

A Comparative Study of Personal and Impersonal Meta-discourse in Academic Writing

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Abstract. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the use of personal and impersonal metadiscourse (MD) by Persian- and English-speaking writers in academic writing. For this purpose, 80 abstracts were selected (40 written by Persian-speaking writers and 40 by English-speaking ones) and analyzed. These abstracts were selected from endocrinology and metabolism journals published during 2010 to 2012. The results of the study indicated that Persian speakers used more impersonal MD while the use of personal MD was higher in English speakers' written text. Among the four subcategories of impersonal MD, code glosses and references to text/code were used more by Persian speakers, while English speakers used more Phoric markers and discourse labels in their writing. The use of first person plural we as a type of personal MD was more frequent than the first person singular I, and in comparison with Persian speakers, English speakers used nouns as a type of personal MD more in their writing.

Keywords: Metadiscourse, personal MD, impersonal MD

1. Introduction

The term metadiscourse (henceforth, MD) comes from discourse analysis which denotes to the features of a text that clearly relate to the organization of the discourse or to the writer's position towards either its

content or the reader (Hyland, 1998). Thus, it is the author's manifestation in a text to bracket the discourse organization and the expressive implications of what is being said (Schiffrin, 1980).

MD has been defined in a number of ways by different scholars. Williams (1989) explained it as the language that writers use to point not only to the substance of their ideas but to themselves, their readers, or their writings. By the same token, Vande Kopple (1985, p.83) classified MD into a number of features stating that MD is the "Linguistic material that does not add prepositional meaning to the content but signals the presence of the writer".

Modern applied linguistics describes MD or metatext as a part of spoken or written discourse. For instance, Crismore, Rajja, and Steffensen (1993) defined it as the linguistic material in a text that 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.

Hyland (2004) provided a broad definition of MD. In his point of view, MD is based on a view of writing as social commitment in which writers project themselves into their discourse to indicate their attitudes and commitments. In discourse literature, MD is writing about writing (Williams, 1989), or discourse about discourse, or communication about communication (Vande Kopple, 1985); depending on the nature of the discourse considered, either written or oral.

Metadiscourse, simply put, refers to the speaker/writer's awareness of the ongoing discourse and the writer-reader interaction. In written mode of communication, MD is the self-reflective language used to assist writers to manage their unfolding discourse, express their stance, and engage with readers (Hyland, 2005).

The importance of MD in writing cannot be disputed and over the past decades, the study of MD has attracted much attention from researchers of Second Language (L2) writings. This is evidenced by the number of research that ranged from classification to cross-cultural studies on MD. It has a noticeable significance in academic writing. It conveys an important social meaning by revealing the author's personality and identity and by representing how s/he hopes his/her readers to react to

the ideational material. According to Mauranen (1993), the use of MD in academic rhetoric was associated with the establishment of coherence and logic. It is also argued that the addition of metadiscourse features can assist writers alter a dry text into a reader-friendly prose, and indicate the ability of the writer to supply adequate cues to secure an understanding and acceptance of the propositional content (Hyland, 2004). The use of MD has positive impacts on readability, including improved comprehension of texts (Crawford, Camiciottoli, 2003) and remembering (Crismore, 1989; Crismore & Vande Kopple, 1988; Reitbauer, 2001), motivating learning and interest among students (Crismore, 1990) and decision-making in a business setting (O'Keefe, 1989). However, one point about MD is still in shadow which is the use of personal or impersonal MD which indicates the authors' stance toward reader. Very few studies, if any, have considered these types of MD in academic writing.

This study tries to analyze academic published work in the field of medicine to compare and contrast the use of personal and impersonal metadiscourse by Iranian and non-Iranian researchers.

1.1. Research questions

This study tries to answer the following questions:

1. What are the differences between Persian- and English- speakers in the use of personal and impersonal MD in the abstract section of endocrinology research articles?
2. What are the differences in the use of these types of metadiscursive subcategories between these two groups?

