Metadiscourse: Diverse and Divided Perspectives

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1. Introduction

Metadiscourse made its first appearance in Applied Linguistics about twenty years ago, and has maintained a steady interest among scholars ever since. Despite its established status and enduring attraction, it is not easy to characterise it in a way that would make everybody happy. Its core conceptualisation, and what connects it to deeper roots in scholarship, centres around 'discourse about discourse'. This is perhaps also the core area in the sense that all researchers include it in their definitions and interpretations of the object of study. Beyond this, there is little agreement—different views abound concerning where to draw the boundaries around the core. Is all interactive discourse part of metadiscourse? Is all intersentential connectivity marking part of metadiscourse? Does it involve discourse in the sense of ways of speaking, and thereby things like argumentation? Should it be primarily 'language about language'?

These issues are addressed in the papers in this volume, each of which approaches metadiscourse from a different angle. In addition to a basic interest in metadiscourse, there is one common thread running through all the contributions: academic language. An interest in the varied manifestations and uses of metadiscourse in academic texts of different kinds has been a central feature of metadiscourse studies in Applied Linguistics from the start. Speaking has entered the scene much more recently, as in other approaches to academic discourse.

In this brief introduction, we make an attempt at outlining the central dividing lines in this field of research today, with a view to how these reflect on the papers at hand. The fundamental issues concern the delimitation of the conceptual underpinnings of the field, and the methodological options for teasing out a rich description of metadiscourse in all its guises. These questions inevitably go together.

Both have a bearing on answering questions about why we use metadiscourse and what is it exactly that we do when we do so.

2. Two definitions of and two approaches to metadiscourse
One of the major issues in the study of metadiscourse is a truly basic one, having to do with the definition itself. Two different traditions have formed in the study of metadiscourse (described, for example, in Mauranen 1993:145-155 and Ädel 2006:167-179): one which uses a broad definition and sees *textual interaction* as fundamental to the category, and one which uses a narrow definition and sees *reflexivity* as fundamental to the category. The former tradition has been labelled 'integrative' (Mauranen 1993) or the 'interactive model' (Ädel, this volume), while the latter has been labelled 'non-integrative' (Mauranen 1993) or the 'reflexive model' (Ädel, this volume).

That this division is a real one is evident from the fact that most of the papers included here refer to it. It is also interesting to note that between some of the studies in this special issue there is no overlap regarding the linguistic phenomenon of study. For example, while connectives and hedges are labelled as metadiscourse in the interactive model, neither category is considered metadiscursive in the reflexive model. This reveals a situation which cannot simply be reduced to 'terminological confusion', but which shows two different research traditions that have evolved since the term was originally coined and used.

In addition to the overall issue of broad versus narrow definitions, the approach itself is different across studies of metadiscourse. It is possible to discern two main types of approach, which generally correspond to the two definitional traditions. These differences in approach have implications not only for the method of identifying metadiscourse, but arguably also for how the category is understood. We will refer to these as the 'thin' approach and the 'thick' approach.

With respect to method, the thin approach can be placed at the purely quantitative end, while the thick approach is considerably more qualitatively oriented. The thin approach operates by retrieving (usually on a large scale) all occurrences of a pre-defined list of members of specific subsets (see e.g. Table 1 in Hyland, this volume). As the words and lemmas on the list are seen as inherently metadiscursive, the

captured occurrences are typically not examined further. The great advantage of this method is that the retrieval can be highly automatised, which makes it possible to compare frequency and distribution patterns across relatively large bodies of data. The analyst is able to obtain a good overview of the occurrence and distribution of metadiscourse in a given database, which then allows for quick comparisons across genres, registers and contexts of use. The result, however, is undeniably superficial, and the view of metadiscourse itself can be static, unless the retrieved examples are examined.

The thick approach operates by first retrieving possible candidates, then excluding irrelevant ones, and finally analysing extended units of metadiscursive meaning. (For an example of the initial step, see Ädel's discussion in the volume of the different types of first person *I*, not all of which are seen as metadiscursive.) In this approach, by contrast to the thin approach, the interesting part begins once the basic examples have been retrieved and established as relevant. The final analytical step typically involves an examination of lexicogrammatical co-occurrence patterns (see e.g. Bondi, this volume), or of the immediate discourse functions served by the larger unit in the discourse (see e.g. Ädel, this volume, Mauranen, this volume, and Pérez-Llantada, this volume).

The thin approach reflects the primacy of the linguist's intuition, while the thick type is essentially a data-oriented approach. With respect to the analytical concept, the thin type generally considers decontextualised units, while the thick type considers contextualised units.

