Writing, Scholarly Identity, and Caution in Applied Linguistics Research Articles: A Discourse Analysis Approach

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Abstract

This study investigates how personal pronouns and modal verbs construct scholarly identity and epistemic caution in Applied Linguistics research articles. Drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis, ten purposively selected articles were analyzed through qualitative corpus-informed discourse analysis. Findings reveal a disciplinary preference for collective self-reference and epistemic modality, reflecting a norm of "controlled confidence" authority enacted through restraint rather than assertion. The study contributes theoretically by integrating SFL and CDA, empirically by documenting discipline-specific identity practices, and methodologically by demonstrating a replicable analytical framework extendable to other lexico-grammatical features in academic discourse.

Keywords: Scholarly identity; Academic writing; Personal pronouns; Modal verbs; Discourse Analysis.

1. Introduction

Academic writing is not only a neutral vehicle for relaying research findings; it is a site where identity, authority, and epistemic standing are discursively produced. Scholars do not merely convey knowledge; they actively place themselves within academic communities through deliberate linguistic choices. As Hyland (2005) argues, academic discourse is intrinsically interpersonal, requiring negotiation between writers and readers within socially placed situations.

In research papers, writers must balance two essential dimensions: confidence and prudence. They are supposed to portray their findings as important advances in knowledge, on the one hand. However, they must exhibit epistemic responsibility and refrain from exaggerating assertions. This balance is especially vital in Applied Linguistics, a discipline defined by interpretative, context dependent investigation. Previous studies have investigated position, hedging, and meta discourse in scholarly writing (Hyland, 2002; Myers, 1989). However, the way certain grammatical elements,

including modal verbs and personal pronouns, cooperate at the micro-linguistic level to create academic confidence and scholarly identity has received less attention. This study addresses this gap by investigating two research questions:

1. How are personal pronouns used in Applied Linguistics research articles?
2. How do personal pronouns and modal verbs contribute to scholarly identity and epistemic caution in Applied Linguistics research articles?

In addressing these questions, this study makes three contributions to the field of applied linguistics. Theoretically, it advances the integration of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis as a unified analytical lens for examining academic discourse, demonstrating how interpersonal meta function analysis can be enriched by ideological interpretation to reveal disciplinary meaning-making. Empirically, it provides original evidence of how scholars in applied linguistics deploy personal pronouns and modal verbs to negotiate epistemic caution and construct scholarly identity, a specific disciplinary context that remains underexplored in the academic discourse literature. Methodologically, it proposes and demonstrates a qualitative corpus-informed framework, offering a transferable model for future research on lexico-grammatical features in academic writing.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Scholarly Identity in Academic Writing

Scholarly identity in academic writing has been widely theorized as a discursive achievement rather than a fixed personal attribute. Hyland (2002; 2005) provides the foundational framework for this view, arguing that writers construct identity through stance-taking and interactional meta discourse, positioning themselves epistemically while simultaneously engaging readers as participants in knowledge creation. This dual function, at once epistemic and social, means that academic writing is never merely informational; it is always an act of identity negotiation.

However, Hyland's framework, while influential, has been criticized for overemphasizing writerly intention at the expense of disciplinary constraint (Burgess & Cargill, 2013). Identity in academic writing is not freely chosen but is shaped by genre conventions, institutional expectations, and power relations, dimensions that SFL and CDA are better equipped to address than meta discourse theory alone. More recent corpus-based studies (Kapranov, 2022; Liu, 2018; Yang, 2018) have moved toward examining how specific lexico-grammatical resources, particularly pronouns and modal verbs, realize identity construction in context-specific ways. Yet these studies tend to treat pronouns and modality as separate phenomena, leaving underexplored the question of how they interact systemically to construct scholarly identity and epistemic caution simultaneously. This is the precise gap the present study addresses.

2.2. Personal Pronouns and Authorial Presence

First-person pronouns are among the most extensively studied markers of authorial presence in academic discourse. Hyland (2002) demonstrates that pronoun choice reflects both identity construction and disciplinary norms, with "we" functioning to distribute agency and align the author with a research community, while "I" foregrounds individual subjectivity and authorial accountability. House (2008) similarly identifies a tension between these two forms, arguing that in disciplines where community-oriented knowledge production is privileged, "we" operates as a socially sanctioned alternative that allows writers to maintain credibility without appearing excessively individualistic.

