元话语研究
——理论与实践

Metadiscourse Studies: Theory and Practice

高　健 ● 著

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内 容 提 要

本书系统梳理各种元话语理论，尝试构建一个学术篇章元话语分析的理论框架，并从对比修辞角度深入分析中国作者和英美作者使用学术篇章元话语的异同，力图揭示中国作者使用英语进行书面学术交流时所进入的误区及对策。本书的读者对象主要为从事对比修辞研究、学术写作教学与研究、话语分析的研究人员、英语教师及英语专业硕士生和博士生。本书对广大科研工作者科研论文的撰写和投稿亦具有一定的借鉴价值。

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Preface

Whenever we use language, we convey an attitude to what we say and to our readers. We might as well convey an attitude to what has been said on the same topic. These functions are projected by metadiscourse: the linguistic expressions which refer to the evolving text and to the writer and imagined readers of that text.

Then, what is successful writing? It lies among the skillful use of metadiscourse. In academic writing, which is taken by many as a typical social engagement, the significance of metadiscourse is well proved by the ways we express our ideas, the ways we expect our audience are likely to accept. It is also well proved by the ways we choose to convey an appropriate writer personality. What's more, it is well proved by the ways we actively engage with our audience.

Metadiscourse has aroused a strong and lasting interest among western scholars from different disciplines. ESP and EAP teachers and researchers in China have also begun to show some interest in it. However, it is still a rarely touched area.

My goal in this book is to review and discuss both conceptions and empirical practices of metadiscourse. More importantly, I intend to bring to public criticism my own study toward a multi-dimensional approach to metadiscourse and my own attempt in probing into the use of metadiscoursal features in Chinese writers' research articles, as compared with native speakers'.

The book falls into four parts. The first presents existing literature on the definitions, functions and classifications of metadiscourse. It also discusses some debates and issues about metadiscourse. The second part is both a review of a variety of approaches to metadiscourse

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and a discussion on how to theoretically treat metadiscourse in academic texts. The third part reports the findings of a contrastive rhetoric study on Chinese writers' use of metadiscourse in their research articles as is compared with native speakers'. The final part explores the importance of metadiscourse for teachers and students of academic English and then points forward to further research in the area.

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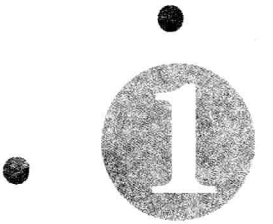

Part One What is metadiscourse?

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Chapter 1

Metadiscourse:definitions

The term of metadiscourse has gained increasing interest in various research fields such as composition, reading, rhetoric, text structure, contrastive rhetoric, EAP and business communication. Metadiscourse in casual conversation (Schiffrin, 1980), school textbooks (Crismore, 1989), oral narratives (Norrick, 2001), science popularization (Crismore and Farnsworth, 1990), undergraduate textbooks (Hyland, 2000), postgraduate dissertations (Bunton, 1999; Hyland, 2004; Swales, 1990), Darwin's *Origin of Species* (Crismore and Farnsworth, 1989), advertising slogans (Fuertes-Olivera et al., 2001) and company annual reports (Hyland, 1998a) has been studied and found important in helping us to organize or to comprehend discourses and texts. It has been used to investigate whether there exist rhetorical differences in the texts written by different cultural groups (Mauranen, 1993; Crismore et al., 1993; Valero-Garces, 1996). It has also been proved to be present in medieval medical writing (Taavisainen, 1999) and in scientific discourse from the late seventeenth century (Atkinson, 1999). It is said to contribute to effective ESP reading comprehension (Camiciottoli, 2003), be a feature of good ESL and native-speaker student writing (Intaraprawat and Steffensen, 1995; Cheng and Steffensen, 1996) and comprise an essential element of persuasive and argumentative discourse (Crismore and Farnsworth, 1990; Hyland, 1998a).

Since the coinage of the term metadiscourse by Zellig Harris in 1959, it has been labeled divergently as *signaling devices*, *signaling*, *signposts*, *gambits*, *framing*, *meta-talk*, *meta-communicative markers*, *non-topical material*, *meta-text*, *evidentials*, and *modalities of texts*

(Bibler & Finnegan, 1989; Chafe, 1986; Chafe & Nichols, 1986; Enkvist, 1978; Keller, 1979; Lautamatti, 1978; Meyer, 1975; Niklas, 1987; Perkins, 1983; Ragan & Hopper, 1982; Rossiter, 1974; Schiffrin, 1980; Stubbs, 1986; Wunderlich, 1979; as cited in Xu, 2001). It is Williams' (1981) book, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, that draws wide attention to *metadiscourse*. Yet ever since then the defining job continues to be a fuzzy one while more agreements have been made upon the functions of metadiscourse.

This chapter is a summary of the defining jobs done by metadiscourse researchers from the 1970s to the first few years of this century. Also discussed is a working definition for the interpretation of metadiscourse in academic written communication.

1.1 Definitions revisited

The definition of metadiscourse has undergone different interpretations. Crismore (1984a) notes that metadiscourse can be defined both broadly and narrowly depending on what field scholars are working in: semiotics, philosophy, speech communication, rhetoric, and linguistics (e.g., sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, speech act theory, and functional perspective). Semioticians, philosophers, speech communication theorists, and rhetoricians define metadiscourse broadly while linguists define it narrowly.

Semioticians consider metadiscourse as a sign. For them, metadiscourse is the semiotic interpretation of the discourse or text. Luhmann (1987), for example, calls metadiscourse signposting (as cited in Cheng, 1997, p.48).

