Metadiscourse across languages and genres: An overview

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1. Introduction

Central to successful communication is the writer/speaker's ability to make statements about the external, experiential world coherent, intelligible and persuasive to a particular audience. This is the domain of metadiscourse, the language we use to help others interpret, evaluate, and react to propositional information in ways that we intend (Hyland, 2005; Ädel & Mauranen, 2010). Following a relatively slow start in the early 1980s, metadiscourse has become one of the dominant ways of analysing discourse, particularly written texts. A search of *Scopus* returns 620 papers on the topic and *Google Scholar* over 25,600. Metadiscourse, therefore, is a concept which has found its time, and in this special issue we explore some recent facets of the concept and why it has established itself so firmly as an analytical tool in applied linguistics.

Metadiscourse is underpinned by the idea of 'recipient design' (Hyland, 2005), or how communication is shaped to appeal to the current interactants, indicating how the writer understands the knowledge, likely objections and processing needs of the audience. Metadiscourse therefore offers insights into a communicative context and the perceptions of its participants. Because of this, metadiscourse studies have been particularly productive in investigating specific contextual constraints on writing, especially academic discourses, and revealing differences between genres, disciplines, languages, student proficiencies and time periods. This short editorial seeks to cover some of this ground and situate the papers which follow in this special issue.

2. Conceptions of metadiscourse

The term metadiscourse was first coined by Zelig Harris (1959) and is defined by Schiffrin (1980) as the author's rhetorical manifestation in the text to "bracket the

discourse organisation and the expressive implications of what is being said" (p. 231). The concept emerged as a correction to balance previous views of discourse which saw texts as largely propositional and expository, merely serving to convey 'content'. Early exponents such as Williams (1981) and Crismore (1983) underlined this distinction between propositional material, which spoke of the world outside the text, and metadiscourse, which helped organise it and made it intelligible to a particular audience. Vande Kopple (1985) presented seven types of metadiscourse markers and Crismore (1989) operationalised it by distinguishing two broad functional categories labelled *textual metadiscourse*, concerned with organising the text for a particular genre, register and readership, and *interpersonal metadiscourse*, used to evaluate the content and make it persuasive.

Other conceptions followed this. Mauranen (1993), for example, takes a narrower view of metadiscourse, restricting it to text-organising features of language which she refers to as text reflexivity or metatext. This perspective seeks to sharpen and clarify the concept by excluding the writer's perspective and stance on the material and limiting it to expressions which refer to the text itself (see also Bunton, 1999; Valero-Garces, 1996). Thus while analysts following this approach would include phrases such as '*in the next section'* and *'this essay is in three parts',* they would exclude expressions like *'in my view'* or *'this is an important point'*.

Hyland (2017) suggests that conceptions of metadiscourse spread along a cline between these two views, with researchers choosing to include (e.g. Crismore, 1989; Crismore, Markkanen & Steffensen, 1993; Hyland, 2005) or exclude (e.g. Mauranen 1993; Sanderson, 2008) interpersonal options. Between them we find conceptions such as that proposed by Beauvais (1989) to limit metadiscourse to explicit illocutionary predicates or Ifantidou's (2005) reformulation based on a relevance framework. More influential has been Ädel's (2006) understanding of metadiscourse which emphasises

cohesive elements but includes features which refer to the writer and imagined reader of the text (see also Zhang, 2016; Salas, 2015).

Perhaps the most prominent perspective in terms of take-up in applied linguistics has been the interpersonal model developed by Hyland (Hyland, 2005; Hyland & Tse, 2004). This attempts to capture the interactive character of communication by seeing a writer or speaker's commentary on his or her unfolding text as representing a coherent set of interpersonal resources which help formulate a connected discourse or express the writer's attitude towards either what or who is addressed. Drawing on Thompson's (2001) distinction between interactive and interactional resources, Hyland refers to *interactive* as the writer's management of the information flow to steer readers through a text and *interactional* as authorial interventions which personally engage with the content and readers. While similar to Crismore's model, this conception seeks to provide a more unified and robust description of how writer/speakers manage both social relationships the organisation of their texts. The interpersonal model, then, offers a broad and robust view of metadiscourse. It assumes that we take control of what we say and how we say it as we speak or write, often unconsciously, as we base our language use on the anticipated effects we might having on our listeners or readers. A finished text is a rhetorical consequence of controlling this level of personality.

