“I have known....” A Corpus-driven Study of Personal Pronouns in Letters of Recommendation in an L2 Context

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ABSTRACT
In recent times, there has been an upsurge of scholarly attention on hitherto occluded genres such as the Letter of Recommendation (LoR). Although several studies have been conducted on the LoR, studies on lexico-grammatical features are rare. This study, therefore, adopts a corpus-driven approach to examine the use of personal pronouns (PPs) in LoRs written by Ghanaian academics. A specialized corpus of LoR, totalling approximately twenty thousand (20,000) running words was created for this study. The concordance tool in AntConc (v. 3.2.4.) was employed to search for all instances of PPs in the corpus. The concordance lines were manually examined to determine the referents of the PPs. The study revealed the diversity of PP resources in LoRs. It was also found that the PPs were mainly recommender-oriented, recommendee-oriented, or requester-oriented, culminating in a proposed model of discourse-internal and external participants in LoRs. Again, the study revealed that LoR is typified by singular PPs, reflecting the fact that it is mainly authored by an individual for an individual. The findings have implications for the pragmatics of PPs and the scholarship on LoR. It is thus recommended that an intercultural study of LoR be undertaken to establish variations in the use of personal pronouns.

Keywords: Corpus Linguistics, L2 Context, Letter of recommendation, English for Specific Purposes

INTRODUCTION
In recent times, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) practitioners have paid unprecedented attention to the letter genre, which constitutes part of what Swales and Freak refer to as ‘supporting genres.’1 The letter genre involves a myriad of subgenres: direct mail letters, birthmother letters, letters of appeal, letters of application, letters of negotiation, sales letters, request letters, letters to the editor, editorial letters, fundraising letters, and letters of recommendation.2 Generally, these letter subgenres are similar and


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dissimilar in the “communicative questions why, what, who, when, where, and how (5WH1)”, which correspond with the “purpose, content, participants, timing, location, and form of communicative action.”

The LoR is unique among the letter subgenres considering that it is an epideictic genre which seeks to project the positive self of a recommendee to make him/her the preferred choice among other potential competitors for an opportunity in the corporate world. It captures crucial information required about applicants from a recommender for employment, scholarship, admission and the like. It is written by someone upon the request of someone about someone for someone. It thus involves a triad of participants (the recommender, the recommendee and the recipient/requester). Schall argues that the LoR “offers us lessons about relationships, growth, power and empowerment, professionalism, attitude, protocol, communication, ethos, and trust.” Hence, the LoR usually serves as a supporting document, which “works with other materials such as transcripts, application forms, and résumés to represent the candidate.”

In the last three decades, LoR has witnessed tremendous growth in terms of research. Studies have generally focused on trust, gender, and race. Little attention, however, has been paid to linguistic investigations. Much, therefore, remains to be examined on the lexico-grammatical resources, particularly personal pronouns (PPs), which allow the writers of LoRs to effectively establish interactions and construct identities of the participants for the intended rhetorical effect. Zhang notes that the “personal pronoun is an important indicator of how audiences are conceptualized by speakers or writers” in all kinds of discourses. The pronoun is considered a heterogeneous class of items. Its heterogeneity is arguably one of the factors that have sparked pronominal argumentation, and widespread scholarly attention.

It is conceptualized as personal markers, self-mentions, participation markers, or stance markers. Pronouns play pragmatic roles in discourse; hence, they are labelled as key interpersonal resources in both written

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Takeshi Yoshioka et al., “Genre Taxonomy: A Knowledge Repository of Communicative Actions.”


and spoken genres. Consequently, they are employed to maintain a good interchange among participants in “situations of communication.” Pronouns are considered as part of the resources employed to manage writer-audience interaction in text. Writers, therefore, use personal pronouns to express their opinions and stances toward propositions made in texts. They enable writers to create a friendly in-text environment for their readers.

Hence, the present study investigates the forms, discourse functions and number of PPs in LoRs, using a corpus of LoRs written by Ghanaian academics. The study is considered corpus-driven (not corpus-based) because it does not use a pre-tagged text, but rather the raw text nor adopt any existing model on personal pronouns. Tognini-Bonelli also states that “in a corpus-driven approach the commitment of the linguist is to the integrity of the data as a whole, and descriptions aim to be comprehensive with respect to corpus evidence.” Sinclair thus asserts that “in corpus-driven linguistics, you do not use pre-tagged text, but you process the raw text directly and then the patterns of this uncontaminated text are able to be observed.”

