Journal of Liberal Arts
Prince of Songkla University

A Corpus Stylistic Analysis of Lexical Features and Interpersonal Meaning in *Never Let Me Go*

การวิเคราะห์รูปแบบของคำและความหมายเชิงปฏิสัมพันธ์ใน *Never Let Me Go* ด้วยแนวทางวัจนลีลาศาสตร์คลังข้อมูล

Received: April 8, 2026 **Revised:** June 11, 2026 **Accepted:** June 20, 2026

Taweewat Inree[1]
ทวีวัฒน์ อินรีย์

Kamonchanok Sanmuang[2]
กมลชนก แสนเมือง

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate linguistic patterns in the novel *Never Let Me Go* (hereafter, *NLMG*) to help explain interpersonal meaning through a corpus linguistics method. This research identified language features in the narration of cloned characters, particularly keywords, four-word lexical bundles, and patterns of Parts of Speech (POS). The *NLMG* corpus was compiled, and AntConc was then used to extract keywords and four-word lexical bundles. Part-of-speech tagging was conducted using TagAnt (version 2.1.1). The keyword results were from the comparison of the *NLMG* corpus with the American English 2006 Corpus (AmE06). The results indicated that personal pronouns, particularly, *I, we,* and *you*, have a major effect on the narrative voice and interpersonal relationships. Some four-word lexical bundles, such as *I don't know*, *I'm not sure*, and *I don't think*, showed hesitation and uncertainty. Other bundles, such as *Tommy and me*, which refer to Ruth and other characters, fostered relationships and patterns of interaction. These patterns showed degrees of certainty, alignment, and social roles. They were interpreted through concordance and file-view analyses of the *NLMG* corpus together with the interpersonal framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly mood and modality, to explain how the characters express certainty, uncertainty, and social relationships. The integration of corpus stylistics and the interpersonal metafunction of SFL provides a functionally motivated account of how recurrent language patterns shape

[1]***Affiliation:*** Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Phranakhon Rajabhat University, Thailand
หน่วยงาน: คณะมนุษยศาสตร์และสังคมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏพระนคร ประเทศไทย

[2]***Affiliation:*** Faculty of Liberal Arts and Management Science, Kasetsart University Chalermphrakiat Sakon Nakhon Province Campus, Thailand
หน่วยงาน: คณะศิลปศาสตร์และวิทยาการจัดการ มหาวิทยาลัยเกษตรศาสตร์ วิทยาเขตเฉลิมพระเกียรติ จังหวัดสกลนคร ประเทศไทย

Corresponding Author: Kamonchanok Sanmuang
E-mail: kamolchanok.w@ku.th

uncertainty, stance, and social standing in literary discourse, offering a depth of explanation neither method achieves on its own.

Keywords: corpus stylistics, lexical bundles, interpersonal meaning, systemic functional linguistics (SFL), parts of speech (POS)

บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษารูปแบบทางภาษาศาสตร์ในนวนิยายเรื่อง *Never Let Me Go* (ซึ่งอ้างถึงในชื่อ *NLMG*) เพื่ออธิบายความหมายเชิงปฏิสัมพันธ์โดยใช้วิธีการทางภาษาศาสตร์คลังข้อมูล และศึกษาลักษณะทางภาษาในการเล่าเรื่องของตัวละครมนุษย์โคลนโดยเน้นการวิเคราะห์คำสำคัญ กลุ่มคำศัพท์สี่คำ และชนิดของคำที่แบ่งตามหน้าที่ในประโยค (POS) ทั้งนี้ได้มีการสร้างคลังข้อมูล *NLMG* ขึ้น จากนั้นใช้โปรแกรม AntConc ในการสกัดคำสำคัญและกลุ่มคำศัพท์สี่คำ และใช้โปรแกรม TagAnt (เวอร์ชัน 2.1.1) เพื่อระบุชนิดของคำที่แบ่งตามหน้าที่ในประโยค ส่วนคำสำคัญในนวนิยายได้มาจากการเปรียบเทียบคลังข้อมูล *NLMG* กับคลังข้อมูลภาษาอังกฤษแบบอเมริกัน ค.ศ. 2006 (AmE06) ผลการวิจัยพบว่า สรรพนามบุรุษที่1 และ 2 โดยเฉพาะ *I, we* และ *you* มีอิทธิพลสำคัญต่อน้ำเสียงการเล่าเรื่อง และความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างบุคคลในนวนิยาย กลุ่มคำศัพท์สี่คำ เช่น *I don't know, I'm not sure* และ *I don't think* แสดงให้เห็นถึงความลังเลและความไม่แน่นอนของตัวละคร ในขณะที่กลุ่มคำศัพท์สี่คำอื่น ๆ เช่น *Tommy and me* ซึ่งอ้างถึงรูธและตัวละครอื่น ๆ มีส่วนช่วยสร้างความสัมพันธ์และแบบแผนของการปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างตัวละคร รูปแบบทางภาษาเหล่านี้แสดงระดับของความแน่ใจ การวางตำแหน่งเชิงปฏิสัมพันธ์ (alignment) และบทบาททางสังคม ซึ่งได้รับการตีความจากการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูล concordance และ file view ของคลังข้อมูลนวนิยาย *Never Let Me Go* ร่วมกับกรอบการวิเคราะห์ความหมายระหว่างบุคคลของไวยากรณ์เชิงระแบบและหน้าที่ (SFL) โดยเฉพาะระบบมาลา (mood) และการแสดงทัศนะ (modality) เพื่ออธิบายว่าตัวละครแสดงความมั่นใจ ความไม่มั่นใจ และความสัมพันธ์ทางสังคม การบูรณาการวัจนลีลาศาสตร์คลังข้อมูลเข้ากับหน้าที่ด้านความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างบุคคลของไวยากรณ์เชิงระบบและหน้าที่ ช่วยให้สามารถอธิบายบทบาทของรูปแบบภาษาที่ปรากฏซ้ำในการสร้างความหมายได้อย่างเป็นระบบ ทั้งยังแสดงให้เห็นว่ารูปแบบภาษาดังกล่าวมีส่วนในการสื่อความหมายเกี่ยวกับความไม่แน่ใจ การแสดงจุดยืน และสถานะทางสังคมของตัวละครในวาทกรรมวรรณกรรมอย่างไร การบูรณาการนี้ยังช่วยให้คำอธิบายมีความลุ่มลึกมากกว่าการใช้แต่ละแนวทางโดยลำพัง

คำสำคัญ: วัจนลีลาศาสตร์คลังข้อมูล กลุ่มคำศัพท์สี่คำ ความหมายเชิงปฏิสัมพันธ์ ไวยากรณ์เชิงระแบบและหน้าที่ ชนิดของคำที่แบ่งตามหน้าที่ในประโยค

Introduction

Corpus stylistics has recently become a significant approach for analysing literary texts by integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This method enables researchers to identify recurring linguistic patterns, such as keywords, lexical bundles, and grammatical features, through quantitative analyses of frequency and distribution patterns, which can then be interpreted qualitatively in context through close reading and concordance analysis (Baker, 2004; Mahlberg, 2010). This approach has been widely used to analyse characterisation, narrative voice, and stylistic elements in novels (See Culpeper, 2009, 2014; Wijitsopon, 2013). Recent corpus stylistic research has also shown the value of corpus methods in literary analysis. For example, Wijitsopon (2022) found that recurring linguistic patterns contribute to the interpretation of colour symbolism in *The Great Gatsby* and its Thai translations. Recent studies further demonstrate its usefulness in analysing narrative structure and character portrayals (Ijam & Al-Ameedi, 2024; Razzaq et al., 2025). Language serves not only as a means of conveying information but also as a resource for constructing social relationships and expressing attitudes. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) offers a useful framework, particularly through the interpersonal metafunction, which examines how speakers express attitudes and position themselves through mood and modality (Ijam & Al-Ameedi, 2024; Iwamoto, 2007). In a world where cloned children are raised as organ donors, Kathy H. retrospectively narrates *Never Let Me Go*, a memoir that recounts her childhood with Ruth and Tommy. The cloned characters' controlled and predetermined lives are gradually revealed by the novel's fragmented narration. They are represented as emotionally vulnerable human subjects due to their limited understanding of their origins, future, donations, and completion, which results in uncertainty and insecurity. Although previous corpus stylistic studies have investigated characterisation and narrative voice in literary texts, limited attention has been paid to how recurring linguistic patterns convey interpersonal meaning through the interpersonal framework of SFL. Furthermore, the ways in which the language of cloned characters contributes to expressions of uncertainty and social positioning in *Never Let Me Go* have received limited research attention. As a result, the *NLMG* novel offers a useful framework for analysing how linguistic patterns create interpersonal meaning through social relationships and expressions of uncertainty.

