

PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN CLASSROOM: A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF I, WE AND YOU IN UNIVERSITY LECTURES ACROSS DISCIPLINES

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Abstract: *Academic disciplines have varied attitudes towards the use of pronominal resources in both written and spoken genres. But most of the studies that seek to reveal these disciplinary peculiarities are largely grounded on written texts. In recent times, however, studies have been conducted using spoken texts such as university lecture, which is regarded the key classroom genre, to support this kind of scholarship. These studies either focus on disciplinary or intercultural variations in the use of pronominal resources. The studies on disciplinary variation are largely from individual disciplines to reveal such disciplines' attitudes towards the use of personal pronouns particularly I, we and you (tri-PP). While these studies provide sufficient evidence about the use of these pronouns in academic lectures within individual disciplines, little is known about their use across disciplinary supercommunities (DSs): Humanity (HS), Social (SS) and Natural (NS) Sciences. Thus, this corpus-based study investigated the use of the tri-PP in academic lectures from Ghanaian public universities to ascertain how the norms, conventions, and epistemologies of the broad disciplinary classifications influence their use. Antconc, a corpus analysis software, was used to search for the occurrences of the tri-PP and their variants across the three subcorpora. The comparisons relied on frequency counts of the tri-PP nominalized per 10,000 words (ptw), given that the subcorpora from the three DSs had different sizes. The frequency counts were supported by log-likelihood tests to establish significant differences across the DSs. The study found that, in total, NS employed more use of the tri-PP than HS and SS, suggesting a high pronominal density in NS's lectures. Furthermore, I, we and you were more frequent in NS lectures than in HS and SS lectures. This indicates that NS lectures have a high degree of lecturer visibility and lecturer-student interaction more than the HS and SS ones. The findings suggest a change in attitude of the DSs towards discourse-internal interaction, engagement and voice. The study has implications for the scholarship on the pragmatics of personal pronouns, disciplinary variation and interaction in discourse.*

Keywords: personal pronouns; corpus-based; disciplines; university lectures; frequency; lectures

1. Introduction

Fortanet (2005) has provided a relatively comprehensive typology of spoken genres in the academy. She classifies them into classroom, institutional, and research genres (which encompass two subdivisions –conference and ‘others’). Among these, the lecture, which is considered a key classroom genre has engendered the attention of scholars in English for Academic Purposes (Akoto, 2020; Hyland, 2009; Yaakob, 2013). Interestingly, Yaakob (2013) proposes a ‘model’ that outlines the key researchable areas in academic lecture, and this involves textual, practice, learning, and process. This paper is situated within the textual focus which involves linguistic and rhetorical resources. The ‘textual’ focuses largely on the ‘language’ of lectures, be it verbal or non-verbal, and linguistic or paralinguistic.

Aspects of the language of academic lectures have been investigated in a number of studies (Ädel, 2010; Lee, 2016; Lee & Subtirelu, 2015). One of the key rhetorical resources that typify academic lectures are personal pronouns particularly *I*, *we* and *you* (Akoto, 2020; Yaakob, 2013). Quite a number of studies have investigated the frequencies of *I*, *we* and *you* in academic lectures. Such studies can be classified into those that focus on disciplinary variation, those that focus on the lecture as a register (Lee, 2009; Fortanet, 2004, Yaakob, 2013, Nesi, 2001), Cheng (2012), and those from contrastive rhetorical perspective (Kelly & Studer, 2010). The first category of studies is interested in how disciplinary influence the choice of the tri-PP in academic lectures. The studies are either intra-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary in focus. The inter-disciplinary studies either compare individual disciplines or disciplinary supercommunities (DSs) such as Humanity, Social and Natural Sciences. While the comparison of individual disciplines offer us the rhetorical specificities for the purposes of ‘micro’-disciplinary discourses, the latter afford us the opportunity to see the peculiarities of a cluster/family of disciplines (Yeo & Ting, 2014).