In the thin approach, the unit of analysis is pre-determined in that the model consists of a list of subcategories, varying from 'connectives' such as *therefore* to 'self-mentions' such as *I*. This shows a heavy reliance on linguistic form coupled with the assumption that the overall function of each form searched for will not vary. The recall of the search/identification of metadiscourse is unknown, since potential items not on the list would not be captured.

The thick approach is a discourse-analytical one, where occurrences are examined in context. Typically, the starting point is a small unit, such as a personal pronoun (cf. Ädel) or a potentially reflexive form, such as PUT or SAY (cf. Mauranen). The metadiscursive unit itself is, however, larger than the search term, and it is the formal realisation and/or discourse function of the larger unit that is the object of analysis. This

implies a highly context-dependent and dynamic view of metadiscourse. Taking this approach allows us to gain a fuller understanding of the workings of metadiscourse, albeit—by contrast to the thin approach—covering a smaller number of items at a time.

Not all studies adopt a pure line in applying one of the approaches outlined in broad brushstrokes here; in fact, some studies combine the two. Historically, however, the study of metadiscourse began with the thin approach (Vande Kopple 1985; Crismore & Farnsworth 1990; Crismore, Markkanen & Steffensen 1993; see also Hyland who represents a more recent and prominent representative of this tradition). The thick approach represents a later development (for early examples, see Ädel 2006; Mauranen 2001, 2003; Vassileva 1998).

Despite the major differences between the two research traditions, we are happy to be able to include papers from both camps in this special issue. The publication has been organised with this division in mind, and opens with studies by Mauranen, Pérez-Llantada, and Ädel applying the reflexive model and taking a thick approach. These are followed by Bondi, which is an intermediate case in that the thick approach is taken, though reflexivity and explicitness are not taken as definitional criteria. Bondi essentially sees metadiscourse as 'representation of research activity', that is, talking about the research rather than the evolving text. In a way, this can be seen as a third model of metadiscourse, very much tied to discourse from an academic context and seeing argumentation as a central feature. The ultimate goal here is to learn about specific research communities (in studying their use of metadiscourse in argumentation) rather than to learn about metadiscourse as a phenomenon. By contrast, the focus of Hyland and others in the interactive traditions is not on talk about research, but rather on the interactivity between writer and reader. The interactive model is represented by Hyland, Noble and Pisanski Peterlin, as well as many of the studies reviewed in Crismore & Abdollehzadeh.

3. Metadiscourse: A diverse area of study

The eight papers included in this special issue on metadiscourse testify not only to the divisions but also to the diversity of this area of study. One of the ways in which this diversity is evident is in the geographical spread of the contributors: the issue includes work by researchers active

in Scandinavia (Finland and Sweden), the rest of Europe (Italy, Slovenia, Spain), Asia (Hong Kong and Iran), Australia and the US.

One of the most exciting instances of diversity with respect to the discourses represented is that not only written registers are covered, but also spoken ones. The analysis of metadiscourse in spoken lectures and seminars spans both relatively monologic data (Ädel) and interactive data (Mauranen). Despite the fact that the research article is such a powerful genre, representing the "key product of the knowledge-manufacturing industry" (Swales 1990:125), it is not exclusively in focus here, even among the written registers. Also represented are undergraduate student essays, master's theses, doctoral theses, textbooks and research articles.

The language covered is predominantly English, but there are comparisons with Slovene and Spanish, as well as reviews of comparisons with Persian. The varieties of English studied are quite diverse, including native-speaker, L2 learner, and mixed English-as-a-lingua-franca settings.

Diversity is also found in the status of the contributors: we are pleased to be able to include both pioneers and newcomers to the study of metadiscourse. One of the contributors, Avon Crismore, deserves special mention as a pioneer, having started publishing on metadiscourse as early as the late 1980s. At the other end of the spectrum, the issue refers to recent research carried out by master's and Ph.D. students, described in the review article by Crismore and Abdollehzadeh.

Both professional and novice academics are also represented in the linguistic material covered in the studies. Several studies look at the writing of novice populations; not only graduate students (Ädel; Hyland) but also undergraduate students (Noble). The discourses of professional academics are also dealt with in several of the contributions (Ädel; Bondi; Mauranen; Pérez-Llantada; Pisanski Peterlin).