Philosophers approach the definition of metadiscourse with propositional logic, emphasizing logical structures and logical problems. They separate language into object language (used to refer to the reality) and metalanguage (used to refer to language). Crismore (1989) points out that this approach is too limited, since it considers

object language as consisting of only propositional content and, therefore, metalanguage is excluded from the language domain.

Speech communication theorists consider metadiscourse as metacommunication, that is, communication about communication, whether it is verbal or nonverbal and whether it is about communication in general or about some specific communicative interactions.

In the field of rhetoric, metadiscourse is broadly defined as commentary. Both Rabin (1986) and Auten (1988) regard commentary as text about the text. Conley (1983), another rhetorician, defines metadiscourse as figures of thought, which are rhetorical strategies used for effective communication rather than just for ornamentation.

Linguists define metadiscourse more narrowly. Sociolinguist Schriffrin (1980) discusses "meta-talk", the talk about the ongoing talk. Keller (1979), from a psycholinguistic perspective, calls metadiscourse "gambits", which are psychological strategies used by participants in communication to introduce what to say next. Beauvais' speech act model (1989) makes a distinction between illocutionary acts and propositional content as well as between metadiscourse and primary discourse. He defines metadiscourse as "the elements in a sentence that convey illocutionary content in either fully or partially explicit form" (p. 30).

The functional approach to metadiscourse, which is widely taken by metadiscourse researchers, is based on Halliday's functional view of language.

Halliday (1978) believes that metadiscourse includes linguistic elements that do not refer to aspects of external reality but to the organization of the discourse itself and to aspects of the relationship between author and writer of the texts.

Meyer (1975) defines metadiscourse as "signaling", a non-

content aspect of writing that gives emphasis to certain aspects of the semantic content, or points out the structural organization of the content. Meyer claims that signaling does not add new topical content but simply accents information already contained in the content structure and shows the writer's perspective on and commitment to the content.

Lautamatti (1978) also defines metadiscourse as one aspect of "non-topical linguistic material". According to her, there are two levels of material in any written discourse: the topical material, which is the discourse topic, and the non-topical material, which is metadiscourse.

Williams (1981) takes metadiscourse to be "discourse about discoursing" (p. 47), "the writing about writing, whatever does not refer to the subject matter being addressed" (p. 111). Williams discusses metadiscourse as a stylistic variable and claims that it is an important level of structure in a description of a writer's style. According to Williams, writers communicate with their readers on two levels: on the level of primary discourse, they supply information about the subject of their text and expand propositional content, and on the level of metadiscourse, they project themselves into the text, guiding and directing their readers to organize, interpret, evaluate, and react to the propositional content (p. 2).

Vande Kopple (1985) defines metadiscourse in a similar way:

> On one level we supply information about the subject of our text. On this level we expand propositional content. On the other level, the level of metadiscourse, we do not add propositional material but help our readers organize, classify, interpret, evaluate, and react to such material. Metadiscourse, therefore, is discourse about discourse or communication about communication. (p. 83)

Later, Vande Kopple (1997) defines metadiscourse as "discourse that people use not to expand referential material, but to help their readers connect, organize, interpret, evaluate and develop attitudes toward that material" (p. 2). Vande Kopple (2002) uses metadiscourse "to designate elements in texts that convey meanings other than those that are primarily referential" (p. 92). Drawing on Williams' (1981) two planes of discourse and Halliday's (1973) three macro-functions, Vande Kopple (2002) still takes a similar definition of metadiscourse to what he defines in his year-1997 study, except that "referential material" is replaced by "ideational material" (p. 93).

Crismore (1989) claims that in any form of language communication, two levels or planes of discourse are involved: the primary discourse level, which consists of propositions and referential meanings, and the metadiscourse level, which consists of propositional attitudes, textual meanings, and interpersonal meanings.

Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffensen (1993) state that metadiscourse is:

> Linguistic material in texts, written or spoken, which does not add anything to the propositional content but that is intended to help the listener or reader organize, interpret and evaluate the information given. (p. 40)

The functional-approach definitions mentioned above all make a clear distinction between metadiscourse and propositional content, regarding the latter as "primary discourse". So they seem problematic when we analyze texts as communicative acts. Luukka (1992) contends that we should not simply define metadiscourse as "non-propositional" elements of texts because metadiscourse certainly cannot be omitted from a text without changing its actual meaning (p. 78). Mao (1993) also challenges the most prominent approach by blurring

the distinction between primary and secondary discourse. Additionally, Hyland (2004) finds out the drawbacks of these definitions; for example, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish what is propositional material from what is not. According to Hyland (2004), if the propositional content of a text in a certain academic situation is rewritten, summarized, paraphrased, or reformulated in different ways, then the meaning of the text depends on the integration of all its component elements, which cannot be separated into independent "meanings" as is suggested by Vande Kopple (2002). A case in point is that certain text connectives in Vande Kopple's (1985, 1987, 1997, 2002) textual metadiscourse subcategory sometimes may serve interpersonal functions as well as textual ones (Barton, 1995). And even Vande Kopple (2002) himself cautions that "one form (of metadiscourse) can fulfill a metadiscoursal function in one place and an ideational function in another" (p. 94).

1.2 Defining metadiscourse in academic written communication

So, when defining metadiscourse in academic context, as Hyland and Tse (2004) suggest, we should first acknowledge that a distinction between propositional content and metadiscourse "is required as a starting point for exploring metadiscourse in academic writing, but it is unwise to push this distinction too far" (p. 160). Hyland and Tse (2004) further point out three reasons for holding this view. For one thing, academic texts seek to inform readers of the world reality in order to persuade them into some action or thought, or seek to give the writer's scholarly claims certain validity. For another, a large proportion of every text is not concerned with the world reality at all, but with its internal argument and its readers. Besides, it is wise to know that metadiscourse is not "secondary" to the propositional content

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