FEATURES OF INFORMALITY IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS RESEARCH ARTICLES PUBLISHED IN IRANIAN LOCAL JOURNALS

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Abstract This study was motivated by the recent study on informality in academic writing carried out by Hyland and Jiang (2017), to see the status of informality in Applied Linguistics research articles published in Iranian local journals. To this end, 50 research articles from two Journals of “Research in Applied Linguistics” and “Iranian Journal of applied Linguistics” were selected. The research articles were published in 2014 and 2015 issues. They were analyzed based on Hyland and Jiang’s (2017) taxonomy. The results imply that unattended anaphoric pronouns and sentence initial conjunctions have received the greatest attention from Iranian writers of Applied Linguistics while exclamations and contractions were totally ignored. Compared to the results reported by Hyland and Jiang (2017), the use of features of informality by Iranian writers of the present study varies to a great extent. The variations could stress the necessity of awareness of Iranian Applied Linguistics and related fields of study writers concerning the use of these features by successful writers.

Key words: Genre, Informality features, Iranian writers, Local journals, Research article

1. Introduction

English as the world’s first true language has conquered the field in terms of media, information, business, diplomacy and more importantly from researchers’ viewpoint, English has become the language of scientific papers and periodicals (Swales, 2004). Consequently English publications are assumed to receive a remarkable amount of cross-border assessments and there also have been several studies investigating different academic genres in terms of the implementation of linguistic, discursive and rhetorical features (Merdunas 2017). Researchers’ languages in written texts, meanwhile, have been put under spotlights concerning the use of formal and informal features (e.g. Chang & Swales 1999; Hyland 2017; Gilquin & Paquot, 2008). The ultimate common goal of these studies is for novice writers who wish to be an accepted member in discourse community. Novice writers, if intend to be successful members of discourse community, need to become aware of meta-discourse markers (Ghami & Sabadoust 2017). Many researchers; further, opine that there is a growing tendency among writers to use the informal language in academic written communication, although this assumption doesn’t hold true for all the disciplines and informal features (e.g. Hyland 2017; Leedham 2015). The root of this drift towards informal language in written academic texts, though is not in the domains of the present study; is assumed to emanate from the potential influence of English language teaching methodology such as the communicative method which is known for exposing students to informal spoken language rather than the strict written one and that may influence students’ idiosyncratic literature in writing (Granger & Rayson 1998). Correspondingly, in the present study, we attempt to identify the status of informality in Applied Linguistics research articles published in Iranian local journals and compare the gained results with those found by Hyland and Jiang (2017).

Informality as Hyland and Jiang believe is “a slippery concept, difficult to pin down with a clear definition. It is typically either defined in contrast with formality, or in terms of lists of language features which are thought to comprise ‘informal elements’, such as using imperatives, employing “I” or starting sentences with “but” (2017). Oxford dictionary defines the formal language as careful, serious, and correct, whereas; informal language is defined as friendly and relaxed. Heylighen and Dewaele (1999) consider formality as detached, rigid, heavy and accurate; informality, on the other hand, as they perceive is associated with flexibility, implicitly and involvement. Formal language is therefore strict and intact. It prevents ambiguity and culls out individual differences (e.g. gender, age, religion, culture) (Simkins-Bullock & Wildman, 1991), while informal writing style is cordial and expressive projecting intrapersonal differences (Argamon, Koppel, Fine & Shimoni 2003). Informality is indeed a mixed blessing phenomenon in that although it is thought to be a deviated form of formality, informality in written academic texts builds a bridge between the writer and reader; making it possible to negotiate and communicate thoughts (Hyland & Jiang 2017). Suffice it to say, informal style of writing is considered to be appealing since it builds up a close relationship with readers, absorbs an audience, socializes as it attempts to create a social contact, keeps intimacy, negotiate information, persuades readers and expresses ideas in a relaxed way. Still informality confounds many readers. There are still many novice writers who do not know what it genuinely means to write informally and what informality in written academic texts is like.

