A Review of Metadiscourse Research

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Abstract

The concept of metadiscourses has developed greatly since it was proposed by Zelig Harris in 1959. This study provides a comprehensive overview of the definitions of metadiscourse and evolution of metadiscourse studies. In addition, the research patterns of metadiscourse research in major academic databases are analyzed. We find that metadiscourse research is keeping an upward tendency since the occurrence of this term and has boomed in recent years, especially in academic writing, whether from synchronic or diachronic perspective. Synchronic studies examine metadiscourse in a variety of written and oral contexts, revealing interdisciplinary and cross-cultural differences; while diachronic studies trace the historical development of metasdiscourse practices. The paper demonstrates the growing research interest in metadiscourse and offers future prospects for scholars.

Keywords: metadiscourse, synchronic research, diachronic research, academic writing.

Introduction

Since the term "metadiscourse" was coined, its interpretation has evolved over time among scholars. In addition, the empirical research on metadiscourse from synchronic and diachronic perspectives is also flourishing. Firstly, this paper reviews the evolution of the definition of metadiscourse. Then it analyzes the trend of metadiscourse research in the main databases Google Scholar, Scopus and WoS. Finally, this paper will introduce and synthesize the empirical research of metadiscourse from synchronic and diachronic perspectives respectively. Through reviewing the scope and trend of metadiscourse studies, the research gaps in this field and suggestions for future investigations are provided.

Evolution of Metadiscourse Interpretation

In 1959, the American linguist Zellig Harris first coined the term "metadiscourse" (Beauvais, 1989). He states that "Metadiscouse kernels contain words entirely different from those of the main kernels and … talk about the main material entirely different from those of the main kernels and … talk about the main material" (Beauvais, 1989). Generally, it refers to language that is different from the information of a discourse and used to facilitate the information in it. The new concept emerged to correct the traditional view of regarding discourse and texts as propositional and expository only to convey content. However, Harris didn't distinguish the differences

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between metadiscouse kernels and main kernels and specify the types and items of metadiscouse kernels. Since the emergence and notification of the term "metadiscourse", various scholars proposed their definitions and explanations from different perspectives.

In the 1980s, the theory of metadiscourse was rapidly developed by many scholars. Williams (1981) interprets metadiscourse as "writing about writing, or whatever does not refer to the subject matter being addressed." Crismore (1983) argues that metadiscourse refers to linguistic cues that indicate the author's active role in organizing the text and evaluating its content, as distinct from the subject matter itself. Vande Kopple (1985) defines metadiscourse as a type of discourse that reflects the discourse itself and helps readers navigate through the text. He emphasized that metdiscourse would not add new propositional content; Instead, it helps readers understand and engage with the text. This contains components that help construct the message, engage the reader, clarify the author's intent, and thus improve the overall effectiveness of communication in writing. As we can see from the above, they all emphasize the distinction between propositional and metadiscourse. The former speaks of the world outside of the text, while the latter helps to organize ideas and communicate them clearly and intelligently to persuade the readers. Their work has laid down two major categories of metadiscourse in Halliday's functional view: textual metadiscourse and interpersonal metadiscourse.

Beauvais (1989) proposes an alternative theory of metadiscourse that aims to address the major flaws of existing theories while placing metadiscourse within the broader framework of speech act theory. He defines "metadiscourse" as "illocutionary force indicators that identify expositive illocutionary acts." From the perspective of speech act theory, Beauvais's definition emphasizes the pragmatic function of metadiscourse in guiding discourse interpretation and understanding. Metadiscourse not only contributes to the organization and coherence of discourse, but also helps the listeners or readers to recognize the illocutionary force behind the speaker's utterances. This understanding enables participants to accurately understand the speaker's intentions, thus will improve the effectiveness of communication.

Swales (1990) defines metadiscourse as "the various ways in which writers come out from behind what they have written, distancing themselves from what they have said, or hedging their commitment to what they have said." Swales can break the stereotype of text-centered role of metadiscourse and realize its communicative function between authors and readers.

Hyland (2005) emphasized the interactivity and sociality of metadiscourse. He defines it as "the ways in which writers project themselves into their text, manage information flow, and engage with their readers." Metadiscourse is a rhetorical resource used to emphasize the writer's sensitivity to the reader's requests for clarification, guidance, and interaction, thereby promoting immediate communicative goals and revealing an understanding of said groups. Hyland argues that metadiscourse reflects an author's awareness of the ongoing text as a conversation: how authors position their use of language to involve the text, the author, and the reader. This metadiscursive view provides a comprehensive understanding of how academic writers connect with their readers and shape their arguments to produce persuasive, coherent texts by making linguistic decisions in the social contexts.

