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The multiple functions of the word 'one' in research articles

This corpus study arose from questions regarding appropriate usage of the word 'one' in academic writing for publication in cases of nominal substitution and when used as a generic pronoun. Are these usages avoided in research articles published today? What roles does 'one' play in journal articles? These questions were investigated in 15 recently published articles from the journal English for Specific Purposes. *Results show that 'one' used as a number is most frequent, occurs in all articles throughout main body, and often appears to have a role in organizing information. 'One' as a substitute for a previously appearing noun was used in ten of the articles as a cohesive device, most often in the results and discussion section, while the generic pronoun 'one' – used in five articles – was rather used inclusively than impersonally. The questions seem worth investigating further in a larger corpus.*

Keywords: *genre analysis, research articles, nominal substitution, generic pronoun*

Introduction

As all language users know, regardless of the language under discussion, certain styles of speech fit certain occasions, and speakers adjust structures and make word choices that are suitable for the particular situation. Part of growing to be a more proficient language user – whether in a first or additional language – is gaining proficiency in a variety of registers by learning the options available and by gathering input on conventional usage in different situations, from buying an ice cream cone to applying for a passport, from having a chat with neighbors to at least recognizing, if not producing, the language suitable in a courtroom. The same is naturally true of written language, where we distinguish different genres (a grocery list, a three-paragraph school essay, a love letter etc.) and their language use – structures, vocabulary, even format. We expand our knowledge through exposure and attention to a variety of texts and the contexts in which they are produced and read.

The process of becoming a proficient writer of research articles is a long and often difficult one that moves through a variety of steps and genres, often beginning with reading textbooks, referring to style guides, and reading and writing different types of texts as one's studies progress. One of the more difficult tasks is writing about one's own research or analysis, and one factor that makes this particularly difficult is that conventions and preferences may vary by discipline, or even by journal. While there certainly is a general body of knowledge that we may label "writing for research publication", different fields of study approach the task somewhat differently (e.g. Hyland, 2000). To become familiar with the preferences of a particular field or subfield, probably the best method is to read large numbers of articles in that area – which will normally occur as part of the research process in any case – and learn through this input. This can be a long process if the reader is more focused upon content than on language – which is where language experts can perhaps lend a hand.

When assisting authors with publication of their research, language experts adjust the text to a register suitable for academic publishing. The question examined in this study arose from situations in which I (in the role of a native-American English-speaking proofreader, reviewer, or translator) tended to make recommendations without knowing whether these

intuitions regarding two specific uses of the word *one* – as a nominal substitute and as a generic pronoun – were indicative of current usage in research articles.

The resources available to the general academic writer were consulted. Complete style guides typically used in applied linguistics publications (APA, MLA, Chicago Manual) were not available in the central library of the author's university; information from them that could be accessed online did not include information on either the nominal substitute or generic pronoun usage of *one*. One brief guide called for clarity, precision, and inclusion; the section on precision specified three items: *"Choose specific nouns and verbs. Avoid the editorial "we" to refer to all people. Provide exact numbers and statistics rather than approximations."* (APA style writing principles). The general information from major publishers was also vague: the most relevant information in a 12-page guide from Elsevier was *"Avoid using 'this' unqualified"*; it then points out that readers may guess wrong, and *"the writer serves the reader well by clearly qualifying"* (Griffies et al., 2013:7). A book on academic writing for novice writers briefly addresses the use of *one*, but just in a footnote: the author suggests avoiding the generic *one* or *we* when referring to both the author and reader, writing that *"if much of the paper is written in this style it can become very heavy for the reader"* (Wallwork, 2013:90). Thus, general reference materials were of little use to answer this question.

The primary objective of this pilot study is to examine recently published research articles (RAs) in an area of applied linguistics to explore the roles in which the word *one* is used and test the hypotheses regarding two uses: (1) the generic pronoun *one* is not often used in academic writing, and (2) nominal substitution with the pro-form *one* tends to be avoided.

