How to explore academic writing from metadiscourse as an integrated framework of interpersonal meaning: three perspectives of analysis

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Abstract

The purpose of this contribution is to discuss the role of metadiscourse as an integrated framework for the study of interpersonal meaning in academic discourse. Metadiscourse refers to linguistic material in texts, whose main function is not to add propositional (or experiential) meaning but to help readers organize, interpret and evaluate information. This material does not simply support propositional content: it is the means by which propositional content is made coherent, intelligible, persuasive and convincing to a particular audience. Metadiscourse features are grouped into two macro-categories: interactive and interactional, which were previously referred to as textual and interpersonal, adopting the Hallidayan terms.

In this paper three perspectives for the exploration of interactional metadiscourse in academic articles and abstracts taken from different disciplines will be described: the intercultural, the interdisciplinary and the intergeneric. The first perspective is illustrated through the interlinguistic and intercultural contrast of research articles written in two different languages or cultural contexts: in Spanish in a national context and in English for an international readership. The second, interdisciplinary perspective will be shown through the contrast of research articles in English from different disciplines. With the third perspective the scope of the study will be widened in order to carry out inter-generic analyses of research articles and abstracts, as these may also yield relevant results.

Key words: metadiscourse, written academic discourse, interpersonality, intercultural, interdisciplinary and intergeneric perspectives.

Introduction

Academic discourse has traditionally been perceived as impersonal and objective. This view has gradually been replaced by a perception of academic writing as social engagement, involving interaction between writers and readers (Hyland, 2005a). Writers and readers negotiate their meanings, and they use interpersonal resources to organise texts coherently and to convey their personality, credibility, reader sensitivity and relationship to the message.

The group InterLAE shares this view of academic writing and it has as its main focus the analysis of interpersonality in academic language, more specifically, the exploration of the writer’s voice in the expression and communication of academic knowledge. The main research goals of the project are to explore the resources writers use in academic publications in English and Spanish to express their authorial selves and stance in several disciplines and to establish points of similarity and divergence both cross-linguistically and cross-disciplinarily, with the aim of furnishing scholars with appropriate writing tools.
Metadiscourse in academic texts

We approach the study of academic texts from the point of view of metadiscourse. Metadiscourse refers to those linguistic elements in the text through which writers and readers organise and evaluate their discourse. They also express their attitudes towards the content of their messages, thus establishing a particular relationship with their readers. Several definitions and taxonomies of metadiscourse have been proposed (Vande Kopple, 1985, 2002; Crismore and Fansworth, 1990; Markkanen et al., 1993; Luukka, 1994; Bunton, 1999; Hyland, 2000, 2005a; Hyland and Tse, 2004; Dafouz, 2003). Most scholars trying to define metadiscourse coincide in signalling that it refers to that linguistic material in the text, whose primary function is not to add propositional meaning, but, as Hyland (2005a: 39) says, “it is the means by which propositional content is made coherent, intelligible and persuasive to a particular audience.”

The most comprehensive framework for the study of metadiscourse is probably the one provided by Hyland (2000, 2005a), in which metadiscourse is defined as “the 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: 46). Metadiscourse offers a way of understanding the interpersonal resources writers use to present propositional material and therefore a means of investigating the distinctive features of different disciplinary and cultural communities. Metadiscourse features are grouped into two macro-categories: interactive and interactional. Interactive features are used to organise propositional information in ways that a projected target audience is likely to find coherent and convincing, whereas the interactional dimension concerns the ways writers conduct interaction by intruding and commenting on their message. These two macro-categories were previously referred to as textual and interpersonal, adopting the Hallidayan terms. The change of labels was put forward by Hyland (2004, 2005a), who claims that all metadiscourse is interpersonal “in that it takes account of reader’s knowledge, textual experiences, and processing needs […]” (Hyland and Tse 2004: 161).

Metadiscourse has been investigated in different genres: textbooks (Crismore, 1984, Hyland 2000), dissertations (Bunton, 1999), student essays (Markkanen et al., 1993) popularizations (Crismore and Fansworth, 1990), research articles (Mauranen, 1993; Luukka, 1994, Valero Garcés, 1996; Hyland, 1998a, 1999, 2000). It has also been investigated cross-culturally between English and Finnish (Markkanen et al., 1993; Mauranen, 1993) and between English and Spanish (Valero Garcés, 1996).