Features of informality, on the other hand, may assist in giving insights as to what informality precisely means in academic writing because it is literally difficult to be identified. There are some approaches to the categorization of informality features; the present study, however, was carried out based on Hyland and Jiang’ extracted list of informality features (Hyland & Jiang 2017). The aforementioned list consists of a set of distinctive elements which pave the way for a clearer picture of informality which Hyland and Jiang describe as quite slippery. The extracted list of informality features by Hyland and Jiang (2017) consist of 10 distinctive grammatical items, namely First person pronouns to refer to the author(s), unattended anaphoric pronouns, split infinitives, Sentence initial conjunctions or conjunctive adverbs, listing expressions, Second person pronouns/determiners to refer to the reader, Sentence final preposition, contractions, direct questions and exclamations.

Academic writing was mostly of impersonal type until last few years and perhaps still is, among novice writers. As Hyland (2001) puts it, personal bias used to be warned of and avoided by researchers due to the assumption that academic writings are objective in nature and therefore human agency ought to be absent in the process. A strong evidence for impersonality dominance in academic text could be Albert Einstein’s conflicting advice that there ought to be no “I” in scientific papers (Albert Einstein, 1934). The personal style and the presence of the author’s self has recently received a great deal of attention. Some researchers, eventually, found the use of personal pronouns (I, We) makes the text interactive, cooperative and friendly. Author’s presence and voice secures readers’ acceptance of the idea and boosts the plausibility of the argument (Hyland, 2001). The way writers express their findings is quite effective in that self-mention in academic papers makes the text interactive, thereby students gain a stronger tendency to accept authors’ ideas (Hyland 2002).

Second person pronouns, similarly, are believed to play almost the same interactive role (Kuo, 1999). The implementation of second person pronouns in academic writings implies writers’ intention to secure cooperation and solidarity with readers. Hyland (2001) restated this assumption that writing is a social act, so a successful writer is expected to be able to engage appropriately with his/her audience. As a means to this end, some have suggested that writers may use personal pronouns including both first and second types, questions and some other things which add interactivity to the text. Questions in texts, for instance, invite readers to engage and

make them active participants who are getting more brisk and curious to go ahead and unfold the text (Hyland 2002; Bell 2007).

Unattended anaphoric pronouns almost met the same degree of refusal due largely to the fact that they are prone to distort texts' clarity and cohesion (Gray 2010). Steinberg, Kaufer & Geisler (1998) for example, stated that novice writers before using unattended pronouns; must ask themselves what these pronouns refer to so that they can add nominal parts to the sentence if it looks lacking in clarity. As with the previous features, some researchers, however, found stand-alone pronouns succinct and economic in disguise since they help writers create a topic out of a central predictive. By doing so, writers can discuss the topic economically, at one stroke, with no need for names (Geisler, Kaufer & Steinberg 1985).

All told, informality has been recently introduced differently as a means to build relationships with audience, get them engaged, and negotiate ideas with them. Recent researches on so-called academic informality motivated us to conduct approximately the same investigation into Applied Linguistics (AL) research articles (RA) published in Iranian local journals. Using Hyland and Jiang's (2017) framework, we aim to find out to what extent Iranian researchers have moved towards informality in writing AL RAs, and afterwards to compare the findings with those of Hyland and Jiang's (2017) investigation.

The questions of the study are as follows:

1. How frequent are the informality features in AL RAs published in Iranian local journals?
2. What is the status of informality features in AL RAs published in Iranian local journals compared to findings of Hyland and Jiang (2017)?

2. Methodology

2.1. Sample

The sample of the present study comprises 50 AL RAs written by Iranian writers and get published in Iranian local journals. The following are the details of the sample:

- a. **Discipline:** Applied linguistics.
- b. **Writers:** Iranian writers of AL RAs.
- c. **Number:** 50 RAs published in Iranian local journals
- d. **Years of publication:** 2014- 2015
- e. **Journals:** "Iranian Journal of Applied linguistics" (published by Kharazmi University press-Tehran) and "Research in applied linguistics" (published by Chamran university press-Ahvaz).