Literature review

The word *one* is classified by Quirk et al. (1985) into three categories: 1) numerical *one*; 2) substitute *one*; and 3) generic *one*, and Biber et al. (1999) follow this system. Halliday and Hasan (1976) suggest five categories: 1) personal pronoun *one*; 2) number *one*; 3) nominal substitute *one*; 4) determiner *one* (as an alternative indefinite article, sometimes difficult to distinguish from the cardinal number); and 5) a pro-form *one* that does not refer to an earlier occurrence in the discourse (which seems more likely to occur in spoken discourse). This paper will take the classification put forward by Quirk et al. and also used by Biber et al. as its basis.

In the three-category approach, numerical *one* covers the use of the cardinal number (written out) either on its own or occurring as a determiner (*one boy*) or the head of a noun phrase (*one of the boys*). A corpus-based study by Biber et al. (1999) found that *one of the* is among the most common three-word lexical bundles in academic prose, with over 200 occurrences per million words.

Substitute *one* is used as a substitute for a head noun that is countable and can occur in the plural (*ones*). It is typically anaphoric, referring back to a noun already mentioned, but can be cataphoric (Quirk et al., 1985); Biber et al. (1999) report that in academic prose it is usually anaphoric, and is usually used with a modifier to add more or contrasting information about the referent. They also found that post-modification is more common in the academic corpus than the general corpus, presumably because relative clauses and other forms of post-modification can contain more information. To cite one of their examples: (1) *A black body is one that perfectly absorbs, and then re-emits, all radiation falling upon it.* (Biber et al., 1999: 582)

Halliday and Hasan (1976) point out that *one* as a nominal substitute fills the slot for a head noun that has been previously mentioned, without carrying over the head noun's modifying information, and *one* is typically accompanied by modifying information of its own (Halliday–Hasan, 1976). Thus, in Example 1 we read *one* as "a body" (and not "a black body") and it is followed by a defining relative clause. Substitution is listed in their classification of cohesion strategies as one type of grammatical cohesion. Biber et al. (1999) found that the use of substitute *one* is far higher in conversation than in any of the written corpora they examined

(fiction, news, and academic texts). The most commonly occurring variant in the academic corpus was *the one*/*the other one*, at 50 occurrences per million words, but around 400 per million in the conversation corpus.

One important effect of using substitute *one* is that repetition of words can be avoided. Traditionally, writers are often taught to avoid repeating words in elegant, well-formed writing and are encouraged to demonstrate a wide vocabulary. However, this is not necessarily the case in academic writing in English, where words – when used as specific terms of art, technical terms, or key words – should not be randomly varied to exhibit one's lexical versatility, as this may lead to different interpretations and confusion. Advice for novice academic writers may point this out (e.g., Tan 2019; Word choice). Because of this restriction regarding technical terms, there may be less need for using substitute *one* in more specialized types of academic texts, where repetition of the same key word or term is allowed or encouraged. Rating of student essays seems to reward this. Károly (2002) investigated repetition in university students' argumentative essays, finding that high-rated essays used more same-unit repetition than low-rated essays. This was backed up by Adorján (2015) in two small corpora of academic summaries and compare/contrast essays (again, by English L2 university students). This may link to less frequent usage of substitute *one* in research articles, as well.

Generic *one* is sometimes also termed impersonal *one*, particularly in works dealing with semantics and crosslinguistic studies. It is often contrasted with other pronouns: *"When we, you, and they are used with reference to people in general, they tend to retain a tinge of their basic meaning. Another possible form for general reference is one, which has no such personal overtones."* (Biber et al.,1999:331). Quirk et al. (1985) write that *one* refers to people in general but add *"often with particular reference to the speaker, e.g.: I like to dress nicely. It gives one confidence"* (Quirk et al., 1985:388). Pearson (2023) presents evidence to support the argument that *one* can imply first-hand experience, pointing out that the sentence *"One feels exhausted after running a marathon"* would sound rather strange if the speaker had never run a marathon themselves.

In academic discourse, the use of *one* as an impersonal pronoun is noted as one technique for making a text impersonal and conforming to an academic register (e.g. Hyland, 2002). However, its use in academic writing and more specifically research articles has received far less attention than studies of *I*, *we*, and *you* (see e.g. Bondi–Nocella, 2023; Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2023; Wang et al., 2021; Zapletalová, 2009) in studies related to authorial presence and impersonalization. Biber et al. (1999) note that generic *one* rarely appears in conversation; in written texts it occurs in fiction but is most often found in academic writing (400 occurrences per million words). Another study (Hardjanto–Roselani, 2022) compares corpora of research articles in linguistics, medicine, and natural science for features of impersonalization, finding that the generic use of personal pronouns such as *one* and *we* were less often used than *it*-clauses and personification (pairing inanimate subjects and active verbs, such as "the study discusses…"). The researchers found *one* to be slightly more frequent than *we*. Looking at disciplines, linguistics made more use of personification, *it*-clauses, and generic impersonal pronouns than the other two broad disciplines.