3. Directions and genres

The concept of metadiscourse has inspired a profusion of studies over the past 40 years, mainly in academic and business texts and in English. Hyland & Jiang's (in preparation) study of papers on the *Web of Science*, however, found papers in more than 10 languages focusing on metadiscourse. The largest source of papers is the USA (25% in *Scopus* and 30% in *WoS*) with Spain, England, Iran and China comprising another 30% (Hyland, 2017). The fact that *Scopus* includes peer reviewed papers

originating in 46 different countries indicates the wide geographical interest in metadiscourse.

Many of these papers explore the role of metadiscourse in a particular domain or genre. We therefore find studies of its use in students' writing (Bunton, 1999; Hyland, 2004; Jiang & Ma, 2018), Twitter posts (Russell, 2011), newspaper journalism (Fu & Hyland, 2014), blogs (Zou & Hyland, 2020), undergraduate textbooks (Hyland, 1999), academic presentations (Qiu & Jiang, 2021) and social media discussion groups (Ryoo, 2005). The vast majority of metadiscourse research, however, focuses on an academic register. This work tends to largely address research articles (Valero-garces, 1996; Dahl, 2004), and often their introductions (e.g. Rubio, 2011) and abstracts (e.g. Gillaerts & Ven de Velde, 2010).

Metadiscourse has been found to employ similar purposes in professional discourses as diverse as job postings (Fu, 2012) and company annual reports (Hyland, 1998). In magazine advertising, metadiscourse enables copywriters to build rapport with readers to attain persuasive, and ultimately commercial intentions. This is often largely done through the use of self-mention to express a clear authorial presence in the text and impress consumers with a sympathetic author who addresses them personally (Fuertes-Olivera et al., 2001, p.1298-9). Such a drive for corporate persuasion also justifies the heavy use of metadiscourse in CEO's letters and company annual reports. Hyland (1998) found that transitions and hedges together comprised two thirds of all items, attributing the frequent use of these devices to the role in building personal credibility, and the interactional features also suggest a forthright writer committed to particular views and confident in achieving the best for the company.

While less studied, metadiscourse research has also informed us of spoken genres. Camiciottoli (2019), for example, shows how professional financial analysts use

deontic modals (*should, must, have to*) and second person (*inclusive we, you*) to foster greater engagement in earnings call Q&A sessions. Similarly, Fogarty-Bourget et al (2019) look at how questions and 'gestural silence' by teachers act as engagement devices to involve students in doing mathematics. In her study of parliamentary debates, Ilie (2003) discusses how speakers use metadiscourse to control, evaluate and negotiate the goals and impact of their and of their interlocutors' ongoing talk. This includes signaling speaker role shifts, widening/narrowing the scope of their contribution, redefining terms and challenging facts.

In more monologic genres, Qiu and Jiang (2021) and Scotto di Carlo (2014) found that inclusive pronouns helped speakers breach the expert/audience barrier and establish an 'alignment' with them while self-mention and second person pronouns are most likely to generate audience applause. Similarly, Hyland and Zou's (2021) examination of interactional metadiscourse in 3-minute theses presentations to hook, involve and lead non specialist audiences to a desired conclusion.

4. Contrastive studies

Contrastive studies have been of particular interest to scholars, with studies exploring variations across genres, modes, languages, first language writers, student proficiencies and time.

Gender has been one contrastive variable, so that Tse and Hyland (2008) and D'Angelo (2008) examined metadiscourse in academic book reviews by male and female authors and showed that gender and disciplinary identities cross-cut each other in significant ways in terms of professional self-conception and personal preferences. Studies have examined proficiency as a contrastive variable and found greater use of interactional resources in the texts of higher-level students (Hyland, 2004b; Hinkel, 2005; Jiang, 2015) while Cheng and Steffensen's (1996) and Shaw and Liu (1998) showed that

high-assessed essays included a greater number and variety of metadiscourse features than ones with lower grades.

A few studies have contrasted metadiscourse across written and spoken modes, so Zou and Hyland (2022), for example, found that 3MT presenters use more stance resources and take stronger positions than academic bloggers, largely by indicating certainty and creating a more visible authorial presence. Academic bloggers, on the other hand, prefer to downplay their commitment and highlight affect.

