



Indexing Academic Identity: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Variations in Hedges and Boosters in BS (Hons) Assignments of Stylistics Code 9062 in Relation to Research Rabbit Use

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how undergraduate students in a Stylistics course (Code 9062) at AIOU index academic identity through interactional markers, specifically hedges and boosters in their assignments. It aims to examine the variation in the construction of academic identity through the implication of hedges and boosters by distance based education learners. A corpus is made of eight assignments of course stylistics and the corpus-based analysis is made on the basis of Silverstein's (1976) theory of indexicality. The integration of Research Rabbit, an online citation mapping tool, is examined as a variable influencing these discourse strategies. Findings reveal significant variation in hedges and booster usage tied to disciplinary conventions, computer mediated discourse analysis highlighting the dynamic integration between digital tools and the construction of academic identity.



Introduction

Academic writing is a medium where linguistic choice interacts with identity construction, particularly through interactional markers, which highlights the writer's identity in relation to knowledge and disciplinary norms (Ahmad, Iqbal & Rao, 2023; Sadaf et al., 2024). In higher education, these strategies examined through the use of hedges and boosters: the interactional discourse features that temper or strengthen the force of propositions. Hedges, such as could be or likely, allow writers to signal tentativeness and softness of the claim, thereby acknowledging

alternative perspectives and maintaining academic caution. Conversely, boosters, such as clearly, obviously, and certainly, convey strong commitment to claims, reinforcing authority and reducing suspicion. Hyland (1998, 2005). The balance between these two categories reflects not only rhetorical competence but also the sociolinguistic performance of academic identity.

For BS (Hons) English students, particularly in linguistics-focused courses such as Stylistics (Code 9062) at Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), mastering this balance is a marker of academic maturation. Their written assignments require them to engage in interpretive and analytical work, positioning themselves simultaneously as novice learners and as legitimate contributors to academic discourse. This position is negotiated through stance markers, which can be studied both for their local rhetorical functions and their broader identity-indexing roles.

The present study approaches this phenomenon through the lens of Silverstein's (1976) theory of indexicality, which conceptualizes linguistic features as social signs pointing beyond propositional meaning. At the first-order indexical level, hedges and boosters index epistemic standpoint of tentativeness, certainty within the immediate context of a proposition.

At the second-order indexical level, their patterned use across texts becomes a contextual signal of the writer's academic persona, aligning them with the epistemic and rhetorical norms of their discourse community. By adopting this framework, the study treats hedges and boosters not simply as stylistic elements but as sociolinguistic tools that encode identity work in academic writing.

A distinctive dimension of this research is its focus on the role of Research Rabbit, a digital literature discovery and citation management tool, in shaping stance-taking and citation behavior. As AI-driven academic technologies become increasingly integrated into the research process, they influence not only what sources students engage with but also how they construct arguments, manage intertextuality, and signal epistemic positioning. This study situates itself at the intersection of corpus-based discourse analysis and digital literacy studies, integrating a Research Rabbit-assisted corpus to examine how AI-supported citation patterns interact with the distribution and function of hedges and boosters in student writing.

While existing scholarship has examined hedges and boosters in professional and postgraduate academic writing Hyland (2005); Biber et al (2021), little is known about how undergraduate writers in Pakistan traverse these discourse devices when their writings are mediated by AI-powered tools. This study addresses that gap, offering both empirical evidence and theoretical insight into the sociolinguistic implications of such mediation.

Research Questions

1. How do hedges and boosters vary in assignments influenced by Research Rabbit?
2. In what ways do hedges and boosters function as indexical markers of identity in student writing?
3. How does the integration of Research Rabbit shape students' stance-taking and citation behavior?

Research Objectives

1. To explore the variation in discourse markers between traditional and AI-supported citation patterns.

2. To analyze how interactional markers index academic voice and identity.
3. To investigate the sociolinguistic implications of digital citation tools in academic discourse.

By addressing these questions and objectives, this study aims to contribute to three intersecting areas of scholarship: (1) sociolinguistic analyses of discourse and identity in learner writing; (2) corpus-based methodologies for examining interactional metadiscourse; and (3) critical perspectives on how AI-supported research tools reshape the epistemic and rhetorical practices of novice academic writers. In doing so, it offers a nuanced account of how Pakistani undergraduate students negotiate epistemic caution and assertion, and how digital research environments mediate the indexing of academic identity.