On the Letter of Recommendation

The Letter of Recommendation (LoR) is considered an evaluative, persuasive, personal and epideictic genre that is expected to provide unbiased, critical and factual information about the general personality of an individual (i.e. recommendee) for consideration in a job offer, scholarship, promotion and leadership position. It provides a professional link between the recommender and the recipient since it is seen as an individual’s testimonial about an applicant. The LoR provides a “link between the educational and occupational world” and it is regarded as a crucial part of the hiring process. The LoR is expected to be a true reflection of the state of an individual as unknown by the recommender. However, it is sometimes considered a subjective genre because some characteristics attested to by the recommender may be immeasurable and unscientific. Notwithstanding, it is perceived to be objective because there are some traits of the individual, which are verifiable and measurable. The measurable ones mostly concern the general academic competence or performance of the applicant usually communicated in one’s curriculum vitae, transcripts and certificates.

LoRs can be written by a superior to a subordinate, and vice versa, though some scholars like Trix and Psenka doubt the legitimacy of the latter. They argue that the LoR constitutes part of gatekeeping therefore, a subordinate cannot open the door for a superior. It is written upon request (by an applicant or organization), but recommenders are not legally bound to write such letters. Hence, it is said to be a

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17 Elena Tognini-Bonelli, “The Role of Corpus Evidence in Linguistic Theory and Description” (University of Birmingham, 1996).
25 Trix and Psenka, “Exploring the color of glass”
letter by choice. The choice can be seen from two directions: the applicant chooses who must write, and the potential recommender decides to write or not to write it. Sometimes, as noted by Schall, some academics inform people who ask them for letters of recommendation to draft one and submit it for review, and onward endorsement. This type is supported by people who uphold the flexible principle of confidentiality.

Schall notes that writing LoR has both ethical and legal implications. Consequently, LoR writers take into cognizance the factuality and accuracy of the information they provide. It is thus considered a true record of the life of the recommendee from the perspective of the recommender. Recommenders are, therefore, advised to avoid both inflationary and deflationary rhetoric in the LoRs, which may mar the reliability of the documents and the credibility of both the recommender and recommendee. In other words, writers of LoRs are advised to be careful not to overstate or understate the qualities, qualifications and competencies of the recommendees.

The LoR is regarded as a trustworthy document, especially as it is provided by a self-selected referee—usually mentioned in one’s curriculum vitae. The importance of the LoR concerns three key discourse players: the recommender, the recommendee and the requester/recipient. For the recommender, it is an opportunity to provide a critical perspective on his view on the recommendee. This helps display the writer’s sense of criticism, and upon this, people can judge the principles of the person, and also his/her membership in the general academic discourse community. More so, it offers the requester a verifiable basis for their decision on an applicant. It is believed that most LoRs are written and submitted at the blind side of the recommendee.

LoRs contain writer-based knowledge about the general competence and personality of the individual. Schall notes that the recommender and the recommendee both have rights and responsibilities regarding the content of LoRs. It is noted that the former has the responsibility not to include some sensitive information about the applicant, especially private information that has ethical and legal implications. Schall, therefore, notes that in some universities, the recommendee is required to waive his/her access rights. This indicates that writers have restrictions on the information that can be included in LoRs. However, the recommendation may be positive or negative, based on the information revealed about the recommendee. Surprisingly, the present corpus did not contain any negative LoRs, though, in three of them, the recommenders were quite hesitant. It is said that sociocultural norms influence the writing of LoRs such that in societies where it is regarded as taboo for one to say evil about another, LoRs contain writer-sensitive information about the applicant, especially private information that has ethical and legal implications. Schall, therefore, notes that in some universities, the recommendee is required to waive his/her access rights. This indicates that writers have restrictions on the information that can be included in LoRs. However, the recommendation may be positive or negative, based on the information revealed about the recommendee. Surprisingly, the present corpus did not contain any negative LoRs, though, in three of them, the recommenders were quite hesitant. It is said that sociocultural norms influence the writing of LoRs such that in societies where it is regarded as taboo for one to say evil about another, negative LoRs are rare. However, it should be noted that socio-cultural beliefs, norms, or practices must not override the principles of honesty, fairness, trustworthiness, and meritocracy. Thus, the answer is affirmative to Callahan’s question, “When friendship calls, should truth answer?”

