SELF-MENTION IN RESEARCH SECTIONS OF UNIVERSITY WEBSITES IN ESTONIA AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Abstract: *This article presents a study that investigates how self-mention is represented in research sections of university websites in Estonia and the United Kingdom (the UK), respectively. The study is embedded in the view of the English language as the Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles (Kachru 1985). It is hypothesised that there would be quantitative differences in the use of self-mention in the research sections of university websites depending on whether or not they are associated with the Expanding Circle (e.g., Estonia) or the Inner Circle of English (e.g., the UK). The corpus of the study is comprised of research sections of the official websites of the University of Cambridge (the UK) and the University of Tartu (Estonia). The results of the quantitative analysis reveal that the most frequent self-mention per 1000 words is the pronoun "we" on the university websites in Estonia and the UK alike. These findings are further presented and discussed in detail in the article.*
Keywords*: Computer-Mediated Discourse (CMD), the Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles of English, self-mention, university websites*

1. Introduction

This article presents a quantitative study that seeks to establish how discursive means of self-mention are represented in research sections of the leading universities in Estonia and the United Kingdom (the UK), respectively. Research sections of university websites serve as digital artifacts that are used to communicate, disseminate and promote research (Tomášková 2015). Typically, the university's research communication on its website involves discursive means of self-mention, i.e. how the university refers to itself on the website. The specific aim of this study is to identify and juxtapose self-mentions in the research sections of the university websites in Estonia and the UK.

This study is grounded in the theoretical premises of self-mention in academic discourse that are formulated by Hyland (2001, 2008) and the construal of the Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles of the English language in the sense postulated by Kachru (1985). According to Kachru (1985), the Inner Circle of English is represented by the countries where English is the mother tongue, e.g., the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland. In the Inner Circle, English is "a mother tongue that is passed on to infants naturalistically across generations" (Bruthiaux 2003: 159). In the countries of the Inner Circle, English is used in a normative manner as a linguistically codified and socially accepted set of norms or standards that are regarded as norm-providing to the Outer and Expanding Circles (Bolton 2006; Kachru 1985). The Outer Circle is associated with the speakers of English as the second language (ESL) in the former British colonies (e.g., India, Jamaica, Singapore, etc.), where "English is only one of the community languages in what are clearly multilingual societies" (Bolton 2006: 3).

In contrast to the Outer Circle, the English language in the Expanding Circle of English does not have an official or semi-official status. The Expanding Circle is theorised to be associated with English as an international language in those countries where English is taught as a Foreign Language, or EFL (Bolton 2006: 3). English in the Expanding Circle is assumed "to be exonormative in that speakers, educators, and policy-makers have traditionally looked to American or British models for linguistic norms" (Bruthiaux 2003: 159-160). Arguably, the use of English in the Expanding Circle is norm-dependent, since EFL speakers need to be provided with a model or a codified norm of English associated with the Inner Circle (Bolton 2006).

The aforementioned characteristics of the Expanding Circle of English could be illustrated by the case of Estonia. Whilst English does not have an official status there, the importance and prestige of the English language increases in today's Estonia (Lazdiņa, Marten 2019) due to the country's participation in the "collective West", as a member-state of the EU, NATO, OECD and other international organisations that use English as a lingua franca (Jurkynas 2020). In addition, the use of the English language in Estonia is facilitated by an increased number of international students at Estonian universities (Soler, Björkman, and Kuteeva 2018). After Estonia regained its independence after nearly 50 years of Soviet occupation, the teaching and learning of English have aligned with the practices that are found in the West (Alas, Liiv 2009: 20).

Given the increase in international co-operation and university mobility, Estonian universities maintain and regularly update websites in English (van Doorslaer, Loogus 2020; Virkus 2008). Presumably, English-mediated university websites in Estonia could be regarded as digital discursive artifacts that construe university-specific narratives associated with a variety of aspects, i.e. the presentation of the university's structure, university's identity, university student life, enrollment, and research activities. In this regard, it should be noted that university websites in Estonia and the UK alike could be theorised as a complex multimodal discursive space, where verbal and non-verbal discursive means are employed in order to achieve the pragma-communicative goals of promoting the university to the public (Tomášková 2015).

