

Analysis of Attitude and Engagement Markers in Academic Writing Context: A Cross-Disciplinary Study



تحليل علامات التوجه والإشترك في سياق الكتابة
الأكاديمية: دراسة مشتركة بين التخصصات

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الكلمات المفتاحية: علامات التوجه ، علامات الإشتراك ، تصنيف هايلاند (2005).

كيفية اقتباس البحث

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الخلاصة:

تهدف الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على استخدام طلبة الدكتوراه (الأترك) من غير متكلمي اللغة الأصليين لعلامات التوجه والإشترك من ناحية التكرار والنوع. تم تحليل بيانات (20) أطروحة دكتوراه في التخصصات العلمية (طبية و هندسية) و إنسانية (إنسانيات و علوم إجتماعية) طبقاً لتصنيف (هايلاند) 2005 الخاص بتحليل علامات الحوار الوصفي بأعباره أنسب تصنيف ممكن أن يستخدم في هذه الدراسة. أظهرت النتائج بأن علامات التوجه شكلت النسبة الأكبر في التخصصات الإنسانية بما نسبته (70.48). هذه النسبة تشير إلى مواقف الكُتاب، في التخصصات الإنسانية مدار بحث هذه الدراسة التي بين أيدينا، نحو فرضيات المؤلفين و نظرياتهم وكيف يُعبرون عن ثقتهم من عدمها أو شكوكهم أو حتى يُظهرون مواقف مُعينة تجاه نتائج و فرضيات كُتاب آخرين. بينما شكلت علامات الإشترك النسبة الكبر في التخصصات العلمية بما نسبته (74.70). هذه النسبة تشير إلى حقيقة مفادها هو أن الباحثين في التخصصات العلمية مدار بحث هذه الدراسة التي بين أيدينا ينقلون الحقائق المطلوبة باستخدامهم المتنوع للصفات. هذا وبالإمكان أن يستفيد متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية بإشراك وتوجيه القراء لكتاباتهم الأكاديمية. وتقتصر الدراسة أن يتم تدريس الحوار الوصفي بعمق أكثر لما له من أهمية في إكتساب مهارة الكتابة الأكاديمية.

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Abstract

The current study aims to highlight the use of attitude and engagement markers by non-native postgraduates (Turkish context) in terms of frequency and type. This is a corpus-based study in which 20 PhD theses in hard (medical and engineering) and soft (humanities and social sciences) are analyzed. The data of the study are analyzed according to Hyland's (2005) taxonomy of metadiscourse markers as it is considered the most suitable taxonomy to be used. The findings showed that attitude markers constituted the largest portion of soft domain theses with a percentage of (70.48). The high percentage of frequency in using attitude markers in the soft domain refers to the writers' positions toward others' prepositions and theories, and how they express their confidence or arguments, or doubts or even show certain attitudes toward others' findings and prepositions. Attitude markers enable authors to present their points of view toward others' works and productions. As for the engagement markers, it constituted the largest portion in the hard domain theses with a percentage of (74.70). This percentage refers to the fact that the researchers in hard domain disciplines communicate the facts they want through a diverse use of adjectives. The results can be employed by EFL learners to engage and direct readers in writing academically. It also suggests teaching the importance of teaching metadiscourse deeply due to its importance in effective learning.

1. Introduction

Language is a basic tool of communication. Writing is an important portion of the communication (Alqahtani & Abdelhalim, 2020). *Metadiscourse*, often mistakenly defined as '*discourse about discourse*', is a concept adopted by researchers and practitioners in writing in particular and learning in general. It was coined by Zelling Harris (1959) who considered it as a way of understanding a language in use and how authors managed to direct a reader's grasp of a text (Hyland, 2005). The term *metadiscourse* or as it is sometimes called *metatext* or *metalinguage* in a considerable number of previous studies (e.g. Bunton, 1999; Farrokhi & Ashrafi, 2009; Mauranen, 1993; Rahman, 2004) is "self-reflective linguistic expressions referring to the evolving text, to the writer, and to the imagined readers of the text" (Hyland, 2004). Swan and Smith (2005) define a discourse marker as "a word or an expression which shows the connection between what is said and the wider context.". Such definition refers to the fact that discourse markers function as connectors that connect what is before to what is after to convey a speaker's or writer's message in a way that





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contributes to the discourse coherence. Metadiscourse is an umbrella that covers a group of diverse cohesive and interpersonal characteristics that contribute to creating a kind of relation between a text and its context by directing readers to focus on the perspective preferred by the writer (Hyland, 1998).