Some studies also note that the generic *one* can aid in aligning the writer with the reader as fellow researchers. In a study of research articles in the natural sciences and engineering, Kuo (1999) concluded that *one* was used for two purposes in the discourse: to generally refer to any researcher (not any person) stressing some shared aim, interest, or knowledge, and referring to writers (or writers and readers) when giving an opinion or action statement. Kuo points out that using *one "can make the opinion less personal and suggest that the opinion is widely held…or the action would be taken by any researcher in a given situation"* (Kuo, 1999:129). Hyland observes that generic *one*, which he calls an indefinite pronoun, is often used with

> *"...an interactive and encompassing meaning, which shows that writers are able to identify with readers, anticipating their objections, voicing their concerns, and expressing their views... the writer adopts the position of an imaginary reader to suggest what any reasonable, thinking member of the community might conclude or do."* (Hyland, 2001:557-58).

Hyland goes on to discuss this as a technique for claiming membership in the discourse community, treating the reader and writer as equals, while attempting to persuade the reader towards some desired reaction.

One important consideration when analyzing research articles is that the article is made up of different sections, each with a different set of purposes and linguistic resources that best fulfill them. Most genre analysis studies describe this using the IMRAD structure of Swales (1990), reflecting the very typical Introduction-Methods-Results-and-Discussion framework employed in most research studies, whether in physics or applied linguistics. Naturally, there are other parts of the research article that fulfill important functions, notably the title, abstract, and conclusions, and perhaps even the increasingly common highlights. Within each of these sections, there may be several moves – some of which are optional – to meet the aims of the writer and expectations of the reader (Swales, 1990). The different sections and the moves within them can affect the lexical and syntactic choices made, including – potentially – the use of *one* as a number, a generic pronoun, or a substitute.

As the literature on academic genres has not dealt with the usage of *one* in much detail, this matter seems worth looking into further, beginning with a pilot study of one recent issue of one applied linguistics journal with the objective of examining how often and in what circumstances each category of *one* appears.

Methods

The corpus is made up of fifteen articles in recent volumes of the journal *English for Specific Purposes* (from Volumes 76-78, October 2024–April 2025). The journal, published by Elsevier, is prestigious: it has been ranked in the top quartile (Q1) in two categories (Education; Language and Linguistics) since 2004 (Scimago Journal Ranking) and has a 2023 impact factor of 3.2 (Insights). The running word count is approximately 128,500 words, with tables, figures, footnotes/endnotes, references, and appendices omitted. The language status of authors (native speakers or second/additional language users) was not taken into consideration, as the broader aim is to gain a better understanding of writing for publication in an international context. A single journal was chosen in an attempt to avoid the factor of differing editorial or journal policies.

The articles were downloaded in pdf format and the search terms *one, ones*, and *one's* were used to find all appearances, which were then highlighted and manually counted. Each appearance of *one* was manually classified into one of three main categories by usage: 1) numerical, 2) substitution, or 3) generic. A fourth category, "other", was added for idiomatic uses such as *"on the one hand"*, *"one-off events"* and labels such as *"one-to-one interview"*, or *"one-way MANOVA"*. Instances of *one* that occurred in language examples were excluded, but instances in quotations were included, since the author had the option to paraphrase but chose not to do so. Items such as *"one-third"* or *"twenty-one"* were included as numbers.

In order to examine the possible effect of moves within the article, results were totaled for sections. The journal does not require a particular structure or labeling for section headings apart from the highlights and abstract, stating only *"Divide your article into clearly defined and numbered sections"* (Guide for Authors). Not all articles used the same division: for instance, some articles separated introductions from literature reviews, and it frequently proved difficult to separate out results (focusing on data and description) from discussion (interpretation, comparison) in some cases. For these reasons, my final decision was to analyze the results in

the following six categories: 1) highlights, 2) abstract, 3) introduction and literature review, 4) methods, 5) results and discussion, and 6) conclusion.

