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The use of metadiscourse and persuasion: An analysis of first year university students' timed argumentative essays

Victor Ho ^{a,*}, Cissy Li ^b^a The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, AG 428, Hung Hom, Hong Kong^b Hong Kong Baptist University, OEE 1202, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to obtain a better understanding of the way first-year university students construct persuasive arguments in writing by exploring their pattern of use of metadiscourse. A total of 181 argumentative essays produced by first-year university students while completing a timed writing task were analyzed by drawing upon the interpersonal model of metadiscourse as the analytical framework. The findings indicate that, while writers of low-rated essays differ significantly from those of high-rated ones only in the use of a few metadiscourse markers, they have problems using metadiscourse in constructing convincing arguments. Our study suggests that direct and explicit teaching and learning of metadiscourse should be implemented at both secondary education and at the early stage of tertiary education to enable students to use metadiscourse effectively in creating convincing arguments in English academic writing.

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1. Introduction

The use of metadiscourse in academic writing has gained considerable research attention (e.g. [Aull & Lancaster, 2014](#); [Hyland & Tse, 2004](#); [Hyland, 2004](#); [Lee & Deakin, 2016](#); [Mur Duenās, 2007](#)). This may be attributed to the fact that metadiscourse can function to persuade by making appeals to rationality, credibility and character, and emotions ([Hyland, 2005a](#)). In other words, with metadiscourse, writers can realize the three means of persuasion as suggested by [Aristotle \(2010\)](#) – logos, ethos, and pathos.

Metadiscourse has been construed and defined in different ways. For example, it is regarded as resources that convey a secondary level of meaning of a text in that it helps readers to “connect, organize, interpret, evaluate, and develop attitudes towards the materials” ([Vande Kopple, 2002](#), p. 93). That is, it does not contribute to the propositional meaning – the primary level of a text. The construal of metadiscourse as non-contributory towards the propositional meaning of a text is strengthened by [Mauranan's \(1993\)](#) non-integrative approach to metadiscourse. This approach makes a clear distinction between metadiscourse and proposition, and takes metadiscourse as only functioning to help the writer to organize a text. This metadiscourse-proposition distinction, however, has been criticized for its inability to explain the change in the propositional meaning of a text when metadiscourse is removed from it ([Hyland & Tse, 2004](#)). Instead of being secondary to the propositional meaning of a text, metadiscourse has been also regarded as linguistic resources writers could use to intrude in the text to interact with the reader ([Crismore & Farnsworth, 1990](#); [Hyland, 2005a](#)), and to shape their propositions to create

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: victor.ho@polyu.edu.hk (V. Ho), yxli@hkbu.edu.hk (C. Li).

texts that are coherent and convincing (Hyland & Tse, 2004). Metadiscourse, with which writers can interact and convince readers, is taken to be interpersonal in nature and defined as:

“[T]he cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community” (Hyland, 2005a, p. 37).

An interpersonal model of metadiscourse consisting of interactive and interactional categories has been proposed based on the definition (Hyland, 2005a, p. 49):

Interactive metadiscourse functioning to help to guide readers through the text:

- Transitions: express relations between main clause, e.g. *in addition, but, thus*
- Frame markers: refer to discourse acts, sequences or stages, e.g. *the aim is, in conclusion*
- Endophoric markers: refer to information in other parts of the text, e.g. *as mentioned above, in the next paragraph*
- Evidentials: refer to information from other texts, e.g. *XX argued that, according to YY*
- Code glosses: elaborate propositional meanings, e.g. *that is, for example, in other words*

Interactional metadiscourse functioning to involve readers in the text:

- Hedges: withhold commitment and open dialogue, e.g. *may, probably, I guess*
- Boosters: emphasize certainty or close dialogue, e.g. *certainly, in fact*
- Attitude markers: express writer's attitude to propositions, e.g. *(un)fortunately, (un)deniably*
- Self mentions: refer to the writer explicitly, e.g. *I, we (exclusive), our*
- Engagement markers: build relationship with readers explicitly, e.g. *you, we (inclusive), note ...*

Apart from the metadiscursive-propositional distinction and the writer-reader interaction, Hyland (2005a, p.38) has also emphasized that metadiscourse “refers only to relations which are internal to the discourse”, echoing Mauranen's (1993) and Ädel's (2006) notion of language reflexivity. In other words, metadiscourse should be restricted to those linguistic units that describe language, or text, but not the world outside of the text. The sentence below, taken from the data of the present study, will illustrate this point. Preceding this sentence is a series of propositions explaining why the writer objected to the suggestion that university students should take subjects unrelated to their chosen discipline.

“Such unnecessary requirement would consequently erode the unique value of universities and deprive those tertiary education receivers' autonomous right that they deserve. Therefore, the suggestion should never be put in practice. Therefore, the suggestion should never be put in practice.” [Essay 47]

There are altogether four potential metadiscourse markers: *Therefore, suggestion, should, and never*. The transition marker *Therefore* serves to link the preceding and succeeding texts by specifying that the two text units have a “consequence relation” (Hyland, 2005a, p. 50). The booster *never* serves to show the writer's desire to emphasize certainty and close down alternatives (Hyland, 2005a, p. 53). The hedge *should* expresses the writer's reservation about the proposition – the writer could have instead chosen to emphasize his/her commitment by using *must* in place of *should*. The noun *suggestion*, which could function metadiscursively if it refers to the act of suggesting made earlier or later in the text. However, ‘suggestion’ in fact refers to requiring students to take subjects unrelated to their chosen discipline, a suggestion that had been made in the real world before the student wrote the text. Therefore, it refers to a text-external entity and is not considered a metadiscourse marker in this study.

Research in the use of metadiscourse in academic writing has explored a range of academic genres including research articles, postgraduate dissertations, and undergraduate essays. These research studies show that persuasion in English academic discourse can be achieved by making the logical relationship between clauses explicit and signposting the development of the text with interactive metadiscourse in various academic genres: research articles (e.g. Khedri, Heng, & Ebrahimi, 2013; Hyland, 2007; Mur-Dueñas, 2011), postgraduate dissertations (e.g. Basturkmen & Randow, 2014; Hyland & Tse, 2004), and undergraduate academic essays (e.g. Li & Wharton, 2012). It also shows that interactional metadiscourse can be used to achieve persuasion by making the writer's stance clear and engaging the readers in these academic genres (e.g. Gillaerts & Van de Velde, 2010; Hong & Cao, 2014; Hyland, 2004; Lee & Deakin, 2016; Mur Duenäs, 2007).

Research in the language usage of undergraduate academic essays is another recent research focus. Yang and Sun (2012) studied how second-year and final-year students used cohesive devices in their essays. Some of the devices studied such as pronouns and conjunctions could in fact serve a metadiscursive function. It was found that the final-year students used more cohesive devices and demonstrated a higher level of accuracy than the second-year students. Wu (2007) discussed how first-year university students used boosters, hedges, and transitions (which corresponded respectively to concur/pronounce, entertain, and deny in Wu's study) to engage the reader. It was found that writers of high-rated scripts showed a higher frequency to moderate their hypotheses with hedges and to develop their points with transitions; and those of low-rated

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