Original Paper

A Functional Study of Meta-discourse

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Abstract

With the development of the discourse analysis theory, researchers have begun to pay attention to the meaning of discourse itself, and the meta-discourse has become a hot spot in discourse research. The definitions of meta-discourse in different schools are different and have their own biases, but the meta-discourse role has been widely accepted of organizing the discourse, expressing the author's views, and considering the reader's reflection, which is a way for the author to carry out the structure of the paper and organize ideas. From the perspective of Halliday's system and function, this paper analyzes the three major functions of metadiscourse: ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions. The ideational metadiscourse can affect the propositional content and semantic interpretation of discourse to a certain extent. The interpersonal metadiscourse helps understand and evaluate propositional information, establish the relationship between the author and the reader and emphasize the interaction between them. The textual meta-discourse helps the writer express how they connect conceptual materials and how the text produces meaning in the context. In addition, the author believes that the use of the meta-discourse also reflects the interactive, inter-subjective, and dialogic features of the discourse.

Keywords

meta-discourse, function, study

1. Introduction

The study of metadiscourse can be dated back to the 60s of the 20th century. Zellig Harris coined the term metadiscourse in 1959 to understand the use of language, providing a way for authors/speakers to guide audiences to understand the discourse. Later, Williams (1981), Vande Kopple (1985), Crismore (1989), Hyland (2005), etc. further developed this concept, placing into the category of the metadiscourse the ambiguous language, connectives, and various commentaries that can indicate author/speaker intervention in the discourse to influence the reader. Many scholars have explained this concept and proposed an analytical framework, which has been applied to the empirical research in various fields such as discourse analysis, academic English, and English teaching. People realize that in the process of

using language, the author conveys not only the attitude towards the proposition, but also the attitude towards the reader. The scope of research has also expanded from focusing on the basic propositional content of the discourse to studying the interpersonal functions of the discourse. As a master of the metadiscourse research, Hyland (2005) placed the metadiscourse in social context, emphasizing that metadiscourse can promote the interaction between the discourse and the context, and then realizing the organic interaction between the two sides of the communication. But as Hyland (2005) pointed out, the metadiscourse still lacks a theoretical basis and is vague in practical application. Previous researches have often distinguished the transmission of information from the transmission of emotions, focusing on the meaning of propositions and ways of expressing ideas and ignoring the fact that communicative participants can create discourse. Through the connection between meta-discourse and functional linguistics, this paper focuses on the relationship between the discourse producers, users and the discourse itself, discusses the interaction between meta-discourse and ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function, explains the ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning and textual meaning of the metadiscourse, and summarizes the universal characteristics of the discourse, so as to deepen our understanding of the nature, law and function of language.

2. Definition of Metadiscourse

Since Harris (1959), the study of the metadiscourse has developed rapidly, and many scholars have tried to define "metadiscourse". In general, there are two major schools of exploration in this area: the functional linguistic path and the sociolinguistic path. Vande Kopple (1985) argued that the metadiscourse is "discourse about discourse", which has nothing to do with propositional content and is mainly used to guide readers to organize, classify, interpret, and evaluate the information conveyed by the text. Crismore (1989) made a clear distinction between primary discourse and metadiscourse, arguing that the basic discourse is used to express propositional content, while metadiscourse is to help readers understand, comment, and respond to propositional information about a topic. On the other hand, the concept of metadiscourse has also attracted the interest of many sociolinguists. On the basis of Meyer (1975)'s use of signaling to explain the linguistic construction and semantic content of metadiscourse, Schiffrin (2007) argued that metadiscourse is metatalk that can be used to organize and evaluate the discourse. Yu Jianping (2007) and Yang Xinzhang (2007) started from the three meta-functions of Halliday, and believed that metadiscourse is the linguistic mechanism that expresses the linguistic structure and the attitude of the speaker in the discourse. Xu (2006) questioned the notion of "discourse about discourse", arguing that metadiscourse should be seen as a means of incorporating the speaker's attitudes and perspectives into the passage, thus attracting the attention of the listener or reader.

