

A tale of three waves: Or, concerning the history and theory of metadiscourse

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Abstract

In this paper we provide an overview of past and current research on metadiscourse and highlight new research discourses emerging from the field. We trace the category back to its critical and theoretical origins, examining the three 'waves' that have configured it over the last four decades. We investigate how metadiscourse has evolved and the reasons why it continues fascinating researchers in professional and academic fields in a variety of disciplines and domains. We then focus on the fact that, as communication moves online and a variety of genres become digitalised, researchers active in metadiscourse are increasingly concerned with digital communication and are accordingly questioning (or adapting) well-established methodologies, but also proposing new and much-needed perspectives on reflexivity. The field is undoubtedly in a flux and new and interesting approaches and eclectic frameworks are emerging, which merit consideration.

Keywords: metadiscourse, reflexivity, discourse analysis, genre analysis, digitalization.

Resumen

Crónica de tres olas. Acerca de la historia y de la teoría del metadiscurso

El presente artículo ofrece una retrospectiva de la investigación del metadiscurso, con especial énfasis en la emergencia de nuevas perspectivas de análisis. En él se rastrean los orígenes teóricos y críticos de esta categoría y se examinan las tres olas que han moldeado el metadiscurso en las últimas cuatro décadas. Asimismo, se muestra cómo ha evolucionado y por qué sigue fascinando a los investigadores de ámbitos académicos y profesionales de diferentes disciplinas y dominios. Por otra parte, se muestra cómo los investigadores que trabajan activamente en el análisis del metadiscurso cada vez prestan mayor atención a la comunicación

digital, como consecuencia de la mayor relevancia que ha ido adquiriendo la comunicación en Internet y la digitalización que han sufrido diferentes géneros textuales. Todo ello está llevando a cuestionar y adaptar algunas metodologías ya establecidas en relación con el metadiscurso y a formular nuevas propuestas en torno a la reflexividad. Así pues, este campo de investigación está, sin duda, evolucionando de manera constante y dando lugar a interesantes acercamientos novedosos y marcos de análisis eclécticos que se han de tener en cuenta.

Palabras clave: metadiscurso, reflexividad, análisis del discurso, análisis de género, digitalización.

1. Prologue: Of *parerga*, and other marital facts

In what is probably the first portrait of an artist's wife in Europe, Margareta van Eyck sat for her husband Jan in early 1439 (Fig. 1). In three-quarter view, half-length on a dark background with light coming from the left, she is depicted in an accurate tone of typically bourgeois discretion. A triumph of naturalistic representation, Margareta is vividly captured as she gazes at the viewer, and a vigilant observer she is indeed, her blue-grey eyes scrutinising an encoded beholder (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996) –despite it being unclear whether this is her spouse, as befits marital life, or an external onlooker.

What interests us here is, however, the occurrences taking place in the original wooden frame, a liminal area of the artwork that lies outside the canonical 'sphere' of pictorial representation. Painted in imitation of dark-veined greige marble, it bears two orders of trompe-l'oeil epigraphic pseudo-inscriptions in Latin. Van Eyck, that is, has encased in the artwork's frame mouldings a verbal apparatus that complements his lifelike representation of his wife. In the upper edge inscription, Margareta herself informs us about her identity and relationship to the author, and the work's date of completion: "co[n]iv[n]x m[eu]s joh[ann]es me c[om]plevit an[n]o 1439° 15° ivnij" ('my husband Johannes completed me in the year 1439 on the 15th of June'). On the lower edge (see detail in Fig. 2), she goes on to reveal her age at the time of the portrait: "[a]etas mea triginta triv[m] an[n]orv[m]" ('my age is thirty-three years').



Figure 1. Jan van Eyck, *Portrait of Margareta van Eyck* (1439), oil on panel, 41.2 x 34.6 cm (original frame included), Bruges, Groeningemuseum



Figure 2. Jan van Eyck, *Portrait of Margareta van Eyck* (1439), detail from lower frame moulding.

Most importantly, to the right of the frame's lower moulding, there appears van Eyck's personal motto, a phrase in ancient Flemish transliterated in Greek capital letters: "ALC IXH XAN" ("AS [BEST AS] I CAN"). This is an utterance that works as an expression of ironic modesty, revealing the painter's awareness about the quality of the execution, indisputably daring and yet inescapably other than (or utterly inferior to) nature itself.