3.1 Summary of papers

Mauranen's paper "Discourse Reflexivity - a Discourse Universal? The case of ELF" examines spoken interaction where English is used as a lingua franca in a university setting. The material amounts to 400,000 words and consists of multi-party discussion sections (6-15 speakers) retrieved from seminars from a variety of disciplines. In the first part of the study, phraseological units are analysed as they occur around the

typical discourse reflexive verbs PUT and SAY. The second part is a close analysis of ways in which discourse reflexivity is drawn on in a selection of three dialogic events (from medical science, political science, and women's studies), with a special emphasis on social practices. It is found that there is a considerable amount of 'other-oriented' metadiscourse in the material, which shows that "dialogue brings out new facets and different emphases on the functions of self-referential language in communication from written text analysis". Another finding is that the tendency of discourse reflexivity and hedging to co-occur in 'discourse collocation' is confirmed by the data. The analyses suggest that reflexivity is a discourse universal, that is, "such a major element of communication that languages generally possess means for expressing it and that these means are available to speakers as resources which they can draw on as necessary".

Pérez-Llantada's paper "The discourse functions of metadiscourse in published academic writing: Issues of culture and language" presents a large-scale study of two key sections of research articles: introductions and discussions. The material is based on biomedical journals and represents 114 samples each of introductions and discussions, retrieved from different populations: Spanish scholars writing in Spanish, Spanish scholars writing in English, and North-American scholars writing in English. The total word count per population ranges between approximately 65,000 and 70,000. Pérez-Llantada analyses 'text-oriented' and 'participant-oriented' types of metadiscourse (based on Ädel 2006), with a view toward the discourse functions carried out by metadiscourse. These micro-level discourse functions are then related to broader move-patterns found for introductions and discussions (based on Swales 1990, 2004). While showing similar overall frequencies of metadiscourse types cross-culturally, the results bring to the surface "both culture- and language-specific lexicogrammatical realisations of metadiscourse units, different preferences for personal/impersonal metadiscourse as well as preferred textual developments in the construction of dialogism through metadiscourse".

The aim of Ädel's paper "*Just to give you kind of a map of where we are going*: A taxonomy of metadiscourse in spoken and written academic English" is to shed light on the similarities and differences between spoken and written types of metadiscourse, as they appear in an academic context. Personal metadiscourse is analysed in a qualitative and

corpus-based study, based on 30 spoken university lectures (255,000 words) and 130 essays by highly proficient graduate students (400,000 words). Ädel presents an empirically-based taxonomy of the discourse functions of spoken and written metadiscourse in academic English. In creating one taxonomy for both modes, both similarities and differences are highlighted in the distribution of discourse functions across speech and writing. The proposed taxonomy consists of 23 discourse functions, divided into four main categories: *Metalinguistic comments*, *Discourse organisation*, *Speech act labels* and *References to the audience*. The findings reveal that most of the discourse functions in the taxonomy occurred in both speech and writing, although spoken metadiscourse performed a greater range of discourse actions than written metadiscourse. Differences in the conditions of speech and writing, such as the lack of time for planning and revision in speech, and the direct presence of an audience in speech, are specifically found to result in variation in the use of metadiscourse. Furthermore, factors related to genre are found to give rise to variation in the use of metadiscourse.

Bondi's paper "Metadiscursive practices in introductions: Phraseology and semantic sequences across genres" provides a close analysis of the use of metadiscourse in introductions to research articles (40 samples, totalling 36,000 words) and textbooks (10 samples, totalling 70,000 words) in economics. In other words, both a research genre and a didactic genre are represented in the corpus. Differences and similarities across the genres are highlighted by studying the types of framework sequences (Hunston 2008) in which forms of 'self-mention' and 'illocution markers' are realised. The author concludes that textbooks "favour personal forms (*we discuss*) [and] tend to adopt combinations highlighting topic-setting (*look at notions*) and the explanatory function of the genre (*provide examples; explain concepts*)", while articles "favour non-personal forms (*Section 1 discusses*), together with combinations highlighting purpose (*present model*) and research structure (*test hypotheses; review literature; provide results*)". This reflects the purposes of the genres and the values of the community.

Hyland's paper "Metadiscourse: Mapping interactions in academic writing" reports on a study of advanced second language writing by predominantly L1 Cantonese speakers, based on a four-million-word corpus of 240 master's and Ph.D. dissertations. The analysis of metadiscourse is used to uncover one aspect of the rhetorical and social

distinctiveness of disciplinary communities, as six different disciplines are examined: electronic engineering, computer science, business studies, biology, applied linguistics, and public administration. The analysis employs ten subcategories altogether, which represent a broader distinction, drawn originally from Thompson (2001), between 'interactive' and 'interactional' resources. Categories of the interactive type are concerned mainly with organizing discourse and its interpretation, whereas the interactional elements are concerned with creating a writer personality and involvement with the reader. Not only corpus data, but also interview data are drawn on from the six disciplines in order to further explore differences and similarities across discourse communities. The results show that the use of metadiscourse varies both in the master's versus Ph.D. variable and in the disciplinary variable. Members of these groups "represent themselves and see their readers in quite different ways", as evidenced by the use of metadiscourse.

