The importance of studying metadiscourse

William J. Vande Kopple
(Professor, Calvin College, USA)
vkop@calvin.edu

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Abstract

This essay focuses on metadiscourse, a name for elements of texts that convey meanings other than those that are primarily referential. The essay provides some theoretical background to the study of metadiscourse, briefly reviews a taxonomy of metadiscourse, and explores four reasons why the study of metadiscourse is interesting and important: (a) Such study shows how intricately structured language is; (b) Such study opens up intriguing questions about ethics and language use; (c) Such study reveals differences in how metadiscourse is used in similar texts in different languages; (d) And such study provides reasons why metadiscourse deserves a special place in second-language instruction.

Keywords: Metadiscourse; pedagogy; language use; ethics; ESL/EFL.

Metadiscourse: Theoretical background

In the last several years, few elements of language have elicited more study from scholars in various related academic fields than have elements that can be classified as metadiscourse. Scholars involved in the study of metadiscourse represent fields such as discourse analysis, linguistics, applied linguistics, pragmatics, rhetoric, and second-language theory and pedagogy. And the languages in which they have focused on metadiscourse are numerous; in his 2005 book *Metadiscourse: Exploring Interaction in Writing*, Ken Hyland (2005) refers to studies of metadiscourse in at least eleven different languages, ranging from Arabic through Iranian to Vietnamese.

The term *metadiscourse* is closely related to terms such as *metatalk* (cf. *metalanguage* and *metacommunication*), which some researchers in conversational analysis use to name the language people employ to talk about language (cf. Schiffrin, 1980). In my work, I have focused mainly on written language, and I have used *metadiscourse* to designate elements of texts that convey meanings other than those that are primarily referential.

In describing such meanings, I follow Halliday (1973), who has shown that when people use language, they usually work toward fulfilling three macro-functions. They try to give expression to their experience, to interact with their audience,

and to organize their expressions into cohesive discourses that their addressees can make coherent sense of. In other words, Halliday (1973) asserts that people communicate with messages that are integrated expressions of three different kinds of meaning, which he calls ideational, interpersonal, and textual.

Linguistic elements that convey ideational meaning "are concerned with the content of language, its function as a means of the expression of our experience, both of the external world and of the inner world of our own consciousness" (Halliday, 1973, p. 58). Some examples of these elements in clauses are those that express transitivity. The most accessible labels for these are identical to those found in many case grammars, such as "agent," "process," and "goal."

Elements that convey interpersonal meaning are concerned with "language as the mediator of role, including all that may be understood by the expression of our own personalities and personal feelings on the one hand, and forms of interaction and social interplay with other participants in the communication situation on the other hand" (Halliday, 1973, p. 58). These elements show how a person steps into the rhetorical situation and tries to affect others; these elements carry essentially social meanings. In clauses, some of these elements indicate choices of mood; others are some of the modal verbs.

Finally, elements within the textual set have "an enabling function, that of creating text, which is language in operation as distinct from strings of words or isolated sentences and clauses. It is this component that enables the speaker to organize what he [or she] is saying in such a way that it makes sense in context and fulfills its function as a message" (Halliday, 1973, p. 58).

What I up to this point have labeled *referential meaning* is equivalent to what Halliday (1973) calls *ideational meaning*. And I suggest that kinds of metadiscourse convey interpersonal or textual meanings. Interpersonal metadiscourse helps writers express their personalities, reveal their evaluations of and attitudes toward ideational material, show what role in the communication situation they are choosing, and indicate how they hope readers will respond to the ideational material. Textual metadiscourse helps writers show how they relate bits of ideational material within a text and how that text makes sense in a particular situation or situations.

What this analysis suggests is that as we write, we generally proceed on more than one level (cf. Williams, 1981, p. 47). On one level, we expand ideational material. On the levels of metadiscourse, we do not expand ideational material but help our readers connect, organize, interpret, evaluate, and develop attitudes toward that material. Thus, although a well-formed text is, strictly speaking, an integrated expression of three kinds of meaning, there is a sense in which what I have called metadiscourse is discourse about discourse.

Kinds of metadiscourse

In 2002, I offered a taxonomy of metadiscourse that included six main categories (Vande Kopple, 2002):

1. Text Connectives: These show readers how the parts of texts are connected to one another and how texts are organized.

Specific examples of these are elements that indicate sequences (*first, next, in the third place*) as well as those that indicate logical or temporal relationships (*consequently, at the same time*). Also included with the connectives are reminders about material presented earlier in texts (*as we saw in Chapter One*) and statements about forthcoming material (*as we shall see in the next chapter*). Finally, sometimes writers use what Williams calls *topicalizers* (*as for*, *with regard to, in connection with*). These are words that "focus attention on a particular phrase as the main topic of a sentence, paragraph, or whole section . . ." (p. 50).