Corpus and methodology

So far our corpus consists of 100 abstracts in Applied Linguistics, 50 of them written in English and 50 written in Spanish, 24 research articles (RAs) in Business Management, 12 of them written in English and 12 written in Spanish. In order to explore the interdisciplinary perspective, we are using 96 RAs in English from four different disciplines (Business, Applied Linguistics, Urology and Food Technology). Our aim is to enlarge the corpus by including equivalent RAs in Spanish to those compiled so far, more abstracts in other disciplines in the two languages and texts of a different generic nature,
such as popular science articles or book reviews, again from different disciplines in the pair of languages or cultural contexts we are interested in.

All the articles and abstracts were selected at random from recent issues of high-impact international journals. To carry out the quantitative analysis, the concordance software Wordsmith Tools 4 was used. This was combined with a manual qualitative analysis of the examples.

**Three perspectives of analysis: intercultural, interdisciplinary and intergeneric**

Our perspective so far has been contrastive in a double sense. Some members of the research group analyse academic discourse interlinguistically and interculturally (that is, contrasting academic texts written in two different languages or cultural contexts: in Spanish in a national context and in English for an international readership), while some others analyse academic discourse interdisciplinarily (that is, contrasting academic texts in English from different disciplines). At present we are widening our scope in order to carry out deeper inter-generic analyses, as these may yield relevant results.

**The intercultural perspective**

It is one of the aims of our research project to look into how the frequency of use and distribution of metadiscourse features in different written academic genres may vary according to the cultural context in which the texts are written and published. A first analysis of the business management (BM) RAs in the two linguistic and cultural context seems to indicate that BM scholars publishing their RAs internationally in English make a greater use of those interactional features which indicate the writer’s stance (namely, hedges, boosters, attitude markers and self-mentions) (Hyland, 2005b) than Spanish ones. On the other hand, Spanish BM scholars tend to include more engaging features (especially reader pronouns) in their RAs than their international peers writing in English, involving the readers in their arguments as active participants in the negotiation of meaning and new scientific knowledge. The following examples illustrate how international BM scholars indicate their stance through the use of self-mentions, trying to convince the readership of the validity of their research and present it as a valid, meaningful contribution to the discipline.

*(Example 1)* This study contributes to acquisition research on two fronts. First, we develop a theoretical model that integrates resource picking and deployment as drivers of acquisition outcomes. Second, we test that model by including and comparing a range of potential contributors to acquisition outcomes as perceived by executives close to the transactions. We examine factors affecting satisfaction with acquisitions and achievement of certain key objectives for these transactions that are driven by resource picking, deploying, and the interaction between the two. *(Journal of Management 1-D)*

International BM scholars also very frequently indicate their stance by means of (1) boosters, expressing their certainty or closing alternatives (Hyland, 2005a) (examples 3 and 4), (2) hedges, expressing uncertainty and allowing for alternative voices and viewpoints opening up negotiation of meaning and space for possible oppositions to their claims (Hyland, 2005a) (example 5), (3) and attitude markers conveying importance,
relevance, agreement, surprise or other affective meanings (Hyland, 2005a) (examples 6 and 7):

(Example 2) Clearly, the resources of the late mover do have an impact on its chances for survival, but not on the level of market penetration achieved by those who survive. Finally, Tables 3 and 4 provide strong support for Hypothesis 3. (Strategic Management Journal 2-R)

(Example 3) But we also think it possible that the process generating attention to ethics in MNCs may involve factors other than concern for opportunistic behavior and agency losses, factors that are more likely to operate at the level of managerial cognition and behavior rather than formal organizational structure. (Journal of International Management 3-D)

(Example 4) Given that a large number of firms attempt to enter well after the market has begun to grow, it is particularly surprising that few studies have attempted to explain the differences in the levels of market penetration that has been observed among these late entrants. (Strategic Management Journal 2-I)

Although Spanish BM scholars also use equivalent stance features in their RAs, they do not use them to the same extent. Their stance is not as explicitly coded in their texts. It seems that, given the smaller, more homogeneous readership Spanish BM RAs are intended to and the lower levels of competitiveness to have them published in this context, they do not need to establish their stance as clearly as their peers addressing an international readership. On the contrary, they more commonly bring the smaller community into the text, making a greater use of inclusive pronouns than their international peers (examples 8 and 9).

