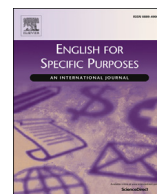


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Metadiscursive nouns: Interaction and cohesion in abstract moves



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ABSTRACT

Research article abstracts have become an important genre in all knowledge fields, playing a crucial role in persuading readers, and reviewers, to take the time to go further into the paper itself. This promotional aspect of abstracts is well known, but less discussed is the ways writers are able to skilfully foreground their claim, package the information in a cohesive and coherent manner, and craft a disciplinary stance. One such rhetorical strategy is what we are calling *metadiscursive nouns*. Nouns such as *fact*, *analysis*, and *belief* are common in abstracts and do a great deal of rhetorical work for writers. In this paper we explore the interactive and interactional functions they perform in the rhetorical moves of 240 research abstracts from six disciplines. The results show how these nouns are frequently used to frame and coherently manage arguments while, at the same time, helping writers to claim disciplinary legitimacy and promote the value and relevance of their research to their discipline.

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1. Introduction

Social interaction in academic writing has attracted considerable attention in recent years, with features such as citation, hedges, first person pronouns, boosters and directives among those investigated (e.g. Hyland, 2004, 2005; Biber, 2006). One familiar feature which has been less fully explored, however, is the use of nouns to promote the writer's persuasive goals. While a substantial literature has discussed the importance of nouns in organising cohesive discourse (e.g. Flowerdew & Forest, 2015; Francis, 1986) we propose a more rhetorical function for them. In this paper we introduce a category we call *metadiscursive nouns* (such as *fact*, *analysis*, and *belief*) and illustrate the interactive and interactional functions they perform in the moves of 240 research article abstracts from six disciplines. In doing so we hope to show that nouns do not merely contribute to the objectified and abstract character of academic prose (e.g. Halliday, 2003; Sword, 2012), but play important interpersonal and rhetorical functions. More specifically, we attempt to demonstrate how these nouns help writers organise their arguments and persuade disciplinary peers of their claims to achieve communicative purposes in different moves. Finally we suggest some pedagogical implications of the work.

2. Metadiscursive nouns

The term metadiscursive noun was first used by Francis (1986) interchangeably with “anaphoric nouns”, referring to the cohesive function of nouns, but giving no explanation of their metadiscursive functions. We define metadiscursive noun as

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those which refer to the organisation of the discourse or the writers' attitude towards it. We see them as a subset of abstract nouns and distinguished from them by their unspecific semantic meaning. So, while the meaning of an abstract noun is constant across contexts (e.g. *society*, *democracy*) metadiscursive nouns have both this constant meaning and a variable, pragmatic meaning which depends on contextual lexicalisation. They assist writers point to material somewhere in the current context and shape how the reader should understand that material, thus performing both stance-taking (interactional) and cohesive (interactive) roles in a text.

Thus, these nouns enable writers to organise cohesive discourse, express viewpoints on content and interact with readers as members of a particular community. They have metadiscursive functions, as we can see in (1) to (5). In all examples, metadiscursive noun is bolded, with specifying information underlined and the demonstrative determiner italicised.

(1) This research examines the **notion** that guilt, the negative emotion stemming from a failure to meet a self-held standard of behavior, leads to preferences ... to the original source of the guilt.

[Marketing]

(2) We show that *these* opposing **tendencies** cause environmental entanglement through superpositions of adiabatic and antiadiabatic oscillator states, which then stabilizes the spin coherence against strong dissipation. *This insight* motivates a fast-converging variational coherent-state expansion...

[Physics]

(3) The **aim** of *this study* was to determine if differences in coronary endothelial function are observed between ... magnetic resonance imaging in response to cold pressor stress, an established endothelium-dependent vasodilatory stress.

[Medicine]

(4) According to the traditional **view**, children can learn a L2 to a level indistinguishable from that of native speakers.

[Applied linguistics]

(5) Hence, indirect sensitivity accounts cannot fulfill their purpose of explaining our intuitions about skepticism. *This* is the hard **problem** for indirect sensitivity accounts.

[Philosophy]

“Notion”, “tendency”, “insight”, “aim”, “study”, “view” and “problem” are metadiscursive nouns and their vagueness is remedied by immediate reference. To explain it is unclear what “notion” refers to in (1) until it is specified cataphorically in the subsequent complement clause, while “tendencies” and “insight” in (2) are specified anaphorically in the previous discourse. Although “study” in (3) is also attended by demonstrative *this* (like “insight” in 2), we do not see this as a retrospective marker but one which signals prospectively towards the research that follows in the full article. Nouns such as *paper*, *article* and *essay* work in a similar way, and this is more typical in abstracts than other genres (see Flowerdew & Forest, 2015; Francis, 1986). “View” in (4) is slightly different as it relies on readers summoning a referent from their background knowledge.

The specification of meaning provides the necessary referent for the metadiscursive noun, while the metadiscursive noun indicates how the specifics are intended to be understood in relation to the surrounding discourse. Metadiscursive nouns typically preview or review material, linking current with other information, whether inside or outside the text. This helps writers to create more cohesive arguments and thus helps readers gain a better comprehension of the text. These examples also exhibit the four most frequent lexico-grammatical patterns in which metadiscursive nouns are used, that is, *N + post-nominal clause* (as in example 1); *Determiner + N* (2; 4); *N + be + complement clause* (3); *Determiner + be + N* (5) respectively (Schmid, 2000). We can, therefore, see metadiscursive nouns as a rhetorical feature of textual interaction, in that they recognise the presence of readers, acknowledge their knowledge-base and appeal to them as discourse participants. We name them metadiscursive nouns to emphasise that these nouns set up writer–reader interactions in texts in ways similar to metadiscourse, performing both interactive and interactional functions. The former referring to the writer's management of a cohesive flow of information to guide readers through the text, and the latter concerning his or her explicit interventions to comment on and evaluate material (Hyland, 2005).

In the *interactive* dimension, metadiscursive nouns either refer backward, to encapsulate earlier material into the ongoing discourse (see the anaphoric use of “tendency” and “insight” in example 2), or forward to predict forthcoming information (see the cataphoric use of “notion” in example 1 and “aim” in example 3). They therefore work to signal the relationships between parts of the text and address readers' potential processing needs. This interactive function suggests a writer's awareness of a participating audience and the ways the text must accommodate its probable knowledge, rhetorical expectations and processing abilities. The writer's purpose here is “to shape and constrain a text to meet the needs of particular readers, setting out arguments so that they will recover the writer's preferred interpretations and goals” (Hyland, 2005, p. 49).

The *interactional* dimension highlights the writer's stance and attempts to engage with readers. Metadiscursive nouns here perform evaluative and engaging roles, either expressing writer's stance to the message or involving readers as discourse participants through appeal to shared knowledge and awareness of rhetorical practices. For example, “insight” in (2) indicates the writer's positive acknowledgment of the prior clausal message while “problem” in (5) expresses the writer's negative attitude towards the underlined material information in the above sentence. “View” in (4), on the other hand, engages readers by orientating them towards a conventional wisdom. Here, the writers' goal is “to make his or her views explicit and to

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