THE PRAGMATIC ROLE OF METADISCOURSE MARKERS IN RA ABSTRACTS

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Abstract

Research article (RA) abstracts are informative in nature. They inform the reader about the aim of the writer's specific scientific research and their main findings. Since they are restricted in length, they are supposed to be precise, economical and engaging. Metadiscourse markers help writers to comment on their text and lead the readers in the direction in which they want them to see and understand their arguments. More precisely, interpersonal metadiscourse markers are used by writers to modify their arguments so that they make them more acceptable for the readers, while textual metadiscourse markers guide the reader through the text and direct them to how they should read and understand the presented arguments.

Therefore, this paper seeks to analyse the use of textual and interpersonal metadiscourse devices in RA abstracts written in English by both native English and native Macedonian scholars, experts in the area of linguistics and literature. For this purpose, 60 abstracts (30 abstracts written by Macedonian native speakers (15 in the area of linguistics, and 15 in the area of literature) and 30 abstracts written by English native speakers, (15 in linguistics and 15 in literature)) were randomly selected from various scientific journals of Applied Linguistics and Literature and analysed. The results show differences in the form of the abstract, as well as in the usage of metadiscourse markers employed in the abstracts written by the native and non-native speakers, and between the two disciplines. This study contributes to deepening the understanding of English academic discourse and enhancing the understanding of the differences in approach between Macedonian and English scholars when writing abstracts both in the area of linguistics and literature.

Key words: *RA abstracts, metadiscourse, interpersonal and textual, contrastive analysis, linguistics, literature*

Introduction

Research article (RA) abstracts are considered an independent discourse which functions as a 'representation' (Bazerman, 1984: 58), 'distillation' (Swales, 1990: 179), crystallisation (Salager-Mayer, 1990: 367) or a summary (Kaplan et al., 1994: 405) of an associated text (Hyland, 2004: 64). The purpose of the abstract is regarded as 'a description or factual summary of the much longer report, and is meant to give the reader an exact and concise knowledge of the full article' (Bhatia, 1993: 78).

It is the readers' first encounter with a text – the point at which they decide whether to continue reading further. Therefore, writers need to plan it carefully and write it in such a way

that it persuades the reader that the text which follows is worth reading. The abstract also serves them to negotiate the significance of their research and prove they have professional credibility.

So, the aim of the paper is twofold: 1. to compare and contrast the format of RA abstracts written in English by Macedonian and British/ American academics in order to see if there is some difference in format between the academics and how they write abstracts and 2. to analyse and compare the form and function of metadiscourse markers used in RA abstracts written in English by Macedonian and British/ American academics.

Corpus and research methodology

For the purposes of this analysis, 60 RA abstracts written in English were collected. Thirty of them were written by Macedonian academics - 15 in the area of linguistics[1] and 15 in the area of literature[2] and the other thirty were written by British and American native speakers- again 15 in the area of linguistics[3] and 15 in literature[4].

Before the analysis two initial hypotheses were made:
1st hypothesis: there will be differences both in format and the distribution of metadiscourse markers between disciplines;
2nd hypothesis: there will be differences both in format and the distribution of metadiscourse markers between native and non-native academics.

Theoretical background

The selected abstracts were analysed in terms of two main aspects: their form and the text writers used to talk about the text presented in the abstracts. In the first part of the analysis, the abstracts' format was compared and contrasted i.e. the organisation of the information presented in it. According to Hyland (2004: 67), the classification of rhetorical moves in article abstracts corresponds to the organisation of the paper itself: Introduction-Methods-Results-Conclusion and each part focuses on certain aspect which needs to be covered (see table 1 below). So, this analysis tends to show how much the academics follow this format when writing their abstracts and if there is any difference between disciplines (Linguistics and Literature) and between native and non-native speakers of English.

Table 1. Abstract's format

MOVE	FUNCTION
Introduction	establish context
Purpose	outlines the intention behind the paper, indicates purpose, thesis, hypothesis
Method	information on approach, data, procedures
Product	states main findings or results
Conclusion	draws inferences

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[1] taken from *Proceedings from the English department 2011 conference and ESIDRP 2016 conference* – 3351words, 223 words/average

[2] same source as above – 3460 words, approximately 230 words/average

[3] taken from the *Web of science* journals: *Journal of Pragmatics, Cognitive Linguistics and English language and Linguistics* (2868 words, 191 words/average)

[4] taken from the *Web of science* journals: *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture, Language and Literature* (2320 words, 154 words/average).