Results and discussion

In total, the word *one* appeared 194 times in the corpus of the 15 research articles. In order of frequency, there were 139 instances of *one* as a number (71.6%), 27 of substitute *one* (13.9%), generic *one* occurred 13 times (6.7%), while 15 items were in the 'other' category (7.7%). Given that each section of a research article has a different focus and function, it seemed potentially useful to look at occurrences on a different scale than entire articles, so instances were counted section by section; results are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Number of occurrences of *one* in different sections of the research articles, by category
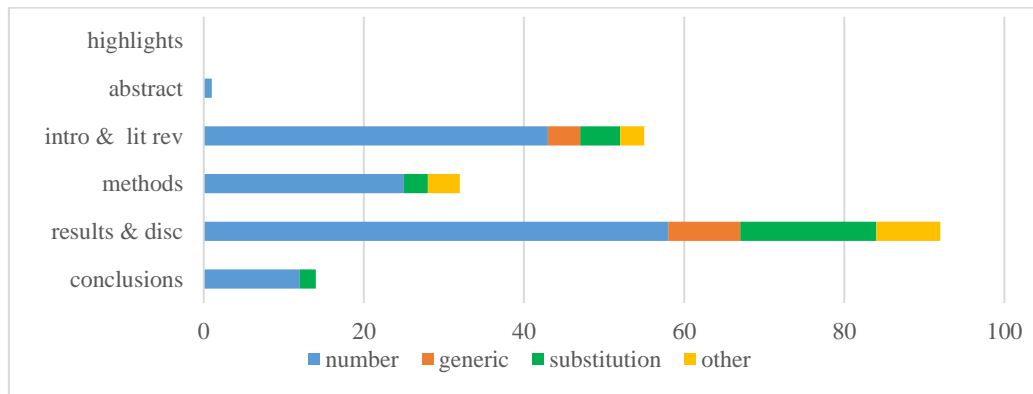
No instances of *one* are found in the highlights, and only one use appears in the abstract. If we consider that highlights are given in bullet points and not necessarily even connected to each other, then this makes sense: the role played by *one* in cohesion (reference, substitution, etc.) is largely irrelevant. Abstracts, while more cohesive texts, need to cover a variety of information and are limited in word count, and thus probably tend to avoid repetition. Similar results have been found in the literature in one category: a study on cohesion in conference abstracts (28 abstracts in the field of education) observed no instances of nominal substitution (Cabrejas, 2022). As for generic *one*, it usually seems to appear in longer stretches of text, for instance when building up an argument. This may also account for its absence in this corpus from the methods and conclusions sections.

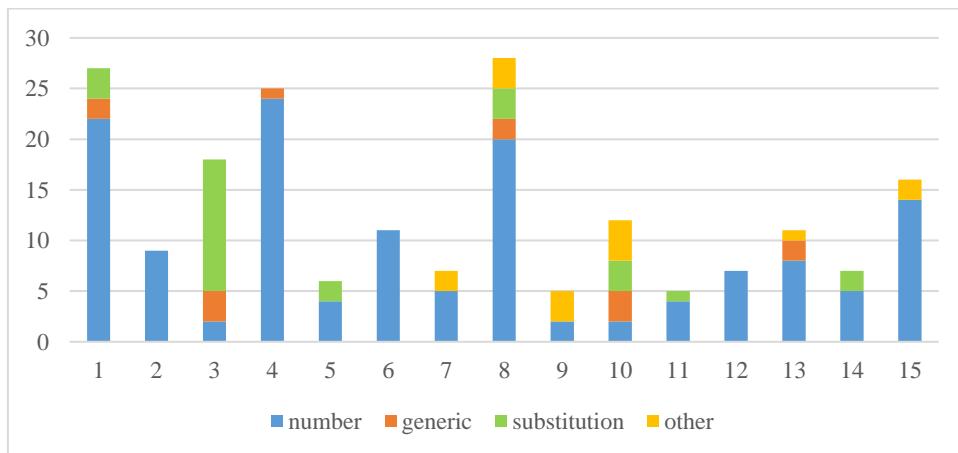Figure 2. Number of occurrences of *one* in the 15 research articles, by category

Figure 2 reveals rather striking differences among the articles, both in terms of the number of occurrences and the categories represented. Naturally, author preferences and perceptions of appropriate discourse conventions likely play a large role in this, but such an investigation is not within the scope of this pilot study. Another factor may be the type of information in focus, and indeed this seems to play a role in explaining higher numbers in in the frequency of *one*.