JIS Schall proscribed discriminatory language that is based on the gender, religion, or ethnicity of both the recommender and the recommendee. Studies have confirmed that the gender of either the recommender or the recommendee significantly influences the content of LoRs. These studies noted that males write favourably about their co-males than about females, and vice versa. Further, LoRs must not

27 Schall, “Writing Recommendation Letters Online.”
28 Schall, “Writing Recommendation Letters Online.”
30 Schall, “Writing Recommendation Letters Online.”
33 Kyei and Afful, “Schematic Structure of Letters of Recommendation Written by Lecturers of a Public University in Ghana.”
34 Schall, “Writing Recommendation Letters Online.”
35 Schall, “Writing Recommendation Letters Online.”
36 Larkin and Marco, “Ethics seminars: beyond authorship requirements.”
37 Schall, “Writing Recommendation Letters Online.”
39 Schall, “Writing Recommendation Letters Online.”
contain unqualified glorification or exaggerative/hyperbolic praises.\textsuperscript{41} Writers are, therefore, cautioned to avoid overly inflated and/or deflated language in LoRs as it will have future repercussions on both the recommender and the recommendee.\textsuperscript{42}

**CORPUS AND PROCEDURE**

Sixty-seven (67) LoRs written by Ghanaian academics constituted the corpus for the study. The entire corpus has approximately twenty thousand words (20,000). The soft versions of the LoRs were gathered from the writers themselves. It is, therefore, assumed that recommendees do not own personal copies of LoR written about them although Schall posits that in some countries and/or institutions there are laws that permit recommendees to have access to the content of their LoRs.\textsuperscript{43} In such cases, recommenders are to indicate whether or not recommendees were privy to the information captured in the letters of recommendation. This brings to bare the strict and flexible principles of confidentiality in LoR writing.\textsuperscript{44}

In processing the corpus, the researchers anonymized the data to remove all information pointing to the identities of the recommenders, the recommendees or the recipients/requesters. Hence, all personal names of the recommenders and recommendees were initialized; the recipient’s addresses, letterheads, signatures, and dates were deleted. The texts were then converted into plain text format using Microsoft Word to ensure that it is AntConc-readable. AntConc, a text analysis software, is an agglomeration of tools (e.g. concordance, cluster/N-grams, and collocates) developed by Anthony.\textsuperscript{45} Anthony describes the software as “a freeware, multi-platform tool for carrying out corpus linguistics research and data-driven learning”.\textsuperscript{46} The concordance, one of the tools in AntConc, was used to search for all instances of PPs in the corpus. The electronic analysis was complemented manually to ensure that all the occurrences of the PPs met the following criteria: referred to a human being and referred to the discourse internal or external world.\textsuperscript{47}

The categories of the pronominal item were determined based on the linguistic context, and or co-text, indicating that the principle for categorizing the PPs in the corpus is context and/or co-text dependent.\textsuperscript{48} The PPs identified were examined qualitatively to determine their discourse functions and referents. The qualitative analysis was supplemented by “the quantitative power of computerized corpus analysis”\textsuperscript{49} in accounting for the distributions of the PPs and their functions.

**PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section discusses the results of the use of the PPs in the corpus, concerning the kinds, functions and numbers.

