



Analyzing Subjectivity in University Students' Spoken Discourse

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Article History

Received
16-06-2025

Accepted
18-07-2025

Published
20-07-2025

Abstract & Indexing

 WORLD of JOURNALS

 Crossref 



ACADEMIA



Abstract

Subjectivity, defined as the presence of personal bias or emotional inclination, often undermines the objectivity required in academic settings. While extensive research has examined subjectivity in written communication, the subjective nature of oral discourse among university students remains an underexplored area. This study investigates the manifestations of subjectivity in the oral discourse of university students through textual analysis of interview data. Grounded in Émile Benveniste's theory of subjectivity which posits that language is inherently shaped by the speaker's perspective this research also adopts Alan McKee's framework for textual analysis to identify linguistic markers of subjectivity. The analysis reveals a prevalent use of self-referential pronouns, emotionally charged vocabulary, and personalized expressions, indicating a consistent pattern of subjective language in students' spoken interactions. These findings suggest that oral discourse in academic environments is often compromised by personal biases, potentially limiting critical engagement and scholarly rigor. The study highlights the need for targeted interventions in higher education curricula to enhance students' oral communication skills, particularly by promoting objective discourse practices. Integrating structured training in rhetoric and critical speaking may help cultivate a more balanced and analytical academic culture. Moreover, this research paves the way for future studies to explore the impact of pedagogical strategies on reducing subjectivity in academic speech across various disciplines. Such inquiries may offer deeper insights into how students' spoken communication can be refined to meet the intellectual standards of higher education.

Keywords:

Subjectivity, Oral Discourse, University Students, Emile Benveniste, Textual Analysis, Academic Communication, Linguistic Bias, Higher Education, Communication Training, Objective Speech.

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Introduction

Discourse is more than just language; it is a way of thinking, talking, and acting within a social group (Gee, 1990). It includes the common ideas, values, and communication practices within a group. Academic success is significantly influenced by the interplay between subjective and objective spoken discourse. In academic settings, oral discourse plays a vital role in sharing ideas, knowledge, and perspectives, and also encourages active learning and critical thinking. But it is observed that the oral discourse among university students is plagued with huge subjectivity, and this is an indicator of great social decay in an academic environment. According to Lyons (1982), spoken discourse inherently reflects speakers' subjective perspectives, attitudes, and biases. This happens because speech is often unplanned, interactive, and shaped by personal experiences. Similarly, Emile Benveniste defined spoken discourse as the realm where the speaker's 'I' emerges and engages with others (Benveniste, 1966).

Most of the researchers have previously investigated subjectivity in written discourse. These studies have highlighted the negative impacts of subjectivity that can have on academic objectivity and accuracy in written communication (Graham & Perin, 2007). However, the exploration of subjectivity in university students' spoken discourse is an unexplored area. Since the spoken discourse is spontaneous, identifying the ways through which subjectivity appears in spoken interactions will clarify the mental processes that support students' engagement in academic discourse.

Background of the Study

Although subjectivity has been widely studied in written texts but there is limited research on its role in spoken discourse. Spoken language differs from written language because it is more interactive and spontaneous. In conversations students often use subjective language to express their thoughts and ideas. But excessive use of personal opinions without critical analysis can affect the clarity of their arguments. The purpose of examining subjectivity in spoken discourse is to understand how students use language to express themselves while maintaining academic discipline. By investigating spoken discourse, this research provides insights into the manner in which students express opinions, engage in discussions, and balance subjectivity with logical reasoning. The findings can contribute to a better understanding of students' communication strategies and the role of subjectivity in academic conversations.

Statement of the Problem

It has been observed that the oral discourse among university students is characterized by significant subjectivity, which indicates considerable social decay within the academic environment. Extensive research has been conducted to examine subjectivity in students' written work; however, the exploration of subjectivity in university students' oral conversations remains a relatively underexplored area. Consequently, the current study aims to investigate the subjectivity present in the oral discourse of university students.

Aim of the study

The study aims to investigate the subjectivity present within the spoken discourse of university-level students.

Research Objectives

- To explore the types of pronouns used in the discourse of the selected sample.
- To examine the prevalence of emotive language used in the discourse of selected sample.

Research Questions

- What type of pronouns are used in the discourse of selected sample?
- What is the prevalence of emotive language used by the discourse of selected sample?

