

Metadiscourse: What is it and where is it going?

Ken Hyland*

Centre for Applied English Studies, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Received 9 November 2016; received in revised form 14 March 2017; accepted 15 March 2017

Available online 28 March 2017



CrossMark

Abstract

Metadiscourse – the ways in which writers and speakers interact through their use of language with readers and listeners – is a widely used term in current discourse analysis, pragmatics and language teaching. This interest has grown up over the past 40 years driven by a dual purpose. The first is a desire to understand the relationship between language and its contexts of use. That is, how individuals use language to orient to and interpret particular communicative situations, and especially how they draw on their understandings of these to make their intended meanings clear to their interlocutors. The second is to employ this knowledge in the service of language and literacy education. But while many researchers and teachers find it to be a conceptually rich and analytically powerful idea, it is not without difficulties of definition, categorisation and analysis. In this paper I explore the strengths and shortcomings of the concept and map its influence and directions through a state of the art analysis of the main online academic databases and current published research. © 2017 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Metadiscourse; Interaction; Research databases; Academic writing; Rhetoric

1. Introduction

Metadiscourse is the commentary on a text made by its producer in the course of speaking or writing and it is a widely used term in current discourse analysis and language teaching. In fact, it is perhaps now one of the most commonly employed methods for approaching specialist written texts, so that a simple *Google* search produces over 154,000 hits, *Google Scholar* returns some 185,000 documents containing the term and the *Web of Science* encompasses over 270 papers on the topic. It has become one of the main ways that interaction is studied in academic writing and there are hundreds of articles and postgraduate dissertations completed each year which use it. *Metadiscourse*, then, 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. In addition, like many terms which emerge and quickly attract a wide following, it has grown without any clear idea of its general development, contribution to discourse studies or overall direction and as a result it is difficult to judge its impact or the areas where it is having most effect.

In this paper I attempt to untangle some of the conceptual difficulties of the term and track its development. I first offer a brief critical overview of its main distinctions, assumptions and classifications and argue for an interactive model of metadiscourse. I then go on to provide a bibliometric map of its trajectory in terms of patterns of publication in the main research databases and the topics and keywords most frequently associated with the term in those publications. Finally, I explore the main themes which have been followed in the metadiscourse research and the directions in which it seem to

* Correspondence to: CAES, Run Run Shaw Tower, University of Hong Kong, Pok Fu Lam Road, Hong Kong.
E-mail address: Khyland@hku.hk.

be going. While perhaps an unconventional paper for this journal, I hope these methods clarify the term, document its main areas of focus and indicate its current strengths, limitations and directions.

2. Background and preliminaries

Originally introduced by the structural linguist Zelig Harris (1959), the term only gained traction in applied linguistics in the mid-1980s with the work of Vande Kopple (1985), Crismore (1989) and Williams (1981). At the heart of 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. This view connects metadiscourse to deeper roots in scholarship such as Jacobson's (1980) 'metalinguistic function' of language, which refers to language which focuses on the text itself, and Halliday's (1985:271) 'metaphenomena' which are "categories of the language, not of the real world".

In this way, metadiscourse is related to, and often confused with, terms such as *metalanguage* and *metapragmatics*, although it differs from both. Essentially *metalanguage* concerns people's knowledge about language and representations of language, so it is the terms used by teachers, learners and analysts to make statements about an 'object' language. It is a resource to talk about and reflect on language itself and is therefore a staple of such areas as language teaching, stylistics, language attitudes and folk linguistics. Because metalanguage allows us to analyse and convey ideas about what language is, it also has an ideological dimension, enabling statements to be made about what it ought to be (e.g. Jaworski et al., 2004). *Metapragmatics* on the other hand, is concerned with speakers' judgments of appropriateness of communicative behaviour, both their own and that of others. The metapragmatic dimension of language therefore allows the competent language user to both monitor his or her ongoing interaction and to talk about this ability (Caffi, 2006). Clearly the second concept is closer to metadiscourse than the first as it concerns the appropriate use of linguistic devices by the speaker to manage self-impressions and maintain interpersonal alignment.

However, while metadiscourse embraces these discourse monitoring and interactive functions, it differs from metapragmatics. Significantly, its proponents tend to focus on written rather than spoken texts and to prefer corpus methods rather than ethnographic inquiry, interactional sociolinguistics or conversational analysis (e.g. Bublitz and Hübler, 2007). Moreover, metadiscourse analysis has largely focused on specialised varieties of language, rather than general conversational competencies, and to expand analyses beyond the ways participant role relationships are negotiated to the persuasive structuring of discourse, looking at the contribution of cohesive features to writer–reader understandings. Perhaps the most significant difference, however, is the almost exclusive concern with explicit linguistic devices as functional markers, neglecting more indirect signals, so we see little analysis of pragmatic concepts such as presupposition or violations of cooperative maxims in metadiscourse studies.

Essentially metadiscourse refers to how we use language out of consideration for our readers or hearers based on our estimation of how best we can help them process and comprehend what we are saying. It is a recipient design filter which helps to spell out how we intend a message to be understood by offering a running commentary on it. This is important as drawing attention to the text in this way reveals a writer's awareness of the reader and the type and extent of his or her need for elaboration, clarification, guidance and interaction. In turn, because the successful management of these local rhetorical resources helps achieve immediate social and communicative objectives, such reader assessments also reveal something of how the writer/speaker understands the community being addressed (Hyland, 2005). Metadiscourse thus suggests a familiarity with an audience and so connects texts with contexts. It points to the routine, almost automatic, use of conventions which are developed through participation and linked to familiar situations and relationships which tie us into webs of common sense, interests and shared meanings. The fact that metadiscourse choices index a social and rhetorical context in this way means that the concept has been enthusiastically taken up by researchers seeking to characterise a range of genres, languages, modes and proficiencies.

3. Problems and workarounds

So far, so good. There is little in this overview that most metadiscourse analysts would disagree with. It acknowledges that metadiscourse sets out to capture something of the interactive character of communication, it recognises a distinction between propositional and reader-oriented material and it suggests that these features are context dependent and differ across genres and languages. Here, however, the broad consensus ends as there is little agreement on where we should draw the boundary of metadiscourse or what rhetorical categories it includes. Only part of this disagreement stems from divergent perspectives on metadiscourse, however, as the concept itself offers considerable opportunities for multiple interpretations.

Essentially, metadiscourse is a fuzzy category, most importantly in the sense of what it is. For there to be something called *metadiscourse* there needs to be something which is *not* metadiscourse, and this is generally posited to be

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5042688>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5042688>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)