Ifantidou (2005) uses relevance theory to provide a coherent framework for understanding the semantic and pragmatic functions of metadiscourse. She believes that metadiscourse go beyond the basic propositional content of the information presented. Its role is to tell readers how they organize, classify, interpret, evaluate, and react to the information in the text. This definition covers a wide range of linguistic features, including lexical items, punctuation, typographic markers, and visual design elements that contribute to the overall coherence and interpretative framework of the text. She believes that metadiscourse is not only a stylistic device, but also meaningful to the process of communication. In addition, she also emphasizes the cognitive role of metadiscourse, believing that it can help reduce readers' processing workload and improve their comprehension ability.

Adel (2006) uses a framework based on Jacobson's functional theory of language to define metadiscourse as "text about the evolving text, or the writer's explicit commentary on her own ongoing discourse" and "reflexive linguistic expressions referring to the evolving discourse itself or its linguistic form, including references to the writer-speaker qua writer-speaker and the (imagined or actual) audience qua audience of the current discourse" This critical approach to defining metadiscourse, which distinguishes them from other related linguistic categories, emphasizes the functional properties of metadiscourse while taking into account its reflexivity and its role in connecting writers and readers. This perspective highlights not only the metadiscursive nature of these elements, but also their context-sensitive nature.

## Overview of Metadiscourse Studies in Major Databases

After the keyword "metadiscourse" was searched, 19200 papers were found in Google Scholar, 950 in Scopus, and 1048 in WoS until 2023. The first work appeared in 1979 in WoS contrasted with 1984 in Scopus. It was around the beginning of the 1980s that the metadiscourse study got its first publication. The general development can be summarized into four phases: the budding phase, the developing phase, the rising phase, and the flourishing phase.

The development of metadiscourse studies can be seen in Figure 1. There are rare studies from 1979 to 1987, sometimes only one result in each year. This is the budding stage. From 1987 to 2000, there were more studies with slight turbulence, which manifests the developing phase. From the millennium on, the first decade witnessed a rising tendency; the average increased steadily to nearly 20 results in 2010 with a sudden boom of over 20 in 2009. Hyland (2022) pointed out that the breakpoint of metadiscourse studies is 2006 due to the publication of influential books of Adel's (2006) *Metadiscourse in L1 and L2 English* and Hyland's (2005) *Metadiscourse*. Hence, metadiscourse studies came into a rising phase. From 2010 on, the studies came into their flourishing phase, as can be seen, there is an abrupt boom, especially, from 2016 till now, the numbers are rocking to new peaks. Specifically, in the recent years of 2021-2023, the results made an evident breakthrough to more than 100 each year both in Scopus and WoS. The topic of metadiscourse has aroused more and more concerns from scholars around the world to explore it in a wide range of contexts. The research topic of metadiscourse has evolved into a research field (Dong et al 2023). It can be foreseen that metadiscourse studies will be flourishing in the future years.
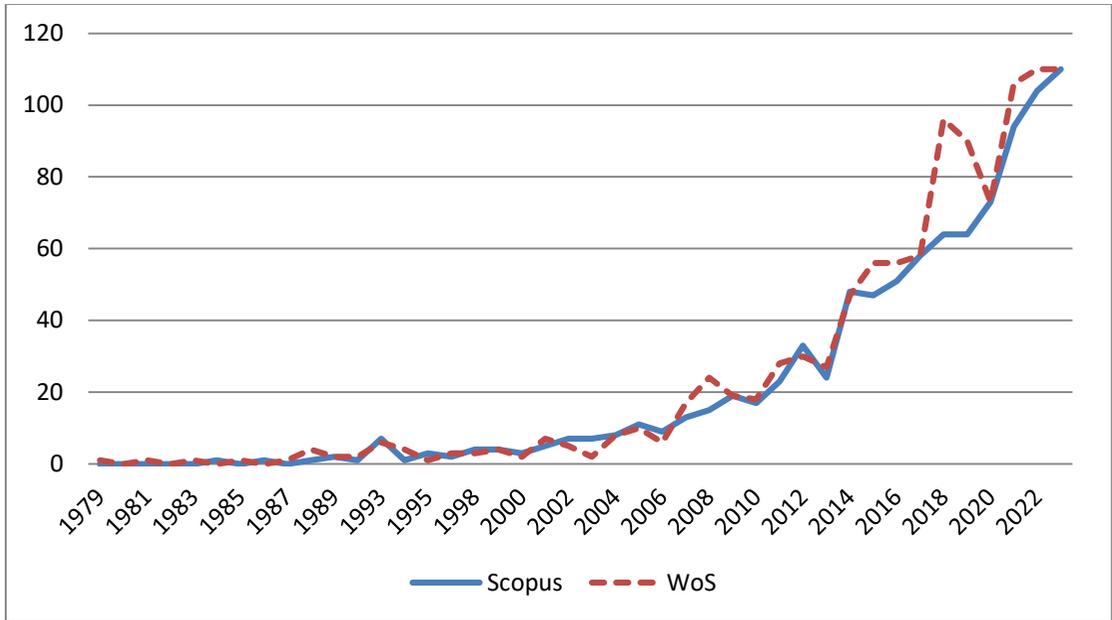
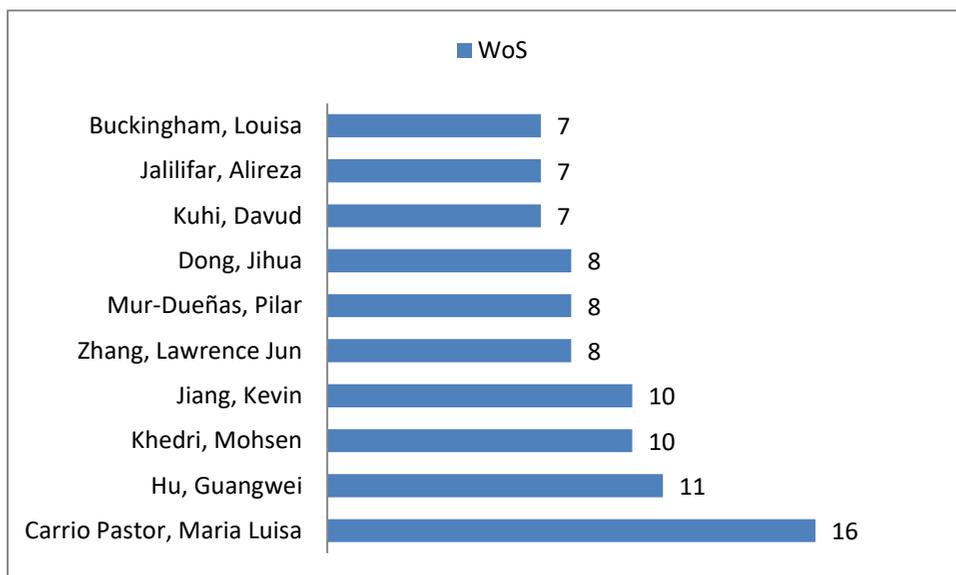**Figure1 Publications of Metadiscourse Studies in Scopus and WoS until 2023**