Examples of *one* as a number were found throughout all articles and all major sections. However, four articles showed a particularly high number-related figures. A closer look at the nature of the papers reveals characteristics that may be related to this phenomenon:

- RA1 is described as "a critical review" and thus focuses on an extensive literature review and discussion. It contains no methods or conclusions. *One* as a number frequently appears when introducing references and describing studies:
  (2) *"One of the first discipline-specific pedagogic initiatives is reported in…"* (RA1)
  (3) *"The study explores one grammatical feature of… "*(RA1)

- RA4 is an observation-based study, and *one* introduces examples of interaction patterns or topics:
  (4) *"The following excerpt exemplifies one of those CF instances where…"*(RA4)
  (5) *"Excerpt 11 demonstrates one of those instances…"*(RA4)

- RA8 is a questionnaire study, and *one* often appears when discussing information from individual respondents:
  (6) *"For instance, as one engineer mentioned,…."* (RA8)
  (7) *"According to one of the instructors,…"* (RA8)

- RA 15 involves both a questionnaire and an interview, and *one* is especially common when discussing responses from participants:
  (8) *"One aviation English teacher also observed that instructor-student ratios had increased."* (RA15)

Other studies also involved reporting responses but chose a different strategy of more precise identification: RA 7 used "Interviewee 2", for instance.

Instances of *one* for substitution appear in ten of the 15 articles. Some examples are:

(9) *"The researchers are mindful that the **journal corpus** is an 'analogue' **one**:…"*(RA1)
(10) *"…, a quite different **situation** from the **one** in which most individual ESP tutors find themselves."* (RA1)
(11) *"Longer **words** convey more specific and specialized meaning than shorter **ones.**" (Biber, 1988, p. 104).* (RA5)
(12) *"The **ESP course** in the university was a typical English course held for civil engineering students in Iran and was the only **one** the university offered."* (RA8)
(13) *"In this study, meaningless **repetitions**, contrasting intentional **ones**, are indicators of disfluency."* (RA14)

One article makes especially frequent use of substitution: RA3, which compares two corpora. The instances of nominal substitution occur almost entirely in the sections corresponding to results and discussion. The first three examples from the section are shown here:

(14) *"The results show that both the US and Chinese letters share a similar distribution of grammatical structures,* **from the most common construction** *N + post-nominal clause* **to the least used one** *Determiner + be + N."* (RA3)

(15) *"***Anaphoric expressions** *allow CEOs/chairpersons to connect with the information mentioned retrospectively (e.g., this process), whereas* **cataphoric ones** *predict the following message by…"* (RA3)

(16) **"The US texts** *use significantly more anaphoric and cataphoric references than* **the Chinese ones**.*"* (RA3)

The majority of occurrences after this are used as in Example (16), i.e., when comparing results from the US corpus with those from the Chinese corpus. Its use is presumably intended to avoid repetition. Nominal substitution in other articles is far less frequent (up to three occurrences), and eight of the 15 articles do not use it at all.

The generic *one* occurs in six of the 15 articles. Most common is inclusive, collegial usage in which the author and reader are considered as members of the same group. This tends to be of the "informed people/academic writers/researchers like us" type:

(17) *"Similarly, it seems to be a cross-disciplinary norm to use causal connectives to account for* **one's results** *and possible contrasts with previous findings in the discussion section."* (RA10)

(18) *"By pasting the text into Vocabprofiler,* **one can get** *the frequency profile including the most frequent 1000 and 2000 GSL words, AWL words and off-list words."* (RA13)

This also seems to be the case in Examples (19) and (20), but addition of the modal verb 'might' adds a flavor of "a reasonable/experienced researcher":

(19) *"The references section of these fifteen studies were perused and,* **as one might expect,** *cross-references to previous studies were made in more recent accounts, …."* (RA1)