It could be assumed that, by serving the aforementioned pragma-communicative aims, the use of the English language on the English-mediated university websites reflects the realities of the Circles of English, as well as the cultural, educational, and socio-economic realities. Consequently, the discursive means of self-mention on the university websites might differ, due to the disparities between a university that is situated in a country of the Expanding Circle of English (e.g., Estonia) and a university in the UK that belongs to the Inner Circle of English. Currently, however, little is known about whether or not self-mentions are linguistically similar and/or different on the English-mediated university websites in the Expanding Circle of English (e.g., Estonia) and the Inner Circle of English (e.g., the UK). Furthermore, there are no prior studies that investigate self-mentions in the research sections of Estonian university websites in order to compare their use with that of the UK's university websites. The present study seeks to address this under-represented issue.

This article is structured as follows. First, I will provide a review of the current literature associated with self-mention in academic writing in English and in computer-mediated discourse in section 2. Then, I will introduce and discuss the present study with its research questions, corpus, methodology, and results, and

provide a detailed discussion of the major findings in section 3. Finally, the article will be concluded with the summary of the results in section 4.

2. Literature review

As previously indicated in the introduction, self-mention is one of the theoretical tenets in the present study. Self-mention is defined as an explicit reference to the author/authors by means of such self-mention markers as *I*/*my*, and *we*/*our* (Hyland, Tse 2004). The use of these markers is theorised to be genre-specific (Hyland 2008). For instance, in the genre of academic discourse in English, self-mention markers typically involve the first person pronouns (Hyland 2001; Ivanič 1998) that serve as "an important rhetorical device which allows writers to emphasise their contribution to the academic debate and construct an authoritative discoursal self" (Martínez 2005: 175). In this regard, Hyland (2001: 209) argues that any form of "writing carries information about the writer, and the conventions of personal projection, particularly the use of first person pronouns, are powerful means for self-representation".

The current interest of applied linguists and discourse specialists in the manner of authorial self-representation in the sense postulated by Hyland (2001, 2008) is based upon seminal works of Bakhtin (1986), Foucault (1988), and Ivanič (1998), where the authorial presence is set within the co-ordinates of self and others (Bakhtin 1986), the author's voice and the audience (Foucault 1988), and the writer and the writer's identity (Ivanič 1998). Arguably, the construal of authorial self-representation which is manifested by the explicit discursive means of self-mention refers to any form of written discourse, inclusive of academic writing and computer-mediated discourse.

Whilst there is a cornucopia of prior studies that elucidate the use of self-mention in authorial representations in the genre of academic writing in English (Hyland 2008; McGrath 2016), self-mention in computer-mediated discourse (CMD) has received less scholarly attention (Malenkina, Ivanov 2018). In the present study, I follow the definition of CMD proposed by Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015), who posit that it involves the form of human communication produced by means of "transmitting messages via networked or mobile computers, where "computers" are defined broadly to include any digital communication device" (Herring, Androutsopoulos 2015: 127).

The current literature associated with self-mention on websites in the genre of CMD is represented by scientific inquiries into how self-mention is used in a variety of settings, for instance, in teaching and learning (Zhu, Herring, Bonk 2019), research projects (Lorés-Sanz, Herrando-Rodrigo 2020), as well as tourist (Malenkina and Ivanov 2018) and business (Pérez 2014) websites. In particular, Zhu, Herring, and Bonk (2019) indicate that the Internet-based university course is associated with the students' social presence, which is manifested by using the first person singular pronoun *I* (Zhu, Herring, Bonk 2019: 219). Whilst the first-person mention *I* is prevalent in CMD in online university courses, Lorés-Sanz and Herrando-Rodrigo (2020) reveal that *we* is the most frequent form of self-mention on research projects websites. Moreover, they indicate that *we* on those websites refers to the following three types of self-mention: "we as project, we as partner/institution and we as group of researchers" (Lorés-Sanz, Herrando-Rodrigo 2020: 87).

A linguistic analysis of self-mention identified in a number of English-mediated official tourist websites in Spain is conducted by Malenkina and Ivanov (2018), who have found that self-mentions on those websites are "almost entirely displayed through the use of the first person plural, which helps to enhance the notion of a community or group of people as part of the tourism destination" (Malenkina, Ivanov 2018: 212). Whereas the first person plural seems to be prevalent in CMD on the tourist websites in Spain, the contrastive comparison of self-mention on business websites in Spain and USA reveals that business websites in the US are marked by the prevalent use of the first person singular, which is employed substantially more frequently in the US, in contrast to the analogous websites in Spain (Pérez 2014: 85).