After navigating into the development of metadiscourse studies, let's discover the most prolific scholars. As shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3, Hyland is ranked at the top with 23 research works in Scopus. Besides, Adel and Crimsmore should also be noticed for their well-known interpretation of metadiscourse.
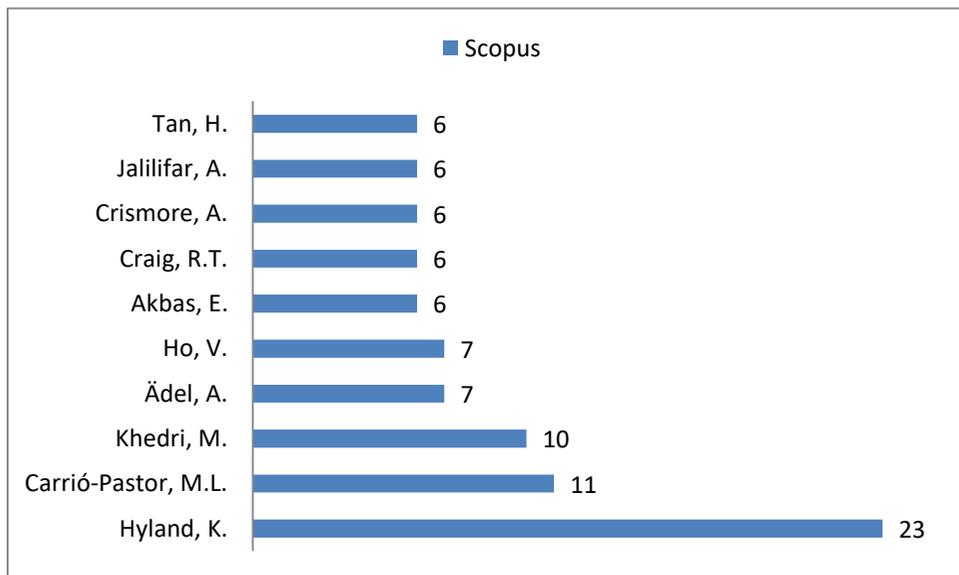
**Figure 2 Top 10 Published Authors on Metadiscourse in Scopus until 2023**

In WoS, the top one is Carrio Pastor & Maria Luisa with 16 results (Figure 3). It should be mentioned that 4 Chinese scholars are in the top 10 list. They are Hu Guangwei, Jiang Kavin,

Zhang Lawrence Jun, and Dong Jihua. It seems that metadiscourse studies arouse intense interest in the Chinese academic field.