Rounds (1987a & b), Milne (2006), and Kelly and Studer’s (2012) examined *I*, *we* and *you* in Mathematics, Engineering and Physics lectures respectively. They observed differences in the occurrences of *I*, *we* and *you*. Rounds (1987a), for instance, found that *we* was preferred more in Mathematics classroom lecture than *I* and *you*. Specifically, *we* was three times more frequent than *I* or *you*. Currently, the only known studies that have investigated *I*, *we* and *you* from broad disciplinary perspectives is Plaza and Álvarez (2013) and Yeo and Ting (2014). Yeo and Ting (2014) noted that “the use of personal pronouns for student engagement in lecture introductions varies across broad disciplinary lines” (p. 29). They found that the tri-PP had greater occurrences in the Sciences than the Arts. The paucity of studies on personal pronouns use in academic lectures from broad disciplinary perspectives informed the present study. Hence, the paper investigates the frequency distribution of *I*, *we* and *you* (hereafter referred to as triumvirate personal pronouns –tri-PP) in academic lectures across Humanities (HS), Social Sciences (SS) and Natural Sciences (NS) university lectures.

The next section examines matters on corpus building. This is followed by analysis and discussion, and then conclusions.

2. Corpus and Methodology

We audio-recorded undergraduate academic lectures from two leading universities in Ghana in the 2016/2017 academic year. The lectures were manually transcribed orthographically and processed into computable readable form. Given that the focus of the paper is on the personal pronouns used by lecturers, only the lecturer-inputs in the lecturer-student classroom interaction were included in the subcorpora. Details on the subcorpora HS, SS and NS are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Details on the subcorpora

Disciplinary supercommunities	Corpus size (tokens)
Humanities English Language Philosophy Religious Studies	36 586
Social Sciences Law Communication Studies Political Science Educational Foundations	43 916
Natural Sciences Electrical Engineering Mathematics Biology	34 622

We used AntConc (Anthony, 2015) to search for the tri-PP and their variants in the subcorpora. We then manually examined each pronoun in its context in order to determine its *pronounness* since there were instances of ‘I’ which were initials of personal names. Next, we prepared frequency lists of these pronouns, and the items were normalized per 10,000 words (ptw). Finally, we used Rayson’s (n.d.) log-likelihood calculator to determine whether the differences observed were statistically significant. We used 95th percentile; 5%; $p < 0.05$, with log-likelihood value =3.84 as the cut-off point of statistical significance, implying that any value equal or above 3.84 was deemed statistically significant (McEnery & Hardie, 2012). In the analysis, raw and normalized frequencies of the tri-PP are provided to shed light on their use since “it is usually considered a good practice to report *both* raw and normalized frequencies when writing up quantitative results from a corpus” (McEnery & Hardie, 2012: 51). We also present the statistical significance of the observed differences in tri-PP use across the three disciplinary supercommunities (DSs). Frequency analysis is undertaken at two levels: ‘macro’ (where the totality of occurrence of the tri-PP are discussed); and ‘micro’ –where the frequency of individual PPs are examined) in sections 3.1 and 3.2 respectively.

3. Analysis and Discussion

This section comprises two subsections, which respectively examine the overall frequencies of the tri-PP (i.e. I, we and you), and the frequencies of individual pronouns across the disciplinary supercommunities (HS, SS and NS).

3.1. Overall Frequencies of Tri-PP across the DS

The analysis shows that *I*, *we* and *you* and their respective variants constitute substantial part of the language of academic lectures. This confirms the findings of previous studies (Akoto, 2020; Kelly & Studer, 2012; Milne, 2006; Plaza & Álvarez, 2013; Yeo & Ting, 2014).

Table 2: Overall raw and normed frequencies of tri-PP across DSs

Disciplinary supercommunities	Corpus size	Raw freq.	Normed freq. per 10, 000 tokens
HS	36586	2266	619.36
SS	43916	2570	585.21
NS	34622	2953	852.93

A log-likelihood greater than 3.84 indicates a p-value less than 0.05.