As evident from the meta-analysis of the literature, there is a growing body of research associated with the use of self-mention in a variety of CMD contexts (Lorés-Sanz, Herrando-Rodrigo 2020; Malenkina, Ivanov 2018; Pérez 2014; Zhu, Herring, Bonk 2019). However, little is known about the use of self-mention on university websites that deal with the respective university's research activities (Lorés-Sanz, Herrando-Rodrigo 2020). In particular, there are no state-of-the-art publications that address the use of self-mention in the research sections of websites by the leading universities in the UK, as a representative of the Inner Circle of English, and Estonia, that is associated with the Expanding Circle of English. In the following section of the article, I will present a quantitative study that aims at revealing new information about self-mention on university research websites in Estonia and the UK.

3. The present study

The present study sets out to explore the use of self-mention by the University of Cambridge (the UK) and the University of Tartu (Estonia) that are currently (in 2020) ranked as the leading universities in their respective countries (Times Higher Education 2020). As previously mentioned in the introduction, the present study is informed by the following theoretical tenets:

i) self-mention as an explicit reference to the author/authors by means of the first person pronouns and their forms, e.g. *I/my/me/mine*, and *we/our/ours/us* (Hyland 2001; Hyland, Tse 2004);

ii) the university website as a genre of CMD that is characterised by culture-specific and language-specific features, which are "unified by a common communicative purpose – presenting the institution and promoting it" (Tomášková 2015: 79), and

iii) the English language as a system of the Inner, Outer and Expanding Circles (Kachru 1985).

In line with these theoretical premises, it is assumed in the present study that the use of self-mention in the English-mediated research sections on the official university websites of the University of Cambridge (UC) and the University of Tartu (UT) would be reflective of these universities' presentational and promotional purposes, that are, arguably, culture-specific and language-specific in the sense of the differences between the Inner and Expanding Circles of English. Concurrently with this assumption, however, it is not precluded that the use of self-mentions in the research sections on the UT website would be similar and/or identical to that of UC, given that it is a prestigious and well-established university,

with extensive discursive practices of CMD, and the standard use of the English language that is norm-bearing (Bolton 2006). Based upon these assumptions, the following research questions have been formulated:

RQ1: What are the most frequent discursive means of self-mention in the research sections of websites of UC and UT?

RQ2: Are there differences and/or similarities in the frequency of self-mention use between UC, as a representative of the Inner Circle of English, and UT, which represents the Expanding Circle of English?

3.1. Corpus

The corpus is comprised of the research sections on the official websites of UC and UT as they appear on the Internet in August 2020. The count of the total number of words in the corpus equals 29 831. The descriptive statistics of the corpus are provided in Table 1 below.

N	Descriptive Statistics	UC	UT
1	Total number of texts	31	10
2	Total number of words	23124	6707
3	Mean words	746.3	608
4	Standard deviation	289.2	588.2
5	Minimum	195	226
6	Maximum	1544	2173

Table 1. The Descriptive Statistics of the Corpus

The sub-corpus of the research section of the UT website is comprised of the texts available at https://www.ut.ee/en/research: i) the research brochure "Change the World with Us", ii) Research in UT (NB, the attachments concerning ethics in this rubric are excluded from the corpus on the grounds that they are Estonia-wide and relate to all Estonian tertiary institutions), iii) Research at the cutting edge, iv) Research ethics Committee of the UT, and v) Research news. These rubrics are exemplified by Figure 1.

Figure 1. UT's Research Section

The UC sub-corpus involves the research section found at https://www.cam.ac.uk/research: i) research home, ii) research news, iii) our people, iv) about research, and vi) research impact. The texts in the sections Spotlight, and Business and Enterprise are excluded from the corpus, since they