Figure 3 Top 10 Published Authors on Metadiscourse in WoS until 2023

Figure 4 shows in which countries scholars contribute most to the field of metadiscourse studies in WoS and Scopus. China is ranked to top one in Scopus while the second in WoS. The result is in line with the fact that four scholars appear in the top-10 list in Figure 3 above. English is used as the first language in the USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. Therefore, it can be inferred that metadiscourse is investigated in L1 countries as an important linguistic phenomenon. In Malaysia, English is widely used as the official language whereas English is not an official language in China, Spain, Iran, Germany, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia but widely taught.
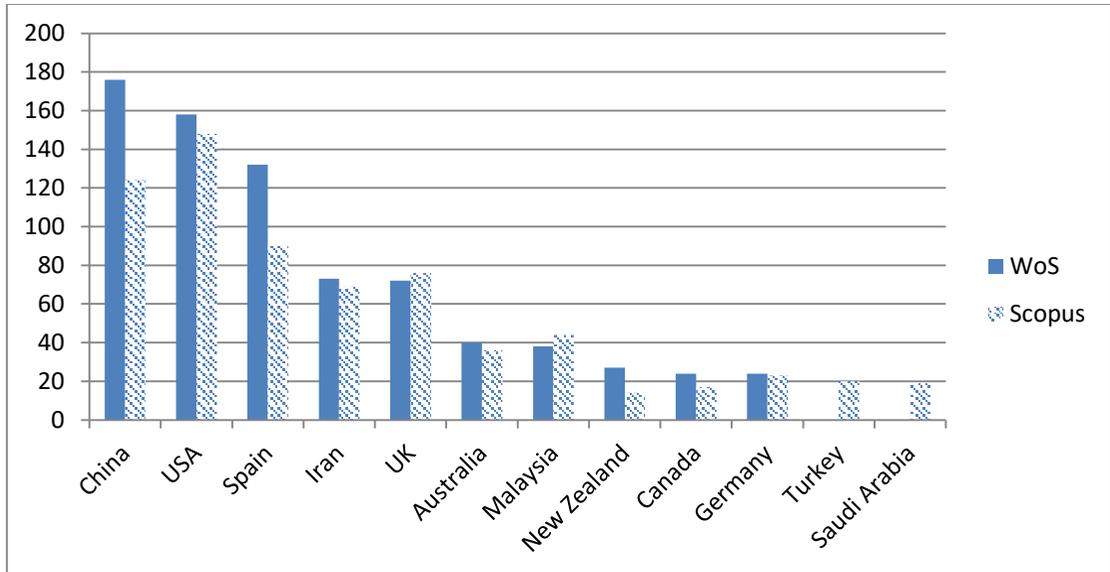
Figure 4 Top 12 Countries of Metadiscourse Publication in WoS and Scopus until 2023

The most published journals on metadiscourse in WoS are shown in Figure 5 below. It can be seen that the top two major journals are *Journal of English for Academic Purpose* and *Journal of Pragmatics*, which can be inferred that is because metadiscourse is studied most in academic writing and as a pragmatic device to achieve the communicative function.
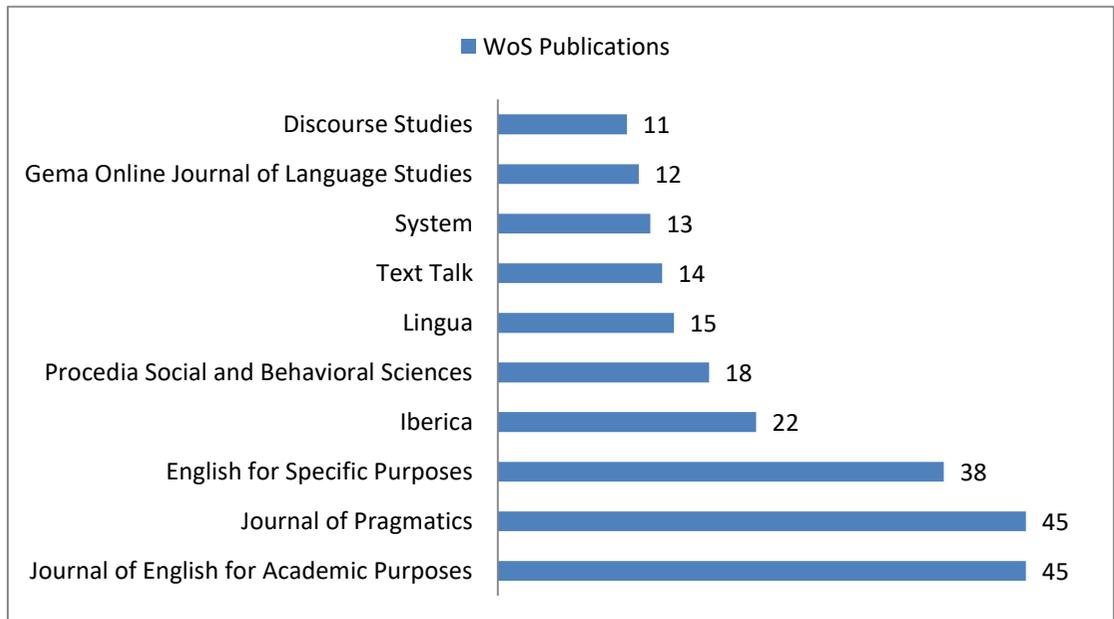
Figure 5 Top 10 Journals on Metadiscourse Publications in WoS until 2023

