



Reflexive metadiscourse in research articles in Spanish: Variation across three disciplines (Linguistics, Economics and Medicine)

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Abstract

This corpus-driven study focuses on reflexive metadiscourse, taking the non-integrative approach to the study of this phenomenon (Mauranen, 1993a; Ädel, 2006; Toumi, 2009). The aim of this research project was to compare the deployment of reflexive metadiscourse in research articles from three disciplines (Medicine, Economics and Linguistics) written in Spanish, by looking at the occurrence of certain lexico-grammatical features that signal it. In this mixed-methods study, which combines quantitative and qualitative results, the findings were derived from a close manual analysis of 238 recent empirical RAs from Spanish-medium journals indexed in Web of Science (the MEL-2011 corpus). The results indicate that scientific writers from Economics and Medicine employ significantly fewer metadiscourse markers than their counterparts in Linguistics. There are also statistically significant differences between the three corpora in terms of several functional categories: self-mentions, relational markers, directives, discourse verbs, and code glosses. This suggests that this scientific genre varies greatly in terms of the manner and the extent to which scholarly writers from different disciplines are expected to signal their authorial presence, interact with their audience and guide the reader.

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1. Introduction

Writing research papers is not reduced to a mere objective presentation of empirical findings. As Becher (1989) notes, the subject who writes in a discipline possesses a metaknowledge that enables him/her to handle, among other things: (1) implicit conventions regarding the conception of science or the application of the scientific method in their respective discipline, (2) specific discursive codes concerning how disciplinary knowledge is presented and the establishment of authority and (3) textual formulas designed to establish distance from or support other research within the discipline. Thus, writing in a particular discipline implies that the writer is aware of a number of aspects that make up the specific culture of their “academic tribe” and that go beyond the actual investigative skills such a scientist may possess. All aspects mentioned by Becher (1989) are related to the rhetoric that is characteristic of particular discourses of various scientific disciplines.

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Reflexive metadiscourse, or discourse reflexivity (Mauranen, 2010), is a feature of scientific prose. This discourse about the ongoing discourse (thus, its reflective nature) includes at least three aspects (Ädel, 2006): (1) how scholarly writers refer to themselves, (2) how they relate and speak to their audience, and (3) how they refer to their own texts. The first one involves the phenomenon of self-reference or explicit self-mentions by the author. In this respect, some studies of research articles (RAs henceforth) written in English have shown that in some disciplines it is customary for authors to use first-person pronouns (singular and plural) to refer to themselves, while in others a more impersonal style is favored (Hyland, 2005; Fløttum et al., 2006b), while some studies which have focused on English–Spanish intercultural or interlinguistic variation (Carciu, 2009; Sheldon, 2009; Williams, 2010; Lorés-Sanz, 2011a) have found differences between English L1 and Spanish L1 scientific writers in terms of the deployment of self-reference markers. The second aspect is related to the existence of relational markers, for example, directives and inclusive “we” of engagement through which the authors explicitly establish a relationship with the reader. Regarding this point, it has been pointed out that scientific writers across cultures and disciplines use directives at a different extent and with different purposes (Swales et al., 1998; Taki and Jafarpour, 2012) and the use of inclusive “we” varies greatly across disciplines (Harwood, 2005) and languages (Lafuente-Millán, 2013; Diani, 2014; Vassileva, 2014). The third aspect is realized through the use of metatext or textual clues left by the author in order to guide the reader through RAs. In relation to the latter, studies have shown that in terms of the use of metatext, English scientific prose is usually more friendly to the reader than its counterpart written in other languages, such as German (Siepmann, 2006), Finnish (Mauranen, 1993b), Norwegian (Fløttum et al., 2006b) or Spanish (Valero-Garcés, 1996). That is, scientists writing in English tend to pave over the route through the text to their readers. This is achieved through the inclusion of lexical–grammatical resources, for example, code glosses, endophoric markers (also known as previews and reviews), text connectives or connectors, action markers. Cross-disciplinary (Hyland, 2007; Pooresfahani et al., 2012) and cross-linguistic (Mauranen, 1993b; Valero-Garcés, 1996; Moreno, 1997; Blagojevic, 2004) studies, as well as some which take a doubly contrastive approach (Dahl, 2004; Fløttum et al., 2006b; Zarei and Mansoori, 2007), have found evidence of variation regarding the deployment of these metatextual features.

Evidence is mounting that the research article as a scientific genre varies greatly across disciplines in terms of metadiscourse markers (Myers, 1989; Hyland, 1998, 1999a,b, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2005; Hyland and Tse, 2004, 2005; Lindeberg, 2004; Fløttum et al., 2006a,b; Mur Dueñas, 2003; Dahl, 2008; Afros and Schryer, 2009; Bruce, 2009; Afros and Schryer, 2009; Abdi, 2011; Keshavarz and Kheirich, 2011; Khedri et al., 2013). There is also some evidence of interdisciplinary variation in scientific prose in Spanish (Beke, 2005; Cubo de Severino, 2005; Müller, 2007; Bolívar et al., 2010). Müller (2007) and García Negroni (2008), in particular, focus their study on cross-disciplinary variation of metadiscourse in research articles. However, both studies are limited by the use of qualitative methods and small corpora, which does not allow for the findings to be generalizable.

The aim of this study is to compare how the RAs of Linguistics, Economics and Medicine written in Spanish signal the presence of their authors and their interaction with the readers. These three disciplines have been chosen on account of the observation made by some authors (Fløttum et al., 2006a,b; Silver, 2006) that they are representative of the three main branches of science: humanities, social sciences and natural sciences, respectively. Assuming that each of these branches exhibits different epistemological traditions and research methodologies, that is different understandings of what qualifies as scientific knowledge and of how science is done (Tosi, 2010; Abdi, 2011), it seems reasonable to expect that the writers of RAs from these three disciplines would realize differently their identity as authors in their scientific texts (Flowerdew, 2013).

I believe that the relevance and novelty of this research project lies in the fact that it is, to the best of my knowledge, the first mixed-methods study of variation of metadiscourse (MD) across disciplines which uses a relatively large corpus of scientific texts written in Spanish (238 RAs). Likewise, there are a number of implications and applications of this study. First, the findings may contribute to a better understanding of how the different linguistic systems, cultures and disciplinary communities interact and influence the rhetorical choices made by scientific writers. Second, the proposed taxonomy of metadiscourse markers for scholarly writing in Spanish can make a contribution towards the semi-automatic interrogation of large corpora of Spanish texts. Third, and in terms of pedagogical implications, an inventory of metadiscursive markers may facilitate the modeling of this genre in pre-graduate and graduate composition programs in Spanish-medium universities, as well as the teaching of academic writing in SAP (Spanish for academic purposes) courses. Finally, it may be useful to authors of academic writing manuals.

The aim of this paper is to establish what kind of relationship is established between the writer, the text and the readership in Spanish RAs across three distinct disciplines, and how this is shown in lexico-grammatical choices, which is accomplished using the reflexive metadiscourse model.

The research questions of the study are as follows:

1. What are the lexico-grammatical features which signal metadiscourse in research articles written in Spanish from three disciplines (Medicine, Economics and Linguistics)? How can they be grouped?

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