2.2. Analytical framework:

The framework of the present study consists of 10 definite grammatical items which are considered to be informality representatives in academic contexts. It is precisely the one which was first suggested by Chang and Swales (1999) and then modified and implemented by Hyland and Jiang (2017). We adopted this framework to our study because it is quite succinct and capable of drawing a clear picture of what informality is like in academic texts. (See table 1)

Table 1. The list of informal features adopted from Hyland and Jiang (2017)

Informal features
1. First person pronouns to refer to the author(s) (I and We). Example: <u>We</u> should conclude that a critical stand point in ELT with

2. Unattended anaphoric pronoun (this, these, that, those, it) that can refer to antecedents of varying length Example: one reason for such a difference is that subject teachers might not know that the ELT materials might convey hidden goals and through <u>this</u> , the ELT industry aggresses the culture of EFL learners.
3. split infinitives – an infinitive that has an adverb between to and the verb stem Example: <u>To</u> empirically <u>examine</u> the relationships in the present study, the following questions were posed and investigated.
4. Sentence initial conjunctions or conjunctive adverbs Example: <u>Therefore</u> , critical thinking is not considered static rather it is a dynamic process which learners can apply
5. Sentence final preposition Example: activities had positive attitudes toward the above-mentioned activities they were engaged <u>in</u> .
6. listing expressions ('and so on', 'etc', 'and so forth' used when ending a list) Example: In Figure 8, <u>for example</u> , the edge of the window forms a frame line dividing the picture into two parts
7. Second person pronouns/determiners to refer to the reader (you and your) Example: <u>You</u> can also say in English
8. contractions Example: Export figures <u>won't</u> improve until the economy is stronger.
9. Direct questions Example: Is there any significant difference in EFL learners' ability in?
10. exclamations Example: This is not the case!

2.3 Analytical Procedure

To analyze the sample of AL RAs for the features of informality, we went through the following procedures. First, two journals were selected. The selection was mainly because that these two journals are published by two famous universities in Iran and they have been issued under the permission from ministry of science and higher education. They are both indexed in Islamic Science Center (ISC). Then, 2014-2015 issues of both journals were downloaded and only regular RAs were culled for analysis. Next step was the identification of features of informality based on the framework suggested by Hyland and Jiang (2017). Findings were tabulated and discussed and finally compared with findings suggested by Hyland and Jiang (2017).

3. Results

The samples of AL RAs were analyzed for the informality features based on Hyland and Jiang's (2017) framework and results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequencies of features of informality in AL RAs

Informal features	Total number of the words	Pre-number of the words	Frequency	Final findings	Hyland & Jiang's findings		
					1965	1985	2015
First person pronouns	327622	10000	137	4.181	60.9	53.6	52.5
Unattended pronouns	327622	10000	1040	31.74	108.9	70.8	71.8

Split infinitives	327622	10000	10	0.305	0.6	0.7	2.1
Sentence initials	327622	10000	1152	35.12	30.6	32	37.9
Sentence final preposition	327622	10000	30	0.91	1.3	0.3	1.0
Listing expressions	327622	10000	40	1.2	3.5	2.8	1.9
Second person pronouns	327622	10000	22	0.6	4.9	6.4	10.0
exclamations	327622	10000	0	0	1.3	1.2	0.8
Contractions	327622	10000	0	0	1.8	4.8	13.5
Direct questions	327622	10000	2	0.06	0	0	0.2
Overall	327622	10000	2433	74.26	213.8	202.7	191.7

4. Discussion

The results in Table 1 indicate that Iranian writers of AL RAs have presented features of informality only in 74.26 per 10000 words. This result compared with findings presented in Hyland and Jiang's (2017) could indicate that AL RAs published in Iranian local journals are more formal than those RAs published in international journals. The language teaching methods through which Iranian writers have learned English as foreign language (EFL context) can account for this finding. In such context, mostly formal English is taught and writers consider academic genres such as RAs as a formal academic genre that includes no room for informality. It seems that Iranian writers of AL RAs published in Iranian local journals treat to great stance RAs as merely reports of experiments carried out. In this case, the writer prefers to take a laissez-faire stance and put himself in safe hand by formally reporting the experiment. Another reason could be the writing experience of Iranian postgraduate students. In the Iranian educational system, writers are not required to write in a creative and critical way. Such students do not dare enough to present themselves in writing through features of informality and prefer to use formal grammatical sentences to make sure about the syntactic and semantic features of their RAs because they assume that informal style of writing may jeopardize the acceptance of their works. They possibly forget that editors of journals also want to know the writer's stance on the experiments reported in RAs and that they can make it possible through the correct use of features of informality. The great difference between the findings of this study and those reported by Hyland and Jiang (2017) could be an important point that needs further investigation and considerable attention from Iranian writers. Such a difference could be one of the reasons that lead to the rejection of AL RAs when submitted to high impact international journals.

