
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Metadiscourse Across Discourses: A Cross-Cultural Review of Current Trends and Future Directions

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| ABSTRACT

This paper provides a cross-cultural review of metadiscourse research, focusing on its application and development in academic discourse, media discourse, and business discourse. As a linguistic tool, metadiscourse helps authors organize text content and interact with readers, reflecting the author's stance and discourse structure. The paper reviews early definitions of metadiscourse and its theoretical development, particularly Hyland's interpersonal metadiscourse framework, and analyzes the use of metadiscourse across different discourse types. The study finds that the use of metadiscourse in academic discourse varies significantly across disciplines, while media discourse shows significant cross-cultural differences. In business discourse, metadiscourse is primarily used to construct corporate image and engage with the audience. Additionally, the paper explores metadiscourse research from a cross-cultural perspective and discusses metadiscourse adaptation in translation studies. Finally, the paper identifies gaps in current research and suggests that future studies should further explore the role of metadiscourse in digital media and multimodal discourse.

| KEYWORDS

Metadiscourse; Interpersonal Metadiscourse; Ken Hyland

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Metadiscourse, a term introduced by structural linguist Zelig Harris, has evolved over decades to become a central concept in discourse analysis. Initially conceptualized as a method for understanding language use, it is now applied across diverse fields such as linguistics, education, computer science, and psychology (Hyland & Jiang, 2022). Metadiscourse refers to the ways authors or speakers guide the recipient's perception of a text, helping structure the discourse and signal their stance toward the content and the reader. Schiffrin (1980) expanded on this by defining metadiscourse as the rhetorical representation used by authors to "bracket the discourse organization and the expressive implications of what is being said" (p. 231).

The distinction between propositional content and metadiscourse was highlighted by early scholars such as Williams (1981) and Crismore (1983). While propositional content conveys information about the world outside the text, metadiscourse organizes that content and shapes how the audience comprehends it. Lautamatti (1978) described metadiscourse as non-topical material that organizes discourse without contributing to its discourse topic, aligning with Williams's (1981: 226) view that metadiscourse "does not involve the subject matter being discussed." Similarly, Vande Kopple (1985) and Crismore (1983) defined it as language that signals the author's presence in the text, helping to guide the reader's interpretation of the primary discourse.

This conceptualization of metadiscourse was further developed by scholars like Mauranen (1993) and Hyland (2005), who emphasized its role in structuring text and reflecting authorial stance. Mauranen (1993) limited metadiscourse to features related to text organization, excluding expressions of the author's perspective, while Ädel (2006) extended this by including how authors

refer to themselves, the readers, and the text. Textual reflexivity views metadiscourse as the author's interpretation of the text itself, rather than the reader's awareness.

In contrast to Mauranen and Ädel's text-centered views, Hyland's (2005) interpersonal approach to metadiscourse positions it as a key tool for organizing discourse and projecting the author into the text, making the discourse more understandable and persuasive.

Metadiscourse research has become a central method for analyzing written communication across a range of genres, including academic writing, media texts, and business communication. Previous studies have focused on various contexts, such as journal articles (Hyland et al., 2023), business reports (Hyland, 1998a), and media editorials (Le, 2004). This review aims to provide a cross-cultural perspective on the use of metadiscourse in academic, media, and business discourse, exploring the current trends and identifying gaps for future research.

2. Previous Studies On Metadiscourse

2.1 Metadiscourse In Academic Discourse

Research on metadiscourse in academic writing has focused primarily on journal articles, with particular attention given to introductions (He & Yan, 2021), abstracts (Guo & Ma, 2016), and conclusions (Liu et al., 2023). Additionally, the metadiscourse features across different academic disciplines have become a growing research focus.

For instance, Mu (2023) analyzed a self-constructed, multidisciplinary, bilingual corpus of English abstracts from Chinese and international journals, and explored the discourse structure and interpersonal functions of metadiscourse nouns in these abstracts. His findings revealed that Chinese journal abstracts use fewer "background" and "conclusion" moves compared to international journals, with Chinese authors' English abstracts being influenced by Chinese writing conventions. Furthermore, Mu's research indicated that humanities and social sciences employ more metadiscourse than science and engineering disciplines, which aligns with the findings of Hyland (2010).