A recent development has been an interest in diachronic aspects of metadiscourse use, focusing on the same journals to compare how current uses compare with uses in the past. Using a corpus of 2.2 million 2.2 million words compiled from articles in the top journals in four disciplines at three points over the past 50 years, Hyland and Jiang (2019; 2020), for example have explored changes in both interactive (Hyland & Jiang, 2020) and interactional metadiscourse (ibid, 2019). Their results show a considerable increase in an orientation to the reader over this period, reflecting changes in both research and publication practices which encourage accessibility and understanding to gain influence, readers and citations for career purposes.

Another productive area of comparative research in metadiscourse involves descriptions of the role and distribution of metadiscourse across different genres, indicating how distinct purposes and audiences lead writers to make very different choices. Hyland (2004), for example, found that PhD dissertations contained over a third more metadiscourse (per 10,000 words), and almost double the interactive forms, than Master's theses. While partly explained by the greater length of the PhD theses, which demand more interactive devices to organise longer arguments, this might also represent a more reflective awareness of self, text and audience. The importance of the genre to how content is organised and conveyed is also shown in the ways authors

discoursally recontextualise in blogs the scientific information they have recently published in journal articles. Based on two corpora of 30 blog posts and 30 journal articles with the same authors and topics, Zou and Hyland (2019) examine the ways researchers use metadiscourse to reconstruct a different writer persona and relationship with their readers. Similarly, Kawase (2015) found that writers use far more metadiscourse in article introductions than in the PhD theses they are based on, with less reference to other parts of the text and to authorial presence.

Clearly genre plays a big part in how writers understand the rhetorical problem of structuring their discourse for a particular audience, but no less important is the community they are writing for. Discipline is a major factor in writers' use of metadiscourse so that disciplinary variations have not only been found in research articles (e.g. Jiang & Hyland, 2016; Jiang, 2017), but also in undergraduate essays (Jiang, 2015; Noble, 2010), postgraduate dissertations (Charles, 2006), university textbooks (Hyland, 1999) and academic book reviews (Tse & Hyland, 2006). These studies reveal considerable differences in academic persuasion and have contributed to our understanding of the rhetorical and social distinctiveness of disciplines. This is because they point to the routine, almost automatic, use of conventions which are developed through participation in particular communities and which index a shared context for insiders.

One example is Bruce's (2010) use of the BAWE corpus to compare essays written by students in sociology and English, finding "significant differences between the essay genre in the two disciplines in the complex variety of rhetorical purposes and associated textual resources that they draw upon". While interactional metadiscourse is used to construct reader relations in the most apparently quantitative and faceless texts, such as mathematic research articles (e.g. McGrath & Kuteeva, 2012), it is in the soft disciplines where we find the most frequent use.

Academics in the more discursive social sciences and humanities are found to use more metadiscourse markers than those in science fields. Here work is more interpretive and writers work harder to establish a credible disciplinary voice and plausible argument in the absence of established methodological approaches which offer 'strong' explanations for observations (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Hyland, 2012; Jiang & Wang, 2018). Thus Hyland and Jiang (2018, 2020), for example, report more interactional but less interactive metadiscourse in applied linguistics than hard disciplines such as biology. These metadiscourse variations point to disciplinary argument practices and systems of values about what can be known and how it can be known.

Perhaps the most studied comparative aspect of metadiscourse is that of language. While mainly concerned with English, studies have examined several other languages including Chinese (Wang, 2019), Iranian (Crismore & Abdollehzadeh, 2010), Finnish (Mauranen, 1993), Slovene (Peterlin, 2010) and Spanish (Valero-Garcés, 1996) as well as speakers of these languages writing in English (Ädel, 2006). All these languages draw on a large repertoire of metadiscourse expressions to secure effective communication. Although speaking of metadiscourse as 'text reflexivity', Mauranen (2010) regards it as a 'discourse universal' in that it is "such a major element of communication that languages generally possess means for expressing it" (p.21).