**PPs in LoR**

The researchers examined the PPs in the corpus to identify the PPs that typify this key academic and professional genre. In all, one thousand seven hundred and twenty-three (1723) PPs were identified in the corpus. The distributions of the PPs are presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Personal Pronouns</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>His</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>He</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Her</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{41} Schall, “Writing Recommendation Letters Online.”
\textsuperscript{43} Schall, “Writing Recommendation Letters Online.”
\textsuperscript{44} Schall, “Writing Recommendation Letters Online.”
\textsuperscript{46} Anthony, “AntConc (Version 3.4. 3).[Computer Software].
\textsuperscript{47} Ädel, “Metadiscourse in L1 and L2 English”; Hyland, “Metadiscourse: Exploring interaction in writing.”
\textsuperscript{48} Akoto, “Individualities in the Referents of I, We, and You in Academic Lectures across Disciplines.”
\textsuperscript{49} Upton, “Understanding direct mail letters as a genre.”
Thirteen PPs were identified in the LoR corpus, suggesting that LoRs are characterized by pronominal diversity. In the discussion, he and she are combined since they are both the subjective forms of the 3PP, and what distinguishes them is gender which has already received sufficient attention in the literature on LoRs. Table 1 shows that s/he recorded 26.1% (i.e. 17.4 + 8.7), making it the PP with the highest frequency. S/he designates the one being recommended; hence, it is not surprising that it has recorded the highest frequency because LoR is markedly recommendee-centred. The 3PP is used to refer to the person about whom the recommendation is written because s/he is the third party in the discourse (see corpus evidence LoR0001 and LoR0002).

1. While in my ENG 399 (Research Methods), LIN 306 (Sociolinguistics), ENG 402 (Varieties of English & Advanced Writing Skills), and LING 403 (Discourse Analysis) classes, he demonstrated a clear understanding of concepts, research approaches as well as a high sense of critical acumen, necessary for undergraduate work in a Humanities department.

LoR0001

2. I first got to know R when she enrolled in the MPhil (English language) programme at the University of Cape Coast in 2009.

LoR0002

Thus, the first party, who is the recommender, writes about the third party (the recommendee) who is represented as he and she in LoR0001 and LoR0002 to the second party, who is the requester. The direct consumer of the LoR is, therefore, the requester who requires it as the basis of decision-making. The degree of presence or representation of the three parties through the distribution of the PPs is very significant. In terms of the diversities of the PPs, those that concern the recommendee are more pervasive than in the cases of the two others. Additionally, in terms of frequencies, the sum of those pronouns significantly exceeds that of the two others. These observations support the fact that the recommendee is at the centre of the recommendation discourse. Next to the recommendee is the recommender, both in terms of diversity and frequency.

3. I have known Mrs. RT variously as my student, supervisee, and a member of a research team.

LoR0003

4. If you have further questions regarding Mr. N’s ability or this recommendation, please do not hesitate to contact me through the above address and e-mail (xxx).

LoR0004

5. I have known Mr. M for seven years as one of my former postgraduate students and currently a Senior Research Assistant in my department.

LoR0005

The recommender, referred to as I, my and me (see the corpus evidence LoR0003, LoR0004 and LoR0005) positively projects him/herself in the text to enact a persuasive persona of the recommendee.

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52 Schall, “Writing Recommendation Letters Online.”

53 Larkin and Marco. “Ethics seminars: beyond authorship requirements.”
Finally, the second party is represented through the second person pronouns (2PP) you and your. The emphasis placed on the requester as the third most projected party through the 2PP (as shown in the corpus evidence LoR0006 and LoR0007) is based on the fact the recommender and the recommendee know each other more than they know the requester. 54

6. I highly commend xxx for the program she desires to pursue because I am certain that she will excel in your reputable university. Please feel free to contact me via xxx if you need any additional information or clarification about xxx.  
LoR0006

7. As you may notice from his curriculum vitae, this work has since been co-published.  
LoR0007

Contrary to the view that the 2PP is used to show attachment, in the LoR the third person pronoun (3PP) rather reveals a greater attachment to the writer.55

The PPs used for the recommendee and the requester have two key implications bordering on the discourse-internal and external relations. Within the text, the 2PP for the requester and the 3PP for the recommendee suggest that the recommender and the requester are closer to each other than they are to the recommender. This relationship which is officially ‘faceless’ hinges on the fact that the recommendee initiates this discourse. The second relation is the discourse-external one which existed between the recommender and the recommendee before the creation of the triad network among the three parties in the LoR. The discourse-internal relation appears more prominent and crucial because the first party directly communicates to the second party about the third party. The dimensionalities of the interrelation among the three parties in LoR can be represented in Table 2.

