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Research Article

Variation in Metadiscursive “You” Across Genres: From Research Articles to Teacher Feedback

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Abstract

This article takes the theme of metadiscourse across genres as a point of departure. To illustrate variation in the use of metadiscourse, reflexive uses of second person “you” are examined in different genres and discourse types, all of which represent academic discourse. The material includes university lectures, research articles, advanced university student essays and teacher feedback on student writing. The data is analysed both quantitatively, taking frequency into consideration, and qualitatively, taking discourse function into consideration. The extended units in which “you” occurs are compared across genres and discourse types to highlight the considerable variability of metadiscursive uses. One of the implications of the variation found—which was brought to the fore especially through the study of teacher feedback—is that our conceptualisations of metadiscourse are overly influenced by the type of data that have been in focus in research to date: highly visible written genres at the highly monologic end of the continuum. The metadiscourse in teacher feedback was found to be primarily about solving communication problems rather than organising the discourse and telling the reader how to respond to it. In fact, the feedback material is congruous with Roman Jakobson’s original conceptualisation of the metalinguistic function as solving communication problems.

Keywords

Metadiscourse • Genre • Academic discourse • Reflexivity • Variation

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Metadiscourse across Genres

One of the pioneers in the study of metadiscourse, Vande Kopple (1985, p. 88), raised the question about the relation of metadiscourse and genre variation over thirty years ago, asking: “Are some kinds of metadiscourse more appropriate than others—or even necessary—in some kinds of texts?”. This question is beginning to generate interesting answers. A recent event which helped paint a clearer picture was the first conference fully dedicated to work on metadiscourse, whose theme was “Metadiscourse across Genres”.² This theme is taken as a point of departure here.

Two main points will be presented: (i) There seems to be considerable variation in the use of metadiscourse across genres; the second person pronoun “you” will be used to illustrate this. (ii) One of the implications of this is that our definitions and conceptualisations of metadiscourse need to be rather flexible to accommodate this variability. In fact, they need revisiting, as they are overly influenced by the type of data that have been primarily in focus in research to date: written genres, at the “monologic” end of the continuum.

If we consider previous work on metadiscourse from the perspective of genre, we can see that it is especially academic genres that have been in focus. Divided into written and spoken types, the following list includes some examples of types of discourses studied in an academic context together with a selection of references.

WRITING

- Research articles (e.g. Dahl, 2004; Harwood, 2005; Hyland, 1998; Kuo, 1998; Mauranen, 1993; Pérez-Llantada, 2010; Sanderson, 2008; Vassileva, 1998)
- MA/PhD theses (e.g. Hyland, 2004)
- University student essays (e.g. Ädel, 2006; Crismore et al., 1993)
- Textbooks (e.g. Bondi, 2001; Hyland, 2004)

SPEECH

- University lectures (e.g. Ädel, 2010; Mauranen, 2001; Pérez-Llantada, 2006; Molino, 2018)
- Conference talks (e.g. Luukka, 1994; Thompson, 2003)
- Spoken ELF interactions (Mauranen, 2012)

² The conference was held in 2017 and attracted participants from some 40 different countries, which testifies to the fact that metadiscourse is a dynamic area of research across the globe. This article is based on a plenary talk given at the conference.

It is academic writing that has gained the widest popularity by far compared to academic speaking. For a host of different reasons, our research is “scripto-centric”.³ The most widely investigated genre appears to be the research article—a high-prestige genre that is also highly visible. The focus of research into metadiscourse has been on written texts and the linguistic resources that are typically drawn on to interact with the audience even in a highly “monologic” text. By “monologic” is meant a type of discourse that is not executed face-to-face and that offers no possibility for direct linguistic exchanges.⁴ Metadiscourse has been conceptualised as contributing to “organis[ing] a discourse or the writer’s stance toward either its content or the reader” (Hyland, 2000, p. 109).

Variables studied in research on metadiscourse

In addition to looking at metadiscourse across genres, we should also, to a greater extent and more specifically, be looking at variables which affect the use of metadiscourse. After all, if we break down the concept of “genre”—in the sense “type of discourse”—it involves a complex set of variables which may all be relevant to the variability of metadiscourse. We know that language is not a static phenomenon, but rather varies depending on why it is used, where it is used, by whom it is used, to whom it is addressed, and so on. In studies of metadiscourse, we are interested in the discourse level, but variability of course occurs at all levels of language, with speakers making choices in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, information structure, politeness, etc. Some prominent variables that have figured in classic work in sociology and anthropology are listed as follows in Biber and Conrad (2003, p. 175): the participants, their relationships, and their attitudes toward the communication; the setting, including factors such as the extent to which time and place are shared by the participants, and the level of formality; the channel of communication; the production and processing circumstances; the purpose of the communication; the topic or subject matter.