Purpose of Study/Justification/Significance of the Research

Training sessions may be organized for various subject domains based on the needs identified through the findings of the study. Course outlines can be tailored according to departmental requirements, thereby placing additional emphasis on objective perspectives across the diverse discursive fields, in consideration of the findings. Furthermore, additional research could be conducted in light of the findings to investigate the social factors influencing the identified subjectivity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Subjectivity refers to an individual’s feelings, opinions, or preferences” that comprise a person’s identity (Siegesmund, 2008, p.2). It significantly influences interpersonal interactions and situational interpretations. In the domain of research, subjectivity is sometimes regarded as an impediment to objectivity, as it can affect researchers’ comprehension and analysis of their data. The phenomenon of subjectivity in academic writing has been extensively examined, particularly concerning the methods by which students endeavor to reconcile their personal opinions with the expectation for objectivity. Arguments within academic discourse should be grounded in empirical evidence, logical reasoning, and critical analysis, rather than subjective beliefs or emotional responses, given that academic writing is traditionally expected to uphold objectivity. Nonetheless, attaining complete objectivity poses challenges, considering that writers inherently integrate their personal viewpoints and experiences into their work; research indicates that total objectivity is elusive. This situation presents potential challenges for students who must navigate the delicate balance between articulating their opinions and adhering to academic standards. As a result, the clarity, precision, and reliability of their writing may be compromised by an excess of subjectivity.

A considerable body of research has explored the manifestation of subjectivity within students’ academic writing, despite the widespread belief that academic discourse is entirely objective. However, can this belief be regarded as accurate? Hyland (2005) presents a challenge to this assumption. He asserts that what is commonly referred to as objectivity is, in reality, intricately intertwined with the writer’s own interpretive choices, whether in the selection of sources for citation, the arrangement of arguments, or the methodology utilized in the assessment of evidence. As a result, instead of functioning merely as a transmission of facts, academic writing evolves into a realm where the author’s presence, albeit subtle, inevitably becomes apparent.

This concept is further elaborated upon by Ivanic (1998), who posits that student writing transcends mere academic exercise; it also serves as a vehicle for identity construction. In other words, what students articulate on the page reflects not only their knowledge but also their identities or, at the very least, their aspirations regarding their identities within an academic framework. Their backgrounds, experiences, and educational histories significantly influence their participation in scholarly dialogues. Furthermore, this process is often complex. Tang and John (1999) echo this sentiment by characterizing academic writing as a means of constructing an academic persona. It is not solely about the exhibition of knowledge; it also entails the performance of a self that is perceived as academically legitimate.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methods used to explore how university students use language to express thoughts, feelings, and aspects of personal identity in everyday conversations. It covers the research design, data collection and analysis processes, participant selection, and the theoretical framework.

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design. Its aim is to explore how students express their feelings and thoughts in spoken communication. Semi-structured interviews

were conducted to collect data. After the interviews, the recordings were carefully transcribed. Every word from the recordings was written down exactly as spoken.

Population and Sample Size

This study focused on university students in Pakistan, specifically those enrolled at COMSATS University Islamabad.

Sampling Technique

The study used simple random sampling to choose participants.

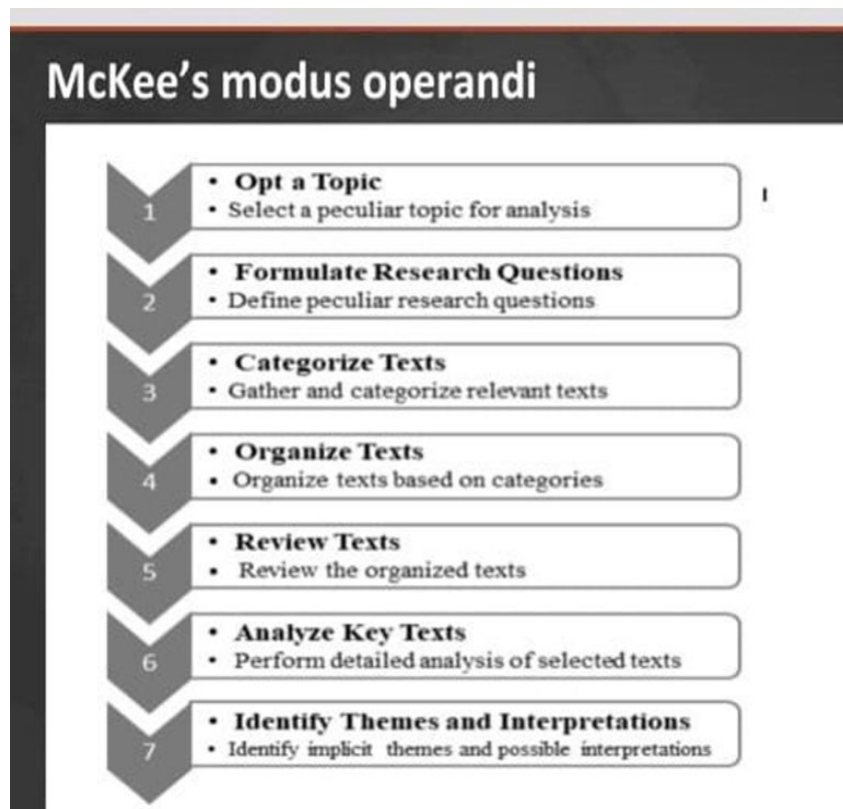
Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon Émile Benveniste's theory of subjectivity (1971), which provides a compelling framework for examining how individuals utilize language not solely for communication, but also for the construction and negotiation of their identities. For Benveniste, language is not merely a neutral conduit for conveying information; rather, it serves as the fundamental mechanism through which individuals define themselves in relation to others.

