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Remember that your reader cannot read your mind: Problem/solution-oriented metadiscourse in teacher feedback on student writing



Annelie Ädel

Department of English, School of Languages and Media Studies, Dalarna University, 791 88 Falun, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Feedback on student writing is a common type of discourse to which university teachers dedicate much time. A pilot corpus of feedback—40,000 words representing five teachers' comments on 375 student texts—was investigated for metadiscourse, defined as reflexive expressions referring to the evolving discourse, the writer-speaker, or the audience. The overarching question concerned how visible the writer, reader and current text were. To help determine how the feedback data may be unique, comparisons were made to previous studies investigating metadiscourse in other types of academic discourse, both written (university student proficient L1 writing and university student L2 writing) and spoken (university lectures). The feedback data had considerably higher proportions of metadiscourse and the overall frequency of metadiscourse was exceptionally high. The student reader ('you') was considerably more visible than the teacher writer giving feedback ('I'). The material involved large quantities of references to the text, e.g. 'here' used to indicate trouble spots. Previously studied data have resulted in a view of metadiscourse as prototypically discourse-organising, but the metadiscourse in feedback is instead problem/solution-oriented, serving the metalinguistic function and aiming to solve communication problems. The findings have led to a revision of the model of metadiscourse in which the roles of the writer, audience and text are multidimensional rather than one-dimensional.

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1. Communication about communication

All human languages can be used self-referentially to comment on linguistic matters (Hockett, 1977:173). This capacity of human language to refer to itself has been called 'reflexivity' (Lyons, 1977:5). Reflexivity in language is in no way restricted to specialist discourse, but cuts across all types of linguistic activity, including everyday communication (cf. Jakobson, 1980; Verschueren, 1999). Recent sociolinguistic work takes further the notion that reflexivity is central and suggests that one of the great clichés of our time is that it is "good to talk"; the English-speaking world has developed into a self-reflexive 'communication culture' (Cameron, 2000).¹ The argument goes that a large amount of explicit communication *about* communication is taking place, both in public and private discourse, and that people are actively looking

E-mail address: annelie.adel@du.se.

¹ A 'communication culture' is said to be particularly self-conscious and reflexive about communication, generating large quantities of communication about communication (Cameron, 2000).

for strategies to communicate “better” (see also Craig, 2005) and are thus “highly receptive to expert advice” (Cameron, 2000:viii).

An area in which communication *about* communication has long been institutionalised is education. Text commentary in the form of teacher feedback on student writing can be said to serve the reflexive function of language *par excellence* as discourse itself is the topic of discussion and the text itself is at centre stage. Teacher feedback on student work is a highly frequent type of discourse, occurring from primary to tertiary education, in a host of different educational contexts around the world. However, despite its frequency, it is mostly out of public view and represents a less visible type of discourse. While feedback—and assessment more generally—is clearly widely studied in pedagogy, this type of communicative practice has been less studied by linguists, despite there being a range of interesting questions deserving to be posed, especially related to the pragmatics of feedback.

The empirical material used in the current study is teacher written feedback on student written work in tertiary education. The study approaches reflexivity in teacher feedback through the notion of ‘metadiscourse’, defined here as reflexive linguistic expressions that refer to the discourse itself as discourse or as language. More specifically, it refers to linguistic material which reveals the writer’s and reader’s (or speaker’s and hearer’s) presence in the text, either by referring to the organisation of the text or by commenting on the text in other ways (cf. Ädel, 2006). Metadiscourse has been studied in academic types of discourse specifically, focussing on written texts and the linguistic resources they typically draw on to interact with the audience even in a monologic text. What metadiscourse has been conceptualised as contributing to is “organis[ing] a discourse or the writer’s stance toward either its content or the reader” (Hyland, 2000: 109). Teacher feedback has not been studied from the perspective of metadiscourse, even though it exemplifies a very interesting type of writer–reader ‘interaction’—one that is more truly interactive than texts written for a largely anonymous audience. In feedback, there is a specific recipient, who is typically urged to act in specific ways, *vis-à-vis* the specific text that the feedback is dependent on and responds to. It has become clear over the course of the current project that looking at metadiscourse through the lens of this new type of data has provided very useful insights into the theory of metadiscourse—in fact, it has prompted the revision of the author’s model of metadiscourse.

If we consider the work that has been done on metadiscourse in academic discourse in English, we will find that it is predominantly highly visible and high-prestige genres in academia that have been investigated thus far (see e.g. Hyland, 2005). Importantly, these genres are written and at the highly monologic end of the continuum and it can be argued that this has very much shaped our view of what metadiscourse is: prototypically, it is seen as a way for the writer to signal the structure of the text to the reader and to make his or her communicative intentions clear (this written bias is found in most definitions of metadiscourse). This is acceptable, if we wish to see metadiscourse as a phenomenon mostly restricted to written academic discourse of the type that is published and where there are no possibilities for real-life interaction between discourse participants. However, if we take a broader perspective on metadiscourse as a linguistic phenomenon potentially realised in all sorts of discourse, we need to expand the scope to other genres. There has been some work to date analyzing metadiscourse also in spoken academic discourse (e.g. Ädel, 2010; Luukka, 1994; Mauranen, 2001, 2012), for example, but more diverse input is needed to develop our thinking about metadiscourse.

The overarching research question of the study is ‘How visible are the writer, the reader and the current text itself² in teacher feedback?’. To answer this question, overall frequency of metadiscourse is investigated as well as the distribution of different types of metadiscourse. By way of bringing out what is potentially unique or special about the feedback data, comparison with other types of data is employed, to answer the research question ‘To what extent is the use of metadiscourse in the feedback material similar to and/or different from the use of metadiscourse in other academic genres?’. For this purpose, the study compares the feedback data to both written and spoken types of academic discourse (university student proficient L1 writing, university student L2 writing, and university lectures), from the author’s own previous studies.³ Important theoretical implications of the study are discussed, especially from the perspective of how the findings affect our conceptualisation of metadiscourse and the three main components of the speech event: the writer/speaker, the reader/audience and the text. A third research question concerns the extent to which there are differences in the distribution of metadiscourse across the five teachers whose feedback is included in the study. Even if the sample studied is not in any way representative of feedback—a highly contextualised practice—we still need to consider the methodologically important issue of dispersion and check whether the speakers included behave similarly linguistically. This is important also given that feedback is often characterised as highly individualised.

2. Metadiscourse in the reflexive approach

As is the case with most, if not all, linguistic phenomena, there are different views on how to define and delimit metadiscourse. Two strands that have emerged in the study of metadiscourse have been referred to as the ‘interactive’ and the ‘reflexive’ approaches (e.g. Ädel & Mauranen, 2010; Flowerdew, 2015:19–20). The interactive⁴ approach—which is broader

² The text itself is made visible for example when the discourse participants explicitly comment on such things as the style of the discourse or the semantics of words and phrases used. Early accounts of metadiscourse often characterised it as “discourse about discourse”.

³ This restriction was imposed to ensure that the unit of analysis be held constant, as definitions of metadiscourse vary to quite an extent in the literature.

⁴ Readers who are familiar with the distinction between ‘interactive’ and ‘interactional’ resources (e.g. Thompson & Thetela, 1995) may be confused by the use of the term ‘interactive’ here, but both aspects are intended to be included under this label.

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