If we consider the variables that have been explored in previous research on metadiscourse, we find language culture (e.g. Crismore et al., 1993; Mauranen, 1993; Mur-Dueñas, 2011; Pérez Llantada, 2010; Salas, 2015) and academic discipline (e.g. Dahl, 2004; Harwood, 2005; Hyland, 1999, 2005) among those most widely studied. Studying metadiscourse from the perspective of rhetorical styles cross-linguistically has attracted a great deal of attention, as has the study of research writing across academic disciplines. Metadiscourse has been studied contrastively also across

3 Overall, this general trend also applied to the first conference on metadiscourse (MAG 2017), even if the repertoire was expanding somewhat, especially into media discourse. Of a total of some 90 presentations, as many as 60 were on academic writing, and only half a dozen on academic speaking.

4 Researchers such as Ken Hyland have convincingly shown that no discourse is truly ‘monologic’, as there is always a recipient in mind—hence the scare quotes marking ‘monologic’.

different genres/types of texts (e.g. Bondi, 1999, 2010; Hyland, 2005). Given the complexity of the concept of genre, it is useful to try to break it down into more specific variables if possible, and for example see a study looking at BA-level writing and MA-level writing as contrasting the academic proficiency of the writer. There is also work that takes a diachronic perspective on metadiscourse, investigating its potential change over time (e.g. Boggel, 2009; Hyland & Jiang, 2016; Taavitsainen, 2000). Furthermore, there is a small number of studies that have contrasted spoken and written modes from the perspective of metadiscourse (e.g. Ädel, 2010; Mauranen, 2001; Zare & Tavakoli, 2017). We are beginning to see more work on metadiscourse in spoken genres (e.g. Correia et al., 2015; Molino, 2018; Zhang et al., 2017). The extent to which metadiscourse varies based on gender has also been studied (e.g. Alotaibi, 2018; Crismore et al., 1993; Sanderson, 2008; Tse & Hyland, 2008), with varying results. Then there are additional variables which have been investigated only to a small extent, such as age and academic status in the case of academics writing research articles (Sanderson, 2008). The use of metadiscourse has also been investigated comparing learner versus native-speaker writing (e.g. Ädel, 2006) and, more recently, focusing on “novice” writers at the postgraduate level contrasting not only L1 English to L2 English but also the L1 of the L2 group (Akbas & Hardman, 2018). It has also been considered from the perspective of position in text (e.g. Ädel, 2006), with findings suggesting that metadiscourse is likely to occur particularly often in part-genres such as introductions and conclusions. Just to further stress the fact that the number of relevant variables may be large, we can consider also the relative power of the discourse participants. There is a hypothesis in a study by Mauranen that “those in a dominant position in any speech event will use more reflexive expressions” (2001, p. 209). It seems that this has yet to be tested empirically, but it is likely to be true for instance in institutional settings if we consider teachers versus students.

To sum up, there appears to be considerable variation in the use of metadiscourse, but we are still far from being able to map in a comprehensive way the extent of the variation, the variables that give rise to it, or the possible ranking of different variables (cf. Ädel, 2012a). Thus, in future work, we would stand to gain from taking a more systematic approach to variability.

Reflexivity in Language

Having set the scene by considering briefly genre and variability, next I will give some background on reflexivity in language. My own work on metadiscourse has approached it as a form of reflexivity in language. This is not the dominant paradigm given what is published on metadiscourse, but the dominant paradigm is what has been called the *interactive* approach, where the interactivity aspect is foregrounded and a broad definition of metadiscourse is applied. This is championed by Ken Hyland,

who has done so much important work in this area. I adopt a *reflexive* approach to metadiscourse, where the reflexivity aspect is foregrounded, and a more narrow definition is applied [These two different approaches are described for example in Ädel and Mauranen (2010) and Flowerdew (2015, pp. 19–20)].⁵

I see metadiscourse as a specific type of reflexivity in language, defined as “reflexive linguistic expressions referring to the evolving discourse itself or its linguistic form, including references to the writer-speaker *qua* writer-speaker and the (imagined or actual) audience *qua* audience of the current discourse” (cf. Ädel, 2006). Human language gives us the means not just to convey information, but also to refer to the situation of communicating itself, as when we emphasize the main message or show how the discourse is structured. Communication *about* communication is one of the basic functions of language, first described as such in the 1950s by Roman Jakobson who dubbed it the “metalinguistic function”. Jakobson (e.g. 1990) essentially described the function as being about checking that the channel is working and removing obstacles to communication. Another term used for this function is “reflexivity” in language, defined as the capacity of language to refer to or describe itself (Lyons, 1977, p. 5). Jakobson’s work has been used as a basis for a model of metadiscourse where the “reflexive triangle” is central (cf. Ädel, 2006). If we focus on the foregrounded parts in Figure 1 (the backgrounded parts are explained below), we see that, central to this model is the view of metadiscourse as serving *metalinguistic*, *expressive* and *directive* functions of language, based on three of Jakobson’s six basic functions of language. This means that the main components of metadiscourse include the discourse, or text, itself (the metalinguistic function),

