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Socio – Cognitive Perspective to the Analysis of the Strategic Features of the Discussion Section of Research Articles in Applied Linguistics: Native vs. Non-native Researchers

Saeedeh Golmohammadi, Somayeh Suluki, Forugh Daneshmand, Farzad Salahshoor

Abstract

Writing is like a mirror that reflects the social and personal realities. Any culture and society has some specific ways and strategies for text and talk organization and communication, e.g. generic conventions, moves, metadiscourse markers, etc. are some of such strategies for better text organization and communication. Metadiscourse categories are specific rhetorical devices that help the participants to effectively communicate with each other (Hyland, 2005). Employing these interactional devices is different in various languages and societies, in other words metadiscourse strategies are context dependent. In order to find differences between the use of interactional metadiscourse strategies, in two different societies and contexts, we analyzed and critically interpreted their usage in the discussion sections of 40 research articles written by Iranian and English scholars in English. This critical analysis was based on the socio-cognitive approach of van Dijk. This analysis showed similarities and differences in the rhetorical behaviour of these authors in their use of interactional metadiscoursive strategies. There was a considerable tendency to the use of ‘hedging’ by both groups of writers. The main difference was in the use of self-mentions and engagement markers. The frequency rate of such strategies was very low amongst Iranian writers. The social constructions and cognition of participants may have undeniable effects on the use of interactional strategies. The findings of such studies can have useful implications for ESL, EFL, and ESP courses in general; and for developing academic literacy in particular.

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Keywords: metadiscourse; interactional metadiscourse; socio-cognitive perspective

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1. Introduction
Academic centers all over the world are usually related to each other through academic communication e.g. conferences, textbooks, journals and research articles. By the use of research articles, members of an academic community can broaden the boundaries of knowledge. So; the participants of an academic communication should be highly competent in academic literacy. Members of academic discourse community should be completely aware of the norms, rules, conventions, and interactional strategies of Standard English. But, in some cases, it seems that Iranian university students are not completely aware of them to participate successfully in the international communication. In order to explore the related barriers of academic communication, this study with the purpose of comparing and exploring differences in the use of communication strategies in the research articles of native (English) and non-native (Iranian) researchers has been done. However, among various strategies used for effective academic communication (e.g. generic conventions, schematic structures, and metadiscourse resources) my main focus was on the use of metadiscourse features. Metadiscourse is broadly defined as an umbrella term for words used by a speaker or writer to mark the direction and purpose of a text. Also it is used to include an apparently heterogeneous array of cohesive and interpersonal features which help relate a text to its context. It is a kind of commentary, made in the course of speaking or writing. Among various metadiscourse resources; as a rhetorical tool for interaction; a writer usually selects some specific ones. Selection of metadiscoursal resources in the academic text is highly influenced by the context of use, reader’s cognition, shared knowledge between readers and writers, social relations of participants, purposes of the communication, and etc (Hyland, 2005).

This study is the cross-cultural critical analysis of using interactional metadiscourse resources in research articles in applied linguistics domain which was tried to answer to the following question:
- How do the discussion section of research articles, written by native (English) and non-native (Iranian) scholars, vary in using interactional metadiscoursive features and why?

This study was identified as being of importance to teachers to provide them necessary background to give awareness to students during the writing courses, especially academic writing courses, about these various socio-cultural norms and communication strategies, which are context dependent elements.

Many research have been done in metadiscourse which are categorized into three areas: a) metadiscourse in writing in English; for example, (Hyland, 1998, 2004), (Abdi, 2000), (Simin, 2004); b) contrastive cross-linguistics and cross-cultural metadiscourse markers in two languages; for example, (Crismore and Fransworth, 1990), (Mauranen, 1993), (Marandi, 2002), (Abdollahazadeh, 2003& 2007), (Dahl, 2004); and c) metadiscourse in EFL and ESP reading comprehension; for example, (Camiciottoli, 2003), (Jalilifar and Alipour, 2007), (Khorvash, 2008).