involve an array of texts and hyperlinks that refer to an amalgamated discursive space of business communication, journalese, and academic discourse. The research section of the UC is exemplified by Figure 2 below.
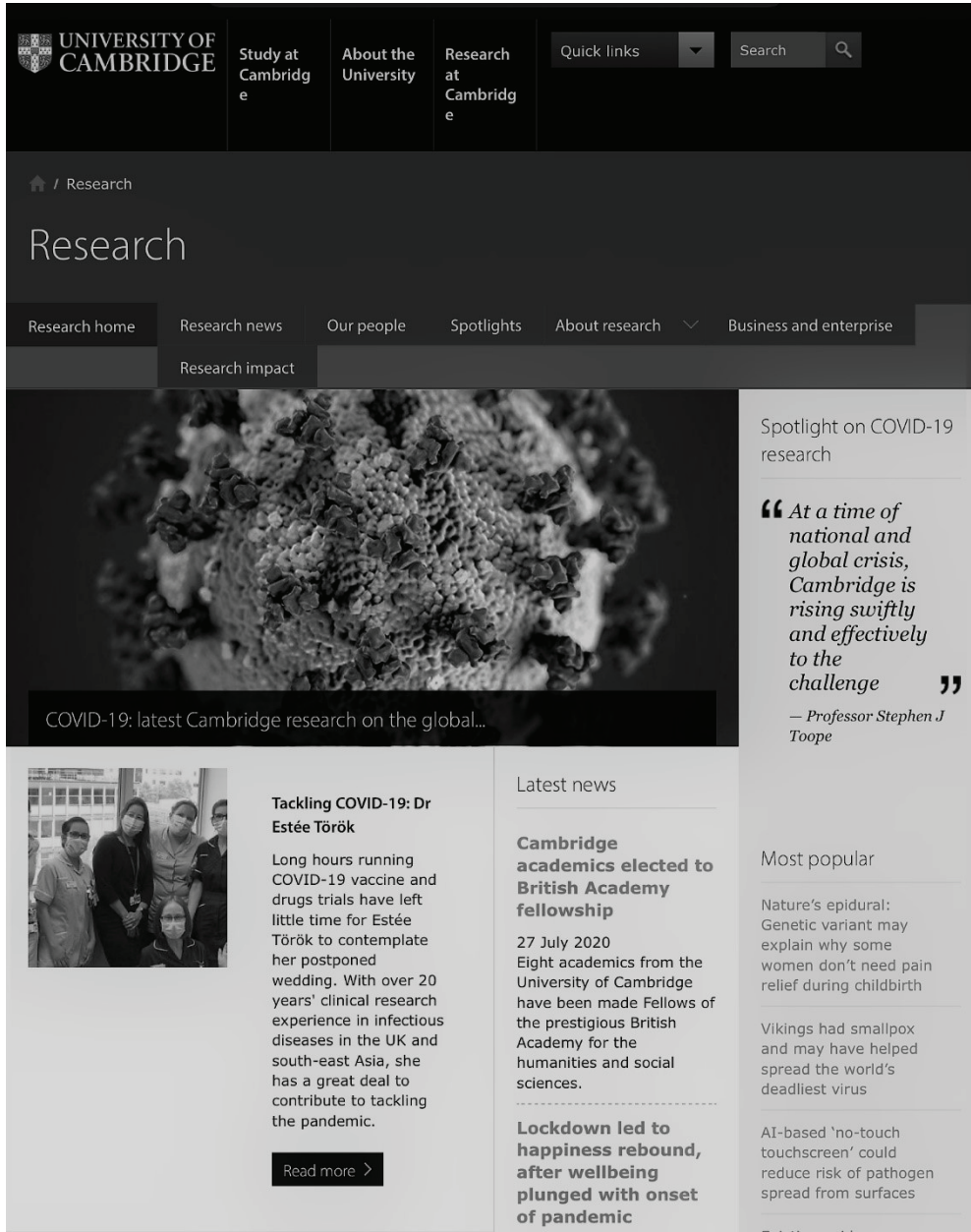

Figure 2. UC's Research Section

3.2. Procedure and method

Methodologically, the study was based upon the following procedure. First, the corpus of the study was collected. It was comprised of the research sections of the official websites of UC and UT that were available in free online access in August 2020. Then, the corpus was converted into plain text files (.txt). I manually searched for the presence of self-mentions in the corpus in accordance with the definition of self-mention formulated by Hyland (2001: 211). Thereafter, self-mentions in the corpus were entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 18.0, (IBM 2009) as raw data in order to compute means and standard deviations of self-mentions in the corpus. Next, the raw data were normalised by means of applying a 1000 words cut-off and subsequently processed in the computer program WordSmith (Scott 2008) in order to establish the frequency of occurrence of self-mentions per 1000 words. The normalisation of the data was deemed a necessary procedure due to the differences in the number of words in the sub-corpora of texts by UC and UT (see Table 1). Finally, the normalised data were subjected to a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) in SPSS (IBM 2009). The purpose of the one-way ANOVA was to establish whether or not there were statistically significant differences between the frequency of occurrence of self-mentions in the sub-corpora of texts by UC and UT.

