# Culture and identity: A genre-based positioning analysis of academic leadership discourse in Italy and the USA

**Danni Yu**
Beijing Foreign Studies University (China)
yudanni@bfsu.edu.cn

## Abstract

Constructing an authorial self in a particular genre can be challenging for L2 writers with limited linguistic competence, especially when they are novice members of the discourse community practicing the genre. This necessitates genre analysis that goes beyond linguistic patterns to demystify the process of identify construction embedded in regularly practiced genres. This paper proposes that cultural similarities or variations in genre-constructed social identities can be revealed through an analytical framework integrating rhetorical move analysis and positioning theory. By way of demonstration, the case study examined 60 public speeches opening an academic year by Italian and American university leaders. The analysis revealed both common social positions across cultures –*institutional representative* and *value disseminator*– and culture-specific ones. Italian leaders tend to self-construct as *advocates* proposing courses of actions to a wide public on behalf of their institution. Their American counterparts, on the other hand, regularly self-construct as *advisers* providing guidance to students, also using the positions of *morale-builder* and *relatable individual*. This study demonstrates that genres can serve as tools to understand the positionings typically associated with a social group in different cultural contexts. This understanding can enhance the metacognitive genre awareness of L2 writers, aiding them in evaluating whether a position is conventional or unexpected for the audience in the target culture, thereby constructing an effective authorial self.

**Keywords:** Identity, cross-cultural, genre analysis, rhetorical moves, positionings, L2 writing.

## Resumen

***Cultura e identidad en el discurso del liderazgo académico: un análisis de posicionamiento basado en el género en Italia y Estados Unidos***

Construir una identidad autorial dentro de un género específico puede ser un reto para los escritores en segunda lengua (L2), especialmente cuando cuentan con una competencia lingüística limitada y son miembros noveles de la comunidad discursiva que emplea dicho género. Esto pone de relieve la necesidad de un enfoque analítico que trascienda los patrones lingüísticos y permita desentrañar el proceso de construcción identitaria inherente a los géneros recurrentemente utilizados. Este artículo propone que las similitudes y diferencias culturales en las identidades sociales construidas a través del género pueden examinarse mediante un marco que combine el análisis de movimientos retóricos con la teoría del posicionamiento. Para ello, se presenta un estudio de caso basado en 60 discursos inaugurales del año académico pronunciados por autoridades universitarias en Italia y Estados Unidos. El análisis reveló tanto posicionamientos sociales comunes en ambas culturas —como el de *representante institucional* y *transmisor de valores*— como otros específicos de cada contexto. En el caso italiano, los líderes tienden a construirse como *defensores* que promueven acciones en nombre de su institución ante un público amplio. Por su parte, sus homólogos estadounidenses suelen adoptar el rol de *asesores* que guían a los estudiantes, además de posicionarse como *motivadores* y *figuras cercanas*. Este estudio demuestra que los géneros pueden funcionar como herramientas para comprender los posicionamientos sociales típicos de un grupo en distintos contextos culturales. Esta comprensión puede fortalecer la conciencia metacognitiva sobre el uso de los géneros en escritores en L2, ayudándoles a discernir si un determinado posicionamiento resulta convencional o inesperado para su audiencia en la cultura de destino y a construir así una identidad autorial más efectiva.

**Palabras clave:** Identidad, análisis intercultural, análisis de género, movimientos retóricos, posicionamiento, escritura en L2.

## 1. Introduction

Understanding and respecting the identities of people from a different culture is a crucial element for effective cross-cultural communication. Not only are identities influenced by broad categories such as race, ethnicity, gender and class (Clarke, 2008), but they are also shaped by more specific factors such as social roles in institutional contexts. This study proposes that the identity construction of a social role varies across cultures and such variations can be revealed by analyzing the *genres* used by the actors practicing that social role in the respective cultural context. Here genre is understood as a social action linked to "community" and "membership" (Swales, 1990). Discourse communities often use an evolving set of genres to pursue "a

broadly agreed set of goals" (Swales, 2016, p. 12). These genres constitute part of the membership knowledge required for individuals to perform their roles within the community. Through consistent practice of these genres, individuals develop a sense of membership, which in turn constructs their "social identity" as part of their self-concept (Tajfel, 1974, p. 72).

To understand identity more specifically, this study views it through the lens of positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990). Positioning, closely related to discourse, is regarded as both constructed and constructive within the field of discursive psychology (Kayı-Aydar, 2019). A position, defined as a "complex cluster of generic personal attributes, […] rights, duties, and obligations" (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999, p. 1), can be crafted using linguistic devices. Through acts of positioning, we shape our identity in the social realm by establishing relationships with others. These acts can be either conventional (conforming to group norms) or unconventional (deviating from them).

Importantly, positioning conventions can vary across cultural contexts. This variation occurs because the choice of positioning can be influenced by the types of social relationships that form the social structure within a specific discourse community. For example, a study by Wu et al. (2023) found that English-speaking Twitter users preferred explicit unmodified self-praising strategies, while Chinese-speaking Weibo users opted for more implicit forms. In particular, Weibo users often employed a strategy where they quoted praise from a third party, thus positioning themselves as members under evaluation within the community. This strategy might be indicative of the underlying collectivist social relations characteristic of Chinese culture (Hofstede et al., 2010).