2. Methodology
In the present study I had a contrastive and critical look at using the metadiscoursal strategies, as one of the main rhetorical devices in the discussion sections of research articles, which are written by native (English) and non-native (Iranian) scholars in the discourse community of applied linguistics.

A corpus of forty randomly selected research articles; twenty written by non-native (Iranian) and twenty by native (English) researchers was selected (see appendix). The discussion sections of research articles were read and analyzed to determine the frequency of interactional metadiscourse strategies per 1000 words, based on the Hyland (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse. After statistical analysis, the results were interpreted critically based on the socio-cognitive perspective of van Dijk (2008).

3. Results: Distribution of Interactional Metadiscourse Resources in the Research Articles
The results of the analysis showed that the total number of words which were used by English writers in the discussion section of research articles, are higher than the words used by Iranian writers. Table (1) represents the total number of words in the discussion section of research articles written by English and Iranian scholars; also it represents the frequency of interactional metadiscourse resources in two sets of the data and their total frequencies.

In order to find out the differences in the distribution of five interactional categories of metadiscourse in the discussion section of research articles, the frequency of the interactional metadiscourse resources in each category per 1000 words and their percentage were computed. As the results show in table (2), among five interactional metadiscourse strategies ‘Hedges’ were used more than others in research articles written by English scholars. Its frequency was 19.67 per 1000 words. In other words 49.92 percent of the all interactional strategies in the writings
of native speakers were allocated to the 'hedging' category. Engagement marker was the lowest one. Its frequency rate was 3.61 per 1000 words and its percentage was 9.16% of all the used strategies. The frequency number of attitude markers and boosters were the same; 5.89 per 1000 words.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interactional Categories</th>
<th>F per 1000 Words</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Raw Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hedge</td>
<td>19.67</td>
<td>49.92%</td>
<td>457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booster</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>14.95%</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude Marker</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>14.95%</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement Marker</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>9.16%</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-mention</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>11.02%</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>39.44</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>916</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But Iranian applied linguists used these strategies differently. The following table (3) shows the frequency rate of metadiscourse resources in the discussion section of Iranian research articles. The frequency rate of the 'hedging' strategy was higher than the others. Its occurrence per 1000 words was 20.71. It contained 64.28 percent of all strategies. This result showed that Iranian scholars use the 'hedging' strategy even more than the English scholars. Self-mention category has the lowest frequency rate: 1.35 per 1000 words; it included 4.19 percent of all interactional strategies. The frequency rate of engagement markers was 1.62 per 1000 words; and attitude markers 3.62 per 1000 words. The frequency rate of boosters was 4.92 per 1000 words.

<table>
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<th>Interactional Categories</th>
<th>F per 1000 Words</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Raw Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hedge</td>
<td>20.71</td>
<td>64.28%</td>
<td>383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booster</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>15.27%</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude Marker</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>11.23%</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement Marker</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>5.03%</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-mention</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>4.19%</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32.22</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>596</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Discussion: A Critical Orientation to the Use of Interactional Metadiscourse Strategies

The main concentration of Critical Discourse Studies is on scholars rather than their methods. The main point for CDS scholars are that how a discourse produces social domination (Bloore & Bloore, 2007). By giving a multidisciplinary orientation, van Dijk (2008) labelled it as 'sociocognitive' discourse analysis. Socio-cognitive theory of van Dijk, explains how social structures may affect and be affected by discourse structures via a theory of social cognition. Therefore, according to sociocognitive approach in this study, the focus was only on the dimensions defined by "discourse-cognition-society" triangle. Such an approach "examines the ways in which such cognitive phenomena are related to the structures of discourse, verbal interactions, communicative events, and situations, as well as, societal structures" (van Dijk 2009, p. 64). The integration of cognition and society cannot be related to each other directly. There should be a mediator or interface to make relation between them. Context model acts as an interface. Here, a context is a "subjective mental representation, a dynamic on line model of the participants about the for-them-now relative properties of the communicative situation" (van Dijk 2009, p. 66).