However, He and Yan (2023) reached different conclusions than Mu and Hyland. They collected 120 introductions from English papers in mathematics and applied linguistics written by native English speakers and found that the frequency of metadiscourse in the introductions of mathematical papers was higher than that in applied linguistics papers, especially in terms of self-referencing expressions. This difference may arise from the distinct textual composition characteristics of different disciplines, as well as language use differences between native English speakers and non-native English learners.

Hyland, Jiang and Chen (2023) classified 441 empirical papers from the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes (JEAP)* to explore how authors in various fields use metadiscourse to establish interaction. They found that, overall, interactive metadiscourse occurred more frequently than interpersonal metadiscourse. In critical and teaching-oriented papers, interactive metadiscourse was relatively less frequent, likely because these papers often use qualitative research methods that emphasize participants' personal experiences and use fewer data and tables for narrative purposes. Similarly, Gao (2018) compared interpersonal metadiscourse in Western medicine and traditional Chinese medicine journal papers and found that traditional Chinese medicine papers showed a significantly higher frequency of self-mentions, hedges, and engagement markers compared to Western medicine papers.

Subsequent studies on subcategories of metadiscourse have also garnered attention. For example, Zhong and Xu (2018) investigated the use of transition markers by Chinese English major students in their writing and found that students tend to overuse transitions in informal writing while avoiding them in academic writing. This finding resonates with Jiang and Hyland's (2022) research on the diachronic trends of interpersonal metadiscourse, which noted a decline in interpersonal metadiscourse use in the social sciences and humanities from 1965 to 2015, while its use in science and engineering disciplines has gradually increased.

These studies indicate that the use of metadiscourse in academic discourse is diverse, with varying demands across disciplines and discourse sections. Research in this field not only enhances our understanding of the linguistic characteristics of academic communication but also provides valuable insights for academic writing and cross-cultural communication.

2.2 Metadiscourse In Media Discourse

Research on metadiscourse in media discourse covers various aspects, including editorials, columns, and news commentary. Studies primarily focus on the differences in metadiscourse use across different linguistic and cultural contexts and how these differences affect the interaction between authors and readers in news texts.

Le (2004) explored how the author of *Le Monde* editorials uses citation, personal markers, and relational markers as metadiscourse to shape the image of public representatives and independent intellectuals. This study demonstrates that metadiscourse is not only a tool for organizing the text but also helps authors construct identity and establish relationships with readers. Mu (2010) compared metadiscourse usage in Chinese and American newspaper editorials and found that the frequency of metadiscourse in English editorials was significantly higher than in Chinese editorials. This result supports the hypothesis of "reader-responsible" versus "author-responsible" writing modes, where Chinese writing tends to be reader-responsible, emphasizing coherence, while English writing is more author-responsible, focusing on cohesion. This difference reflects varying cultural understandings of responsibility allocation in writing.

Huang and Xiong (2012) selected 30 English and 30 Chinese news commentaries, and found that English news commentaries contained significantly more metadiscourse than their Chinese counterparts, particularly interactional metadiscourse. This suggests that English news commentaries place greater emphasis on interaction with readers. Liu (2013), in a comparison of news commentaries in *New York Times* and *People's Daily*, found that the frequency of interactive metadiscourse was higher than interactional metadiscourse, which differed from Huang and Xiong's findings. The discrepancy may be due to differences in the corpus sources and time span. Huang and Xiong chose award-winning commentaries from 2007 to 2009, which are more likely to reflect mainstream stylistic trends and be more representative, whereas Liu's corpus consisted of randomly collected news commentaries from 2010, which may have been influenced by the specific events and writing context of that time.

Furthermore, Sun (2014) studied the differences in the use of stance adverbs by Chinese and American columnists in *China Daily* to express their stance. She found that Chinese writers tend to either overuse or underuse stance adverbs, with a more direct, rigid, and formal style, showing a significantly lower awareness of interaction compared to native English speakers. This highlights the significant influence of cultural background and writing tradition on metadiscourse usage. Ju (2018) further explored interactional metadiscourse in column commentary writing and found that stance markers accounted for over 80% of the interactional metadiscourse usage. This phenomenon is related to the evaluative nature of column writing, where authors tend to use stance markers to express their attitudes. However, Chinese writers used less engagement marker than native English writers, possibly due to the underemphasis on interaction and involvement markers in Chinese writing style. Chinese speakers or writers are typically better at presenting or expressing their views but may not focus as much on attracting readers' attention and engaging them in interactive discourse. This further confirms the profound impact of cultural background on metadiscourse usage.