While these accounts are valuable, they share a common limitation: they treat pronoun use primarily as a matter of rhetorical choice rather than as a systemic resource within a functional grammar. Neither Hyland (2002) nor House (2008) situates pronoun use within SFL's interpersonal meta function, which would allow for a more systematic account of how pronouns realize social roles and relationships in text. Furthermore, most existing studies draw on broad disciplinary corpora, leaving the specific patterns of pronoun use within Applied Linguistics research articles, a discipline with its own epistemological conventions, insufficiently documented. The present study addresses this by examining pronoun use specifically within Applied Linguistics, interpreted through an SFL lens.

2.3. Modality and Epistemic Caution

Modal verbs have long been recognized as central tools of epistemic stance in academic discourse. Within Halliday's (2014) SFL framework, modality belongs to the interpersonal meta function, encoding degrees of probability, usuality, and obligation, resources through which writers calibrate their commitment to propositions. Coates (2015) further distinguishes epistemic modality as expressions of probability and possibility, noting that these forms position writers along a continuum of confidence and tentativeness that is particularly consequential in research discourse, where overclaiming risks credibility.

Empirical studies have confirmed the pervasiveness of modal hedging in academic writing. Myers (1989) established early on that hedging strategies do not weaken arguments but rather enhance scholarly credibility by signaling awareness of limitations. Building on this, Yang (2018) demonstrates through functional analysis of research article abstracts that epistemic modals are systematically deployed to manage writer-reader relations, while Liu (2018) provides corpus-based evidence that modal verbs constitute the most frequent hedging device in Applied Linguistics research articles specifically.

Taken together, these findings establish that epistemic modality is a defining feature of academic discourse. However, two significant gaps remain. First, most studies treat modality in isolation from other interpersonal resources such as personal

pronouns, despite the fact that these resources co-occur and interact in actual texts. Second, the ideological dimensions of modal choices what they reveal about disciplinary power, authority, and knowledge validation, have received limited attention, particularly within Applied Linguistics as a discipline. By integrating SFL interpersonal analysis with CDA's ideological interpretation, the present study offers a more complete account of how epistemic caution and scholarly identity are co-constructed through the simultaneous deployment of pronouns and modal verbs in Applied Linguistics research articles.

Modality is broadly categorized into two types relevant to academic discourse. Epistemic modality, realized through modal verbs such as may, might, can, and could, expresses degrees of probability, possibility, and certainty, enabling writers to calibrate the strength of their knowledge claims (Coates, 2015; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Deontic modality, by contrast, realized through must and should, encodes obligation, necessity, and recommendation, directing action rather than expressing epistemic commitment (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). While epistemic modality dominates academic discourse as a hedging resource, deontic modality plays a more selective role, appearing primarily in methodological justification and pedagogical recommendation. Understanding this distinction is essential for analyzing how writers negotiate authority and epistemic responsibility across different rhetorical sections of the research article.

3. Methodology

3.1. Corpus

The corpus consists of 10 published research articles drawn from peer-reviewed applied linguistics journals. Articles were selected based on the following criteria: (1) genre conformity, all texts are full empirical research articles following canonical IMRD structure; (2) disciplinary focus, all articles are situated within applied linguistics, the field under investigation; and (3) accessibility and authenticity, only articles available in their complete published form were included. This purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) ensured that selected texts were maximally relevant to the analytical focus on scholarly identity and epistemic caution. Consistent with SFL-based discourse analysis, corpus size was determined by analytical depth rather than statistical representativeness. As Eggins (2004) and Martin & Rose (2007) emphasize, SFL analysis requires close, multi-layered examination of lexico-grammatical patterns, making a focused corpus of 10 texts methodologically appropriate and sufficient to identify systemic meaning-making patterns across the data.

