



A Comparative Case-Study of the Level of Development of Metadiscourse Elements in Two English-Based Undergraduate Research Projects in A Nigerian University

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Abstract

Effective writing is recognised through the way writers make use of elements that depict their understanding of the linguistic rules for cohesion, coherence and persuasion. One of the difficulties confronting meaningful written communication among Nigerian students, however, is improper deployment of metadiscourse elements. This reflects at an appalling level even in some academic writings by students of higher education. Therefore, this study investigated two English-based undergraduate research projects comparatively in relation to the level at which some selected metadiscourse elements were deployed. Four research questions were generated as the focus of the investigation. Findings indicated that the two sets of corpus examined made appropriate use of the target metadiscourse elements to a large extent. The deployment of self-mentions by the respondent in Data Two in its review of literature chapter led to the recommendation that students should be given appropriate training on how to avoid use of personal pronouns in research reports, while also learning the proper use of the passive voice to convey impersonality.

Key Words/Expressions: Academic writing, Metadiscourse, Research report, Cohesion, coherence

Introduction

Metadiscourse has been perceived in diverse ways by different scholars. In the early period, metadiscourse was used to refer to the use of text to describe text within the same discourse and a text so used is known as a metatext. This is a text that talks about another text. To Harris (1959), metadiscourse emerged as a way of understanding language in use, representing a writer or speaker's attempt to guide a receiver's perception and reception of a text. Modern scholars'



perspectives on the notion of metadiscourse have outgrown its early characterisation as simply “discourse about discourse”. It is now seen in ‘an interactive model’ as an umbrella term for the range of devices writers use to explicitly organise their text, engage readers and signal their attitudes to both their material and their audience (Hyland, 2005:126). Others who were of the same opinion with Hyland (2005) include Crismore (1989); Mauranen (1993); and Adel (2006). Hyland’s position thus outgrew the pioneering work of Crismore (1989) and others in the 1980s.

In his discussion on dimensions of style in the study of language, Lawal (1997: 30-33) gave an informative piece on discourse markers. He noted that there exist rules guiding the arrangement of text within and between sentences, stanzas, paragraphs and a whole connected discourse. One of such rules is the use of transition markers like ‘furthermore’ or ‘moreover’ which suggests “an incremental proposition,” ‘therefore’ or ‘thus’, an inferential proposition and ‘however’ or ‘nonetheless’, a proposition of negation or contradiction, as examples (p. 30). The others are rhetorical rules for organising texts in a way to achieve logical appeal and effectiveness in the long run.

Trillo (2006) cited Schenkein (1972) and Jefferson (1978) as two of the earliest linguists who considered studying discourse markers a worthwhile exercise. They referred to discourse markers as elements like *you know, I mean, well, oh, you see, look, listen*, and the like, which do not stand on their own as separate entities. They do not also have distinct communicative/ semantic value, yet they add to the building up of the pragmatic coherence of linguistic interaction. Schegloff (1984) perceived discourse markers as ‘continuers’ that speakers employed to make their listeners realise that the speech is a coherent and continuous on, while Feng (2010) viewed them as a set of linguistic items which characterise different styles or register and guide listeners and readers in appropriate interpretation of texts.

There is enough evidence suggesting that communicating ideas through writing is a vital issue in contemporary society. Its importance notwithstanding, effective writing continues to be a difficult endeavour because of the technicalities involved, one of which is appropriate deployment of discourse markers which enhances the quality of



academic writing. It has, however, been noticed from available academic documents, especially those produced by students, that there is the need for continuous training in proper deployment of metadiscourse elements. This study therefore investigated the deployment of these tools from a comparative perspective by focusing on two English-based undergraduate projects in University of Ilorin, Nigeria.

Methodology

The investigation was a case-study which adopted the mixed methodology of applied-linguistic research to comparatively analyse the levels at which two purposively selected English-based undergraduate research projects have made use of metadiscourse features. Thematic analysis and quantitative analysis involving percentages were used to analyse the data. Bar graph analysis was further done and presented on the data. The four research questions generated to guide the study were:

1. What discourse features do the metadiscourse in the undergraduate research projects display?
2. How have the metadiscourse features in the undergraduate projects been displayed to indicate the structural/generic class of the academic discourse?
3. How have the metadiscourse features been deployed in the research projects to explain the nature of the academic discourse itself?
4. How have the metadiscourse features in the research projects made provision for the reader to recognise the writer's purpose in the discourse?

