A Corpus-based Study on the Writer's Identity in German Academic Writing[*]

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Abstract—**There are different approaches that study the representation of identity and interaction in scientific research articles. Compared to English-speaking countries, German scholars hold different opinions on whether first person pronouns should be used in academic writing. In this paper, the author tried to address the construction of writers' identity in German academic writing through a corpus-based analysis. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the corpus, the author found out that the occurrences of first person pronouns in the German corpus are much lower than in the English academic articles. The feature of the German academic writing to avoid the use of first person pronouns shows the impersonal style of German academic writing. This feature has its own cultural and historic backgrounds and should be respected.**

Index Terms—**German academic writing, writer's identity, author's role, self-mention, first person pronouns**

I. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing has gone through a long period of historical development, during which many scholars have produced research in great numbers and involving various aspects. Many studies have shown that scientific research articles are not created in a vacuum, but in a kind of social structure, in which the author must position himself in relation to his readers and thus within the scientific community. With this positioning, he takes on a social role, from which he interacts with his recipients through his text.

The author's role in scientific research articles has become a field of research in itself, especially in English-speaking countries. Hyland (2001, p.223) has pointed out that "first person pronouns and self-citation are not just stylistic optional extras but significant ingredients for promoting a competent scholarly identity and gaining accreditation for research claims. Self-mention is important because it plays a crucial role in mediating the relationship between writers' arguments and their discourse communities, allowing writers to create an identity as both disciplinary servant and persuasive originator".

There are different approaches that study the representation of identity and interaction in scientific research articles. Compared to English-speaking countries, German research on academic writing starts later. But this problem has also gradually attracted the research interest of German scholars. Researchers hold different opinions whether first person pronouns should be used in academic writing. The traditional conception that academic articles must be written in impersonal and object style seems to be challenged. According to Steinhoff (2007a), the present linguistic research on German scientific writing is predominated by the assumption of the so-called *Ich-Tabu* or *Ich-Verbot*. He has critically discussed this position and made a plea for a different point of view regarding both functional-linguistic and social-semantic aspects. Through his corpus-based investigation on the usage of the personal pronoun *ich* in German scientific texts, in which the frequency of *ich*-tokens is examined, he has classified the different usages by introducing the terms *Verfasser-Ich*, *Forscher-Ich* and *Erzähler-Ich*. This classification will be further introduced hereinafter.

In the light of the previous research, the author tried to address the construction of writers' identity in German academic writing through a corpus-based analysis. The most direct form of manifestation of the writer's identity is the self-mention of author, that is, the use of first person pronouns. As the first step of this research, we created two corpuses: each one contains respectively 20 German and English academic articles. Then we analyzed the occurrences and the functions of first person pronouns in these two corpuses.

There are some language phenomena in German, in which the authors express theirs opinions without mentioning himself, in other words, without using first person pronouns. Nevertheless, the readers can still be aware of the identity of the writers by reading between the lines. To further analyze the feature of the German academic writing to avoid the use of the first person pronouns, the author found some concrete examples for the concrete forms non-self-mention of the author, which shows the impersonal style of German academic writing.

In the last part, the author tried to explain the characters of German academic writing by analyzing the academic and cultural tradition in which it is set.

II. THE USE OF FIRST PERSON PRONOUNS

In order to find out the actual usage of the first pronouns in academic articles, which are written in the German

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language, the present study firstly explored a corpus of 20 academic articles, which are randomly selected from three representative journals in the discipline of German language and linguistics: *Zeitschrift für Interkulturellen Fremdsprachenunterricht (ZIF), Informationen Deutsch als Fremdsprache (Info DaF), German as a foreign language (GFL)*. These 20 academic articles were published in the last five years, all written by single-authors and have an average length of 8,138 words (totally 162,761 words). The reason to choose the articles from these journals is that the articles are written by native German writers who have a say as to the current standard for the use of first person pronouns in German academic writing.