Table 2: Discourse internal and external worlds relation among the three parties in LoR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse-internal world</th>
<th>Recommender vs. Recommendee</th>
<th>Recommender vs. Requester</th>
<th>Recommendee vs. Requester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>–</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse-external world</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The – sign indicates the absence of an explicit relationship while + sign shows the presence of an explicit relationship. As has already been intimated, the use of the 3PP by the recommender for the recommendee is evident in the distance and absence of an explicit relationship between him and the recommendee.

8. Her performance at the viva voce left no one in doubt that she had really worked hard.  
LoR0008

9. Mr. KOB, a former student whom I have known for the past five years, has asked me to say a few words about him, as he seeks to pursue postgraduate education in your reputable institution.  
LoR0009

The recommender distances himself through the use of 3PPs (as in LoR0008 and LoR0008) to establish credibility and trustworthiness.56 This positioning enables the recommender to appropriately represent the recommendee to the requester to achieve the intended rhetorical effect.57 While the 3PP marks an absence of an explicit relationship between the recommender and the recommendee in the text, the pattern I have known... in the corpus signals the relationship that existed between the two.

54 Kyei and Afful, "Schematic structure of letters of recommendation"; Schneider, "Why You Can't Trust Letters of Recommendation."
55 Erdem Akbas, "Commitment-Detachment and Authorial Presence in Postgraduate Academic Writing: A Comparative Study of Turkish Native Speakers, Turkish Speakers of English and English Native Speakers" (University of York, 2014).
56 Schall, “Writing Recommendation Letters Online.”
57 Kyei and Afful, "Schematic structure of letters of recommendation"; Ädel, "Metadiscourse in L1 and L2 English."
These patterns, with 52 occurrences in the corpus, reveal the discourse-external world relationship between the recommender and the recommendee. The recommender through this pattern does not only demonstrate his familiarity with the recommendee but also projects himself as a credible person whose testimonies about the recommendee are experience-based.\[58\]

Furthermore, Table 2 shows that there is an explicit relationship between the recommender and the requester in the discourse-internal world but none in the discourse external. Cowan and Kasen describe this relationship as a professional one that is faceless.\[59\] This attachment between the two parties is shown through the 2PP as shown in LoR000x and LoR000x.

10. I believe that Mrs. RM will not disappoint, and will exceed your expectations.

LoR0010

11. Should you require any further information, please contact me via the above postal address and e-mail address xxx.

LoR0011

The use of 2PP for the requester demonstrates the recommender’s attachment to the requester in the discourse-internal world. This rhetorical strategy enables the recommender to establish the closeness needed for interaction with the requester. It allows him to disclose information about the recommendee to assure the requester of his readiness to provide further information upon the requester’s demand as evident in LoR00011. While 2PP indicates the explicit relationship between the recommendee and the requester, there are, however, no pronominal or rhetorical resources that express an explicit relationship between the two in the discourse-external world. Finally, there are no pronominal resources that reveal recommender-requester interaction in both the discourse-internal and external worlds. This kind of interaction could have been instantiated through the use of we and its variations such as our.

12. We were just satisfied to witness M complete the process of his induction into the academia.

LoR0012

13. M continues to be a cherished member of this department, available at a very short notice, very resourceful and creative, able to take up responsibilities in quite challenging situations, adept at using ICT for teaching, full of humour and very approachable by all, especially by our students, some of whom already find in him a mentor. LoR0013

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58 Larkin and Marco. “Ethics seminars: beyond authorship requirements.”
14. Mr. A served as a teaching assistant and a demonstrator where he assisted in the teaching of language courses to our undergraduate students.

However, there was only one occurrence of we and two of our which mainly designated the recommender and his colleagues as shown in LoR0012-14. In LoR0012, for instance, we refer to the viva voce panel when the candidate (now the recommendee) defended his master’s thesis.

