

○ **K. HYLAND, *METADISCOURSE***

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The goal Ken Hyland sets himself in this book is ‘to review, discuss and critique existing conceptions of metadiscourse, to discover their strengths and weaknesses, and to explore what they have to tell us about communication in general and academic writing in particular’ and to ‘synthesise and build on these conceptions to offer a more robust, explicit and useful model of metadiscourse’ (x). Section 1, ‘What is metadiscourse?’ (chapters 1–3) is where he primarily accomplishes this, and so this is the section that carries the greatest theoretical burden. The first two chapters review and evaluate existing approaches, models, concepts and classifications of metadiscourse, and in chapter 3 Hyland presents his own model. In section 2, ‘Metadiscourse in practice’ (chapters 4–7) Hyland employs his model to show how metadiscourse analysis can clarify how rhetoric (chapter 4), genre (chapter 5), culture (chapter 6) and community (chapter 7) impact on discourse. In section 3, ‘Issues and implications’, he considers the usefulness of metadiscourse studies for teaching writing, in particular L2 writing (chapter 8), and then concludes with a discussion of issues that need further exploration and research (chapter 9).

The use of the term ‘metadiscourse’ might seem unusual to some. It does not refer to discourse about discourse, but to the use of language to ‘organise texts, engage readers and signal attitudes to the material and the audience’ (ix) and therefore, with propositional aspects of a text (aspects that index the world beyond text, 38–39), constitutes discourse: metadiscourse is ‘integral to the process of communication and not mere commentary on propositions’ (41).

Although researchers generally agree that metadiscourse refers to the way writers weave into their texts expression of their interests and stances to the content and the reader, their awareness of addressee and context of writing, and assumptions about the reader, they differ in emphasis and on which text features count as metadiscourse (27). Hyland rejects positions that restrict metadiscourse to speech acts, or cohesive devices, for example, or that seek to identify metadiscourse by linguistic criteria (26–27). He argues that metadiscourse is tied to interaction, to the way ‘we create the social interactions which make our text effective’ (ix), and therefore we need to identify metadiscourse in functional terms (25). Consequently, he argues metadiscourse analysis must focus on features that serve an interpersonal function (27) and are explicit (28, 43).

In chapter 3, Hyland defines metadiscourse as follows:

Metadiscourse is a cover term for self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer [or speaker] to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community. (37)

Underlying his conceptualisation are three principles: (i) ‘that metadiscourse is distinct from propositional aspects of discourse’; (ii) ‘that metadiscourse refers to aspects of the text that embody writer-reader interactions’; and (iii) ‘that metadiscourse refers only to relations that are internal to the discourse’ (38). He elaborates on these three principles (38–48) but of particular significance is the interaction function which he sub-divides into the ‘interactive’ and ‘interactional’ dimensions (49). ‘Interactive’ elements are features of a text that index the assumptions a writer makes about his/her reader. The ‘interactional’ refers to expressions of the writer’s position and stances, and therefore is an expression of ‘the writer’s voice or community based personality’ (48). As such, the interactive features *embody* the writer’s performance in their text, whereas the interactional features *represent* it (44).

Hyland provides a classification of the functional resources that are typically drawn on to enact these interactive and interactional dimensions in text. The interactive involves transitions markers, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials and code glosses (50–52), whereas interactional resources include hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self mention and engagement markers (52–54). In section 2 Hyland provides empirical analyses of text extracts drawn from different corpora to show how use of these functional elements varies according to rhetorical purpose, genre, culture, and community, and thus he argues that analysis of metadiscourse contributes in valuable ways to understanding how these dimensions have effect on text/discourse.

Rather than continue with summarising Hyland’s text, I will now address some questions raised by it. First, how can we determine the functions textual elements serve? Hyland relies largely on an intuitive reading of the texts he refers to. Although he acknowledges that in so far as texts are constrained by the contexts and communities from which they emerge, metadiscourse ‘must be analysed as part of a community’s practices, values and beliefs’ (37), he does not explain how language analysts such as Hyland can determine functional meanings of text features that reflect ‘practices, values and beliefs’ of communities the analyst is not a member of.