Context models have the responsibility of controlling many aspects of discourse; for example, in the production
and comprehension of text and talk. So, it can be concluded that such mental definitions are not expressed or formulated in discourse; they may be effective on discourse. In this analysis context can be affected on the academic discourse or particularly on the use of metadiscourse resources as interactional strategies and discourse elements in the research articles. According to van Dijk (2006), pragmatic understanding of discourse is based on the context models. They provide initial plans which precede all discourse, as in my cases, any researcher during the writing process should have a plan and presupposition of his/her readers, before addressing them.

Iranian scholars in some cases have not any more things to say. They directly have reported the results and briefly interpreted them with sometimes no more explanations. It seems that there is no initial plan for guiding texts. Moreover, their research articles mainly are addressing to a limited group of audiences (sometimes only Iranian students in Iran), so they do not attempt to use enough and suitable rhetorical strategies in their texts. But English researchers used a logical manner and assertive language for presenting their results and showing clearly 'what is going on' in the articles with a more dialogic interaction in a pre-planned manner, to gain acceptance for their claims (Abdollahzadeh, 2007).

Society is a complex combination of situational structures and societal structures. The society dimension of triangle includes cultural and historical aspects, too (van Dijk, 2009).

A writer represents not only the thoughts and attitudes of him/herself, but also shows the ideologies, beliefs, and socio-political constraints of his/her society. As van Dijk (2009, p. 66) said contexts have a controlling power and can influence and control what people say and especially how they say. Lexical choice, syntax, topic turning, strategic feature, metadiscourse resources and many other properties of different styles of writing and speaking are controlled by the context in which the text or event takes place. Also our understanding of various events and social problems depends on our context models and ideologies.

The cognition of the participants of an interaction is one of the most important aspects of the ‘context’ of talk and text. It includes the knowledge, beliefs or intentions of participants of interaction, and mental processes of production and comprehension of text and talk (van Dijk, 2006). In this analysis, the position of any scholar, his/her ideology, knowledge, context model etc., affected his/her communication manner.

4.1. Hedge: among the interactional metadiscourse categories,"hedge" was used more than others by both groups of the writers. However Iranian scholars have used it to some extent more than English writers. This shows that both groups of the academic writers are aware of the critical importance of using ‘hedge’ category for distinguishing fact from fancy in academic writings (Abdollahzadeh, 2007). ‘Hedging’ can be a useful means in argumentations for the writers to gain community acceptance and solidarity; can be a sign of humility and respect to the readers; and give an opportunity for them to be agreed or disagreed on the propositional content.

4.2. Boosters: have the second level. With little difference, the degree of its use by Iranian writers was lower than that of the English writers. Iranian writers used boosters to highlight common knowledge in order to support their new findings. Writers usually used boosters to show the significance of their study; restrict possible alternative interpretation; and show the writers degree of certainty and complete commitment on their findings and propositional content. Therefore, confidently use of boosters by English writers reflects their high degree of power and personal authority, and display a confident ethos.

4.3. Attitude Marker: is used by Iranian scholars considerably in a limited range. They usually used this strategy to highlight the importance of the findings. But English writers more frequently used attitude markers to communicate their feelings and beliefs. It seems that Iranian authors tend not to express their attitudes and evaluative beliefs overtly. In our society and culture academic writing is not so much critical and evaluative. This can be due to: The specific methods of teaching and learning in our educational system, which brought up conservative students; Iranian scholars' higher proficiency level and academic status and the high power distance that they hold (Hofstede, 1977. cited in Abdollahzadeh, 2010); different context models of writers and their supposed readers, and different cognitive realities of the participants' expectations. Like other discourse elements, also metadiscourse marker is under the control of context models and its related factors.

4.4. Engagement Marker and Self-mention: were the next biggest areas of difference. English writers used
engagement markers twice and self-mentions three times more than Iranian scholars. These strategies have a mediating role in the relationship between writers’ arguments and their discourse communities.