While four-word lexical bundles highlight recurrent patterns connected to character expression and interaction, keywords help in identifying key linguistic elements in the book. Parts of speech (POS) patterns offer additional evidence of the narration's grammatical preferences. The interpersonal metafunction of SFL is used to interpret these linguistic elements, especially mood and modality, to explain how the characters convey attitudes, social relationships, and uncertainty. When taken together, these analytical aspects offer a methodical framework for analysing the novel's interpersonal meaning.

This study explored keywords, four-word lexical bundles, and POS features in the *Never Let Me Go* novel (henceforth *NLMG*) to examine how linguistic patterns realise interpersonal meaning and shape character positioning, with a particular focus on expressions of uncertainty.

Research Questions

1. What keywords, four-word lexical bundles, and parts of speech (POS) patterns are associated with the speech and narration of human-cloned characters in the *Never Let Me Go Corpus*?
2. How do the identified linguistic patterns realise interpersonal metafunctions, particularly modality, in shaping the social positioning of the characters?

Literature Review

Corpus stylistics is now recognised as a critical approach in literary studies due to the way it can analyse language patterns in texts through the integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Quantitative analysis identifies recurring linguistic features, whereas qualitative analysis interprets their meanings in context. It allows researchers to recognise recurring features, including keywords, lexical bundles, and collocations, which aid the interpretation of literary meaning (Culpeper, 2009, 2014; Mahlberg, 2007; McIntyre & Walker, 2019). Previous studies have demonstrated that corpus tools give systematic evidence for the analysis of narrative voice and characterisation. For instance, Ikeo et al. (2024) used a corpus stylistic approach to analyse contemporary present-tense narrative and demonstrated the potential of corpus methods to identify narrative patterns in literary texts. For example, Mahlberg et al. (2019) showed that speech bundles can reveal major patterns of interaction and interpersonal relations in fictional discourse. Similarly, Mahlberg (2010) explained that important patterns in literary texts can be found when qualitative interpretation is combined with corpus methods. Similarly, Ho (2011) highlights how corpus stylistics may aid the stylistic interpretation of literary texts through the use of a systematic analysis of linguistic patterns. These methods include keyword analysis and concordance. In addition, Dalfino et al. (2023) noted that corpus stylistic analysis can detect narrative techniques. It can also identify thematic patterns. These features are often difficult to notice through only manual reading. Consequently, these studies show that corpus methods can be used to analyse character representations. They can also be used to examine thematic focus. This is especially clear in keyword and collocational analysis. Moreover, stylistic research, such as Simpson (2019), stresses the value of linking linguistic patterns with creativity. It also links them with rhetoric and interpretation in literary texts. From a cognitive stylistic view, Culpeper (2009, 2014) argued that linguistic patterns shape how readers understand characters. They do this through cognitive processes.

However, they tend to identify linguistic patterns rather than explain how interpersonal meaning is constructed in *Never Let Me Go* through the lens of language patterns.

Keyword analysis is an important method in corpus linguistics because it shows which words occur more often in a target text than in a reference corpus (Baker, 2004). In literary studies, researchers have used keywords to study characterisation by finding patterns related to particular characters or narrative viewpoints (Culpeper, 2009, 2014). Pronouns such as *I*, *we*, and *you* often work as important markers of point of view and interpersonal relations. These linguistic patterns are especially helpful because they show how characters express their attitudes and position themselves within the narrative. However, keyword analysis alone cannot fully explain meaning because researchers must examine concordance lines and clusters to understand how words work in context (Baker, 2004). In addition, prior studies often identify

keywords as separate features but do not closely examine how these keywords interact with other linguistic patterns to build interpersonal meaning. Therefore, a more integrated approach is needed to explain how keyword patterns contribute to the expression of uncertainty and character positioning in literary texts.Corpus stylistic studies have investigated a variety of linguistic features in order to understand stylistic patterns in literary works. Khachan (2023) looked at sentence-initial coordinating conjunctions in Kahlil Gibran's writings and illustrated the impact of recurring linguistic patterns on literary style. Similarly, Ikeo et al. (2024) applied corpus stylistics to narrative texts and identified recurring narrative patterns through corpus analysis. Lexical bundles are particularly important as they provide information on recurrent word sequences that explain discourse functions and interpersonal meaning beyond single words (Biber,1999; Mahlberg, 2007). Biber (2006) further argued that lexical bundles can reveal stance and discourse functions through recurrent word sequences. In narrative texts, Examples include bundles such as *I believe* and *I don't know*. This st udy examines mental processes using recurrent lexical bundles that convey uncertainty, perception, and cognition. These bundles give examples of how characters in the story express their thoughts, ideas, and knowledge. These expressions convey hesitation, doubt, and evaluation, which are critical for understanding character identity. These patterns are particularly relevant to interpersonal meaning, as they allow speakers to express their stance and negotiate their relationship with others in discourse. While previous research has looked into the structural and functional roles of lexical bundles, most studies primarily focus on categorising bundles into structural or functional types, rather than examining how these bundles operate in context to construct interpersonal meaning. Few studies have focused on how these bundles express uncertainty and help to character positioning in literary texts. In addition, there is still limited research that explores how lexical bundles interact with other linguistic features, such as pronouns and modal verbs, to realise modality and social positioning in narrative discourse.

Parts of speech (POS) tagging is a useful tool in corpus linguistics and natural language processing. It is also a process that classifies each word in a text into grammatical categories. These include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and pronouns (Atwell, 2008). Then, this method helps researchers analyse linguistic patterns in a systematic way. It also helps them examine how grammatical features contribute to meaning in different contexts. In corpus-based studies, POS tagging is widely used. This is because it helps identify structural and functional patterns in language. According to Awwalu et al. (2020), accurate POS tagging is very important in language processing. It supports the correct interpretation of sentence structure and meaning. In addition, POS tagging allows researchers to examine relationships between grammatical forms and discourse functions. These include pronoun use, modality, and stance. Therefore, POS tagging is an effective analytical tool. It shows how linguistic patterns contribute to interpersonal meaning in literary texts.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides a useful framework for examining how language creates meaning in context. Previous studies have applied different metafunctions of SFL to literary texts. For example, Abood (2024) used the ideational metafunction to examine nominalisation and ideational grammatical metaphor in Toni Morrison's Beloved, showing how linguistic choices contribute to thematic representation. While such studies focus on experiential meaning, the present study adopts the interpersonal metafunction to investigate attitudes, uncertainty, and social relationships in narrative discourse. The interpersonal

metafunction explains how speakers express attitudes, judgements, and relationships through linguistic choices (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In addition, it includes mood and modality, which show levels of certainty, possibility, and obligation. Certainty refers to a speaker's level of confidence, possibility indicates how likely an event or situation is, and obligation reflects the extent to which actions are portrayed as necessary or required. These linguistic resources are especially important when researchers analyse how speakers position themselves and others in discourse, particularly through expressions of uncertainty and evaluation. Besides, previous studies have shown that SFL can explain how language reflects power relations and social positioning in texts. For example, Chueasuai (2017) showed that interpersonal meaning is created through lexicogrammatical choices that encode social relationships and power relations among participants. However, the study focuses on the translation of interpersonal meaning rather than examining how interpersonal meaning is realised through recurring linguistic patterns in literary texts. Moreover, studies have found that modality, a linguistic resource used to express attitudes towards the likelihood, certainty, or obligation of a proposition, and pronoun use can signal degrees of authority, distance, and speaker stance in interaction. More importantly, there is limited research investigating how recurrent linguistic patterns contribute to interpersonal meaning in *Never Let Me Go* through the combined use of corpus-based methods and SFL. This approach is useful because corpus techniques provide empirical evidence, while SFL offers a functional explanation of how linguistic patterns contribute to characterisation and social positioning.