In the second part, the usage of metadiscourse was investigated. Writers employ metadiscourse markers to comment on the text and lead the readers in the direction in which they want them to understand their arguments. The analysis focused on the usage of both textual and interpersonal markers.

Writers use textual metadiscourse markers to guide the readers through the text and direct them to how they should read and understand the presented arguments. In order to see whether they do it successfully, the usage of transition markers (additive, contrastive, reason-consequence) in all the RA abstracts was analysed. On the other hand, writers use interpersonal metadiscourse markers to modify their arguments so that they make them more acceptable for the readers. For that purpose they use hedges (to express tentativeness whenever they are not completely sure in the truth value of their statements), intensifiers (to express certainty whenever they are completely confident in the truth value of their statements), attitude markers (to express their attitude towards the content of the proposition) and self-mentions and engagement markers (to talk about themselves or engage the readers into the discourse with personal pronouns).

FINDINGS
Part 1: Format

The analysis showed certain differences in the format of the RA abstracts across the two disciplines and between the native and non-native speakers of English. As it can be seen from table 2 below, 'Introduction' to the topic was written in abstracts from both disciplines. Native Macedonians give introduction to their research a bit more frequently, though. The analysis also showed that the 'Introductory part' is sometimes interchanged with purpose. Academics sometimes start immediately with focusing on the purpose of the paper and then they introduce the area or just skip it.

Table 2

(n=15)	Ling. (native Mac.)	Ling. (native English)	Lit. (native Mac.)	Lit. (native English)
Introduction	13	11	15	13
Purpose	15	15	14	15
Methodology	11	13	5	7
Product	7	14	3	7
Conclusion	9	5	3	6

The 'Methodology' of the research was described mostly in the abstracts from the area of linguistics. However, the research showed that Macedonian linguists need to work more on being more precise about the methodology they employ in the paper. On the other hand, the literature experts from bot corpora do not seem to employ any procedure in their papers or at least they do not mention it a lot. They mostly retell books used as sources for the article.

As for the findings or 'Product' of the paper, both native and non-native English speakers, literature experts, usually do not state what they achieved as a result from their research on the certain topic. They are mostly narrating and theorising, especially Macedonian academics. As for the linguists, the research showed that Macedonian linguistics experts do not

discuss their product as much as English native speakers do. So, they are not precise about it. For instance, they use expressions of the type: *We expect that the research will show; we hope to detect; reasons for such results will be provided* etc., which shows that they write the abstract prior the analysis and therefore cannot talk about the results of the research. However, they seem to write a conclusion to their abstract more often than the other three groups of academics. In general, academics from both disciplines do not really write a concluding sentence or sentences (see table 2). They simply finish with the product or the methodology.

Part 2: Metadiscourse markers

    A. Textual metadiscourse: Distribution and use of Transition markers

The analysis showed differences in the use of transitions across the two disciplines. Linguistics experts generally used them much more frequently than literature experts (*Ling. (native Mac.)*– 3,28% : *Ling. (native Eng.)*– 3,14 %; *Lit. (native Mac.)*– 0,29 % : *Lit. (native Eng.)*– 0,86 %). They obviously feel the need to better guide the reader through the text of the abstract and thus be clearer on the content.

    Contrastive markers were the most frequently used ones overall, especially: *but, however and nevertheless.* However, of all the 4 corpora analysed, Macedonian linguists seemed to use them least frequently. They used the reason-consequence markers (mostly: *thus* and *therefore*) more often than the other three groups (see table 3 below). Obviously, they tend to explain the connection between the things they research, the reason and the consequence of the concrete findings.

    Additive markers were the least frequently used ones. *Furthermore* was the most frequent additive marker used. Instead of additive markers, writers used the so-called frame markers, like: *Primarily/ Firstly, Secondly, Then, Finally,* which helped them order their arguments better.