These results show that Iranian scholars do not feel any need to have an effective and reader-friendly relationship with the readers. This insufficient use can have origins in their cognitions and contexts or situations in which the articles would be read. English in contrast with Persian is a writer-responsible language not reader-responsible one (Adel, 2006). As was seen in the table (2), Iranian scholars totally use interactional metadiscourse resources less frequently than English scholars; and this can be a representation of Asian tendency to develop a discourse. In the Asian societies such as Iran, a discourse is not the representation of the author’s desire to let that discourse control for itself. Iranian scholars have a ‘received culture’. This means that they prefer to follow the previous rules and conventions and leaning to the imposed sets of instructions in the form of ‘must’ and ‘must not’ without any questioning and doubt. This can be due to the social values, particularly cultural and educational training norms and instructions which are followed by Iranian. They have tendency towards the social norms such as culture of collectivism. Because of this factor we cannot see so much self-mention elements in their writings, particularly the number of “I” subject pronoun, as an index of individualism is very low in the Iranian writings. Furthermore, the schemata of L1 and L2 writers, and the preferred ways of organizing ideas may differ. Therefore, these cultural preconceptions affect their communication, and the strategies which are used for better interaction (Connor, 2002; Hinkel, 2002; Hyland, 2005). In other words, context models and societal structures of Iranian scholars have a high degree of influence on their language and use of strategies for interaction. Another influential factor in this regard, is the religious and philosophical differences. In Iran all of the social and cultural factors and context models are highly influenced by the Islamic precepts, which prefer indirectness, conservatism, and cautious style when expressing ideas, and attitudes (Scollon & Scollon, 1995). While native English speakers, are affected by the Aristotelian philosophy of writing directness, justification, and proof (Hinkel, 2002).

Contexts and societies, in which an author writes, determine and explain not only what she/he writes, but also how she/he writes. Lexical items, syntax, communication strategies, and many other properties of the style of writing are controlled by the context or situation in which she/he is writing. Also it is not their presence in that context or society that provides rules or specific conventions, but it is their definition of that context, which is closely linked to the cognition and ideology of writers (van Dijk, 2006). The use of these metadiscursive categories projects the English writers powerful stance towards their writings and to some extent give them acceptability and credibility among their readers. Also, in our cases, a specific sense of self-confidence is seen in the writings of native speakers. I believe that this can be due to their high level of knowledge and power, which is originated from their long lasting history of academic sciences. Also, English is their own language, and they are masters of their own language; therefore, they completely are familiar with its details, and also know how should use its various categories and functions to have a successful communication with the audience, and persuade them. But for Iranian scholars, it is a foreign language; therefore, they are not so familiar with their socio-cultural norms and conventions for interaction.

It seems that in Iranian society and culture expressing ideas and displaying confidence overtly is not a common behaviour (Abdi, 2009), because they believe that it is a sign of pride and vainglory. While using more hedges and less attitudinal languages and self-mentions are a sign of respect and humility. Moreover, in the western countries, the educational and training systems try to teach individualism, self-confidence, and self-respect to their learners. Also they are encouraged to be in possession of their ideas and attitudes. But Iranian writers, concentrates on the positivists’ rules. They try to keep the text dry and impersonal (Hyland, 2002).

Finally, we can say that, all these societal structures (society) and context models (cognition) have a great influence and controlling power on the use of interactional metadiscourse strategies. Also the cognition of participants or their context model is another factor which is affected and has origins in the cultural and social conventions.

5. Conclusion and pedagogical implications

As discussed, it seems that one of the main problems of academic students in Iranian context is lack of metadiscourse awareness. It seems that it can be one among the main barriers in writing and reading academic texts successfully and making connection in the text effectively. Therefore, lack of metadiscourse awareness can deprive
the academic students and scholars from active participation in different discourse communities. Metadiscourse markers are beneficial rhetorical devices which can control coherence and organization of texts, and affect on the ways of interaction, in order to have an acceptable and persuasive argumentation.