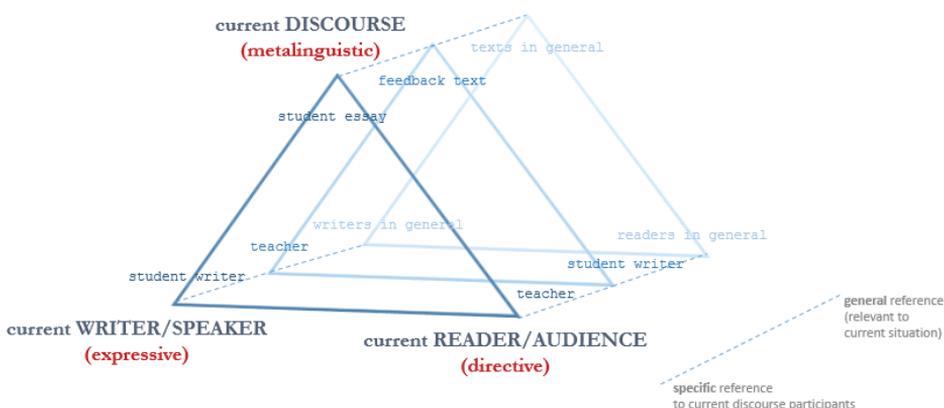


Figure 1. The reflexive triangle in a multidimensional representation (based on Ädel, 2017, p. 56).

5 Note, however, that research into metadiscourse involves more than two single, and dichotomous, approaches (cf. Ädel, 2006, pp. 26;197-8; Hyland, 2017, p. 19).

and also potentially the writer-speaker persona (the expressive function), and the real or imagined audience (the directive function). An important point here is that the referential function is excluded, as it refers to entities in the “real” world, outside the world of discourse.

Even if metadiscourse is a fuzzy discourse phenomenon, we can make the definition more explicit, which in turn makes the identification of metadiscourse more reliable. Thus, specific criteria are applied (Ädel, 2006, 27ff), involving the “world of discourse” and the “current discourse”. The “current discourse” criterion (cf. Mauranen, 1993) means that, in order for a linguistic unit to count as metadiscourse, it needs to refer to the ongoing text rather than to other, unrelated texts. References to other texts are considered intertextual and not metadiscursive. The criteria of the current writer-speaker and the current reader/audience mean that—in personal types of metadiscourse, where there is explicit reference to a discourse participant—the reference needs to be made to the current discourse participants and in their roles as discourse participants, and they need to be carrying out actions, or doing things, in the world of discourse (as in: *as I mentioned earlier*) and not in the “real” world (as in: *I am so happy to be in Cyprus*). To put it differently, the discourse participants’ roles as communicators rather than as agents in the “real” world are foregrounded. The reflexive triangle, together with the criteria of the current discourse/writer-speaker/audience, help restrict the concept of metadiscourse and keep the focus on reflexivity, which is considered key.

In some types of data, the reflexive triangle becomes highly multidimensional, as indicated in Figure 1. This is the case in teacher feedback on student writing, which is a type of discourse which will be in focus later in this article. The backgrounded parts in the figure indicate that the feedback text is part of a larger “genre chain”, which makes the concept of the “current discourse” more complex, as discussed in 4.1. They also indicate that the writer and reader roles are unusually complex in the case of feedback (cf. Ädel, 2017, p. 65).

When applying the model to real-language data, manual analysis is necessary. In corpus-based studies when lists of potential metadiscourse can be systematically and automatically searched for, it may be the case that a relatively large proportion of the retrieved items (such as instances of “I”, which only potentially refer to the current writer in his or her role as writer) do not meet the criteria of the model and thus do not qualify as metadiscourse (cf. e.g. Ädel, 2010).

Second Person “You” across Genres

Next we will take a closer look at second person “you” in metadiscourse across genres. All of the genres that will be referred to come from the academic domain. First, we will briefly consider how “you” is typically treated in studies of metadiscourse.

In the interactive approach to metadiscourse, second person “you” is classified as “commentary” or as an “engagement marker”. Vande Kopple’s (1985) “commentary” is “used to address readers directly and draw them into an implicit dialogue”. Hyland’s “engagement marker” (2001) is also called a “relational marker” in Hyland (1998, p. 444), following Crismore et al. (1993). It includes “devices that explicitly address readers, either by selectively focusing their attention or by including them as participants in the text situation”, through second person pronouns, imperatives, question forms and asides. We can note the reliance on *writing* in these definitions.

How does the reflexive model presented above treat “you”?⁶ First of all, single occurrences of “you” *per se* are not counted as part of a specific subcategory, but they are rather seen as and analysed as part of extended units, which can be seen to fulfil some kind of discourse function (as in 3.2 below). In other words, the frequency of “you” with metadiscursive reference is reported on (as in 3.1 below), but it is not considered a subcategory of metadiscourse as such. Furthermore, a unit involving “you” would be classified as “personal” (rather than “impersonal”) metadiscourse given that there is an explicit reference to a discourse participant—this is a distinction that is important to maintain, and there is likely to be a great deal of interesting variation along personal and impersonal types.