3.3. Results

The analysis of the raw data (i.e., non-normalised data) in SPSS (2009) yielded the descriptive statistics that involved means and standard deviations (SD). The descriptive statistics were summarised in Table 2.

N	Self-mention	UC	UT
1	*I*	Mean 11.2 (SD 2.9)	Mean 0 (SD 0)
2	*Me*	Mean 1 (SD 0)	Mean 0 (SD 0)
3	*My*	Mean 2.7 (SD 1.6)	Mean 1 (SD 0)
4	*Mine*	Mean 1 (SD 0)	Mean 0 (SD 0)
5	*We*	Mean 6.9 (SD 8)	Mean 30.5 (SD 16.5)
6	*Our*	Mean 1.9 (SD 1.4)	Mean 10 (SD 3)
7	*Ours*	Mean 0 (SD 0)	Mean 0 (SD 0)
8	*Us*	Mean 1.3 (SD 0.5)	Mean 1 (SD 0)

Table 2. Means and standard deviations (SD) in raw values

The analysis of the normalised data in WordSmith (Scott 2008) provided the frequency of occurrence of self-mentions per 1000 words, as illustrated by Table 3.

N	Self-mention	UC	UT
1	*I*	11 (0.9%)	0
2	*Me*	1 (0.08%)	0
3	*My*	5 (0.4%)	0
4	*Mine*	1 (0.01%)	0
5	*We*	15 (1.2%)	14 (1.2%)
6	*Our*	7 (0.6%)	6 (0.5%)
7	*Ours*	0	0
8	*Us*	1 (0.08%)	0

Table 3. The frequency of occurrence of self-mentions in the corpus (normalised per 1000 words)

3.4. Discussion

Referring to the first research question in the present study, it is possible to observe that, in terms of the raw data, the most frequent self-mention in the UC's research section is the first person singular pronoun *I* (Mean 11.2; SD 2.9), whereas the first person plural pronoun *we* is the most frequent means of self-mention in the UT's research section (Mean 30.5; SD 16.5). These findings are illustrated by Figure 3 below.
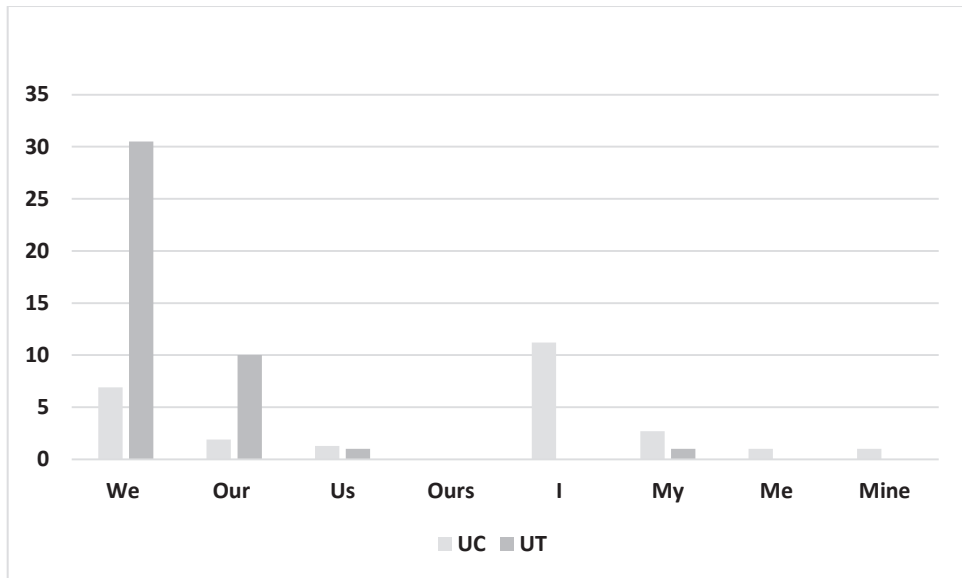

