

A Corpus Analysis of Metadiscourse Markers Used in Argumentative Essays by Pakistani Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT---Metadiscourse is considered as one of the significant rhetorical features and strategies in the production of any piece of written or spoken discourse. It establishes a relationship of the writer with the audience in any communication process. The present study aimed at determining the frequency distribution of metadiscourse markers in argumentative essays of undergraduate students in a private sector university. This quantitative study adopted Hyland's (2005) Interpersonal model of Metadiscourse. A corpus based software AntConc 3.5.7 was applied for a total of 124 argumentative essays. Finding of the study showed that the frequency of interactive metadiscourse markers was higher than interactional markers. It has also been observed that the most frequently used markers were transition markers whereas endophoric markers were used with less frequency. The results of the study have a few pedagogical implications. It highlights the importance of metadiscourse devices in learning and teaching writing skills in English Language Teaching (ELT) context and help to understand the norm of discourse markers. Moreover, metadiscourse analysis would benefit English language teachers to develop the writing skills of learners with appropriate use of metadiscourse devices.

Keywords---argumentative writing, corpus, discourse devices, metadiscourse.

I INTRODUCTION

Writing is a social engagement process where writers engage their audience to convey their meanings. Writers use cues and indicators in their writing, which assist readers to understand and respond the text accordingly (Kumpf, 2000). Hyland (2004a; 2005b), described these cues and indicators as Metadiscourse markers. The effective use of metadiscourse markers helps readers to organize the content in a meaningful manner and develop an association with the reader. Students at all educational levels are required to write, however, at the tertiary level they are more often involved in different genres of writing such as essays, summaries, letters, reports, proposals and the like. Therefore, improving the quality of learning has become an important concern among undergraduate students.

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The term Metadiscourse can be described as “the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community” (Hyland, 2005; Woodlove & Vurly, 2017). These markers are also considered as an essential rhetorical feature in any type of discourse (Chambliss & Garner, 1996; Hyland, 1996).

Harris (1958), used the term metadiscourse to offer a way to understand language usage, representing a writers’ or speakers’ insight of a text to an audience. Writers for instance, Williams (1981), Kopple (1985), and Crismore (1989), explored it further and they collected a number of discourse markers. Metadiscourse encompasses the idea that language is not only about exchanging information, but it also takes into account the perceptions and attitudes of the interlocutors (Hyland, 2005). Metadiscourse organizes the text in such a way that it attempts to guide the audience about the writer’s perception. It engages readers and writers in a meaningful conversation, increases the readability, and signals the attitude of the writer towards its audience and reader (Hyland, 2005).

The researcher observed in her own teaching context that students had lots of problems in using metadiscourse markers. Previous research studies (Asghar, 2015; Muet *al.* 2015; Lu, 2011; Dafouz-Milne, 2008; Hyland, 1999) also showed that students have limited knowledge of metadiscourse markers, while certain metadiscourse markers are commonly used by them which implies a common rhetorical style. For that purpose, this research was conducted to create awareness about metadiscourse markers, which in turn would boost the writing quality. Many studies are being conducted on metadiscourse around the globe, although in Pakistan research in this domain remains limited. Therefore, this current research aims to determine the use of metadiscourse markers in the writing of undergraduate students’ in Pakistani context.

The purpose of the current research was to examine how students perceive their opinions, point of views and beliefs and engage with the audience through the deployment of metadiscourse markers in their essays.

The research study reflects on the following questions to be answered:

- What are the types of Metadiscourse markers employed by undergraduate students at the Public Sector University?
- What is the highest and lowest number of frequencies of Metadiscourse markers in Argumentative essays?

The significance of the study is threefold. First, the notion of metadiscourse has been significant in many ways; it expands the horizon of the text by characterizing it beyond the ideational dimension to its functions. It does not only include an external reality, but the language itself depicts the writer’s stance in the text and engages in a social relation with the audience. Secondly, linguists can easily capture the stylistic deviation and frequency based on the information about the usage of cohesive devices in the text. Lastly, the findings from the research will help teachers to assess their students’ written compositions and to make them aware of rhetorical conventions in academic writing skills. Further, it helps teachers, curriculum developers, and material developers in syllabus designing and error analysis. In addition to this, it would benefit learners to evaluate and improve themselves accordingly.