This study sets out to explore how the social role of academic leaders is represented and constructed in the Italian and American higher education contexts, which exhibit varying degrees of marketization and centralization, through their consistent engagement with public genres. The efficient functioning of any organization hinges on its leaders' ability to take into account the expectations of multiple stakeholders when deciding on communication strategies, which would have an impact on shaping their social identity. In particular, it is important to note that different cultural contexts can produce various social expectations that may lead to distinct leadership positionings. A clear instance of this can be seen in the way the leadership role is named: in Italy, university leaders are known as *rettori*

"rectors", a term also used to refer to heads of religious communities; in the US, on the other hand, they are referred to as *presidents*, and in some cases, even as *CEO*s.

By analyzing the regular discourse strategies made by these figures, this study seeks to provide a cross-cultural perspective that sheds light on their culture-specific choices of positions, which are associated with specific duties and rights, in response to the varied expectations in the two societies. To this aim, the focus of this study is on two public genres that are regularly practiced at the beginning of an academic year: the Italian *rectors' speeches at the inauguration of the academic year* (hereafter, RSIAY) and the American *university presidents' opening convocation speeches* (hereafter, UPOCS). The two genres, often published in written forms, are readily recognizable by the Italian and American public. To reveal how the social identity of university leaders is consistently conveyed to the public through these two genres, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What rhetorical moves are conventionally used in the RSIAY and the UPOCS?
2. What positions are evoked through these moves?
3. Do any cross-cultural parallels or contrasts emerge in the conventional positionings associated with Italian and American university leaders?

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Genre and identity: The corpus-based approach

Viewing genres as community processes, as proposed by Swales and recognized by many genre scholars, allows us to explore the link between texts and identities of individuals as community members. Genres established in a discourse community are often characterized by certain linguistic patterns, which are recognized as shared genre knowledge by the members. Consequently, these patterns facilitate members in sustaining the community culture and guide them towards "the performance of certain kinds of professional identities" (Hyland, 2015, p. 42).

To investigate how identities are constructed in a genre, Hyland (2010, 2012) emphasizes the strength of corpus as a tool to discover regular

patterns of language choices that can "help individuals to realize coherent and relatively consistent identities" (Hyland, 2010, p. 16). The corpus-based approach has seen increasing application in studies of identities of persons (Danis, 2022; Hyland & Tse, 2012) or person-like entities (e.g., Fuoli, 2018; Hu et al., 2024) in specific genres. For example, Hyland and Tse (2012) used a corpus of 600 academic biographies to explore how academics construct their identities through the use of rhetorical moves and process types. Their findings revealed academics' shared interests in using moves such as employment and research interests. However, the use of specific moves varied in terms of social status, gender and discipline. For example, electrical engineers more frequently cited educational backgrounds and personal details, while applied linguists and philosophers gave greater weight to research interests and publications. This variation indicates the different attributes valued by academics from various disciplines in their social identification as academics.

Hyland and Tse's (2012) study provides insights into the conventional resources frequently used by a social group (i.e., the academics) in the genre of academic biographies. They also delve into how individuals from the sub-groups (i.e., electrical engineers, applied linguists and philosophers) employ varied strategies to construct their academic social identity. Their study serves as one of many examples demonstrating that markers of identity, which are culturally determined and associated with a social group, can be systematically discovered through a corpus-based analysis of genres.

### 2.2. Genre, moves, and positioning

One way to understand an individual's micro-level identities is by examining their positionings in discourse. Positioning refers to the discursive production of self and is by nature interpersonally relational (Davies & Harré, 1990). When an individual takes up the position of being a protector/supporter/admirer, the interlocutor is simultaneously positioned to be protected/supported/admired. Positioning analysis, which primarily concentrates on observing how individuals fluidly self-position in interpersonal encounters, has been mainly applied to conversations. However, shifting the focus to genres, Yu (2024) investigates how positionings are regularly associated with a social group through its use of conventional genres. Combining rhetorical move analysis (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1981, 1990) with positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990), she analyses genre as composed of a set of positioning acts, considered

discursive acts that situate the self in a position that is relational *vis-à-vis* the interlocutor (Davies & Harré, 1990).

These positioning acts can be understood through an analysis of rhetorical moves, which refer to "discoursal or rhetorical units performing coherent communicative functions in texts" (Swales, 2004, pp. 228-229). For example, the genre of research articles positions the writer as a knowledge creator, as its primary function is to create new knowledge. A conventional move used in research article introductions is "Establishing a niche", which can be realized by "counter-claiming", "indicating a gap", "question-raising" or "continuing a tradition" (Swales, 1990). This move situates the writer as a member of the research community who is trying to connect with other members. In doing so, the writer self-positions as a communicator who builds new knowledge upon knowledge shared with other scholars. When integrated into a research article, this move enriches the positioning of the writer, constructing a fuller identity as a communicative knowledge creator "standing on the shoulders of giants." This example illustrates how writing contributes to "constructing our relationships with others" (Hyland, 2003, p. 27) through acts of positioning.

