE* in academic discourse, keyword analysis revealed scholars primarily focus on how *WE* functions as a self-mention tool to construct identity, voice, and stance in various academic settings. The analysis also shows a significant emphasis on corpus-based studies (Cao & Xiao, 2015), which are crucial for examining disciplinary differences and diachronic changes in the use of *WE* across different academic contexts. These findings align with broader trends in applied linguistics, emphasizing the interdisciplinary nature and evolving focus of research on *WE* in academic discourse (Millán, 2010; Lorés-Sanz, 2011).

Lastly, the research on *WE* in academic discourse reveals that there are four classic literature key studies have significantly shaped this field. These foundational works collectively emphasize the functional analysis of *WE* from various angles, contributing to an understanding of how self-mentions operate within academic texts. The insights from these studies align with the current literature review's findings, highlighting *WE* as a tool for identity construction, interaction, and disciplinary engagement. Specifically, Hyland (2001) confirmed the prominence of *WE* as a self-mention strategy through both quantitative and qualitative methods, laying a foundation for understanding its rhetorical role in academic writing. Hyland (2005) further developed a model of stance and engagement, highlighting how *WE* facilitates interactions between writers and readers within disciplinary cultures. Harwood (2005) explored the inclusive and exclusive use of *WE*

across disciplines, providing pedagogical insights for academic English instruction. Swales (2004) focused on cross-cultural and interdisciplinary comparisons, influencing corpus-based analyses, while Tang and John (1999) provided a framework for identity construction using pronouns like *WE*. This alignment suggests a well-established foundation in understanding *WE* and points to emerging areas where further research can deepen our understanding, especially in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary contexts.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the significance and trends of the use of *WE* as a self-mention in academic discourse. By analyzing 117 papers from the Web of Science Core Collection (2008-2022) using VOSviewer, the research reveals several key patterns. The findings indicate a steady increase in studies focused on *WE*, particularly in the fields of Language and Linguistics, Education, and Communication. Scholars such as Hyland, Jiang, and others have significantly contributed to understanding how *WE* constructs identity, voice, and stance in diverse academic contexts. Additionally, corpus-based studies have become crucial in examining these dynamics, revealing interdisciplinary and diachronic research trends. The results align with foundational literature, highlighting *WE* as a pivotal tool for identity construction and engagement, with the potential for further exploration in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary contexts.

Funding: This research is not funded.
Acknowledgments: I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my paper advisor, Professor Zhang Yi, (School of Foreign Languages, Northwestern Polytechnical University, China). She is an exceptionally attentive and highly dedicated supervisor. Throughout this article writing, she provided me with invaluable guidance, and it is hard to imagine completing this work without her support. Moreover, she instilled in me a profound understanding of the rigor and seriousness required in academic research, which has not only enhanced my commitment to learning but also raised my expectations and aspirations in life.
Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.
Authenticity: This manuscript is an original work.
Artificial Intelligence Statement: During the preparation of this work, the author used Grammarly to improve readability and language. The author takes full responsibility for the publication's content.

About the authors

Yaru Zhou is a doctoral student in Applied Linguistics at the School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University. Her research interests include academic discourse, self-mention, corpus linguistics, and educational linguistics.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6041-4184

Yi Zhang is a Professor at the School of Foreign Languages, Northwestern Polytechnical University, China. She serves as a master's and doctoral supervisor in Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. Her research interest is academic discourse, systemic functional linguistics and teacher education.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4795-1730

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