In conclusion, metadiscourse use in news discourse demonstrates complexity and cross-cultural differences. The differences in metadiscourse between Chinese and English media discourse are partly due to the differences in writing styles between the two languages. Chinese writing places more emphasis on coherence, focusing on constructing text structure through semantic relationships, while English writing tends to focus on cohesion, using metadiscourse to organize the text, clarify the author's stance, and establish interaction with readers (Mu, 2010; Huang & Xiong, 2012; Liu, 2013). These studies reveal the profound influence of language, culture, and writing traditions on metadiscourse choices.

2.3 Metadiscourse In Business Discourse

In business discourse, metadiscourse is essential for establishing relationships with readers and conveying corporate messages. Research on metadiscourse in business discourse spans multiple domains, including advertisements, emails, annual reports, and corporate reports, reflecting the significant role of metadiscourse in business communication. These studies not only focus on the characteristics of metadiscourse usage in different business genres but also explore the influence of cross-cultural factors on metadiscourse usage.

Studies on metadiscourse in advertising discourse show that metadiscourse can enhance the persuasiveness of information and help establish a close relationship with the reader. Fuertes-Olivera et al. (2001), through their study of metadiscourse in women's magazine headlines, found that metadiscourse plays an important role in establishing interaction between advertisements and their target audiences, especially in conveying the appeal of the product through specific linguistic strategies.

Research on metadiscourse in emails also reveals the diverse applications of metadiscourse in different communicative contexts. For instance, Vergaro (2004) explored the use of metadiscourse in promotional letters, demonstrating that promotional letters effectively convey information through a rich variety of metadiscourse strategies. Jensen (2009) studied business negotiation emails and found that metadiscourse use helps strengthen interaction and trust between the negotiating parties. Carrio and Calderón (2015) compared the use of boosters in business emails written by non-native Spanish and Chinese speakers, revealing significant cultural differences in how metadiscourse is used to enhance credibility and persuasiveness. Ho and Li (2018), in their analysis of 659 workplace request emails, further explored how professionals use metadiscourse to effectively convey information and perform persuasive functions.

Corporate annual reports and CSR reports are key areas of metadiscourse research in business discourse. Among them, the letter to shareholders has received particular attention from scholars. As a critical part of communication with shareholders, consumers, and the media, the letter to shareholders conveys the company's performance and image through metadiscourse.

Hyland (1998a) analyzed letters to shareholders from 137 international and Hong Kong companies' annual reports, and found that nearly one metadiscourse unit appeared for every 50 words. This indicates the significant role of metadiscourse in corporate annual reports, helping companies construct a positive and trustworthy image. Liu (2017), in a comparative study of letters to shareholders from Chinese and American financial companies, found that American companies used more interactional metadiscourse, especially in the use of self-mention and hedge, and more flexibly combined self-mentions with boosters, hedges, and engagement markers. This usage helps create a positive corporate image and enhance interaction with readers, achieving a more persuasive effect.

Hu and Li (2018) further compared the use of metadiscourse in the annual reports of Chinese and American IT companies, finding that the frequency of interactional metadiscourse was higher than interactive metadiscourse, with self-mentions being the most frequently used. This aligns with Liu (2017). Lee (2020) analyzed the differences between Chinese and American companies in the use of boosters and hedges. The study showed that American companies tend to use boosters to convey a confident, decisive, and authoritative corporate image, while Chinese companies tend to use hedges to express caution and humility, which aligns with core values of caution, humility, and trust in Chinese culture.

With the rise of multimodal discourse analysis, metadiscourse research has expanded into the multimodal domain. De Groot et al. (2016) proposed a classification framework for visual metadiscourse. By analyzing images in Dutch and British company annual reports, they found that attitude marker is often conveyed through the image of managers' smiles, which communicates a sense of approachability. Niu Yilin (2022), building on Hyland (2005) and De Groot (2016), analyzed metadiscourse on three levels—textual, visual, and hypertext—in Chinese and American corporate reports, revealing the important role of hyperlinks as part of hypertextual metadiscourse in guiding readers.