Yu's (2024) study implies that a highly conventionalized genre tends to use a stabilized set of positions, while allowing for a degree of fluidity in the internal realization of these positions. Expanding on this, Yu and Vergaro (2024) draw on the Entrenchment and Conventionalization Model (Schmid, 2020) to demonstrate how certain genre-based positionings become entrenched in the form of patterns of associations among the individuals in a discourse community, and how these positionings become conventionalized in that community in the form of shared conformity profiles. This process of entrenchment and conventionalization contributes to instilling expectations among the members of a community regarding the positions associated with a social role. Therefore, genres, as products established and shaped by the members of a community, can serve as mediums where regular linguistic patterns, including those that consistently instantiate positions linked with the identity of a social group, can be analyzed and understood.

### 2.3. Genre across cultures

Genres, as cultural constructs (Miller, 2015), have underlying positionings that are heavily context-dependent and may exhibit cultural variations. Here

the term "culture" refers to sets of mental programs that distinguish "the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 6). Culture can be seen as a broader term encompassing "discourse community", where shared mental programs are visually mirrored in discourse practices.

Over the past two decades, there has been a noticeable increase in research exploring cross-cultural universalities and variations in genre realization. These studies, employing a corpus-assisted approach, have investigated genres such as online book blurbs (Önder, 2013), business faxes (Zhu, 2013), conference abstracts (Samar et al., 2014), corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports (Yu & Bondi, 2017) and research article abstracts (Li, 2020). They have revealed that genres realized by different cultural groups often present a high degree of similarity in general move structure while exhibiting some degree of variation in the use of particular moves. Rhetorical similarity is particularly prominent in highly globalized genres. Yu and Bondi (2017), for example, found that the CSR report, a genre developed in the global context, is realized by noticeably similar generic structure in Chinese, Italian and English. As sustainability has become a global concern, the practice of CSR reporting tends to adhere to international reporting guidelines. In doing so, companies from diverse cultures align with similar discursive positions, thereby constructing a globally expected and recognized corporate identity.

Cross-cultural standardization in move structure may be less prominent in genres that have evolved within more localized contexts, even when used by seeming equivalent social roles in different societies. The public speeches delivered by Italian rectors and the American university presidents, who occupy similar social standings, exemplify this phenomenon. Their social identities may vary due to the unique local contexts in which they operate. For instance, American higher education, initiated in 1636, is widely regarded as one of the most commercialized market systems in the world (McGuinness, 2005). On the other hand, Italian higher education boasts a long tradition, tracking back to 1088 with the funding of the University of Bologna. It demonstrates "a certain reluctance to enter directly into public communication with the purpose primarily of money making" (Boffo, 2004, p. 371) and is still marked by a strong state bureaucracy (Dobbins & Knill, 2017, p. 70). In the Italian higher education context, university finance still relies much on government investment. In the US, on the other hand, colleges and universities receive their funds from various sources, including tuition, state funds, and endowments. In this context, American university

presidents, also called as CEOs, play an important role in fundraising from the public (Gumport, 2000). As noted by Bastedo et al. (2014), the charismatic leadership of American university presidents, constructed through public speeches, could be relevant to alumni donations under specific context. This study, therefore, aims to explore how the rhetorical structures and the underlying positionings of the RSIAY and UPOCS vary within their respective localized contexts.

## 3. Data and method

The corpus used in this study is composed of 30 RSIAY instances and 30 UPOCS instances. These were published in the academic years of 2017-2018, 2018-2019, and 2019-2020 by top-ranking universities in Italy and the US according to QS World University Rankings 2021. The choice of materials published in the pre-pandemic period intends to avoid the potentially disruptive impact of unconventional environmental factors on certain parts of the corpus. The restricted total count of 30 instances is a result of the limited availability of speeches published in written form within the Italian context, where the number of universities is significantly less compared to the American context. Overall, the RSIAY corpus contains 123,635 words, which is much more expansive than the UPOCS corpus, which contains 51,672 words, indicating that the average length of the former (4,121 words) is about twice that of the latter (1,722 words).

Integrating the positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999) with the approach of rhetorical move analysis (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1981, 1990), the analytical procedure consists of three stages: 1) *identification of moves*, 2) *analysis of moves as positioning acts*, and 3) *move annotation*. Details of each stage are provided below.

### 3.1. Identification of moves

In line with positioning theory's conceptualization of discourse as a structured asset of speech acts (Davies & Harré, 1990), this study views genre as a construct collectively realized by moves as speech acts with specific communicative functions, which are to be understood as *illocutionary functions* with specific *perlocutionary goals*, or *social forces* (cf. Yu, 2024) to identity moves. The analysis began with the author conducting a thorough examination of a sample of ten texts to identify potential moves. This process involved labeling, categorizing, merging, grouping and re-labeling of

textual patterns. Following this, stability was checked to reveal intra-observer inconsistency over time (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 211), making minor adjustments to the identified moves where necessary. Based on this initial analysis, a move scheme was developed, which served as a codebook for the subsequent corpus annotation (see Subsection 3.3). Each move was assigned a name reflecting its illocutionary function. For instance, a move with the illocutionary function of suggesting was labeled "Making suggestions".