The table below shows how articles were coded, journal names, and year of publication:

Table 1: Articles' Information

Code	Author(s)	Journal	Year
A1	Liu & Hu	Springer	2024
A2	Wang, Tseng & Johanson	SAGE Open	2021

A3	Naqvi, Afzaal & Qiang	Frontiers in Psychology	2023
A4	Aryadoust, Zakaria, Lim & Chen	Frontiers in Psychology	2020
A5	Amini Farasani & Jamali	Springer	2024
A6	Meihami & Esfandiari	Springer	2024
A7	Hyland	Written Communication	2010
A8	Pho	Discourse Studies	2008
A9	Molino	Journal of English for Academic Purposes	2010
A10	Suntara & Usaha	English Language Teaching	2013

3.2. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative discourse analysis design grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics. Rather than pursuing statistical generalization, the study aims for analytical depth, examining how personal pronouns and modal verbs function as interpersonal resources in Applied Linguistics research articles. Basic descriptive counts are employed as orientating observations to identify broad distributional tendencies across the corpus; however, the primary analytical emphasis lies in the functional and ideological interpretation of these patterns. This approach is consistent with qualitative corpus-informed discourse analysis, where quantification serves to support rather than replace interpretive analysis (Partington, 2010; Dörnyei, 2007).

3.3. Analytical Framework

This study adopts Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as its theoretical framework. Developed by M. A. K. Halliday, SFL conceptualizes language not as a system of abstract rules but as a resource for meaning-making in social contexts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). From this perspective, linguistic choices are functional: they are shaped by the communicative purposes and social relationships embedded in discourse.

The ideational, interpersonal, and textual meta functions that language simultaneously fulfills are fundamental to SFL. The ideational meta function is concerned with representing experience and constructing logical relationships. Textual meta functions arrange discourse into coherent and cohesive statements. The interpersonal meta function, which is the focus of the present study, enacts social relationships and expresses speakers' or writers' attitudes, judgments, and degrees of commitment. The interpersonal meta function is especially important in academic discourse since research writing is fundamentally dialogic. Although research articles appear to be neutral, writers and readers negotiate the validity, importance, and interpretation of knowledge claims.

Through linguistic choices, writers position themselves in relation to their audience, their discipline, and the propositions they advance. Within the interpersonal

meta function, modality plays a central role. Modality expresses degrees of probability, usuality, obligation, or inclination (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In academic writing, epistemic modality, realized through modal verbs such as may, might, can, and could, allows authors to calibrate the strength of their claims. Rather than presenting discoveries as absolute facts, writers frequently describe them as plausible, preliminary, or context-dependent. This modulation of assurance indicates epistemic responsibility and adherence to disciplinary rules.

Personal pronouns also function as interpersonal resources. First-person pronouns, particularly "I" and "we," signal authorial presence and responsibility. However, their use is not merely grammatical; it is socially meaningful. The choice between singular and plural forms reflects how writers construct identity and negotiate authority. The collective "we" may index collaboration, institutional affiliation, or alignment with a disciplinary community, whereas the singular "I" foregrounds individual agency. The absence of first-person pronouns may similarly signal a strategy of authorial invisibility. This study examines personal pronouns and modal verbs as functional resources rather than independent grammatical forms since they are embedded in the interpersonal meta function. Their value resides not only in their frequency, but also in the interpersonal messages they convey. Using these tools, writers create a scholarly persona defined by trustworthiness, caution, and academic alignment.

As a result, SFL offers a suitable analytical framework for investigating the ways in which linguistic characteristics support academic confidence and scholarly identity. It makes it possible qualitative corpus-informed framework.

3.4. Coding Procedure

Target items, personal pronouns (I, we, our, my) and modal verbs (may, might, can, could, will, would, should, must), were identified through careful manual reading of all 10 articles. ATLAS.ti was used as a qualitative data management tool to tag, organize, and retrieve coded instances systematically, enabling structured comparison across texts. Each modal verb instance was categorized according to a two-level typology grounded in Halliday (2014) and Coates (2015): epistemic modality, expressing degrees of probability and possibility (may, might, could, can); and deontic modality, expressing obligation or recommendation (must, should). Personal pronouns were coded for form (singular I vs. collective we) and rhetorical section (Introduction, Methodology, Results, Discussion). Analytical decisions were guided by established SFL categories and cross-checked against published discourse analyses of academic writing to ensure interpretive consistency.