Table 2 shows that the occurrences of the tri-PP in the subcorpora range from 585 to 852 per 10, 000 tokens, where NS (852.93) recorded the highest frequency, followed by HS (619.36) and then SS (585.21). It suggests a low (SS), medium (HS) and high (NS) pronominalised lectures (Csomay, 2002).

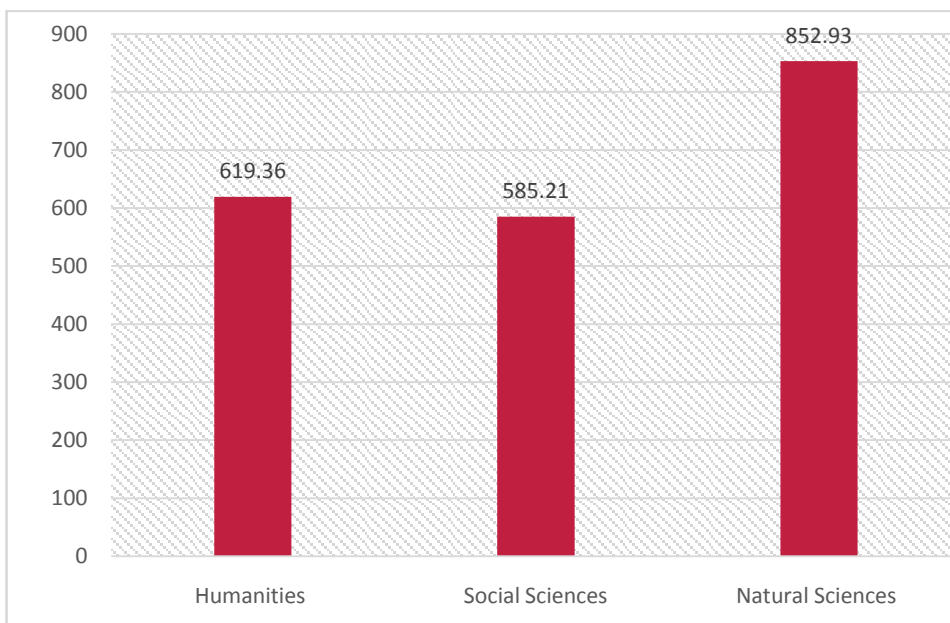


Figure 1: Overall normed frequency the tri-PP across the DSs

Table 2 and Figure 1 display the overall frequencies (raw and normed) of the tri-PP across the three DSs. They show the uneven distributions of *I*, *we* and *you* across the DSs. Hyland (2005) maintains that disciplinary goals influence the use (or non-use) of linguistic/rhetorical variables. This is further affirmed by the test for significance represented in Table 3.

Table 3: Inter-DS log-likelihood values for overall Tri-PP

DS	Log-likelihood value	Significance level: LL 3.84
HS versus SS	3.87	Significant
HS versus NS	132.57	Significant
SS versus NS	195.54	Significant

A log-likelihood greater than 3.84 indicates a p-value less than 0.05.

The log-likelihood test of significance, as shown in Table 3, reveals that the differences at the three independent levels of comparison are statistically significant at LL 3.84 ($P < 0.05$ / 95% level): HS vs SS (LL 3.87), HS vs NS (LL 132.57) and SS vs NS (LL 195.54). Thus, the observed statistical differences are influenced by the distinct disciplinary conventions and norms of the DSs.

