METADISCOURSE MARKERS IN IELTS TEXTS AND IN TEXTBOOKS FOR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Metadiscourse is a term which describes a range of lexical items (words and expressions) whose main function is to enhance communicative efficiency in at least one of two ways: by streamlining the inference process involved in discerning the relation between parts of a text and the context (including the co-text) and by establishing and managing the rapport between communicator and audience.

There are at least two important reasons for considering metadiscourse markers in relation to English language tests of reading comprehension. Firstly, metadiscourse includes as set of open class lexical items each of which has a relatively stable pragmatic role. This suggests that the frequency of such markers will be relatively stable across (types of) texts. The L2 learner will benefit from knowing how they are used correctly, and this knowledge may be systematically tested. Secondly, as metadiscourse markers are relevant in guiding the interpretation of text (rather than contributing to the main propositional content), their precise meanings are often difficult to spell out. So, research on the way particular metadiscourse markers are used, can contribute to our understanding of their meanings and appropriate usage, with important implications for devising more effective tests of L2 comprehension. Data on how metadiscourse markers are used in academic text are of particular value to IELTS as they may guide the selection of texts that best reflect assumptions about the relationship between writer and reader that candidates are likely to encounter in their academic studies. It is acknowledged that the very limited size of the corpus of academic text investigated here places restrictions on the interpretation of the results, but it is suggested that the methodology, applied to a more extensive corpus, could be of considerable value in guiding the selection of text for IELTS.

As Hyland (2005: 31) points out, research on metadiscourse ought to "draw on multiple sources of evidence including the analysis of a corpus of representative texts, interviews with insider informants, and focused expert self-reports concentrating on particular text features."

The following is a brief report on a preliminary comparative analysis of metadiscourse markers in a sample of IELTS texts (33,358 words) and a sample of texts taken from textbooks aimed at first year undergraduate students (35,993 words). The main aim of this

study was to consider whether and to what extent the metadiscourse markers found in the academic texts were represented in IELTS. This seems important as the candidates' performance on IELTS texts related tasks is widely used as an indicator of their ability to follow university courses delivered in English. However, the initial research reported here has not provided a clear answer to this question. A second aim of the study was to gain further insights into promising issues for later research. This aim has been achieved to a greater extent and the main findings are presented in this report.

The list of metadiscourse items considered in this study was taken from Hyland (2005). His taxonomy of metadiscourse markers provides a good starting point for the analysis as it is fairly comprehensive, so few elements were likely to be overlooked. Hyland (2005) draws a broad distinction between two classes of metadiscourse elements: Interactive metadiscourse markers (which indicate the writer's concern for the audience's background knowledge, interests and abilities) and interactional metadiscourse markers (which draw the reader's attention to the author's perspective towards the main descriptive content of the text and towards the reader).

Interactive metadiscourse includes:

code glosses (which 'supply additional information by rephrasing, explaining or elaborating what has been said to ensure the reader is able to recover the writer's intended meaning' (Hyland 2005:. 52)),

endophoric markers (expressions which refer to other parts of the text),

evidentials (which indicate that an idea comes from another source),

frame markers (which indicate text boundaries or delineate elements of text structure)

transition markers (which help the reader to figure out the relevant relations between parts of the text).

Interactional metadiscourse includes:

attitude markers (which convey the communicator's affective attitude towards the descriptive content of the text),

boosters (which suggest that the communicator is opting for one of several possible views relating to a particular point),

self mention items (such as the personal pronoun "I" or phrases such as "the author"),

engagement markers (which directly address readers, guiding their attention or inviting them to see themselves as participants in the discourse) and

hedges (which indicate that the communicator is not fully committed to the truth of the proposition expressed by a particular part of the text).

The small scale comparative analysis of metadiscourse markers in IELTS and undergraduate textbook texts (undergraudate texts, hereafter) reported here identified four interesting groups of findings. There were:

(i)   metadiscourse markers that were relatively frequent in undergraudate texts, but were not found in IELTS texts at all.

(ii) metadiscourse markers that were considerably more frequent in undergraudate texts than in IELTS texts.

(iii) metadiscourse markers from Hyland's list which were not found in either IELTS or undergraudate texts.

(iv) metadiscourse markers that were more frequent in IELTS texts than in undergraudate texts.

While (i) and (ii) potentially have important implications for the design of assessment materials, (iii) points to the importance of further research on whether some generally frequent metadiscourse markers are systematically underused in pedagogical materials. The findings relating to (i) and (ii) are presented here in summary form, by taking account only of those items which occur 5 or more times in one of the samples. The decision to use 5 instances as the cut off point is impressionistic, though not entirely arbitrary, as it seemed that fewer than 5 instances of an item (5 in a sample of around 35,000 words) would not provide reliable evidence for interesting conclusions (other than pointing to the need for studies based on larger corpora).

(i)   Metadiscourse markers which were relatively frequent in undergraudate texts, but were not found in IELTS texts

The undergraudate texts sample included 67 metadiscourse markers (out of a list of 475) which did not occur at all in the IELTS texts sample. Those items which occured 5 or more times are listed in Table 1.