Literature Review

Literature review is a written overview of major writings and other sources on a selected topic. Sources covered in the review may include scholarly journal articles, books, and websites. The purpose of literature review is to gain an understanding of the existing research and debates relevant to a particular research topic (Anjum & Zafar, 2022; Rao et al., 2023; Ahmad et al., 2025). Following is the literature review of present study.

Academic Identity in Student Writing

Academic identity refers to the ways in which writers position themselves as knowledgeable, credible, and aligned with the epistemological norms of their discipline. This positioning is not static but is constructed and negotiated through language choices that signal authority, engagement, and membership within an academic community Ivanic (1998; Hyland (2012). For novice writers, especially undergraduates, this process often involves balancing the competing demands of demonstrating mastery of subject matter while acknowledging their developing expertise Lea & Street (1998). The linguistic strategies employed to achieve this balance such as hedging to display caution or boosting to show confidence, are of central to identity performance in academic discourse.

In the Pakistani higher education context, research on academic identity construction remains limited, with most studies focusing on postgraduate or professional academic writing Shamim & Tribble (2020). Undergraduate writing, particularly in English-medium programs like BS (Hons) English, represents a fertile yet underexplored medium for examining how emerging scholars negotiate standpoint and authority through metadiscourse.

Stance-Taking through Hedges and Boosters

Stance-taking involves the expression of attitudes, judgments, or commitments toward a proposition Biber & Finegan, (1989); Du Bois (2007). Within Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse, *hedges* and *boosters* are key interactional markers for managing stance. Hedges such as *could*, *might*, *possibly* signal tentativeness, allowing writers to present claims as open to discussion, thereby creating space for alternative interpretations. Boosters such as *clearly*, *certainly*, *obviously* project strong authorial commitment, reinforcing the writer's authority and reducing interpretive flexibility.

The balance between these two categories is context-sensitive: research suggests that academic novices often overuse boosters in an attempt to assert authority or, conversely, overuse hedges to

avoid taking strong positions (Hyland, 1998; Crompton, 1997). Corpus-based studies have demonstrated that disciplinary norms and genre conventions shape the distribution of hedges and boosters, with science-oriented texts typically favoring hedges to reflect the provisional nature of claims, while humanities texts display a wider range of boosting devices Vassileva (2001); Biber et al., (2021). However, there is still limited research on how digital research tools might mediate these stance choices in student writing.

Indexicality and the Sociolinguistics of Stance

Silverstein's (2003) theory of indexicality offers a sociolinguistic lens for understanding stance markers as more than textual devices. At the first-order indexical level, hedges and boosters directly signal the writer's epistemic position uncertainty or certainty relative to a proposition. At the second-order indexical level, repeated patterns of such markers become socially meaningful, functioning as cues to the writer's broader academic persona. This means that the presence, absence, or frequency of a given stance marker can serve as an *index* of the writer's identity, authority, and disciplinary alignment.

Recent studies in sociolinguistic discourse analysis have applied indexicality to academic writing to explore how linguistic resources signal not just what is said, but also who the writer is positioning themselves to be Mortensen (2011); Zhang (2020). This approach is particularly relevant to undergraduate writing, where stance markers often reflect both learned conventions and the writer's own negotiation of voice within the constraints of academic expectations.

Corpus-Based Approaches to Stance Analysis

Corpus linguistics offers a robust methodology for examining hedges and boosters systematically, allowing researchers to identify their frequency, collocation patterns, and functional distribution across large datasets Biber et al. (1999); Baker (2006). When integrated with discourse analysis, corpus-based approaches can reveal not only quantitative trends but also the qualitative functions of stance markers in context. Studies have employed tools such as AntConc and Sketch Engine to analyze stance across disciplines, genres, and proficiency levels, producing insights into both the micro-level linguistic choices and the macro-level discourse patterns of academic writing Charles (2003); Hyland & Jiang (2016).

For undergraduate writing, corpus-based stance analysis has the potential to highlight developmental patterns, pinpointing areas where instructional interventions may enhance interactional discourse competence. However, the availability of learner corpora, especially in the Pakistani EFL context, remains limited, making the compilation of course-specific datasets both a methodological necessity and a scholarly contribution.