Due to the ambiguity and openness of the concept of metadiscourse, there is currently no consensus on its content, and the author uses the views of Hyland, the main representative of interactive metadiscourse. Hyland (2005) defines metadiscourse as a form of self-reflective expression used to negotiate the interactive meaning of discourse, helping the author or speaker to express his or her opinion and

communicate with the reader as a member of society, such as *As you might recall, It seems, to a certain extent,* etc., which play the role of regulating and organizing basic discourse in communication, reflecting the speaker or the author's communicative intentions and stances and leading the audience to understand the discourse and engage in interactive communication (Vande Kopple, 1985). This definition emphasizes the interpersonal meanings of metadiscourse such as evaluation, attitude, and participation. Hyland (2005) views metadiscourse as a linguistic component that helps the speaker express his or her opinions and establish interaction with the listener from a functional point of view.

3. Classification of Metadiscourse

The discourse in language communication includes primary discourse and metadiscourse, in which the basic discourse expresses propositional information about the topic, and the metadiscourse guides readers to organize, understand, comment on propositional information, and respond to the propositional content. Many scholars have also proposed a variety of classification frameworks for the metadiscourse. Kopple (1985, p. 83; 1988, p. 236) divided the metadiscourse into textual metadiscourse and interpersonal metadiscourse. Ifantidou (2005, p. 1328) divided it into intradiscourse metadiscourse and interdisciplinary metadiscourse. Among them, the classification method of Hyland (2005) is more commonly used. Hyland believes that basic discourse and metadiscourse are inseparable, because discourse must both represent propositional content and achieve two functions of interaction with the reader. Essentially, the metadiscourse is a series of language organization methods adopted by the author (or speaker) of the text in the process of language communication to help the reader (or listener) better process and understand the information to be expressed. The metadiscourse units can be composed of words, phrases, sentences, or even larger grammatical structures, with functions such as marking the structure of discourse and expressing the author's attitude towards the content of the discourse and the reader. Based on the research of his predecessors, Hyland divided metadiscourse into two categories: interactive metadiscourse and interactional metadiscourse. Hyland (2005) argued that the metadiscourse is as important as fundamental discourse, and that metadiscourse is a representation of self-reflection used in negotiated texts. The interactive metadiscourse guides readers to pay attention to the discourse organization and the author's discourse construction. It includes: transitions, pointing to the connection between clauses; frame markers, pointing to speech acts, chronological sequence or steps; endophoric markers or internal pointing, pointing to information elsewhere in the text; evidentials, pointing to information in other texts outside; code glosses, explanation of the propositional meaning. Interactional meta-discourse aims to establish an interactive relationship with readers, focusing on the expression of the author's position, which includes: hedges, implying that the author's point of view is not completely certain; boosters, expressing the author's affirmation of the argument; attitude markers, expressing the author's attitude towards the proposition; self mentions, explicit reference to the author; engagement markers, explicit reference to the reader. The specific classification and functions are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Meta-discourse Model (Hyland, 2005, p. 49)

category		function	examples
(interactive metadiscourse)	transitions	Expressing the relationship between the clauses	In addition, but etc.
	frame markers	Referring to speech acts, chronological sequence or step	Finally, to conclude
	endophoric markers	Referring to information elsewhere in the text	Noted above, in section 2
	evidentials	Referring to information in other texts outside	According to sb. states
	code glosses	Detailed elaboration	Namely, such as
(interactional metadiscourse)	hedges	Weakening the author's certainty about the proposition	Might, perhaps
	boosters	Strengthening the author's certainty about the proposition	In fact, definitely
	attitude markers	Expressing the author's attitude	I agree, surprisingly
	self mentions	Mentioning author himself or herself	I, we, etc
	engagement markers	Establishing the relationship with readers	Consider, note, you

