Hyland, K. (2022). Preface: Nouns, metadiscourse and academic writing in Jiang, F.K. Metadiscursive Nouns: Interaction and Persuasion in Disciplinary Writing. London: Routledge

Preface: Nouns, metadiscourse and academic writing

Ken Hyland

Some years ago, over lunch at a corpus conference in Iowa, Doug Biber said that you can't understand academic writing without looking at nouns. He's quite right, of course, and this is something Kevin Jiang appreciates very well. Academic writing is an extremely noun-heavy register. Not only are nouns overwhelmingly the most frequent word class in English, occurring about every fourth word, they are particularly prevalent in academic prose (Biber, et al 1999:573-580). It is not hard to see why this is as academic discourse, particularly in the physical sciences, concerns itself with "things" and the objects which constitute the natural and social worlds. A focus on the outcome of activities rather than those activities themselves. Michael Halliday (1998), with his long interest in grammatical metaphor, has said something similar as it is through nouns that science conveys a sense of being highly informational, abstract, lexically dense, and impersonal.

This predilection for nouns, then, is one of the main ways in which the language of scholarly communication distinguishes itself from other domains of English. Nor are academics content with the nouns that are available to them. They are constantly creating new ones--or at least devices which function like nouns in naming things – through combining words or via a process called nominalization; a word which is itself an example of the process. So, when we are not talking of *vocalization, textual appropriation* or even *grammaticalization*, we are busy surrounding ourselves with acronyms such as *CALL*, *ERPP* and *SLA.*

Clearly there must be a reason for all this and linguists are quick to take up arms in defence of nouns. They rightly point out that nouns allow a great deal of information to be packed into a few words, which is extremely useful when writing to journal word limits (Biber & Gray 2011). Also, as Halliday (2004) has pointed out, using nominal groups to compact and

summarize activities as entities enables writers to bundle a great deal of information into a single unit as the subject or object of a sentence in order to say more about it. Perhaps most importantly, nouns allow authors to turn processes, in which actors do things, into entities, the things themselves. This semiotically reconstructs human experience by avoiding explicitly referring to human actors.

For these reasons, then, there has been an ever-increasing preference for nominalized forms in scientific writing over the past 300 years (Degaetano-Ortlieb et al, 2019). Our own recent research also shows that science has steadily moved from congruent forms, where meanings correspond with grammatical categories, to a reliance on a dense array of nouns representing qualities and processes as well as entities (Hyland & Jiang, 2021). This use and proliferation of nouns therefore has its benefits by allowing faster more efficient processing by expert readers. But at the same time it objectifies ways of experiencing and talking about phenomena which reifies human actions while, at the same time, obfuscating issues and making them inaccessible to all but an inner circle of specialists (e.g. Billig 2013).

This, then, is how nouns have largely been understood in the applied linguistics literature, with an overwhelming tendency to focus on their ideational role in academic discourse. But this has pushed other ways of seeing nouns into the background, with a relative neglect of their interactional potential. Rarely do we ask questions like how do nouns act rhetorically to guide readers through a text, convey the writer's stance and engage an audience in the argument? This, then, is the gap that Kevin Jiang steps into with this book, seeking to unpack the interpersonal character of nouns.

The lens he uses to address these questions is metadiscourse - the ways in which writers and speakers interact with readers and listeners through their use of language. Essentially metadiscourse refers to those aspects of a text which draw attention to the writer's understanding of the content and the effect it might have on readers. It is therefore a kind of 'recipient design' feature which offers an insight into a writer's understanding of an audience and therefore how the text is related to its context. It is now perhaps the most widely used means of describing specialist written texts, so a *Google* search, for example,

produces over 380, 000 hits, with hundreds of articles and postgraduate dissertations completed each year on the topic. In fact, the research reported here emerged from Kevin's dissertation work at the University of Hong Kong and his keen interest in metadiscourse.

So metadiscourse is a concept which seems to have found its time, yet despite this popularity, it is a hard term to pin down and is often understood in different ways. Mauranen (2010), for example, argues that we should restrict the term to features of textual organisation such as *'I want to make two points'* or *'In this paper we…'* which refer to the text itself, signalling its direction, purpose and internal structure. But while this perspective has the virtue of analytical simplicity, it neglects a whole area of related rhetorical activity. At the other end of a cline of perspectives (Hyland, 2017), is the view that metadiscourse represents a coherent set of interpersonal options. So, here metadiscourse is seen to include text organising material, it also extends to the ways speakers and writers project themselves into their discourse to signal their understandings of the material and their audience.