Background of *Never Let Me Go*

Never Let Me Go (2005) is a dystopian science fiction novel by Kazuo Ishiguro. The story is narrated by Kathy H. and follows the lives of Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth, who are raised at Hailsham and later discover that they are cloned children created to become organ donors. Through Kathy's memories, the novel explores themes of identity, friendship, mortality, and humanity. These three cloned characters are the focus of the present study.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

A corpus stylistic approach is employed in the study to examine how language constructs interpersonal meaning in the novel *NLMG*. Particularly, it focuses on the speech and narration of the main cloned characters, namely Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth. The study adopts a combined quantitative and qualitative approach, where corpus tools are used to identify recurring linguistic patterns and contextual interpretation is used to explain their meanings. The study used SFL as an analytical framework to interpret ways in which linguistic features express attitudes, uncertainty, and relationships between characters. It particularly focuses on the interpersonal metafunction, with emphasis on how linguistic features realise attitudes, uncertainty, and relationships between characters.

2. Corpus Design

The *NLMG* corpus was built, and it comprises 5,500 words that were extracted from the speech and narration of the primary cloned characters in the novel. The study focuses on Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth as they are the three central cloned characters in the novel, contributing significantly to the majority of narrative interactions. Kathy H. serves as the narrator and protagonist whose retrospective account structures the story. Tommy is Kathy's close friend and later becomes her romantic partner, while Ruth is Kathy's childhood friend and a socially influential figure within their peer group. Their speech and narration provide rich evidence of interpersonal relationships, uncertainty, and character positioning, which are the main focus of the present study. The corpus was intended to represent linguistic patterns associated with character positioning, uncertainty, and interpersonal meaning. Prior to analysis, the selected texts were converted into plain text format and cleaned by removing page numbers, chapter headings, and other non-linguistic elements. Keywords, lexical bundles, and concordance patterns were subsequently analysed using AntConc versions 3.5.9 and 4.2.4 (Anthony, 2024). Although the *NLMG* corpus is relatively small, it was compiled as a specialised corpus focusing on the speech and narration of the main cloned characters. Therefore, the corpus size is appropriate for the purposes of this study. For this reason, a smaller, more focused corpus is considered the most suitable means of capturing detailed patterns of language in context. Pojanapunya (2025) suggested that size and dispersion should not be the sole criteria for evaluating corpus validity. Instead, what matters is how well the corpus aligns with the research objectives. Keywords and lexical bundles were derived as linguistic features. The *NLMG* corpus was also used for parts of speech (POS) tagging extracted with TagAnt (version 2.1.1), see also Anthony (2024).

3. Data Collection

The *NLMG* corpus was used to extract linguistic features, including keywords, four-word lexical bundles, and POS. *Never Let Me Go* was selected because it centres on the lives of cloned characters whose experiences are shaped by uncertainty, limited knowledge, and predetermined futures. The novel is narrated from Kathy's first-person perspective and contains frequent interactions among Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth, making it particularly suitable for examining interpersonal meaning, character positioning, and expressions of uncertainty through recurring linguistic patterns. The keywords were identified by comparing the *NLMG* corpus with a reference corpus, the American English 2006 (AmE06) corpus. The AmE06 corpus was selected because it is a balanced corpus of general American English containing approximately one million words from a range of written genres. As *Never Let Me Go* is a contemporary novel written in English, AmE06 provides a suitable baseline for identifying words that occur unusually frequently in the *NLMG* corpus. In addition, the corpus is broadly contemporaneous with the publication period of the novel, making it appropriate for keyword comparison. The purpose of the reference corpus was not to match the literary genre exactly, but to identify linguistic features that are particularly prominent in the target corpus. Although the novel is written in British English, AmE06 was selected because it is a balanced and readily accessible reference corpus in AntConc. The focus of the analysis was on identifying prominent lexical patterns rather than investigating national varieties of English. For detailed analysis, the top 30 keywords were selected because they included the most prominent personal pronouns

and character names in the *NLMG* corpus, which were particularly relevant to the investigation of interpersonal meaning and character positioning. The American English 2006 (AmE06) corpus is a 1-million-word balanced corpus of American English texts that was compiled and published around 2006. Keywords were identified based on their frequency and keyness. Four-word bundles, keywords, and POS were used to interpret meaning in context that represents the cloned characters in the *NLMG* novel. The N-Gram function in AntConc version 4.2.4 (Anthony, 2024) was used to extract four-word lexical bundles. Four-word bundles were selected because they offer more meaningful and structurally complete patterns than three-word bundles and are widely used in corpus linguistic studies (Biber et al., 1999; Mahlberg, 2007).

4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out in several steps. First, keyword analysis was used to identify key lexical words in the *NLMG* corpus. Second, four-word bundles were collected from key pronouns to explore recurrent patterns of expression in the *NLMG* corpus. They were identified using keyword-guided extraction rather than frequency and dispersion, as the focus was on functional meaning in context. The bundles were analysed for their structural and functional roles, particularly in expressing uncertainty, mental processes, and interaction. To answer the second research question, the identified linguistic features were interpreted through the interpersonal metafunction in SFL. Modal verbs, modal adjuncts (e.g., maybe, perhaps), and mental process verbs (e.g., think, know, remember) were used to examine modality and speaker stance. These characteristics were used to explore how characters show degrees of certainty, hesitation, and evaluation, as well as how such expressions contribute to their social positioning in the novel. In this regard, mental processes were explored through recurrent lexical bundles that express cognition, perception, and uncertainty, such as *I don't know, I'm not sure, I didn't know,* and *I don't think*. These bundles reflected the characters' thoughts, beliefs, memories, and judgements Concordance analysis was then used to examine the contexts in which these bundles occurred, allowing an interpretation of how mental processes contributed to interpersonal meaning, uncertainty, and character positioning in the novel. Third, POS tagging was used to identify grammatical patterns such as personal pronouns, modal verbs, adverbs, and verbs by using TagAnt (version 2.1.1). These categories were selected because they are closely associated with interpersonal meaning. Finally, concordance analysis was used to investigate how linguistic features functioned in context. The findings were interpreted through the interpersonal metafunction in SFL. The study focused on mood types and modality resources, which contributed to the construction of interpersonal meaning in the text.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the corpus stylistic analysis of *Never Let Me Go* and addresses the first research question. The findings are divided into three categories, which are keywords, four-word lexical bundles, and part-of-speech patterns. These findings show how the novel's language facilitates subjectivity, interaction, and relationships among the cloned characters, specifically Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth.

1. Keywords in the *NLMG* Corpus

Keyword analysis was conducted by comparing the *NLMG* corpus with the AmE306 reference corpus to identify lexical and grammatical items. As shown in Table 1, the analysis identified 30 salient keywords, with frequencies ranging from 517 to 3,389 occurrences. Among these, personal pronouns accounted for eight of the 30 keywords (*I, we, you, she, me, her, us,* and *it*). This suggested that the novel is strongly interpersonal and participant-oriented. The language consistently reflected who is speaking, who is being addressed, and how other characters are represented throughout the narrative.

The keywords in Table 1 occur mainly in Kathy's retrospective narration and in conversations among Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth. As the novel is narrated from Kathy's perspective, many of the keywords reflect personal memories, interpersonal interactions, and shared experiences among the cloned characters. The prominence of personal pronouns, character names, and reporting verbs suggests that the narrative is strongly centred on relationships, dialogue, and the characters' attempts to understand their experiences and future lives.