The author adopted a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the academic articles in the corpus. At first, PDF documents were converted into Word format, then the occurrences of first person pronouns with the help of statistical tools were searched, including the singular forms with declension *ich, mein- (with different terminations), mir, mich* and the plural forms with declension *wir, unser- (with different terminations), uns*. In order to make the statistical data more accurate, the data that does not meet the conditions were manually removed, such as the first person pronouns in direct quotations and those in example sentences, because they are unrelated to the self-mention of author.

A.   Occurrences in the Corpus

The following two tables list the raw frequency and normalized frequency all the used first person pronouns in the German corpus.

TABLE 1
RAW FREQUENCY AND NORMALIZED FREQUENCY OF THE FIRST PERSON PRONOUNS SINGULAR IN THE GERMAN CORPUS

Kasus	Singular forms	Raw frequency	Frequency (per 10,000 words)
Nominative	ich	121	7.43
Genitive	mein-	22	1.35
Dative	mir	29	1.78
Accusative	mich	15	0.92
	Total	187	11.49

TABLE 2
RAW FREQUENCY AND NORMALIZED FREQUENCY OF THE FIRST PERSON PRONOUNS PLURAL IN THE GERMAN CORPUS

| Kasus	Plural forms	Raw frequency	Frequency (per 10,000 words)
Nominative	wir	84	5.16
Genitive	unser-	28	1.72
Dative + Accusative	uns	33	2.03
	Total	145	8.91

In order to show that German academic articles differ from English academic articles on the use of first-person pronouns, a contrast-corpus of English academic articles as a reference of comparison was also built. The English corpus contains also 20 single-authored articles of similar length (totally 179,634 words) from English linguistics journals. The statistics of the frequency of the first person pronouns used in the English corpus are shown below:

TABLE 3
RAW FREQUENCY AND NORMALIZED FREQUENCY OF THE FIRST PERSON PRONOUNS IN THE ENGLISH CORPUS

Personal pronouns (Singular)	Raw frequency	Frequency (per 10,000 words)
I	501	27.89
My	154	8.57
Me	61	3.38
Total	716	39.86
Personal pronouns (Plural)	Raw frequency	Frequency (per 10,000 words)
We	238	13.26
Our	110	6.13
Us	43	2.41
Total	391	21.77

We can see that the most frequent first person pronoun used by English native writers is *I* (27.89 per 10,000 words), and that the second most frequent first person pronoun is *we* (13.26 per 10,000 words), supporting the research results from Hyland (2001). From Hyland's results, we can see that the most and the second most frequent first person pronouns used in the research articles in the discipline of linguistics are 36.1 per 10,000 words and 25.4 per 10,000 words respectively.

In view of the significantly lower frequency of the first person pronouns in the other three Kasus (Genitive, Dative, Accusative) compared with the Nominative-Kasus, the two bar charts below (Chart 4, Chart 5) only distinguish between the first person pronouns singular forms and plural forms. Followed by descending order, they clearly reflect the frequency of the first person pronouns in the 20 articles of the German corpus.