In other words, metadiscourse is a term which seeks to collect together the linguistic devices writers use to shape their messages for particular readers. It includes a heterogeneous array of features which assist readers not only to connect and organise material but also to interpret it in a way preferred by the writer and with regard to the understandings and values of a particular discourse community (Hyland, 2005). This is the line that Kevin takes in this book and in doing so makes a significant contribution to our understanding of metadiscourse, to the role on nouns in academic communication and to how interaction functions in written texts.

For many years an academic focus on interaction was the domain of speech act theorists, conversation analysts and others concerned exclusively with spoken, and usually face-to-face, communication. Writing, and especially academic writing, was largely regarded as monologic and the product of isolated individuals dealing directly with observable phenomena. But while conversation is the most obvious form of interaction, we now see that academic texts are sites where authors rhetorically shape their interpretations to the expectations of their readers. All reporting occurs in a disciplinary context and interpretations depend on what the mind allows

the eye to see. Such shaping recognises that different communities have certain preferences of argument, so that knowledge depends on the ways that we present our claims. In metadiscourse models, interaction is seen as the writer's intervention to anticipate the reader's possible reactions, objections and processing needs, and Kevin Jiang is among the first to show how nouns contribute to these interactions. How they work to establish relationships between texts, between ideas and between people.

Kevin also undermines a serious misconception that has emerged about metadiscourse analysis by challenging the view that there is a finite and predefined set of lexical items which express metadiscourse functions. The fact that many of us attempt to compare different languages, disciplines or genres using corpus approaches seems to have persuaded some people that researchers just need to count forms. But discourse function, not formal realisation, is the object of analysis and lexical items and phrases can never be a reliable indication of metadiscourse. Checking concordance lines is always more important than counting frequencies. Nor can we assume that the sample makers provided by Hyland (2005), Adel (2006) and others are comprehensive lists rather than just a starting point for analysis. Genre and context are key considerations in identifying metadiscourse signals and the literature has revealed features such as hypertext in webpages (Gonzalez, 2005) and 'the excited utterance' in courtroom testimony (Andrus, 2009) as potential candidates.

In this book Kevin Jiang shows that metadiscourse has, most definitely, not been comprehensively mapped in the most studied genre in the applied linguistics literature: academic research articles. His focus on 'metadiscursive nouns' examines in detail a recognised, but previously unexplored, dimension of metadiscourse patterning. This work therefore uncovers more about how writers refer to the organisation of their discourse and the readers' understanding of it. The nouns he discusses are a sub-set of abstract nouns with a variable pragmatic meaning which assist the expression of metadiscourse functions. This is an important and stimulating idea which not only takes the study of nouns forward but which will have a significant impact on metadiscourse research and studies of written discourse more generally.

References

Ädel, A. (2006). *Metadiscourse in L1 and L2 English.* Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Andrus, J. (2009). The development of an artefactual language ideology: Utterance, event, and agency in the metadiscourse of the excited utterance exception to hearsay. *Language and Communication* 29 (4), pp. 312-327

Biber, D & B Gray. (2011). Grammatical change in the noun phrase: The influence of written language use. *English Language and Linguistics* 15(2). 223-250.

Biber, D, S Johansson, G Leech, S Conrad & E Finegan. (1999). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Harlow: Longman.

Billig, M. (2013). *Learn to write badly: How to succeed in the social sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Degaetano-Ortlieb, S, H Kermes, A Khamis & E Teich. (2019). An information-theoretic approach to modeling diachronic change in scientific English. In C Suhr, T Nevalainen & I Taavitsainen (eds.), *From data to evidence in English language research*, 258-281. Leiden: Brill.

Gonzalez, RA. (2005). Metadiscourse in commercial websites. *Iberica* 9: 33-52

Halliday, M A K (1998). Things and relations: Regrammaticising experience as technical knowledge. In JR. Martin & R Veel (eds.), *Reading science: Critical and functional perspectives on discourses of science*, 185-235. London: Routledge.

Halliday, M A K (2004). *The Language of Science*. London: Continuum.

Halliday, M A K & JR. Martin. 1993. *Writing science: Literacy and discursive power*. London: Falmer Press.

Hyland, K. (2005). *Metadiscourse*. London: Continuum.

Hyland, K. (2017). Metadiscourse: what is it and where is it going? *Journal of Pragmatics*. Vol 113: 16-29

Hyland, K. & Jiang, FK (2021) Academic naming: Changing patterns of noun use in research writing. *Journal of English Linguistics*. 49 (3): 255-282.

Mauranen, A. (2010) Discourse Reflexivity - A Discourse Universal? The Case of ELF. *Nordic Journal of English Studies*. 9 (2): 13-40.