Table 1

Keywords in the NLMG Corpus

No.	Keyword	Rank	Frequency
1	I	1	3,389
2	the	2	4,092
3	it	3	2,243
4	and	4	2,528
5	was	5	1,945
6	a	6	2,061
7	we	7	1,429
8	that	7	1,546
9	you	9	1,414
10	of	9	1,775
11	not	11	1,160
12	in	11	1,375
13	had	13	1,093
14	she	14	1,065
15	but	15	1,018
16	is	16	988
17	about	17	787

No.	Keyword	Rank	Frequency
18	at	18	779
19	me	19	663
20	all	19	703
21	were	19	686
22	had	19	710
23	her	19	698
24	tommy	24	565
25	then	24	595
26	said	24	586
27	what	24	587
28	there	24	580
29	ruth	29	517
30	us	29	541

The most frequently used keyword was *I (3,389)*, which reflected Kathy's first-person narration, indicating that the story was primarily shaped by her memory and personal perspective. The novel's repeated use of *I* also gives it a reflective and subjective tone, implying that the narrative is limited to one speaker's viewpoint.

The use of *we (1,429)* was also notable because, while *I* emphasised individual experience, *we* signaled a shared perspective among the cloned characters. This suggested that the novel presents not only Kathy's story but also a group identity shaped by shared experiences and social circumstances.

The pronoun *you (1,414)* also supported the interpersonal nature of the text because it appeared frequently in conversations, direct address, and explanations. This showed that the novel was interactive and dialogic. In other words, the narrative developed through interactions and relationships.

Another key word was *not (1,160)*. Its high frequency suggested that negation, correction, and hesitation were common in the discourse, indicating that the narrative voice often expressed uncertainty rather than full certainty. The extract (1) below illustrates this pattern:

> *I didn't know what to do or say, or what to expect next. Perhaps she would come into the room, shout at me, hit me even, I didn't have a clue. As it was, she turned and the next moment I could hear her footsteps leaving the hut. I realised the tape had gone on to the next track, and I turned it off and sat down on the nearest bed. (Extract 1)*

The keyword *not (1,160)* appeared in the contracted negative form *didn't know*. Although it functioned as grammatical negation, it also revealed Kathy's lack of knowledge and uncertainty in a tense situation. Because she was unable to predict how another character would react, the expression *I didn't know what to do or say* reflected hesitation and a lack of control. Thus, the word *not* functioned not only as a marker of negation but also as an indicator of uncertainty and emotional vulnerability, positioning Kathy as hesitant and insecure throughout the narrative.

The names *Tommy (565)* and *Ruth (517) were* also noteworthy because they appeared a lot and played an important role in shaping the novel's interpersonal relationships. Kathy's emotional and social world was repeatedly organised around her relationship with these two characters.

In addition to personal pronouns and character names, other keywords such as *then (595)* and *said (586)* also contributed to the narrative. The keyword *then* helped organise the sequence of events, while *said* reflected the frequent reporting of speech and interaction among characters. These patterns supported the development of the narrative and character relationships throughout the novel. Overall, the keyword findings indicated that the discourse of *NLMG* was strongly shaped by subjectivity, collectivity, interaction, and relational reference. These patterns provided a foundation for the analysis of four-word lexical bundles and grammatical patterns.

2. Four-Word Lexical Bundles Associated with Cloned Characters

The N-Gram function in AntConc (version 4.2.4) was first used to identify recurrent four-word lexical bundles in the corpus. Subsequently, keyword-based cluster analysis was conducted for selected keywords such as *I, we, Ruth,* and *Tommy* to examine their contextual patterns. The four-word lexical bundles were generated using keyword-based patterns derived from the 30 most frequent keywords in the *NLMG* corpus. The top 30 keywords were chosen due to their direct relevance to interpersonal meaning and character positioning, as they contained notable personal pronouns and character names. Four-word bundles associated with these keywords were subsequently examined in context.

Table 2

Four-Word Bundles Associated with I in the NLMG Corpus

No.	*Four-word Bundles*	Frequency
1	I don t know	39
2	I m not sure	17
3	I didn t know	16
4	I didn t want	15
5	I don t think	15
6	I don t see	10
7	I can t remember	9
8	I don t remember	9
9	I didn t have	8
10	I didn t say	8

The bundles in Table 2 occur mainly in Kathy's retrospective narration as she recalls past events, relationships, and conversations. Many of these expressions appeared when Kathy reflects on uncertain memories, interprets past experiences, or evaluates situations involving Tommy and Ruth. As a result, the bundles frequently expressed limited knowledge, hesitation, and self-qualification, contributing to her reflective narrative voice. Table 2 shows a major pattern appearing in bundles headed by *I*. The most frequent bundles included *I don't know (39), I'm not sure (17), I didn't know (16), I didn't want (15), I don't think (15), I can't remember (9), and I don't remember (9)*. Given that these groups suggested a conversation that was based on doubt, limited knowledge, and incomplete memories, Kathy's voice was not very assertive. Rather, it was built by doubt, qualification, and reflection. This pattern was important because many of these bundles included negative forms like *can't, didn't, don't,* and *didn't.* These forms helped create a cautious tone of the story, showing that Kathy's speaking and remembering were often tense and uncertain. Similarly, the bundle *I don't see* (10) was also important because it often expressed difficulty in understanding or evaluating a situation rather than literal visual perception. This could be seen in an extract from the NLMG Corpus: *"Things have been falling apart for me. But I don't see what you mean, Kath."* In this exchange, Tommy questioned Kathy's interpretation of events rather than simply rejecting the information she provided. Similarly, the bundles *I don't see how you could know* and *I don't see what difference it makes* reflected uncertainty and cautious evaluation. Like *I don't know* and *I don't think*, these bundles contributed to Kathy's reflective and non-assertive narrative voice.

The bundles in Table 3 occur mainly in Kathy's recollections of her interactions with Tommy. Many of these expressions appeared in scenes where the two characters shared experiences, discussed past events, or responded to emotionally significant situations. As a result, Tommy was frequently represented through his relationship with Kathy and through observable actions and emotional reactions.

The bundles related to Tommy showed a different pattern, as presented in Table 3. The most common ones are *Tommy and I were (39), Tommy shook his head (16), Tommy and I had (9), Tommy and I would (8),* and *Tommy gave a sigh (8).* Unlike the first-person bundles that frequently expressed uncertainty, the Tommy-related bundles highlighted interpersonal relationships and character positioning. Bundles such as *Tommy and I were* and *Tommy and I had* emphasised shared experiences between Kathy and Tommy, while expressions such as *Tommy shook his head* and *Tommy gave a sigh* foreground his emotional and behavioural responses. These patterns contributed to the construction of interpersonal meaning by revealing how Kathy represented her relationship with Tommy throughout the narrative.

Table 3

Four-Word Lexical Bundles Related to Tommy in the NLMG Corpus

No.	4-word bundle	Frequency
1	Tommy and I were	39
2	Tommy and I we	17
3	Tommy shook his head	16
4	Tommy what are you	15
5	Tommy about what had	15
6	Tommy and I found	10
7	Tommy and I had	9
8	Tommy and I leaned	9
9	Tommy and I would	8
10	Tommy gave a sigh	8

The repeated pattern *Tommy and I* was important because it showed that *Kathy and Tommy* often shared experiences. This suggested that Tommy's character was built through closeness, friendship, and shared moments, rather than through personal reflection.

The bundles in Table 4 occur mainly in scenes involving Ruth's interactions with Kathy and other characters. Many of these expressions appeared in conversations, social activities, and relationship-related events, highlighting Ruth's role within the group. The bundles therefore reflected her influence on interpersonal relationships and her active participation in shaping social dynamics throughout the narrative. Examples include *Ruth and the others (6), Ruth and I had (4), Ruth said what she (4),* and *Ruth came up (2).* These bundles showed Ruth in situations where she spoke, moved, and interacted with others.