NS, known to “foreground events rather than actors” (Hyland, 2009: 7), is expected to use limited personal pronouns. However, the present finding is incongruent with this position, and the conventions of impersonality and anonymity (Hyland, 2002b). This finding questions the broad stereotypical “disciplinary compartmentalization” (Hart, 1998: 10) with respect to interpersonal and impersonality. It is believed that NS “... emphasizes demonstrable generalizations rather than interpreting individuals, so greater burden is placed on research practices and the methods, procedures and equipment used” (Hyland, 2005: 188) rather than the discourse participants. Because NS has been construed as a less interpretive knowledge domain, *I*, *we* and *you* usages are expected comparatively to be minimal. But the current finding suggests otherwise. It suggests that Natural Scientists are becoming the most explicitly interpretive, while HS is becoming less interpretive and the SS the least interpretive. This shifts the Natural Scientists’ attention to the interactional (not only the transactional) use of language largely for interpersonal purposes (Yeo & Ting, 2014).

Furthermore, HS generally employed more tri-PP than SS. There is a significant difference (statistically) between the two disciplinary supercommunities, as shown in Table 2. Compared to the Social Scientists, the Humanity Scientists utilized more tri-PP. Although both knowledge domains are described as interpretive (Hyland, 2009) and support social constructivism (Hyland, 2009), the SS is considered less interpretive as it is perceived to be close to the NS in rhetoric than the HS (Hyland, 2009). Thus, the Humanity Scientists’ higher use of the tri-PP more than the SS is not surprising as the HS has traditionally been said to favour personal style of communication as against the impersonal, self-detached style (Afful, 2010).

3.2. Frequency Distribution of *I*, *We* and *You* across DSs

In this section, *I*, *we* and *you* (tri-PP) are individually discussed in order to highlight the possible effect of disciplinary on their use. The frequency lists of the

tri-PP in the subcorpora revealed that their use in classroom lecture is uneven. Table 4 shows the frequencies of the tri-PP within and across disciplinary supercommunities.

Table 4: Raw and Normed Frequencies of Tri-PP

DS	Tri-PP	Raw frequency	Normed freq. per 10, 000 tokens
HS			
	I	573	156.62
	We	630	172.20
	You	1063	290.55
SS			
	I	577	131.39
	We	750	170.78
	You	1243	283.04
NS			
	I	922	266.30
	We	722	208.54
	You	1309	378.08

A log-likelihood greater than 3.84 indicates a p-value less than 0.05.

It is worthy to note that the tri-PP are common to the three DSs. This is, however, not surprising as Biber (2006) has reported that personal pronouns are characteristic of spoken university lectures. But aside from this, we find some surprises based on the occurrences of the tri-PP across the three DSs. The distributions of the individual tri-PP are examined in the proceeding subsections.

3.2.1. Frequency distribution of / across DSs

Table 4 shows the frequency patterns of / across the disciplinary supercommunities (DSs). NS recorded the highest instances of I per 10, 000 words (266.30) followed by HS (156.62), and then SS (131.39). The current finding supports the assertion that NS has evolved in its attitude towards interpersonality, visibility, voice and impersonality (Hyland, 2002a). It has been held that NS avoids the use of the first personal pronoun which makes discourse personalized and thus projects the image of the speaker rather than the ideational content (Hyland, 2002a, 2005). It is now clear that the Natural Scientists comparatively represent themselves in classroom lectures more than their HS and SS counterparts. The low frequencies of / in HS and SS are quite surprising. For instance, it is established that discourses in HS are more personalized (Hyland, 2005), making self-representation of speakers more central and crucial. However, in this case, we see a limited use of / (as compared to NS). On the other hand, SS, which is said to be a society-oriented knowledge domain and anthropocentric (Afful, 2010) use fewer /-forms. This realization is quite difficult to justify. It suggests that given the global call for knowledge generation to solve the socio-economic problems, Social Scientists are shifting attention to the propositional content rather than the self of the individuals who produce the discourses.