Figure 3. Self-mentions in raw values

The most frequent self-mention *I* on the UC's research website (in terms of the raw values) is employed as a grammatical subject in the sentences that impart the narrative about UC's research-related activities a personalised perspective. Specifically, the use of *I* on the UC's website is associated with the presentation of the current research and/or a research proposal by the research team leader or by a research team member, who communicate with prospective students and other

stakeholders by means of a personalised *I*-centred narrative, as illustrated by excerpt (1):

> (1) Returning to full-time clinical practice after so long was daunting at first. **I**'m rusty in a number of areas if **I**'m perfectly honest, and it's a very different setting. The last time **I** wore surgical scrubs was decades ago. Being in a situation where **I**'m seeing people with masks, gloves, gown, hat – it's very, very different, but fortunately my colleagues have been incredibly supportive. (The University of Cambridge 2020)

In (1), the personalised narrative is employed to present a UC researcher, who is an eminent doctor conducting research on COVID-19. During the pandemic, the researcher returns to work at a hospital and continues his research on the virus. Presumably, the narrative is purposefully presented as a personalised *I*-centred account of that professor's research, seen through the lenses of a "researcher with a human face", in order to make the narrative more direct, understandable and, perhaps, more emphatic, so that the readers could relate to it both on the emotional and the personal levels. In this sense, it is, presumably, possible to describe the use of the self-mention *I* as a means of personification, whereby the university is framed in the narrative as a personified entity.

It could be argued that the strategy of using *I* as the most frequent discursive means of self-mention constitutes a typical approach to expressing self-mention in CMD in the countries of the Inner Circle of English (see Pérez 2014). As previously mentioned in the introduction, the literature indicates that CMD of business websites in the USA, i.e. in the country that belongs to the Inner Circle of English, is also characterised by the use of the first person singular, which is employed substantially more in the USA in contrast to the analogous websites in the countries of the Expanding Circle of English (idem).

Whilst UC sems to report its research-related activities by frequently employing the self-mention *I*, the UT's research section is marked by the predominant use of *we* and its forms (e.g., *our*, *us*) as far as the raw values are concerned. This finding supports the prior literature that points to *we* as the most frequent form of self-mention on research projects websites in Spain, a country which shares with Estonia the status of the Expanding Circle of English (Lorés-Sanz, Herrando-Rodrigo 2020). In addition, the present finding lends support to Malenkina and Ivanov (2018), who argue that *we* as a form of self-mention is routinely employed on websites in the Expanding Circle of English, e.g. in Spain, in order "to enhance the notion of a community" (Malenkina, Ivanov 2018: 212). Arguably, *we* and its forms on the UT's website serve the purpose similar to that described by Malenkina and Ivanov (2018) in the sense that UT frames itself as a research community, a team of researchers, and a collective body that conducts and facilitates research.   Notably, the UT's research brochure on the UT website contains the form of *us* in its title "Change the World with Us" (see Figure 1). Further in the brochure, *we* as well as *us* and *our* are routinely employed to portray the community of researchers, a research team that UT stands for, as exemplified by excerpt (2):

> (2) In the University of Tartu, **we** address this challenge by focusing on the person, and on one's genetic background, in addition to social and environmental effects. In case there are no technologies, **we** will make them! (The University of Tartu 2020)

In (2), the pro-active approach to health research in the sentence "In case there are no technologies, we will make them!" is, arguably, reinforced by the self-mention *we* that is indicative of the communal effort on the part of UT to present itself as a research team working at a research-intensive university. It should be noted that UC also makes ample use of the self-mention *we* as far as the raw values are concerned (Mean 6.9; SD 8).