The results in Table 1 indicate that 'sentence initials' and "unattended pronouns" and "first person pronouns" have received the greatest attention from Iranian writers of AL RAs.

Sentence initial conjunctions as one of the informality features received noticeable attention from Iranian writers of AL RAs. These writers have used this informality feature for 35.12 per 10000 words that is close to the number reported in Hyland and Jiang's table of findings

(2017). Even in academic writing guides, writers are not recommended to use such informality feature at the sentence initial position, yet we see that writers show great tendency to use this informality feature. The common sentence initial conjunctions found in Iranian writers of AL RAs are “*however, and, but, thus*”. The finding of this study concerning the use of this informality feature could be based on the following justifications; first, in Persian language writers mostly prefer the sentence initial slot to use conjunctions. This is a preferred way to make sure of the text’s cohesion and coherence. Second, based on similarity of findings of this study and that of Hyland and Jiang’s (2017), it seems that the use of sentence initial conjunction is imposed by genre of RAs or by RA writing conventions in AL discipline. In addition, Iranian writers of AL RAs preferred to largely use the common conjunctions in the initial position while less common conjunctions such as *still* and *yet* were absent.

Unattended pronouns have received great attention from Iranian writers of AL RAs published in Iranian local journals. This attention could be justified based on the fact that unattended pronouns such as “this” that is followed by a noun phrase may increase comprehension by readers and show the authoritative nature of writers (Swales and Feak, 2012). Strauss (1993) and Swales (2005) pointed that unattended pronouns are used as one of the common structures in spoken academic genres. In this regard, Gray (2010) points that such references could be treated as an alert that important information is about to be presented in the sentence. Another reason for great use of such features could be that writers set themselves free from taking the responsibilities of presented information, claims and arguments. In such cases, writers refer to text (paper, article, study) to present the intended information, claims, and arguments.

Comparing the findings of this study with the findings presented in Hyland and Jiang’s (2017) study could indicate that Iranian writers AL RAs have showed far less attention to this feature of informality (see Table). This finding could be justified based on two theories: a) in EFL contexts, writers use fewer unattended pronouns due to the fact that they are usually stumped for appropriate lexical options to come with unattended pronouns. For example, they mostly tend to use unattended pronoun such as “this, these” with some shell nouns like “results, findings, study”; b) in EFL contexts, writers prefer to use unattended references only in the case that they are sure about the selection of appropriate signaling nouns that help them to accurately reflect the concepts they are trying to re-conceptualize (Flowerdue, 2006).

First person pronoun that is treated as the defining marker of informality has received little attention from Iranian writers of AL RAs. Table 2 indicates that the difference between the findings of Hyland and Jiang’s research (2017) and those of this study concerning the use of first person pronoun is noticeably significant. It seems that Iranian writers of AL RAs are not aware of the role of the first person pronoun in finding out impersonal stance. In addition, it could be seen that Iranian writers of AL RAs do not think it is necessary to greatly participate in their published research. One reason could be that most of the AL RAs published in local journals are M.A. theses mostly written by Iranian M.A. students. These students consider publication objective and factual which has no space for self-mentioning, therefore, they do not consider themselves as community members to practice using self-mention pronouns and ordinarily avoid them. They let the research speak directly to the researcher/reader. They generally think ‘we are still novice writers and we still lack much to have the authority to claim or personalize results and arguments’. They need to keep in mind that readers would accept the claims or arguments in the study when both social and rhetorical patterns were practiced. This means that claims should be objective and at the same time presents discourse community relationship of the writer with readers. It could be clearly seen that this fact has been neglected by the Iranian writers of AL RAs.