4. Findings

4.1. Personal Pronouns

Across the corpus, first-person pronoun use revealed a clear and systematic disciplinary pattern. Six of the ten articles 60% employed the collective pronoun "we" as their dominant self-reference strategy, one article 10% used the singular "I", and three articles 30% avoided first-person pronouns entirely. Rather than constituting quantitative findings in a statistical sense, these distributional observations provide the backdrop for the functional analysis that follows, consistent with the qualitatively-oriented design of this study.

4.1.1. Functional Distribution Across Sections

The pronoun "we" was not uniformly distributed across the articles but performed distinct interpersonal functions depending on the rhetorical section in which it appeared. In Introduction sections, "we" typically served to establish research agency and signal authorial commitment to the study's aims, as in constructions such as "we aimed to track the (un)changing research foci and methodological orientations" (A1: Liu & Hu, 2024). In Methodology sections, it constructed procedural authority, positioning the authors as competent and systematic agents of the research process, as in "we utilized keyword analysis to depict research trends and frontiers in light of methodological orientations" (A5: Farsani & Jamali, 2024). In Results sections, "we" guided the reader's interpretive attention, as in "we identified the most represented research topics and frontiers" (A6), while in Discussion sections it projected evaluative stance and argumentative authority, as in "we argue that the role of the venue as an external characteristic of context is underestimated in the political discourse research" (A10: Suntara & Usaha, 2013).

This section-specific functional variation demonstrates that "we" is not a stylistic habit or a grammatical default but a strategically deployed interpersonal resource whose meaning shifts according to the communicative purpose of each rhetorical stage. The singular "I" appeared in only one article and was confined to moments of explicit individual positioning, such as stating a personal interpretive stance. The three articles that avoided first-person pronouns entirely relied on passive constructions and nominalization to maintain authorial presence while erasing visible agency, a strategy of what may be termed deliberate authorial invisibility, itself a meaningful identity choice.

4.1.2. SFL Perspective

Within Halliday's interpersonal meta function, personal pronouns function as resources for enacting social roles and relationships in text. The corpus data shows that "we" operated primarily in two process types. As Actor in material processes, it constructed the research team as active methodological agents: "we analyzed 7602 articles with over 198,000 unique references published between 2017 and 2021 in 42 SSCI-indexed applied linguistics journals" (A1: Liu & Hu, 2024). As Senser in mental processes, it positioned authors as reflective interpretive authorities: "I attempt to show

how corpus techniques might inform our study of identity construction" (A7: Hyland, 2010).

This dual positioning is interpersonally significant. By occupying both the role of doer and thinker, the collective "we" constructs a scholarly persona that is simultaneously active, accountable, and epistemically engaged a carefully calibrated identity that projects disciplinary competence without asserting individual dominance.

4.2. Modal Verbs

4.2.1. Epistemic Modality: Hedging Knowledge Claims

Epistemic modal verbs dominated the corpus, with may, can, and could appearing as the most frequent forms across all ten articles. These modals served three primary and distinguishable functions in the data.

- The first function was claiming mitigation, softening the assertive force of interpretive statements to signal analytical tentativeness. This was most evident in Discussion sections, where writers introduced interpretations cautiously rather than declaratively: "the findings may have some implications for enhancing communication" (A10: Suntara & Usaha, 2013).
- The second function was possibility framing and presenting findings as plausible tendencies rather than established facts: "this preference may be attributed to the fact that writers tried to stay as objective as possible when they presented the methods of their studies" (A10: Suntara & Usaha, 2013).
- The third function was cautious generalization, extending findings tentatively beyond the immediate data while signaling awareness of the limits of generalizability: "the knowledge gained by this study can increase awareness of academic writing norms (A10: Suntara & Usaha, 2013). Together these three functions reveal that epistemic modality in Applied Linguistics research articles does not signal weakness or uncertainty but rather enacts what the discipline recognizes as responsible knowledge construction.