Analytical Framework

For the purposes of this analysis, the study employed McKee's textual analysis model (2003). This model offered a systematic framework to adhere to while scrutinizing the transcripts and discerning the linguistic nuances. By synthesizing McKee's methodology with Benveniste's theory, I was able to comprehensively investigate the manifestation of subjectivity in the interactions among students.

The subsequent diagram, which is included in the final draft, delineates the step-by-step application of McKee's textual analysis model throughout the research process.



ANALYSIS

The interview data focuses on the interviewees' views on co-education and its role in promoting gender equality and preparing individuals for real-world professional interactions. The participant emphasizes the benefits of co-education, particularly how it promotes confidence, mutual respect, and practical experience. This analysis critically examines the

language used by the participant, focusing on pronouns, emotive language, generalizations, and other linguistic features that reveal subjectivity.

The use of pronouns plays a central role in shaping the speaker's subjectivity. The frequent employment of first-person pronouns like "I" and "we" helps to construct both individual and collective identities. The pronouns "I" and "we" signify the speaker's personal investment and authority in the opinion expressed, highlighting the personal subjectivity inherent in the discourse.

It is shown that the interviewee predominantly used first-person pronouns ("I") and collective pronouns ("we") throughout the discourse. The use of "I" indicated a self-centered perspective, where the speaker emphasized their personal beliefs and experiences, constructing a subjective narrative centered around individual understanding. The frequent use of "we" served to create a sense of collective experience, but it also highlighted an implicit assumption that others share the same viewpoint. This consistent reliance on pronouns suggests a narrow focus on personal perspectives, reinforcing the speaker's limited scope of cognitive thinking and an absence of broader, more objective analysis.

Emotive language was prevalent throughout the discourse, with the interviewee using intensifiers like "best platform" and emotionally charged terms like "strongly support". These words amplified the emotional significance of co-education, making the argument emotionally compelling but lacking in objective grounding. The hyperbolic nature of phrases such as "co-education is the best platform" demonstrates a tendency to overstate the benefits, indicating a subjective emotional investment rather than an empirical or balanced perspective. This emphasis on emotive language reflects a decline in social and cognitive ability to engage with more objective or critical analyses, as the speaker prioritizes emotional resonance over factual argumentation.

The data shows a very subjective point of view based on personal belief and emotional involvement. For example, first-person pronouns like "I" and "my" underline the subjective quality of the conversation. Phrases such as "I suppose" and "it's my opinion" suggest the participant makes her case based on personal ideology rather than impartial argument. "I" indicates the speaker is putting herself at the center of the debate. As a result, it demonstrates that the opinion is personal and subjective. This dependence on first-person pronouns emphasises a self-centred point of view in which the speaker's emotional and subjective position overrides rational thought.

"I suppose" is a hedging statement, and hedging is one of the characteristics of academic writing. However, here it reflects that the speaker is not totally convinced of the universality of her viewpoint.

The frequent use of intensifiers such as "very good," "very positive," and "very progressive." highlights the emotive language employs by the speaker during the interview. This expressive language shows the speaker's emotional involvement in co-education. Hyperbolic language's significant dependence makes co-education seem like a perfect answer to social issues, but it ignores its practical complexity. This creates a subjective story that emphasizes emotional appeal over critical involvement of the problem.