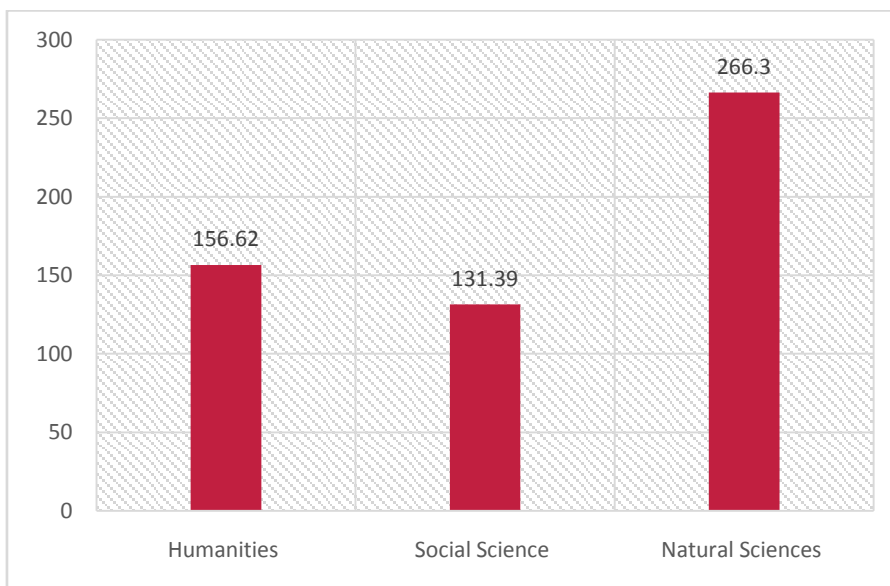


Figure 2: Normed frequency of I across DSs

More so, we notice from Table 5 and Figure 2 that there are marked differences, statistically, among HS, SS and NS. NS, HS and SS used 266.3, 156.62 and 131.39 of *I* per 10, 000 tokens respectively. Interestingly, these observed differences are supported by the evidences from the significance test as being statistically significant (See Table 5).

Table 5: Inter-DS log-likelihood values for *I*

DS	Log-likelihood value	Significance level: LL 3.84
HS vs SS	8.86	Significant
HS vs NS	102.62	Significant
SS vs NS	183.30	Significant

A log-likelihood greater than 3.84 indicates a p-value less than 0.05.

Statistically, the observed differences have proven to be significant at the $p < 0.05$ level between HS and SS (LL 8.86), HS and NS and SS (LL 102.62) and NS (LL 183.30). These suggest that disciplinarity influences the use of *I* in classroom lectures at all the three independent levels of comparison. The present finding contrasts the conceptual norms and established rhetoric of NS (Hyland, 2009). We are told that NS prefers passive voice to the active one, and therefore, impersonal use of language (Hyland, 2002a & b). Contrarily, NS lecturers exhibit the strongest presence in lectures as compared to their HS and SS counterparts since Hyland (2002b: 6) argues that “the higher the number of *I*, the stronger the writer’s presence”. The present finding points to a possible emerging trend with respect to classroom lectures in NS. It also in tandem with Yeo and Ting (2014), who also found the normed frequencies of *I* in Science and Arts as 22.83 and 11.50

respectively. However, the finding is inconsistent with Plaza and Álvarez (2013), who found SS to have recorded the highest use of *I*-forms. Given that the corpora for Plaza and Álvarez’s study are from a native context, and both Yeo and Ting, and the current study from L2 context, the differences between the two sets of studies can be ascribed to the L1-L2 factor.

3.2.2. Frequency Distribution of *we* across DSs

The frequency information on *we* in the subcorpora are represented in Figure 3 below.

