

A Contrastive study of metadiscourse devices in abstracts and conclusions in linguistics research articles

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Abstract: This article is a quantitative and qualitative corpus-based study of how academic writers use the interactional metadiscourse devices in abstracts and conclusions in linguistics research articles. The main focus of the essay is to explore the shift from the least personal point of view to the most personalized strategies used by the author, to search the intrusion from the authors' part into their texts through the use of interactional metadiscourse devices and to explore to what extent they show a certain degree of responsibility in the text. A contrastive generic approach was used in a corpus of 18 journals in the Linguistics field based on Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse taxonomy. The corpus was analyzed manually because all the occurrences had to be studied in context. In the results section some extracts from my data are included and commented on in order to validate the analysis provided. The study ends with comments on the significant findings illustrating how writers strategically use interactional metadiscourse devices to convey what they mean and highlighting the importance of metadiscourse resources for future research.

Keywords: Corpus-based analysis; Genres; Abstracts; Conclusions; Metadiscourse devices.

Introduction

With the huge acceleration of information access and management, it is true that the use of a common language becomes vital and it may facilitate the international cross-cultural communication at all levels and in all fields. And it seems that English, due to historical circumstances, fits in this role, since it has increasingly dominated world communication and media access.

Although there are some possible interpretations of the expressions *English as an international language (EIL)* and *English as a lingua franca (ELF)*, these two meanings, as Seidlhofer (2004: 210) observes, are therefore in “complementary distribution”. It is because of the potential for confusion of the word *international* that ELF researchers prefer the term *English as a lingua franca* to *English as an international language*. For many reasons as it is cited below, it is clearly notable that the expansion of English for scientific/academic communication is assuming a self-perpetuating dynamic role of its own, and once established, a popular lingua franca like English will definitely attract still further users:

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The current dominance of English as an international language of academic publication, particularly in the natural and social sciences, has been so amply documented (see, for example, Crystal, 1997; Graddol, 1997; Ammon, 2001a & 2003; Swales, 2004) that only a brief descriptive account is needed here. One useful statistical source is Ammon (2003), who, drawing on Anglo-Saxon bibliographic databases, reports that by 1995 English accounted for 87.2% of journal publications in the natural sciences and 82.5% of publications in the social sciences. (FERGUSON, 2007, p. 10)

For the purposes of the present study, since a corpus-based approach followed by a corpus-driven methodology will be used, it is also interesting to mention that corpus-based English for Academic Purposes (EAP) materials are beginning to appear (cf. Harwood and Hadley 2004; Swales and Feak 2000), so being familiar with a variety of genres and the importance of their pragmatic functions is a fundamental issue for research on students' writing as well as the teaching of ESP.

Considering the ongoing studies on genre sets in general, comparing research article abstracts and conclusions in the linguistics field would be a worthwhile exploration. As this analysis will be based on a comparison between the genre of the abstract and the conclusion move in research articles and they certainly differ in their function, a brief description of each one will be provided. An abstract is a concise summary of a much longer report (Lorés, 2008) while the conclusion is the space in which the authors tend to advocate the importance or noteworthiness of their findings.

Because this contrastive analysis will focus on metadiscourse devices, the relevance of using these elements will be pointed out here. According to Hyland (2005), the ability of writers to use metadiscourse effectively, to control the level of personality in their texts by offering a credible representation of themselves and their ideas, is coming to be seen as a defining feature of successful writing. That means that we tend to vary the degree of our claims depending on the way we use discursual features aimed at influencing the receiver's reception of a text. Thus, we assume a more or less authoritative role and also state the level of visibility and/or non-visibility in our texts. It seems that all writers' rhetorical purpose is to achieve a balance in which they get a credible representation of themselves by stating the relevance of their research in order to feel part of the disciplinary community but also appearing as modest and humble scholars in front of that same community.

As Hyland (2005) states, metadiscourse refers to an approach to conceptualizing interactions between text producers and their texts and between text producers and their users. So, this essay tentatively hopes to contribute by showing how writers project themselves in abstracts and conclusions and how there is a shift in the degree of visibility between them

within the RAs. Following Hyland's model of metadiscourse (Hyland, 2005), two dimensions of interaction are recognized as basic models: the interactive dimension which deals with the way writers organize the discourse while the use of metadiscourse resources in the interactional category concerns the way writers lead interaction through comments on the message, that is, the writer intends to convince and involve the reader explicitly. In this paper, the interactional metadiscourse elements are examined in both abstracts and conclusions through an exploratory analysis with extracts from my data.