Compared to Tommy, Ruth was more strongly linked to talking and acting in a group. In particular, *Ruth said what she (4)* was important because it foregrounded the verb *said (586),* which highlights Ruth's role in shaping interactions and influencing others through speech (see Table 4). The frequent occurrence of speech-related verbs suggested that Ruth was often represented through her verbal actions rather than physical actions. This indicated that her words had social consequences in the narrative and contributed to her interpersonal influence over other characters.

Table 4

Four-Word Lexical Bundles Related to Ruth in the NLMG Corpus

No.	4-word bundle	Frequency
1	Ruth and the others	6
2	Ruth and I had	4
3	Ruth said what she	4
4	Ruth and Chrissie were	2
5	Ruth and I came	2
6	Ruth and I were	2
7	Ruth and I would	2
8	Ruth and Tommy split	2
9	Ruth came up to	2
10	Ruth from that early	2

Taken together, the lexical bundle findings showed that the three central characters were associated with different discourse routines. Kathy was frequently linked to uncertainty and self-qualification, while Tommy was often represented through shared experience and physical reaction. In contrast, Ruth was commonly associated with social relationships and group interactions through bundles such as *Ruth and the others (6)*, *Ruth and I had (4)*, and *Ruth and Tommy split (2)*. The bundle *Ruth said what she (4)* further suggested that her speech played a role in shaping interactions among characters.

3. Parts of speech (POS) Patterns in the *Never Let Me Go* Corpus

Table 5 shows the part-of-speech analysis of the *NLMG* corpus. Part-of-speech tagging categorises each word in the corpus by its grammatical class, enabling an organised review of linguistic patterns (Atwell, 2008). The POS categories were generated using TagAnt version 2.1.1, which used the Penn Treebank tagset, including personal pronouns (PRP), nouns (NN, NNS), verbs (VB, VBD, VBG), adverbs (RB), and modal verbs (MD). The most frequent category was personal pronouns (14,550), followed by prepositions or subordinating conjunctions (13,063), singular nouns (9,813), adverbs (9,807), and past tense verbs (9,446). Modal verbs *(*1,708*)* were also important. The high frequency of personal pronouns supported the keyword findings. It confirmed that the discourse was strongly participant-oriented and focused on human relationships rather than on detached description. The frequent use of *I, we, you,* and *she* strengthened the idea that the novel was deeply personal and interactional. The POS categories examined in detail were selected because of their particular relevance to interpersonal meaning, uncertainty, and character positioning in the novel.

This supported previous research that highlights the importance of POS tagging in allowing for accurate interpretation of grammatical structure and meaning in texts (Awwalu et al., 2020). The POS patterns in Table 5 occur across both Kathy's retrospective narration and the dialogues among Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth. The high frequencies of personal pronouns, past tense verbs, adverbs, and modal verbs reflected the novel's focus on remembered experiences, interpersonal interactions, and the characters' attempts to understand their circumstances. These grammatical patterns therefore provided important contextual evidence for interpreting interpersonal meaning in the narrative.

Table 5

POS Tagging in the NLMG Corpus

No.	Tag	Description	Frequency	Examples of POS Tagging in the *NLMG Corpus*
1	PRP	Personal pronoun	14,550	I, it, we, you, she
2	IN	Preposition or subordinating conjunction	13,063	of, in, to, for, about
3	NN	Noun, singular or mass	9,813	time, something, way, anything, thing
4	RB	Adverb	9,807	not, then, just, so, now
5	VBD	Verb, past tense	9,446	was, had, were said, did
6	DT	Determiner	8,983	the, a, that, this, all
7	JJ	Adjective	4,551	other, few, little, sure, good
8	VB	Verb, base form	4,403	have, be, see, go, do
9	TO	*to*	4,303	to
10	CC	Coordinating conjunction	3,850	and, but, or
11	NNS	Noun, plural	3,198	things, people, years, days, students
12	NNP	Proper noun, singular	3,169	tommy, ruth, Hailsham, miss, madame
13	VBG	Verb, gerund or present participle	2,833	going, looking, talking, being, doing
14	VBP	Verb, non-3rd person singular present	2,101	have, am, think, know, remember
15	VBN	Verb, past participle	1,968	been, gone, done, got, seen
16	MD	Modal	1,708	could, would, will, might, can
17	RP	Particle	1,223	up, out, on, off, down
18	WRB	Wh-adverb	1,131	when, how, why, where, which
19	VBZ	Verb, 3rd person singular present	1,092	is, does
20	WP	Wh-pronoun	736	what, who
21	CD	Cardinal number	648	one, two, three
22	EX	Existential *there*	385	there
23	UH	Interjection	300	well, oh, okay, no, yes
24	WDT	Wh-determiner	273	that, which
25	PDT	Predeterminer	262	all

No.	Tag	Description	Frequency	Examples of POS Tagging in the *NLMG Corpus*
26	POS	Possessive ending	261	s
27	RBR	Adverb, comparative	253	more, earlier,
28	JJR	Adjective, comparative	252	more, better
29	JJS NNP	Adjective, superlative	169	least, best, most
30	S	Proper noun, plural	89	guardians

The prominence of past tense verbs reflected the retrospective structure of Kathy's narration. Because the story was told as a remembered event, the language was memory-based, and verbs such as *was*, *had*, *were*, *said*, and *did* were used extensively to support this narrative style.

Likewise, adverbs such as *not*, *then*, *just*, *so* and *now* were important because they helped organise time, soften meaning, and created a more conversational tone. For example, the word *not* showed how negation and limited knowledge are expressed in the discourse.

In this study, modal verbs like *could*, *would*, *might*, *can*, and *will* contributed to interpersonal meaning by expressing different degrees of certainty, possibility, and prediction. Their functions varied according to context rather than being associated with a single meaning. For example, in the extract below, the modal verb *will* performs several interpersonal functions (see Extract 2 below).

> *When it's time for donations, I'll be able to do it really well.' When I said this, she starts shaking her head, shaking it really hard so I'm worried she'll get dizzy. Then she says: 'Listen, Tommy, your art, it is important. And not just because it's evidence. But for your own sake. You'll get a lot from it, just for yourself.' (Extract 2)*

As can be seen in excerpt 2, the use of *will* in the phrase *I'll be able to do it really well* expresses Tommy's confidence and commitment to a future event. In contrast, *she'll get dizzy* reflected Kathy's concern about a possible future outcome and therefore conveying a degree of uncertainty. Meanwhile, *You'll get a lot from it* is used by Miss Lucy to reassure Tommy and express confidence in his future development. These examples demonstrated that the same modal verb can realise different interpersonal meanings depending on context, ranging from confidence and prediction to possibility and uncertainty. The characters often avoided being fully certain by using these verbs frequently. This suggested that certainty was not only shown in vocabulary, but also in the grammar categories of the novel. The findings supported previous studies, including Chueasai (2017), which showed that interpersonal meaning was shaped by lexicogrammatical choices that reflected social relationships and power relations between participants. POS results also suggested that the *NLMG* corpus was relatively personal, reflective, and interactive. The use of pronouns, modality, clause structure, and speaker positioning helped express interpersonal relationships in the discourse. For example, the frequent use of pronouns, past tense verbs, adverbs, and modal verbs supported the idea that interpersonal meaning was expressed at different linguistic levels.

Discussion

These findings can be discussed through the interpersonal metafunction in SFL, which focuses on how language is used to express attitudes, certainty, uncertainty, and relationships with others. In this study, the frequent use of pronouns, modal verbs, and uncertainty bundles showed how the cloned characters express their views, position themselves, and interact with other characters throughout the novel.

Modal verbs and stance adverbs are also common. These features showed that interpersonal meaning in *NLMG* was mainly built through hesitation, qualification, and limited certainty. The novel did not present a confident voice. It also did not present a fully authoritative voice. Instead, it presented a narrative voice that was cautious, controlled, and often uncertain.

Furthermore, the narrative voice did more than simply describe events. It showed how much the narrator could know and how far the narrator could go in interpreting events. It also showed how far the narrator could explain what happened. As a result, the narrator's discourse reflected a continuing struggle. This was about knowledge and understanding. This pattern was especially significant in the novel because identity was not fully formed and memory is incomplete.