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Personal and impersonal metadiscourse

It is useful to make a distinction between metadiscursive items that refer explicitly to the author and/or the reader and those in which the reference is implicit. According to Mauranen (1993), all language use is naturally dialogic, whether the addressee is present or not. In written

text, the writer is always present in the entire discourse, and any textual choice signals the implicit presence of a writer.

2.2. Personal metadiscourse

The most apparent means available to writers for explicitly showing their presence is to use first person pronouns, which is the unmarked way of showing one's presence in spoken discourse. But they can also refer to themselves in the third person by using a noun like the author, for instance. The 'presence' of the imagined reader, similarly, is most explicitly shown in the use of second person pronouns, or in the use of noun phrases such as the reader or dear readers. In a few words, personal MD makes direct reference to the writer and/or reader of the current text, either by pronouns (personal *I*, *we*, *you* and their oblique and possessive forms) or nouns (such as *the writer*, *dear reader*) (Adel, 2006).

The use of first person singular pronoun *I* is the unambiguous way in referring to the speaker/writer (Biber, Stig, Geoffrey, Susan, & Edward, 1999), in contrast to *we*, which usually involves a fluidity and uncertainty of meaning (Wales, 1996). An example to qualify as MD, not only does the *I* have to refer to the writer of the current text, but the action that the *I* performs has to be carried out within that discourse. If the action does not occur within the domain of the current discourse, it will not be considered metadiscursive. First person plural *we* is more complex than singular *I*. Most occurrences of *we* in the text are not metadiscursive, but relate to discourse-external phenomena (Adel, 2006).

Apart from referring to the current writer or reader by means of pronouns, there are other possible explicit linguistic realizations of their presence which are nouns like *writer*, *author* and *reader*. This type of reference to oneself seems to be particularly common in academic writing. One reason for writers to refer to themselves in the third person is that it gives a formal impression. This usage may be a result of the fact that in some genres it is more or less forbidden, or at least quite uncommon, for writers to use *I* to refer to themselves. Nevertheless, on occasion, writers still find a need to make their presence or personal position explicitly known, for instance in showing the origin of an idea or argument (Adel, 2006).

2.3. Impersonal MD

Impersonal MD, on the other hand, does not make explicit reference to the participants of the discourse. There are many ways to avoid explicit self-presentation in a text – for instance, by using passives and various impersonal structures. In most cases, readers easily infer (Biber et al. 1999) that non-explicit MD expressions should be attributed to the writer; thus, implicit types are still interpreted as being expressed and intended by the writer of the current text. Impersonal MD is categorized into four functional subcategories which are; References to the Text/Code, Phoric Markers, Code Glosses and Discourse Labels (Adel, 2006).

2.3.1. Phoric markers

Phorics point to various sections in the current text. They can be described as the road signs of a text, referring to and stressing different parts at different times. Just like road signs, they assist readers to navigate through the text (Adel, 2006). The type of MD that announces what is going to follow in the discourse (e.g., *as we shall see in Chapter 2*) has been called Announcement (Crismore, et al. 1993), Advance Labelling (Tadros, 1993), and Preview (Crismore & Farnsworth, 1990). Such references are cataphoric, i.e. “the text to which they are referring follows the occurrence of the referring term” (Schiffrin, 1980, p. 208). The type in which the writer tells the reader what she has already done in the discourse (e.g., *as I noted earlier*) has been called Reminder (Crismore, et al. 1993), Recapitulation (Tadros, 1993), and Review (Crismore & Farnsworth, 1990). These references are anaphoric, i.e. “the text to which the referring item points precedes its occurrence” (Schiffrin, 1980, p.208). Hyland (1998) uses the term ‘endophoric markers’ to delineate expressions that refer to other sections of the text (e.g., *see Table 2, as noted above*), which play an important role in making additional ideational material salient and therefore available to the reader in aiding the recovery of the writer’s argumentative intentions.