My purpose in this essay is to analyze 18 research articles, taken from journals on applied linguistics. The main focus of the essay is the shift from the least personal point of view (as it appears in abstracts) to the most personalized strategies used by the author in order to assume the responsibility for the text in the conclusion sections. I will adopt a contrastive generic approach and by this means I intend to focus on the analysis of the abstracts and the conclusion move in order to search for the intrusion from the authors' part into their texts through the use of interactional metadiscourse devices and to explore to what extent they show a certain degree of responsibility.

My choice of this specific subject was due to the fact that no matter what interactional resources they are, they involve the reader collaboratively in the development of the texts and they represent a powerful means of self-representation according to the way they are mentioned in the text.

Methodology

The corpus used for the present study comprises 18 journals, published from 2004 to 2008 (approximately 14,590 words), and written by native and non-native English-speaking writers. It is important to point out that my purpose regarding the authors' selection is due to the expansion of English as an international language of academic publication. All the journals were retrieved from the website in electronic format and from three different leading journals in the Linguistics field: 6 from *TESOL Quarterly*, 6 from *Applied Linguistics* and 6 from *English for Specific Purposes*. I refer to each journal in the corpus by abbreviating as follows: *TESOL Quarterly* (TQ), *Applied Linguistics* (AL), and *English for Specific Purposes* (ESP). So, for example, the fifth Tesol RA abstract or conclusion subcorpus is denoted by the Abbreviation (T5, AL3 or ESP1). Full details of the RAs included in the corpus can be found in the Appendix.

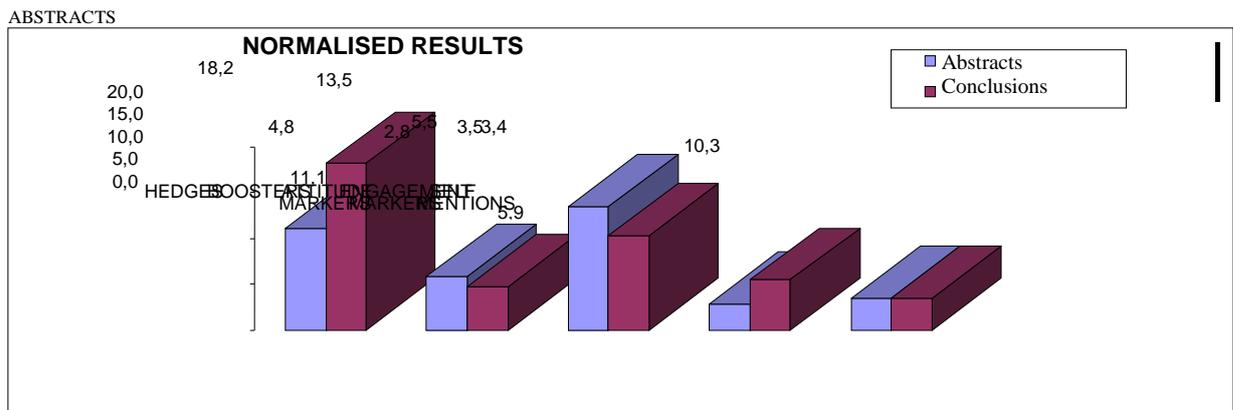
No co-authored papers were included in the corpus due to the main focus of the essay, which is the contrastive analysis of the abstracts and the conclusion move in order to search for the intrusion from the authors' part into their texts through the use of interactional metadiscourse devices and the degree of responsibility shown by the writer. For that to happen, the use of the pronoun *I* by authors to refer to themselves would be guaranteed. Such opportunity would be unavailable if multiple-authored research articles were selected. The analysis approaches a corpus-based study of interactional metadiscourse devices in an exploratory way, based on Hyland's (2005) taxonomy and also on a corpus-driven methodology since I intend to revise his proposal, extract data from my own texts and add them to the list of items included in his book. The corpus was analyzed manually because all the occurrences had to be studied in context. In the Results section some extracts from my data are included and commented on in order to validate the analysis provided. Having outlined the methodology, I move on to the analysis itself.