Chart 4 The Raw Frequency of First Person Pronouns Singular
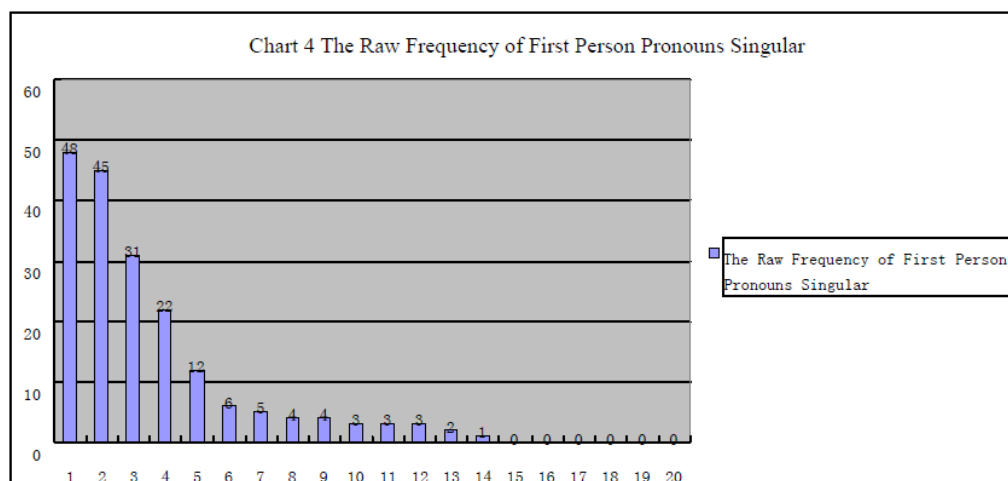
In these 20 German academic articles, there are 6 articles which did not use the singular forms of the first person pronoun at all, with this zero-occurrence accounting for 30%. There are 9 articles in which the occurrence of the singular forms of the first person pronoun lies between 1 and 10, accounting for 45%. There are 5 articles in which the singular forms of the first person pronouns appeared between 10 to 50 times, accounting for 25%. Even the highest frequency, 48, is quite low in comparison with the frequency of the first person singular pronoun in English academic articles.

Chart 5 The Raw Frequency of First Person Pronouns Plural
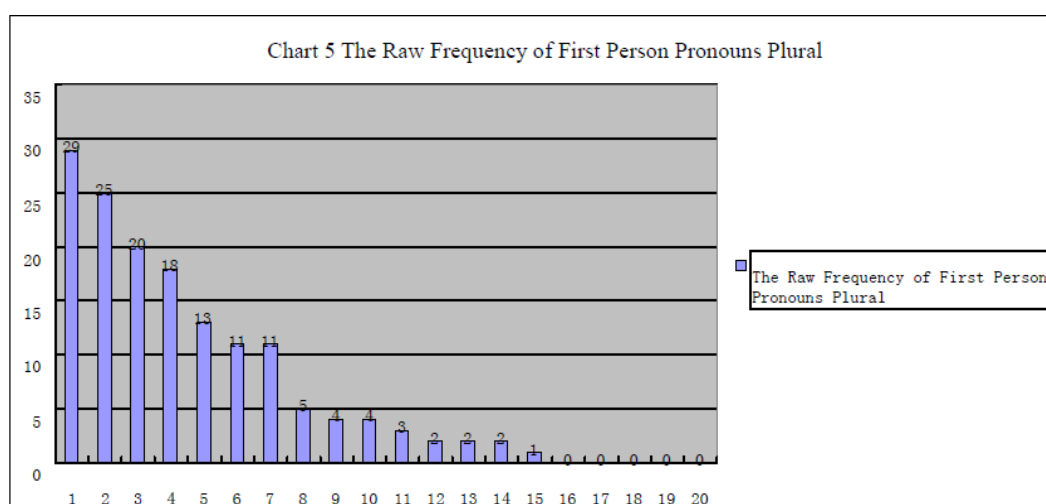
Within these 20 German academic articles, there are 5 articles which did not use the plural forms of the first person pronouns at all, with this zero-occurrence accounting for 25%. There are 8 articles in which the occurrence of the plural forms of the first person pronouns lies between 1 and 10, accounting for 40%. There are 7 articles in which the plural forms of the first person pronoun appeared between 10 to 30 times, accounting for 35%. The most high frequency count, 29, is also quite low in comparison with the frequency of the first person plural pronoun in English academic articles.