Digital Research Tools and Academic Writing: The Case of ResearchRabbit

With the proliferation of AI-supported academic tools, research processes are increasingly mediated by platforms that shape not only source discovery but also citation practices and argument construction. ResearchRabbit is a literature mapping and recommendation tool that enables users to explore related works, visualize scholarly networks, and manage citations efficiently. Its algorithmic recommendations have the potential to influence the thematic scope of research, the intertextual network of citations, and, indirectly, the rhetorical positioning of the writer.

While prior studies on reference management tools like Zotero, Mendeley, and EndNote have highlighted their role in facilitating organization and improving citation accuracy Chen & Han (2018), there is minimal empirical research on how these tools impact stance-taking in written output. In particular, there is a gap in understanding whether AI-supported citation discovery leads to changes in the distribution or function of hedges and boosters, as students engage with potentially more diverse or authoritative sources.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The reviewed literature establishes that hedges and boosters are central to the construction of academic identity that indexicality offers a powerful framework for interpreting their sociolinguistic functions, and that corpus-based methods are well-suited to their systematic analysis. However, there remains a notable gap in integrating these strands to investigate how AI-driven research tools, such as Research Rabbit, mediate stance-taking in undergraduate academic writing. This study addresses this gap by combining corpus-based analysis, sociolinguistic theory, and a digital literacy perspective to examine the indexing of academic identity in BS (Hons) Stylistics assignments.

Research Methodology

Research methodology is the part of the research study in which researchers give an account of the research methods, which they have used to conduct their research (Ahmad, Maitlo & Jeevan, 2023; Saleem et al., 2024; Yousaf et al., 2025). Design of the research comprises of the whole procedure which is conducted research (Ahmad, Farhat & Choudhary, 2022; Naz & Zafar, 2023; Arshad et al., 2025). This study employed mixed-methods, corpus-based discourse analysis to investigate variations in hedges and boosters as indexical markers of academic identity in BS (Hons) Stylistics (Code 9062) assignments from AIOU, Autumn 2024. The dataset comprised eight anonymized assignments, divided into ResearchRabbit-assisted Files 8 and sub-corpora. Stance markers were identified using Hyland's (2005) taxonomy, supplemented by corpus-specific forms, and coded for type, linguistic form, indexical level, and citation context. Quantitative analysis was conducted in AntConc (v4.0) with normalized frequency counts and collocation profiles, while qualitative discourse interpretation applied Silverstein's (2003) indexicality framework to examine first-order (epistemic stance) and second-order (identity projection) functions. ResearchRabbit-assisted assignments were further analyzed for citation diversity and stance-source interactions. Reliability was ensured through double-coding of 20% of the corpus ($\kappa = 0.88$), and validity through triangulation across tools and literature. Ethical clearance was secured, and all data were anonymized with participant consent.

Data Analysis

This study investigates how BS (Hons) English students in Stylistics (Code 9062) assignments index academic identity using interactional markers, particularly hedges and boosters, and how the use of ResearchRabbit potentially influences these patterns. The following analysis interprets the data based on Hyland's (2005) framework and Silverstein's (1976) theory of indexicality. The first part focuses on the analysis of hedges as:

Hedges: Indexing Epistemic Caution and Tentativeness

Hedges identified: *perhaps, maybe, likely, might, could be*

The implication of these hedging devices suggest epistemic modality, where the writer conveys uncertainty, tentativeness, **or** openness to interpretation, key traits in academic writing.

Hedges		
Perhaps	Frequency	6
	Files	3, 6, 7, 8, 4,4
Maybe	Frequency	3
	Files	3,6,7
Likely	Frequency	9
	Files	6,7,3,1,2,6,7,3,8
Might	Frequency	45
	Files	6,7,3,5,5,1,2,6,7,8,3,6,7,3,6,7,3,1,2,8,3,6,7,6,7,6,7,1,2,8,5,5,5,5,8,3,8,8,4,5,3,5,5,4
could be	Files	6
	Frequency	8,8,5,3,6,7

Boosters		
Clearly	Frequency	6
	Files	3, 6, 7, 6,7,3
Obviously	Frequency	4
	Files	1
certainly	Frequency	7
	Files	6,7,3,1,2,3,8

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood"

sets the stage for the central metaphor of the poem. The word "diverged" implies a clear division or split between two paths, a metaphor for life's choices. The adjective "yellow" further adds an autumnal, perhaps melancholic tone to the setting, suggesting that time is running out and decisions must be made before the opportunity passes.