II LITERATURE REVIEW

Around the globe, there are a considerable number of researches related to metadiscourse markers across different genre in academic written discourse. Studies have recommended the significance of metadiscourse markers in academic research articles (Hyland, 2001), postgraduate dissertations (Bunto, 1999), PhD dissertations (Bunton, 1999; Smith *et al.*, 2018), medical and library text (Mostafavi&Tajalli, 2012), popular and professional science discourse (Crismore& Farnsworth, 1990), language & culture based articles (Moreno, 1997; Ozdemir& Longo 2014), as a rhetorical art (Crismore, 1989), metadiscourse as a writing technique (Cheng &Steffensen, 1996), as a feature of persuasive writing (Crismore *et al.*, 1993), ESL essays (Intaraprawat&Steffensen, 1995) and CEO's letter (Hyland, 1998).

Halliday (1998), explained it as a varied collection of features which facilitate to relate a discourse or text to its perspective and context of supporting readers to attach, systematize, and understand matter in a way chosen by the author and with regard to the understandings and principles of a specific discourse community. In addition, Hyland (2005), proposed the interpersonal model of metadiscourse that differentiates interactive and interactional marker. The former markers are used to plan a text in a unified and coherent manner and reflect the author's meaning explicitly. On the other hand, later are concerned with establishing a relationship with an audience and drawing readers in an argument to involve them in the overall process of communication. The usage of both types of marker varies across disciplines and in different genre of writing.

Cheng &Steffensen (1996), explored the use metadiscourse marker as a strategy to advance students writing skills and how it reflects the quality of writing. A pre and post-test was conducted on a controlled and experimental group to examine the usage of different types of markers in a text. The results have shown the significant effect on the experimental group and it was suggested that use of metadiscourse markers not only strength the textual features but it improves interpersonal dimensions of text as well.

Hyland &Tse (2004), argued that through metadiscourse markers writer can understand the use of interpersonal markers that writer use in their proposition and it discovers the rhetorical and social conventions. Achieving the purpose, 240 L2 dissertations from various disciplines were analyzed. The results have discovered that writers employed slightly more interactive metadiscourse markers than interactional. It was also recommended in their study that use of rhetorical features is independent of the writer's style and it is more applicable in the context in which it occurs.

Kan (2016), attempted to determine the types and frequencies of interactional metadiscourse in different sections of research papers of Turkish education and literature. It was revealed that Turkish language education used more interactional marker than in the domain of literature. Wang & Zang (2016), compared the different frequency and usage of metadiscourse in mathematical and linguistic academic papers. The result showed that more interactive markers are used in the abstracts of both disciplined than interpersonal markers.

Bal-Gezegin (2016), study revealed interpersonal metadiscourse features were noticeably higher in the English as compare to Turkish book review. In addition to this, variation was found in the use of hedges between

Turkish and English. Zhang (2016), conducted a multidimensional analysis of various written registers. A reflexive model of metadiscourse was used. The result was interpreted in three dimensions: writer's presences, text presentation and readers' guidance. It was revealed that more metadiscourse markers were used in informative and abstract register than narrative and concrete registers. Also, it was revealed that more markers were used for reader's guidance.

Asghar (2015), conducted a research to explore metadiscourse and contrastive rhetoric academic writing of tertiary level students. Through analysis it was revealed that interactive and interpersonal markers were not used effectively. It was suggested that awareness should be given to language learners about metadiscourse markers in order to make their written composition well structured.

Ozdemir & Longo (2014), investigated cultural aspect of metadiscourse markers between Turkish and US language learners. The results revealed both markers were higher in American culture and cultural differences were also found. Anwerdeen *et al.* (2013), examined the frequency distribution of metadiscourse markers and explore the error in using metadiscourse in writing. Results showed that student use textual discourse markers more than interpersonal markers. In addition to this, it was also found that the students mixed the usage of metadiscourse markers as preposition and adverbs in their writing.