2. Code glosses: These "help readers grasp the appropriate meanings of elements in texts" (Vande Kopple, 1985, p. 84). Sometimes we judge that we should define a word or phrase for our readers. Or sometimes we signal that there is a problem with the ordinary interpretation of a word; we use expressions such as *so-called* or *what some people call* (cf. Stubbs, 1986, p. 13). At other times, we signal how strictly or loosely we wish readers to take our words—we use expressions like *strictly speaking* or *technically* to signal strict or technical interpretations, and expressions like *sort of* (cf. Aijmer, 1984) and *roughly speaking* to signal loose interpretations. At still other times, we predict that readers might be having trouble interpreting passages, and we signal that we will re-phrase: *I'll put it this way* or *What I mean to say is*.
3. Illocution Markers: With these we "make explicit to our readers what speech or discourse act we are performing at certain points in texts" (Vande Kopple, 1985, p. 84). For example, we can use elements such as *I hypothesize that, to sum up, we claim that, I promise to*, and *for example*. Further, we can modify the amount of force that many illocution markers and the acts they signal have. For instance, we might add a modal verb to a direct request: *I must ask that you*. All elements that attenuate the force of speech acts can be called *mitigators* (cf. Fraser, 1980, p. 342). On the other hand, we can increase the force of certain speech acts with boosters such as *enthusiastically* and *most sincerely*.
4. Epistemology Markers: Several kinds of metadiscourse are linked in the overarching function of indicating some stance on our part toward the epistemological status of the ideational material we convey. One stance has to do with how committed we are to the truth of ideational material. Sometimes we are cautious, and we signal that caution with what I call *shields* (such as *it is possible that* and *perhaps*). Sometimes we as writers

"underscore what we really believe—or would like our reader to think we believe" (Williams 49) by using what are called *emphatics* (such as *without a doubt* and *most certainly*). A second kind of stance that we can take with regard to the epistemological status of ideational material has to do with the "kinds of evidence" (Anderson, 1986, p. 273) or bases we have for that material. Chafe (1986) notes that there are several different bases we might have for ideational material, from our personal beliefs (*I believe that*) through sensory experience (*it feels like*) to what we hear from others (*the professor told me that*).

5. Attitude Markers: The function of the fifth kind of metadiscourse is to help us reveal what attitude we have toward ideational material. To express such attitudes, for example, we can use adverbs such as *fortunately*, parenthetical expressions such as *I regret* and *I rejoice*, and clauses such as *I am grateful that*.
6. Commentary: The final kind of metadiscourse in my 2002 taxonomy is commentary, with which we address readers directly, often appearing to draw them into an implicit dialogue. For example, we can comment on their probable moods, views, or reactions to our ideational material (*some of you will be amazed that*) or even recommend a mode of reading (*You might wish to skip to the next chapter*).

In *Metadiscourse: Exploring Interaction in Writing*, which is probably the best place now for those interested in metadiscourse to become oriented to it and its study, Ken Hyland offers a somewhat different taxonomy from mine. Here it is not my goal to try to reconcile these two taxonomies or expand upon them. Rather, I would like to devote a few pages to some thoughts about why the study of metadiscourse is so interesting and important. And I am hoping that these thoughts will stimulate others to add to them in the future.

The study of metadiscourse: Aspects of its interest and importance

One of the reasons the study of metadiscourse is so interesting and important is that it shows how intricately structured language is and how attentive to detail one must be in the study of language and its effects. Consider some examples directly related to metadiscourse: In some sentences readers can find several different kinds of metadiscourse. For instance, in *Finally, I am sorry to proclaim that you are guilty*, readers find a text connective, an attitude marker, and then an illocution marker before they get to the ideational material.

Further, in other sentences some linguistic forms appear to fulfill more than one metadiscoursal function at a certain point in a text. As Barton (1995) suggests, some kinds of metadiscourse may fulfill functions in both the interpersonal and textual domains. She suggests that text connectives, which clearly have textual functions, can in

academic argumentation also serve "complex interpersonal purposes" (235). Similarly, *I hypothesize that* probably functions in some texts as both an illocution marker and a shield. And phrases like *to conclude this section* probably often function both as text connectives and illocution markers. Perhaps the kind of categorization that will emerge in future research will show overlaps between Halliday's (1973) macro-functions of language.

Finally, it is important to note that some linguistic forms can function as metadiscourse in some contexts but as conveyors of ideational information in others. The clause *I guess* in "He is, I guess, at work" functions as a shield. The same clause, albeit now lacking the commas that set it off parenthetically, conveys ideational content in "I guess a lot on standardized tests." Similarly, *may* (along with *be*) in "There may be a correlation between the two findings" functions as a shield; however, *may* in "Teachers in that school may never reprimand students" functions as part of the ideational content.

Just these few examples show how finely nuanced meanings conveyed by metadiscourse can be and how carefully researchers must examine linguistic elements, meanings, and probable effects of those meanings within particular contexts.