Why begin this overview on metadiscourse by citing van Eyck's eccentric artwork? Because instances of textual and visual metadiscourse, which today are highly debated topics, indeed pervade the history of humankind. In early panel painting, for instance, frames were essential elements, often made out of the very same piece of wood as the painting itself, or nailed to it with utmost care. The frame often became an essential part of the artwork, not

only physically, but also conceptually, in that it carried texts. And these texts helped the viewer in ‘reading’ the image, so much so that text, frame, and picture were equally structural parts of the artwork (Küllerich, 2001). Ever since antiquity, aesthetics and critical theory have employed the multifaceted term *parergon* (*para*, ‘beside’, and *ergon*, ‘work’) to indicate the metalinguistic affordances of non-propositional devices such as van Eyck’s frame inscriptions, which extend far beyond the role of accessory by-work, subordinate embellishments or filling supplements to an artwork’s main subject. Despite its historical origin as the expression of a ‘peripheral’ form of beauty –which is how, for instance, Kant (1790) and J.J. Winckelmann (1850) considered it, as an addendum to an artwork’s propositional content–, the principle of parergonality has progressively developed into a cunning manifestation of reflexive intelligence.

Parerga are nowadays in fact identified with the material and/or conceptual thresholds, boundaries or even literal margins of a text (Duro, 2019), as semiotic resources whose purpose is not to add to the work’s ideational dimension, but to jump beyond the referential function of representation. To point, that is, to the very act of representation itself, and to reveal the dialogical relations (suggestions, assumptions, expectations, interpretations, negotiations, etc.) that are nurtured amongst the different social actors that partake in the semiotic process: authors, recipients and discourse itself. The function of *parerga* is thus not intrinsically propositional, but extrinsically social and epistemological. It is indeed metadiscoursal. “[N]either work (*ergon*) nor outside the work [*hors d’oeuvre*], neither inside or outside, neither above nor below”, they “giv[e] rise” to the artwork’s ‘sphere’ in its broader sense (Derrida 1987: 9). A form of discourse on the artwork itself *qua* discourse, the *parergon* plunges the *ergon* within the fabric of textual, contextual, interpersonal and social relationships and discourses in which they jointly take shape and meaning.

To come closer to the more familiar terms of applied linguistics, we may say that van Eyck’s metadiscoursal expedients set the stage for a full reading of his painting’s ideational contents. Quite in the fashion of margins in medieval manuscripts, these *parerga* are consubstantial with the subject matter of the actual painting, to such an extent that it is unthinkable to separate panel from frame, icon from text (or wife from husband, for that matter). In particular, Jan’s motto complements and integrates Margareta’s likeness, for which it provides hermeneutic scaffolding, suggesting the artist’s awareness that, even with the best intentions, representation can only

get as close as it can to empirical reality. It also implies that –whatever semiotic system it may employ, be it visual or verbal or (as in this case) hybrid– language itself works as an integrated system of strata (Jakobson, 1985), in which a referential drive towards a text-external reality (the *ergon*, Margareta’s portrait) is complemented and counterbalanced by a metalinguistic function (the *parergon*, Jan’s philosophy of representation). A full intelligibility of the meanings conveyed by the artwork as a whole therefore depends on the systemic and functional relations between, on the one hand, the *ergon*’s ideational dimension and, on the other, the *parergon*’s interpersonal and textual resources (Halliday, 2002 & 2004). As with good marriages, or linguistic systems, there is no untying the knot: the artwork’s ‘sphere’ comprises and articulates all metafunctions, binding and structuring the work’s social existence as much as its privileged relation with the world and with language itself.

All of these phenomena –regardless, obviously, of aesthetic parameters– we nowadays read as metadiscourse, or to be more precise, visual metadiscourse. The interactional dynamics synthesised in Margareta’s size of frame and oblique angle stance; her inquisitive demand gaze; the temporal and metaleptic anchors fictionally carved in the frame mouldings; and especially Jan’s first-person “ALC IXH XAN”, a reflexive downtoner which condenses an attitude of paradoxical disengagement from the illusionistic epistemicity of his pictorial grammar in a gesture of ornamental exoticism. All the parergonal facts that make van Eyck’s portrait of his wife such a dazzling visual (as well as verbal) artwork may be analysed, contrasted and discussed in relation to metadiscoursal resources (such as hedges and boosters, frame, attitude, self-mention and engagement markers; Hyland, 2005), or to metadiscoursal criteria such as reflexivity, explicitness, intratextuality (Mauranen, 1993; Ädel, 2006; Ädel & Mauranen, 2010). For, despite the taxonomic or even conceptual fuzziness it may have produced over time (Nash, 1992: 100; Hyland, 2005: 16) as different ‘waves’ of studies have developed and interconnected, metadiscourse is still a long way from declining in interest, fascination and versatility across languages, cultures and media.

In what follows, we compile a concise critical history of metadiscourse over the last four decades (Section 2), tracing it back to its various formulations and different approaches in applied linguistics and providing reasons why it has become such an all-pervasive “discourse universal” (Mauranen, 2010a). We then focus on the most recent developments of the category, in

particular regard to today's increasing digitalization of knowledge and discourse, and discuss some new and promising directions for future research (Section 3). Hopefully, we will highlight some of the reasons why metadiscourse has been –and still is– a must-have compass to language and communication in an ever-increasing variety of domains, genres and settings. As van Eyck's *Portrait of Margareta* seems to suggest, metadiscourse is among the most intriguing and productive facets of our social and intellectual life. It shapes and explains nearly everything. Marriage excluded, of course.