**Discourse Functions of PPs**

It has been established that PPs are context-dependent and hence perform polypragmatic functions. The researchers found in the corpus that the PPs perform four functions, which revolve around their referents identified in the corpus (i.e. recommender, recommendee and requester). The PPs employed in the corpus to enact these identities and to perform these functions are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Classification and functions of PPs in LoRs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Pronouns</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recommender-oriented PPs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1086</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recommender-oriented PPs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Her</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Him</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>574</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Requester-oriented PPs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>63</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Others-oriented PPs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first three categories correspond with Jeremy et al.’s observation on the LoR that “We all write them. We all receive them. We all solicit them.” The discourse functions of PPs can be classified into metadiscursive and non-metadiscursive, which respectively comprise recommender-oriented, recommendee-oriented and requester-oriented, and others-oriented. The metadiscursive functions concern participants that belong to the text-internal world. This affirms the assertion that LoRs are written by, for and to. The ‘by’, ‘for’ and ‘to’ roles are performed by the recommender, the recommendee and the requester respectively.

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60 Akoto, “Individualities in the referents of I, we, and you”; Hyland, “Humble servants of the discipline?”; Ädel, “Metadiscourse in L1 and L2 English.”


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Table 3 shows that recommendee-oriented PPs are almost twice that of recommender-oriented. Some factors may have accounted for this marked difference. One, the genre is recommendee-centered such that what is said and unsaid directly and indirectly project the recommendee to the requesters for their judgments or evaluations. It is a recommendation of the recommendee; hence, their identity must be projected above all other participants. This classification consists of PPs that are related to the one about whom the LoR is written. PPs found in the corpus include he, she, his, her, and what we term recommendee-inclusive their. Further, it is noted that LoR is a genre by the recommender, about the recommendee, for the requester. Therefore, the recommendee needs to be foregrounded, and this is evidenced by the percentage of the recommendee-oriented pronouns.

The next highest category is the recommender-oriented category. This category comprises the PPs that directly designate the writer of the LoRs. They comprise first-person pronouns (1PP) such as I, my, and me. The author establishes credibility through his authorial presence, voice and stance since it is “a function associated with promotional genres and persuasion.” The credibility of the recommender will be to the advantage of the recommendee. It is, therefore, in the right direction for the recommenders, after projecting the image of the recommendee, to make themselves prominent. The recommenders draw on these PPs “to add some personal experience to the discourse.” The authors, through the PP I, established themselves, among other things as teachers/lecturers, supervisors, mentors, examiners/assessors and advisors. These roles are cast in the frequent PP + Verb patterns in the corpus.67 The verbs that collocate with the IPP manifest the explicit roles of the recommenders, or the relationship between the recommender and the recommendee.

Figure 2: Concordance output of IPP + verb patterns

Figure 2, hits 405, 408 and 422 These project the identities of the recommenders as supervisors, teachers and examiners respectively. These authorial roles are strategic because they help strengthen the persuasiveness of the text to increase the recommendee’s chance of being considered for the offer. Recommender-oriented pronouns are, therefore, important as they evidence the author’s attachment to the recommendee, and their familiarity with the personality, traits, competencies and weaknesses of the recommendee.

66 Ädel, “Metadiscourse in L1 and L2 English.”
67 Akbas, “Commitment-detachment and authorial presence in postgraduate academic writing.”
judgements, and assessments”. They allow recommenders to pass their judgements on the recommendee.

The penultimate category in terms of frequency of occurrence is the requester-oriented category. This class involves PPs that directly address the one to whom the LoR is written (e.g., educational institution, business entity/firm, scholarship body, customer, etc.). You and your were found in the corpus to be requester-oriented. As already mentioned, LoR is written by an individual, about an individual, for people (person or organization) whom Beard refers to as a narratee or a group of narratees. The one for whom the LoR is written is third on the list as shown in Table 2. It is justified to have the requester appear after the recommender and recommendee. LoRs are largely about the recommendee, whose consideration, to some extent, is dependent on the credibility of the recommender. The essence of requester-oriented PPs is mainly for interaction between the recommender and the requester. Recommender-requester interaction in LoR is mediated through the PPs you and your which are employed as engagement markers, as shown in Figure 3.

As can be observed from Figure 3 you is generally used by the recommender to address the requester in anticipation of seeking further information about the recommendee. This supports Ädel’s finding that ‘you’ is sometimes used to anticipate the reader’s reaction.

The final function of the PP is what is described as Others-oriented. This function is non-metadiscursive because the PPs are used to refer to people who are not one of the primary participants in the LoR. This concerns text-external participants who are referred to in the LoRs. It includes recommendee-exclusive their. We identified two forms of their in the corpus (i.e. recommendee-inclusive and recommendee-exclusive). These are exemplified by the concordance output in Figure 4.