The inference that most metadiscourse studies are conducted in academic writing is verified in the citation topic list of WoS as shown in Figure 6. The total number of metadiscourse studies

in academic writing is 627, which takes up 60% of the total amount of metadiscourse studies (1048 in WoS). Conversation analysis is the second most frequently studied field for metadiscourse.
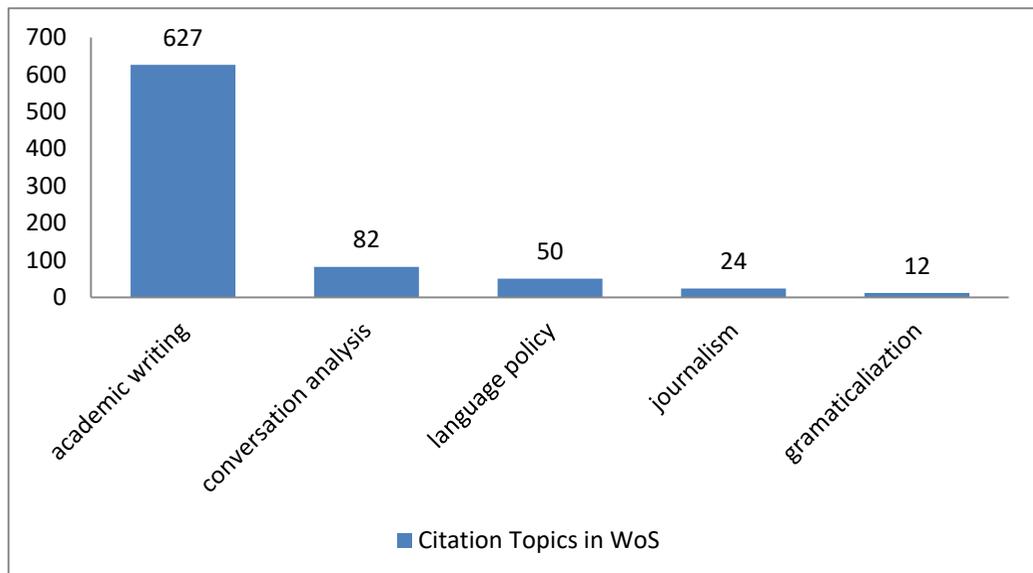

Figure 6 Top 5 Citation Topics of Metadiscourse Publications in WoS until 2023

Previous Empirical Studies on Metadiscourse

As can be seen in Figure 1, the recent ten years have witnessed the surging tendency of metadiscourse studies, especially the empirical studies. More and more researchers follow a specific theoretical model on metadiscourse and employ systematic methods to investigate the usage, functions, and effects of metadiscursive features in real-world contexts. Empirical studies on metadiscourse contribute to our understanding of how metadiscursive features are used, interpreted, and evaluated in different communication contexts, providing empirical evidence to support theoretical frameworks and informing pedagogical practices in academic writing and discourse analysis.

After reviewing the titles of the research papers in WoS, the previous empirical studies can be categorized into synchronical and diachronic ones. The former focuses on metadiscourse in certain contexts to investigate its characteristics and functions without considering the historical development of this linguistic phenomenon. The latter examines the historical development and evolution of metadiscursive practices over time. In WoS, as is shown in figure 7, synchronical studies take the advantageous majority (972 research results) while there are only 23 research papers of diachronical ones. Different perspectives of studies on metadiscourse are blossoming into a broader dimension.
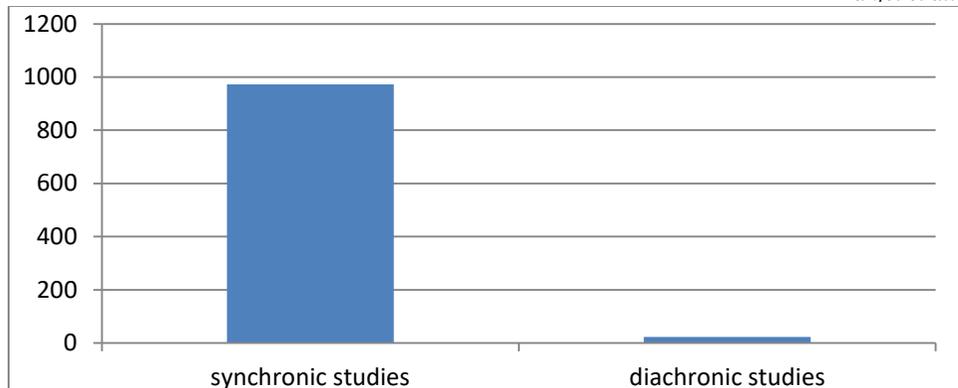
Figure 7 Contrast between Synchronic and Diachronic Studies on Meatadiscourse in WoS

Synchronic Studies on Metadiscourse

Synchronical studies of metadiscourse provide insights into the communicative strategies and linguistic conventions employed by writers within specific genres, disciplines, or discourse communities. By analyzing metadiscourse synchronically, researchers can uncover patterns of usage, stylistic preferences, and sociocultural influences that shape the discourse practices of a given community or period. In the following sub-sections, the representative synchronic empirical studies of metadiscourse used in oral and written texts will be reviewed.