As can be seen from the above data, the occurrences of the first person pronouns in the German corpus are much lower than in the English academic articles. We can directly recognize the gap of each first person pronoun in the German and English academic articles. The most significant difference exists in first person pronouns *ich/I* between the two corpuses, the frequencies are 7.43 per 10,000 words and 27.89 per 10,000 words respectively. The frequency of *ich* in the German corpus is nearly four times as high as the frequency of *I* in the English corpus. We can find out that the German academic articles show very limited use of the first person pronouns. A sizable part of the authors strictly followed the German academic tradition of *Ich-Tabu*. The vast majority of the authors use first person pronouns very cautiously, which again is very different from the features of the English academic articles that emphasize the writer's identity through the self-mention of author. However, we can see that a part of the writers also used more first person pronouns, which may reflects a new trend of German academic writing style.

After the quantitative study on the occurrence of the first person pronouns, the qualitative methods to analyze the usage and functions of the first person pronouns in German academic writing should be applied. Due to space limitations, this article will focus on the use of *ich*, namely the most frequent first person pronoun that is used in the German academic articles.

B.   Functions of the First Person Pronouns

In order to get a deeper understanding as to the limited use of the first person pronouns in German research articles,

the following part would analyze the use of the first person pronouns in the German corpus from the functional perspective.

At this point, it is necessary to introduce the theory of the German linguist Steinhoff (2007b). He studied the use of *ich* in academic writings of German scholars and students and defined three types of author roles (*Autorenrollen*) realized by using the first person singular pronoun: the *Verfasser-Ich*, the *Forscher-Ich* und the *Erzähler-Ich*.

The *Verfasser-Ich* (I as writer) occurs mainly in passages of text-annotation, it serves as reader guidance. Furthermore, Steinhoff also summarizes text procedures that establish intertextuality (quote, refer etc.) as well as acknowledgements. The *Forscher-Ich* (I as researcher) used to prove the originality. It is mainly used for conceptualizations and definitions, but to explicate hypotheses and to express their opinions about other authors or their assumptions. The *Erzähler-Ich* (I as narrator), however, is only used by students in the early stages of their studies. It is used as auto-narration, that is, the authors write about themselves and their experiences and feelings that relate primarily to the thesis papers. This form is clearly evaluated as non-scientific.

The classification of *Verfasser-Ich* and the *Forscher-Ich* seem to be interdisciplinary relevant and shares similar principles with the categories of discource functions of self-mention that Hyland (2002a/b) used for his analysis of academic writing. Table 6 gives an overview of the correspondence between the categories and the proportion of each functions.

TABLE 6
THE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN THE CATEGORIES AND THE PROPORTION OF EACH FUNCTIONS

Steinhoff 2007	Hyland 2002	Raw	%
Verfasser-Ich	Explaining a procedure	44	36.36
Forscher-Ich	Stating results or claim	26	21.49
	Elaborating an argument	19	15.70
	Stating a goal/purpose	21	17.36
Erzähler-Ich	Expressing self-benefits	11	9.09

So far we can make an observation that a significant difference exists between the German and English academic writing. In the process of academic writing, German scholars deliberately avoid the use of the first person pronouns, which is quite different from the scholars in English-speaking countries. It is believed that avoiding the use of first person pronouns is an unwritten rule in German academic community. Although the different disciplines, the author's academic background or personal style can cause to a certain degree of difference, overall the most academic writers still follow the tradition of the so-called *Ich-Tabu*. The next part of this article is about this kind of impersonal feature of German academic writing.

III.   ICH-TABU – IMPERSONAL STYLE OF GERMAN ACADEMIC WRITING

To strive for objectivity, a tendency to Impersonalization is clearly observed in the German scientific texts. Concretely, this means that the pronoun *Ich* and its pro-forms are largely avoided. Although this Taboo was nowhere explicitly stated, it has the character of an unwritten rule.

From the starting point "forms of scientific language", Weinrich (1989, p.119) makes the assumption that the low frequency of the first person can be explained by so called "Ich-Verbot" *(I-Ban)*. Kretzenbacher (1995, p.32-33) calls this phenomenon "Ich-Tabu" (*I-taboo*). The I-taboo makes the impression that the meaning of a scientific text is something that lies behind the text itself and is independent of the communication.