2. The three waves: A short history of metadiscourse

Metadiscourse has been circulating in Western culture for a long time. Its manifestations in verbal discourse can be traced as far back as the Middle Ages, and to different domains such as science, medicine, biography, narrative and poetry (Alter, 1975; Hutcheon, 1980; Waugh, 1984; Taavitsainen, 1999). Its roots also embrace the history of visual discourses such as heraldry, painting, sculpture and architecture (Foucault, 1966; Dällenbach, 1977; Flam, 2009; Stead, 2017), and even music (Mannion, 2019). And yet, not until the early 1980s did the ways in which authors may embed marks of authorship and/or potential (or actual) readership in texts, so as to steer and shape the reception and interpretation thereof, become the object of systematic and specialised scrutiny on the part of applied linguistics. Interest towards metadiscourse was triggered by the 'interactional turn' of language analysis in the late 1970s (Sinclair & Courthald, 1975); it was then crucially fuelled by Halliday's trifunctional model (2002 & 2004), in which the centuries-old vocation of language to represent the 'real' world –the one supposedly standing prior to, and outside of, sign systems– was re-perspectivised by the interpersonal and textual metafunctions, accounting for the intersubjective processes performed by language in terms of social relationships and the compositional arrangements structuring language's meaning-making processes (2004: 29).

As is part of the legend, the first conceptual appearances of metadiscourse were somewhat low profile, to some extent reminiscent of early (and fairly restrictive) formulations of the *parergon*, i.e. as an apparatus of peripheral, residual areas of the text where contents that are not propositional, and thus appear to exceed the text's main subject, tend to be stored. That is, as ancillary paraphernalia of the *ergon* ('normal', first-degree referential

discourse). Harris first defined metadiscourse as a set of subsidiary kernels, “entirely different” in content from a text’s main kernels, “except that they often contain one word from [...] or a pronoun referring to a main kernel” (1970 [1959]: 464-65), thus underlying their satellite status with respect to the referential pertinence of fully-fledged propositional cores. Likewise, Williams described it in terms of second-degree “writing about writing, whatever does not refer to the subject matter being addressed” (1981: 84), while Crismore shifted the focus to the *in-fieri* poststructuralist notion of ‘discourse’ as he spoke of “discoursing about discourse” (1984: 280). Vande Kopple (1985: 83) identified it with material “which does not add propositional information but which signals the presence of an author”, thus bringing in the explicitation of a principle of authorship (Burke, 1995) as its main trigger, while Crismore, Markkannen and Steffensen completed the picture by incorporating the opposite side of the semiotic spectrum, that is, the reader/listener. Irrelevant to a text’s ideational sphere, metadiscourse is key in structuring its organisation, interpretation and evaluation on the part of the audience (1993: 39).

What immediately emerges from this ‘first wave’ of metadiscourse research is how beneficial the category can be to the study of aspects of textuality which did not receive attention until the end of the 1970s, when the so-called ‘textual turn’ (Ferraris, 1986) climbed over language’s referentiality to investigate semiosis *in extenso*, that is, the entire semiotic spectrum of communication, from its origin to its arrival point, as part of a text’s message. Here lies the “distinct element of sophistication” that metadiscourse bestows on language: it allows us to produce meanings that go “beyond referential information about states of affairs” (Mauranen, *forthc.*) and cover discourse itself in its full sense, as “the social use of language” (Danesi, 2016: 204). An incrementally dynamic vision of metadiscourse has thus taken shape, also nurtured by two classics of language-as-socialization theory. On the one hand, Foucault’s historicist notion of discourse as “a group of sequences of signs” existing within specific social, cultural and ideological settings that –far from being accessory elements in the interpretation of texts, are foregrounded as the very conditions of their existence– provided an intersubjective and materialist standpoint from which even specialised discourse, such as “clinical discourse, economic discourse, the discourse of natural history, psychiatric discourse”, should always be examined (1969: 108). On the other hand, Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism clarified that any discourse has to some

extent “already been articulated, disputed, elucidated, and evaluated in various ways”, so that “various viewpoints, world views, and trends cross, converge and diverge in it” (1979: 94). For this reason, any discourse works as a two-way chain of communication, pivoting “responsive reactions and dialogic reverberations” with both its predecessors and addressees. The role “of the others for whom [an] utterance is constructed is extremely great”, for these ‘others’ are the “active participants” from whom the speaker/writer expects and elicits a response (1979: 95-96).

