Investigating interpersonal metadiscourse markers in English M.A. theses: The case of transition markers

Hosna Rasooyar[*], Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, Shahrekord Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shahrekord, Iran

Esmail Hosseini, Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, Shahrekord Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shahrekord, Iran

Abstract

This study aimed to know which types of transition markers (i.e., and, since, hence, in addition and then) were more frequently used in English M.A theses. To do this study, the researcher collected 30 English M.A theses which were written by Iranian students from Azad University of Kermanshah. Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse was used in this study. Identifying each type of transition markers was used more, the teacher analysed the so-called texts by utilising one of the Cutting-Edge softwares. Next, the frequency of transition markers was calculated by AntConc, one of the simplest and easiest corpus analysis toolkits. The outcome of the study was revealed that 6924 transition markers were found. The transition marker of 'and' was the most frequent and the transition marker of 'hence' was the least frequent. Furthermore, the results of Chi-square test indicated that transition markers were not equally used in English M.A theses. The implication of the study suggests that using concordance software can make English teachers aware of high-frequency and low-frequency vocabularies.

Keywords: AntConc software, metadiscourse, transition markers

---

[*]ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Hosna Rasooyar**, Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, Shahrekord Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shahrekord, Iran
E-mail address: hosna_rasooyar.1391@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in metadiscourse markers that are seen as the interpersonal resources used to organise a discourse or the writer's stance towards either its content or the reader (Hyland, 2000). It refers to the linguistic device writers use to shape their arguments for the needs and anticipation of their target readers. The term is not always defined and used in the same manner, but it is typically employed as a cover term to entail a heterogeneous range of features which facilitate to relate a text to its context by assisting readers to connect, organise and interpret material in a way preferred by the writer and with regard to the understandings and values of a particular discourse community (Halliday, 1998). While some analysts have limited the focus of metadiscourse to features of textual organisation (Valero-Garces, 1996) or explicit illocutionary markers (Beauvais, 1989), metadiscourse is more generally seen as the author's linguistic and rhetorical presentation in the text to 'bracket the discourse organisation and the expressive implications of what is being said' (Schiffrin, 1980, p. 231).

Metadiscourse has been recently used in text analysis. It has informed studies about the features of the texts, participant interactions, historical linguistics, cross-cultural variations and writing pedagogy. Studies have suggested the significance of metadiscourse in casual conversation (Schiffrin, 1980), science popularisations (Crismore & Farnsworth, 1990), undergraduate textbooks (Hyland, 2000), postgraduate dissertations (Bunton, 1998) and school textbooks (Crismore, 1989). It appears to be a feature of a range of languages and genres and has been used to investigate rhetorical differences in the texts written by different first language groups (Valero-Garces, 1996).

In L2 classes, metadiscourse has been often familiar to teachers as a range of distinct devices which are helpful in assisting readers to understand and analyse written texts. Thus, transition markers (by contrast, however, therefore, etc.), sequencing items (first, next, then, etc.) and hedges (apparently, perhaps, doubtful, etc.) are, if English for Academic Purposes (EAP) textbooks are any indication, generally taught in academic writing courses. While the addition of these features can aid the writers to transform a dry, intricate text into coherent, reader-friendly prose, they are often taught in a rather piecemeal fashion and little attention is drawn to how they function more widely to influence the interaction between writer, reader and text, or how they relate to the particular genre and discipline, in which the student is working. This is probably because they are often considered as primary linguistic aspects of writing.

Crismore (1984) defines metadiscourse as a level of discourse, in which the continuing discourse is intruded by the author to control rather than notify the reader. In a similar way, Hyland (2005) believes that 'metadiscourse embodies the idea that communication is more than just the exchange of information, goods or services but also involves the personalities, attitudes and assumptions of those who are communicating' (p. 3). In the same view, metadiscourse is derived to be '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, 2005, p. 46). Similarly, metadiscourse is defined by Vande Kopple (1985) as 'discourse that people use not to expand referential material, but to help the readers connect, organise, interpret, evaluate and develop attitudes towards that material' (p. 83).

Multiple classifications of metadiscourse elements have been suggested since primary interest began some decades ago (e.g., Hyland, 2005; Adel, 2006). Regarding the effect of metadiscourse markers in writing, this study investigated the frequency of interpersonal metadiscourse markers in English theses following Hyland's interpersonal model of metadiscourse.