### 3.2. Analysis of moves as positioning acts

At this stage, the identified moves were examined through the lens of their illocutionary force and perlocutionary objects (Austin, 1959) to uncover their underlying *positions*. The perlocutionary object of a move is identifiable as it is marked by a certain degree of conventionality in a specific genre context. For example, in the context of American university president speeches, the move of providing suggestions presumably has the perlocutionary object of directing the students towards a specific end. The illocutionary force and the perlocutionary object of this move, therefore, contribute to positioning the president as an adviser providing guidance to students.

### 3.3. Annotation of moves

The annotation process followed the established move scheme that served as a codebook. The whole corpus was annotated by the author and three additional coders, all proficient in Italian and English (C1-C2 level), using *NoteTab Light*. Prior to the annotation, the author explained the fundamentals of move analysis and the specifics of the codebook to ensure their familiarity with the move annotation process. Subsequently, two rounds of inter-coder reliability checks were conducted on a randomly selected sample of four texts to ensure consistency. In the initial round, two coders independently annotated four texts (two in English and two in Italian) each. The agreement percentage was 82.46% for the English sample and 76.96% for the Italian sample. The minor inconsistencies that emerged were collectively discussed among all coders to reach consensus and refine the move scheme where necessary. The second round of reliability check was performed by the two coders on the remaining four texts (two in English and two in Italian). The agreement percentage improved to 91.77% for the English sample and 93.33% for the Italian sample, suggesting that the coding scheme was relatively reproducible among the coders. Following this

verification, the coders applied the scheme to annotate the entire corpus. Finally, to compute the statistical distribution of the identified moves, the annotated corpus was analyzed using *WordSmith Tools 7.0*.

Move distribution in the corpus was represented by *frequency* (percentage of texts containing a move) and *extensiveness* (proportion of words dedicated to a move) (Yu, 2022). Following Nodoushan and Khakbaz (2011), moves were categorized as obligatory (100% frequency), conventional (66-99%), or optional (□ 66%). A position is considered conventional when it is constructed through obligatory or conventional moves. Furthermore, a position is considered prominent if the moves used to evoke it exhibit high extensiveness within the corpus. This study focuses on conventionalized positions, presenting only moves appearing in more than 20 texts (≥ 66.66%) in the corpus.

## 4. Results

Before being published in written form for broader dissemination, the RSIAY and the UPOCS are initially presented on-site, each catering to different audience ranges. The RSIAY is delivered to a diverse audience, including not only internal stakeholders such as professors, researchers, management staff, and students –who may be part of the electoral body of the rector – but also external stakeholders. The latter group comprises political authorities, religious figures, rectors, and delegates from other universities. Among these external stakeholders, there may be state actors responsible for allocating funding to universities, which are highly financially dependent on the Italian state (Dobbins & Knill, 2017). On the other hand, the UPOCS primarily caters to incoming students and their parents, who might be potential financial contributors to the university.

Despite these audience differences, the analysis has revealed rhetorical commonalities in the public discourse of university leaders in both societies. Table 1 presents the obligatory and conventional moves (frequency ≥ 66.66%) used in the RSIAY genre and the UPOCS genre. These genres conventionally employ six moves: "Presenting the university", "Demonstrating the university's mission, vision or values", "Articulating the broader context", "Referring to broader knowledge", "Making epistemic and deontic statements", and "Making suggestions". These shared rhetorical strategies hint at common approaches in the public discourse of university leaders, regardless of the specific audience range.