Furthermore, not all occurrences are considered relevant, so there is no blanket acceptance of “you” as metadiscourse, but all examples need to be analysed in their context. Quoted material is not included, as it is the current writer-speaker’s discourse that is of interest. Even if the writer-speaker strictly speaking has produced the text, there are cases that are excluded, as in (1), where the writer provides a backtranslation of an example in another language.

- (1) Tu prends quel train demain? **you** take which train tomorrow

Also, we want to apply a discourse-internal focus, so in metadiscursive uses, the reference needs to be made to the current discourse participants and in their roles as discourse participants, carrying out actions in the world of discourse primarily.

Generic uses of “you” form an interesting case. With generic “you”, there is no specific reference to a discourse participant (the expressive and/or directive functions are not explicitly activated), but the unit in which “you” occurs can still be situated in the world of discourse (the metalinguistic function is activated). Thus, generic “you” can be metadiscursive, as is the case in (2), marked by the discourse verb *SAY*, from a research article in Literary Studies.

- (2) Johnson once said that a man wasn’t on oath in epitaphs. **You** could say the same about book-plates.

⁶ This sentence is a good example of ‘you’ used as metalanguage and not as object language. While such examples are metalinguistic, they are not classified as metadiscourse.

Quantitative Analysis

What do we find in terms of variation across genres if “you” is considered quantitatively? To begin with, let us contrast two genres which (among those considered for this study) represent extremes at either end of the scale with respect to second person “you”: on the one hand, research articles, and, on the other, written teacher feedback on student writing. Expressions involving “you” are telling of the extent to which metadiscourse can vary across different types of academic discourse. In research articles, second person “you” practically does not occur, while in the feedback material, it is by far the most frequently occurring personal pronoun.

Second Person in Research Articles and in Feedback

Table 1 shows how the second person pronoun is essentially non-existent in the research article (RA) material. It represents the least frequently occurring personal pronoun; the frequency of occurrence of first person pronouns is included for comparison. The material represents writing in the Humanities, specifically History [Hist], Linguistics [Ling] and Literary Studies [Lit], where this type of audience address is more likely to happen at least when compared to areas in the hard sciences (see e.g. Hyland, 2005a⁷). A distinction is also made between regional variety (British and US-American English) as a variable potentially affecting the use of metadiscourse. Each row in the table is represented by 16 RAs, for which the total number of words is found in the first column.

Table 1

Frequency Comparison of Metadiscursive Uses of Personal Pronouns in RAs; Raw Numbers and Normalised Frequency per 10,000 Words

Corpus size	Corpus material	<i>I</i>		<i>we</i>		<i>you</i>	
		n	f/10,000	n	f/10,000	n	f/10,000
160,204	Hist (<i>BrE</i>)	20	1	8	0	0	0
263,693	Hist (<i>AmE</i>)	136	5	93	4	0	0
210,274	Ling (<i>BrE</i>)	487	23	673	32	21	1
135,591	Ling (<i>AmE</i>)	253	19	195	14	6	0
113,415	Lit (<i>BrE</i>)	52	5	119	10	3	0
172,963	Lit (<i>AmE</i>)	224	13	259	15	4	0

One single author accounts for the majority of examples of “you” in Linguistics, so it really is extremely low-frequency and not used across the board.⁸

By contrast to the research articles, “you” is very highly frequent in the feedback material, as seen in Table 2. The material is from the context of a first-term course

⁷ “It is clear that writers in different disciplines represent themselves, their work and their readers in different ways, with those in the humanities and social sciences taking far more explicitly involved and personal positions than those in the science and engineering fields” (Hyland, 2005a, p. 187).

⁸ It is also interesting to note that the use of metadiscourse involving personal pronouns *I* and *we* varies both across disciplines and varieties of English (cf. Ädel, 2018).

on academic writing in English Studies at a university in Sweden. The feedback is given electronically by different teachers on a range of different tasks. The number of words amounts to just over 40,000, counting the feedback only and not the student texts.⁹ The table includes first person pronouns for comparison. It is clear that “you” is the most common personal pronoun in personal metadiscourse, showing that the student writer (“you”) is considerably more visible than the teacher giving feedback (representing “I”). Interestingly, these pronoun distributions in feedback are corroborated in Rodway (2018). Also, there were relatively few exclusions, but the number of relevant metadiscursive uses was considerably higher in the feedback data than in other types of academic discourse. The likelihood that “you” will be referring to the current audience is unusually high, so the world of discourse is more salient than the “real” world.

