Metadiscourse Use in Thesis Abstracts: A Cross-cultural Study

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Abstract

The present study aims to investigate cultural variations in the use of metadiscourse between Turkish and USA postgraduate students’ abstracts in MA thesis written in English. The taxonomy was borrowed from Hyland (2005). The corpora in the present study comprise a total of 52 thesis abstracts written in English from the department of English Language Teaching, 26 thesis from USA students and 26 from Turkish students. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed to analyse the texts in the corpora. The analysis revealed that there were some cultural differences in the amounts and types of metadiscourse. The incidence of evidential, endophorics, code glosses, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions were fewer in Turkish students’ master thesis abstracts. However, Turkish students used metadiscourse transitions, frame markers and hedges more than USA students. Pedagogical implications were provided in light of empirical data.

Introduction

When we write, we usually write at two levels. The first level contains propositional content that is the subject of the text, while the second level is metadiscourse that helps readers read, organise, understand and interpret the writing (see Vande Kopple, 1985). More specifically, metadiscourse refers to linguistic cues which help the reader to organize, interpret and evaluate the information provided (Crismore, Markkanen & Steffensen, 1993). These cues can be realised by a variety of linguistic forms and be used as an effective interpretation of the written discourse.
(i.e., such as, means, however). Thus, as a significant component of academic writing, metadiscourse facilitates communication with the readers to foster comprehension of the texts. Authors use various linguistic signals to project themselves throughout their texts for a better comprehension of their writing, i.e., attitude markers such as ‘surprisingly’ or ‘unfortunately’ to show their positions. Relevant literature suggests that effective use of metadiscourse is significant for authors to reach the target reader (see Gillaerts & Van de Velte, 2010; Hyland, 1998; Longo, 1994) because metadiscourse is considered a “self-reflective linguistic expression” with its strategic focus on text, the writer and the reader (Hyland, 2004, p. 133). Indeed, the language used in academic writing tends to present creativity skills and build credibility to reach the target audience.

It is notable that as a lingua franca, English is used in academic contexts for scientific publication purposes to situate scholars, academics, postgraduate students themselves in the world of science. Therefore, academic texts have been examined considerably in the literature (for contrastive approach see Dahl, 2004; Mauranen, 1993; for expert academic writing see Hyland, 2010; Onder, 2012). However, to the best of our knowledge, there is scant attention on the use of metadiscourse with a comparison of native and non-native speakers’ academic writing. Considering this gap in the literature, in the present study, we intend to investigate whether metadiscourse changes across cultures when English is used by native speakers (America) and non-native speakers (Turkish), and, if so, what the variations tend to be. Specifically, this study is designed as a cross-cultural study involving MA students in Turkey and the United States.

2. Methodology

The study employed qualitative and quantitative analysis with a focus on frequency counts and manual text analysis of a corpus of 52 thesis abstracts written in English by Turkish and American students in the last five years who are doing MA in English Language Teaching/Linguistics. The total number of the words in USA corpus was higher than Turkish corpus, 12,101 and 7,046, respectively. To alleviate the problem, we calculated the frequency of each metadiscourse type per 10,000 words.

The literature covers various metadiscourse taxonomies (see Adel, 2006; Crismore, Markkanen, Steffensen, 1993; Mauranen, 1993). Given the significance of academic writing, various taxonomies were suggested (e.g., Adel, 2006; Crismore, et al., 1993; Hyland, 2005) with some overlapping features. This study adopts the taxonomy Hyland (2005, p. 49) developed (see Table 1). The taxonomy suggests that metadiscourse is comprised of two types of classification as interactive and interactional resources (Thompson, 2001). According to Hyland (2004), interactive resources allow the writer to help the reader to correctly interpret the text by managing information flow. On the other hand, interactional resources allow the author to communicate an authoritative and credible persona by means of the interaction of the text and reader.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Examples from the corpora</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interactive</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions</td>
<td>connections between steps in an argument</td>
<td>thus, although, and, however</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame markers</td>
<td>discourse acts, sequences or stages</td>
<td>the purpose of the study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endophoric markers</td>
<td>information on other parts of the text</td>
<td>the first chapter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidential</td>
<td>information from other texts</td>
<td>X's (1980) observations about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code glosses</td>
<td>additional information</td>
<td>such as, including, e.g.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interactional</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedges</td>
<td>subjectivity of a position</td>
<td>possible, may, seem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boosters</td>
<td>expressing certainty</td>
<td>clear, somewhat, suggest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Functions of metadiscourse in academic texts
Attitude markers  writer’s attitude to proposition  appropriate, best, surprisingly
Self-mentions  author’s (s) presence  I
Engagement markers  building relationship with reader  note that

Metadiscourse examples of Turkish and American students are given in (1)-(9).