Similarly, other research was conducted by Muet *et al.* (2015), on English and Chinese corpus. It was concluded that both corpus use more interactive than interactional metadiscourse makers. Similarly, Hyland (2010), investigated 240 PhD and MS thesis consists of four million words. Using MonoConc software, 300 common metadiscourse markers from Hyland (2005), framework was selected. The overall results conveyed that students somewhat used more interactive markers as compared to interactional.

To conclude, metadiscourse is considered as an essential feature in promoting communication between readers and writers, negotiating propositions, and building relationship with an audience. Yet regardless of this, a little has been explored about the way metadiscourse markers are being used in Pakistani context. This paper aims to address this gap.

The research has used the Hyland's Interpersonal model of metadiscourse (2005). In his book *Metadiscourse- Exploring interaction in writing* a comprehensive model has been presented which many researchers have used. Hyland (2005) has further categorized interactive in five subcategories: transitions logical connectives, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidential and code glosses. Interpersonal metadiscourse has five subcategories: hedge, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers or relation markers and self-mentions.

Table 1:Hyland’s(2005) Interpersonal Model Of metadiscourse

Table 1		
Hyland’s (2005) Interpersonal Model of Metadiscourse		
Category	Function	Examples
Interactive	Help to guide the reader through the text	Resources
Transitions	expressive relations between main clauses	in addition; but; thus; and
Frame markers	refer to discourse acts, sequences or stages	finally; to conclude; my purpose is
Endophonic markers	refer to information in other parts of the text	noted above; see Fig; in section 2
Evidentials	refer to information from other texts	according to X; Z states
Code glosses	elaborate propositional meanings	namely; e.g.; such as; in other words
Interactional	Involve the reader in the text	Resources
Hedges	withhold commitment and open dialogue	might; possible; perhaps; suggest
Boosters	emphasize certainty or close dialogue	in fact; definitely; it is clear that
Attitude markers	express writer’s attitude to proposition	unfortunately; I agree; surprisingly
Self-mentions	explicit reference to author(s)	I; we; my; me; our
Engagement markers	explicitly build relationship with reader	consider; note; you can see that

(Hvland. 2005. p. 49)

The table 1 shows the first subcategory in interactive category is transition; it is used to make connections at phrasal and sentential level, such as *in addition, but, thus, and so on*. It provides cohesion by making explicitly clear and signals how one idea is related to another. The second sub-category is frame markers. It is further categorized into sequencing, label stages, announce goals and topic shifts. It includes phrases for example *firstly, finally, in a nutshell*, and phrases to announce goals for example, *now you have to and my purpose here is to*.

Another category is endophoric markers, which refer information to the other parts of the text such as, *noted above, see fig 1, and discussed earlier*. The next sub-category is evidential it is the information that has been cited from other sources or outside the text such as *according to X/Y, 2009 Z states, beliefs, suggests and literatures shows*. The last sub-category is Code glosses “supply additional information, by rephrasing, explaining or elaborating what has been said and to ensure the reader is able to recover the writer’s intended meaning” (Hyland, 2005), such as *in other words, it can be defined as, and for example*.

On the other hand, the next main category is interactional markers, which includes hedges. These words assist writers in “allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than a fact and therefore open that position to negotiation”(Hyland, 2005), such as *possible, might, could and perhaps*. The second sub category is booster that refers to the extent writer is certain about his or her own argument and position in the text. The writers not only acknowledge diverse point of view, but he or she confronts them with his single alternative and confident point of view such as *I believe, certainly, it is clear, the fact that and it is clear*. The next sub-category is attitude markers. It reflects the writer’s attitude to propositions and it “convey surprise, agreement,

importance, obligation, frustration, and so on” (Hyland 2005). For examples, *surprisingly, I agree, prefer, hopefully and unfortunately*. Furthermore, the second last sub-category is relational or engagement markers; it addresses the audience attention and overtly involves them in the meaningful exchange. In addition, it is also used to create an impression of authority, integrity and credibility (Hyland, 2005), with the readers as an audience such as *let us, note that and you*. Finally, the last sub category is self-mention as its name suggests it refers to the writer’s existence in the text through first- person pronouns as I or possessive adjectives such as *me, mine and ours* (Hyland, 2005).