(Example 5) De esta manera si somos capaces de definir con fines analíticos, qué es actual y qué es nuevo, entonces estaremos en disposición de situar dicha innovación. (Revista Europea de Dirección y Economía de la Empresa 2-I)

This difference in the extent of inclusion of stance and engaging features is apparent in Figure 1, in which the number of exclusive first person plural adjectives and pronouns referring to the author(s) —the most explicit way through which they can indicate their stance— and the number of reader inclusive pronouns —bringing the reader into the text— are compared in the two sub-corpora:

Figure 1. Normalised frequency of exclusive and inclusive pronouns and adjectives in the BM RA comparable corpus
As pointed out above, the preference for either promotional or engaging interactional features of metadiscourse can be accounted for bearing in mind the different national or big contexts (Atkinson, 2004) in which the RAs are written. In addition, it could be partly explained taking into account the particular rhetorical preferences of Anglo-Americans, -which seem to have been adopted in international academic written communication (at least in some disciplines)- and of Spaniards. Whereas the former are usually said to be highly individualistic cultures, favouring the ‘I’ perspective and negative politeness strategies, the latter tend to be viewed as a collective culture, favouring features that display in-group communality and positive politeness strategies. In accordance to these rhetorical differences, academic writers might need to adjust their writing conventions when addressing a different (inter)national readership in terms of the frequency of use of interactional features for their texts to be accepted as valuable contributions.

A first approximation to the comparable corpus of BM RAs has revealed differences in the frequency of use of interactional features. Besides carrying out detailed qualitative analyses of the different interactional metadiscursive categories, it is our aim to unveil what the most common realisations in each category are in the two linguistic and cultural contexts. Further, these same intercultural analyses will be carried out in RAs from other disciplines and in texts of a different generic nature.

The interdisciplinary perspective

The social-constructionist belief that the text is shaped by the social interactions and epistemological practices that prevail in the author’s culture has served as the starting assumption for a large stock of cross-cultural research. Nevertheless, a number of researchers (see for example Becher and Trowler, 2001; Atkinson, 2004; Hyland, 2000; inter alia) have argued that disciplinary communities may well be considered as cultural entities with distinct internal norms and practices which have to be acquired by its members. Moreover, some research evidence indicates that these disciplinary conventions significantly constrain writing style and that sometimes these conventions may have an even greater effect on the writer’s choices than national or “big” cultures (as claimed by Breivega et al., 2003; Hyland, 1998, 2002; inter alia.). In keeping with this hypothesis, we turned our attention to the analysis of the possible variations in the use of several interpersonal metadiscourse strategies across the four disciplines in our corpus.

One of the aspects covered by our analysis was the degree of writer presence occurring in the texts. In the literature (Hyland, 2001, 2002; Kuo, 1999; Harwood, 2005a) exclusive personal pronouns and possessives, as well as self-citations are considered as key strategic resources appearing in academic texts in order to increase the degree of writer presence. As can be seen in Figure 2, researchers in BM appeared as the most willing to project a strong authorial identity in their texts by using first person pronouns. What is perhaps more surprising was that urologists constructed a stronger authorial voice than that of applied linguists as they often tended to use personal pronouns for explaining the methodological decisions or for providing hypotheses and results. Finally, it should be noted that in food technology (F.Tech.) markers of the writer’s presence were very rare.
A very different pattern to the one described above was discovered for the use of self-citation in the same disciplines. The references to one’s own work were ostensibly more frequent in the hard knowledge disciplines, with the highest values being found in the medical RAs. In contrast, applied linguists and, particularly, business experts seemed to be more reluctant to promote their previous work by means of self-citations. In fact, in BM extensive self-citation seems to be considered an objectionable practice, as it was explicitly discouraged in some of the guidelines for publication.