Table 3. distribution of transition markers

% - distr. per 1000 words	Ling. (native Mac.)	Ling. (native Eng.)	Lit. (native Mac.)	Lit. (native Eng.)
Additive markers	0,89	0,69	0,58	0,86
Contrastive markers	2,69	5,23	7,23	3,45
Reason-conseq.	3,58	1,05	2,60	1,29

    B. Interpersonal metadiscourse

    1. Hedges and Intensifiers

As it was previously mentioned, writers use hedges and intensifiers to express tentativeness or certainty in their statements accordingly, depending on how confident they are in their truth value. Since academics build their credibility depending on the quality of their papers, and abstracts for that matter, it is very important that they modify statements appropriately so that they present themselves as experts in the area who know what they know and what they might not really have the proof of and still need to investigate further. They use hedges and intensifiers to achieve that.

For the purposes of this analysis, Hyland's (2005) classification of hedges and intensifiers (boosters) was used (see table 4 below).

Table 4.

Hyland (2005)		HEDGES	INTENSIFIERS
VERBS	Modal verbs	*may, might, could*	*will, would*
	Judgemental verbs Evidential verbs	*suggest, seem, argue, tend to indicate, imply*	*show, demonstrate*
ADJECTIVES /ADVERBS		*somewhat, likely, possible/ly, suggest, argue, seem*	*undeniably, undoubtedly*
NOUNS		*possibility, probability*	*fact*

As it can be seen from table 5 below, verbs were the most frequently used markers both as hedges and intensifiers in both disciplines and by all the academics. However, there were some noticeable differences in the use of hedges by Macedonian literature experts – they used them less frequently than the other three groups of academics, and the use of intensifiers by Macedonian linguistics experts who used them the most frequently. Compared to them, English literature experts used them the least frequently. So, it could be concluded that there is some cultural difference between native and non-native speakers of English and the perception they have of the presentation of their arguments in the abstract. Macedonian linguistics experts obviously believe that they need to make confident claims in the abstract so, as it can be seen from table 5, they use intensfiers twice as frequently compared to English native speakers. The same goes for literature experts. Macedonian academics use intensifiers more than three times more frequently than English academics, who, on the other hand, tend to make more tentative claims in the abstracts.

Table 5. Distribution of hedges and intensifiers across corpora

% - distr. per 1000 words	Ling. (native Mac.)	Ling. (native Eng.)	Lit. (native Mac.)	Lit. (native Eng.)
HEDGES				
Verbs	3,58	4,53	1,73	4,31
Adverbs/ adjectives	0,59	0,69	1,16	--
Nouns	--	0,69	--	--
INTENSIFIERS				
Verbs	6,27	3,14	3,18	0,86
Adverbs/ adjectives	0,59	0,35	0,87	--
Nouns	0,29	0,35	--	--

Examples: Hedges
  (1) The findings <u>suggest</u> that grammatical person, but not grammatical voice <u>may</u> also <u>influence</u>…
  (2) Our results <u>indicate</u> that preposition copying creates redundancy …
  (3) The occurrence of t-to-r <u>seems</u> to be constrained …
  (4) We <u>argue</u> here that it is <u>possible</u> for grammatical innovation to …

(5) Some versions <u>may become</u> established as dominant accounts of events, whilst others <u>may be marginalised</u> as counter narratives…
(6) They are a <u>sort of</u> "paintings" themselves…
(7) Considering that Williams was recounting the weary painter's self-portrait, one <u>might be led to suggest</u>…

Examples: Intensifiers
(8) This paper <u>will show</u> how captive Mind has shed light to…
(9) The analysis <u>shows</u> overall increased sensitivity to their pronunciation errors …
(10)   These generic formulations are <u>undoubtedly</u> related to the aesthetic vision…
(11)   It is <u>clearly</u> a complex issue and has relevance to a number of theoretical questions
(12)   Instead, t-to-r <u>shows</u> evidence of being lexically restricted and this <u>fact</u> has recently encouraged…

As for the use of adjectives and adverbs, there is no some conspicuous difference among the 4 corpora investigated. It can be noted, though, that Macedonian literature experts use them a bit more frequently than the others. Nouns, in general, were very rarely used by all academics.

2. Attitude markers

The use of attitude markers reveals the writer's attitude towards the propositional content – they can convey importance, relevance, agreement, surprise or other affective meanings. The most frequently used attitude markers were the attitudinal: adverbs (*unfortunately, luckily*) and adjectives (*it is important, essential, surprising*). The results showed that they were much less frequently used by Macedonian linguistics experts (*2,39%*) compared to the other three groups of academics (*Ling. (native Eng.) – 4,18 %; Lit. (native Mac.) – 4,91 %; Lit. (native Eng.) – 4,31 %*), who used them more or less the same. Obviously, Macedonian linguists are avoiding the usage of words with affective meaning and tend to be more factual.