The Selected Corpus

Data One is an undergraduate research project titled, "A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Language of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*" written in the year 2010. It has four chapters and it identifies, describes and analyses the sociolinguistic features of the language of some characters in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. The utterances of some of the characters in the novel are analysed critically using sociolinguistic precepts and principles to determine how linguistic variations reflect their social status, age,



educational background, occupation, religious/spiritual beliefs, geographical location, ethnic/cultural background and gender.

Also, the project considered some notable differences in the language of men and women in terms of their responses, questions, turn taking, interruption, mitigation, topic development, verbal aggression, politeness, among others. Apart from these, the corpus discussed the reasons for women language variations as including their social status, their roles as the guardians of societal values and the impression that they are the subordinate group. Lastly, the data described other aspects of the sociolinguistics of the corpus, including multilingualism/bilingualism, diglossia, code-switching, code-mixing, linguistic interference, transfer, semantic extension and the contact languages (Pidgin & Creole).

Like Data One, Data Two is also an undergraduate research project, titled “Code-mixing and Code-switching among Nigerian Secondary School Students in Osun State, Nigeria” in the year 2009. While Data One adopted a sociolinguistic model for the analysis of the novel, Data Two has identifies, describes and analyses two related sociolinguistic phenomena of code-mixing and code-switching in the conversations of the Nigerian secondary school students in Osun State. The work examined the factors responsible for code-mixing and code-switching, the reasons for these two sociolinguistic phenomena and their effects of on communication. In this data as well, the challenges of language contact (attitudes of the people, interference, borrowing, Pidgin, diglossia, language shift, loss and death) and language choice have been identified as the factors responsible for code-mixing and code-switching. Finally, the project distinguishes between code-switching and code-mixing, explains the differences and similarities between the two sociolinguistic phenomena and identifies two main reasons for code-mixing and code-switching as linguistic motivation and sociolinguistic motivation.

The ten (10) discourse elements assessed are hereby explained briefly. The transitional elements are used for making elaboration, extension, contrast, result and sequential ordering while frame markers are used for emphasizing the thematic structure of a text through titles, subtitles and in-text schemas. In the case of endophoric markers, they



are linguistic tools for elaboration, reference, apposition and clarity of ideas. Evidentials are meant for authenticating or validating a piece of writing and acknowledging the sources from which ideas are borrowed. Code glosses are deployed for listing, expatiation and clarification of ideas, while hedges are for indicating politeness, imprecision, uncertainty and for shying away from responsibility. The use of boosters are for displaying confidence, certainty of a proposition, for emphasising the force of a proposition and for validating a proposition as perceived by the writer. Again, attitude markers reveal the researcher's level of appraisal, surprise, obligation and importance, while engagement markers are used for establishing a cordial relationship with the readers and exposing them to new ideas. Lastly, self- mentions are tools suggesting the writer's presence in the writing without portraying the opinions of the researcher.

Findings and Discussion

Findings from the corpus examined are presented here in the Table1 showing frequency, percentage level of deployment and rank of each of the metadiscourse elements for the two research projects. This is followed by explanatory notes on the findings and a discussion of the findings based on the research questions earlier generated.