Institutional knowledge such as information about Hailsham, donations, and the clones' predetermined futures, was not shared equally among the characters. In this context, the language of uncertainty was more than a stylistic feature. It was also a meaningful way to represent the characters' unstable social world. In addition, it represented their unstable psychological world.

1. Kathy: Uncertainty and Reflective Positioning

Kathy's discourse profile was shaped by low certainty bundles. These included *I don't know (39), I didn't know (16), I don't think (15),* and *I'm not sure (17).* These uncertainty bundles contributed to the interpersonal meaning of the novel by expressing both uncertainty and reflective positioning. Rather than presenting events as definite facts, Kathy frequently qualified her statements and acknowledged the limits of her knowledge. As shown in Table 6, the bundle *I don't know* repeatedly occurred in a context where Kathy reflected on past experiences, explained events, or acknowledged incomplete knowledge. Those concordance lines suggested that she often presented information cautiously and avoided making absolute claims. The bundle also signaled uncertainty while also positioning Kathy as a reflective narrator who evaluated events from her own limited perspectives.

Table 6

Concordance of the Bundle "I Don't Know" in the NLMG Corpus

Line	Left Context	Target Bundle	Right Context
1	I'd more or less forgotten all about it when Tommy stopped me a few days later.	*I don't know*	how it was where you were,
2	He gave a laugh, then became serious again. "	*I don't know*	who she was angry with. But
3	About us, about how one day we'll start giving donations.	*I don't know*	why, but I've had this feeling for some time now, that it's all linked in, though I can't figure out how.
4	And of course, we had our "collections" to think of.	*I don't know*	if you had "collections" where you were.
5	I must have done well enough, because eventually she let me have a go on Thunder, her favourite.	*I don't know*	how long we spent with her horses that day: it felt a substantial time, and I think we both lost ourselves completely in our game.
6	Then I glanced at Ruth and got a real shock.	*I don't know*	what I'd expected; for all my fantasies of the past month, I'd never really considered what it would be like in a real situation like the one unfolding at that moment.
7	And it was because of this cigarette that I got so secretive about the tape, right from the moment I found it at the Sale.	*I don't know*	how it was where you were, but at Hailsham the guardians were really strict about smoking.
8	The door was partly open, and just as I came up to it, the hissing started up again with a new intensity.	*I don't know*	what I expected to discover as I cautiously pushed the door, but I was properly surprised to find Miss Lucy.

Table 7

Concordance of the Bundle "I Didn't Know" in the NLMG Corpus

Line	Left Context	Target Bundle	Right Context
1	Except this time there was something else, something extra in that look I couldn't fathom.	*I didn't know*	what to do or say, or what to expect next.
2	He was looking at me in complete innocence and	*I didn't know*	what to say.
3	But the days passed and I heard nothing. What	*I didn't know*	at the time was that something pretty significant had happened only a few days after I'd seen her in Room 22
4	I could see was that it advertised what a child he still was, and how easily you could take advantage of him.	*I didn't know*	much then about the world that awaited us beyond Hailsham, but I'd guessed we'd need all our wits about us
5	"What were you saying through all this?"	*I didn't know*	what to say. In the end, she actually asked.
6	Why should you be any different?	*I didn't know*	what she was talking about, so I just said again: 'I'll be all right, Miss.'
7	Then he looked over to the boiler, and said:	*I didn't know*	you liked that sort of stuff." "Girls are allowed too, aren't we?"
8	After a while Tommy decided	*I didn't know*	any better than he did and announced he would lead the way.

Similar patterns can be observed in Tables 7 and 8. As shown in Table 7, the bundle *I didn't know* frequently occurred in contexts where Kathy lacked information, was unable to interpret events, or could not predict what will happen next. Concordance lines such as *I didn't know what to do or say* (Lines 1 and 2 in Table 7), *I didn't know much then about the world that awaited us beyond Hailsham* (Line 4 in Table 7), and *I didn't know what she was talking about* (Line 6 in Table 7), reflected limited knowledge and uncertainty. The bundle therefore signaled both epistemic limitation and emotional vulnerability.

Table 8

Concordance of the Bundle "I Don't Think" in the NLMG Corpus

Line	Left Context	Target Bundle	Right Context
1	In those days,	*I don't think*	what the boys did amongst themselves went much deeper than that.
2	His favourite polo shirt."	*I don't think*	anyone heard me, because they were all laughing at Laura
3	"Taught enough? You mean she thinks we should be studying even harder than we are?" "No,	*I don't think*	she meant that. What she was talking about was, you know, about us.
4	Tommy thought for a moment, then shook his head.	*I don't think*	she meant it like that. She just thinks we aren't taught about it enough.
5	A very important reason. But if I tried to explain it to you now,	*I don't think*	you'd understand.
6	It's a bit too much like a conspiracy theory for me	*I don't think*	our guardians were that crafty—but there's probably something in it
7	He was obviously unaware of it, and	*I don't think*	his friends had seen it either or they'd surely have made something of it.
8	And that it wasn't too late, I should start straight away, making up the lost time.	*I don't think*	I said anything, and she looked at me and I thought she'd hug me again.

Likewise, Table 8 shows that *I don't think* was commonly used when Kathy offered cautious interpretations rather than definite statements. Expressions such as *I don't think she meant that* (Line 3 in Table 8), *I don't think you'd understand* (Line 5 in Table 8), and *I don't think our guardians were that crafty* (Line 6 in Table 8), soften her evaluations and present them as personal opinions rather than objective facts. These bundles therefore functioned as a marker of reflective positioning, allowing Kathy to distance herself from complete certainty.

Taken together, the expressions *I don't know (39)*, *I didn't know (16)*, and *I don't think (15)* reveal a recurring pattern of uncertainty, self-qualification, and limited epistemic authority. These bundles contributed to the portrayal of Kathy as a reflective narrator who continually reassessed her memories and understanding of the world around her rather than presenting events with complete certainty.

Table 9

Concordance of the Bundle "I'm Not Sure" in the NLMG Corpus

Line	Left Context	Target Bundle	Right Context
1	Months could go by without incident, he'd think the whole thing was behind him, then something he did or one of his enemies, like Arthur would get it all going again.	*I'm not sure*	when the big temper tantrums started.
2	Then for a few minutes we talked about nothing in particular, just like the lunch-queue business hadn't happened.	*I'm not sure*	if it was for Tommy's benefit, or for any onlookers', but I'd kept my posture looking very provisional
3	I found out though over the next several days	*I'm not sure*	for how long the "secret guard" business carried on
4	Then I took the tape out of the bag with a disappointed air, and	*I'm not sure*	the disappointment wasn't still there on my face while I examined it.
5	I found out later, not because he couldn't actually walk and	*I'm not sure*	what was going on in our heads during those discussions.
6	A present?" I looked at him in surprise.	*I'm not sure*	Ruth would approve of that. Not unless you got her a bigger one."
7	They left without fuss in the usual way, the increased numbers made them impossible to ignore.	*I'm not sure*	our feelings were, witnessing these departures.
8	Some older ones—especially those who'd started their training—would sigh quietly and leave the room when this sort of talk began, but for a long time we didn't even notice this happening	*I'm not sure*	what was going on in our heads during those discussions.

Similarly, as can be seen in Table 9, *I'm not sure* expresses hesitation and a lack of confidence in interpreting past events. Unlike *I don't know*, which reflected limited knowledge, *I'm not sure* signaled uncertainty about how events, actions, or motivation should be understood. The bundle suggested that Kathy was reflecting on possible explanations rather than making a firm judgement. Likewise, as shown in Table 8, *I don't think* functions as a cautious evaluation rather than a direct assertion. Kathy softened her interpretation of past events and presented it as a personal perspective rather than an objective fact.