4. Functions of Metadiscourse

The function of metadiscourse refers to how the metadiscourse achieves the communication purpose required by the author, which is related to whether the discourse can make requests as the author wishes, guide readers to respond, explain meanings and ask questions. We have the following consensus on the function of metadiscourse: (1) metadiscourse can help guide readers to understand the content of the proposition of the discourse, and reflect the author's attitude towards the content and reader; (2) Metadiscourse can help readers organize, interpret, and evaluate the information provided by the discourse. Halliday (1978) believed that language embodies ideational, interpersonal and textual functions at the same time. The meaning of discourse is the result of the fusion of three metafunctions. From the point of view of systematic functional linguistics, language is a system of meaning, and the lexical grammar choices we make in communication are the result of context triggering. At the same time, these choices also construct the context, and the context also constrains choices. Halliday argues that discourse allows speakers to create discourse that connects the ideational meaning and interpersonal systems to context. The ideational semantic system expresses the function of language to transmit new information, and the interpersonal semantic system expresses the speaker's intervention in speech events,

including the speaker's attitude, evaluation, judgment, expectation and requirements. Textual semantic system means to connect narratives about the world and organize the discourse into propositions. At the same time, it connects the narrative and the reader and organizes it into a metadiscourse.

4.1 Ideational Function of Metadiscourse

Ideational function refers to the empirical function and logical function embodied in the discourse. The experiential function refers to the speaker's use of words to describe the objective world and the inner world, talk about their experiences and emphasize the speaker's reflection of them. Language does not express itself in a loose form when it reflects everything and all processes in the objective and the inner world. The representation of language has a certain logic, or juxtaposition or subordination, that is, the logical function of language. The empirical function and the logical function superimpose each other to form the ideational function of the discourse.

The metadiscourse is an organic component of discourse. A metadiscourse is a discourse distinct from the content of a proposition, which is similar to the ideational function of language. Propositional information and metadiscourse often appear together in this text, sometimes in the same sentence, and both play an equally important role in the coherence and meaning of the text. Ifantidou (2005) argued that metadiscourse does not merely assume the function of non-propositional, auxiliary, secondary textual interpretation. Although most metadiscourses do not affect the propositional content of the discourse, some adverbs indicating possibility, connectives indicating cause and effect, etc. can indeed affect the propositional content. There are adverbs that indicate evidential adverbials, such as *obviously, clearly, evidently, etc.*, and adverbs that indicate hearsay adverbials, such as *allegedly, admittedly, reportedly*, etc., have propositional functions. Like propositional information, metadiscourse can express the author's intention and is an integral part of the information. It can help the text to establish a connection with the context, and consider the reader's needs, comprehension, existing knowledge, and text experience acquired. Therefore, metadiscourse also has an ideational function. However, the ideational function of metadiscourse and that proposed by Halliday are not equivalent, but the part and whole relationship. The ideational function of metadiscourse is a part of the one proposed by Halliday. Halliday's ideational function describes activities in the real world, and focuses on information outside the discourse, that is, external information while that of the metadiscourse conveys the information inside the text, the thought, state or behavior inside the text.

4.2 Interpersonal Function of Metadiscourse

The interpersonal meaning of words is inseparable from the person who uses them. Human beings are social animals with social attributes, psychological intentions, cognitive ability and value judgment ability. In social interactions, people realize their intentions through the discourse functions of words to convey belief, feelings, and actions, and to influence or change the views, positions, attitudes, and behaviors of others (Thompson, 1996, 2000, p. 28). Words are the vehicle for the speaker to engage in all meaningful actions. First, the speaker uses words to convey his or her views on people, things, and the world. Second, the speaker uses words to build bridges with others and build and maintain

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interpersonal relationships. Third, the speaker exerts some degree of influence on the behavior of others through his words. Vande Kopple (1985) and others believed that the interactional metadiscourse corresponds to the interpersonal function proposed by Halliday. The Interactional metadiscourse includes hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and engagement markers. The metadiscourse is closely related to the three subsystems of the evaluation system. For example, *curious, fortunate, surprising, etc.* indicating attitude, *broadly, roughly, from our perspective, etc.* indicating engagement, *always, definitely, truly, etc.* indicating graduation, are respectively attitude markers, hedges, and boosters in metadiscourse. In addition, there is an overlap between interpersonal metadiscourse and the modality proposed by Halliday. Modal verbs that express modality, modal appendages, and verb extensions can all fall under the category of metadiscourse. Mood appendages and evaluation appendages in modal adjoins, such as *clearly, in fact, personally, frankly, no doubt, in general, strictly speaking, etc.* have metadiscourse functions with tone appendages indicating the strength of evaluation, and comment appendages the speaker's attitude and comments on a proposition. Martin and White (2005) proposed that the evaluation system includes three subsystems: attitude, engagement, and graduation, focusing on the author's evaluation of people, things and events at the basic discourse level, systematically analyzing the vocabulary resources that express the meaning of evaluation while the metadiscourse expresses the evaluation significance of the entire proposition. For example,

(1) *Hopefully these new ventures in a market with tremendous potential will bring us more profits to the group.*

Hopefully in the sentence is the attitude metadiscourse marker, evaluating the whole proposition, while *tremendous* is evaluating the subsequent noun *potential*, and these two evaluations often coexist in the discourse.