Epistemic modality markers (EMMs) are also essential dialogic devices used by writers to negotiate with readers the truth value of their own propositions. By means of hedges, writers strategically “tone-down” (Lewin, 2005) their commitment to the proposition in order to comply with disciplinary expectations and to achieve a number of rhetorical goals (modesty, self-protection, face-redress, etc). In our corpus, hedges were far more frequent in BM than in any of the other disciplines analysed. Moreover, researchers in BM used a wide variety of hedging resources, including modals, lexical verbs, nouns and adjectives. Even though hedges were also found quite frequently in the other subcorpora, the significantly higher use of these strategies in BM indicates that in this discipline there exist very specific epistemological norms. In accordance with these norms, writers are expected to put forward tentative hypotheses to explain possible connections between a set of variables. As a result, writers resort to the use of down-tuning devices which clearly signal to the reader the provisional status of the assertions made by the writer. It could also be tentatively argued that some of these markers actually function as “real hedges” (Mauranen, 1997; Banks, 1994), inasmuch as they are not used for reasons of modesty or politeness but in order to accurately represent the strength of the author’s evidence.
Boosters can also be treated as types of EMMs insofar as they are used to qualify, in fact to increase, the speakers’ commitment to their propositional material. By using boosters, writers project an image of aptitude and confidence which often helps to highlight the significance of the findings presented. Moreover, some boosters (e.g. obviously, clearly) can be used dialogically, because they allow writers to bring the reader into the text by strategically drawing on shared knowledge. Boosters appeared most frequently in BM. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the modal auxiliary will accounted for a very large percentage of all the boosters found in BM. It could therefore be concluded that, despite the high incidence of boosters in this discipline, the use of some of these markers in BM is to a large extent conventional and that little rhetorical effect may spring from their use. Unexpectedly, the incidence of these emphatic forms in the medical texts was rather high, in fact almost as high as that in applied linguistics, a discipline which has traditionally been considered as a far more dialogical and subjective than the scientific or technical areas.

Our results do not support the traditional assumption that we can draw a distinction between hard and soft knowledge disciplines in terms of the impersonality and the objectivity of their knowledge base. While the RAs in F.Tech show a clearly impersonal voice which is consistent with the positivist portrayal of science, writers of medical RAs tend to project a very powerful authorial identity in their texts by means of personal pronouns, self-citations and emphatic markers. In doing so, urologists represent themselves as competent and original members of the discipline and they prepare the ground for the publication of their work. These results are therefore in accordance with Kjorup’s suggestion (1996: 18, in Dahl, 2005) that medicine may be considered as a branch of science that is separate from the rest of the natural sciences.

To summarise, disciplinary affiliation appears to be a very significant determinant in the use of interpersonal metadiscourse strategies. By studying the frequency and variety of interpersonal resources the analyst may bring to light the cultural attributes and identities that are preferred in each discipline. Moreover, data obtained from this type of analysis may be used for the elaboration of writing materials in order to help students acquire the rhetoric that is characteristic of their own disciplines.
The intergeneric perspective

Most of the contrastive work on metadiscourse in academic writing has focused on the analysis of how cultures and disciplines influence writers’ choices at the time of constructing their authorial self. However, the aim to be recognised as a competent and well-informed member of a certain disciplinary community might also demand the mastering of the metadiscoursal uses which are appropriate to certain social practices. The exploration of metadiscourse from the point of view of genres in contrast undoubtedly contributes with a complementary perspective to the ones mentioned before.

The corpus we have compiled so far has allowed us to start drawing conclusions from the comparison between two research genres: the RA abstract and the RA itself, both within the discipline of applied linguistics. It is now generally agreed that RAs are the outcome of a complex process, a negotiation in which writers anticipate readers’ and reviewers’ reactions. As Hyland (2005a: 90) observes, “[it] remains the primary genre of the academy: the site where names are made, knowledge authenticated, rewards allocated and disciplinary authority exercised”.

Without underplaying the promotional role that the RA may have as a textual construction, abstracts are increasingly becoming a way of assuring that the attempts to promote writers’ research are given space in the disciplinary world to which they belong. The increasing information flow in the scientific community in the last decades has made necessary the development of a genre whose main function is to channel that flow of information. The close relationships and links between the RA and its abstract confer them the quality of what Swales has come to call a “genre set” in academic writing, “that part of the total genre network that a particular individual engages in, either or both receptively or productively, as part of his or her normal occupational or institutional practice” (Devitt, 1991 in Swales, 2004: 20). The exploration of such links can be pursued, for instance, by means of the analysis of interactional metadiscoursal features.

Along these lines, our study has focused on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the interactional metadiscoursal category of self-mention and, more specifically, on the strategic use of first person pronouns I and exclusive we, as indicators of the writers’ desire to project a competent authorial self and persuade readers of the validity of their claims.