One example of such a comparative study is Dafouz-Milne's (2008) exploration of metadiscourse in the editorials of the Spanish *El Pais* and the British *The Times*. She found that while similar amounts of metadiscourse were found in the Spanish and British texts, the Spanish writers made a much greater use of interactive categories, particularly sequencing devices and code glosses, while *The Times* contained more interactional resources. The most striking differences were in the use of transition markers where the Spanish were inclined to employ additive markers to link ideas (e.g. y, *ademas, aunmas /*

and, moreover, furthermore) while the British writers relied far more on adversative markers (*but, however, in contrast*). These differences might be explained by the Spanish tendency to produce much longer sentences which need to be coordinated by additive markers. Carrió-Pastor (2019) showed that Spanish and English engineers conveyed personal attitudes in strikingly different ways in research writing.

While Spanish has been the main language of contrast to English, a variety of languages have been studied. Crismore, Markkanen and Steffensen (1993), for example, found that both US and Finnish students employed far more interactional than interactive metadiscourse in their essays. The Finnish students, however, had a higher density of metadiscourse overall and substantially more *attitude markers* and *hedges*, despite generally being seen as reserved and distant. Hu and Cao (2011) found significantly more hedges in applied linguistics abstracts of articles published in English than those in Chinese-medium journals. Comparing Italian and English 'For-Your-Information' letters, Vergaro (2005) found more metadiscourse used to engage readers in English and Perez (2014) discovered differences in how authors used interactional metadiscourse to define their identity on the websites of Spanish and US toy companies.

Finally, numerous studies have explored the question of how individuals use metadiscourse when writing in English as a foreign language, revealing the preference of native English speakers for more frequent use of metadiscourse in guiding and orienting readers and in projecting their presence in the text (e.g. Mauranen, 1993; Valero-Garces, 1996). These findings obviously differ according to the L1 group, so that Vassileva (2001) found Bulgarian academics used far fewer *hedges* and more *boosters* when writing in English and Yakhontova (2002) discovered that Ukrainian/Russian speakers strongly preferred *self-mention* and *evaluative expressions* than their English counterparts when writing both in English and Ukrainian. Ädel

(2006), on the other hand, found that her texts by Swedish learners of English exhibited far higher metadiscourse use than either British or American native users. Overall, then, these patterns seem to reflect both a transfer of L1 practices and a lack of proficiency in English which might usefully respond to greater pedagogic attention to metadiscourse in ELF courses.

5. Papers in this issue

The papers in this Special Issue take up many of the topics and themes raised in the overview above and seek to extend studies into new features and genres. The collection brings together seven contributions from an international line-up of distinguished scholars in applied linguistics bringing diverse perspectives and interests to the topic.

The first two papers focus, in different ways, on specific realisations of metadiscourse. Many studies which explore metadiscourse have sought to elaborate one feature or collection of features under the umbrella term of metadiscourse. Generally interactional functions, taking stance and engagement as starting points, have proved to be popular ways of exploring argumentative texts. Here we have papers which look at an aspect of interactive, text referential discourse and at interactional, stance-taking features.

First, **Hilary Nesi** examines the linguistic features of typical citation patterns in undergraduate assignments. Drawing on the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus she explores the types of sources cited and the different functions the students use in their citations. In her paper, Nesi demonstrates a wide diversity of forms, functions and purposes of citation, more extensive than the descriptions given in student writing guides. The study also highlights the contrastive interest of metadiscourse work as students' use of citation is found to increase as they progress

through their undergraduate studies and it is performed in different ways according to discipline.

In the second paper, **Bin Wu** and **Brian Paltridge** also examine student writing, but here they compare how MA and PhD applied linguistics dissertations, written in English by the same Chinese students, differ in their use of stance. Adopting a corpus-based analysis and drawing on Hyland's (2005) model of stance expressions, Wu and Paltridge show that compared to their MA theses, student writers with doctoral training demonstrate greater maturity and progress in their use of stance marking in their PhD dissertations. They use significantly fewer boosters, master a broader range of attitude markers, and display an increased ability to express a personal take and engage readers in their texts. These findings reveal stance to be a developmental feature in the students' writing, and also indicate the effect of targeted academic writing training at the graduate level for Chinese students writing in English.

While the first two studies draw on established metadiscourse features to identify examples of citation and stance, various studies have suggested that metadiscourse items do not comprise a complete and comprehensive set. Gonzalez (2005), for instance has shown that hypertext links can function as textual metadiscourse in commercial webpages, and Jiang and Hyland (2016) have categorised the metadiscourse functions of nouns. The next two papers demonstrate the potential of the concept by exploring new realisations. Jiang and Hyland's paper on metadiscursive nouns and Hu and Chen's paper on surprise markers not only extend our understanding of the linguistic resources of metadiscourse, but also adopt innovative research methods to do so.