1.2. Significance of the study

Metadiscourse is one of the language areas, which considers the relations between the reader and the writer of the texts. It is believed that teaching students of different disciplines and fields of the studies to use metadiscourse markers effectively in their writings and also speeches could improve their writing and reading skills and, therefore, help them to better communicate with their audiences. The findings of this study may make the syllabus designers and also teachers of EAP are more aware of the different kinds of metadiscourse devices used in different disciplines and fields of the studies. Consequently, the wider variety of metadiscourse they know the better communication they can make.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Metadiscourse markers

In the field of discourse analysis, researchers such as Hui and Na (2008) assert that when we talk about the use of metadiscourse in a text, we are talking about metadiscourse features. They are actually those linguistic markers, which are not necessary to the topic, show that the writer is aware of the needs of the audience to communicate the semantic content. However, Hyland (2005) and Hyland and Tse (2004) offered a more effective interpersonal view of metadiscourse: 'All metadiscourses are interpersonal in that it takes account of the reader's knowledge, textual experiences and processing needs'.

Accordingly, Thompson's (2001) explanation of interactive and interactional resources is as two inter-related modes of interaction. However, onward with this view of metadiscourse, scholars' discourse choices through the text are developed out of the relationship between the author(s) and their peers within a particular discourse community. Thus, both interactive metadiscourse features (seek to organise the material with regard to the reader's needs and expectations) and interactional metadiscourse features (meditate to depict the scholars as authors and to unite writer and reader simultaneously) are a reply to the interpersonal element of writing.

Using metadiscourse allows reader to comprehend discourse texture and intertextuality, to share pragmatic presuppositions, to infer intended meanings and to interpret the institutional and ideological ties underlying the text (Pérez, 2003). Nonetheless, removing metadiscourse features would make the passage much less personal, less interesting and less easy to follow. Metadiscourse markers are evidently appropriate in guiding the interpretation of text (rather than contributing to the main propositional content); their precise meanings are often difficult to spell out. In short, research on the way metadiscourse markers are used can contribute to our understanding of their meanings and appropriate usage.

2.2. Metadiscourse and classroom ınteraction

Hyland (2005) believed that a text has to talk to readers or hearers in ways that they find familiar and acceptable, which mean that the process of comprehension and participation is not just a matter of informational clarity, but of the individual writer's or speaker's projection of a shared context. In other words, when the senders pursue their personal and professional goals, they try to embed their discourse in a particular social context which they reflect through a particular recognised and accepted discourse.

Hall and Versplaetse (2000) considered language classrooms as discourse communities, in which interaction contributes to language learners' language development. According to Hall and Verplaetse (2000), interactive processes are not strictly individual or equivalent across learners and situations; language learning is a social enterprise, jointly constructed and intrinsically linked to learners' repeated and regular participation in classroom activities.

Hall and Verplaetse (2000) stated the important role of interaction in additional language learning. They believe that it is in their interactions with each other that teachers and learners work together to create the intellectual and practical activities that shape both the form and the content of the target language as well as the processes and outcomes of individual development. According to Allwright's (1984) claimed on the importance of classroom interaction in language learning, in foreign language lessons, it is 'inherent in the very notion of classroom pedagogy itself'.

As Hall and Walsh (2006) proposed, interaction in L2 classrooms is essential for language learning to take place, as much of the learning during language lessons occurs through such interactions. Some others, like Van Lier (1996), argued that 'interaction is the most important element in the curriculum'. According to Hyland (2005), interaction in academic writing essentially involves adopting a point of view in relation to both the issues discussed in the text and to others who hold points of view on those issues. These interactions are managed by writers in two main ways: Stance and engagement.

Hyland (2005) defined stance as an attitudinal dimension which includes feature that refers to the ways writer's present themselves and conveys their judgements, opinions and commitments. He believed that it is the ways that writers intrude to stamp their personal authority onto their arguments or step back and disguise their involvement. He also defined engagement as a dimension where writers acknowledge and connect to others, recognising the presence of their readers, pulling them along with their argument, focusing their attention, acknowledging their uncertainties, including them as discourse participants and guiding them to interpretations.

This interpersonal function is investigated by Hyland (1998), who argued that the 'sense of audience is critical' because the perceived truth of the arguments themselves requires the linguistic choices to be persuasive (p. 439). Hyland (1988) showed how specific markers in this metadiscourse constitute 'the central pragmatic construct which allows us to see how writers seek to influence readers' understandings of both the text and their attitude towards its content and its audience'.

