Metadiscourse Variations across Academic Genres: Rhetorical Preferences in Textual and Interpersonal Markers

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Introduction

It is now commonly accepted that academic discourses tend to provide venues for participants to interact where the producer needs to display an awareness of the audience, and metadiscourse (MD) is the set of tools enabling the involved parties to establish relationships. MD strategies allow writers to project themselves into their work, signal their communicative intention, influence their readers and align, and distance themselves from cited materials (Hyland,1998, 2005a, 2005b). The problem is, however, that the rules of engagement differ from one culture to another, and from one specific genre to another (e.g., educational vs. professional), and according to Bizzell (1992), academic writers or speakers would not be able to produce texts fulfilling their aims unless they are closely acquainted with the intricate conventions followed in the particular genre by the particular discourse community. The overall aim of researchers exploring academic discourses, therefore, revolves around how such an interaction is built and sustained.

Keeping in mind the multinational/multicultural nature of the academic community, the main aim of academic texts (i.e., individuals with different L1s and cultures should be able to understand the messages of the authors and they should be persuaded that authors' claims are valid), and how frequently due to insufficient training on both sides (i.e., writers/speakers vs. readers/listeners), misunderstandings and communication breakdowns occur, experts in the field have called for more research scrutinizing the use of MD in different languages and genres (Ädel, 2017; Gholami, Tajalli, & Shokrpour, 2014; Hyland, 2009; Kawase, 2015). The goal of the papers in this issue is to contribute to this specific field of research and to widen, deepen and enrich the knowledge and understanding of the elusive term MD in the various sub-academic genres (e.g., university lectures, teacher feedback, dissertations, undergraduate writing). To fulfil these goals better, the contributors to the issue employ up-to-date theories, rich array of data collected in a wide variety of contexts and varied data analysis techniques. As a result, authors are able to point to and explain where and how native and non-native writers from different discourse communities employ and combine various sets of MD tools to solve communication problems, influence audience's understanding of the propositions as well as to reveal their attitude towards its content.

The studies also show how variables such as native language, training related to MD, writing experience in the genre, teaching materials related to MD can affect writers'/speakers' uses of MD devices. They also demonstrate and explain why MD and related concepts should be an important part of language teaching classes (as in teaching contrastive transition markers, hedges and boosters, modal markers), and how and when information related to MD could/should be integrated for more successful training of language users (e.g., under- and postgraduate students, translators, EMI instructors). It is believed that the articles in this issue will not only bring forward various understandings of the intricate metadiscoursal mechanisms at work in different contexts, but will also start discussions leading to the improvement of teaching and learning of MD both at national and international levels. Since both commonly studied (e.g., English) as well as less studied languages (e.g., Chinese, German, Saudi Arabian, Serbian, Turkish) are examined in the papers of this issue, it is also hoped that the findings of the studies will advance the development of more robust and widely applicable theories related to the field.

Background of Metadiscourse and Issues

Metadiscourse (MD) as a term was first introduced in the 1960s and since then it has been defined, examined and (sub)classified from different perspectives. MD's beginning was humble. Zellig S. Harris (1959) used it to refer to the passages in texts that contained information of only secondary importance. From there, it evolved into a relatively easy-to-remember aspect of texts, that is "discoursing about the discourse" (Crismore, 1984, p. 280), "writing about writing" (Williams, 1985, p. 226) and "discourse about discourse" (Vande Kopple, 1985, p. 83). Despite the fact that a big number of researchers agreed that MD indicated a speaker's/ writer's attempt to guide readers'/listeners' perceptions of the texts, no consensus concerning a precise definition of the word existed until Halliday (1994) suggested a holistic perspective towards functions of language, from which today's definition of MD has its origins. He argued that language fulfilled three important functions such as *ideational*, *textual* and *interpersonal* – and the first of those focused on issues outside the world of discourse known as propositional content. The *textual* and *interpersonal* functions, on the other hand, were defined as language uses operating within the discourse. The former was defined as the text creator's interest in the text-internal organization of the text while the latter as the writers/speakers attempt to establish relationships with the intended audience in one way or another.

Accepting this broader view towards conceptualising MD, Hyland (2017) has suggested that "the idea is the view that language not only refers to the world, concerned with exchanging information of various kinds, but also to itself: with material which helps readers to organise, interpret and evaluate what is being

said" (p. 17). Finally, Ädel (2018) argues that the conceptualisation of MD and its related definitions should be widened even more and should be approached from a more context specific angle since MD can be "realized in all sorts of discourse" and because it can have peculiar characteristics and functions in the different genres. Therefore, a more context and genre-dependent conceptualisation of the term could be of more help to both researchers and practitioners in the field since such a more flexible perspective would give them the freedom and tools to uncover the nuances of the MD that otherwise might go unnoticed. With this in mind, the articles in this special issue attempt to employ both a general approach in defining and exploring resources with which interactional and textual meanings are achieved; and a narrower approach with a focus on *reflexivity* (Ädel, 2006) signalling commentary on the ongoing discourse.