**Table 1: Frequencies, Percentages and Ranks of Metadiscourse Elements in the Corpus**

Tools	Data One			Data Two		
	Freq.	Perc.	Rank	Freq	Perc.	Rank
Transitions	427	39.2	1 st	523	47.2	1 st
Frame Markers	94	8.6	5 th	116	10.4	6 th
Endophoric Markers	160	14.7	2 nd	144	13.0	2 nd
Evidentials	121	11.1	3 rd	57	5.1	4 th
Code Glosses	51	4.7	7 th	57	5.1	7 th
Hedges	77	7.1	6 th	51	4.6	5 th
Boosters	51	4.7	7 th	55	5.0	8 th
Attitude Markers	10	1.0	9 th	14	1.3	9 th
Engagement Markers	96	8.8	4 th	83	7.5	3 rd
Self Mentions	2	0.2	10 th	9	0.8	10 th
Total	1089	100		1109	100	

As reflected in the Table 1, transitions were made use of in the two data at a high level. While transitions appeared in 427 places at 39.2 % of the total discourse elements deployed in Data One, the frequency and percentage of the same element in Data Two were 523 and 47.2% respectively. The figures in the table show that there were slight disparities in the levels at which frame markers, evidentials, hedges, boosters, and engagement markers were used in the two English-based undergraduate research projects examined. Viewing these from the ranking, while frame markers ranked fifth in Data One, it ranked sixth in Data Two; while evidential ranked third in Data One, it ranked fourth in Data Two; hedges came sixth and fifth in the ranking in Data One and Two, respectively. Boosters ranked seventh and eighth in the two data, while engagement markers ranked fourth and third in Data One and Data Two, respectively. A broad similarity in the pattern of deployment is indicated in the table based on the ranking of transitions, endophoric markers, code glosses and self-mentions. This implies that the two independent writers appeared conversant with the rules guiding the deployment of these particular discourse elements. The findings are further presented graphically in the bar graph in Figure 1.

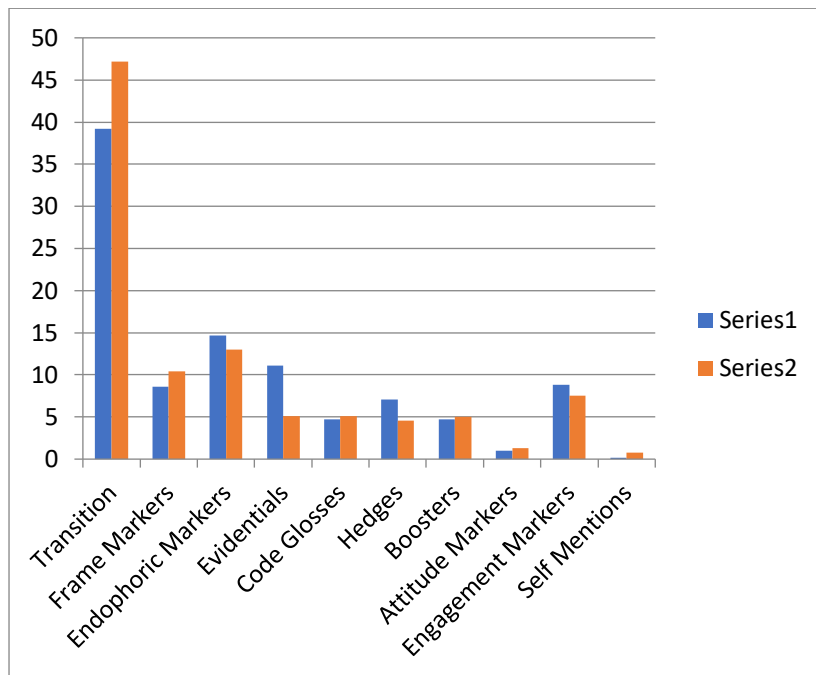


Figure1: Bar Graph on the Percentage Distribution of Metadiscourse elements in the Corpus

On Research Question 1 which focused on kinds and patterns of metadiscourse features displayed in the two data, findings indicated that the data consisted of all the ten discourse elements examined as identified by Hyland (2005). In other words, transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials, and code glosses were used. Other elements displayed included hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers and self-mentions. Regarding the patterns of usage, these elements were deployed at different levels within each of the data and across the data. The fact that each of the data consisted of all the selected variables listed above could be an indication of a substantially polished background of the writers prior to the writing as well as thorough supervision by the project supervisors.