Perhaps	Frequency	6
	Files	3, 6, 7, 8, 4,4

Here the usage of hedges perhaps is presenting the attempt of the poet to maintain analytical distance, avoiding complete certainty and making a subjective identity. This interpretation is of

hedge perhaps is also open for the BS learners to explain them open endingly and to construct their subjective academic identities.

The poetic line “The adjective ‘yellow’ further adds an autumnal, perhaps melancholic tone...”, with the usage of the hedge “perhaps” fulfills a distinctive, multi-layered personality reflection of learners within Silverstein’s framework of indexicality exploring the interpretation of this linguistic feature as learner’s broader identity signal.

On its first part perhaps applied by the poet in stylistics is directly marking the writer’s identity, signaling interpretative caution rather than an assertive claim. This tentative approach aligns with how emerging academic learners often position themselves in scholarly contexts demonstrating awareness of the provisional nature of their interpretations rather than adopting an overly authoritative tone. This led to construct the learner’s identities. This cautious metadiscursive strategy is supported by corpus-based studies showing that hedges like *perhaps* help learners to establish their uncertain looks and express individual thoughts. Ebrahimi et al.,(2023)

On the second part, *perhaps* here is also signaling the writer’s identity as reflective, reproductive in social context, and aligned with academic conventions that which are responsible for stylistic variations. In the context of this research, this mirrors how BS (Hons) students in Stylistics evoke tentative authority through similar hedging strategies in their assignments. Their use of hedges like *perhaps* does not merely soften claims; it is also indexing to their position as reproductive scholars making their social individual voices.

Meanwhile, the hedge *perhaps* in this extract exemplifies how this linguistic choice not only marking the cautious interpretation but also signaling the deeper aspects of scholarly positioning. Through AntCont tracking its frequency 6 times as used in the file number 3, 6, 7, 8, 4,4 this functions to represent the learner’s knowledge of stylistic indexes, especially in relation to ResearchRabbit use on comparative grounds. This applicability also provides a window into how students reshape their academic identity from uncertainty to confident academic social voices.

When analyzed through a ResearchRabbit an AI mapping citation tool, particularly comparing assignments before and after the usage of this tool, interesting variations are being examined: indicating of growing academic stylistic confidence in learners as compared to earlier. This variation captures both first-order indexicality changes from uncertainty to **second-order indexicality** as evolving academic identity on sociolinguistic grounds.

Maybe

<i>Maybe</i>	Frequency	3
	Files	3,6,7

Maybe

Frequency 3 files 6,7,3

7. Adverbs like probably, certainly, and maybe also convey epistemic modality.

In this data, hedge such as maybe and probably are applied in combination with the booster, certainly” each signaling the mixed understanding of stylistic indexes on the part of the learner. It is ranging from uncertainty *maybe* to moderate *probability* to stronger claim of certainty as *certainly*. Under Silverstein’s framework of indexicality, these indexes reveal the learner’s

immediate shift from uncertainty to assuredness. This mixed usage of hedges with boosters is signaling a more encompassing and strong academic identity of the learner.

Moreover, when analyzed using a ResearchRabbit tool, these distinctions become visible across a wide variety of literature on single click. This is illustrating how learners can identify the research gaps and can work confidently to illustrate the novel ideas in their researches.

As much as they increasingly engage with the ResearchRabbit tool they get all the relevant literary references in integration with Zotero. This access to the authoritative or identified literature through ResearchRabbit suggests that the corpus of eight assignments reveal a decline in the usage of maybe that moved towards more assertive alternatives like *probably* or *certainly*. This shift exemplifies both a change in the construction of academic identity of learners from uncertainty to the indexing of evolving academic identity and then to confident academic author of the assignments.