2.3. Experimental background

Using metadiscourse allows reader's to understand discourse texture and intertextuality, to share pragmatic presuppositions, to infer intended meanings and to interpret the institutional and ideological ties underlying the text (Pérez, 2003). There is no doubt that removing metadiscourse features would make the passage much less personal, less interesting and less easy to follow. Indeed, metadiscourse markers are relevant in guiding the interpretation of text (rather than contributing to the main propositional content), so, their precise meanings are often difficult to spell out. Research on the way metadiscourse markers are used can contribute to our understanding of their meanings and their appropriate usage.

Duruk (2017) explored what extent Turkish writers use interpersonal metadiscourse markers in a written register and to examine the way Turkish writers use interpersonal metadiscourse, namely in MA dissertations from one major academic field; English language teaching. The rationale of the study is based on a corpus-based approach by examining a total of 20 dissertations written by Turkish writers writing in a second language. Such kinds of expressions were searched through the dissertations and analysis was made by examining three sections of dissertations – methodology, results and discussion. After having an in-depth analysis based on the use of interpersonal metadiscourse markers, it was revealed that to some degree, 'hedges', 'empathic (boosters)' and 'attitude markers' are all used by Turkish writers; however, 'attitude markers' are found to be preferred most frequently. Even though with respect to the use of personal markers, differences were found among the writers. The analysis of dissertation sections revealed common results.

3. Research Question

The present study sought to examine the following question:

RQ. Which types of transition markers (i.e., and, since, hence, in addition and then) more frequently occur in English M.A theses?

4. Method

4.1. Corpus

To do this research, 30 English M.A theses were collected by the researcher. The theses were written by Iranian M.A students from Azad University of Kermanshah. They were both quantitative and qualitative theses. The transition markers (i.e., and, since, hence, in addition and then) used in these theses were identified and counted to answer the research question.

4.2. Instruments

The AntConc concordance software (Anthony, 2016) was employed to detect the instances of hedging in the editorials. It is worthy to note here that AntConc is one of the simplest and easiest corpus analysis toolkits, which has been shown to be extremely effective in the technical writing classroom. AntConc is a freeware, multiplatform tool for carrying out corpus linguistics research and data-driven learning. AntConc contains seven tools: Concordance, Concordance Plot, File View, Clusters, Collocates, Word List and Keyword List. In the current study, the researcher used the Word List tool for counting the total number of transition markers in M.A theses.

4.3. Framework

Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse recognises the essence of two dimensions of interaction, the first one is the interactive dimension which 'concerns the writer's awareness of a participating audience and the ways he or she seeks to hold its probable knowledge, interests, rhetorical expectations and processing abilities' (Hyland, 2005, p. 49). In this dimension, the resources were incorporated addressing ways of arranging and creating discourse with the reader's needs in mind. The interactive resources contain five categories:

➤ Transition markers are a set of devices, which applied to mark argumentative, contrastive and significant steps in the discourse, contrary to the external world and help readers to construe pragmatic connections between steps in an argument. They consist of items such as 'in addition', 'but', 'thus' and 'and'

➤ Frame markers are elements that illustrate the schematic text structure and consist of items applied in sequence, to tag text stages, to declare discourse goals and to show topic shifts: My purpose here is to, to conclude, etc.

➤ Endophoric markers are expressions that refer to other parts of the text to create additional information available to the reader such as noted above.

➤ Evidences are the source of information from others for example, Z clarifies, according to X.

➤ Code glosses are elements that make additional information by illustrating, rephrasing or developing what has been said as: in other words, for example, etc. On the other hand, interactional metadiscourse refers to the ways the writers express on their own messages to create their views recognised while revealing 'the extent to which the writer works to jointly construct the text with the reader' (Hyland, 2005, p. 49). The interactional resources contain the following categories:

➤ Hedges are features, which restrict the writer's full obligation, to what is said in a proposition and which may be the result of special pragmatic conventions in academic writing.

> Boosters are features, which bright the writers' assurance and opinion about a proposition and which may be the consequence of certain pragmatic conventions in academic writing.

> Attitude markers are items, which indicate the writer's impressive evaluation of given parameters or entities.

> Engagement markers are elements through which researches bring the readers into the text, importing them in the discussion of academic knowledge. These consist of personal pronouns, question forms, directives and asides.

> Self-mentions are clear signals of the authorial persona of the research(s). They highlight self-references and self-citations.

> Transitions are used to express relations between main clauses such as and, but, since and so.