Results

Abstracts are a growing field of study in linguistics. Also, we have to take into consideration that abstracts in published papers function as independent discourses (Van Dick, 1980) since they summarize the content and structure of the whole following text in advance. Another important fact is that the abstract constitutes a genre in its own right, while the conclusion is a move and as such they differ in several important aspects, one of which is their use of metadiscourse devices, that is somewhat, linked to the notion of writer identity and personal choices. My first goal in this paper is to begin with a brief quantitative analysis of the interactional metadiscourse devices by showing in a table and a graphic chart the instantiations in percentage and then how these linguistic realizations are displayed both in the abstracts and the conclusions of RAs. In other words, in this section, I am going to describe the findings from my data concerning the way authors project themselves in abstracts, as compared with the conclusions, illustrated through examples taken from contexts in Table 1 and Graphic 1.

	RAW NUMBERS		NORMALISED RESULTS	
	ABSTRACTS	CONCLUSIONS	ABSTRACTS	CONCLUSIONS
HEDGES	32	213	11.1	18.2
BOOSTERS	17	56	5.9	4.8
ATTITUDE MARKERS	39	121	13.5	10.3
ENGAGEMENT MARKERS	8	64	2.8	5.5
SELF MENTIONS	10	40	3.5	3.4
TOTAL NUMBER OF WORDS	2.881	11.709	1,000	1,000

Table 1. Raw numbers and normalized results per thousand words of interactional metadiscourse devices in both abstracts and conclusions



Graphic 1. Normalized results per thousand words of interactional metadiscourse devices contrasted in both abstracts and conclusions.

As can be seen in the quantitative table above, there is clear evidence concerning the writers' use of interactional metadiscoursal instances, that is, they rely on different mechanisms in order to convey what they mean. From an overall view, it is clear, for instance, that the frequency of hedges is very different in abstracts and conclusions.

Interactional metadiscourse devices in abstracts

1. Use of Hedges. Only 32 tokens were recorded in the 18 abstracts that make up the corpus, but only 5 out of the 18 abstracts did not make use of hedges. 15 from these 32 tokens are modals, such as: 11 *can*, 2 *may*, 1 *should* and 1 *might* and taking into consideration their pragmatic functions, the modality can be used to express the writer's inferences about the likelihood of something or to show assessment of possibility or probability about something. Even though *can* is not included in Hyland's list (2005), it seems that it is a good example to suit the rule, as it is shown in the following example:

(1a) I present data extracts which reveal how I and we **can** help writers create a sense of Newsworthiness and novelty about their work, showing how they are plugging disciplinary knowledge gaps. Inclusive pronouns **can** act as positive politeness devices by describing and/or critiquing common disciplinary practices, and elaborating arguments on behalf of the community. They **can** also organize the text for the reader, and highlight the current problems and subject areas which preoccupy the field. (AL6)

2. Use of Boosters. Although there were only 17 tokens recorded in the 18 abstracts, a higher percentage of use was revealed in relation to the conclusions and only 11 abstracts used this resource. 10 of these abstracts used verbs such as: *demonstrate*, *show*, and I also consider the inclusion of the verbs *reveal*, *illustrate* and *illuminate* since these verbs emphasize certainty and establish some rapport with the audience and the topic. See the following example:

(2a) The analyses **illuminate** the lexical shape of summonses in conjunction with prosody, body posture, gestures, and classroom artefacts. As **demonstrated**, a simple structure of summoning provided a handy method for soliciting and establishing the teacher's attention, and facilitated the novices' participation in classroom activities from early on. Importantly, however, the local design of the summonses was influenced by the competitive multiparty classroom setting. The analyses **illustrate** how the novices upgraded their summonses by displaying a range of affective stances. (AL5)

3. Use of Attitude Markers. With regard to the use of attitude markers, 39 instances were found in 16 abstracts, with the exception of 2 abstracts out of the total in which no writer's affective attitude was seen at all. Interestingly, it was in the abstracts that the highest number of tokens was seen and it was also surprising that attitude markers were more used in abstracts than in the conclusions. See some of the examples:

(3a) Target language competence of EFL teachers is an **important** aspect of EFL teaching and teacher expertise, and a case of ESP which is often not acknowledged as such. This paper presents a target language needs analysis for EFL teachers, carried out in Slovenia between 2003 and 2005. A survey of the literature shows that such studies are **rare**, even though there are reports from several countries of EFL teachers' insufficient target language competence. (ESP6)

(3b) The results are **of value** to all those involved in developing and redesigning EFL teacher training programs, particularly their language training component, in the countries where English is taught as a foreign language. (ESP6)

4. Use of Engagement Markers. These metadiscourse features were the least frequently used devices in abstracts. Only 4 out of the 18 abstracts used engagement markers devices and mainly as personal aside resources. Besides, there were 2 instances of the use of pronouns *our* and *us* as shown below:

(4a) The analysis provides evidence that humour not only contributes to the construction of effective workplace relationships (**the creative use of relational humour**), but may also stimulate intellectual activity of direct relevance to the achievement of workplace objectives (**the use of humour to foster workplace creativity**). The analysis suggests that the first category is pervasive and examples abound throughout **our** data set, whilst humour associated with workplace creativity is less frequent and tends to characterize some communities of practice more than others. (AL4)

5. Use of Self Mentions. As shown in the graph, there seems to be a balance concerning the use of self mentions in abstracts as well as in the conclusions. Only 5 out of 18 abstracts show the writer's presence explicitly by means of the first personal pronouns in 8 occurrences and 2 instances of the possessive adjective *my*.

(5a) **I** look more closely at definitions of WEs and ELF. Then follows an overview of relevant developments in WEs and ELF research during the past 15 years, along with a more detailed discussion of some key research projects and any controversies they have aroused. **I** then address the implications of WEs/ELF research for TESOL vis-à-vis English language standards and standard English, and the longstanding native versus nonnative teacher debate. Finally, **I** assess the consensus on WEs and ELF that is emerging both among researchers and between researchers and language teaching professionals. (T4)

(5b) This article concludes with a statement of **my** own beliefs about grammar teaching, grounded in **my** own understanding of SLA. (T2)

Interactional metadiscourse devices in conclusions.

Although it is said that the abstract is a space in the RA where information is reported in rather impersonal terms, recent research has suggested that academic prose is not completely impersonal (Hyland, 2002). Instead, writers take on credibility by constructing an identity and showing confidence in their evaluations in order to engage in the disciplinary community. It seems that writers have reached a balance concerning their desire to project an authorial self and to persuade readers of the validity of their claims either in abstract or conclusion (Lorés, 2008).

1. Use of Hedges. According to the quantitative chart showed previously, hedges got the highest number of occurrences in conclusions rather than in abstracts, and hedges were the only metadiscourse device used in all the 18 conclusions analyzed with no exception. 138 instances out of the 213 were modal verbs such as: 45 *can*, 31 *may*, 19 *should*, 18 *could*, 17 *would* and 12 *might*. Interestingly enough, modals as hedges are so frequent in conclusions that 33 modals were recorded in a single sample. This view reflects the crucial importance of distinguishing fact from opinion in academic writing, leaving a space for open negotiation. It also protects the authors from unexpected changes. Note this in the following paragraph:

(1a) It has shown that generic interrelatedness **may** also vary across disciplines. Conservation Biology abstracts are more similar to research article introductions than are Wildlife Behavior abstracts to research article introductions. We **can** conclude from this that disciplinary values relating to discursive practices **may** not just be manifested in variations in discourse structure in a particular genre but **may** also be manifested in the relationship that genres have with one another within a discipline. The relationship between two genres **may** subtly change over disciplinary boundaries. The distinction between two genres **may** be more blurred in some disciplines than in others. (ESP5)

This might happen because the writers imply that a statement is based on the author's credible reasoning rather than on certain knowledge and also, as Hyland (2000:56) states, it certifies the need for the writers to evaluate their assertions in ways which recognize potential alternative voices.