In this study our main focus was on the research article, which is one of the important channels for exchanging new findings and establishing the produced knowledge all over the world. Amongst different sections of a research article, we have selected the discussion section. Because in this section writers try to explain their own views and attitudes towards the new findings; therefore, they may need more interactional metadiscourse strategies.

The components of this research were 40 research articles in applied linguistics, written in English by Iranian and English scholars. We analyzed these research articles to know how these two groups, with different cognitive and socio-cultural norms, use interactional metadiscourse resources. However, our study had some limitations. In this study, I analyzed only the interactional metadiscourse features in the discussion section of research articles in applied linguistics, by native and non-native writers; according to Hyland’s model (2005), with a limited number of data. Our analysis was a critical cross-cultural one, according to the socio-cognitive approach of van Dijk (2008). While for further research, other precise studies can be done to analyze both interactive and interactional metadiscourse markers based on some other taxonomies (e.g. Vande Kopple, 1985; Hinkel, 2004; Salager-Meyer, 1994; Dahl, 2004; and Adel, 2006). Also such a study and analysis can be organized for other sections of a research article such as abstract, introduction, etc. is different. So, these diversities in purpose can affect the degree of using various metadiscourse resources for engagement, expressing attitudes, and so on (Hopkins and Dudley – Evans, 1988). Also the writer’s degree of proficiency can be another line of investigation; I mean ‘how do professional writers organize the writings and guide their readers, and how do the amateur writers do so?’

Our analysis showed that there were significant differences in the use of interactional metadiscourse strategies. Two groups of writers used all of these interactional strategies, but in different ways. The analysis revealed that among five sub-categories (hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers, and self-mentions) ‘hedges’ were used more than the other categories and engagement markers less than the others. The frequency rate of ‘hedges’ in the writings of both groups of researchers were the highest. But Iranian scholars used it even more than English writers. The other strategies were used by English scholars more than Iranian scholars. All these differences in the use of interactional metadiscourse resources can be due to their different context models and social norms. Van Dijk (2008) defined context as subjective mental constructs, which plays an essential role in interaction, production and comprehension of any discourse and discourse community. Also, context dynamically controls how language use and discourse are adapted to their situational environment, and hence defines under what conditions they are appropriate (van Dijk, 2008).

The cognition of the participants in any interaction in a specific discourse community may control the process of communication. Living in different societies or contexts, with different cultures and cognitive patterns mainly may interfere in the selection of lexical items, syntax… and interactional strategies. For example, using more engagement markers by native scholars may show that their writers are responsible to engage the readers to have a successful communication. But insufficient use of this strategy by Iranian scholars can show that in their cultures the main responsibility in interaction and communication is on the shoulders of the readers. Therefore, insights of such studies can give us invaluable results and make us familiar with the conventions of argumentation, persuasion, and effective communication in different genres and disciplines in different cultures and societies. In other words, the ways writers or speakers communicate with their audiences, express themselves and engage them in the communication, is highly related to the cognition of the participants or context models and socio-cultural norms and expectations.

5.1. Pedagogical Implications

5.1.1. For Academic Literacy and ESP, ESL, EFL Courses
The findings of metadiscourse analysis studies are directly relevant to and useful in the academic writing and reading (even speaking and listening). Also in order to have a successful communication and better interaction, having metadiscoursive awareness is highly essential for language users. Therefore, the teachers can help the students to be aware of these strategic features. This sensitivity in the use of metadiscourse markers, as devices for better communication, can assist them to have a well-organized writing. Also this consciousness can help the academic students and research writers to write persuasively in order to achieve a high level of acceptance from the readers. It helps them control their writings and shows them the ways of writers engagement with their topics and readers; and appropriate ways for conveying attitudes. Also teaching interactive metadiscourse features to the students will “provide them with important rhetorical knowledge and equip them with ways of making discourse decisions which are socially grounded in the inquiry patterns and knowledge structures of their disciplines” (Hyland 2009, p. 142).