On quantitative basis AntConc is used to measure the frequency of hedge, maybe is found 3 times in the selected corpus in file numbers 3,6 and 7. This calculation is also exploring the learner's understanding of the applicability of stylistic indexes as a source of constructing their identity of soft or uncertain writers.

This interpretation aligns with the findings as showing that hedges and boosters are central to academic persuasion authors use them to adjust the strength of their assertions and to align them with disciplinary norms.

Thus, tracking the frequency and distribution of "maybe," "probably," and "certainly" in learner's assignments with and without ResearchRabbit integration, opens a window into how students linguistically index their developing academic identity: moving from guarded hesitancy to confident scholarly assertion.

Likely

<i>Likely</i>	Frequency	9
	Files	6,7,3,1,2,6,7,3,8

File:7

It provides information about the degree of certainty, necessity, or possibility regarding the action or state described by the verb in a sentence. Modality indicates whether something is likely possible, obligatory, or merely hypothetical, and it can reveal the speaker's subjective stance, such as approval, doubt, permission, or obligation

In these Stylistics assignments (Course Code 9062), the hedge *likely* appeared nine times across multiple files 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and 8, with repeated occurrences in some files 3,6 and 7. This relatively high recurrence suggests that *likely* serves as a preferred interactional marker for expressing indexical features as indicating a speaker's assessment of possibility rather than certainty.

As the extract illustrates that the modality conveys the degree of certainty, necessity, or possibility regarding an action or state, with *likely* pointing to the softer claim.

Under the framework of Silverstein's (2003) indexicality, the use of *likely* functions as an indexical sign pointing to the learner's stylistic practices and identity as firstly *likely* alleviates

assertiveness, allowing the writer to present claims as conditional and revisable rather than absolute.

Secondly, such hedging indexes the normative expectations of academic discourse, where caution and evidential qualification signals the credibility of the learner. (Hyland, 2005). Thirdly, under the influence of ResearchRabbit-assisted research writing, this frequent use of *likely* further indexes the writer's identity as a proficient academic writer, aware of the need to align their claims with general or seed evidence emerging from digital research tools.

Moreover, the distribution of *likely* across different assignments suggests that students are internalizing this hedging strategy as part of constructing their disciplinary identity performance. In alignment with interactional metadiscourse theory, *likely* allows the learners to balance knowledge display and humility (Hyland & Tse, 2004), thereby constructing an academic self that is both informed and critically cautious. This of indexical forms reflects what Silverstein terms an indexical order shift, where a linguistic form not only marks modality but also indexes in integration to an identity of academic community that values measured, evidence-based reasoning.

Might

Countering the Criticism

<i>Might</i>	Frequency	45
	Files	6,7,3,5,5,1,2,6,7,8,3,6,7,3,6,7,3,1,2,8,3,6,7,6,7,6,7,1,2,8,5,5,5,5,8,3,8,8,4,5,3,5,5,4

Integration with Traditional Approaches

Emphasize that stylistics is not a replacement but an extension of literary criticism. It helps uncover linguistic subtleties that might otherwise go unnoticed.

In this extract the hedge *might* emerges as the most frequent epistemic marker, appearing 45 times across a wide range of files, as mentioned in the table above with especially dense clustering in files 5, 6, and 7. This high frequency suggest that *might* functions at the first-order indexical level (Silverstein, 2003) as an expression of possibility, directly illustrating the writer's reduced epistemic commitment to the claim. In stylistic academic, this hedging aligns with Hyland's (1998, 2005) description of hedges as devices that "withhold complete commitment to a proposition" while keeping the other perspectives as open-ended.

Moreover, under the influence of Silverstein's framework of indexicality *might* serves as a strategic cautious, evidence-based argumentation claim making resource. It suggests that the usage of *might* is representing the uncertain identity of the learner, while integrating stylistics with traditional literary criticism. As the statement *stylistics is not a replacement but an extension... it helps to uncover linguistic complexities that might otherwise go unnoticed*" the student's application of this *might* tends to represent his/ her softer claim, avoiding the assuredness. This mirrors Myers' (1989) observation that hedging in academic writing operates as a politeness strategy, showing regard to potential dissenting views.