Unlike the raw values, however, the analysis of the normalised data indicates that *we* is the most frequent self-mention on both the UC and UT websites. In conjunction with this finding, let us briefly discuss the second research question in this study, namely whether or not there are potential differences and/or similarities in the use of self-mentions by UC and UT. As evident from Table 3, the results of the normalised data analysis point to the similarities in the frequency of use of self-mention *we* and its forms between UC (N of occurrence = 15; 1.2%) and UT (N of occurrence = 14; 1.2%). The application of the one-way ANOVA to the normalised data reveals that the results are not significant at $p < .05$ [$F(1) = 0.79$, $p = .38$]. In other words, the use of the self-mention *we* is similar at UC and UT, as exemplified by Figure 4.
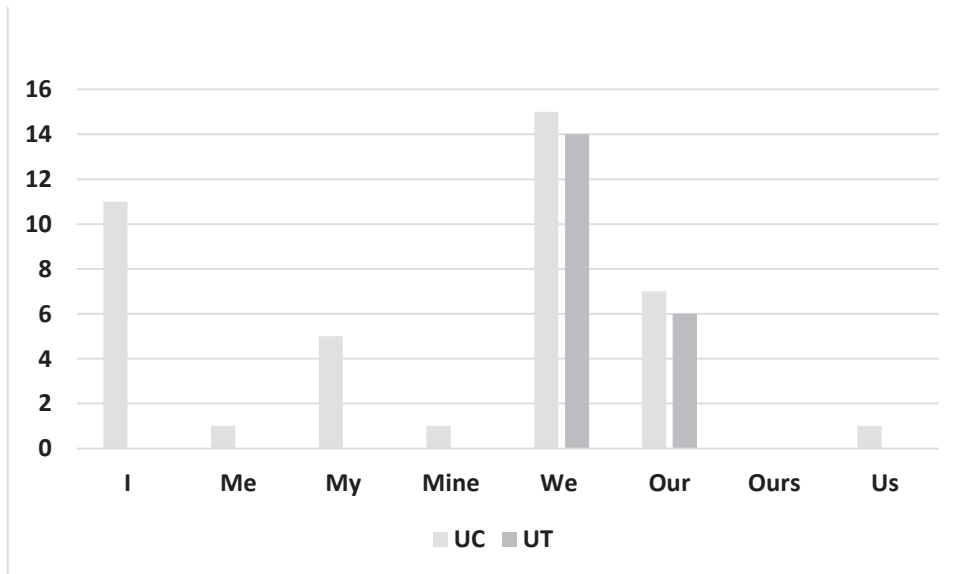

Figure 4. Self-mentions in normalised values

Notably, the use of *we* by UC and UT is similar to that in Lorés-Sanz and Herrando-Rodrigo (2020). In particular, both UC and UT employ *we* to refer to i) a scientific research project, e.g. (a) "**We** set up and implemented a system to rapidly sequence clinical samples" (The University of Cambridge 2020) and (b) "**We** recently demonstrated a novel phenomenon of multisite phosphorylation in cell cycle regulation" (The University of Tartu 2020); as well as ii) a tertiary research-intensive institution, e.g. (a) "In Cambridge, **we** are committed to achieving excellence in research and scholarship" (The University of Cambridge 2020) and (b) "**We** involve students in technology development during their studies already and thus contribute to the emergence of UT spin-offs" (The University of Tartu 2020).

4. Conclusion

The present article seeks to establish how discursive means of self-mention are employed in CMD by the leading universities in Estonia (UT) and the UK (UC). The results of the quantitative analysis indicate that both UC and UT use the self-mention *we* to present their research to the stakeholders. Arguably, the use of *we* is associated with the endeavour to impart a sense of scientific community, a scientific project, and to signal the presence of the research-intensive tertiary institution. As far as the normalised data are concerned, there is no statistically significant difference associated with the use of the self-mention *we* by these two universities. However, in terms of the raw values, UC appears to frequently employ the self-mention *I* in order to communicate a more personalised narrative about its research-related activities.

These findings could be interpreted as a certain convergence in terms of the use of *we* by UC as the representative of the Inner Circle of English and UT that represents the Expanding Circle. However, despite the convergence of discursive means of self-mention by UC and UT (e.g., *we*), UC's research-related discourse exhibits the Inner Circle-specific preferences for self-mention. Specifically, the self-mention *I,* which is amply employed by UC on its website, involves a personified dimension, whereby a research narrative is framed via the lenses of the *I*-narrator. That narrator is typically represented by an individual researcher as a member of the UC research team. In contrast, the individualised and personified dimension expressed by the self-mention *I* is absent in the UT's research-related discourse represented on its website. These findings suggest that the self-mention *I* that is found on the UC's website concerning research-related activities bears the mark of the language-, culture-, and discourse-specific conventions associated with the Inner Circle of English.

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