Examples:
(1) *What the <u>tricky part</u> in fact is how to include the standards of the processes of observing…*
(2) *<u>Problematically,</u> however, the rule does not apply blindly across …*
(3) *When either of the coordinates is a personal pronoun, <u>difficult choices</u> have to be made…*
(4) *<u>It is doubtful</u> whether the first poem in William's series is based on…*
(5) *<u>What is most fascinating</u> in William's verbal portrait…*
(6) *What makes this book such <u>interesting reading</u> is …*

3. Self-mentions and engagement markers

Finally, the use of self-mentions and engagement markers in all abstracts was investigated. The use of self-mentions help the writer make herself/himself visible in the text, while with the use of engagement markers, the writer involves the readers into the discourse. For the purposes of this

research, Hyland's (2005) classification was used: **self-mentions** *(I, my, we, our, us (exclusive[5]))* and **engagement markers** *(we, our, us (inclusive[6])).*

Table 6. Distribution of self-mentions and engagement markers across corpora

% - distr. per 1000 words	Ling. (native Mac.)	Ling. (native Eng.)	Lit. (native Mac.)	Lit. (native Eng.)
Self-mentions (I, my)	0,89	1,74	1,45	5,17
We (excl.)	0,89	8,02	-	1,29
We (authorial)	-	0,69	1,16	-
Our (excl.)	-	2,44	0,29	-
Us (excl.)	-	0,69	0,29	-
OVERALL	1,78	13,58	3,19	6,46
Engagement markers				
We (incl.)	0,29	0,35	0,58	0,43
Our (incl.)	1,19	0,35	-	0,43
Us (incl.)	-	-	-	-
OVERALL	1,48	0,7	0,58	0,86

As it can be seen from table 6 above, English native speakers used self-mentions (especially "I" and "exclusive we[7]") much more frequently than Macedonian in both disciplines, especially linguistics experts. This might be the result of some cultural difference or difference in the writing style between the two cultures, in a sense that Macedonians are taught to be as objective and impersonal as possible in academic writing so they use passive constructions or avoid mentioning themselves. By avoiding the use of self-mentions they might also be avoiding to take responsibility for their arguments. As for the use of engagement markers, they were much less in all the four corpora, which shows that writers do not really tend to involve the readers in the discourse.

Conclusion

This analysis focused on RA abstracts. The aim was to investigate differences in how native and non-native speakers of English (academics from 2 different areas, linguistics and literature) write abstracts. Both initial hypothesis proved to be correct. There were differences both in the format and the distribution of metadiscourse markers across the two disciplines (linguistics and literature) and between the native and non-native speakers.

When it comes to the format, the analysis showed that non-native speakers do not or rarely state the product, while in literature abstracts in both disciplines, there was lack of description of the Methodology and Product. As for the use of metadiscourse markers, it turned out that contrastive markers were the most frequently used ones. However, in the area of linguistics, native English speakers used them more, while in the area of literature, Macedonian academics used them more. Another interesting finding was that frame markers were used more frequently by linguists than by literature experts.

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[5] excludes the reader from the discourse

[6] includes the reader into the discourse

[7] this either referred to the authors (if they were two) or it was the usage of authorial *we.*

When it comes to the usage of interpersonal metadiscourse markers, the analysis showed that in both disciplines hedges were used more frequently by native English   speakers, while intensifiers were more frequently used by native Macedonian speakers. This reveals some cultural differences because obviously Macedonian academics feel they should be more confident when making their claims in the abstract, while British/American academics do the opposite. As for the use of attitude markers, they were used less frequently by Macedonian linguists who obviously have a "stricter" style of expression than British/American academics. Finally, the analysis showed differences between native and non-native speakers of English in the use of self-mentions. Native speakers make themselves more visible in their texts compared to Macedonians who write more impersonal statements.

So, overall, the analysis showed differences between native and non-native speakers when they write abstracts in English in the two disciplines: linguistics and literature. Academics, especially Macedonian ones, should obviously be made aware of these differences when they send an abstract to a more prestigious journal and thus be more successful in their professional area than they are.

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