The third-order indexical level suggests that *might* operates metapragmatically or how talk should be understood. It is indexing the writer's awareness of academic identity as a cautious identity. The

frequent usage of *might* reflects a reflexive orientation towards academic discourse as collaborative stylistic construction. This identity construction under the influence of ResearchRabbit tool, presents a review of peer-reviewed articles in front of the students, where claims are often tentatively framed. This repeated exposure works to highlight the similar works in according to the timelines as socializing the academic texts where modal hedges function as markers of credibility and intellectual humility (Tang & John, 1999).

Hence, *might* in this corpus not only encode possibility but also performs identity work. Moreover, it values interpretive openness, particularly in constructing stylistics individuality. Its distribution across the corpus highlights its role as a key indexical **tool** in the construction of an academic persona grounded in epistemic caution and scholarly diplomacy.

Could be

<i>could be</i>	Files	6
	Frequency	8,8,5,3,6,7

"He could be the one who called." (The speaker suggests a probable scenario, though not certain.)

In the selected corpus, the modal phrase *could be* occurs eight times across files 8, 8, 5, 3, 6, and 7, with higher frequency in 8,8 files making multiple interpretations on the basis of a softer hedge. At the first-order indexical level (Silverstein, 2003), *could be* functions as a modal hedge denoting possibility rather than certainty, allowing the learner to make a claim while acknowledging alternative interpretations. As the extract given above "He could be the one who called," illustrates that the speaker suggests a probable situation without fully committing to its truth value. Such hedging accommodates with Hyland's (1998, 2005) definition of epistemic devices that modulate the strength of propositions to maintain academic caution.

Moving to second-order of indexicality, *could be* emerges as a standpoint that reflects the learner's pointing toward their argument. Its use in student assignments often appears in contexts where multiple readings are possible, such as textual interpretation or stylistic analysis, thus setting the theme of open-ended views. By providing this open-endedness, students avoid overstating their claims, a practice Myers (1989) associates with scholarly politeness and deference to the reader's potential counter-interpretations.

Next, this hedge *could be* is indexing the learner's alignment with the stylistic patterns of their discipline and their awareness of the applicability of softer or flexible hedges. In this regard the learner's exposure to academic literature is examined through ResearchRabbit where hedges are prevalent in journal articles stating as students frame their discourse more with flexible interactional markers. This not only suggests their competence in academic discourse conventions but also reflects an identity of the student-writer as a careful, critically engaged scholar who prioritizes evidence-based reasoning over absolute assertion (Tang & John, 1999).

Moreover, the hedge *could be* operates in this corpus as more than a syntactic hedge; it serves as an indexical tool for managing epistemic commitment, negotiating interpretive space.

Boosters: Indexing Certainty and Confidence

Boosters identified: *clearly, obviously, certainly, definitely, in fact*

These express emphatic certainty, asserting confidence in claims: key in indexing authority or assertiveness in student writing.

Clearly

<i>Clearly</i>	Frequency	6
	Files	3, 6, 7, 6,7,3

File: 7 Additional Examples:

1. "They explained the situation clearly."
2. Sayer: "They"
3. Process: "explained"
4. Receiver: "the situation"
5. Verbiage: "clearly"

In the BS (Hons) Stylistics corpus, the booster *clearly* appears six times across files 3, 6, and 7, with a slightly higher concentration in files 6 and 7. This distribution suggests that its use is more prevalent in sections where students provide explanations, evaluations, or strong assertions, reinforcing their positioning in analytical discussions. It is elaborated from the extract from File 7 as stated above *where clearly* functions as an intensifier that emphasizes the certainty of explanation, leaving little room for ambiguity.

Under Silverstein's (2003) framework of indexicality, *clearly* directly indexes certainty in discourse. It signals the speaker's standpoint that the explanation is not only accurate but also presented in an understandable way, thus projecting the impact of certainty. Moreover, repeated use of such boosters reflects the learner's academic identity as making assured or firm claims.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, within the framework of *Indexing Academic Identity*, the use of *clearly* reflects an intentional identity construction of the learner.

The ResearchRabbit tool assists in incorporating the social perspectives from the most similar literary contexts. The observed similar literary patterns reflect the gaps on the basis of which the gap of this research got identified. In doing so, they construct a discursive identity that balances assertive claim-making with other interactional markers, such as hedges, to achieve both credibility and rhetorical effectiveness.