| Position | Move | Definition | Social force | Frequency | | Example |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | RSIAY | UPOCS | |
| INSTITUTIONAL REPRESENTATIVE | Presenting the university | Presents the university's current status, achievements, policies, projects, and so on. | To present the university's profile to promote a positive university image or to report on the leader's performance during their tenure. | 100% | 90% | This University is the most international, the most global, of any in the country. (Columbia, 2018-2019)<br>Nell'a.a. 2017/18, il numero di studenti in mobilità in uscita è stato pari a 536, in leggera crescita rispetto all'anno accademico precedente (+4.7%). [In the academic year 2017/18, the number of students studying abroad was 536, a slight increase compared to the previous academic year (+ 4.7%).] (Udine, 2018-2019) (Translation by Author) |
| | Demonstrating the university's mission, vision or values | Demonstrates the university's mission, vision, ambition, values, or beliefs. | To present the university's culture to shape or reinforce the audience's sense of membership or to justify the university's actions. | 73.33% | 83.33% | Our mission statement refers to Brown as a partnership of students and teachers in a unified community. (Brown, 2018-2019)<br>L'Università di Parma ha piena consapevolezza dell'importanza di un tale processo di osmosi biunivoca con il fertile territorio nel quale è inserita, attraverso cui attingere stimoli operativi e riversare la conoscenza prodotta dai propri ricercatori in tutti gli ambiti del sapere. [The University of Parma is fully aware of the importance of such a two-way osmosis process with the fertile area in which it is located, through which it can draw operational stimuli and channel the knowledge produced by its researchers into all fields of knowledge.] (Parma, 2019-2020) |
| VALUE DISSEMINATOR | Articulating the broader context | Describes the cultural, social, or political context of the contemporary environment. | To support a viewpoint by referring to the contextual need or exigences to promote empathy and understanding or to enhance the validity of a statement. | 100% | 66.67% | In our country and our world today, questions about citizenship and immigration are hotly contested. (Yale, 2018-2019)<br>Milano è una città che sa proporsi e distinguersi nel panorama internazionale anche grazie alle tante iniziative che ne stanno cambiando il volto […]. [Milan is a city that knows how to present itself and stand out on the international stage thanks to the many initiatives that indicate its change of face [...].] (University of Milan, 2018-2019) |
| | Referring to broader knowledge | Refers to proverbs, famous sayings, historical events, stories of an individual, and so on. | To support a viewpoint by referring to established knowledge to appeal to shared values, enhance persuasiveness, or to emphasize the significance of a topic. | 80% | 90% | Ancient Athens executed the philosopher Socrates because he sought truth even if it meant exploding the city's defining myths. (Princeton, 2018-2019)<br>Michel Crozier, un celebre sociologo francese, sottolineava come l'uomo non è soltanto un braccio e non è soltanto un cuore. [Michel Crozier, a famous French sociologist, emphasized that man is not just an arm and not just a heart.] (Politecnico di Torino, 2019-2020) |
| | Making epistemic and deontic statements | States a general law, illustrates a topic, proposes a viewpoint, or demonstrates what should be done in relation to a specific topic. | To disseminate knowledge or values to justify an action or a call to action. | 100% | 100% | Our measure in life will largely be what we are able to do together. (Duke, 2018-2019)<br>Incertezze e distrazioni non sono più accettabili. [Uncertainties and distractions are no longer acceptable.] (Bari, 2019-2020) |
| ADVISER/ ADVOCATE | Making suggestions | Proposes courses of actions or provides guidance on what actions to take. | To influence, guide, or direct the audience towards a particular end. | 100% | 100% | So, be curious, and go after the opportunities that make your heart sing. (Standford, 2017-2018)<br>Non dobbiamo avere paura – docenti, personale, studenti – nel ribadire ogni ora, con forze, disperazione e passione, la nostra funzione, malgrado l'oblio che l'avvolge. [We must not be afraid – teachers, staff, students – to reiterate every hour, with strength, despair, and passion, our function, despite the oblivion that surrounds it.] (Milan, 2019-2020) |
| MORALE-BUILDER | Anticipating the students' future | Casts a vision of promising or challenging scenarios that the students might face in the future. | To motivate students by enhancing their sense of security or instilling hope in them. | 10% | 90% | You'll be a better person for it and I guarantee you, you'll also make some lifelong friends. (Harvard, 2018-2020) |
| | Evoking the students' status | Reminds students of their current status, goals, values, or choices. | To motivate students by showing empathy towards their status or experiences. | 13.33% | 90% | Today, you officially join a Penn line of explorers stretching back nearly three centuries. (Penn, 2019-2020) |
| RELATABLE INDIVIDUAL | Presenting personal matters or viewpoints | Presents the speaker's personal experiences, status, thoughts, viewpoints, or requests. | To self-construct as a relatable individual to reduce the distance with the audience. | 46.67% | 83.33% | When I started college, I was nervous. (Standford, 2017-2018) |

Table 1. Rhetorical moves and their frequency in RSIAY[1] and in UPOCS.

The common moves evoke three similar positions linked to university leaders in both communities. Firstly, the move "Presenting the university" and "Demonstrating the university's mission, vision or values" construct the position of an *institutional representative*. Secondly, the move "Making epistemic and deontic statements" shapes the position of a *value disseminator*. The credibility of this position is further bolstered by the moves "Articulating the broader context" and "Referring to broader knowledge", which position the university leader as a knowledgeable thinker possessing a big-picture perspective. Lastly, the move "Making suggestions", empowered by the authoritative leader role, positions the university leader as an *advocate* or *adviser* tasked with guiding actions that can lead to positive social changes either directly or indirectly.

However, although these moves are conventionally used in both genres, their rhetorical prominence varies significantly, as indicated by the parameter of extensiveness. As shown in Figure 1, the move "Presenting the university" (extensiveness = 43.07%) occupies almost half of the textual space of the RSIAY genre, while the UPOCS genre dedicates only 18.83% of its space to it. Conversely, the move "Making suggestions" is more prominent in the UPOCS genre (extensiveness = 15.58%) than in the RSIAY genre (extensiveness = 5.9%). This difference in textual resource allocation leads to different weighting of communicative functions in the two genres. In RSIAY, university leaders spend much more time crafting a positive image of the university, while they devote less attention to advice-giving in comparison to leaders using the UPOCS genre.