Secondly, Hyland’s approach to analysis and understanding of metadiscourse accentuates convention and conformity of use. A major purpose of this book is to show how metadiscourse research can contribute to teaching academic literacy. In his chapter on

‘metadiscourse and the classroom’, Hyland argues that a major justification for researching and teaching metadiscourse is to enable students to learn how to use metadiscourse in appropriate ways (175), in order to negotiate a position with anticipated readers. However, the negotiation of metadiscourse use itself is not something Hyland explores. Successful negotiation of position is contingent upon *appropriate* use of metadiscourse (e.g. 178). Conformity to convention thus appears indispensable. While communities may well prefer conformity, since it eases the act of communication, this does not justify the assumption that reproduction of convention and practices is *necessary* for communicative success. In the academic environment, in which Hyland takes particular interest, understanding between L2 writers and their teachers is often managed despite existing practices not being drawn upon in ‘appropriate’ ways. There is negotiation of position through metadiscourse, but also at some level there is negotiation of metadiscourse use itself. Given Hyland’s assertion that metadiscourse is precisely that aspect of discourse through which non-propositional aspects are managed, metadiscourse analysis would also need to account for its own negotiation. However, such an account probably requires an analysis that is not limited to explicit textual features. Hyland’s restricted approach runs the risk of reducing discourse to text (see Widdowson 1995), and risks reducing significantly the scope of the interpersonal that Hyland wishes to hinge metadiscourse analysis on.

Thirdly, the recommended conformity is to existing practices identified through empirical analysis of text. This not only invokes the idea that such features are necessary, but also disguises a transition, not justified by Hyland, from empirical description (how things are) to prescription (how things should be). The empirical analysis of metadiscourse in Section 2 assumes that the texts analysed are exemplary. But the *fact* that metadiscourse is used in certain ways is clearly not sufficient ground for judging that such uses constitute appropriate use to which language users should conform. Hyland himself draws on this fact when, in chapter 8, he argues that a textbook searching for an engaging and informal style ‘misguidedly overuses’ conversational metadiscourse, causing ‘problems of adjustment’ for students and ‘irritation for the rest of us’ (177). In this instance Hyland rejects a published example, but provides no principled means for determining when a use of metadiscourse is appropriate or inappropriate. Lack of conformity is presented as an obstacle, rather than something to work productively with. Hyland doesn’t explore who the ‘us’ are that feel so irritated, and on what grounds we might impose our non-irritating standards. The authors of the textbook presumably felt no irritation, and possibly neither did the intended readers. Responses to texts vary, contingent upon multiple factors which produce particular resultant effects. This points to the importance of the situatedness of

language use, but emphasis on the uniqueness of each situated occasion of language use reduces the significance we can attach to the necessity of adhering to convention for communicative success.

Hyland draws attention to the importance of ‘situatedness’ in his discussion of community (chapter 7). Although metadiscourse is always situated and ‘must be analysed as part of a community’s practices, values and beliefs’ (37), Hyland acknowledges critiques of the idea of ‘discourse community’ (138–141) and notes Swales’ argument that we need to understand ‘discourse community’ ‘in terms of an individual’s engagement in its practices, rather than orientation to rules and goals’ and thus communities should be seen as ‘rhetorical constructs which persist by instantiation and engagement, rather than existing through membership and collectivity’ (141). This suggests that acceptability and effectiveness may not only depend upon conformity to existing conventions, but may also be a resultant of present contingencies and their convergence, which we can speculate will be framed by the dialogic, interlocutory relationship, and the power dynamics entailed in that. Consequently, contingency may be integral. If so, metadiscourse use will in part be validated at the moment of its instantiation. Interlocutors may therefore work between differences, rather than overcome them by aligning with pre-existing conventions. This in turn suggests we cannot account for successful metadiscourse use solely by reference to conventionalised practices. This argument also suggests that conventions themselves might well be sustained by, and dependent upon metadiscourse, and so a dialectical relationship needs to be explored. Hyland does not acknowledge such a relationship. He insists that good use of metadiscourse depends upon the writer being ‘familiar with the conventions and expectations which operate in particular settings’ (198). Hyland’s analysis centres on conventions to be reproduced; in my view he pays insufficient attention to how metadiscourse can help generate unconventional, yet successful, practices.

Overall, this valuable book raises many issues, some more comprehensively addressed than others. But it is always thought provoking. Metadiscourse is a very complex notion and Hyland shows the difficulty in ‘nailing it down’, but in his efforts to do so, he provides a very stimulating overview of existing debates and discussions. His contribution will be valued by both researchers and those wishing to think through for themselves the value of metadiscourse research for teaching. It will also prompt reflection on where metadiscourse analysis sits with respect to other linguistic approaches to analysis of the interpersonal, such as Systemic Functional Linguistics.

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REFERENCES

Widdowson, H.G. 1995. 'Discourse analysis: A critical view'. *Language and Literature* 4 (3): 157-172.