Although still in its first stages, the analysis of the data yielded by the comparison of corpora from two different academic genres in the same discipline seems to indicate that the use of first person personal pronouns as realisations of self-mentions is more frequent in abstracts than in RAs. Also as a preliminary conclusion, it could be claimed that writers in single-authored articles tend to construct for themselves an “I-persona” in the abstract, whereas it is a “we-persona” that they project themselves from in the RA. If frequency of use were the only parameter to be taken into account, we could easily conclude that academic writers tend to show a much more stronger self in abstracts than in RAs, because they use more self-mentions and because they do so by means of a much more “risky” I, probably due to the fact that abstracts frequently are the only chance academics have of showing and promoting their work, and in that sense, writers
need to take advantage of any “marketing tactics” (Harwood, 2005b) they can take hold of.

However, a look into the discourse functions pronouns fulfil in each genre casts a different light: the I used in abstracts is the one Tang and John (1999) refer to as “architect of the text and recounter of the research”. The use of the personal pronoun does not reveal much powerful authorial presence, and the author can commit to it without much risk. Its function is rather one of marking transitions between steps or moves in the text and, in that sense, they are more interactive than interactional resources, as illustrated in the following examples:

(Example 6) This article describes […]. I first provide an overview of the method and its role in applied linguistics research […]. I examine the macro- and micro-level contexts of communication within one content-area course. I focus on the discourse and interactional features associated with teacher-led whole-class discussions, […]. I conclude with a poststructural commentary on the ethnography of communication. (Applied Linguistics)

(Example 7) In this paper, I consider the semantics of a modifier infinitive in English, […]. I argue that the semantics of this infinitive (a Telic Clause) derives from the properties of the predicate which heads it (TELOS). I characterize TELOS, within a Davidsonian event semantics, as a pure relation between events […] I explore the conditions on reference which apply to TELOS. […] (Journal of Linguistics)

The use of we in RAs is more related to the projection of writers as “opinion holders” (Tang and John, 1999), who have to elaborate an argument and express results and claims, which involves committing themselves to a particular position, thus exposing themselves more clearly to potential criticism. In that sense, it reveals a much more powerful authorial presence than the use of I in abstracts, as the following examples show:

(Example 8) Then, the authors operationalized a measure of this construct which they call the bilingual preference ratio, or BPR. We showed that through ages 10:8 (twins) and 12:8 (the brother), the context with the greatest influence on the children's propensity to speak either English or French in a bilingual home is the linguistic community within which they are immersed. (Applied Linguistics)

(Example 9) Trying to make a distinction between the twins' audio-taped speech proved too difficult. However, we believe that it makes sense conceptually to view the twins together. (Applied Linguistics)

Even considering that our approach to genres in contrast is still in its prime, we can already conclude that the same metadiscoursal features may have conventional and institutionalised uses which vary from genre to genre, which reveals that competent members of a certain discipline community use metadiscoursal devices differently, in terms of frequency and function, depending on the generic nature of the text they need to write.

Concluding remarks

In recent years, researchers have become aware of the fact that differences in the use of metadiscourse should be understood not only in relation to the national culture of the writer, but also in relation to the genre and the immediate discourse community to which
the text is addressed. That is why we have adopted these three perspectives of analysis, which we have illustrated in this paper.

Our preliminary results seem to prove that metadiscourse choices are, not only sensitive to a number of interactional elements of the “big” culture, but also of the “small” cultures (the disciplines) with which they interact. The study of the comparable corpus of BM RAs in English and Spanish has revealed differences in the frequency of use of interactional features and what the most common realisations in each category are in the two linguistic and cultural contexts. Disciplinary affiliation, on the other hand, appears to be a very significant determinant in the use of interpersonal metadiscourse strategies, in RAs from the four disciplines we examined. Finally, the exploration of metadiscourse from the point of view of genres in contrast seems to point out in the following direction: the same metadiscoursal features may have conventional and institutionalised uses which vary from genre to genre. That means that there are striking differences, in terms of frequency and function, in the way competent members of a certain disciplinary community use metadiscoursal devices. Such fundamental differences both distinguish the genres and help to explain the variations in metadiscourse use.

References


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Notes

1. The research group InterLAE, coordinated by Dr. Ignacio Vázquez Orta, is based at the Department of English and German Studies at the University of Zaragoza (Spain). We are indebted to the Aragonese Government (DGA2006-H21 INTERLAE) and the Ministry of Education and Science (HUM2005-03646) for their financial support.

2. Following Hyland’s proposal (2002, 2005) the inclusive we has not been considered here, as it is taken to be a realisation of a different metadiscoursal category: the engagement marker.