Graefen (1997) discussed whether a kind of *Ich-Verbot* extists? She believed that the more an author formulates explicit guidances, such as announcements, summaries or informations about his own plans and decisions, the sooner and more often the use of *Ich* or *Wir* is expected. If the author thinks of himself a guardian of knowledge expansion, he can make his text so be a means of communication. In this case, the author stands here as a special person with his communicative means and capabilities. In fact, this point can be verified by the results of my corpus study. According to the statistical results of the German corpus, there is a certain regularity of the distribution of ich in each article part[1], as shown below:

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[1] In order to facilitate the statistic, I roughly divided each article into three parts: the introduction, the body and the conclusion because of their different contents and functions.

Chart 7 Distribution of *ich* in each Part
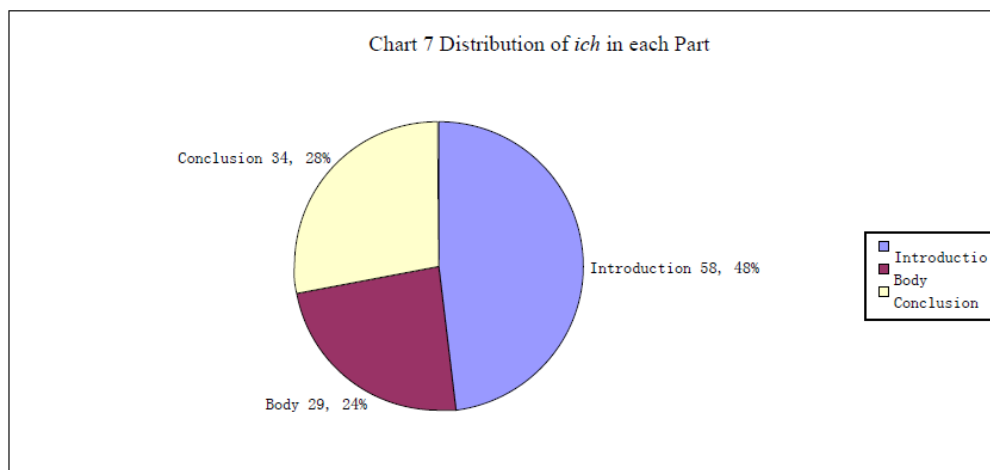
Through the above chart, we can see that the first person singular pronoun *ich*, that appeared in the German academic articles, is mainly concentrated in the beginning and the end of the articles. This is mainly because in the opening paragraphs of the articles, the authors explain the purpose of their writings, their research plans and processes, and in the end part, the authors make conclusions and express prospects for future research directions. In these two parts, the authors play a role of agent of the researches and use first person pronouns directly to reflect their role and identity as writer and researcher. In the main body of the articles, where the process of argumention or dicussion is demonstrated, it is no more of importance to show the writer's identity as an individual; thus, there is more emphasis on the science itself and the objectivity of the argumentation. This distribution trend is also echoed with the function types of *ich* in Table 6.

The Author can be seen as a bundle of indexing. Which indications are given about what a certain author does in his or her article? The author is indeed the authority in the article that presents arguments, makes considerations, makes distinctions, summarizing results etc. The readers get a certain impression of the author during reading of a series of markers. The markers, however, need not to be first person pronouns. In the present research, it is important not only to search direct markers of writer's identity, but also indirect markers of writer's identity. The next part is a brief introduction of several commonly used impersonal forms or grammatical structures in German academic writing.

A.   Deagentivierung

This term is based on the German syntax. In sentences in the subject-predicate structure, the role of agent is linked to the subject. An inanimate object can take over the role of agent, when it is used as the subject in the sentence. This process is also called hypostatization. It means the revival of an inanimate subject.

