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From the Editors

"In this paper we suggest": Changing patterns of disciplinary metadiscourse

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ABSTRACT

Metadiscourse is the commentary on a text made by its producer in the course of speaking or writing. Here we take an interpersonal perspective, focusing on metadiscourse as a repertoire of resources available for writers to organise a discourse or their stance towards its content or the reader. In this paper we explore whether, and to what extent, metadiscourse has changed in professional writing in different disciplines over the past 50 years. Extending our diachronic work analysing a corpus of 2.2 million words from articles in the top journals in four disciplines, we show there has been a significant increase in interactive features and a significant decrease in interactional types. Surprisingly, interactional metadiscourse shows a marked decline in the discursive soft knowledge fields and a substantial increase in the science subjects.

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Synchrony and diachrony are complementary perspectives on language use but, with notable exceptions, research on academic and professional discourse has almost exclusively focused on the description and analysis of language, rather than the historical processes that affect it over time. How disciplinary writing changes and develops, however, is important to our understanding of current practices, both in providing an awareness of how we got to where we are and in offering insights into the relationship between language and its contexts of use. Such insights are, of course, the lifeblood of ESP instruction. Authors, such as Atkinson (1999), Banks (2008), Bazerman (1988), Valle (1999) and Salager-Meyer (1999), have all made important contributions to this endeavour, revealing significant changes in the apparently frozen textual surfaces of (usually) scientific research articles. If not always theorizing the conditions and situations that may have promoted the changes in the text, these studies have reinforced our understanding that academic writing is not so much "natural" but very much a form of knowledge construction.

Our own interest in changes in professional research writing concerns recent developments in rhetorical practices and in academic interactions more specifically. We were initially moved to see if there was evidence for an often-heard claim that academic writing has become more informal in recent years (Hyland & Jiang, 2017), finding that this may be the case in the hard sciences, but the social sciences seemed to be heading in the opposite direction. This surprising result encouraged us to look for diachronic change in intersubjective positioning in greater detail, first exploring stance-making practices (Hyland & Jiang, 2016a) and then reader engagement strategies (Hyland & Jiang, 2016b). These studies show overlapping results, broadly, applied linguists and sociologist now present their research more impersonally and make less explicit effort to

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finesse readers, while electronic engineers and biologists are more visible in their texts and seek to connect with their audience more directly.

In the current manuscript we extend the diachronic research into academic writing to recent times and broaden our own line of work to examine interaction through the lens of metadiscourse. *Metadiscourse* is the commentary on a text made by its producer in the course of speaking or writing and has become one of the most productive ways of modelling interaction. Interaction is understood here as the writer's rhetorical awareness of the reader as a participant in the discourse, as someone who, through the choice of metadiscourse devices, can be engaged, guided and swayed by a text that is both comprehensible and persuasive. It focuses on those items which most overtly invoke the presence of the writer or reader in a text, organise propositional discourse and display the writer's stance (Hyland, 2005).

Using the same corpus as the earlier studies, 360 articles consisting of 2.2 million words compiled from the top journals in four disciplines, we explore whether, and to what extent, metadiscourse has changed in different disciplines over the past 50 years. This is an important extension to the previous investigations since, as seen below, metadiscourse comprises an important element of textual practice, encompassing a set of rhetorical choices which not only help project the writer's perspective and engage readers, but also work to organize cohesive discourse. We believe this exploration contributes to the study of diachronic variation in academic writing and helps unpacks the impact of the significant changes which have occurred in publication and research practices in recent years. For teachers, a diachronic perspective on metadiscourse reinforces our awareness of the malleability of academic writing and its sensitivity to context as well as providing access to current practices for the creation and delivery of teaching materials.

1. Metadiscourse and interactions in academic writing

Academic knowledge is the outcome of a process of getting people to believe things. All reporting occurs within a disciplinary context and persuading readers to accept a particular observation as a worthwhile contribution involves careful decisions about how best to contextualise results and embed them in disciplinary argument, affiliation and agreement-making. Representations of reality have to be worked for as readers always have the option of refuting interpretations, which means writers must galvanize support for their claims and anticipate disagreement (e.g. Hyland, 2004). So, while research writing is a projection of a writer's voice, this is done with sensitivity to the expectations and views of a disciplinary audience. It is a place where writers and readers try to imagine each other's purposes and strategies and write or interpret a text in terms of these imaginations.

Academic texts therefore carry traces of these social interactions and analysts have sought to identify these interactions and reveal the rhetorical bases of persuasion. Metadiscourse has been a very productive tool in this regard and has a longish history itself, introduced by the structural linguist Zelig Harris (1959) and taken up in applied linguistics in the mid-1980s with the work of Vande Kopple (1985) and Crismore (1989). 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, through material which helps readers to organise, interpret and evaluate what is being said. It is a way of looking at language use based on the fact that, as we speak or write, we monitor the possible responses of others, making decision about the kind of effects we are having on our listeners or readers, and adjusting our language to best achieve our purposes. It does this, moreover, by focussing on lexico-grammatical items which are both searchable in a corpus, thus aggregating individual decisions to reveal community preferences, and which are eminently teachable. They therefore offer EAP instructors ways of helping students to examine the text they seek to engage in and to use salient and high frequency items disciplinary experts find effective in their own texts. As a consequence, metadiscourse has been picked up and used by teachers across the globe (Hyland, 2017).

This does not mean the term, or the features it is used to embrace, is uncontested. Some researchers prefer to limit the term to explicit references to the text itself (e.g. Mauranen, 1993; Dahl, 2004), to illocutionary predicates (Beauvais, 1989) or to a relevance framework (Ifantidou, 2005). However, it is difficult to restrict authorial interventions to text organising or stance elements in any principled way. This is because an awareness of the reader not only involves assisting their grasp of cohesive connections but also the effect that their evaluation and assessments of material might be understood. In other words, the use of discourse to manage social relationships is inseparable from its role in managing the organisation of texts. With post-modern exceptions, a text communicates effectively only when the writer has correctly assessed both the reader's resources for interpreting it and his or her likely response to it and we cannot fully comprehend this process by arbitrarily excluding a whole area of relevant rhetorical activity. Academic writers therefore seek to balance claims for the significance of their research against the convictions and expectations of colleagues. Metadiscourse is one way in which they seek to anticipate readers' likely objections, background knowledge, rhetorical expectations and processing needs.

Thus, in this short extract from a research article (1) we see the authors intervening to review previously established information (*in comparing Text 1 and Text 2*), to frame the upcoming discussion (*In the remainder of this section of the paper, features will be examined under four headings*), offer evaluative commentary on the information presented (*most striking difference, much more messy, what seem to be*) and address readers directly through a direct question and a reference to 'us'.

(1) In comparing Text 1 and Text 2 the most striking difference is that the commercial text is very coherent, explicit and self-contained, whereas the authentic text is much more "messy". In the remainder of this section of the paper, we will examine in more detail some of the features which set these two texts apart. Why does one seem so coherent and the

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