2. Use of Boosters. Those devices were the least frequently used in the conclusions move if compared to the abstracts. 56 tokens were recorded and the 2 most frequent realizations were *clear/clearly* and *certain/certainly* as in the example:

(2a) It is **certainly** true that I do not believe (and do not think the research demonstrates) that there is just one preferred approach to teaching grammar. The acquisition of the grammatical system of an L2 is a complex process and almost **certainly** can be assisted best by a variety of approaches. (T2)

(2b) These small acts of elaboration thus convey **clear** disciplinary meanings where what counts as convincing argument and appropriate tone is carefully managed for a particular audience. (T2)

(2c) Such discursal conventions as preferences for particular kinds of elaboration are persuasive precisely because they are significant carriers of the epistemological understandings of community members. It is clear that writers in different disciplines represent themselves, their work and their readers in different ways, and the features

discussed in this paper support the disciplinary variations in argument reported elsewhere. (AL3)

3. Use of Attitude Markers. Since the writers need to choose selectively the words they intend to influence and persuade their readers, it is through the attitude markers that they express affectively their attitude to the propositions. It is then when they feel the ease to demonstrate surprise, agreement, frustration among other feelings and emotions. The results revealed 121 tokens in almost all the conclusions, except one in which no attitude marker was found, maybe because it was the shortest conclusion of all. On the other hand, there seemed to be a balanced use of attitude markers in most cases.

(3a) it becomes painfully obvious that the politics of accountability has infiltrated the public discourse surrounding L2 teaching, L2 learning, and the professional preparation of L2 teachers. In light of these realities, it is not surprising that L2 teachers struggle to reject a teach-for-the-test mentality, (T6)

4. Use of Engagement Markers. The most significant difference concerns the use of engagement markers since 64 instances were recorded in 16 conclusions and in one of them 7 instances were used as it is seen in the short passage below.

(4a) Considering the more significant trend-setting shifts that have marked the 1990s, **we** can claim with some justification that **we** have now reached a much higher level of awareness. **We** might even say, with a good measure of poetic license, that **we** have moved from a state of awareness toward a state of awakening. (T1)

5. Use of Self Mentions. One of the most obvious and important ways writers can represent themselves to readers, however, is to explicitly affirm their role in the discourse through first person pronouns (Hyland, 2001; Kuo, 1999, Tang and John, 1999). 40 occurrences were found in 12 conclusions and 9 instances were recorded in just one of them. See the examples:

(5a) **I** therefore suggest that the most effective way of raising students' awareness of the role that inclusive and exclusive pronouns have to play will be for the EAP teacher to design their own corpus-based classroom activities, and so **I** close by outlining a few possible activities. (AL6)

(5b) In **my** study of master's dissertations, for instance, **I** built my corpus from distinction grade dissertations, so that student writing which had been judged by subject specialists to be successful was analysed. (AL6)

However, I included here one particular example to show how engagement markers and self mentions can be used very closely but with specific different purposes. There are

moments in which *we* functions as an engagement marker that means the writer shares conclusions with members of an academic community and there are other moments that *we* features as a self mention, that is when the writer attempts to persuade the readership by revealing achieved significant results. Another interesting fact is that many writers avoid the subjectivity and assertiveness of the singular form and seek the rhetorical distance that the plural meaning allows, as a way of lessening their personal intrusion but at the same showing they are present in the text. This aspect can also be considered a cultural concern. According to some informants, in the Spanish academic environment, for instance, writers tend to agree on making use of this resource, maybe to show modesty of knowledge claims or even a way of not being imposing. The fact that the writer of a single-authored article uses *we*, instead of *I*, may suggest an intention to reduce personal attributions.

(5a) we can conclude that different patterns of what we here call ‘textual dynamics’ appear: whereas in the IMRD abstract the writer, as a ‘participant persona’ tends to hide behind real-world entities and processes, in the CARS structure, the writer chooses to present himself/herself as a visible participant in the research community.

Conclusion

Interactional resources play a crucial pragmatic function in the academic discourse since not only do they contribute to the writer’s construction of a text but they also help the writer control the level of personality in the text. Academic writing, like all forms of communication, is an act of identity: it not only conveys disciplinary ‘content’ but also carries a representation of the writer. As Hyland (2002) states, a central element of pragmatic competence is the ability of writers to construct a credible representation of themselves and their work, aligning themselves with the socially shaped identities of their communities.