4.2.2. Deontic Modality: Directing Action and Justifying Procedure

Although considerably less frequent than epistemic forms, deontic modals must and should appeared in specific and functionally predictable locations. In Methodology sections, should was deployed to justify procedural necessity and signal methodological rigor: "it is suggested that future ILP studies should pay more attention to details" (A10: Suntara & Usaha, 2013). In Discussion and Implications sections, should carried recommendatory force, directing future researchers or practitioners toward specific courses of action: "the rhetorical structure and some linguistic features of research article abstracts should be incorporated into academic writing courses for graduate and postgraduate students" (A10: Suntara & Usaha, 2013).

4.3. The Interaction Between Pronouns and Modal Verbs

The most analytically significant pattern emerging from the corpus is the systematic co-occurrence of collective first-person pronouns and epistemic modal verbs at precisely the moments of highest interpretive stakes, the presentation of claims, the drawing of conclusions, and the advancement of arguments. Constructions combining "we" with epistemic modals such as (A4: *"we have provided...)* and (A2: *"we consulted three information science professors..."*) appeared consistently across the corpus, concentrated in Results and Discussion sections.

This co-occurrence is not incidental. Functionally, it produces a layered stance structure in which the two resources perform complementary interpersonal work: "we" asserts collective agency and establishes the authors as responsible knowledge producers, while the epistemic modal simultaneously moderates the strength of the claim being advanced. The result is a discourse that is authoritative yet non-imposing, what this study terms “controlled confidence”. This concept describes a scholarly voice that enacts disciplinary identity not through categorical assertion but through the strategic balance of agency and epistemic restraint.

This interaction finding directly demonstrates that pronouns and modal verbs function not as independent grammatical choices but as an integrated interpersonal system for constructing scholarly identity in Applied Linguistics discourse.

5. Discussion

5.1. Constructing Collective Identity

The overwhelming preference for "we" across the corpus extends and refines Hyland's (2002; 2005) foundational account of authorial stance in academic discourse. Hyland argues that pronoun choice enacts disciplinary identity negotiation; the present findings support this claim while adding a more specific observation: in Applied Linguistics, collective self-reference has become so conventionalized that it appears even in single-authored texts. The case of A7 (Hyland, 2010) is particularly revealing in this regard, a single-authored article in which the writer shifts between "I" and "we," suggesting that even an established scholar navigates a tension between individual voice and community alignment. This implies that "we" in Applied Linguistics research writing functions less as a marker of literal plurality and more as an index of disciplinary membership.

This finding sits in productive tension with House (2008), who argues that collective pronouns distribute agency and align writers with broader research communities. While this account is largely confirmed by the corpus data, the three articles that avoided first-person pronouns entirely complicate the picture. Their reliance on passive constructions and nominalization represents an alternative identity strategy, one that constructs authority through apparent objectivity rather than through visible agency. This variation within a single disciplinary corpus suggests that scholarly identity in Applied Linguistics is not monolithic but is negotiated differently depending on epistemological tradition and methodological orientation.

From a CDA perspective, the systematic suppression of singular "I" in favor of collective or impersonal forms is ideologically significant. It reflects and reproduces a disciplinary ideology in which credibility is constructed through community affiliation rather than individual expertise framing knowledge as socially produced and collectively validated. As Fairclough (1992) argues, such naturalized discursive conventions are among the most powerful mechanisms through which institutional power is maintained. The choice of pronoun is therefore never merely grammatical; it is a site of disciplinary power and identity reproduction.

5.2. Epistemic Modality as Disciplinary Epistemology

The predominance of epistemic modals across the corpus confirms the findings of Liu (2018) and Yang (2018), both of whom identify modal verbs as central hedging devices in Applied Linguistics academic writing. However, the present study goes beyond a purely rhetorical account of hedging. Where Hyland (2005) frames epistemic modality primarily as a face-saving strategy, a way of protecting writers from criticism by softening claims the SFL-CDA perspective adopted here suggests something deeper: that epistemic modality in Applied Linguistics reflects a disciplinary epistemology in which knowledge claims are inherently provisional, contextually situated, and open to revision.

This distinction is analytically important. A rhetorical account treats hedging as strategic self-protection. An epistemological account treats it as a genuine reflection of how Applied Linguistics as an interpretive discipline understands the nature of knowledge itself. The corpus data supports the latter interpretation: writers do not hedge selectively when threatened but consistently across all rhetorical sections, suggesting that epistemic caution is internalized as a disciplinary value rather than deployed tactically.