A considerable extant literature on L2 academic writing paid thorough attention to the use of metadiscourse markers from several perspectives, aiming to highlight how they are employed in academia. (e.g., Ädel, 2006; Bruce, 2016; Hyland, 2002, 2005, 2012; Thompson, 2001; Wu, 2007). According to Hyland (2005) attitude markers function as words that express or assert the writer's attitude or estimation toward a certain proposition, which may lead to a kind of obligation, agreement, or surprise. Engagement markers, in turn, function as words that create a relationship between the text itself and its readers. Engagement markers also contribute to directing readers' attention toward the text through the employment of person pronouns, question forms, or imperatives.

The current study investigates the use of metadiscourse specifically attitude and engagement markers, in terms of type and frequency, in non-native doctoral theses in Turkish settings and context. The English language is the dominant language in academic writing and academia. Day by day, the wide use of the English language pushes it to become the language of science. The coherent and cohesive written works (research articles, books, theses, theses, etc.) started to emerge in academia during the last few years due to the efficient level of English mastery (Afzaal et al., 2021).

The Turkish setting adds a kind of competition due to the societal diversity that serves the issue of following certain academic writing conventions, such as discourse markers, clarity, hedges, and other transitions of cohesion (Mohan & Lo, 1985).

2. Previous Studies

A simple click in international journals aggregators shows the big body of research about metadiscourse, especially in limited parts of articles, theses, theses, and book reviews, to name but a few: Hashim, et al. (2024) and Qiu et al. (2024). Despite the growing body of literature on the use of metadiscourse markers in the academic writing context; there is still a need and a dearth to investigate this use in non-native postgraduates' writings in general and Turkish postgraduates in particular. This area has not received enough investigation yet despite the increasing number of studies in the applied linguistics field. However, it is important to highlight the use of attitude and engagement markers from different perspectives and backgrounds, specifically by Turkish postgraduates due to their importance in the academic writing discipline.

Deng et al. (2021) diachronically investigated the evolution of PhD dissertation writing, particularly that related to interactive and interactional metadiscourse at three phases of time (1966, 1986, and 2016). The study examined the abnormal or foreign features in text change patterns involved in the metadiscourse under study. The sampling consisted of one hundred and eighty PhD theses. This sampling was retrieved from soft and hard domain disciplines and constituted a 5.16 million words

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corpus. The results showed that metadiscourse had been profoundly available in hard domain disciplines' PhD theses and less than that in their soft domain counterparts. The study concluded that textual features in soft domain disciplines tend to be objective, responsible toward the audience, and careful more than those in hard domain disciplines.

Yasmin et al.'s (2021) corpus-based study explored the employment of interactional patterns and how they were used professionally in research articles writing in two fields. The corpus consisted of one hundred research articles retrieved from the fields of social sciences and pure sciences. By adopting Hyland's (2005) framework of metadiscourse, the study examined the authorial strategies followed by authors in two academic fields. The results showed that authors' voices in the social sciences field are visibly shown in their academic discussions and disputes, trying to create a relationship with readers explicitly, while the opposite case occurred in the field of pure sciences.

Yang's (2014) study investigated selected quotes from academic speeches to show if their any variations or differences between those used in soft domain disciplines classes and their hard equivalents according to Hyland's (2005) model of academic discourse. The findings showed that employing pronouns, self-mention, hedges, and boosters used in these speeches were less diverse across disciplines in spoken discourse. The study also showed that there was a slight difference in terms of word frequency and ranking. According to Hyland and Bondi (2006), such various ways of usage may produce certain models or styles in different disciplines that contribute to producing arguments and may construct a discourse out of such knowledge, which in turn, will lead to such slight variations.

Several earlier studies shed light on the use of rhetorical devices (or choices) in the diverse genres of academic writing comparing/contrasting the soft and hard domain disciplines, to name but a few, Hyland (2000, 2007, 2008) focused on academic research articles, Yang (2013) focused on academic textbook blurbs, Hyland and Tse (2004) and Yang (2012) focused on dissertation acknowledgments (Yang, 2014). These studies are just a few examples to show how different academic genres may produce diverse outcomes. Diverse disciplines present various contexts to be interpreted within their disciplinary framework (Hyland, 2004).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study is a descriptive comparative one. The research methodology in this study is a mixed one. The data is collected qualitatively and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively to get simple and clear findings.