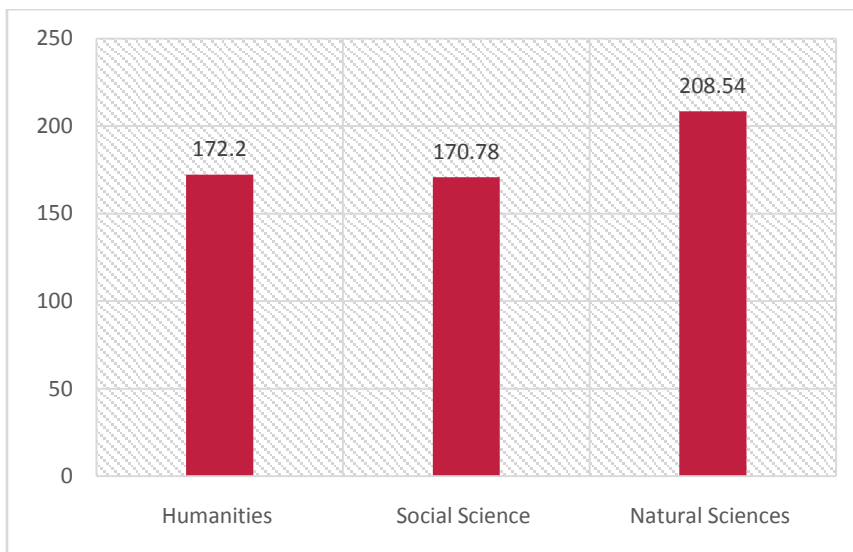


Figure 3: Normed frequency of *we* across DSs

We notice the effect of disciplinarity on the frequency of *we* across the three DSs. NS utilized 208.54, while HS and SS respectively employed 172.2 and 170.78 of *we* per 10, 000 words. The use of *we* largely reveals an individual DS’s construction of disciplinary solidarity (Hyland, 2005) or sense of communality/collegiality (Hyland, 2000). Rounds (1987b: 649) argues that “*we* is an egalitarian pronominal choice”, hence “by using *we*, teachers can signal solidarity with their students while covertly maintaining a certain semblance of power” (p. 649). In fact, *we* “sends a clear signal of membership by textually constructing both the writer and the reader as participants with similar understanding and goals” (Rounds, 1987a: 183). In relation to the current realization, NS lectures, on one hand, appear student-friendlier than HS and SS, on the other hand. NS’s overwhelming preference for *we* is quite justified by its reliance on quantitative ideology and thus described as a more positivist knowledge domain (Hart, 1998). Through *we*-forms, the Natural Scientists establish disciplinary ethos to achieve *institutionalized* objectivity.

Table 6 shows that the difference in the use of *we* is inter-disciplinarily significant (statistically) at two levels HS vs NS (LL 12.37) and SS vs. NS (LL 14.63), and not significant (statistically) at one level –HS vs SS (LL 0.02). The statistically significant relations suggest that disciplinary variation really influences

the use of *we*-forms in classroom lectures. Meanwhile, the difference between HS and SS is not significant (statistically) as the LL score (0.02) is substantially below the significance threshold (3.84). This implies that the observed difference may be due to chance. Arguably, this may stem from the fact that both areas share a common subject matter –largely related to humans (Hyland, 2002a). Again, this slightly supports the view that they both share similar characteristics of *softness* (Hyland, 2009).

Table 6: Inter-DS log-likelihood values for *we*

DS	Log-likelihood value	Significance level: LL 3.84
HS vs SS	0.02	Not significant
HS vs NS	12.37	Significant
SS vs NS	14.63	Significant

A log-likelihood greater than 3.84 indicates a p-value less than 0.05.

NS lectures' frequent use of *we*-forms more than HS and SS concurs with previous studies. It affirms Yeo and Ting's (2014), and Plaza and Álvarez's (2013) studies where NS (Science) employed more *we* than Arts, HS, and SS. The finding from the meta-analysis appears to reinforce the collectivist, objectivist, and positivist tag accorded NS (Hyland, 2009; Plaza & Álvarez, 2013).

3.2.3. Frequency distribution of *you* across DSs

We find that there is a marked difference of *you* use across the DSs, as shown in Figure 4. Yaakob (2013: 183) has remarked that “the use of ‘*you*’ suggests that the power-distance between lecturer and student is softened”. The management of power relations between lecturers and students realized through the diversity and frequency of pronominal choices in lectures is informed by different disciplinary norms, conventions and epistemologies.