Table 2
Frequency of Metadiscursive Uses of Personal Pronouns in Written Teacher Feedback (based on Ädel, 2017)

	<i>I</i>		<i>we</i>		<i>you</i>	
	n	f/10,000	n	f/10,000	n	f/10,000
Feedback corpus	237	57	71	17	1,094	262

Further Comparison of Second Person “You” across Genres

To further illustrate how metadiscourse may vary across genres and discourse types, Table 3 shows further quantitative data involving metadiscursive “you”. In addition to research articles at the top in the table—with the humanities disciplines lumped together by regional variety (British English and US-American English)—and teacher feedback on student writing at the bottom of the table, the comparison includes university student essays of different kinds and spoken university lectures from the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English, MICASE. The L2 student essays are argumentative essays from the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) and written by Swedish university students who are advanced learners of English. The L1 student essays come from the Locness corpus, designed to be comparable with the L2 ICLE essays. Like the research articles, these have also been split by regional variety, as speakers of both British and American English are represented. The L1 proficient student texts come from the Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Student Papers, MICUSP, and exemplify top-grade writing of varying genres by graduate and final-year undergraduate students. See Ädel (2017) for details about the corpora. As above, results for first person *I* and *we* are included for the sake of comparison

9 For more information about the material, and more specific findings, see Ädel (2017).

Table 3
The Frequency of “I”, “We” and “You” in Metadiscursive Units across Corpora (partly based on Ädel, 2017)

Corpus material	I		we		you	
	n	f/10,000	n	f/10,000	n	f/10,000
Humanities (Ling; Hist; Lit) research articles (<i>BrE</i>)	559	12	800	17	27	1
Humanities (Ling; Hist; Lit) research articles (<i>AmE</i>)	613	11	547	10	13	0
L2 student essays (<i>SwicLe</i>)	347	17	84	4	110	5
L1 student essays (<i>AmE</i>)	72	5	38	3	57	4
L1 student essays (<i>BrE</i>)	20	2	29	3	3	0
L1 proficient student texts	425	11	234	6	33	1
University lectures	794	31	735	29	1,869	73
Feedback corpus	237	57	71	17	1,094	262

A graphical representation of proportions will make the differences even clearer. Table 4 shows the normalised frequencies of personal metadiscourse involving “you” in the same genres and discourse types as in the table above, ordered by frequency.

Table 4
Occurrences of Personal Metadiscourse Involving “You” Contrasted across Discourse Types (Each asterisk represents 10 occurrences per 10,000 words, while an asterisk in parentheses represents a value close to 10)

	Metadiscursive “you”
Humanities RAs <i>BrE</i>	-
Humanities RAs <i>AmE</i>	-
L1 student essays (<i>BrE</i>)	-
L1 proficient student texts	-
L1 student essays (<i>AmE</i>)	-
L2 student essays (<i>SwicLe</i>)	(*)
Spoken university lectures	*****
Written feedback	*****

It is interesting to note that the dividing line here is not between spoken and written modes, as we might expect. This gives partial support to Mauranen’s (2010, p. 37) observation that metadiscourse plays a “much more important role” in spoken discourse than written prose because the “need to manage spoken interaction in real time” is greater. But it seems that the discourse management that is a key feature of the written feedback data has a considerable effect on the frequency of metadiscourse. The spoken mode is only represented by one genre (lectures) here, which happens to be of a type that is not very interactive, but where there is a certain amount of discourse management.

Qualitative Analysis

In previous work I have looked at audience orientation involving “you” from the perspective of the discourse functions in which it is involved. This type of analysis is inspired by work by Kuo (1998) and Vassileva (1998), among others. Ädel (2012b) investigated how the audience is addressed in three different monologic academic

registers: (i) published academic prose (“drawn from e.g. books and research articles in different subject areas” from the BNC—including popular science), (ii) proficient student texts and (iii) spoken lectures.¹⁰ A randomly selected dataset of 150 examples was taken from each of these three types of discourse and each example was coded based on a taxonomy from Ädel (2010), based on spoken lectures and written student essays. The results showed that the distribution of discourse functions was similar in the three discourse types, but that the highest frequency of metadiscourse was found in the spoken lectures and not in the written modes.

There is not sufficient space to go into all of the different discourse functions here, but we will consider selected examples of a few of them, taken from the subcategory “References to the audience”. This is meant to give a sense of some of the qualitative differences in the use of metadiscourse across genres, as the taxonomy of discourse functions will be contrasted to, first, the research article material (below) and, second, the feedback material (in Section 4). The work of coding the data for discourse functions is still ongoing, so information about how prevalent the functions are across genres is not given here.

What happens if research articles are considered from this perspective? To begin with, the method of taking a randomly selected dataset of 150 examples did not work, given how infrequent “you” is, even in a corpus of over one million words. A second observation is that, despite the sparse data, it was possible to classify the “you” units in the research articles on the basis of the taxonomy, even if it was originally developed for other types of academic discourse. A large proportion of the occurrences in the RAs involved the discourse function “Imagining scenarios”, as in (5) below. However, the data came mostly from one single author, so the dispersion was poor.