It is highly possible to consider the concept of MD as a particular kind of social engagement of the text producer with the intended audience through the assistance of the world of discourse, which can range from the evaluation of the producer about the propositional content and negotiation it with the audience (i.e., this will probably result in, unsurprisingly, could) to the signals of text organisation (i.e., but, the aim of the talk, see Fig 3). However, one of the current arguments about the conceptualisation of MD lies within the boundary of MD items with respect to their dynamic nature when combined with the propositional content in different genres. As an example, Ädel and Rodway in their articles suggest that the personal pronoun 'you' can be seen as a way of drawing the attention of the audience to not the text produced but to the communication to be established via commentaries. This is also linked to how the researchers perceive the concept, identify the MD unit and adopt their own fundamental perspective towards investigating it.

Another issue about exploration of MD is closely associated with the extend that researchers approach the units functioning as metadiscourse. So far, a number of trends have emerged in the field of MD research. Because of their study goals, various researchers have relied on pre-determined categories of MD items with a more corpus-based approach, which allows them to deal with larger corpora (i.e., Gardner and Han, Alotaibi in this issue) and reach a broader generalization of the phenomenon under investigation. In contrast, some researchers have turned their attention to examining extended MD units and their various functions with a more corpus-driven approach. Since this approach requires a closer investigation of all potential cases, these researchers usually work with relatively smaller size corpora (e.g., Ädel, Rodway, Akbas, Andresen and Zinsmeister in this issue) and are able to uncover the previously unnoticed nuances in the MD functions. And, there are some other studies combining both approaches. Such a blend of approaches enables researchers to create tailor made solutions for specific contexts and language users (i.e., Bogdanović and Mirović, Martikainen, Molino, Hatipoğlu and Algı in this issue).

Overview of Contributions to the Special Issue

The first article in the issue looks at MD from a new angle and shows that the definition of the term and how it is approached should be modified. Ädel, as the title of the paper suggests, looks at *"Variation in Metadiscursive 'You' Across Genres: From Research Articles to Teacher Feedback"*. She scrutinizes university lectures, research articles, advanced university student essays and teacher feedback on student writing, and identifies and classifies the uses of 'you' as a MD marker in these texts. Her thorough quantitative and qualitative analyses reveal the varied levels of employment of reflexive 'you' across the examined corpora. From the researcher articles where it was not encountered at all to teacher feedback materials where its frequency was 262 instances per 10,000 words. Based on these findings, Ädel argues that the metadiscursive 'you' in her teacher feedback corpus cannot be classified as a device building the stance of the user towards the content or the audience but that it is a tool aiming to solve communication problems; which in turn, is a function closer to the original conceptualization of the term MD. To be more specific, the personal pronoun 'you' is found to build a more salient world of discourse to communicate with the audience-students in this case-and respond to the audience with a more dialogic nature.

Similar to Ädel, Claire Rodway in her article entitled *"Metadiscourse use in a dialogic feedback practice"* focuses on the MD properties of teacher feedback. She looks at the electronic formative comments (n=627) provided by a lecturer to the student assignments written for the EAL [English as an additional language] courses and argues that the teacher feedback is a special genre whose metadiscursive properties should be investigated since by providing feedback to their students, teachers get involved in a dialogic partnership with them. Rodway examines the teacher comments both quantitatively and qualitatively to find potential MD uses from two major perspectives: (1) the reader's response, and (2) a pedagogical response. The analyses show that different MD markers assume different metadiscursive roles/responsibilities. While 'here' and 'see' seemed to be almost exclusively referencing the current text, items such as *look* and *review*, exclusively point to a reference in the designed-in scaffolding from classroom instruction. The findings of the study lead Rodway to conclude that problem/solution orientation of MD in feedback is different from the typically discourse-organising function of MD in academic writing and that as participants in a feedback discourse community, teachers as well as students have agency and visibility. This, writer/reader reciprocity, in turn, makes the roles of the participants particularly complex since for the feedback to fulfil its role the awareness of the audience is essential.