Another reason why research on metadiscourse is interesting and important is that it opens up intriguing questions about ethics. A good study to examine in this connection is Simpson's (1990) "Modality in Literary-Critical Discourse." Simpson examined F. R. Leavis's use of shields. He notes that in "The Great Tradition," Leavis shields relatively uncontroversial statements (for example, about influences of Dickens on Conrad) and then leaves truly controversial statements unshielded (for example, "D. H. Lawrence . . . was the great genius of our time"; cited in Simpson, 1990, p. 89). Simpson points out that this tactic helps Leavis nudge his readers into asking the little questions but skipping the big ones about issues in the history of English literature.

One especially interesting thing about Leavis's tactic is that it raises important questions about how to convey material that is not accepted as certain. When a writer uses an emphatic such as *obviously* (as in "Obviously, Trollope was a great writer"), or when a writer uses an attitude marker like *regrettably* (as in "Regrettably, they stopped doing meaningful research last year"), is the writer in any way seeking to "sneakily strengthen the force of the proposition by presupposing its truth" (Holmes, 1984, p. 353)?

So which ways of using metadiscourse with debatable material are fair and just? If some ways are not fair and just, how serious is the harm that those ways cause? In this connection, I believe that beyond shields, emphatics, and attitude markers, evidentials and bits of commentary could reward further study.

A third way in which the study of metadiscourse is interesting and important has to do with how metadiscourse is used in similar texts in different languages. Mauranen (1993) has found that native speakers of Finnish use few text connectives in economics texts in Finnish, whereas native speakers of English, in similar texts in

English, use a good many connectives. This finding accords in part with research by Clyne (1991), who found that texts in linguistics and sociology produced "by English speakers are far more likely to have advance organizers than those [in German] by Germans" (54).

Mauranen (1993) writes that the Finnish school system teaches that using connectives "is not only superfluous, but the sign of a poor writer" (8). Many North American schools, on the other hand, stress using connectives, especially between paragraphs. Mauranen comments that the different Finnish and Anglo-American practices of using textual metadiscourse probably reflect different ideas of politeness and of what should be expected of readers. She would say that Finnish writers show respect for their readers by leaving more of the textual processing up to them.

These points lead me to wonder about how much misunderstanding and possibly even conflict might be associated with different practices with and understandings of metadiscourse. For example, imagine people from a cultural-linguistic background that values individual deference and group identity encountering important messages full of attitude markers from people from a different cultural-linguistic background. Or imagine people from a cultural-linguistic background that leads them to be very careful about the truth value and sources of their ideation conveying such material to people whose cultural-linguistic background leads them to view messages containing shields and evidentials as exhibiting a kind of weakness. Or consider the following example, one that students often bring to my attention: Imagine how people from a cultural-linguistic background that shuns all direct references in writing to writers and readers would react to texts full of commentary including the pronouns *I* and *you*.

One final example in this connection: I remember hearing James Paul Gee giving a talk at a convention, a talk that dealt with different understandings of uses of interpersonal metadiscourse, among other things. He told about how a doctoral student from a non-Western culture for some reason lost her dissertation director at a university in the United States and was nearly in panic trying to line up a new one. She came to Gee and said, "You must be my new director." Gee never revealed how he ultimately responded to her, but he made it clear that her approach, with its very strong modal verb, shocked him in that it was not the polite and deferential one that he had become accustomed to in North American graduate education.

The final way that I would like to discuss about how the study of metadiscourse is interesting and important is actually implicit in some of the comments appearing directly above. That is, metadiscourse deserves a prominent place in second-language instruction. We have seen that texts in one language might contain more text connectives than do similar texts in other languages. It is easy and reasonable to assume that certain kinds of texts in some languages would pay more attention to expressing precise degrees of certainty about information than would texts in other languages. Similarly, it is easy and reasonable to assume that texts in some languages would contain more instances of *I* and *you* within bits of commentary than

would similar texts in other languages. Expanding this list of possible differences in uses of metadiscourse would be relatively easy.

What is more important now, however, is seeing how much detailed instruction in metadiscourse would be needed to lead a speaker and writer of one language to approach fluency and facility in another. Such teaching would probably have to include at least the following several steps:

1. Looking closely at a variety of texts in the L2 to discover what elements of metadiscourse appear.
2. With the help of a native speaker of L2, discovering whether the uses of metadiscourse are natural and successful or not.
3. Deciding which function or functions the elements of metadiscourse are meant to fulfill.
4. Discussing whether or not other specific elements of metadiscourse could be substituted for the elements of metadiscourse that do appear.
5. Discussing whether there is a link between functions of metadiscourse and aspects of the culture that sustain and is sustained by the particular L2.
6. Discussing why there might be a link between functions of metadiscourse and aspects of the culture that sustain and is sustained by the particular L2.
7. Working on analyses, exercises, and real-world tasks to help the students learn appropriate uses of the metadiscourse.

This list probably only hints at the pedagogical steps necessary to help students acquire skillful use of metadiscourse in an L2. And even though the list is probably incomplete, it shows how challenging the task of teaching something like full acquisition of an L2 is. But such teaching is certainly worth pursuing, for it is with such teaching that we move toward true cultural and linguistic meeting of minds.

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