Number of instances	21	11	10	8	7	6	5
Meta-discourse item(s)	(in) Chapter X	Figure X	Generally	need to; should	Section X; next	quoted,	First, wish to; suppose

Table 1.

The absence in the IELTS texts sample of interactional metadiscourse markers 'generally' (hedge), 'need to' (engagement), 'should' (engagement) and 'suppose' (engagement) is particularly interesting, because one might expect to find them in the kinds of general interest texts that IELTS texts represent. This is clearly a point for further research. The relatively frequent references to interactive metadiscourse markers (chapters, figures and sections) in undergraudate texts suggest that these should also be represented in materials for assessing the candidates' level of competence in English for academic purposes.

(ii)   Metadiscourse markers which are significantly more frequent in undergraudate texts than in IELTS texts

Out of the total of 473 metadiscourse markers, 187 were found in both IELTS texts and undergraudate texts. 77 of these had a frequency of less than 5 in each sample and in 22 instances there was just one occurrence in each. Items that occurred at least five times in the undergraudate texts, and that were at least twice as frequent in undergraudate texts as in IELTS texts, are listed in Table 2.

	TYPE		undergraudate	IELTS
MARKER	**INTER-ACTIVE**	**INTER-ACTIONAL**		
indeed	code gloss		9	3
specifically	code gloss		5	1
then	sequen-		8	3

	cing			
moreover	transition		8	3
since	transition		**27**	**4**
while	transition		**20**	**8**
demonstrate		booster	12	3
find		booster	18	6
prove		booster	6	3
show		booster	15	3
think		booster	19	4
I		self-mention	**78**	**10**
we		self-mention	19	1
my		self-mention	20	2
our		self-mention	34	14
us		self-mention	17	8
see		engagement	**13**	**3**
you		engagement	**159**	**26**
your		engagement	**73**	**14**
feel		hedge	8	3
argued		hedge	11	3
may		hedge	**112**	**50**
probably		hedge	11	5
should		hedge	50	15

Table 2.

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I will comment briefly on the most interesting findings in Table 2 which are highlighted in bold. Clearly, the first person pronoun (nominative) singular *'I'* was far more frequent in undergraudate texts than in IELTS texts. This might reflect a deliberate decision in the selection of IELTS texts to avoid those in which the first person pronoun is used. However, this seems unlikely, as there are 10 instances of the first person pronoun in the IELTS texts sample. As the first person pronoun *'I'* appears as many as 78 times in the undergraudate texts sample, it may be worth considering ways to increase its frequency in IELTS assessment materials.

The use of the second person pronoun *'you'* in addressing the reader (and as an indefinite personal pronoun) was far more common in the undergraudate texts (159) than in the IELTS

texts (26). While this could be explained by the pedagogical nature of the undergraudate texts, it does raise the question of whether more frequent use of *'you'* and *'your'* in IELTS texts might have some positive effect on the candidates' performance on IELTS texts related tasks.

It is also worth exploring in a little more detail the use of *'you'* and *'your'* for the insight this gives into the relationship of engagement between the writer and reader of the text books. Such a relationship is not paralleled in the IELTS texts, a relationship that is also reflected in the differential use of other personal pronouns. The 26 occurrences of *'you'* in the IELTS texts appear in just 8 of the 42 texts. *'You'* appeared in 19 of the undergraduate texts covering 9 of the 14 books.

'You' is often used in the undergraduate texts to guide the reader and to set out the objectives of the book or of a chapter or section:

> *By the time you have finished working through this chapter you should have a better idea of the dimensions that may be important to you. (Business Students' Handbook)*
> *If you have not studied these areas before, this part will provide you with some basic facts, but if you are already familiar with the topics you can use it to revise and check your knowledge. (Human Structure and Function)*
> *Using this textbook, you will learn how to command computers to perform those tasks. (Java)*

It is also often used where the writer seeks to engage the readers by posing questions or setting them reflective tasks:

> *Think about some good conversations that you have recently had and the sorts of benefits which you were deriving from them. (Business Student's Hanbook)*
> *How important do you think home computers are for children's education? Are you aware of which pupils have them? (Interactive Children)*

Among the text books, there was considerable variation in the use of *'you'*. Fully half of the occurrences in undergraduate texts came in the *Business Student's Handbook*, reflecting the purpose of the book, which offers personal advice to students both on how to make the best use of the book as a resource as well as on topics such as interview technique and career planning:

you will need to start a file (paper or electronic) in which to store your responses

When a suitable opportunity is identified, you need to research the organisation

Other texts, including the texts on human resources management, tourism, multimedia education, law and criminology yielded no occurrences of *'you'* or *'your'*.