Feng (Kevin) Jiang and **Ken Hyland** use a diachronic methodology to track changes in what they call *metadiscursive nouns* over the last 50 years of research writing.

Metadiscursive nouns refers to a type of unspecific abstract nouns (such as *fact*, *analysis*, *belief*) which perform interactive and interactional roles in academic discourse. Employing a rhetorically-based classification, they find that *this N* pattern is the most frequent use overall. They also argue that hard scientists have made increasing use of quality nouns to promote the value of their research outcomes while writers in the soft disciplines rely on evidential nouns to provide factual support for their propositions. The rhetorical functions of these nouns justify the need to include the nominal resources into the metadiscourse repertoire.

Guangwei Hu and **Lang Chen** propose surprise markers as a candidate for metadiscourse status. These comprise a type of attitude marker which function as metadiscourse by conveying unexpectedness. The authors report a corpus study of 160 research articles in applied linguistics published 30 years apart. Unlike previous metadiscourse research, their paper takes a frame semantics perspective on surprise, seeing it as a knowledge-oriented emotional expression. They use a frame-based analytical framework to examine diachronic trends in the use of surprise markers and how they collocate with other types of interactional metadiscourse (boosters, hedges, and self-mentions). They seek to interpret the diachronic increases in types by the heuristic nature of surprise and the growing pressure on academics to rhetorically sway readers with the value of their research.

The following two papers address metadiscourse used by speakers of different languages in two very different contexts. Taking up the widespread interest in the influence of language background on the use of metadiscourse, these two papers explore differences in the ways English and Spanish writers use hedges in research articles and English and Chinese speakers deploy metadiscourse in the International Modeling Contest in Mathematics (MCM).

Pilar Mur-Dueñas presents a corpus-based intercultural analysis of hedging in English and Spanish research articles in Business Management. Hedges are rhetorically used in the genre to construct tentative argument and strategically withhold full commitment to what is presented. Mur-Dueñas's study identifies differences in the overall use of hedging expressions, in their distribution across the generic sections of research articles, and in their lexico-grammatical patterning. She accounts for these differences in preferred rhetorical choices int terms of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural factors, considering the different languages in which they are written and the contexts in which they are published.

Ulla Connor, **Xuemei Tan**, **Yu Zhang** and **Matthew Hume** examine how intercultural rhetoric can inform the study of metadiscourse in research writing. Their focus is the Outstanding Winner papers at the International Modeling Contest in Mathematics (MCM), an annual competition in which teams of students from all over the world spend a weekend composing original mathematical papers in English. The analyse the papers written by 20 Chinese and 20 American students and find that both Chinese and American writing depend heavily on the use of metadiscourse although there were considerable differences between the two sets of papers in the abstract and summary sections. Once again, this highlights distinct differences in the frequency and linguistic realization of metadiscourse across cultures and the authors go on to discuss how these findings were used to develop an EAP course for Chinese undergraduate students.

The final paper in the issue continues this interest in linguistic variation but takes a very different perspective. Rather than report an empirical study of language use, **Wenbin Wang** and **Xinmiao Liu** offer a theoretical discussion of Chinese and English which raises questions of what language comparisons of metadiscourse use in the two languages might mean. They propose that Chinese is a spatiality-dominant language

and English a temporality-dominant one, and argue that this fundamental difference underlies many of the particularities existing in the two languages in terms of their syntactic and textual structures. They document the argument by tracing the history of Chinese and English and examining the features of the two languages that most typically exhibit these fundamental differences in linguistic expressions. Importantly, this spatiality-temporality duality provides an overarching interpretive principle which accounts for a wide range of linguistic differences between Chinese and English, including metadiscursive use of language.

Overall, this special issue brings together important contributions to research on metadiscourse. The first contribution is the value of unpacking the relationship between language and its contexts of use. That is, how writers use language to respond to particular social contexts, and especially how they exploit their understandings of these to effectively communicate their intended meanings. Finally, some authors seek to draw out practical pedagogic implications concerning how their studies might be translated into practical classroom activities.

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