Research Question 2 centred on how the metadiscourse features in the undergraduate projects under examination were employed to indicate the structural/generic class of the academic discourse. It was discovered that there were substantial uses of the discourse elements to indicate the structural or generic class of the academic discourse. For instance, structurally, transitional expressions were highly deployed in the two data. It is not surprising that transitions came first in the ranking, because transitions are highly needed to make a good academic text portray cohesion and coherence. This is congruent with Aldrain-Vallance et al., (2009: 250) who aptly noted that cohesion helps to ensure unity in a text, just as transitions help in guiding readers to connect a part of writing to another. It means that the authors could not have done less in employing transitional expressions. Again, frame markers were highly employed to indicate the thematic structure of the academic discourse in the two undergraduate projects examined. The level at which these elements were utilised added aesthetic value to the works.

Moreover, on Research Question 3, which has to do with how the metadiscourse features were deployed in the projects investigated to explain the nature of the academic discourse itself, it was discovered that there were enough evidences of proper usage of the elements. For example, the meagre use of the self-mention element portrays the genre and style of research projects. The fact that self-mentions appeared only twice and nine times in Data One and Data Two respectively shows that the projects are academically compliant. The project writers were thus conscious of the rule of objectivity that precludes subjective use of personal pronouns in a work of this kind. The finding corroborates what Murphy (2009) expressed unequivocally, as he asserted that passive voice should be used in academic writing instead of the personalised active 'I' (McGarrell & Brillinger, 2008).

Again, the nature of the academic discourse presented in the projects was also indicated by the extent to which frame markers were deployed. It is evident that frame markers were used as indicators of the nature of the research. Evidentials were highly displayed in both Data One and Data Two. However, the disparity in the levels of the deployment of evidentials in the two write-ups investigated could be due



to the possibility of the author of the first project having a better appreciation of the existing literature. It could then mean that awareness about how to utilise and acknowledge academic sources might not be high enough for the author of Data Two.

Research Question 4 was on how the metadiscourse features in the undergraduate research projects examined were made use of to make provision for the reader to recognise the writer's purpose in the discourse. The findings indicate that the writers made their purposes known to their readers through the use of code glosses and engagement markers. For instance, code glosses were employed by both authors in each of the chapters of the projects. While code glosses were used 51 times in Data One, they were employed 57 times in Data Two.

More importantly, the provision made by the authors to carry their readers along to identify their purposes is indicated in the level at which they deployed engagement markers. While Data One contains these elements spread through the four chapters, totalling 96 in number, it was deployed in 83 places in Data Two. This means that the authors were conscious of what an academic writing is majorly all about. According to McGarrell and Brillinger (2008), the purpose of an academic writing is to meet the potential reader's intellectual needs. The authors have done credibly well in carrying their potential readers along in relation to the purpose of their research due, perhaps, to their proper grooming in their area of specialisation. As students in the field of English Studies, their training could have enhanced their consciousness about their potential readers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As a comparative case-study, this study investigated the level of deployment of metadiscourse elements in two English-based undergraduate projects. The research questions raised have been adequately addressed based on the findings presented in Table1 and Figure1 and the subsequent discussion. As part of its contribution to knowledge, the study enriched the literature on the subject of metadiscourse by applying it to the exploration of the discourse elements in the two English-based undergraduate research projects in the Nigerian ESL context. Regarding the theoretical aspect, the study has demonstrated that it can be gainfully applied to explicate metadiscourse



features especially in academic writing. It was discovered that discourse elements can be beneficially deployed to express the interpersonal disposition of writers. Finally, the study contributed to knowledge on the deployment of metadiscourse markers in supervised academic projects.

On the basis of the findings, the following recommendations are made to future researchers: First, the evidential verbs alone in the undergraduate research projects are enough as data to be critically examined for their pragmatic value and metadiscourse functions. Also, metadiscourse studies can be conducted within a stylistic theoretical framework using the various stylistic tools. It is also recommended that the undergraduate students of English Studies should be groomed more in the area of acknowledging sources used while writing academic reports. This may be enhanced by more regular assignments focusing on applications of evidentials in writing. It is also recommended that undergraduate students in general should be given appropriate instruction in metadiscourse deployment through the Use-of-English programme, especially in the use of transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, code glosses, boosters and engagement markers because of their high level of significance in achieving textuality in all forms of report writing.

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