In the paper entitled *"Young researchers writing in ESL and the use of metadiscourse: Learning the ropes"* by Bogdanović and Mirović, we see the

implementation of a qualitative case study approach to the examination of MD. The authors work with three young native speakers of Serbian who have advanced level of proficiency in English, and scrutinize their knowledge and understanding of MD devices. To be able to create a more complete picture of the young researchers' expertise and a more reliable network of analysis, authors collect multilateral data. First, they trace mathematics, computing and electrical engineering researchers' patterns of MD use in their academic articles. Then, they collect detailed information related to their background and training related to the field/topics; and complete the circle by conducting semi-structured interviews with the researchers where their conceptualization and awareness of MD are probed. The analysis of the data illustrates that the young researchers seemed to be aware of the concept, without being aware of the labels, as well as the rationale behind some of the linguistic items in accomplishing a more successful communication with the intended audience via their academic texts. Nevertheless, Bogdanović and Mirović argue that the lesser use of some of the interactional markers in their writing can be field dependent (e.g., math vs. computing). The paper brings to the fore once again the value of training in MD and a number of pedagogical issues to be considered while such training is planned.

The paper by Akbas and Hardman, *"Strengthening or weakening claims in academic knowledge construction: A comparative study of hedges and boosters in postgraduate academic writing"*, zooms in on how the claims are strengthened or weakened with the help of linguistic resources functioning as hedges and boosters. The material of their investigation is based on a corpus of dissertations written by L1 Turkish, L1 English and L2 English writers (approximately 300,000 words in total). They take the extent of commitment/detachment as a broader concept into account when assessing interpersonal functions of hedges and boosters. Apart from a range of differences and similarities across three groups from a qualitative perspective, the quantitative analyses suggest that the native speakers of Turkish and English established relatively divergent tones of certainty in expressing their knowledge claims; the former sounded more definitive and authoritative whereas the latter presented more academic modesty. Akbas and Hardman also highlight an interesting case for the Turkish writers of English (EL2), which shows a rather distinctive place for these interlanguage users with even more cases of weakening propositional content than the EL1 writers to signal detachment. This finding can be of help in advancing our understanding of how close the L2 practices can be to the academic conventions in the target language, digressing from their L1 (*see* also Akbas, 2012, 2014), partly due to their familiarity of target practices by means of instruction or self-development.

Gardner and Han's paper *"Transitions of Contrast in Chinese and English University Student Writing"* is an examination of linguistic representation

of *contrast* known to be one of the central concepts of academic knowledge construction. The researchers build the Han CH-EN corpus by taking various issues (i.e. comparable genres, level of study, discipline) into account in order to investigate and compare the use of contrast markers in student writing. Analysing 156 assignments written in English by Chinese (78 texts totalling 170,000 words) and English writers (78 texts totalling 204,000 words), they find no statistically significant difference between these two groups in general. Nevertheless, a closer examination of the data across five disciplines reveals that the non-science disciplines such as Business and Law had higher number of instances of contrast when compared to the science disciplines (Biology, Engineering and Food Sciences). It is also noteworthy to add that some of the contrast items (such as *while, on the other hand, whereas, in contrast*) are preferred by the Chinese writers more than the English writers at a significant level. Interestingly, the use of *on the other hand* by the Chinese writers is flagged to be misleading since they use it with a function of adding an argument to the preceding one rather than signalling a relation of contrast. The English writers, in contrast, heavily rely upon the use of *however* and *but* to signal contrast, accounting for more than 86% of all contrast items in the sub-corpus. Gardner and Han draw upon a range of implications with respect to the teaching of students in L2 writing for particular contrast transitions functioning appropriately in their contexts.

The next contribution is by Andresen and Zinsmeister who provide a cross-disciplinary perspective towards understanding the role of MD in German Linguistics and Literary Studies. The researchers employ a data-driven approach via n-gram analysis to explore their corpus of 60 PhD theses written by German students. The n-gram analysis indicates that there is a variation between two disciplines with respect to frequency and use of metatext. A closer analysis of *im Folgenden* ('in the following') reveals that literary texts included the item as an intertextual element whereas the item was mainly use for metatextual purposes in linguistics texts. In addition, the analysis of reporting verbs co-occurring with *im Folgenden* allows the researchers to come up with a theoretical argument with respect to the distinction between disciplines; that is, linguists seem to 'present an investigation' more via communication verbs (i.e., auf etw. eingehen, darstellen, vorstellen) in comparison with the literary authors who mainly 'investigate' (untersuchen) in their own texts. The results related to *zusammenfassend* ('summarizing') show that the linguistics texts had a more frequent use with metatextual function so as to introduce the summary of what has been discussed or referring to any figure or tables. Andresen and Zinsmeister suggest that the MD investigations need to focus on details rather than relying on automatic identification; otherwise, various aspects could be overlooked. The authors finalize their paper by addressing potential explanations for the disciplinary variations

they reached and some practical teaching implications while teaching academic writing to the students of these disciplines since the conventions of Linguistics and Literary Studies have distinct ways of creating and conveying knowledge.