Here are three examples:
- *Dieser <u>Begriff</u> erhebt Anspruch auf Universität.*
- *Das erste <u>Argument</u> richtet sich gegen die Vorstellung von ...*
- *Diese Regel <u>erzeugt</u> korrekte Sätze.*

The subjects in these examples - *Begriff* (term), *Argument* (argument) and *Regel* (rule) are actually inanimate, but they are unsed as subjects in the sentences and play the role of angens.

Through the avoidance of the first person, the role of agent is obscured in knowledge-production-process. By letting the thing speaks itself, the real subject of the statement, namely the author as the agent of the scientific research, would be obscured in his role.

B.   Passive

An object stands in the foreground as a grammatical subject. In this case, the actions are relevant and the agent of the action can be blanked. The statement therefore has a higher degree of universality.

For Example:
- *In dieser Arbeit wird hauptsächlich der <u>Begriff</u> X <u>verwendet</u>.*
- *Im Folgenden wird die <u>Entwicklung</u> von X <u>dargestellt</u>.*
- *Die <u>Vorteile</u> von X werden in folgendem Kapitel <u>diskutiert</u>.*

In these examples, the author describes his approach neutrally. The agent of the action, namely the author, is already indicated. Therefore it is no more necessary to use a person pronoun as a subject.

Worth mentioning is also the use of impersonal passive voice. The impersonal passive deletes the subject of an intransitive verb. In place of the verb's subject, the construction include a syntactic placeholder *es*, which has neither thematic nor referential content.

Examples:
- *<u>Es</u> muss angenommen werden, dass ...*
- *<u>Es</u> kann nicht bestritten werden, dass ...*
- *<u>Es</u> sei noch erwähnt, dass ...*

The impersonal passive voice helps to create an objective writing attitude. German scholars often use this kind of expression to obscure the author's identity.

C.   Nominal Style

A striking feature of the German scientific language is the nominal style. This means the accumulation of nouns and nominal constructions in a text. These include in particular:

1. Long nominal compounds;

2. Foreign words (mostly Greek or Latin origin);

3. FVG;

In connection with the nominal style, we can also see the frequent use of *Funktionsverbgefügen* (Functional verb structure). A FVG is a lexical unit of a verb and a noun and possibly a preposition. The verb has hardly any meaning in itself when part of such a construction, for example: *etw. zum Ausdruck bringen, die Schlussfolgerung ziehen.*

In addition, FVG can be transformed into passive:

- *Diese These findet bei den Fachkollegen viel Anerkennung.*

- *Diese These wird von den Fachkollegen anerkennt.*

4. Participle constructions.

Such constructions support the nominal style of a text, because after using prepositional phrases, there is no need to use a clause, of course, neither a verb nor a subject.

An Example:

Instead of the sentence: *Die Aussagekraft der Ergebnisse, die so gewonnen wurden, lässt sich ...*, the following sentence is stylistic better:

- *Die Ausagekraft der so gewonnen Ergebnisse lässt sich ...*

There are also other typical impersonal constructions, for example:

- *Es lässt sich zeigen, dass ...*

- *Daraus ergibt sich, dass ...*

- *Dem ist hinzuzufügen, dass ...*

These constructions, which are related to reflexive verbs or infinitive with *zu* in German, are not the focus of our discussion here.

IV.   THE TRADITION OF IMPERSONAL WRITING

For a long time, the perception of cultural differences with regard to science communication was by no means obvious, because people thought that the science is something universal, that is independent of national and cultural conditions. Today, we find out that differences do exist within the scientific traditions of various countries or cultures and are articulated in the way that scientific texts or acedemic articles are written. Scientific style is related to the culture. The German scientific style is therefore only one among many and follows a certain tradition.