Most of what the participant says is subjective, as first-person terms ("I" and "my") are used to describe personal thoughts and feelings. Practicing in this way means the speaker's experience anchors the argument in a personal setting. For example, "I had never spoken to a girl apart from those in my family" shows the story is subjective from the speaker's perspective. Repeating "I" and "I've become" makes the participant's change more personal.

Statements such as "honestly," "I mean," and "I don't think" are often used to caution people that the speaker does not intend to state facts, but just isn't sure. It is obvious that the person's opinion on co-education is just their understanding of the religion. When applying

hedging devices, the participant is telling the audience that they're unsure if their message will be accepted by everyone.

Participants seem to be strongly involved, as they describe classmates as "incredibly tough" and talk about wanting to "break my own mental barriers" as a result. They show that the participant developed personally and how tackling their first uncertainties touched them emotionally. How the language is written, with universal tips, underlines how arguing from experience connects with each reader on a personal level.

It is clear from the participant's statements such as "Like us, girls are simply students" and "Crossing those limits is the main problem", that they make their views appear common to everyone. Even though they lack study or rigorous analysis, these opinions are presented as obvious by their writers. In other words, it reveals that the argument simply ignores the unique ways in which co-educational experience can affect students.

According to Islamic teachings, the participant believes classroom education spaces should be separate for women and men to protect respect and honour. The analysis concentrates on subjective elements in the interview by evaluating pronouns, emotive language, general statements, and hedging methods.

The speech revolves mainly around individual beliefs as well as personal experiences. The use of first-person pronouns such as "I" and "my" places the speaker's individual perspective at the core of the argument. The speaker presents personal insights by stating "I was always an outspoken person" and "I think confidence is something that comes from within" but does not engage in objective analysis. First-person pronouns emphasize how the personal experiences of the participant direct the argument towards individual subjective perspectives. The frequent use of first-person pronouns in the discourse strengthens the subjectivity of the discourse by making the speaker's path more important than an objective assessment of co-education.

The speaker employs the hedging statements "To be honest" and "I think" because these phrases express their personal and uncertain views about confidence. This instance of hedging indicates the argument possesses a personal quality while using the academic style for discourse. Through their words the participant establishes all their comments as personal viewpoints because they understand their statements exist among diverse perspectives instead of being definitive facts.

Moreover, phrases like "I think" and "if boys and girls study together from the start", which are used as a hedging statement, indicate that the speaker is tentatively presenting the views. Hedging provides a level of nuance, letting people know that the speaker's opinion is not set in stone and subject to challenge. Still, the use of hedging also suggests a degree of subjectivity and a preference for expressing the argument with a personal belief. Therefore, these hedging phrases make the claims softer as it is recognised that the speaker takes his stand, but then claims that if co-education is introduced early, it bears a positive impact.

Throughout the discourse, the speaker utilises emotive language that includes "cultural shock" and "guilty" together with "awkward" to describe their emotional experience. The speaker's emotional state at the beginning is illustrated through the statement "I felt guilty just sitting next to a female student" yet they have grown to the point of having "normal conversations" with their female peers. The use of strong feelings within the discourse shows how the speaker grew personally, yet weakens objective reasoning due to its emphasis on feelings instead of facts or research. Subjectivity in the participant's discourse is apparent because it concerns the participant's personal experience and emotional reactions. The use of first-person pronouns like "I" and "my" places the participant's individual perspective at the forefront. For instance, "I joined this university from an all-boys school" displays how the participant underwent a personal shift himself. Therefore, His experience is based on individual experience. The frequent use of first-person pronouns in the discourse strengthens the

subjectivity of the discourse by making the speaker's path more important than an objective assessment of co-education.

The participant's use of emotive language, such as "overwhelming", "missed out", and "fear", reflects on the emotional influence of being transferred to co-educational schooling from a single gender schooling after a length of time. These terms are proof that the participant was not comfortable with the new education setting and that he had a personal challenge moving to the new environment. Emotive language used shows that the interview is subjective and not analytical, but instead based on reactions of the participant from an emotional point of view.

FINDINGS

This chapter provides an in-depth examination of the primary findings of the study and analyzes the manifestation of subjectivity in students' spoken academic discourse. The emphasis is particularly on the oral communication of university students, an aspect that, surprisingly, has not been investigated to the same extent as academic writing. By concentrating on spoken interactions, this research enters a relatively unexplored domain and contributes to our understanding of how communication transpires in academic contexts, not solely on paper, but also in real-time scenarios.