Obviously

<i>Obviously</i>	Frequency	4
	Files	1

The educator made sense of the idea obviously.

- *He asked me for bearings*

Here, the booster *obviously* appears four times, all within File 1, indicating a localized but purposeful use in early sections of student writing. In the above mentioned extract the adverb operates as a rhetorical intensifier that strengthens the writer's evaluation of the learner's clarity. In this extract, *obviously* signals that the explanation was self-evident, thereby minimizing potential doubt. This reflects the Hyland's (2005) view of boosters as interactional markers that increase the level of assuredness.

Moreover, *obviously* indexes a high degree of learner's certainty and presumes shared understanding between the writer and reader. It functions as an interactional marker that presents the learner as the holder of certain information.

Besides that, this choice also reflects the confident identity of the learner through his assertiveness and evaluative control over the discourse.

Moreover, from a sociolinguistic perspective, the placement of *obviously* within File 1 may reflect the initial argumentative framing of the assignment, where students attempt to establish credibility early on. Meanwhile, ResearchRabbit citations further reveal that boosters like *obviously* are strategically used to strengthen the writer's identity in academic discourse, projecting intellectual authority while simultaneously aligning with the conventions of scholarly argumentation (Hyland, 1998; Silverstein, 2003). In the context of *Indexing Academic Identity*, the use of *obviously* demonstrates how BS (Hons) students draw on intensifiers to negotiate their position as competent academic participants, reinforcing their identities in a way that signals confidence and alignment with disciplinary norms.

Certainly

<i>certainly</i>	Frequency	7
	Files	6,7,3,1,2,3,8

File:1

Modality is realized through modal verbs (e.g., can, must, should), adverbs (e.g., probably, certainly, adjectives (e.g., possible, necessary), or other linguistic markers.

In this extract the booster *certainly* occurs seven times across files 6, 7, 3, 1, 2, 3, and 8, showing a relatively even distribution but with slightly higher occurrences in analytical and argumentative sections. Its presence in File 1, functions as an adverbial booster that expresses strong intentional assurance about the matter of writing. This aligns with Hyland's (2005) description of boosters as stylistic device that affirm commitment to the truth value of a statement while closing down space for alternative interpretations.

From Silverstein's (2003) framework of indexicality, *certainly* is pointing to the certainty, signaling the writer's strong confidence in the accuracy and validity of the claim. Next, the repeated usage of such an interactional marker across the corpus reflects the students' attempts to project themselves as having more confident individual academic identities in discourse, aligning their individuality as confident writers.

Moreover, the implication of ResearchRabbit, helped in finding the academic relevancies in literary grounds. In the context of *Indexing Academic Identity*, such boosters serve as rhetorical tools that enable students to present themselves as knowledgeable and credible, reinforcing the perception that their claims are both well-grounded and professionally articulated Hyland (1998);

Silverstein (2003). This not only suggests their mastery of academic style but also indexes the students' growing alignment with the with the boosters as reflecting their stylistic maturity .

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that hedges and boosters in BS (Hons) Stylistics assignments (Code 9062, AIOU) serve as salient indexical markers of academic identity, with their distribution and function influenced by the integration of ResearchRabbit as a digital citation tool. Quantitative analysis revealed measurable variation in the frequency and type of stance markers between AI-assisted and traditional assignments, while qualitative interpretation showed that these markers operate at both first-order indexicality—modulating epistemic stance—and second-order indexicality—projecting a credible, authoritative, or cautious academic voice. ResearchRabbit-assisted writing displayed greater citation diversity and more strategically aligned boosters, suggesting that digital tools can subtly reshape stance-taking and rhetorical positioning in academic discourse. These findings underscore the sociolinguistic significance of interactional metadiscourse in student writing and highlight the transformative role of AI-mediated research practices in identity construction. Future research should extend this inquiry to larger, cross-disciplinary corpora and explore the longitudinal effects of AI-assisted research on students' epistemic positioning and disciplinary enculturation.

Contribution to Knowledge

By applying Silverstein's indexicality framework and assessing the influence of AI-mediated research tools, this study advances our understanding of academic writing as a situated discursive practice. It foregrounds how digital research environments intersect with linguistic enactments of identity and epistemic positioning in higher education contexts.

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