III METHODOLOGY

The present study employed quantitative research as it contains statistical data analysis. A corpus of 124 essays by Pakistani students were analyzed. They were currently enrolled in the first semester of their academic discipline. Quantitative research analysis was applied to determine the frequency distribution of metadiscourse markers in the argumentative essays.

The corpus can be defined as “a large collection of naturally occurring authentic text, stored in an electronic base of millions of words that have actually occurred in real life” (Cutting, 2015). It consists of both written and spoken corpora. In this study, written corpus is used in the form of essays and it consists of 124 argumentative essays by undergraduate students. The nature of the essays was argumentative. Students were enrolled in a four-year program at a public sector university. It was the first semester, which is considered as a foundation course entitled functional English. The collected corpus was named as CUPSW (Corpus of undergraduate Pakistani students’ writing). The written corpus consists of 27539 tokens and 2147 types. It was a self-made corpus as the essay writing assignment was given to students. They were told to write argumentative essay of approximately 250 words. The topic for the essay was to agree or disagree if online learning is as good as face-to-face learning.

AntConc 3.5.7 software was used to examine the frequency of metadiscourse markers in written discourse. AntConc is “a freeware, multi-platform, multi-purpose corpus analysis toolkit, designed by the author for specific use in the classroom”. Its features include concordance tool, cluster N-grams, collocates and frequency and keyword list.

In the study, corpus analysis was used to find all the occurrences of words in a corpus. For that purpose, AntConc was used it’s a computer package software known as a concordance program (Cutting, 2015). It not only shows database of words in a corpus, but it also examines the “co-text to the most frequent lexical phrases and grammar within same line” (Cutting, 2015).

The corpus was collected in the form of essays and converted into electronic corpus. Wordlist was made by adapting the Hyland’s list of Interpersonal Metadiscourse markers. Then, AntConc concordance software was applied to count the frequency of the words from Hyland’s (2005) list of Interpersonal Metadiscourse markers. In addition, concordance was checked to ensure the context of Metadiscourse markers.

IV RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of Interactive Metadiscourse Markers

Table 2		
Frequency Distribution of Interactive Metadiscourse Markers		
Category	F	%
Frame markers	134	6.85%
Transitions	1599	81.7%
Endophoric markers	28	1.4%
Evidential	88	4.5%
Code glosses	106	5.4%

If we look at table 2, the subcategories of interactive metadiscourse are transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidential and code glosses which have 134, 1599, 28, 88 and 106 occurrences respectively.

Table 3: Frequency Distribution of Interactional Metadiscourse Markers

Table 3		
Frequency Distribution of Interactional Metadiscourse Markers		
Category	F	%
Hedges	166	12.7%
Boosters	168	12.9%
Attitude markers	140	10.7%
Engagement markers	538	41.4%
Self-mentions	286	22%

In addition to this, in table 3, the subcategories of interactional discourse are hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers and self-mention which have 166, 168, 140, 538, 286 occurrences respectively. The results also revealed that transition markers are found to be the most frequently used in interactive metadiscourse followed by engagement markers and self-mentions. Whereas, the least frequent markers are endophoric marker as it has only 28 hits and they contribute only 1.4 %.