3.2 Sampling

The current study is a corpus-based one in which 20 PhD theses (10 in the hard domain such as medicine and engineering, and 10 in the soft domain such as humanities and social sciences) are selected as data sources for this study.





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3.3 Data Collection

The theses of the hard domain encompass human medicine and electrical engineering disciplines, while that of the soft domain encompass English literature and history. The theses are retrieved from <https://tez.yok.gov.tr/UlusalTezMerkezi/> which is considered the Turkish aggregator of academic productions produced in Turkish universities (theses and theses only).

3.4 Data Analysis

The study collected data are classified according to Hyland’s (2005) taxonomy of metadiscourse markers. The data are analyzed by AntConc software as the suitable computational linguistic tool to analyze such big data.

3.5 Classification and Identification of Metadiscourse Markers

Among several models and taxonomies of metadiscourse classification and identification, the study adopts Hyland’s (2005) taxonomy by which the linguist Hyland classified interpersonal metadiscourse markers into two main categories: interactive and interactional. Interactive metadiscourse markers deal with discourse organization and highlight the textual devices' construction. They are divided into five sub-categories: transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials, and code glosses. Interactional metadiscourse markers deal with how a writer conducts his/her interaction by expressing his/her viewpoint in public about a certain topic or point and connecting with readers clearly and directly. They are also divided into five sub-categories: hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, and engagement markers.

The current study exclusively explores the use of two sub-categories of interactional metadiscourse markers which are attitude and engagement markers due to their linguistically important role in writing in general and in academic writing in particular.

Table (1) An interpersonal model of metadiscourse (adapted from Hyland, 2005)

Category	Function	Examples
Interactive	Help to guide the reader through the text	
Transitions	Express relations between main clauses	<i>also, but, therefore</i>
Frame markers	Refer to discourse acts, sequences, or stages	<i>firstly, in sum, subsequently</i>
Code glosses	Elaborate propositional meanings	<i>for example, in other words, namely</i>
Interactional	Involve the reader in the text	
Hedges	Withhold commitment and open dialogue	<i>might, could, probably</i>



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Boosters	Emphasize certainty or close dialogue	<i>definitely, must, in fact</i>
Attitude markers	Express writer's attitude to proposition	<i>important, unfortunately, agree</i>
Self-mentions	Explicit reference to author(s)	<i>we, I, our, my</i>
Engagement markers	Explicitly build a relationship with the reader	<i>should, you, consider</i>

Table 2: Word Tokens in Corpus

Category	Discipline	No. of Word Tokens
Hard Domain Disciplines	Human Medicine	194416
	Electrical Engineering	202948
	English Literature	271918
Soft Domain Disciplines	History	297387

Discussion and Findings

The findings, resulting from the qualitative and quantitative analysis, showed that there are 1834 attitude markers in the hard domain theses, while there are 5230 attitude markers in their soft equivalents. The engagement markers are frequented 4197 times in hard domain theses, while they are frequented 16486 times in soft equivalents. Table (2) explains.

Table (2) The frequencies of attitude and engagement markers in the theses under study

Type of Domain	Attitude Markers	Engagement
Markers		
Hard Domain	934	2197
Soft Domain	6486	2230



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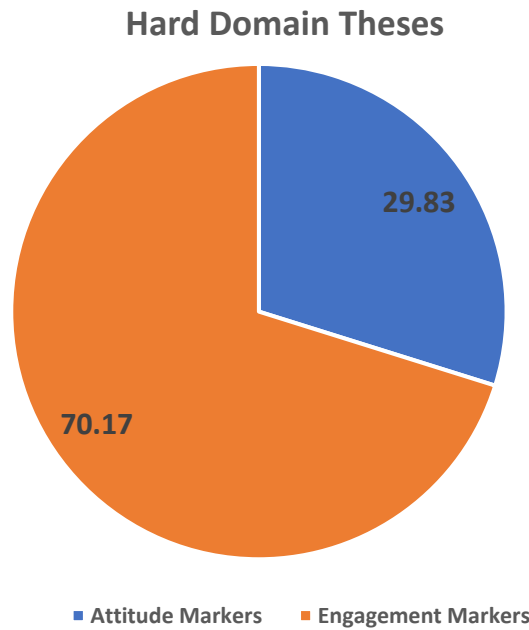


Figure (1) the percentages of attitude and engagement markers frequency in hard domain disciplines