Next follow some examples of ways in which units including “you” are used. Given how infrequent “you” units are in the research article material, examples from the other written genres referred to above will also be included. See Ädel (2012b) for more information about definitions and for further examples. The discourse function called REVIEWING seen in (3) is used to point backward in the discourse. It is used by the speaker-writer to remind the audience about something which has already taken place in the discourse.

- (3) (a) *...her thought processes (in a way which **you** did not in (44))* [research article; Linguistics]
 (b) *If **you** look back to (97), you will notice that...* [research article; Linguistics]
 (c) *...with the constraint it encodes. In particular, **you** will recall the incidents earlier in the...* [research article; Linguistics]

¹⁰ Category (i) is not included in the genre comparison above, whereas (ii) and (iii) are: (ii) overlaps with the MICUSP material and (iii) with the MICASE university lectures.

(d) *This is, as you may recall, just a simple matter of underdetermination of Physics.*
[proficient student writing]

(e) *You may remember that we discussed the distinction between...* [published academic prose]

ENDOPHORIC MARKING¹¹, exemplified in (4), is used to point to a specific location in the discourse; it refers to cases in which it is not clear or relevant whether what is referred to occurs before or after the current point (unlike PREVIEWING and REVIEWING), as for example when the audience is instructed to look at a table, or turn to a specific point in a handout.

(4) (a) *From this figure, you can see that all of the CIR defects occur when using supplier B.* [proficient student writing]

(b) *...but if you are new to this area you would do better to wait until you have read ch. 9.* [published academic prose]

IMAGINING SCENARIOS, exemplified in (5), asks the audience to see something from a specific perspective, often in an engaging fashion, and often adding a narrative flavour. It allows speaker-writers to make examples or descriptions more vivid and pertinent to the audience, often using a hypothetical, “picture this” technique.

(5) (a) *Imagine that, for some terrible accident you lose your tongue.* [proficient student writing]

(b) *Consider this scenario: you are in a casino with a friend. [...] You reply to your friend, “I think she won the jackpot.”* [student writing]

ANTICIPATING THE AUDIENCE’S RESPONSE¹², exemplified in (6), attempts to predict the audience’s reaction to what is said, often by attributing statements to the audience as potential objections or counterarguments. It shows the speaker-writer’s concern with the audience’s reception and processing of what is said.

(6) (a) *From the planet’s surface you might think there is an eastward force, but there...*
[published academic prose]

(b) *...find out how much it is likely to cost, if necessary by one of the high street printing chains. You will probably find you are very surprised by how little that cost may be.* [published academic prose]

Next, we will see to what extent it worked to apply the taxonomy of discourse functions also to the feedback data.

¹¹ Term from Hyland (1998, p. 443).

¹² Early work on metadiscourse talked about “Anticipating the reader’s reaction” (e.g. Crismore, 1989).

Second Person “You” in the Feedback Material

In what follows, I will focus specifically on the feedback material and some of the insights it has provided with respect to metadiscourse. When the taxonomy of discourse functions was applied to the feedback data, it quickly became clear that it was not fully applicable. This is not surprising, as discourse functions are likely to vary across genres, as speaker-writers and audiences have different needs and operate under different circumstances. What is surprising, however, is the extent to which the metadiscourse in the feedback is different from the other academic types of text serving as a point of reference. If we consider uses of “you”, specifically, and a set of common collocations¹³ referring to the student as a writer (material in brackets is optional), for illustration:

- (7) *what [it is] you are trying to say*
you could...
you could have...
you don't...
you have...
you haven't...
[what/do/did] you mean...
you [really] need [to] ...

In most of these strings, it looks as if the teachers are criticising the students for having done X or for not having done Y, which is verified by a close analysis of the individual examples. Many of these strings would be quite face-threatening in many contexts. The metadiscourse in feedback is about directing the reader [the student] *not* regarding how to read the current text, but regarding how to write or, more generally, how to communicate. Below is an example with more context included:

- (8) *What do you want to show us by using this examples [sic]. I think it is good that you use these but the reader does not automatically know what you want to tell us but [by] including these examples.¹⁴*

The final analysis of specific discourse functions is not yet ready, so it is too soon to present a revised taxonomy. However, if we consider general functions, it is still possible to report on general patterns in the feedback material. The two main patterns identified were: (i) metadiscourse is used to refer to/respond to an interlocutor's discourse and (ii) metadiscourse is used to solve communication problems. With respect to (i), we can note that the reference here is specific rather than general, in that the “you” referent tends to be a known entity—a specific student, to whom the teacher directs feedback; cf. Ädel (2017). There is an interesting parallel to Mauranen's category of “altr-centric discourse”, which is described as dialogic and

¹³ These are sufficiently common to appear as ‘clusters’ when searching for patterns involving ‘you’ in the concordance program AntConc (see <http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/>, accessed April 2018).