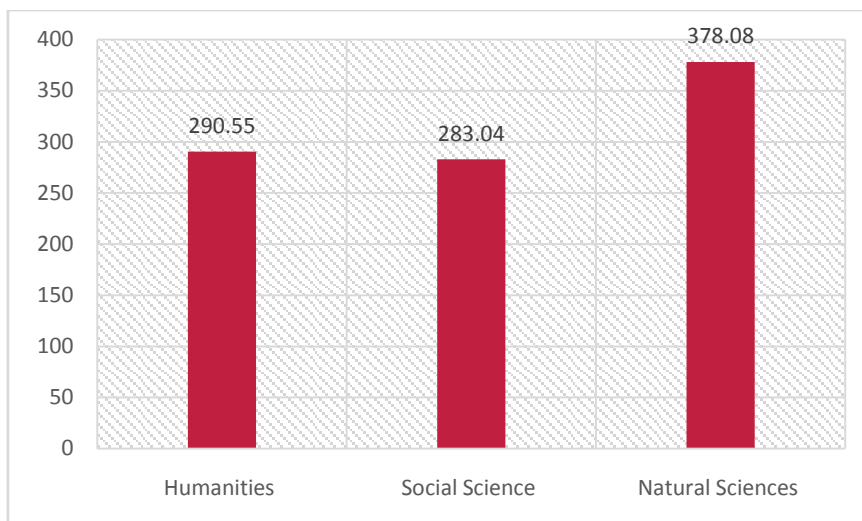


Figure 4: Normed frequency of *you* across DSs

The prevalence of *you* in NS corpus shows that NS lectures (rather than HS and SS ones) are more student-centred since *you* is described as an audience-oriented pronoun (Ädel, 2010). It also suggests that NS lectures have a higher degree of interactivity than the two others since *you* is a key interactive resource (Hyland, 2005). Hyland (2005: 182) argued that “*you* and *your* are actually the clearest way a writer can acknowledge the reader’s presence...”. We can thus conclude that NS lecturers, more than their HS and SS counterparts explicitly recognize the presence of students in their lectures. The discussion can further be facilitated by drawing on the language typology model by Hinds (1987) who divides languages broadly into writer-responsible and reader-responsible languages. The basis of the distinction is the degree of audience’s involvement in discourse. We can, therefore, adapt this in this context and talk about *lecturer-responsible* and *student-responsible lectures*. This is done based on how students’ involvement in lectures is realized through the use of student-oriented *you*-forms. From Table 4 and Figure 4, we notice that NS lectures appear more student-responsible than their other two counterparts.

NS, for years, has been perceived as a content-focused knowledge domain, unlike SS and more particularly HS (Hyland, 2002a, 2009). It is said to be interested in “objectivist accounts of communication” (Lischinsky, 2008: 128) which delights in what is said and not how it is said (Hyland, 2000). The present finding, contrary to this position, has revealed that compared to HS and SS, NS is more interested in their co-discourse participants, the students. It, therefore, suggests that the NS is becoming more ‘humanised’, thereby recognizing their audience as a possible way of changing the tag associated with impersonality and facelessness (Hyland, 2005). The predominant use of *you*, therefore, in NS can be described as a kind of register-shift (Biber & Conrad, 2009). The NS’s preference for *you* more than their HS and SS counterparts supports Yeo and Ting (2014) but differ from Plaza and Álvarez (2013). While SS was found by Plaza and Álvarez to favour the use of *you*, Yeo and Ting (2014) discovered that Science used more *you*.

On the other hand, HS follows NS in terms of the use of *you*. This implies that HS used more *you*-forms than SS did. The current finding contrasts with Plaza and Álvarez (2013) who realized that SS used more *you* than HS employed. The difference in the findings in the two studies can be attributed to the fact that the corpora for the two studies are from L1 and L2 lecturers, a factor which has been found to be responsible for differences in personal pronouns use in lectures (Friginal et al. 2017; Rounds, 1987a & b).