These studies highlight the diverse applications of metadiscourse in business discourse and demonstrate the differences in how companies from different cultural backgrounds construct their image and convey information. For example, American companies are more likely to use boosters and self-mentions to build a confident and decisive image, while Chinese companies tend to use hedges to convey humility and pragmatism. These cross-cultural differences reflect the profound influence of cultural values on metadiscourse choices in business discourse. The study of multimodal metadiscourse also provides new perspectives on understanding the complexity of modern business discourse, especially in cross-cultural business communication and corporate image construction.

3. Emerging Fields in Metadiscourse Research

3.1 Cross-Cultural Perspectives in Metadiscourse Research

The use of metadiscourse is greatly influenced by the social and cultural context, where factors such as communication norms, discourse practices, rhetorical conventions, and power relations can all exert varying impacts (Holmes, 1988). In recent years, metadiscourse research from a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspective has deepened, with this approach becoming a common method and an important angle of investigation in metadiscourse studies (Fu & Xu, 2012).

Abdollahzadeh (2011) conducted a comparative analysis of metadiscourse usage in the conclusion sections of research papers written by authors from the US and the UK, and those written by Iranian authors. Similarly, Abdi (2009) compared the use of metadiscourse in 36 Persian and 36 English papers. The studies revealed significant differences in the use of interactional metadiscourse markers between the two groups of texts. These differences partly reflect the cultural identity of Persian-speaking authors.

Recent research has further expanded the scope of cross-cultural metadiscourse analysis. Huang (2012) examined the distribution and clustering patterns of metadiscourse in the CEO letters of Chinese and Western banking annual reports. The study found that Western CEO letters tend to use more interactional metadiscourse, particularly language structures framed around "I-you," to enhance interaction and emotional resonance with the reader. In contrast, Chinese CEO letters primarily employ interactive metadiscourse, focusing on rational appeals and reflecting power relations. Furthermore, the study highlighted that Western CEO letters tend to establish equal relationships, whereas Chinese CEO letters emphasize power dynamics. The research also pointed out that Chinese authors of CEO letters are relatively less aware of the register.

These studies highlight the profound influence of cultural values on metadiscourse choices and suggest that cross-cultural research can deepen our understanding of how metadiscourse functions across different linguistic and social contexts.

3.2 Metadiscourse in Translation Studies

Metadiscourse research in translation studies provides valuable insights into how metadiscourse markers adapt across different languages. Huang and Wang (2013), using a parallel corpus of *Hong Lou Meng* in English and Chinese, conducted a comparative analysis of the metadiscourse marker "不过" ("however"). The study examined its representation and functional differences in two English translations, finding a degree of omission in the translations. This omission was primarily due to the inherent differences between English and Chinese: English, as a more formal language, uses explicit formal devices to establish coherence, focusing on structure and form; whereas Chinese, as a more content-oriented language, places more emphasis on meaning and functional cohesion, often expressed through implicit logical sequences.

Liu, Zhu, and Si (2022) focused on metadiscourse translation strategies in academic discourse. Using a corpus of Chinese and English academic papers from Chinese Social Sciences, they analyzed types of metadiscourse and their translation strategies. The study found that academic metadiscourse is typically translated literally to ensure the accuracy of information transmission. However, translators also sometimes use expansion or omission, depending on the type of metadiscourse, its semantic flexibility, and the context, in order to improve the readability of the translation. This indicates that metadiscourse translation not only involves linguistic fidelity but also considers the overall structure of the discourse and the reader's comprehension.

These studies reveal not only the differences in the use of metadiscourse across different cultural contexts but also reflect deep-seated cultural values and communication patterns. Cross-cultural metadiscourse research offers valuable insights into the communication strategies and rhetorical characteristics of different cultural groups, providing important references for cross-cultural communication, writing instruction, and translation practice.

4. Conclusions

Metadiscourse research has significantly advanced our understanding of how language functions in written communication across various genres. However, there remain several gaps in the field. While much research has focused on academic discourse, more attention is needed to explore metadiscourse in genres like business communication, media texts, and translation. Additionally, although interpersonal metadiscourse has been extensively studied, there is less research on how metadiscourse contributes to the internal organization of texts.

5. Study Limitations and Future Research

Future research should aim to bridge these gaps by expanding the corpus sizes and exploring new genres, such as digital media and multimodal communication. A more integrated approach to studying metadiscourse across different languages and cultures can provide valuable insights for improving cross-cultural communication and enhancing the effectiveness of written discourse in diverse contexts.

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