Pronoun Usage and Self-Positioning

In response to research question one, one of the most striking observations across the interviews was the frequency with which students relied on first-person pronouns, primarily "I" and "my." However, the pronoun "we" was occasionally mentioned as well. This tendency suggests an inclination to articulate academic concepts through the lens of personal experience, or at the very least, from an individual perspective. Statements such as, "I am a great supporter of co-education," or, "I used to believe that boys are naturally better at certain subjects," exemplify this inclination. Such expressions are characterized by a grounded sense of self-reflection, bordering on confessional at times.

This observation is not entirely surprising, as it resonates with the insights shared by Hyland (2002) regarding the rhetorical utilization of pronouns to construct identity and establish an authorial presence. In this regard, the students are engaging in a notably strategic action: they are asserting their position within the discourse. However, there exists an inherent risk. When personal beliefs begin to substitute for evidence, as has occasionally occurred, the distinction between opinion and argument becomes somewhat nebulous. Some students appeared to regard their viewpoints as definitive, instead of recognizing them as provisional or subject to debate.

There exists a certain push and pull in this context. On one hand, the usage of "I" renders their discourse more authentic and engaged. Conversely, it may also indicate a deficiency in exposure to or confidence with the norms of spoken academic discourse, wherein a degree of critical distance is anticipated. Achieving this balance is challenging: maintaining a personal touch without becoming excessively subjective, and exhibiting confidence without descending into absolutism.

Emotive Language and Persuasive Appeal

In response to the second research question, a significant characteristic of the data was the prevalent utilization of emotive and affective language. Terms such as "very good," "mutual respect," "confidence," and "more open-minded" were frequently observed, particularly in the descriptions of students' personal development or interpersonal experiences. One student reflected on their journey as "incredibly tough," attributing their transformation to co-education, which they claimed facilitated their ability to "break [their] own mental barriers."

At one level, these expressions convey a significant value—genuine emotional investment, which is often overlooked in discussions regarding academic competence. However, the appropriateness of this emotional investment remains uncertain. Pavlenko (2002)

argues that, while emotion is a fundamental aspect of language, it has the potential to obscure argumentation if not grounded in rigorous analysis. In this context, students often prioritized emotional resonance over evidentiary support. Their narratives were compelling and persuasive; however, they were not necessarily analytical.

Limitations of the Study

Although the study provides significant insights regarding the role of subjectivity in students' academic discourse, several limitations must be recognized.

Initially, the sample size was limited and selected purposefully. Although this approach is suitable for qualitative research, it implies that the findings cannot be generalized to encompass all student populations or institutional contexts. Discourse practices may vary substantially across disciplines, institutions, and cultural environments.

Secondly, the subject of co-education may have influenced the type of language employed by students. As a matter of social and personal significance, it may have elicited emotional responses that might not be present in discussions concerning more abstract or technical subjects. Future investigations may explore whether analogous linguistic patterns arise across a broader spectrum of topics.

Conclusion

This study aims to investigate the linguistic manifestation of subjectivity in the oral discourse of university students, a relatively under-researched area within the broader field of academic communication. While prior research has extensively focused on the manifestation of subjectivity in student writing, this study addresses a critical gap by shifting attention to the spoken dimension of academic expression. Specifically, the research explores how subjectivity is reflected through the use of pronouns and emotive language.

The findings elucidated a pervasive pattern of subjectivity across all samples. Students predominantly relied on first-person pronouns such as "I" and "my," indicating a self-centered discourse style grounded in personal experience rather than objective reasoning. Emotive terms such as "incredibly tough," "strongly support," and "discourages" were frequently employed to convey value-laden opinions, further exacerbating the subjectivity of the discourse.

In summary, these findings indicate a more significant concern within academic settings, where spoken communication often lacks structure and is inadequately informed by the principles of critical thinking and objective reasoning. Although subjectivity is an inherent aspect of human expression, its unbridled presence in academic discourse may reflect a deficiency in rhetorical training and a limited understanding of the standards for scholarly communication.

Future Research Directions

- Study how subjectivity in speech changes over time with academic training. Compare students' spoken and written work to see how subjectivity differs by mode.
- Test if communication training helps to reduce subjectivity in student speech.
- Explore how subjectivity affects academic performance in presentations and discussions.
- Broaden the sample to include students from different universities, cultures, and disciplines for wider insights.

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