4.4. Procedure

To do this study, 30 English M.A theses were collected. Then, the transition markers included in the corpus were identified; afterward, the frequency of each category was calculated. It should be mentioned that a pilot study was conducted on 10% of the data to ensure the reliability of the analysis method before the main phase of the study. To do so, two people separately analysed the data and then correlation coefficient was obtained through Cohen's Kappa (r = 0.811). To analyse the data, the frequency of occurrence and percentage of transition markers were calculated. A Chi-square test was applied to find out whether the differences were statistically significant.

5. Results

To analyse the gathered data, the SPSS software, version 22 was used.

Table 1. The frequency and percentage of transition markers in MA theses

Transition markers	Frequency	Percentage
Then	190	2.74
Since	146	2.10
In addition	41	0.59
And	6531	94.32
Hence	16	0.23
Total	6924	100

Table 1 shows the frequency of transition markers in MA theses. After counting the transition markers in M.A theses, 6924 transition markers were found. Transition markers of 'and' (6531) (94.32), 'then' (190) (2.74), 'since' (146) (2.10), 'in addition' (41) (0.59) and 'hence' (16) (0.23) were the most frequent transition markers, respectively. Based on these findings, 'and' was the most frequent transition marker and 'hence' was the least frequent transition marker.

Based on the aim of this research question, a Chi-square test was utilised to determine the differences between the uses of transition markers in MA theses. These results are provided in Table 2:

Table 2**. Chi-square test of the transition markers in MA theses**

	Transition markers
Chi-square	23920.39
Df	4
Asymp. sig.	0.00

Table 2 shows that there was a significant difference between the uses of transition markers in MA theses since the p = 0.00 (marked as sig.) was lower than the level of significance 0.05. Therefore, it can be concluded that transition markers were not used equally in English M.A theses.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

After collecting the data and counting all transition markers used in English M.A theses, the researcher used frequency and percentage to analyse the data and to provide answer for the research question. The results show that 6924 transition markers were used in English M.A theses. Transition markers of 'and', 'then', 'since', 'in addition' and 'hence' (Table 1) were the most frequent transition markers, respectively. In fact, 'and' and 'hence' were the most frequent and the least transition markers, indeed. The results of Chi-square test revealed that transition markers were not used equally in English M.A theses.

Some transition markers such as 'hence' and 'in addition' were not used by the authors frequently; this may be due to the lack of mastery of norms and conventions of academic writing genre. Hyland and Tse (2004) claimed that metadiscourse resources have a great deal of impact on higher levels of writing in an academic and at the same time meaningful and appropriate way to a particular disciplinary community.

In general, to make their piece of academic writing more fluent and comprehensible, the writers make use of lots of transition markers. They may use different genres to satisfy the dynamic necessities of the members of the discourse communities. In other words, the writers of the articles and theses should be aware of the genre they are writing in. This kind of unawareness may have its root in the fact that academic writers in Iran during their B.A, M.A and Ph.D. studies do not pay enough attention to the genre of thesis and dissertation or article writing. Therefore, Iranian EFL students need to getting acquainted with different genres and metadiscourse markers. Metadiscourse markers are essential elements in writing and speaking, as Hyland (2005) holds that metadiscourse elements play a crucial role in contributing new knowledge and making academic claims. In short, using concordance software can make English teachers aware of high-frequency and low-frequency vocabularies and teaching metadiscourse markers to the students should be followed seriously.

6.1. Implications of the study

The findings of this study may render some pedagogical implications, especially for academic writing practices. According to Hellermann and Vergun (2007), there is a correlation between the learners' proficiency level and appropriate use of metadiscourse markers. In other words, more proficient learners make more use of metadiscourse markers in their writings to make it cohesive and coherent. Hence, making students familiar with the rules of academic writing may improve the way they use metadiscourse markers in their academic writings. This familiarity can be gained through direct or indirect instruction during which, different kinds of genres, metadiscourse markers and the required strategies to employ them may be introduced in different contexts. This awareness-raising through instruction will lead to successful 'membership in the academic and professional discourse community' (Hyland, 1994, p. 244).

Accordingly, students are highly required to become well acquainted with the techniques, leading to further cohesion and coherence in the text. In particular, the instruction and analysis of the texts focusing on the genres and interactional metadiscourse markers employed in different contexts can help students to better organise their texts and guide their readers. Metadiscourse studies, such as the one presented here, can also help foreign language researchers, teachers and learners in increasing their awareness of English writing conventions and determining the potential problematic areas and the right application of metadiscourse markers as they are used in various contexts.