Researchers believe that the main function of interactional metadiscourse is to establish the relationship between the author and the reader, to realize the exchange of the author's thoughts and the reader's thoughts, thus reflecting the interpersonal function.

4.3 Textual Function of Metadiscourse

The discourse is an interactive relationship formed between language and society, politics and culture. It is not only the carrier of various human activities, but also the carrier of negotiation and construction of social relations. The textual function emphasizes the speaker's organization and construction of discourse. In the process of using the discourse, the speaker mainly expresses the complete thought, and the conveyance of thought requires the conveyance and organization of information to reflect a certain sense of hierarchy and logical relationship, to indicate the relationship between information, and reflect the process of constructing the discourse.

The metadiscourse is the author's method of engaging readers and creating coherent discourse, expressing how the discourse is used to create and maintain relationships with readers. In order to better achieve the purpose of communication, the speaker must adopt the appropriate form of metadiscourse, for example, using the hedge *possible* to suppress commitment or start a dialogue; the attitude marker

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unfortunately to express the speaker's regret. Scholars such as Hyland (2005) pointed out that the metadiscourse refers to those elements in a discourse that are conducive to forming coherent discourses and displaying the author's personality, credibility, reader awareness and their relationship with information. According to Hyland's classification, the metadiscourse is usually embodied by conjunctions (so, because, and), adverbs (sequently, first, therefore) and phrases (as a result, on the other hand, needless to say). Scholars such as Vande Kopple (1985) believed that interactional metadiscourse corresponds to the textual function proposed by Halliday. They participate in the construction of information and pay attention to the cohesion and coherence of discourse. The metadiscourse can guide readers to understand the text and express their attitudes towards propositions or readers. For example:

(2) *In the next section I will focus explicitly on ecotourism.*

(3) *We firmly believe we are well positioned to become a multi-media technology leader.*

In the example (2) and (3), the internal reference mark *in the next section*, self-proclaimed words *I and we*, and attitude marks *focus on, believe, will, explicitly, firmly and well positioned* play a role in guiding readers and expressing opinions and attitudes.

In addition, Hyland placed metadiscourse in the social context, emphasizing that metadiscourse can promote the interaction between discourse and context, and then realize the organic interaction between the two parties in communication (Hyland, 2005). Contextual factors include the speech act domain, the discourse domain, and the participation domain, stylistic domain and non-linguistic domain (Wang & He, 2022). Moreover, connectives can organize texts and connect activities in the world outside the text. For example:

(4) *In contrast to western culture, Asian societies put emphasis on an interdependent view of self and collectivism.*

In contrast in example (4) is used to compare the characteristics of two cultures, expressing the relationship between western culture and Asian society, and has an empirical tendency. Authors are not only creating cohesive discourse, but also trying to align themselves with the expectations of the community and influence their readers.

All in all, from the point of view of Systemic Functional Linguistics, both propositional sentences and metadiscourse have three metafunctions, but there are qualitative differences. First, the function and meaning of propositional sentences are highly systematic, independent and context-dependent, realized by independent systems. For example, the ideational metafunction and meaning of propositional sentences are realized through the transitivity system; the interpersonal metafunction and meaning are realized through the modality system; Textual metafunction is realized through the analysis of theme-rheme structure. Different from propositional sentences, the ideational, interpersonal and textual functions and meanings of metadiscourse in the lexicogrammatical sense are unitary and cohesive. As mentioned above, metadiscourse is the non-propositional components before propositional sentences, such as conjunctions, commentary adjuncts, linking adjuncts, curses, call words, interjections, and projective clauses. When these non-propositional components appear as linguistic phenomena

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independently of propositional sentences, their respective functions and meanings do not have three functions at the same time, but one of them. For example, conjunctions and connecting adjuncts are mainly used to plan the layout of the article, only having the meaning of organizing the article; commentary adjuncts, curses, calls, and interjections are mainly used to influence interpersonal relationships, only having interpersonal meaning; projective clauses and commentary clauses are mainly used to present concepts or experiences, only having conceptual or empirical meanings. Another characteristic of metadiscourse is cohesiveness. That is to say, it must be attached to the propositional sentence and combined with the propositional sentence to form a larger unit of discourse.