(1) Transitions Both the teacher and the students think that the most challenging task among all the Internet-based reading tasks is the teacher-facilitated one. (Turkish)

(2) Frame markers: The purpose of this study is to investigate the Teachers role in adults ESL learning, by focusing on the teachers’ personality and the teachers methods…. (USA)

(3) Endophoric markers: The present study is conducted in order to occupy the above stated niche. (Turkish)

(4) Evidential: Levinson (1988) revises Goffman's participation roles to reflect the more complex reality of the speaker/hearer dyad. (USA)

(5) Code glosses: …there might be other constructs than self-efficacy beliefs that relate to students’ perceptions of responsibility, such as motivation and interest. (Turkish)

(6) Hedges: … considering all the possible problems that the learners may have outside the class, which affect their motivation for learning. (USA)

(7) Boosters: Accordingly, a clear majority of teachers believe that changing patterns of English use should influence what we teach. (Turkish)

(8) Attitude markers: With an appropriate model in place it may be possible to gain a deeper understanding of mechanisms. (USA)

(9) Self-mentions: These are the distinctive features by which we can track the changes which metaphor creates in the underlying conceptual network/ontology… (USA)

3. Results and discussion

We found both cultural similarities and differences in the MA abstracts of Turkish and American students. Frequency of each type of metadiscourse was evaluated over 10,000. The overall frequency of interactive and particularly interactional metadiscourse was higher in the American students’ abstracts than Turkish students, 925.8 and 855.8, respectively. There were some salient differences as presented in Table 1 below. For example, it is notable that the frequency of evidential (1.4), code glosses (11.6) and endophorics (8.5) was very low in Turkish post-graduate students abstracts, while American students used more evidential (67.3), code glosses (102.9) and endophorics (27.7) as interactive resources. The most frequent interactive metadiscourse use was regarding transitions (542.2 in Turkish students’ abstracts and 323.5 in American students’ abstracts) and frame markers across cultures (182.2 and 134.5, respectively).

Table 2. A model of metadiscourse taxonomy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Masters in Turkey</th>
<th>Masters in USA</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>f per 10,000</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>542.2</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidential</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code glosses</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As for interactional metadiscourse, the frequency of hedges was very similar, 55.4 and 49.5. There was not any use of engagement markers in both corpora. An interesting finding was on the frequency of boosters. American students used boosters (73.2) 26 times more than Turkish students (2.8). Similarly, the frequency of attitude markers was higher in American students (140.5 vs. 53.9). Self-mentions were not used by Turkish students and used very few in US students’ abstracts (7.9). Overall, the biggest difference in the frequency of metadiscourse was regarding evidential, whereas the biggest similarity was in the frequency of hedges. We suggest that the differences across cultures may be attributed to academic writing education and the use of English as a lingua franca in Turkish post-graduate students’ writing. It is notable that when we compare the frequencies in the interactive and interactional metadiscourse, US students used interactional metadiscourse twice more (112.1 vs. 271), while the use of interactive metadiscourse was similar (743.7 vs. 654.8). A possible explanation for this outcome can be Turkish students’ paucity in awareness concerning the control the level of personality in their arguments, such as the expression of intimacy and attitude.

4. Conclusion

These results concerning the frequency of metadiscourse markers in Turkish and American master’s degree thesis abstracts suggest that writing in English as a non-native speaker may impact the writer’s ability to conceptualize the relationship between writer and reader in the different cultural context implied by the communication situation. Because communicating ideas through written language is an act of relationship-building between author and reader, the differing use of metadiscourse we found in this sample may also reflect different social norms for interpersonal relationships. Even in the cross-cultural marketplace for academic writing, the use of English as a lingua franca does not mean that the ability to write in academic English erases more deeply held cultural norms and perspectives. It would seem that teachers of English to non-native speakers could enrich language instruction to include awareness of interactional metadiscourse markers that help writers to express their professional opinions in the text and strengthen their persona as experts in their fields.

These results also suggest that graduate students who have learned English as non-native speakers may also have difficulty viewing the structural elements of the text and how their text relates to other texts in their field. For example, the lower frequency of endophorics and evidential in the Turkish students’ text compared to the American students’ text can result in readers having difficulty following the logic of an argument or relating the students’ argument to related professional conversations on the topic of study. It would seem that teachers of English to non-native speakers could also enrich language instruction to include awareness of interactive metadiscourse markers that help readers to follow the writer’s logical argument and connect the writer’s ideas to related ideas from other researchers.
References