Alotaibi's paper "*Metadiscourse in Dissertation Acknowledgments: Exploration of Gender Differences in EFL Texts*" studies the concept of MD from an understudied perspective – gender. He investigates the role of gender in determining the generic structure of dissertation acknowledgements written in English by EFL Saudi students at US universities (totalling 120 samples of sixty males and sixty females). The study includes two major steps in analysing the genre (1) identification of the moves and (2) identification of interactional MD devices within the corpus of the study. The analysis indicates that the acknowledgement sections written by Saudi students comprise of four main moves in conveying gratitude of the writers such as *thanking for academic assistance*, *thanking for moral support*. Interestingly, Alotaibi reports that his corpus did not include any hedges or engagement markers, which signals a distinctive Saudi rhetorical choice for both genders. In contrast to boosters and attitude markers, the self-mentions appear to vary largely between the genders. The female students show a heavy reliance on self-references when compared to males both in general (1348 vs. 969 instances) and particularly in the use of plural forms such as *we, our, us* (29 vs. 6 instances) in establishing an explicit rhetorical identity. Building upon the argument of strategic use of MD resources by learners, the paper offers a venue for increasing the MD awareness of the users via authentic materials and activities. Echoing some other papers in the special issue (e.g., Adel, Akbas, Molino), the researcher maintains that to be able to develop more comprehensive understanding of the applications of MD, more research investigating different academic genres and part-genres should be conducted.

The study by Martikainen examines the concept of MD by focusing on modal markers in translated medical discourse since the process of presenting the modal meaning in translated medical texts is highly vital with respect to the interpretation of the elements such as treatment, effectiveness of intervention and level of confidence. The data of the study includes Cochrane Abstracts written in English (85,000 words) and their translated versions in French (107,000 words) to investigate the sources of distortion due to biased translation of modal markers. The translation of auxiliary 'may' (mainly via more affirmative indicative mood of the verb 'pouvoir' in French) seems to shift the interpretation of the readers since the translated version signals a higher level of certainty. She offers cases of positive distortion in the translation of English texts owing to the selection of evidential verbs rather than their closest meanings in French. As an example, the translation of the evidential verb 'show' is positively distorted with a choice of reinforcing the knowledge instead of conveying a neutral meaning via 'montrer' or 'indiquer'. By

touching upon various potential sources of distortion in the translation of medical texts, the article brings up pedagogical possibilities in relation to the significance of precision on modal markers in medical texts, especially for translation students.

Molino's paper focuses on spoken interaction at an English-Medium Instruction (EMI) setting in order to investigate the functions and patterns of context-specific uses of MD by Italian lecturers in the fields of Physical Sciences and Engineering. The data of her study consists of six university lectures totalling 418 minutes with around 45,000 words. After identifying personal and impersonal markers of MD in this special corpus, she offers a close analysis of *metatext* categories (i.e. metalinguistic comments, discourse organization, speech act labels) by referring to personal and impersonal forms. The mode of communication and discipline specificity seem to have resulted in variations in the use of MD. For example, the total absence of items signalling 'arguing' in combination with extensive use of 'saying and exemplifying' creates a quite unique way of interaction with the audience. The results also show that the second person pronoun 'you' is extensively used with the functions of inviting students to the process of creating meanings or assessing their knowledge throughout the teaching process. Judging from the non-standard forms of MD, hesitations and repetitions, Molino also reflects upon the extent to which the comprehensibility of MD markers can be influenced by non-native use of English. Furthermore, the integration of MD into teacher training is proposed since the results of the study can shed light on various teacher talk issues from topic management to discourse labelling for particular teaching settings.

The last paper in the issue is entitled *"Catch a tiger by the toe: Modal hedges in EFL argumentative paragraphs"* by Hatipoğlu and Algı. Here researchers focus on a particularly problematic area for non-native speakers of English (Algı, 2012; Hatipoğlu & Algı, 2017) –modals– and use detailed analysis to answer their research questions. They begin by identifying and describing the number and functions of modal hedges used by native speakers of Turkish learning English in their English argumentative paragraphs and then, analyse the level of appropriateness of these in the contexts where they were employed. This multi-layered designed (i.e., frequency, function, appropriacy, context) allows researchers to detect problems peculiar to specific groups of learners (e.g., overreliance or avoidance of specific modals) and to suggest a number of tailor made methods for teaching modal hedges. The study also points to a number of potential factors that might shape/determine how Turkish writers express their degree of confidence and assess possibilities in argumentative paragraphs (e.g., teaching materials, norms in L1) written in their foreign language. Hatipoğlu and Algı conclude their paper by underlying how important MD related instruction is in EFL contexts and how significant it is to ensure that knowledge related to modal and other hedges is included in the academic writing assessment rubrics. Without these, they claim, L2 writers will continue "catching the tiger by the toe".

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