The behavior of deontic modality further supports this reading. The confinement of *must* and *should* to Methodology and Implications sections and their near-total absence from Results and Discussion reveals a sophisticated genre awareness. Applied Linguistics writers permit themselves directive authority only in procedural justification and pedagogical recommendation, not in the interpretation of findings. This section-specific modal distribution is not accidental; it reflects a deeply internalized understanding of where different kinds of authority are disciplinarily legitimate.

5.3. Controlled Confidence as Discursive Identity

The central analytical finding of this study is the systematic co-occurrence of collective pronouns and epistemic modal verbs at moments of highest interpretive stakes. This interaction produces what this study terms “controlled confidence”, a scholarly voice that simultaneously asserts agency and moderates epistemic

commitment, projecting disciplinary competence through restraint rather than through categorical assertion.

This concept makes two contributions to existing literature. First, it moves beyond studies that treat pronouns and modality as independent phenomena, demonstrating that their interpersonal meanings are co-constructed in actual discourse. Liu (2018) examines modality in isolation; Hyland (2002) focuses primarily on pronouns and meta discourse. The present study shows that separating these resources analytically risks missing the most significant interpersonal dynamic in the data, the way they work together to produce a coherent and disciplinarily recognizable scholarly voice.

Second, controlled confidence provides an empirically grounded characterization of disciplinary identity specific to Applied Linguistics, a field whose epistemic norms have received less systematic attention than those of hard sciences or medical discourse, which dominate the academic writing literature. The finding that Applied Linguistics scholars construct authority through moderation rather than assertion suggests a discipline that values interpretive humility as a mark of scholarly sophistication, a norm that has significant implications for how novice researchers in this field learn to write.

From a CDA perspective, controlled confidence is not merely a stylistic tendency but a form of disciplinary subjectivity. It describes a way of being a scholar that writers learn, internalize, and reproduce through repeated participation in the genre. Scholarly identity in Applied Linguistics is therefore neither individually expressed nor freely constructed; it is discursively constituted through the lexico-grammatical patterns this study has examined, shaped by disciplinary power relations and community expectations that operate largely below the level of conscious authorial choice.

5.4. Addressing the Research Questions

The first research question asked how personal pronouns are used in Applied Linguistics research articles. The findings demonstrate that pronoun use is systematically patterned and functionally motivated rather than arbitrary. The collective "we" dominates the corpus, performing distinct interpersonal roles across rhetorical sections establishing research agency in Introductions, constructing procedural authority in Methodology sections, guiding interpretation in Results, and projecting evaluative stance in Discussions. The near-absence of singular "I" and the presence of pronoun-free articles further indicate that Applied Linguistics writers navigate a disciplinary expectation of collective or impersonal positioning, within which individual variation remains possible but is constrained by genre convention and community norms.

The second research question examined how personal pronouns and modal verbs contribute to scholarly identity and epistemic caution. The analysis demonstrates that identity construction in Applied Linguistics emerges not from either resource alone but

from their systematic interaction. Collective pronouns establish agency and signal community membership; epistemic modal verbs regulate the degree of commitment to knowledge claims. Together they produce controlled confidence, that is; an authoritative yet epistemically restrained scholarly voice that enacts disciplinary identity through strategic balance. Scholarly confidence in Applied Linguistics is therefore not realized through declarative certainty but through disciplined, community-oriented, and epistemically responsible positioning, a discursive achievement reproduced across the corpus with remarkable consistency.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how personal pronouns and modal verbs function as interpersonal resources in Applied Linguistics research articles, and how their deployment contributes to the discursive construction of scholarly identity and epistemic caution. Drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics as the primary analytical framework and informed by Critical Discourse Analysis, the study examined ten purposively selected research articles through close functional interpretation of lexico-grammatical patterns.