Noble's paper "Understanding metadiscoursal use: A local study" is an investigation into the use of specific types of metadiscourse in argumentative essays written by first-year undergraduate L2 students, majoring in business studies and computing. 'Connectives', 'frame markers', 'code glosses' and 'self-mentions' are studied. The 80 essays included in the corpus, written in the context of an EAP course and totalling 120,000 words, have been coded by grade (high-scoring and low-scoring). The results reveal that, overall, the learner writers show a heavy reliance on a narrow range of connectives. However, it is also found that high-scoring essays display both a higher frequency and a greater range of connectives. In contrast to connectives, frame markers, code glosses and self-mentions in the form of first person singular are rarely used by the student writers. The lack of self-mentions is hypothesised to be induced by the instructor's input. The paper brings up pedagogical possibilities regarding metadiscourse, concluding that "[a] learner corpus is not only useful to examine the use of rhetorical devices in student essays, but also to create a database appropriate to the local context of the course from which to draw pedagogical materials for current and future class work."

Pisanski Peterlin's paper "Hedging devices in Slovene-English translation: A corpus-based study" explores the question of how hedging devices are translated in research articles. The fact that hedging has been shown to be quite central to academic discourse but also subject to cross-

cultural variation raises the question of what happens to hedges in the process of translation. Research articles in geography are selected to answer the research question. The material analysed consists of 30 original articles in Slovene, 30 English translations of these articles, and 30 comparable original English articles—all totalling 500,000 words. Considerable differences are found: not only are half as many hedging devices used in the translated texts as in the originals, but the realisation of hedging devices is considerably less varied in the translations.

The final contribution, by Crismore & Abdollezadeh, is entitled "A review of recent metadiscourse studies: The Iranian context" and is not a research paper, but a review article. The inclusion of a discussion of Iranian research in this special issue will help to disseminate research coming from a context that is rarely considered in the West. The article covers fifteen studies carried out by master's and Ph.D. students at different universities in Iran. The studies fall into three areas: metadiscourse use in writing in English, cross-linguistic comparison of metadiscourse in English and Persian, and metadiscourse in EFL reading comprehension. The studies have adopted very different approaches and consequently yielded a wealth of results that testify to the complexity of the issues involved as well as to the diversity of roles of metadiscourse in a non-western and variably West-influenced academic environment.

4. Final comments

We have described the division, pertaining both to definition and to approach, in studies of metadiscourse. The *interactive* model uses a broad definition and conceives of metadiscourse as interaction between writer and reader, while the *reflexive* model uses a focused definition and conceives of metadiscourse as a reflexive or metalinguistic function of language. The two approaches outlined here have been labelled *thin* and *thick*. The thin approach is quantitative and decontextualised, while the thick approach is qualitative and context-oriented, typically taking syntagmatic sequences or discourse functions into account. The way these two dimensions generally pan out is that the interactive model tends to go with the thin approach, and the reflexive model with the thick approach.

Disparity can be characterised both negatively as 'division' and positively as 'diversity'—both perspectives are relevant here. We have

depicted not only the division present in the study of metadiscourse, but also the diversity as it is represented in the current special issue. We have pointed to diversity in the contributors themselves (researchers from many different countries, both newcomers and veterans) and in the linguistic material analysed (different genres of writing *and* speech, produced by both novice and professional academics, in different Englishes as well as other languages). We hope that by pointing out the divisions in the field and simultaneously maintaining a wide diversity, we may promote awareness of the issues and divergences in the field, and bring them together in a fruitful academic dialogue which takes the field forward. Metadiscourse as an area of study is evidently in a dynamic phase.

We indicated above that this research area has taken a large step forward since the first full-fledged studies of metadiscourse in the late 1980s. That said, there is still plenty of room for further development. For all its diversity, this special issue includes studies solely concerned with academic discourse, whether research genres or didactic genres. What is the status and place of metadiscourse in non-academic language (cf. Ädel, this volume)? The universality discussed by Mauranen (this volume) underlines the fact that metadiscourse is not a concern only for the academic world, but for all contexts of language use.

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