It is interesting to note Table 7 that while the significance test reinforces the observed differences between HS and NS, and SS and SS, it presents an opposite picture on HS vs SS.

Table 7: Inter-DS log-likelihood values for *you*

DS	Log-likelihood value	Significance level: LL 3.84
HS vs SS	0.39	Not significant
HS vs NS	40.94	Significant
SS vs NS	53.39	Significant

A log-likelihood greater than 3.84 indicates a p-value less than 0.05.

The LL values for HS and NS (40.94), and SS and NS (53.39) overwhelmingly exceed the LL 3.84, the statistical significance threshold. These reveal that disciplinarity affects the use of *you* forms in classroom lectures at two independent levels.

4. Conclusion

The paper investigated the use of *I*, *we* and *you* (tri-PP) in Humanity (HS), Social (SS) and Natural (NS) Sciences university lectures. The overall and individual frequencies revealed variations in the use of the tri-PP across the three broad disciplinary knowledge domains. In all, the tri-PP were more frequently, holistically, in NS than in HS and SS. This suggests a higher pronominal density in NS lectures than the HS and SS ones. On the other hand, the frequencies of *I*, *we* and *you* were greater in NS than in HS and SS. This also indicates that interactivity is more profound in NS lectures compared to HS and SS. It is really surprising to find the positivist domain preferring more use of pronouns than HS and SS that lean more towards the constructivist paradigm.

NS's overwhelming use of tri-PP as part of its lecture language calls for a critical consideration. This finding is surprising, considering that Natural Science has been tagged to be impersonal and detached in its discourses (Hyland, 2005). The current finding has a number of implications. First, it strongly supports Mason and Pennington's (2009) admonition against people's reliance on advice offered in writing/style guides and textbooks on the nature of discourses in the broad disciplines with respect to author (in)visibility enacted through the use or otherwise of personal pronouns. The current finding is, therefore, a potential indicator of register shift of the NS towards a more personalized discourse. The suggested 'evolution' of NS towards a more 'pronominalised register' is an attempt to project the NS as a more human-friendly knowledge domain. Oliveira (2010: 106) noted that Natural Scientists "...employ personal pronouns to position themselves socially in relation to their students" more than their other counterparts in the HS and the SS. It further indicates that Natural Scientists are no longer "neutral observers of the world" (Hart, 1998: 83) – a view in line with the tenets of positivism (Hart, 1998).

It has been established that disciplinarity affects the rhetorical choices in spoken genres in the academy (Biber, 2006). Students who are socialized into disciplinary discourse communities from the undergraduate level have little or no appreciation of this reality. Therefore, a study of this nature is useful to such students who are being socialized into their respective DSs. Among other things, pronominal choices in terms of diversity and frequency help reveal the extent to which disciplinary norms, conventions and epistemologies affect communications from disciplinary perspectives. While lecturers draw on interactive and interactional rhetorical choice to engage their students, personal pronouns particularly *I*, *we* and *you* play a crucial role in this kind of discourse-internal interaction.

Moreover the study is of significant use to both content and language lecturers who provide different epistemic information to students. Content and language lecturers will appreciate the effect of their disciplinary orientation on the choice of pronominal resources in their engagement with students. Besides, it will highlight the key role personal pronouns play in spoken academic lectures. The study will also advance the scholarship on interaction in discourse in the field of English for Spoken Academic Purposes. Over the years, typologies of academic

disciplines have been grounded on written genres. This study makes a significant contribution to the move towards classifying disciplines based on spoken genres. It is, therefore, recommended that other studies can explore issues such as discourse functions of the tri-PP in lectures to further reveal the effect of disciplinarity on the pragmatics of personal pronouns.

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