Synchronic Studies on Metadiscourse in Written Texts

Metadiscourse was widely studied in various genres of written discourse, including scientific work, business context, news reports, judicial discourse, academic papers, etc. Written academic texts, especially research articles, are extensively favored in metadiscourse research, with a significant emphasis placed on comparing metadiscourse features across disciplines, genres, and languages (Hyland, 2022). Figure 8 reveals that out of 1056 RAs on metadiscourse, 330 specifically focus on academic writing, accounting for over 30% of all metadiscourse studies. The number of these studies has surged significantly since 2015, with the period from 2021 to 2023 being especially prolific.
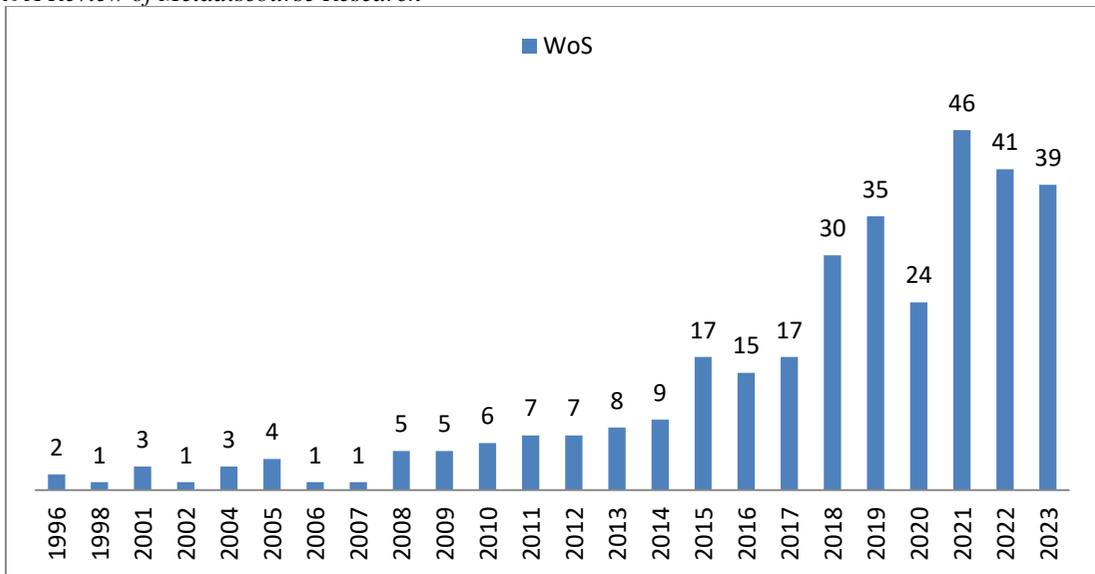
Figure 8 Number of Metadiscourse Studies in Academic Writing until 2023 in WoS

Prominent scholars such as Hyland have made significant contributions, with 21 RAs attributed to him alone. Early work by Hyland and Tse (2005) used a corpus-based approach to compare metadiscourse frequency in L2 postgraduate dissertations. Their findings challenged the traditional view of metadiscourse as merely "discourse about discourse," advocating instead for a social constructionist and functional orientation in metadiscourse theory. Recent studies continue to explore various aspects of metadiscourse. Dontcheva-Navratilova (2023) examined self-references in English-medium master's theses by Czech students, finding significant cross-cultural differences in the expression of authorial presence. Yoon et al. (2023) analyzed the use of textual markers in argumentative writing tasks by first-year university students, revealing variations in voice usage between opinion-based and source-based writing. Crosthwaite et al. (2023) investigated metadiscourse in secondary-level students' exam writings, finding differences in marker usage across text quality and genres.

Recent studies on metadiscourse reveal a strong emphasis on cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural comparisons in academic writing. The cross-disciplinary analysis of metadiscourse has become a significant sub-topic, with 39 research articles (RAs) identified in the WoS. These studies often compare metadiscourse usage between soft and hard sciences. For instance, Ramos (2010) noted differences between engineering and liberal arts students at De La Salle University, while Zarei et al. (2015) compared applied linguistics and computer engineering, highlighting variations in interactive and interactional elements across Persian and English. Salas (2013) examined disciplines like medicine, economics, and linguistics, emphasizing the impact of disciplinary conventions on metadiscourse. Recent studies by Birhan (2021) and Boginskaya (2023) further explore these differences, including nuanced variations in lexical hedging.