Table 4: Overall Distribution of Interactive and Interactional Metadiscourse

Table 4			
Overall Distribution of Interactive and Interactional Metadiscourse			
	Interactive Metadiscourse	Interactional Metadiscourse	Total
Frequency	1955	1298	3253
Percentage	60.09%	39.9%	100%

According to table 4, the findings demonstrate that the frequency of interaction Metadiscourse markers was higher than interactional markers in argumentative essays. Table 4 shows that the frequency of interactive metadiscourse was 1955 (60.09%) and for interactional metadiscourse, 1298 (39.9%). The percentage gap of metadiscourse devices was 20.19. The findings of the research were parallel to other metadiscourse related studies such as Wang & Zang (2016), Asghar (2015), Muet *al.* (2015), Anwerdeen *al.* (2013), Hyland & Tse (2004). The results of these studies claimed the frequency of interactive metadiscourse markers were higher than interactional. Conversely, the results of the study were in contrast with Bal-Gezegin (2016) and Kan (2016), wherein the frequency of interactive metadiscourse was comparatively higher. Mohamed & Rashid (2017), claimed that the effective use of interactional metadiscourse markers is dependent on the writing ability of a writer and he also added “experienced writers are expectedly writing with more interactional metadiscourse as compare to inexperienced writer especially undergraduate” (p. 217). It is quite relevant that students in the current study were also fresh undergraduate who have just started their academics. Therefore, it could be one of the reasons of less usage of interactional markers in their writing as they might not be aware of rhetorical conventions of writing. Usually at this point students are more inclined towards grammatical accuracy and academic vocabulary and they pay less attention to the interactive dimension of their writing. This can also be taken in other ways, for example, when students are given specific word limit; students are bound to use less interactional marker to make their arguments clearly framed and to reduce the chances of refutation and maximize the possibility of acceptance in their proposed arguments.

The result of the study also revealed that students used all metadiscourse markers in their writing, but the frequency of a few metadiscourse markers is much higher than others. The most frequent markers in the sub-category are transitions; it constitutes 81.7% of the entire corpus. It reflects how the writers guide readers to move from one idea to another through examples, comparison, time, results and the like. It is quite evident that

students have used transitional signals to make their argument clear and logically organized for their audience. An interesting pattern in the findings is the usage of engagement or relation markers in the corpus. Hyland (2010) defined as it “explicitly address readers, either by selectively focusing their attention or by including them as participants in the text through second person pronouns, imperatives, question form and asides” p. 129). It is the second most frequently used markers as it reflects how the students explicitly engage the reader into their arguments by creating and maintaining relationships with them through various ways, for example, *let us, you, our and like*.

The use of metadiscourse markers implies how we project ourselves in any piece of writing by signaling our position, opinions, attitudes toward the content and the audience of the text. It helps to build the relationship with an audience by achieving credibility. This is an important finding in the understanding of the different functions of a text and the use of metadiscourse markers in the rhetorical characterization of any text. The results suggested that awareness should be given to language learners regarding the usage of sub categories of markers not only to improve their writing skills but to make their writing more interactive and reader friendly.

The study also comes with a few limitations Firstly, because of the time constraint, this study was limited to only one Public Sector university. Secondly, it has used small corpus because the assignment of essay writing was a part of sessional activities. Lastly, it was limited to one classroom only.

V CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

The research aimed to determine the use of metadiscourse marker in the writing of undergraduate students’ writing in Pakistani context. From the results of the study, it is concluded that ESL undergraduate students used more interactive markers than interactional markers. The research made several contributions. Firstly, it will help teachers to teach metadiscourse markers in their foundation or basic English language course. This would not only improve their efficiency and proficiency in writing, but it also helps them to add a variety as well. In addition, the knowledge of metadiscourse markers will help learners to analyze language for social interaction.

The results of the study have a number of pedagogical implications. It highlights the importance of metadiscourse devices in learning and teaching writing skills in English Language Teaching (ELT) context, and helps understand the norm of discourse markers. Metadiscourse markers enhance the quality of writing, therefore this study will help other researchers explore it further in multiple dimensions and in different genres as well.

In addition to this, it provides a new dimension to the novice and experienced researcher to use corpus analysis in multiple domains to get an insight of the functions that language perform in a variety of contexts. It provides lexicographers and grammarians “objective, evidence-based description of patterns and function” (Cutting, 2015). It assists textbook writers and material designers to pick texts based on authentic language for students. Most importantly, language teachers can guide students by showing some concordance lines to make them identify their errors and recognize the most frequently used words in their writing. Last but not the least, Cutting (2015) claimed that corpus analysis is the best way to analyze language learners’ needs.

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