The shift from the least personal point of view to the most personalized strategies used by the author (either in abstracts or conclusions) in order to assume the responsibility for the text was the main focus of this study and observations from the present study tell us interesting findings. Firstly, that the frequency of hedges is far higher in the conclusion than in the abstracts. The reason for this may be, following Hyland (1998), a certain degree of claiming protection in the event of its eventual overthrow since the linguistics field is so subjected to changes. It is so very true that this assertion can be applied to both abstracts and conclusions, with a slight difference that in conclusions there is more room to open negotiation concerning information to be presented as an opinion rather than a fact. Secondly,

it was not surprising that boosters were more frequently used in abstracts rather than in conclusions since it is acknowledged that writers express their certainty in the study that will still be presented, that is, they project a more reliable self when “advancing” research than when they state and explain that research (as they do in conclusions). A second explanation regards engagement markers. Since the functions of involving the audience rhetorically into the discourse are mainly performed by imperatives, questions, among others, they will not find space in the abstracts for such a role.

Finally, the two most unexpected findings from this paper concerned attitude markers and self mentions. It was really surprising to find that attitude markers were more frequently used in abstracts than in conclusions. Viewing written text as interaction, we can say that the communicative purpose of scholars to publish the results of their research can be revealed by the metadiscourse interactional selection in order to express the writer-reader interactions in a more judgemental stance. Considering that the conclusions are ~~rather~~ much longer than the abstracts and the space where the author explains in an evaluative way their research findings is greater, we may expect to find more frequency used elements such as: comparatives, subordinations among others, to convey agreement, relevance, reliability, etc..., than in abstracts, which have a space limitation.

Although it is said that the abstract is a space in the RA where information is reported in rather impersonal terms, it seems that at least the linguistics academic environment has been changing and reaching a balance concerning the use of self mentions in abstracts as well as in conclusions. The ways that writers represent themselves, and find themselves represented by their rhetorical choices has been extensively discussed by Ivanic (1998) and Ivanic´ and Weldon (1999), who argue that writers’ identities are constructed in the “possibilities for self-hood” available in the sociocultural contexts of writing. This study showed that self mentions represented by the pronouns *I* and *we* which help to promote authors, creating a sense of novelty and newsworthiness were used either in the abstracts as they were also used to help repeat claims and findings in the conclusions as a way to show the seriousness of the work. Also, due to the fact that all the abstractors were scholars, the *I* as the opinion-holder and the *I* as the originator were definitely used in their abstracts.

In my view, the awareness of metadiscourse resources is so important in interpreting a text and constructing an argument convincingly that it seems to be crucial to incorporate the study of metadiscourse in our teaching/learning materials as well as in our models of teaching reading and writing skills. Based on the fact that it has taken some time since the article was

written, there may be the need of revisiting the model of analysis, and a considerable opportunity for future research.

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Um estudo contrastivo dos dispositivos do metadiscorso em resumos e conclusões em artigos de pesquisa linguística

Resumo: Este artigo é um estudo quantitativo e qualitativo com base em corpus de como escritores acadêmicos usam os recursos metadiscursivos interacionais em resumos e conclusões dos artigos de pesquisa na área da linguística. O foco principal do artigo é explorar a mudança do ponto de vista menos pessoal para as estratégias mais personalizadas usadas pelo autor, detectar a intrusão da parte dos autores em seus textos através do uso de recursos de metadiscorso interacionais e explorar até que ponto eles mostram um certo grau de responsabilidade no texto. Uma abordagem genérica contrastiva foi utilizada em um corpus de 18 periódicos da área de Linguística com base na taxonomia de metadiscorso de Hyland (2005). O corpus foi analisado manualmente porque todas as ocorrências tiveram que ser estudadas no contexto. Na seção de resultados, alguns trechos são incluídos e comentados para validar a análise. O estudo termina com comentários sobre as descobertas significativas que ilustram como os escritores usam estrategicamente os recursos de

metadiscorso interacional para transmitir o que querem dizer destacando a importância dos recursos de metadiscorso para pesquisas futuras.

Palavras-chave: Análise com base em corpus; Gêneros; Resumos; Conclusões; Recursos metadiscursivos.