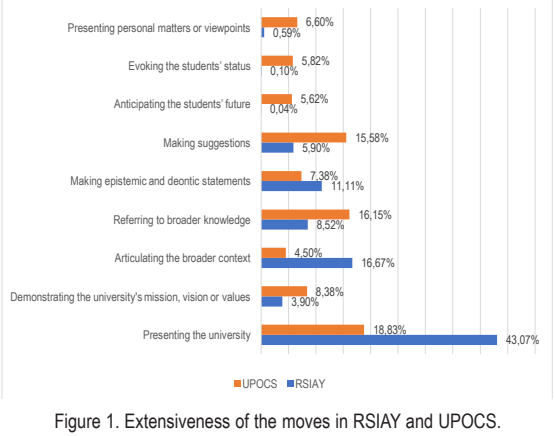


Figure 1. Extensiveness of the moves in RSIAY and UPOCS.

The analysis of the internal realizations of the moves reveals subtle differences concerning these seemingly common positions. Notably, while the move "Making suggestions" uses the directive speech act in both genres, it addresses different social groups. In the RSIAY genre, suggestions were primarily directed towards the general public (Example 1), the university system (Example 2), and the political authorities (Example 3), with students seldom being the direct recipients. Conversely, the UPOCS genre primarily focused on giving advice to students (Example 4), with occasional comments to parents. These differences indicate that Italian rectors position themselves as public advocates endorsing certain views or actions on behalf of their institution, while American university presidents tend to position themselves as advisers that offer guidance, advice or recommendations to incoming students in order to assist them in navigating the challenges of campus life.

(1) *Dobbiamo* tutti fare uno sforzo: credere nella scienza.

[*We must* all make an effort: believe in science] (Trieste, 2018-2019).

(2) In un momento in cui l'Unione europea si ripensa e vi sono dubbi e paure sulla sua stabilità e sul suo futuro, *le università italiane* devono continuare a essere in prima linea nella costruzione dell'Europa della conoscenza.

[At a time when the European Union is rethinking itself and there are doubts and fears about its stability and future, *Italian universities* must continue to be at the forefront in building the Europe of knowledge] (Sapienza, 2017-2018).

(3) Tra le indicazioni più importanti desideriamo segnalarLe, *Presidente*, quella di inserire le Università nei trattati della Comunità Europea.

[Among the most important indications, we would like to point out to you, *President*, the one to include Universities in the treaties of the European Community] (Udine, 2017-2018).

(4) *Embrace* the challenging work of trying to understand the world from a perspective other than *your* own (Harvard University, 2018-2019).

In particular, these positions vary in terms of the use of personal pronouns. Italian rectors frequently used deontic expressions combined with the inclusive first-person (for example, *dobbiamo* 'we should') and third-person (for example, *deve* 'it should'). In doing so, the position of *advocate* is eighter situated as a member of the community, or portrayed as an observer of the community's moral orders. On the other hand, American university presidents showed a preference for second-person pronouns (for example,

*you should*). This engaging method of giving advice positions the adviser in a direct relationship with the students.

Two particular positions associated with American university presidents are *morale-builder* and *relatable individual*. The position of morale-builder is typically expressed through two main rhetorical moves: "Anticipating the students' future" and "Evoking the students' status". Using the former strategy, the president motivates students by laying out a spectrum of future scenarios –either promising or challenging– to provide reassurance and mentally prepare them for their upcoming experiences. Using the latter strategy, the president demonstrates understanding and concern for the students' current status, thereby showing empathy with them. Consider, for example:

> (5) (a) You've probably *gotten* to know well only a small subset of your class this week. Maybe just your roommate. Maybe the group that you came with tonight. […]
>
> (b) But, trust me, *you will* come to know each other, and *your class will* develop its own, unique identity. (John Hopkins, 2017-2018).

In Example (5), the first segment refers to students' situations, indicating the president's awareness of the challenges they might encounter in the new environment. Subsequently, the segment (b) uplifts students by envisioning a promising future, encouraging them to approach their new journey with confidence.

The analysis of the UPOCS sub-corpus also reveals other motivating moves, such as "Emphasizing support for students", "Emphasizing the importance of the students", and "Praising students". However, these moves are not conventionally used in the corpus. Considering only the two conventional moves, the morale-builder position represented 11.45% of the textual space in the UPOCS. This implies that the role of American university presidents engenders the responsibility to motivate incoming college students.

The position of a relatable individual occupies 6.60% of textual space in the UPOCS corpus. This position was often expressed by sharing personal thoughts (for example, *I have been thinking a great deal about you*), feelings (for example, *I was horrified*), actions (for example, *one of the best decisions I ever made as an undergraduate was to*), and desires (for example, *I'd love to hear about how you connected*), offering the audience a deeper understanding of the president as a personable figure, not just an authoritative institutional figure. Consider, for example:

(6) One of *my* closest friends is someone I roomed with as a freshman, and *we* have been part of each other's lives for 49 years and counting. Actually, he is a very, very special person in *my* life because he introduced me to *my* wife, Adele, who is sitting somewhere over there. (Harvard, 2018-2019).