Second person pronoun as a feature of informality received very little attention from Iranian writers of AL RAs. The finding of this study and the finding reported by Hyland and Jiang (2017) are noticeably different. In this study, second person pronoun was used 0.6 per 10000 words while in Hyland and Jiang's study (2017) this feature was realized for 10 per 10000 words. This great difference could be discussed based on the following justifications. First, Iranian writers of AL RAs seems to take on board the advice against using second person pronoun in academic writings. Second, they do not favor using second person pronoun as an engagement marker to engage readers and create an interpersonal relation with their readers. This could be due to the fact that most of the analyzed AL RAs were extracted from M.A. theses which are mostly written by novice non-native students who, as mentioned before, do not consider themselves as AL discourse community members to use second person pronoun as a marker to engage with the readers. The last informality feature that we discuss here is contractions. According to the results in Table 2, contraction is totally ignored by Iranian writers of AL RAs while this feature received noticeable attention in the study carried out by Hyland and Jiang (2017). As stated in the discussion of using second person pronoun, Iranian writers of AL RAs treat writing RA as formal texts that must be written based on the guidelines of academic writings which highly recommend avoiding contractions. Another reason is that there is no such structure in Persian language. Since Interlanguage transfer plays a crucial role in all areas of learning and using another language, Iranian writers of AL RAs do not have the experience of using such structure in their mother tongue and as a result they could easily neglect it.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to find out to what extent Iranian researchers have moved towards informality in writing AL RAs, and afterwards to compare the findings with those of Hyland and Jiang's (2017). To meet this end, two research questions were put forward in introduction section. As to the research question 1, the results showed that Iranian writers of AL RAs are more inclined towards expressing informality through the use of sentence initial conjunctions, unattended pronoun, and first person pronoun. The great inclination towards sentence initial conjunctions compared to other informality features seems to be not due to its informality sense but to the impact of structure of Persian language. Second great attention was devoted to unattended pronoun that was treated as a strategy to free the researchers from taking the responsibility of the claims, arguments and findings. They tend to join unattended pronouns with shell nouns to make reference to the rhetorical sections and draw the attention of the reader from researcher to the rhetorical sections of RAs. First person pronoun was treated as the informality feature to help researchers to only bold their clear cut contributions. They used this feature only in the case of being completely certain about the claim, results, or arguments. Thus it could be concluded that Iranian writers of AL RAs published in Iranian local journals are not to a large extent aware of the change in the rhetorical functions of sections of RAs. It seems that they are treating RA as a strict genre that must be stated in a formal inflexible style. In addition, we can conclude that even if they use some of the features of informality, it is due to the impact of their first language culture and structure.

As to the research question 2, the results showed great differences between the findings of this study and findings reported in Hyland and Jiang (2017). The difference was great in the attention that writers in both studies dedicated to the use of informality features. Iranian writers of AL RAs were more formal in writing. It can be said that Iranian writers of AL RAs are uneasy about increasing flexibility in their RAs through using informality feature. Findings of a study carried out by Chang and Swales (1999) has proved this conclusion about L2 postgraduate writers. In particular, the differences were eye catching in using second person pronoun, unattended pronoun, first person pronoun and contractions as features of informality. The findings of this study could help to contend that Iranian writers do not see a room to involve readers in arguments

and get their secure supports for the claims through positioning themselves more explicitly. They treat academic writing genres such as RA as a genre with formal, fix and strict style of writing. Regarding the use of second person pronoun and contractions, Iranian writers of AL RAs were more careful about using these informality features due to the impact of their mother tongue because it was expected to see greater attention towards using this informality feature based on the findings reported by Cobb (2003), McCrostie (2008) and Leedham (2015).

In a nutshell, this study could help reaching the following main conclusions: First, Iranian writers of ALs RAs do not follow the changes created by the use of informality features. This conclusion could be clearly seen by comparing findings of this study and findings reported by Hyland and Jiang 2017. Second, these writers possibly do not show great attention to use informality features due to limit in language proficiency. The use of informality features could add to the complexity of writing RAs. Third, it seems that Iranian writers of AL RAs do not consider disciplinary conventions in writing RAs. Fourth, based on the conclusions stated, Iranian writers of AL RAs need to be aware of the importance of informality features, how they are used by expert writers, and what discoursal and metadiscoursal functions these features could perform.

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