There is a series of studies on the differences between English and German academic articles. Clyne (1987) argues that German-L1 academic writers demonstrate a lack of reader-friendliness differing from NES academic writers in terms of linearity, discontinuity, integration of data and textual organisation markers. According to Weigle (2002), readers from writer-responsible cultures, are likely to find the writing of those from a reader-responsible cultures difficult to read, poorly organised or excessively vague. Writer-responsibility means that the author takes the responsibility of decoding the text information, er gives explicit references throughout the text to ensure that the communication between text and reader succeeds. Reader-responsibility, however, requires the reader to read between the lines and provide background knowledge to properly decode or understand the text. The German scientific style is such one of reader-responsibility, unlike Anglo-American texts, where more of a writer-responsibility is noticeable. Auer & Baßler (2007) discussed the universality and multiculturalism of scientific styles. They believed that the Anglo-American science style is the winner, not least because of its readability, but especially as a consequence of the American scientists' dominance in many fields: together with the publication language being English, it asserts itself more and more and displaces the others.

According to the German academic tradition, the Frequency of *Ich* in texts may be a simple, but not necessarily a valid manifestation of the author in texts. Basically, texts are conceivable in which the *Ich*-frequency is high but the contents are still perceived as impersonal. In the case of scientific texts, it is natural to assume that the single mention of the author's name in conjunction with the text title is sufficient to definitely determine the agent of obtaining knowledge. Therefore, the *Ich*-frequency may be not an ideal manifestation of the author in scientific texts. Although the author writes the text, defines it in a certain structure, makes statements about objects, etc., he as a person is not a part of scientific topic. The *Ich-Tabu* contributes to the anonymity of scientific texts. By "*Entpersönlichung*" (depersonalizing) (Drescher, 2003, p. 59-60), the facts are to be focused, not the person, who transmit the knowledge, so that the impression of this kind of knowledge is formed, which stands in line with the ideal of objective science and is independent from the subject.

On this issue, Anglo-American scholars clearly take on a different view. According to Hyland (2002a, p.1110-1111), "self-mention constitutes a central pragmatic feature of academic discourse since it contributes not only to the writer's construction of a text, but also of a rhetorical self. The authorial pronoun is a significant means of promoting a competent scholarly identity and gaining acceptance for one's ideas. The ways that writers choose to report their

research and express their ideas obviously result from a variety of social and psychological factors. While Anglo-American academic conventions encourage a conscious exploitation of authorial identity to manage the reader's awareness of the author's role and viewpoint, L2 writers from other cultures may be reluctant to promote an individual self."

V. CONCLUSION

In summary, we can now ascertain that although the convention of *Ich-Tabu* is sometimes ignored, the main tendency of German academic writing is still that the first person singular is used very sparingly. And this feature has its cultural and historic backgrounds and should be respected.

It is true that every scientfic language has undergone changes: on the one hand, certain conventions play no longer a role; on the other hand, some new linguistic phenomena are gradually accepted. 100% objectivity is perhaps unrealistic, unattainable and also unnecessary. Many scholars reach a consensus that the intersubjectivity, not the objectivity, should be achieved through academic writing. It can also explain why we found a small amount of academic articles in the German corpus which do not follow the principle of *Ich-Tabu*.

Although international scientific publications have become increasingly dominated by the English language, we are sure that German as scientific language will still play a role in the scientific community in the future. We should respect its own characteristics, with an open and tolerant attitude towards the natural development of each language. German linguist K. Ehlich (2000) has argued for the retention, expansion and promotion of German as one of scientific languages for the 21st century. His arguments for a reflective, language-conscious and language awareness promoting multilingualism in the sciences and for its scientific investigation, monitoring and development are applicable to any language.

Through the study in this article, the author tried to express that every language is qualified as a scientific language, and each scientific language has its own characteristics. But allowing, even encouraging the existence of such differences is one important way of scientific development. By revealing the differences of academic writing style, we can not only find out the academic tradition and cultural background of an author, but also promote academic reflections.

In future research, it is meaningful to build three corpuses of English, German, Chinese scientific articles in different disciplines. Through more systematic, more comprehensive comparison, the characteristics and development trends of these three scientific languages can be analyzed, so that we can explore the impact of globalization on the development of science and scientific language, and in turn, the promoting role of different scientific languages for the scientific development.

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