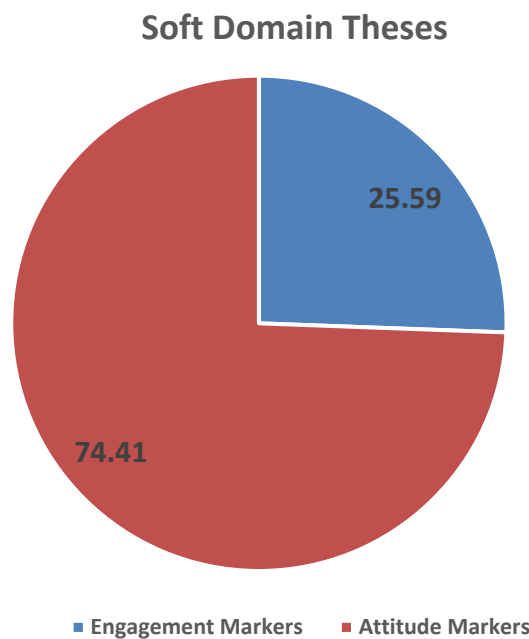


Figure (2) shows the percentages of attitude and engagement markers frequency in soft domain disciplines

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The figure No. (1) shows that the engagement markers in hard domain disciplines theses were employed (2197) times with a percentage (%70.17), while the attitude markers were employed (934) with a percentage (29.83).

As can be seen in Figure No. (2) the attitude markers in soft domain disciplines theses employed (6486) times with a percentage (74.41), while the engagement markers were employed (2230) with a percentage (25.59).

The high percentage of frequency in using attitude markers in the soft domain refers to the writers' positions toward others' prepositions and theories, and how they express their confidence or arguments, or doubts or even show certain attitudes toward others' findings and prepositions. Attitude markers enable authors to present their points of view toward others' works and productions. Soft domain discipline researchers seem to be more qualified in interpreting and explaining linguistic data or analyzing a corpus by utilizing various and multiple attitude markers to achieve their goals. To be more specific, the adjectives "significant", "interesting", and "important" ranked top in terms of frequency in soft domain disciplines PhD theses.

Adverbs or rather (attitudinal adverbs) such as: "only", "significantly", and "completely" ranked second as attitude markers in soft domain disciplines theses. The use of such adverbs is inevitable because of the necessity of use to refer to an evaluation, a lack of sources, a need, emotion, value, importance, strengths, or weaknesses.

As for engagement markers, the findings showed that the hard domain disciplines theses contain engagement markers more than their soft equivalents. This refers to the fact that the researchers in hard domain disciplines communicate the facts they want through a diverse use of adjectives. According to Hyland (2002), the abundance of adjectives used refers to the researcher's desire to create a close bond with readers or audience.

The study findings are in line with those found in Yasmin et al.'s (2021) study where the researchers' voices in disciplines of social sciences are commonly found in interactions within academia and they may create an explicit relationship with the readers, while the pure scientific disciplines are void of such a thing and in contrary to this dimension, while Yang's (2014) findings are different from what we found in the current study because it found out that the hard domain disciplines employ and depend on clear and understandable criteria to support or stand against a hypothesis, and thus the use of attitude markers are more common in these disciplines. In return, the soft domain disciplines witnessed a rise of personal credibility and discourse of persuasion due to the availability of explicit evaluation and a lesser dependence on any already methods to verify any claims they may face while looking for truths or realities (Hyland, 2005).





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A drastic deviation was found in the current findings if compared to those found in Deng et al. (2021) study. The latter showed that pure scientific disciplines were rich in metadiscourse, while their human and social equivalents were poor in metadiscourse. Academic writing in human and social disciplines tends to be more reader-orientated, objective, less persuasive, and responsible toward the audience, while the contrary was found in pure scientific disciplines.

Conclusions

To conclude, the findings of the current study suggest that the disciplined and governed employment of attitude and engagement markers in the PhD theses writing academic genre are subject to the models and styles of domains or fields of study. Findings show that PhD students use more attitude markers in soft-domain disciplines than in hard-domain ones. This belongs to the higher level of interactivity in soft domain Ph.D. Theses are employed to directly engage readers to the text they read.

The current study has certain important implications for instructors, EFL learners, and novice researchers. Analyzing metadiscourse may contribute to the understanding of metadiscourse as a source of coherence that leads to analyzing some rhetorical preferences. Such variation in frequency and type of attitude and engagement markers might be a useful source for English Foreign Language learners, in general, and researchers, in particular.

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