Taken together, the expressions *I don't know (39), I didn't know (16), I don't think (15),* and *I'm not sure (17)* revealed a recurring pattern of uncertainty, self-qualification, and limited epistemic authority. While *I don't know (39)* and *I didn't know (16)* indicated gaps in knowledge, *I'm not sure (17)* and *I don't think (15)* showed Kathy's reluctance to make definite interpretations and judgements. These bundles positioned Kathy as a reflective narrator who continually reassessed her memories and understanding of the world around her.

2. Tommy: Relational and Experiential Positioning

As shown in Table 10, Tommy is constructed differently than others. His most frequent bundles, such as *Tommy and I were (39), Tommy and I had (9),* and *Tommy and I would (8),* foregrounded shared experiences and interpersonal connections. Rather than directly expressing uncertainty, Tommy was often positioned through his relationship with Kathy. These bundles emphasised co-presence and joint experiences, contributing to the construction of interpersonal meaning between the two characters.

Table 10

Concordance of the Bundle "Tommy and I Were" in the NLMG Corpus

Line	Left Context	Target Bundle	Right Context
1	The gallery	Tommy and I were	discussing was something we'd all of us grown up with.
2	Not long ago, when	Tommy and I were	reminiscing about all of this, he thought we'd never really believed in the notion, that it was a joke right from the start.
3	As I say, by the time	Tommy and I were	discussing it, we'd all been told clearly enough.
4	A few years ago, when	Tommy and I were	going over it all again, and I reminded him of Miss Lucy's "told and not told" idea, he came up with a theory.
5	So, you see, it's got to be you to our rescue.	Tommy and I were	made for each other and he'll listen to you. You'll do it for us, won't you, Kathy?"

Line	Left Context	Target Bundle	Right Context
6	At the same time, though, I remember feeling even though they were the ones doing the talking, and	Tommy and I were	Silent-a sort of resentment towards them on Ruth's behalf.
7	But I got the impression Ruth had on a serious, almost frozen look, like	Tommy and I were	people in a play she was watching.
8	As being surprisingly tranquil. Maybe	Tommy and I were	making a special effort to be nice to each other, but the time seemed to slip by in an almost carefree way.

This pattern showed that Tommy was close to others and often appeared in shared situations. His character was revealed more through these moments and feelings than through his own thoughts. Bundles such as *Tommy shook his head (16)* and *Tommy gave a sigh* (8) were also important because they showed that Tommy was frequently represented through visible actions and emotional reactions. Instead of expressing his thoughts directly, Tommy was often characterised through bodily movements and observable responses. These patterns suggested that his feelings were conveyed through behaviour, helping readers understand his emotional state and relationships with others.

The following extract from the novel makes this point particularly clear:

> *The gallery Tommy and I were discussing was something we'd all of us grown up with. Everyone talked about it as though it existed, though in truth none of us knew for sure that it did. I'm sure I was pretty typical in not being able to remember how or when I'd first heard about it. Certainly, it hadn't been from the guardians: they never mentioned the Gallery, and there was an unspoken rule that we should never even raise the subject in their presence. (Extract 7)*

Although Tommy also existed within the same world of limited knowledge, his uncertainty was distributed differently. Kathy verbalised uncertainty through hedging and memory failure, but Tommy was more often positioned within uncertainty as a participant in shared bewilderment and emotional experience. His social positioning was therefore relational and experiential rather than strongly epistemic.

3. Ruth: Assertive and Interactional Positioning

Ruth can be characterised as displaying a unique discourse profile within the narrative. Ruth's textual presence was closely associated with speech, movement, and social activity, as illustrated from the concordance lines of the bundles in Table 11. In comparison to Kathy, Ruth is more closely associated with interactional force and less with low-certainty reflection.

Table 11

Concordance of the Bundle "Ruth Said What She" in the NLMG Corpus

Line	Left Context	Target Bundle	Right Context
1	That was why, when	*Ruth said what she*	did about my not being slow making friends with certain veterans, I wasn't just cross.
2	You know," Tommy said, "when	*Ruth said what she*	did earlier on, and I saw how upset you looked . . ."
3	Another of my theories. But when	*Ruth said what she*	did earlier on, it kind of clicked."
4	But that was when	*Ruth said what she*	did. It felt bad enough at the time, but I had no idea in the churchyard that day how far-reaching the repercussions would be.

The bundle *Ruth said what she (4)* was very noteworthy since it showed that people often remember what she said as relevant. Other characters later interpreted, responded to, or had trouble with what she says. This meant that Ruth's language had a bigger effect on how she interacted with her peers.

Therefore, her social standing was not the same as Kathy's. Kathy typically made her own statements weaker, while Ruth was more commonly presented as someone whose words changed what other people said. This did not mean that Ruth had all the power in the larger institutional system of Hailsham and the donation programme that governed the lives of the clones, but it did mean that she had more control over her peers. This point can be seen clearly in the extract 3 provided below:

> *"No, that's not what I was getting at." He took his weight off the car, turned and pressed a foot against the front tyre as though to test it. "What I meant was, I realised then, when Ruth came out with all that, I realised why you keep looking through those porn mags. Okay, I haven't realised. It's just a theory. Another of my theories. But when Ruth said what she did earlier on, it kind of clicked." I knew he was looking at me, but I kept my eyes straight ahead and made no response. (Extract 3)*

Ruth's character, hence, was built up to be more forceful, active in interactions, and socially important. Her function in discourse was not based on doubt, but on influence. Similarly, Ruth was frequently represented through speech, action, and social relationships. The bundle *Ruth said what she* foregrounded her verbal influence, while Ruth came up to

highlight her active role in initiating interactions. This is evident in Extract 4, where Ruth approaches Kathy and directly asks, *"Do you want to ride my horse?*"

> *This absolutely delighted me. The South Playing Field was the one used most by the Juniors and it was there, in the corner by the poplars, that Ruth came up to me one lunchtime, looked me up and down, then asked: Do you want to ride my horse? I was in the midst of playing with two or three others at that point, but it was clear Ruth was addressing only me. (Extract 4)*

Rather than waiting for others to engage with her, Ruth took the initiative and directed the interaction. Kathy's reaction, *this absolutely delighted me,* further suggested Ruth's social influence and prominence among her peers. Together with bundles such as *Ruth and the others* and *Ruth and Tommy split,* these patterns portrayed Ruth as an assertive and socially active character whose actions and words shaped her relationships with others.

4. Overall Interpretation: Interpersonal Meaning and Character Positioning

The findings supported previous corpus stylistic research that demonstrated the value of recurrent linguistic patterns in literary analysis. Consistent with Culpeper (2009, 2014), the present study showed that linguistic patterns contributed to characterisation and the construction of reader perceptions. Similarly, Mahlberg et al. (2019) found that recurrent phraseological patterns reveal interactional relationships in fictional discourse, a conclusion that is also evident in the analysis of the characters Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth in the present study. Furthermore, the research supported McIntyre and Walker's (2019) argument that corpus stylistics benefited from the integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches, as the interpretation of keywords and lexical bundles required contextual analysis rather than frequency data alone. Likewise, the importance of examining wider contexts was consistent with Mahlberg (2010) and Ho (2011), who argued that corpus findings must be interpreted qualitatively to explain literary meaning.

The findings also extended previous research. While Ikeo et al. (2024) focused on identifying narrative patterns through corpus stylistic analysis, the present study further examined how these patterns contributed to interpersonal meaning and character positioning. Similarly, Biber (2006) demonstrated that lexical bundles play an important role in expressing stance across registers; however, the present study showed how uncertainty bundles such as *I don't know*, *I'm not sure*, and *I don't think* contributed to the construction of interpersonal meaning within a literary narrative. Furthermore, while previous corpus stylistic studies had primarily focused on characterisation, narrative voice, and stylistic features, the current study combined corpus stylistics with the interpersonal metafunction of SFL to explain how recurrent linguistic patterns constructed uncertainty, social relationships, and character positioning in *Never Let Me Go*. This integration provided a more functional explanation of how linguistic patterns realised interpersonal meaning in literary discourse.