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68 Biber et al., “Longman grammar of spoken and written English”.
69 Ädel, “Metadiscourse in L1 and L2 English.”.
70 Adrian Beard, The Language of Sport (Psychology Press, 1998).
72 Ädel, “Metadiscourse in L1 and L2 English.”
In hits 2, 3, and 4 in Figure 4, their included the recommendee, while in 1 and 5 their excluded the recommendee. However, both cases perform a rhetorical and communicative function as they both project a persuasive ethos of the recommendee. The exclusive their reveals the class of the recommendee and the discourse community the recommendee belongs to.

The use of singular and plural PPs

It is shown in Table 1 that plural PPs are very much limited in this genre. The high frequencies of the singular PPs (I and s/he) reveal the LoR as a highly subjective genre.73 The recommender-oriented category recorded only three instances of plural pronouns. This is revealing since LoRs are written by an individual (not a group or on a group’s behalf). Therefore, individual voices, stances and identities are required. The recommender thus presents what he knows about the recommendee. This is confirmed by the fifty-seven (57) I have known… (see Figure 5) structures in the corpus.

The prevalence of the singular recommender-oriented categories affirms the view that the LoR is always characterized by the first-person point of view.74 We occurred once, and even that it referred to the text/discourse external world.75

73Rajesh et al. “What are we really looking for in a letter of recommendation?”
74Schall, “Writing Recommendation Letters Online.”
We (self-inclusive) refers to the panel at the viva voce of the recommendee. This occurred once, and in a sense, it is used to buttress the author’s conviction about the competence of the recommendee. In the last paragraph of the LoR, the individual writer writes: I highly recommend him. This means that the recommendation is the responsibility of an individual, not a group of people. LoR writers, therefore, provide their subjective views about the personality of the recommendee. This suggests that in case of “recommendation inflation” or deflation, the recommender alone will be held liable. The prevalence of recommender-oriented pronouns demonstrates the writers’ explicit manifestation of their authorial presence and their attachment and relationship with the recommendee.

RECOMMENDATIONS
The present study is one of the few studies on LoRs in Ghana. LoRs play crucial roles in linking academia and industry given that academics, among others, usually write LORs for potential employees in the corporate world. It is suggested that academia and industry develop a legal framework that outlines the rights and responsibilities of the recommenders, the recommendees and the requesters. This will enable the parties to comply with such regulations and laws mindful of the socio-legal implications. Further, it is recommended that the model developed in this study be adopted to guide recommenders to ensure a balanced and realistic representation of recommendees to avoid inflating or deflating their identities in the LoRs.

CONCLUSION
The paper investigated pronominal choices in LoRs written by Ghanaian academics. As identity and engagement markers, PPs are classified as being recommender-oriented, recommendee-oriented, requester-oriented and others-oriented. The analysis revealed that PPs performed fourfold functions. For instance, their was seen to contextually function as recommendee-oriented or others-oriented. Further, the study has revealed that the subjective nature of LoR is evidenced by the dominance of singular recommender-oriented PPs. It demonstrates the individuality of the writer as he aims to provide his voice, stance, judgment and assessment on/of the recommendee. This shows that any positive or negative ethical or legal implications will be directed to the person, but not the group they belong to.

The study has three main implications. One, it supports the fact that prescriptive teaching of PPs is unhelpful to both teachers and learners of ESP. The findings reveal that corpus-driven teaching or data-driven learning/teaching should be employed and encouraged in the teaching of PPs as they are context-dependent. Moreover, the categories of PPs in LoRs have theoretical significance. It suggests that function-based models of PPs are not conclusive and that pronominal argumentation and theorization have not ended. The theoretical implication justifies the corpus-driven approach of the study as “[…] the corpus-driven linguist attempts to keep in constant touch with the evidence and to build up the theory step by step in the presence of massive corpus testimony.” Finally, the findings point to further research on letters of recommendation from other geopolitical settings to test the reliability of the present PP categories. Hence, an intercultural study of LoR can be undertaken to ascertain how different contexts influence the use of PPs in LoR.


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