Cross-cultural comparisons also play a crucial role, with 36 RAs identified in WoS. These studies investigate how cultural and linguistic backgrounds influence metadiscourse. Ozdemir & Long (2014) found significant cultural differences in metadiscourse types between Turkish and American students' thesis abstracts. Abdollahzadeh (2019) examined uncertainty markers in Iranian and English graduate students' discussions, revealing distinct hedging preferences.

Afzaal et al. (2021) found that Chinese students preferred interactive metadiscourse, while English speakers used more interactional resources. Gai & Wang (2022) extended this to research articles, highlighting the strong influence of linguistic and cultural factors. Studies by Connor et al. (2022) and Binmahboob (2022) also emphasize cross-cultural differences in hedges, boosters, and self-mentions. Esfandiari & Khatibi (2022) and Soylu et al. (2023) further illustrate the role of cultural context in metadiscourse.

Beyond academic genres, metadiscourse has been studied in various written contexts, including scientific works, business communications, news reports, and judicial discourse. Crismore and Farnsworth (1989) explored metadiscourse in Darwin's *Origin of Species*, identifying markers like evidential and attitude markers that guided reader interpretation and engagement. Hyland (1998) analyzed CEO letters, revealing how metadiscourse contributes to logical, credible, and emotional appeals. Lee (2020) compared hedging and boosting strategies in corporate discourse between Chinese and U.S. companies, noting that U.S. discourse showed higher frequencies of persuasion strategies. In advertising, Al-Subhi (2022) examined linguistic and visual metadiscourse in social media ads, finding that engagement markers and directives were the most frequent. Boshrabadi et al. (2014) and Sukma and Sujatna (2014) focused on newspapers, noting more interpersonal metadiscourse in American economic sections and the prevalence of attitude markers in opinion articles. Noorian and Biria (2017) compared opinion articles from *New York Times* and *Tehran Times*, with American texts showing more interpersonal markers and Iranian texts featuring more hedges. Editorial sections have also been studied, with Alghazo et al. (2023) finding no significant difference in interactive metadiscourse between L1 and L2 English editorials. Chen et al. (2023) compared interactional metadiscourse in COVID-19 news commentaries, revealing cultural differences between the *New York Times* and *China Daily*. In judicial contexts, McKeown (2021) examined reflexive metadiscourse in U.S. Supreme Court opinions, noting differences in focus between majority and dissenting opinions.

These studies demonstrate the wide applicability of metadiscourse analysis across different genres and contexts. The most frequently used theoretical frameworks are Hyland's (2005) taxonomy of metadiscourse and Adel's (2006) model of reflexive metadiscourse. These studies lay the foundation for further research in other written genres and contexts and offer valuable insights for writers on how to effectively use metadiscourse to achieve communicative goals.

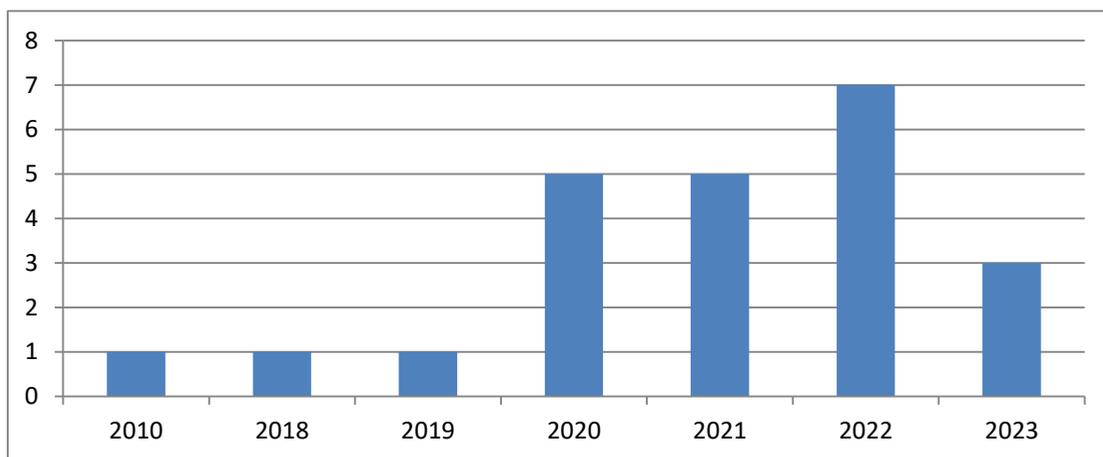## Synchronic Studies on Metadiscourse in Oral Texts

Research on metadiscourse in spoken contexts is less extensive compared to written discourse, focusing primarily on speeches, political addresses, classroom discourse, academic lectures, and moderated discussions. Nan & Liu (2013) analyzed Steve Jobs' Stanford speech using Hyland's metadiscourse model, finding that self-mentions and boosters were predominant. These markers contributed to Jobs' persuasive tone, while transitions, frame markers, code glosses, and evidentials structured the speech and aided audience comprehension. Abusalim et al. (2022) examined Hillary Clinton's political speeches with Dafouz-Milne's framework, discovering that interpersonal markers, especially inclusive pronouns like "we" were prevalent. Clinton used these markers primarily for logical appeals. In classroom settings, Leea & Subtirelu (2015) investigated metadiscourse in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) lessons and academic lectures. They found that EAP instructors focused on framing discussions to facilitate activities, while university lecturers emphasized idea connections, suggesting improvements for classroom interaction and academic discourse preparation. Bu (2014) explored academic lectures from a relevance-adaptation theory perspective, providing a taxonomy of metadiscourse categories and

stressing contextual adaptation for audience relevance.