Implications of the Findings

The findings also had broader implications for understanding identity and social relationships in fictional and non-human characters. Although the cloned characters in *NLMG* were biologically different from ordinary humans, their language reflected many recognisably human features, including uncertainty, self-reflection, emotional attachment, and interpersonal negotiation. The frequent use of pronouns, stance expressions, and uncertainty bundles suggested that the clones constructed relationships and identities through language in ways similar to humans. At the same time, their limited knowledge of their future and restricted access to information contribute to a distinctive pattern of hesitation and uncertainty. These findings may also inform discussions of contemporary human–AI interactions, where questions of identity, agency, knowledge, and interpersonal communication are increasingly important. Like the cloned characters, AI systems participate in social interaction through language, making linguistic patterns a useful lens for examining how human-like identities and relationships are constructed in discourse.

Conclusion

This study investigated how repeated linguistic patterns in *NLMG* help construct interpersonal meaning in the speech and narration of cloned characters. By using corpus-based methods, including keyword analysis, lexical bundle analysis, and part-of-speech tagging, the study identified important patterns related to pronouns, modality, and stance. In particular, the frequent use of personal pronouns such as *I*, *we*, and *you*, and stance bundles such as *I don't know* and *I'm not sure*, show that the discourse is strongly participant-oriented and shaped by epistemic qualification. When interpreted through the interpersonal metafunction of SFL, the findings show that interpersonal meaning is realised through modalisation, hesitation, and reflective self-positioning rather than through full certainty. Kathy is characterised by low epistemic commitment and limited authority, Tommy by relational alignment and shared experience, and Ruth by speech-based interaction and social influence. Overall, the study shows that character identity in *NLMG* is presented thematically and constructed through repeated linguistic patterns. By combining corpus stylistics with SFL, the study offers a clearer explanation of how language expresses uncertainty, stance, and social positioning in literary discourse.

1. Limitations of the Study

This study has some limitations. First, the corpus is relatively small (approximately 5,500 words), which limits the generalisability of the findings. A larger or full-text corpus would allow more stable pattern analysis. Second, the study focuses mainly on frequency and recurrence, which may not capture all context-specific meanings in literary texts. Third, only selected features were analysed, including keywords, four-word lexical bundles, and part-of-speech patterns. Other features such as collocation, semantic prosody, and discourse structure were not included and may provide further insights. Finally, the study focuses primarily on the interpersonal metafunction of SFL. While this framework is useful for examining uncertainty, stance, and social relationships, it does not capture all aspects of meaning construction in the novel. Future studies may integrate the interpersonal, ideational, and textual metafunctions to

offer a more comprehensive interpretation of characterisation, narrative structure, and meaning in *NLMG*.

2. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research has the potential to broaden the scope of this investigation in many different ways. Initially, the findings would be strengthened and broader comparisons of interpersonal meaning across texts would be made feasible by the analysis of a larger corpus of Ishiguro's works. Secondly, the integration of corpus methods with more detailed qualitative analysis, such as concordance analysis and close reading, would offer a more profound understanding of particular narrative contexts. Third, in order to investigate evaluative meaning and narrative structure, it may be necessary to investigate additional stylistic features of the corpus, such as collocation, semantic preference, and discourse markers. Finally, this framework can be applied to a range of texts or genres to analyse uncertainty, stance, and social position across diverse contexts.

References

Abood, H. H. (2024). Systemic functional linguistics to stylistics analysis of *Beloved* novel by Toni Morrison. *Journal of Language Studies*, *8*(11), 319-343. https://doi.org/10.25130/Lang.8.11.20

Anthony, L. (2024). Addressing the challenges of data-driven learning through corpus tool design: In conversation with Laurence Anthony. In P. Crosthwaite (Ed.), *Corpora for language learning: Bridging the research-practice divide* (pp. 9-18). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781040009260-

Atwell, E. (2008). Development of tag sets for part-of-speech tagging. In A. Lüdeling & M. Kytö (Eds.), *Corpus linguistics: An international handbook* (pp. 501-526). Walter de Gruyter.

Awwalu, J., Abdullahi, S. E. Y., & Evwiekpaefe, A. E. (2020). Parts of speech tagging: A review of techniques. *FUDMA Journal of Sciences*, *4*(2), 712-721. https://doi.org/10.33003/fjs-2020-0402-325

Baker, P. (2004). Querying keywords: Questions of difference, frequency, and sense in keywords analysis. *Journal of English Linguistics*, *32*(4), 346-359. https://doi.org/10.1177/0075424204269894

Biber, D. (1999). A register perspective on grammar and discourse: Variability in the form and use of English complement clauses. *Discourse Studies*, *1*(2), 131-150. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445699001002001

Chueasuai, P. (2017). The interpersonal metafunction and translation of power relations: A case study of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. *Manusya: Journal of Humanities*, *20*(3), 1-22. https://sci-hub.si/10.1163/26659077-02003001

Culpeper, J. (2009). Reflections on a cognitive stylistic approach to characterisation. In B. Geert & V. Jeroen (Eds.), *Cognitive Poetics* (pp. 125-168). De Gruyter Mouton. https://doi.org/doi:10.1515/9783110213379.1.125

Culpeper, J. (2014). Developing keyness and characterization: Annotation. In D. Hoover, J. Culpeper & K. O'Halloran (Eds.), *Digital literary studies: Corpus approaches to poetry, prose and drama* (pp. 35-63). Routledge.

Dalfino, D., Allamneni, S., & Cupery, M. P. (2023). Corpus stylistic analysis of postmodern narrative features in Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of The Goat*. *Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies*, *23*(2), 235-247. https://doi.org/10.14456/hasss.2023.21

Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2013). *Halliday's introduction to functional grammar* (4th ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203431269

Ho, Y. (2011). *Corpus stylistics in principles and practice: A stylistic exploration of John Fowles' the Magus*. Continuum.

Ijam, D. M. M., & Al-Ameedi, R. T. K. (2024). A systemic functional linguistic analysis of mood and modality in one of Metcalfe's novels. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 14*(5), 1360-1370. https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1405.08

Ikeo, R., Shigematsu, E., & Nakao, M. (2024). *A corpus stylistics approach to contemporary present-tense narrative*. John Benjamins Publishing Company. https://doi.org/10.1075/lal.43

Iwamoto, N. (2007). Stylistic and linguistic analysis of a literary text using systemic functional grammar. *Human Studies, 162*, 61-96. https://scispace.com/papers/stylistic-and-linguistic-analysis-of-a-literary-text-using-29plgiwguk

Khachan, V. (2023). The 'Ands' and 'Buts' in Kahlil Gibran's English works: A corpus stylistics perspective. *Languages, 8*(4), 1-18. https://doi.org/10.3390/languages8040246

Mahlberg, M. (2010). Corpus linguistics and the study of nineteenth-century fiction. *Journal of Victorian Culture*, *15*(2), 292-298. https://doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2010.491667

Mahlberg, M., Wiegand, V., Stockwell, P., & Hennessey, A. (2019). Speech-bundles in the 19th-century English novel. *Language and Literature*, *28*(4), 326-353. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947019886754

McIntyre, D., & Walker, B. (2019). *Corpus stylistics: Theory and practice*. Edinburgh University Press. https://doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2010.491667

Pojanapunya, P. (2025). Comparing frequency and dispersion keywords: Effects of variations in target and reference corpora. *rEFLections*, *32*(3), 1428-1446. https://doi.org/10.61508/refl.v32i3.284138

Razzaq, H. S., Zahra, S. K., & Jahan, J. (2025). Employing Biber's lexical bundles to explore discourse in Malala Yousafzai's autobiographical narratives. *Social Science Review Archives*, *3*(1), 25-34. https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i1.283

Wijitsopon, R. (2013). A corpus-based study of the style in Jane Austen's novels. *Manusya: Journal of Humanities*, *16*(1), 41-64. https://doi.org/10.1163/26659077-01601003

Wijitsopon, R. (2022). Corpus stylistics and colour symbolism in *The Great Gatsby* and its Thai translations. *Language and Literature*, *31*(3), 267-295. https://doi.org/10.1177/09639470211048159