¹⁴ There are a large number of typos in the feedback material, as evident in this example.

referring to specific interlocutors.¹⁵ As a consequence of (i), we can also note that the metadiscourse in the feedback material is not the prototypical kind (for writing), whereby the current writer is organising his or her own ongoing discourse (cf. Ädel, 2017, p. 64). Instead, it can be said to be “dialogic” (using a label from Mauranen, 2001) or “contextual” (using a term from Luukka, 1994), that is, referring and responding to another speaker’s [the student’s] discourse. Table 5 shows the three subtypes that are included in two general classifications from previous work, which were created for spoken metadiscourse:

Table 5

General Classifications Used in Mauranen (2001) and Luukka (1994) for Spoken Metadiscourse (taken from Ädel, 2010, p. 74)

Subtypes in Mauranen (2001)	Subtypes in Luukka (1994)
<i>monologic</i> (organising the speaker’s own ongoing speech)	<i>textual</i> (used by author to structure text)
<i>dialogic</i> (referring and responding to interlocutor’s talk)	<i>contextual</i> (used by author to comment on the communicative situation or the text as a product)
<i>interactive</i> (eliciting response from interlocutor, e.g. asking questions, choosing the next speaker)	<i>interpersonal</i> (used to signal attitudes towards the content of the text or people involved in the communication situation)

The monologic or textual type is not common in the feedback material, but it represents prototypical metadiscourse according to present-day research. The interactive or interpersonal types, which are also key functions in the interactive approach to metadiscourse, are found, however. More systematic analysis is needed to assess this, but my impression is that these tend to be secondary to the “dialogic”/“contextual” types. Work done by Schiffrin (1980) on metatalk is also relevant here, especially the term “evaluative brackets”, which refers to elements that allow the speaker to for example give her opinion about what has been said or to request an explanation (Schiffrin, 1980, p. 218). Schiffrin’s taxonomy includes “organisational elements” which regulate the discourse and “evaluative elements” which serve to assess or react to the discourse—and the metadiscourse in the feedback material is evaluative to a great extent.

With respect to the second pattern, that (ii) metadiscourse is problem-solving, the work of Roman Jakobson (referred to in Section 2 above) has turned out to be highly relevant to the feedback material. When Jakobson describes the metalinguistic function, what he does is really to focus on potential problems in communication being resolved. He mentions making sure that the channel is working—it is about removing actual and potential obstacles to the communication. This seems to be the quintessential function of teacher feedback, at least in a written proficiency context: to solve problems in the communication. We find comments (i) pointing to problems/unclearities, as in (a)-(b); (ii) asking for changes to problematic items, as in (c)-(d); and (iii) suggesting changes to problematic parts, as in (e)-(f):

¹⁵ Term used at the above-mentioned MAG 2017 conference.

- (9) (a) *It is good that **you** use secondary sources but how does this fit in here?*
- (b) *Sometimes **you** use inappropriate linking expressions Ahmed but it is good that **you** try to use them and this will improve with practice.¹⁶*
- (c) *I agree that this is a great quote, but **you** are using an usually large amount of quoted material in your introduction. Keep in mind that this is your text--try to use your own words to a greater extent.*
- (d) *Instead of repeating this three times, think of what **you** could do to save words*
- (e) ***you** could soften this a little as **you** are only speculating here: “One explanation for the different frequencies of swearwords might be that adults...”*
- (f) *These quotes from Eckert don't quite work at the beginning of the introduction, when **you** haven't yet stated the topic. If **you** want to use them, put them elsewhere or re-phrase them.*

Examples (a) and (c) follow the rather frequent pattern [POSITIVE evaluation] *but* [NEGATIVE evaluation]. This may also be reversed, as in (b), such that the negative evaluation comes first. In the feedback material collected for this study, it is generally the case that the negative feedback by far exceeds the positive feedback. Positive feedback also occurs, and it typically points to especially elegant solutions, or stresses ways in which the communication has worked (particularly) well. The positive evaluation often takes the form of a description of what the student has done, sometimes not even including an evaluative element, as in the following examples:

- (10) (a) ***You** have paraphrased using your own words.*
- (b) ***You** have kept the text concise*
- (c) ***you** also use appropriate linking expressions*

With no explicit evaluating language, it may be difficult for students to know how to respond (Should I keep doing this or not?).

To sum up, many of the examples of metadiscourse revolve around the question *how is the channel working: not so well or very well?* We can see the teacher giving feedback as a mediator, whose task it is to assure felicitous communication; specifically, to make sure that the text communicates what it is intended, and supposed, to communicate (cf. Ädel, 2017, p. 64).

On the Complexity of Metadiscourse in Feedback

The metadiscourse in the feedback material is complex in ways having to do with what might be called the “genre chain” (Ädel, 2017, p. 65; cf. also Figure 3 in Rodway,

¹⁶ The material has been anonymised, so the student's actual name has been replaced.