These studies underscore the role of metadiscourse in oral contexts, offering insights into improving audience interpretation and laying the groundwork for further research in spoken discourse.

Diachronic Studies on Metadiscourse

Rather than examining a single moment or text, these studies track changes in the forms, use, and functions of metadiscourse across different periods, considering the socio-historical and cultural factors influencing these developments. An analysis of the WoS reveals only 23 diachronic RAs on metadiscourse. Compared to 972 synchronic studies, diachronic research began later, gaining traction in 2010, with a peak in 2022 (see Figure 9). This trend suggests an expanding interest in the historical aspects of metadiscourse.

Figure 9 Numbers of Diachronic Studies on Metadiscourse until 2023 in WoS

The earliest diachronic study of metadiscourse in the WoS by Paul and Freek (2010) explored the evolution of hedges, boosters, and attitude markers in research article abstracts in applied linguistics over three decades. Their quantitative corpus analysis revealed that these interactional markers played a more significant role in abstracts than full-length articles and that their interpersonal function diminished over time. In 2018, Ken Hyland and Feng Jiang conducted a comprehensive diachronic study on the changing patterns of interactive and interactional metadiscourse. Analyzing 360 RAs from four disciplines over 50 years, they observed an increase in interactive metadiscourse and a decrease in interactional metadiscourse, with variations between disciplines. Their findings also offer pedagogical insights for teaching academic writing. Kuhi and Rezaei (2020) investigated stance markers in RA discussion sections across 20 years, identifying a significant increase in self-mentions and a decrease in other stance markers. They attributed this shift to the need for a stronger self-image in competitive academic environments, emphasizing the importance of raising students' awareness of stance marker usage. Deng et al. (2021) examined doctoral dissertations' metadiscourse evolution from 1966 to 2016, finding increased metadiscourse in science and engineering (SE) dissertations and a decrease in humanities and social sciences (HSS). Their study highlights trends toward objectivity in HSS and subjectivity in SE, proposing a theoretical model for academic writing evolution.

In conclusion, diachronic studies provide valuable insights into the historical development of metadiscourse, illustrating its dynamic nature and its role in adapting to disciplinary, cultural, and communicative changes over time.

Conclusion

Previous empirical study on metadiscourse indicates that written discourse, especially academic genres, dominates the discipline. Future study should fill in these gaps on the empirical metadiscourse studies in the academic genre by concentrating on a few important areas. First, the majority of previous research ignores the metadiscourse usage of undergraduate theses in favor of concentrating on highly skilled academic writers such as PhD candidates and published authors. Second, studies comparing English L1 and L2 writers are common in cross-cultural research (Ozdemir & Long, 2014; Abdollahzadeh, 2019; Muhammad Afzal et al., 2021; Gai & Wang; Conner; Binmahboob; Esfandiari & Khatibi, 2022), with some studies concentrating on English L2 writers in China and the UK (Li & Wharton, 2012). Research comparing the use of metadiscourse by EFL and ESL writers is lacking, nevertheless. This will enhance our knowledge of how non-native English writers adapt their metadiscursive strategies within varied linguistic landscapes. Lastly, most studies reveal the findings of different usages through comparison no matter across disciplines or cultural backgrounds in academic genre to draw pedagogical implications, but rare experimental studies are done to test and facilitate the teaching practice of metadiscourse markers.

Besides written genres such as academic and scientific writings, news reports, legal documents, and business communication, etc. mentioned above, literary genres like novels, essays, and short stories can also be investigated into how metadiscourse is used to develop characters, create narrative voice, and guide reader interpretation. What's more, the popular new genres online, such as social media posts, blogs, personal comments on those posts and blogs, or even the texts generated by modern AI tools are new ground to break. In oral contexts, interviews, courtroom proceedings, business meetings, guided tours, or even videos in new media forms can be explored further to provide valuable insights into how speakers use language to structure their messages, engage their audience, and achieve their communicative goals.

Last but not least, diachronic studies, while still in its early stages, must continue to explore the historical evolution of metadiscourse practices across different periods and genres. Understanding these shifts will aid in tracing the evolution of rhetorical conventions and their adaptability to changing social and cultural expectations.

As metadiscourse study develops, these underexplored areas are projected to receive more attention. This will help to provide a more thorough knowledge of metadiscourse across genres, contexts, times and etc.

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