Metadiscourse is a response to the writer's evaluation of his or her readers' need for elaboration and involvement, ensuring that he or she supplies sufficient cues to secure an understanding and acceptance of propositional content. Metadiscoursal analysis is, therefore, a valuable means of exploring academic writing and of comparing the rhetorical preferences of different discourse communities. For this reason, it offers teacher a useful way of assisting students towards control over disciplinary-sensitive writing practices. Because it shows how writers engage with their topic and their readers, exploration by students of metadiscourse in their own and published writing can offer useful assistance for learning about appropriate ways to convey attitude, mark structure and engage with readers. Only by employing these interpersonal features in their texts will students be able to get feedback on their practices to evaluate the impact of their decisions more clearly. Assisting students to an awareness of metadiscourse can, thus, provide them with important rhetorical knowledge and equip them with ways of making discourse decisions which are socially grounded in the inquiry patterns and knowledge structures of their disciplines.

References

Adel, A. (2006). *Metadiscourse in L1 and L2 English*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.

Allwright, R. (1984). The importance of interaction in classroom language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, *5*, 2, 156 171. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/5.2.156.

Anthony, L. (2016). *AntConc* (*Version 3.4.4*) [*Computer Software*]. Tokyo, Japan: Waseda University. Retrieved from http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp.

Beauvais, P. J. (1989). A speech act theory of metadiscourse. *Written Communication*, *6*(1), 11-30. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0741088389006001002.

Bunton, D. (1998). The use of higher-level metatext in PhD theses. *English for Specific Purposes*, *18*, S41-S56.

Crismore, A. (1984). The rhetoric of textbooks: Metadiscourse. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *16*, 279-296. https://doi.org/10.1080/0022027840160306.

Crismore, A. (1989). *Talking with readers: Metadiscourse as rhetorical act*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers.

Crismore, A., & Farnsworth, R. (1990). Metadiscourse in popular and professional science discourse. In W. Nash, (Ed.), *The writing scholar. Studies in Academic discourse* (pp. 119-136) Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Dafouz, E. (2003). *Metadiscourse revisited a contrastive study of persuasive writing in professional discourse*. Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad Complutense.

Duruk, E. (2017). Interpersonal metadiscourse markers in a written register used by Turkish writers. *International Journal of Management and Applied Science*, *3*(8), 87-94.

Hall, J.K, & Walsh, M. (2002). Teacher-student interaction and language learning. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *22*, 186-203. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190502000107.

Hall, J.K., & Verplaetse, L.S. (Eds.). (2000). *Second and foreign language learning through classroom interaction.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hellermann, J., & Vergun, A. (2007). Language which is not taught: The discourse marker use of beginning adult learners of English. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *39*(1), 157-179. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2006.04.008.

Hui, J., & Na, B. (2008). Use of metadiscourse in allocating SLA learners' attention. *Sino-US English Teaching*, *5*(11), 55-67.

Hyland, K. (1998). Persuasion and context: The pragmatics of academic metadiscourse. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *30*, 437-455. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(98)00009-5.

Hyland, K. (2000). *Disciplinary Discourses: Social Interactions in Academic Writing*. Longman: London.

Hyland, K. (2005). *Metadiscourse: Exploring interaction in writing.* London: Continuum Discourse Series.

Rasooyar, H. & Hosseini, E. (2019). Investigating interpersonal metadiscourse markers in English M.A. these: The case of transition markers. *Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching. 9*(4), 184-192. https://doi.org/10.18844/gjflt.v9i4.4089

Hyland, K., & Tse, P. (2004). Metadiscourse in academic writing: A reappraisal. *Applied Linguistics*, *25*(2), 156-177. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/25.2.156.

Pérez, M. A. (2003). Meta-discourse in lecture comprehension: Does it really help foreign language learners. *Atlantis*, *14*(2), 3-21.

Schiffrin, D. (1980). Meta-talk: Organizational and evaluative brackets in discourse. *Sociological Inquiry*, *50*, 199-236. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.1980.tb00021.x.

Valero-Garces, C. (1996). Contrastive ESP rhetoric: Meta-text in Spanish-English economics. *English for Specific Purposes, 15*, 279-294.

Van Lier, L. (1988). *The classroom and the language learner.* London, New York: Longman.

Vande Kopple, W.J. (1985). Some exploratory discourse on metadiscourse. *College Composition and Communication*, *36*, 82-93.