5. Discourse Features—Interactive, Intersubjective and Dialogic

The core of metadiscourse theory is that communication is not only the exchange of information, goods and services, but also involves the identities, attitudes and thoughts of both parties in the communication. The use of the metadiscourse not only refers to people, places and activities in the real world but also recognizes, constructs and negotiates social relations. From the perspective of functional linguistics, language use often includes communicative use and interactive use, that is, language can express content as well as interpersonal relationships and attitudes. Sinclair (1981) emphasized the importance of language interaction and divided discourse into interactive and automatic layers. The automatic layer refers to the way in which experiences unfold gradually through the organization and maintenance of the discourse structure. The interactive layer refers to the way language is used to negotiate with others to build a relationship with the reader. Hoey (2001) defined discourse as follows: the discourse is a purposeful and spontaneous interaction between one or more authors and one or more readers. The author takes the lead in the interaction and controls most of the information. Hoey regards interaction as the core of discourse. The roles involved in the interaction are the author and the reader. As the producer and interpreter of the text, they must participate in the generation and understanding of the text, and interact with the subject of the text. All these activities are carried out in the context and participate in the construction of the new context.

In addition, speech markers, which reflect the relationship between sound and dialogue, are closely related to the metadiscourse. A discourse contains two or more interacting voices and is thus polyphonic. Various sounds exist in different relationships, such as compatibility, opposition, contradiction or complementarity. Martin and White (2005) divided polyphony into contractile polyphony and expansive polyphony. Expanded polyphony is divided into belonging and acceptance, indicating that one kind of opinion may exist, and there may be other different value positions and opinions, opening up a space for dialogue, encouraging, inviting, and eliciting the intervention of different voices. The essence of sound is the meaning negotiation between the author and the potential reader, and behind these voices are subjects with different consciousnesses, positions and opinions, so the construction and understanding of the meaning of the discourse is not personal, but interpersonal, social, and intersubjective.

The specific form of existence of language is the discourse, and it refers to the unit of verbal communication, which reflects the unique ideology and value and position of the discourse author, and is in dialogue with other related discourses. Conversationality is a central concept in the philosophy of language and in the theory of literary criticism. Since the metadiscourse is the means used by authors to organize the discourse, attract readers, and express their attitude towards the content and audience, Hyland (2005, p. 13) argued that the metadiscourse connects the important link between the discourse and the context, highlighting the role of the discourse as a dialogue. In language communication, a distinctive feature of human cognition is the ability of humans to see problems from the perspective of others, so the use of metadiscourse reflects the interactive, intersubjective and dialogic characteristics of the discourse.

6. Conclusion

From the above discussion and analysis, it can be seen that the study of the metadiscourse is influenced by the three meta-functions of Halliday (1978), noting the interactivity of ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning. At the metadiscourse level, the author can influence the ideational content to a certain extent, helping the author connect, organize, and interpret the material, express personality and evaluation and attitude towards the conceptual content and help the reader associate the text with a specific context, constructing a persuasive and coherent discourse in a specific context. The interaction of the discourse indicates that the discourse is constructed by the author and the reader or audience, so the construction of the meaning of the discourse should be seen as social rather than personal. And the use of metadiscourse is the most obvious sign of this interaction, and its use reflects the interactivity, intersubjectivity and dialogue of the discourse communication. Because of these functions of the metadiscourse, the author can not only process obscure texts into logical and easy-to-understand articles, but also associate the text with a specific context, conveying the author's personality, trust, attention and connection to the audience (Chen, 2020). The metadiscourse research regards the discourse as a process and attaches importance to the effectiveness of communication, which can provide references for the subsequent development of the metadiscourse research.

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