(20) *"The common core vs. specific debate has incited much discussion in the literature in early work in ESP. Even though* **one might agree**, *in principle, with Hyland's (2002) viewpoint on specificity, it is not always feasible to implement a highly specialised course in contexts involving…."* (RA1)

It is not always easy to interpret the use of generic *one* in texts. Example (21) can be interpreted as either inclusive – all those who have had the experience of speaking in front of an audience (which will probably include all readers) – or impersonal, while Example (22) seems to be impersonal; it does not seem that the Chinese authors would identify it as referring to themselves and the readers, rather "a person":

(21) *"Undoubtedly, public speaking or impromptu communication can be anxiety-inducing regardless of the number of times* **one has performed it**.*"* (RA8)

(22) *"The greater density of interactional metadiscursive nouns in the US discourse is embedded in the Anglo-American preference for using direct and explicit code to manifest* **one's** *authenticity…"* (RA3)

Despite the limited number of research articles investigated, some patterns seem to emerge from the occurrences of *one* that allow us glimpses into broader issues in studies of

research article writing and analysis, such as introducing information, textual cohesion, and authorial presence and positioning.

Conclusions

The use of the word *one* was investigated in this pilot study comprising 15 research articles from a recent issue of the journal *English for Specific Purposes*. At nearly 72% of the occurrences, *one* as a number far outweighed its function as a nominal substitute (nearly 14%) or generic pronoun (6.7%). Even in this small corpus, however, considerable variation was found in the number of occurrences among the research articles, with a small majority never using the generic *one* or substitution. Similarly, there are sections of the articles where it is more likely to find all three types (the Introduction and the Results and Discussion sections), while no instances of any type were found in the Highlights section and just one use in an abstract. Results also indicate that the characteristics of an article – such as a review versus an original study – or types of data reporting may influence how often *one* appears in the text. Naturally, with so small a corpus, based on articles from only one journal, these results cannot be relied upon but can perhaps demonstrate that this one small word has a larger role to play than one might think at first.

 The question that prompted this pilot study concerned whether language experts should encourage or discourage the use of the substitute *one* or the generic *one* when proofreading or translating manuscripts of research articles. Regarding the nominal substitute, it seems best to reserve judgement until a larger sample is investigated. When it comes to the generic *one*, although it was used in only five of the articles investigated, there is a clear tendency towards use in an inclusive sense.

 There are numerous topics that deserve more thorough investigation. One is the role of *one* as a number in the cohesion of texts, including topics such as the effect of its position in the theme or rheme and its combination with ellipsis. The relation of nominal substitution and register requires deeper investigation. Furthermore, it may be worth exploring the connection between specific moves within RA sections, particularly when examining the role played by generic *one* in the negotiation of the relationship between author and reader and its possible persuasive function. Future research in any of these topics would naturally demand a much larger corpus, representing more journals and a wider range of subdisciplines within language studies.

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A *one* szó többféle funkciója angol nyelvű tudományos cikkekben

Ezt a korpuszvizsgálatot szerzői kérdések inspirálták, amelyek a 'one' szó tudományos publikációkban történő megfelelő alkalmazására vonatkoztak helyettesítő névmásként és általános névmásként való használat esetén. Kerülik-e ezek használatát a szerzők a napjainkban publikált tudományos cikkekben? Milyen szerepet játszik a 'one' szó a folyóiratcikkekben? A jelen tanulmány ezekre a kérdésekre keresi a választ 15 cikkalapján, amelyek az „English for Specific Purposes" című folyóiratban jelentek meg a közelmúltban. Az eredmények azt mutatják, hogy a 'one' szó számnévként való használata a leggyakoribb; ebben a formában minden cikkben előfordul a szövegtörzsben, és számos alkalommal szerepet játszik az információk rendszerezésében. Korábban megjelenő főnév helyettesítőjeként a 'one' szó tíz cikkben szerepel kötőelemként, leggyakrabban az eredmények és a tárgyalás részben, míg az általános névmásként funkcionáló 'one' – amely öt cikkben jelent meg – inkább inkluzív, mint személytelen referenciaként jelent meg. A kérdéseket érdemes tovább vizsgálni egy nagyobb korpuszon.

Kulcsszavak: *műfajelemzés, tudományos cikkek, helyettesítő névmás, általános névmás*