2.3.2. References to the text/code

Mauranen (1993) uses the term *references to the text* for examples in which the text itself – either the whole text or parts of it– is explicitly referred to. The following examples are from Mauranen (1993):

The paper concludes by explaining why the results of empirical work done by Chang ... (Whole text is referred to)

In the following section, a method of treating management is proposed that is more general ... (Part of a text is referred to)

According to Adel (2006), it is not very surprising that non-native speakers discuss definitions more often than native speakers, since the latter have stronger and more reliable intuitions about the vocabulary of their mother tongue.

2.3.3. Code glosses

According to Vande Koppel's (1985) terminology, *Code Glosses* give hints to the appropriate interpretation of elements, comment on ways of responding to elements in texts, or call attention to or identify a style.

2.3.4. Discourse labels

Discourse labelling is a term for “the naming of discourse acts in text as they occur, as in *Heat is defined as ...*” (Mauranen, 1993, p. 156). Bäcklund (1998) describes Discourse Labels as the expressions containing verbs or nouns of illocution or other expressions that indicate the textual function of the part of the text in question. As Adel (2006) put forward, discourse labels are critical for clarifying the intentions of the writer, either with respect to parts of the text, or with respect to its overall purpose.

3. Method

3.1. Materials

The research is based on the analysis of 80 academic articles written in English by English and Persian native speakers, 40 of each. These articles were selected from endocrinology and metabolism journals published from 2010 to 2012, and they were strictly chosen by avoiding

the notice that they had been translated, although this possibility might exist. However, this fact is not pertinent to our analysis, since the translator's interventions do not contain any changing or adding of metadiscoursal elements to the author's original texts, so we may consider them genuine part of the author's writing.

3.2. Procedure and data analysis

In order to compare the use of personal and impersonal types of MD in Persian and English native speakers' written text, the abstract section of each paper was selected. Then, the researcher highlighted the type of personal or impersonal MD that were included in each abstract and tabulated them to present the results for the sake of contrasting and comparison.

4. Results and Discussion

To begin with, a frequency count was made in the use of personal and impersonal MD. It was found that the total number of words of the English native speakers written text corpus was 9873 words, while that of the Persian speakers' corpus was 10786 words. The corpus size of English speakers is smaller, as it consists of an average length of 245 words while the average text length of the Persian speakers' corpus was 270. The frequency count is displayed below according to the two major categories of MD use.

Table 1. Frequency of personal and impersonal MD

	Corpus size in words	Frequency of personal MD	Frequency of impersonal MD
Persian speakers	10786	18	29
English speakers	9873	26	22

As table 1 indicates, Persian speakers used more impersonal MD than English speakers in their writing; however, the frequency of personal MD in English speakers' writing was more. The next aspect was to examine the frequency of use according to the specific sub-categories of personal and impersonal MD use.

Table 2. Personal and impersonal MD subcategories use frequency

	Personal MD		Impersonal MD			
	pronouns	Name	Phorics markers	References to the Text/Code	Code Glosses	Discourse Labels
Persian speakers	15	3	4	15	7	3
English speakers	21	5	5	8	3	6

Personal MD was categorized into pronouns and the use of nouns categories and the frequency of them were counted. The results indicated that English speakers used much more pronouns than Persian speakers in their writing. The use of nouns was also much higher in English speakers' written text than Persian speakers.

The tokens of impersonal MD were also divided into four major categories, named Phoric Markers, References to the Text/Code, Code Glosses, and Discourse Labels. The study was intended to give a measure of how explicit the learners and the native speakers are in displaying the structure of the text, or in making lexical references to the text itself. As the result indicated, in contrast to the results for personal MD, overall differences between the Persian and the English speakers' frequency in the use of impersonal metadiscourse were small. However, the two groups produce quite different results. In Persian speakers' written text, the frequency of References to the Text/Code and Code Glosses was higher than the English speakers' written text. In comparison to Persian speakers, the English speakers used more Phorics Markers and Discourse Labels.