The position of relatable individual was rarely adopted among Italian rectors, with just 0.59% of textual space devoted to such expressions in the RSIAY corpus. This highlights a significant difference in the portrayal of individuality between Italian rectors and their American counterparts.

In sum, the conventional positions constructed in RSIAY and UPOCS are illustrated in Figures 2 and 3. These visuals aim to provide a comparative view of the social identities of Italian and American university leaders, as shaped and reshaped through the two genres that are routinely published in written format.

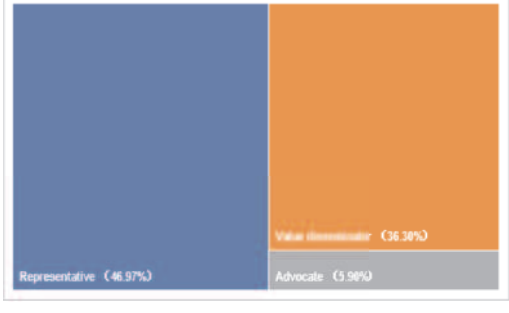


Figure 2. Conventional positions in RSIAY.

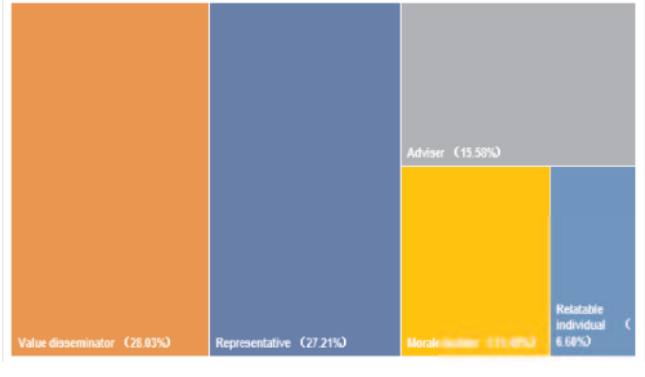


Figure 3. Conventional positions in UPOCS.

# 5. Discussion

## 5.1. Social identification across cultures

The analysis has revealed both similarities and variations in the discursive identification of Italian and American university leaders. Both groups consistently portray themselves as institutional representatives and value disseminators in their public speeches, suggesting a shared understanding of the fundamental responsibilities and rights of an institutional leader.

The move of "Making suggestions", which evokes the position of advocate/adviser, is adopted by both social groups. This indicates a shared responsibility and right to make directive speech acts associated with leadership in both cultures. However, the intended audience for these acts differs. Italian rectors speak to a varied audience and tend to self-construct as advocates that publicly support or suggest ideas or plans. American university presidents, on the other hand, speak specifically to students, positioning themselves as advisers providing guidance to new members. Alongside the adviser position, they also regularly construct themselves as morale-builders and relatable individuals, which helps to foster emotional connections between the leader and community members, thereby minimizing the perceived distance between them. In this scenario, genre is more than just a community process with "a broadly agreed set of goals" (Swales, 2016, p. 8), but also serves as a social bond that fosters emotional involvement among community members.

Clearly, the choice of social positionings is contingent upon the specific contexts that involve different audiences and various interests at stake. According to positioning theory, the space of appropriate positioning, assigned with certain duties and obligations, is a local moral order (Van Langenhove & Wise, 2019, p. 12). Harré (1987) defines this as a "system of rights, obligations and duties obtaining in society, together with the criteria by which people and their activities are valued" (p. 219). Within the space afforded by the RSIAY event, where students are not the main audience, Italian rectors do not seem obligated or duty-bound to portray themselves as relatable, inspiring adviser offering guidance to students. While one might have the right to take an unconventional position, if this "innovation" does not align with the audience's understanding of the moral order, it may be viewed as a socially deviant act. However, such a move could also enhance one's reputation among certain members, as it goes beyond simply using "genre conventions to index membership, claiming *similarity*" (Hyland, 2018, p. 11).

In essence, what this study aims to demonstrate is that the genre systems within various societies, each encoded with unique moral orders, may assign different positionings to the social identity tied to a role, even if that role seems to hold a similar social status across cultures. Another example of cross-cultural variations in positioning concerns the genre of research article introductions. Loi (2010) investigates how the social group of educational psychology researchers from Chinese and English discourse communities approach this genre and finds that they show different preferences in the use of rhetorical moves and steps. For example, the "Counter claiming" step, used to establish a niche, is a frequent component in English introductions but absent in Chinese ones. This may reflect a lower degree of competition in the Chinese discourse community or the importance of face-saving in Chinese culture (Loi, 2010). Chinese educational psychologists may not see it as necessary or appropriate to position themselves as counter-arguers or debaters when introducing their research. Nevertheless, they might consider adopting this position when publishing their work in English-speaking communities to compete for more research space. As they become more accustomed to this position, they might even extend its use within their original community. These scenarios represent instances of cross-cultural positioning shifts and the potential for reverse positioning transfer in the original culture, suggesting valuable pedagogical implications for L2 writing.