Of the occurrences in IELTS, nine came in a single text (*The Scientific Method*). This text also accounted for seven of the 14 occurrences of *'your'* among the IELTS texts. The use of *'you'* in this text to address the reader directly – *It is essential that you, as an intending researcher, understand the difference…/ don't worry if you have some idea of what your results will tell you before you even begin to collect data* – reflects the direct advice to the reader offered by the *Business Student's Handbook* noted above. The use of *'you'* with the less personal function of outlining a process – *then you discard or modify your hypothesis/ you then proceed to a strictly logical and rigorous process* – has parallels in the undergradudate text, *The Principles of Marketing* – *you sign a contract to offer your services as an employee.*

Of the remaining occurrences in IELTS, a further nine came in quotations, often a feature of journalistic style:

'Even two or three per cent is huge,' says John Byers of Idaho University (Play is a Serious Business)

'Once you study athletics, you learn that it's a vexingly complex issue,' says John S. Raglin (Limits to Human Sporting Performance)

This compares with just two occurrences of *'you'* in quotations in the undergraduate texts with a further five appearing in example sentences in the linguistics text. One occurrence in an example sentence is also found in the IELTS text, *Obtaining Linguistic Data.*

Elsewhere in the IELTS texts 'you' was most often used impersonally to make general observations about the world rather than to address the reader directly:

You can engineer around these problems, or you can engineer them out. (Airports on Water)

If you plot the amount of time a juvenile devotes to play each day over the course of its development, you discover a pattern (Play is a Serious Business)

It is also worth noting that *'may'* is significantly more frequent in undergraduate texts than in IELTS texts. This suggests that much more detailed research into the appropriate use of *'may'* (and other modals) in academic writing should be carried out. While the differences in the frequency of interactional metadiscourse markers in the two samples of texts are particularly striking, two interactive discourse markers, *'since'* (transition) and *'while'* (transition) also appear in undergraudate texts far more frequently than in IELTS texts. It seems worth investigating further whether the discourse functions of these markers are indicated in IELTS texts by some other means, or whether the comparatively low frequency of transition *'since'* and *'while'* is a consequence of their discourse functions being underrepresented in IELTS materials.

(iii)   Metadiscourse markers which are not found in either IELTS or undergraudate texts.

171 metadiscourse markers on Hyland's (2005) list do not appear in either IELTS or undergraudate texts. Table 3 shows the total number of discourse markers in each group and the number of markers which are not found in the two samples.

	INTERACTIVE					INTERACTIONAL				
	code glosses	endo-phoric	eviden-tials	frame markers	transition makers	attitude markers	boosters	self-mention	engage-ment	hedges
Total number	22	20	5	60	48	65	64	11	79	99
Not found in samples	5	12	1	43	4	22	21	4	29	29

Table 3.

Out of the total number of 473 metadiscourse markers as many as 170 are not at all represented in the IELTS and undergraudate texts that I have considered. This suggests that it might be useful to carry out in-depth research into the possible reasons for the absence of particular metadiscourse markers from IELTS and undergraduate texts. In some cases the explanation seems straightforward. For example, the so-called 'shift topic' use of *'so'* tends to be confined to spoken discourse (e.g. 'So, shall we watch the news now?"). Therefore, it is not surprising that this use of *'so'* should not be found in samples of written discourse. But in many other instances, it is difficult to see why an item (e.g. 'this means', 'to start with') is absent in these two types of text. One possibility is that the samples looked at are simply too small. This suggests that future research into metadiscourse markers should be based on much larger corpora. The high frequency of a relatively small number of metadiscourse markers indicates that these are particularly important in communication. This could be further investigated experimentally by considering how people interpret and respond to versions of the same text which differ only with regard to the presence/absence of metadiscourse markers.

(v) Metadiscourse markers which were more frequent in IELTS texts than in undergraudate texts

The findings suggest that the more frequent occurrence of a metadiscourse marker in IELTS texts may also be of interest. Consider the findings presented in Table 4:

MARKER	TYPE		IELTS	undergraudate
	INTER-ACTIVE	INTER-ACTIONAL		
and	transition		18	9
but	transition		158	98
thought		booster	7	3
choose		engagement	5	1
about		hedge	27	4
almost		hedge	9	4
around		hedge	7	3
find		booster	18	6
prove		booster	6	3

Table 4.

The differences between IELTS and undergraudate texts highlighted in Table 4 may well be due to the characteristics of textbook writing as a genre. For example, it seems reasonable to assume that in the presentation of facts and arguments, which is typically found in textbooks, hedges (such as *'almost'*, *'about'* and *'around'*) will tend to be relevant less often than in texts written with the aim of giving the readership a general idea about a particular topic (such as many of the IELTS texts). Moreover, some types of inferential relations between parts of text and the context may tend to be more relevant in general purpose informative written discourse, than in textbook writing. For example, *'but'* (which Hyland (2005) calls a 'transition marker') indicates that the utterance which follows should be interpreted as the denial of an expectation suggested by the preceding utterance or larger text. It seems plausible to assume that *'but'* will tend to be more relevant in texts which invite the reader to derive contextual effects by considering contrasts between their existing beliefs and new information (e.g. general educated prose aimed at popularizing science), than in more factual presentations

of ideas presumed to be new to the reader (e.g. textbooks). Again, these are just speculative conclusions, but they seem to be worth exploring through further research which might give us a better perspective on the role of metadiscourse in different types of text and new insights into the way metadiscourse should be represented in English as a second language assessment materials, such as IELTS texts.

Reference

Hyland, K. (2005) *Metadiscourse*. London: Continuum.