The findings reveal that linguistic choices in Applied Linguistics academic writing are systematic, functionally motivated, and ideologically meaningful. The dominant preference for the collective pronoun "we" appearing across all rhetorical sections and even in single-authored texts reflects a disciplinary norm that constructs credibility through community alignment rather than individual assertion. The near-total absence of singular "I" and the presence of pronoun-free articles further suggest that authorial identity in this field is negotiated within tightly bounded genre conventions that constrain individual expression while enabling disciplinary belonging.

Modal verb analysis demonstrated that epistemic modality, particularly *may*, *can*, and *could* dominates the corpus, realizing three core functions: claim mitigation, possibility framing, and cautious generalization. Deontic modals, by contrast, were confined to procedural and recommendatory contexts, revealing a sophisticated and internalized genre awareness among Applied Linguistics writers. The systematic co-occurrence of collective pronouns and epistemic modals at moments of highest interpretive stakes produced what this study terms “controlled confidence” an authoritative yet epistemically restrained scholarly voice that enacts disciplinary identity through strategic balance rather than categorical assertion.

These findings make three contributions to the field. Theoretically, they advance the integration of SFL and CDA as a unified analytical lens capable of revealing how micro-level grammatical choices realize macro-level disciplinary ideologies. Empirically, they provide original evidence of how Applied Linguistics scholars specifically negotiate epistemic caution and scholarly identity, a disciplinary context underexplored in the academic writing literature. Methodologically, they demonstrate

a replicable qualitative framework for corpus-informed discourse analysis that can be extended to other lexico-grammatical features and disciplinary contexts.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing understanding that scholarly identity is not a property writers bring to texts but a discursive achievement they enact through it, shaped by disciplinary power, genre convention, and the interpersonal resources of language itself.

7. Research Implications

The integration of SFL and CDA proves more analytically powerful than either framework alone, with SFL providing grammatical precision and CDA revealing ideological meaning. The concept of *controlled confidence* contributes a new lens for understanding hedging as disciplinary competence rather than weakness.

The findings suggest that EAP instruction must move beyond rhetorical structure to explicitly address stance and epistemic positioning. Students should understand how "we" shifts function across sections and how epistemic modals signal analytical sophistication rather than uncertainty.

The qualitative corpus-informed approach demonstrated here, combining systematic tagging with SFL functional interpretation, offers a rigorous and replicable model extendable to other interpersonal resources such as hedges, boosters, and reporting verbs.

8. Recommendations for Further Research

The present study opens several productive avenues for future investigation. First, and most directly, future research could expand the corpus in both size and diversity. While the focused corpus of ten articles was appropriate for the depth of analysis pursued here, a larger dataset would allow for more robust cross-article comparison and stronger claims about disciplinary patterns. Including articles from a wider range of Applied Linguistics sub-fields, such as second language acquisition, language policy, or language testing would also help determine whether the patterns of controlled confidence identified here are field-wide or concentrated in particular research traditions.

Second, comparative cross-disciplinary studies would illuminate whether the interactional identity strategies documented here are specific to Applied Linguistics or shared across interpretive social science disciplines. Comparing Applied Linguistics with harder sciences such as biology or engineering, where epistemic norms differ substantially, would contribute to a more differentiated understanding of how disciplinary epistemology shapes lexico-grammatical choices in academic writing.

Third, cross-cultural and cross-linguistic investigations would add an important dimension absent from the present study. All ten articles analyzed here were published in English-medium international journals, raising the question of whether scholars writing from different linguistic and educational backgrounds employ similar stance

strategies, or whether L1 rhetorical norms influence their construction of scholarly identity in English-medium publications. Such research would have significant implications for both academic writing theory and pedagogy.

Fourth, future studies could extend the analytical scope beyond pronouns and modal verbs to examine a fuller range of interpersonal resources including attitude markers, engagement markers, boosters, and reporting verb choices in order to construct a more comprehensive model of scholarly identity construction in Applied Linguistics. The concept of controlled confidence developed here could serve as a theoretical anchor for such investigations, tested and refined against a broader evidential base.

Finally, longitudinal studies tracking changes in pronoun and modality patterns across decades of Applied Linguistics publishing would shed light on whether disciplinary identity norms are stable or evolving in response to broader shifts in academic publishing culture, open science movements, and changing expectations around authorial transparency and positionality.

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Appendix

Corpus of Analyzed Articles

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