### 5.2. Pedagogical implications

Over the past two decades, identity has emerged as a prominent research topic within Applied Linguistics (Flowerdew & Wang, 2015), especially in the scholarship of Second Language Writing (Qi & Zhao, 2023). Hyland (2016) argues that the development of an "authorial self" is becoming much more relevant for academic writing than technical proficiency in grammar (p. 67). However, identity construction has been a longstanding challenge for L2 writers, who often struggle in constructing their identity in a language where they lack fluency (Flowerdew, 2011). This difficulty indicates the need for genre analysis to focus on identify in pedagogic contexts (Flowerdew, 2011).

This study explores identity construction in genres through the lens of positioning theory. The effective use of a genre is not solely about the formal use of specific rhetorical strategies. Rather, it depends on whether the positions evoked by these rhetorical strategies are acceptable to the audience. Kotthoff (2015) supports this view, noting that certain positioning in scholarship applications to German institutions can be seen as inappropriate,

such as applicants from former Soviet republics positioning themselves as lovers of German literature. While this might be well-received in their own cultural contexts, where passion may be considered as an important psychological motive for doing research, it does not align with the expectations of German evaluators. Instead, Kotthoff suggests that applicants should adopt the "institutionally expectable identity of a future scientist" (Kotthoff, 2015, p. 8), which can meet the relevant expectations and social needs of the meritocratic German academic community (Kotthoff, 2015, p. 14).

The implications for L2 writing are rich. Hyland (2015) suggests that in the discursive construction of identity, there exists "a tension between using genre conventions to index membership and so claim *similarity* and gaining a reputation by taking a *different* stand using a distinctive set of genre options" (p. 41). For L2 writers, however, the choice between conformity and differentiation can sometimes be challenging, especially when they're not fully acquainted with the genre conventions established in the target community. In such cases, adapting to conventional positionings might be a safer choice, potentially helping to avoid positions that could be face-threatening or undervalued by the target audience. However, taking a different stand would not necessarily lead to disastrous outcomes, as not all unconventional positionings clash with the moral orders of the target community. In some cases, being different can even help writers gain reputations in another culture. The critical factor is the "control of genre conventions to index belonging and manipulation of those conventions to establish individuality" (Hyland, 2015, p. 12).

Having control over genre conventions implies having adequate *genre knowledge* (Tardy et al., 2020), which includes *genre-specific knowledge* –"knowledge that writers hold of a particular genre or group of genres" (p. 294)– and *genre awareness*, that is, "explicit awareness or understanding of how genres work" (p. 296). Genre awareness is viewed as a type of metacognition, referring to knowledge about knowledge, or cognition about cognition (Devitt, 2004; Negretti & Kuteeva, 2011; Tardy et al., 2020). Similarly, Negretti and Kuteeva (2011) propose the notion of "metacognitive genre knowledge" (p. 96). This study suggests that knowledge about positioning, a psychological motivation that drives the use of rhetorical moves, is also metacognitive as it helps understand why a rhetorical move is used. It is knowledge (reason) about knowledge (linguistic forms) and constitutes a form of genre awareness.

In particular, genre awareness is language-independent and offers potentials for recontextualization (Tardy et al., 2020). This feature aligns with the knowledge about the positionings in a genre, as it can be adapted to different languages, provided that the genre event in the target culture encodes similar moral orders and social relation structures as those in the original referential culture. For example, most positionings used in research articles in English could be transferred and recontextualized into Chinese, as the moral order and the writer-reader relationship are similar in both academic communities. However, there are still some positionings that are not transferrable across cultures. This study suggests that whether a position is cross-culturally transferable or not can be enlightened by a genre-based positioning analysis from a comparative perspective.

## 6. Conclusions

This study demonstrates how genres, as conventional discourse forms, can be investigated to uncover both cross-cultural similarities and differences in the identity construction of a social role through the lens of positioning theory. This approach can be of considerable theoretical and practical relevance to L2 writing. Understanding positionings in a genre enriches our metacognitive knowledge of that genre, as it guides our attention to the context to examine the underlying interpersonal relationships at stake. However, this study does not advocate imposing L1 positionings on L2 writers. Adopting a position means integrating it with the "ongoingly produced self" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 48). Whether an L2 writer can comfortably adopt a certain position depends on whether the position is compatible with the values, social expectations, and moral orders of their original culture. Therefore, it is hoped that the cross-cultural approach will help raise awareness among assessors of L2 writing, encouraging them to leave some space for positionings that encode diverse moral values, thereby fostering an inclusive environment where L2 writers can comfortably establish an authorial self.

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**Danni Yu** is Associate Professor at Beijing Foreign Studies University in China. Her research interests include genre analysis, cross-cultural studies, LLM-assisted annotation, and corpus-based discourse analysis. Her publications appeared in *Applied Linguistics, English for Specific Purposes, IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication, International Journal of Business Communication, International Journal of Corpus Linguistics, Lingua, Written Communication* etc. Her most recent book-length publication is *Cross-cultural genre analysis: Investigating corporate social responsibility reports in Chinese, Italian and English* (2022, Routledge).

## NOTES

[1] Data regarding the RSIAY genre are adapted from Yu and Vergaro (2025).