2018), which is at times quite apparent in the feedback. There are vertical links, in that the teacher's comments are added to an already existing text. Here, the genre chain involves the original text, possibly several drafts of it, which is commented on and the feedback (again, possibly several iterations of it, even given by different people—sometimes also by other students, as in peer feedback). The teacher feedback is not a stand-alone genre, but is intrinsically connected to the original text, and even to specific *points* in the original text—in this way, it is indexical and similar to footnotes. It can be seen as a *supporting* (part-)genre, dependent on other texts and part-texts.

The feedback material shows that we cannot always in a straightforward way apply the criterion of “the current [or ongoing] discourse”. (Keep in mind that the reflexive model makes a distinction between current discourse and intertextual discourse, with the latter category representing and/or referring to other texts which makes it by definition not metadiscourse.) Similar complexity is found, for example, in the context of spoken lectures, where there is often good reason “to consider a class or a lecture series as one and the same “speech event” or “text”, even though it is spread out in time and space” (Ådel, 2010, p. 75). This position is also suggested by Mauranen (2001, p. 204), who states that “[a] good deal of discourse organising talk refers to previous or later events which can be in an important way thought to be part of the ongoing discourse - as for instance in the case of a lecture series”. In more recent work, Mauranen has labelled this a “non-immediate” type.¹⁷

There are also horizontal links (if we see time as linear) in the genre chain, with references to future writing by the student and to previous drafts and feedback commentary, as in (a) and (b).

(11) (b) You need to rewrite this Esmeralda as it is very difficult to understand what you are saying. If you have a friend or relative who can read it for you before you hand it in this might help you fix some of the problems.

(c) As I said in your first draft it is better to put the table first (overall results) then put your examples and discuss them. We normally start with the general and then go to the specific.¹⁸

Conclusion

By way of conclusion I would like to offer a few reflections on the value of studying metadiscourse in feedback and what the implications may be for all of us working on metadiscourse. Commentary on text “in the form of teacher feedback on student writing can be said to serve the reflexive function of language *par excellence*

¹⁷ This was mentioned in a plenary talk at the MAG conference in Cyprus 2017.

¹⁸ While there were no examples in the feedback material involving an explicit ‘you’ referring to previous drafts, there were a few examples of this involving possessive ‘your’.

as discourse itself is the topic of discussion and the text itself is at centre stage” (Ädel, 2017, p. 55). In other words, it should contain large amounts of metadiscourse—and Ädel (2017) shows that this is indeed the case, which is also supported in Rodway’s (2018) analysis of feedback—and this makes it an ideal type of discourse to study from the perspective of metadiscourse. Unlike previously studied material, teacher feedback on student work is neither a very visible nor a high-prestige type of discourse. Yet it is a frequently occurring type of discourse in many different educational contexts around the world, and teachers spend a great deal of their time producing it. It is also under-researched as a type of discourse in its own right.

Teacher feedback represents a very interesting type of writer-reader “interaction”—one that is more truly interactive than texts written for a more or less anonymous audience. In fact, it supports quite explicit “co-construction and negotiation of meaning between participants”, as suggested by Rodway (2018). In feedback, “there is a specific recipient, who is typically urged to act in specific ways, vis-à-vis the specific text that the feedback is dependent on and responds to” (Ädel, 2017, p. 55). This makes it especially rich in data on second person “you”.

Looking at metadiscourse through the lens of this new type of data has provided valuable insights. As I hope to have shown, the metadiscourse in teacher feedback is rather different from the metadiscourse found in much previous research: rather than being about “organis[ing] a discourse or the writer’s stance toward either its content or the reader” (Hyland, 2000, p. 109), it is much more about the writer-speaker responding to an interlocutor’s discourse in a problem/solution-oriented way (Ädel, 2017). In the introduction, the point was made that the work that has been done on metadiscourse in academic discourse in English investigates predominantly written genres at the monologic end of the continuum—and it can be argued that this has very much shaped our view of what metadiscourse is: prototypically, it is seen as a way for the writer to signal the organisation of the text to the reader and tell the reader how to respond to the text. This written bias is found in most definitions of metadiscourse.

This is acceptable only if we wish to see metadiscourse as a phenomenon restricted to written academic discourse of the type that is published and where there are no possibilities for face-to-face or asynchronous interaction between discourse participants (cf. Ädel, 2017, p. 55). While this is an approach that has taught us a great deal about interactive and reflexive features in academic writing, we need to take a broader view to learn more about metadiscourse as a linguistic phenomenon, as it can be realized in all sorts of discourse. This also means that we need to adjust our conceptualisations of metadiscourse accordingly. To obtain a more accurate picture of what metadiscourse is and how it works, we need to keep studying it in a range of different genres—considering different variables in a systematic way—and we need to keep making comparisons across genres.

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