In the following, some instances of personal and impersonal MD are presented and elaborated. For the pronominal subcategory of personal MD, the use of *we* was more than first person singular *I* in the Persian speaker writings. For example:

We used descriptive statistics, ANOVA test and other different types of correlation coefficients.

English speakers also used first person plural *we* more than the first person singular *I*. The following sentence in an example of pronominal MD in English speakers' written text:

Our objective was to summarize important advances in the management of children with idiopathic short stature (ISS).

For the other type of personal MD, which is using nouns such as *the author*, *the writer* and etc., we can find more instances in English speakers' written text than the Persian speakers' texts. However, these two groups did not differ very much in using nouns as a type of personal MD. The following sentence is an example of this type of personal MD extracted from English speakers' written text.

In GH-treated girls with TS, *the researchers* discourage the use of the conventional Ox dosage (0.06 mg/kg · d) because of its low benefit to risk ratio.

Analysis of the text produced by the two groups revealed that the use of references to text/code and code glosses were preferred more by the two groups and in comparison to the English speakers, the Persian speakers used these types of MD more. The following sentences illustrate the use of reference to text/code in the two groups' written text. The first one is extracted from English speakers' text and the second one is produced by Persian speakers.

In *this study*, we prospectively tested whether plasma levels of mid-regional ANP (MR-ANP) and N-BNP predict new-onset diabetes and long-term glucose progression.

This paper examined the effects of interval training on serum levels of leptin, cortisol, testosterone, growth hormone (GH) and insulin resistance index (HOMA-IR) in young overweight/ obese men.

What is significant in the written text produced by both groups is that they preferred to refer to the whole text rather than part of the text.

The two sentences below, illustrate the use of code glosses in the written text produced by the two groups. The first sentence is extracted from English speakers' written text and the second one from Persian speakers' text.

Finally, nonverbal learning disabilities marked by deficits in visual-spatial-organizational skills, complex psychomotor skills, and social skills are common in TS.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to investigate the correlation between plasma concentrations of inter cellular adhesion molecule-1 (ICAM-1) and cardiorespiratory fitness and anthropometric indices as noninvasive methods.

The other two types of impersonal MD were found more in English speaking written text. The first one was discourse labels, which as it was mentioned, used for the naming of discourse acts in text as they occur. The following sentence is an instance of using discourse label in written text:

ISS is defined auxologically by a height below -2 SD score (SDS) without findings of disease as evident by a complete evaluation by a pediatric endocrinologist including stimulated GH levels.

For the last type of impersonal MD which were Phorics and were found more in English speakers' written text rather than the Persian one, the following sentence would illustrate its usage.

As I mentioned earlier in the introduction section of the study...

5. Conclusion

Academic writing is a type of evaluation that wants you to present knowledge and show proficiency with certain skills of thinking, interpreting, and presenting related to a specific discipline. Every discipline has their own key concepts and language for describing these important ways of understanding. Those key concepts employed in each discipline can be described by the concept of meta-discourse. This study analyzed produced text by English and Persian speakers in the field of endocrinology and Metabolism. On the basis of the examined texts and the data obtained from it, we may conclude that English speakers' prefer to use more personal MD while Persian speakers' prefer to use impersonal MD in their academic writing. In other words, Persian speakers tend to implicitly indicate their presence and position in the text while the English speakers tend to show their presence explicitly.

However, within the impersonal type of MD, English speakers used two types of impersonal MD more than Persian speakers. The result indicated the specific preferences of the two groups in benefiting the types of MD in their writing. However, like other studies, this one also has some limitations. The first limitation of this study is that, it only considered and analyzed the abstract section of papers. It would be helpful and also informative to consider other rhetorical sections of the papers such as introduction, literature review, results and discussion and conclusion. The other limitation of the study is that only one field of study, endocrinology and metabolism, was considered. It is suggested that for future line of research, several fields of studies be selected and analyzed.

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