Metadiscourse awareness is essential for L2 writing and reading instructions and for teachers. By the use of this means they can help the students “to move beyond the conservative prescriptions of the style guides and into the rhetorical context of their disciplines, and investigating the preferred patterns of expression in different communities” (Hyland 2004, p. 149). Therefore, it seems necessary to teach these special strategies to the foreign and second language learners and academic students. Particularly, it seems highly essential for the English learners in the ESP or research courses. At the present time, there are not so many teachers and textbooks to teach the metadiscoursive markers and their features and functions to the students. As Cheng and Steffensen (1996) argue, effective writing and control of particular genres are not innate behaviors but require explicit learning even for native speakers. Also in the academic texts, non-native speakers have problems in distinguishing between claims which are accepted and those which are disputed by scholars (Salager-Meyer, 1994).

Therefore, providing courses for teaching rhetorical functions, particularly metadiscourse markers, seems necessary. But in such courses the main aim is not teaching only metadiscourse categories; but the main purpose of such courses is teaching writing and its strategies, in order to improving the students writing ability and enhancing their rhetorical awareness. Of course, as was said before metadiscourse awareness is essential for improving reading skills too, but here my main focus is on the writing and its related tasks. Several studies have revealed that both reading and writing are enhanced through appropriate use of metadiscourse. For example, Crismore and Vande Kopple (1988) found that texts with metadiscourse elements such as ‘hedges’ are more useful for students than texts with omitted elements.

5.1.2. For Course and Syllabus Designers

The results and insights of such studies can be useful means for the course and syllabus designers. In order to help the teachers to equip students with this means, and increasing students’ awareness of the strategies for better and effective interaction, syllabus designers can devote some sections of the textbooks to the use of metadiscoursal features as rhetorical tools in different discourse communities, for better text organization and communication.

5.1.3. For Inter-Cultural Oral Communication

In the era of speaking with the members of other communities and languages and in the other societies, as Yarmohammadi (2004) puts it, meaning comes from culture, and there is a mutual and indirect relationship between language and culture. The creation of an effective speaking with people of the other societies and languages, without having knowledge of metadiscoursal features for organization, interaction, persuasion, argumentation, etc., which is used in those languages, is impossible.

However, our study had some limitations. In this study, we analyzed only the interactional metadiscourse features in the discussion section of research articles in the applied linguistics, by native and non-native writers; according to Hyland’s model (2005), with a limited number of data. our analysis was a critical cross-cultural one, according to the socio-cognitive approach of van Dijk (2008). While for further research, other precise studies can be done to analyze the both interactive and interactional metadiscourse markers based on the other taxonomies (e.g. Vande...
Kopple, 1985; Hinkel, 2004; Salager-Meyer, 1994; Dahl, 2004; and Adel, 2006). Also such study and analysis can be organized for other sections of a research article in different disciplines and in different genres, e.g. textbooks, lectures, newspapers. Because, as studies have shown, the communicative purpose of the different sections of a research article such as abstract, introduction, etc. is different. So, this diversity in purposes can affect the degree of using various metadiscourse resources for engagement, expressing attitudes, and so on (Hopkins and Dudley – Evans, 1988). Also the writer’s degree of proficiency can be another line of investigation; I mean ‘how do professional writers organize the writings and guide their readers, and how do the amateur writers?’

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All these differences in the use of interactional metadiscourse resources can be due to their different context models and social norms. Van Dijk (2008) defined context as subjective mental constructs, which plays an essential role in interaction, production and comprehension of any discourse and discourse community. Also, context dynamically controls how language use and discourse are adapted to their situational environment, and hence defines under what conditions they are appropriate (van Dijk, 2008).

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Therefore, insights of such studies can give us invaluable results and make us familiar with the conventions of argumentation, persuasion, and effective communication in different genres and disciplines in different cultures and societies. In other words, the ways writers or speakers communicate with their audiences, express themselves and engage them in the communication, is highly related to the cognition of the participants or context models and socio-cultural norms and expectations.

References