As the material non-neutrality and intersubjective porousness of discourse increasingly became the shared patrimony of critical theory and applied linguistics along the 1990s and 2000s, more and more attention was devoted to the analysis of the personality, attitude, credibility, authority, cognitive and epistemic traits of authors, and likewise to the various aspects that form their encoded recipients’ identikit (although it must be admitted that spoken discourse entered the stage quite late, and has so far attracted much less limelight than written communication.) Since then, metadiscourse has extensively been analysed and compared across cultures and languages (Crismore, Markkannen & Steffensen, 1993; Mauranen, 1993b; Valero-Garcés, 1996; Bunton, 1999) and in different disciplinary domains and communicative genres, from EAP (Mauranen, 1993a; Thompson, 2003; Hyland, 2000, 2005) to L1 and L2 student writing practices (Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2004), ESL, ESP and EAP practice and pedagogy (Intraprawat & Steffensen, 1995; Cheng & Steffensen, 1996; Camiciottoli, 2003; Bondi & Borelli, 2018), ELF (Mauranen, 2010a, 2010b, 2012); scientific discourse (Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Bamford & Bondi, 2011; Hyland & Sancho-Guinda, 2012), news and advertising discourse (Fuertes-Olivera et al., 2001; Dafouz-Milne, 2008), business and corporate discourse (Hyland, 1998; De Groot et al., 2016), etc.

This ‘second wave’ of studies had the indisputable benefit of categorisation, providing analytical body and bulk to the intuitions of poststructuralism and ‘interactional’ textual analysis in the 1970-80s. The singling out of systematic criteria and measurable parameters for identifying, quantifying and comparing linguistic expressions of metadiscourse thus became a key task of research. A whole family tree of taxonomies developed, in which different generations confront and complement each other –producing brilliant bifurcations as much as fuzzy family resemblances. To start with, there was the issue of where to draw a dividing line between metadiscourse and automated language, so as to put together a toolbox for discourse analysis that would be

applicable to a potentially wide variety of contexts. This was no minor concern, if we bear in mind that, essentially, metadiscourse is about strategically making certain language choices in certain material situations –and not others. Orienting the communicative situation via certain (and not other) types of interactive resource (logical transitions, endophorics, evidential or frame markers, etc.), or disciplining discourse itself through specific interactional manoeuvres (epistemic markers, self-mentions, second-person engagement markers, etc.) which help govern the text’s dialogue with its reader/listener, is indeed an art of flexibility. Hence we see the need for ‘soft’ –as opposed to schematic and rigid– categorizations. If early chartings of the phenomenon limited it to metatextual (Valero-Garcés, 1996; Bunton, 1999) or illocutionary resources (Beauvais, 1989; quoted in Hyland, 2005: 199), more articulate approaches rapidly emerged. Vande Kopple’s model (1985), for instance, based on seven types of markers pertaining to textual and interpersonal functions, although challenged by some objections concerning its applicability limits (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995), stimulated revisions such as Crismore, Markkannen and Steffensen’s model (1993) and upgrades such as Hyland’s systematisation (2005).

It is at this stage of research –referred to as the (broader) ‘interactive’, or ‘integrative’ tradition– that key distinctions were introduced to sharpen the category of metadiscourse and counterbalance its development as, in Hyland’s terms, an umbrella term for all expressions that configure and negotiate meaning-making patterns, by way of “assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community” (2005: 37). In particular, metadiscourse was clarified as covering exclusively those “aspects of the text that embody writer-reader interactions”, for it allows writers to encode their positioning and attitude towards propositional contents, as well as enabling readers to be guided along the text and perceive said positioning and attitude (Hyland & Tse, 2004). Secondly, it achieves this through different orders of resources, which Hyland (2005) labels “interactive” and “interactional” (as suggested by Thompson, 2001), accounting for, respectively, assisting readers with the apprehension, organisation and evaluation of the text’s ideational contents, and involving and engaging them in the construction of a mutually shared discursive pact. And finally, it concerns only text-internal relations, that is, reflexive phenomena that pertain to the world of the ongoing discourse only, thus excluding other metatextual occurrences, such as intertextuality (Hyland, 2005: 38).

But to go back to the above question: why has metadiscourse become such a “discourse universal” (Mauranen, 2010)? Although a univocally coherent answer may hardly be formulated (and would probably prove reductive), it is clear how metadiscourse has been critically construed in the 1990-2000s –for reasons it seems to partially share with the logic of the *parergon*– as a paradigm of language’s anti-referential cleverness. Conceptualised as scaffolding composed of lexical, grammatical and semantic elements at work both within and beyond sentence level, its function is to circumscribe, encapsulate and regulate the social and hermeneutical life of discursive artefacts, by dialectically designing their interpersonal borders as a privileged observatory for the trifunctional operativity of language (Halliday, 2002, 2004). Indeed, it seems that much of the fascination with metadiscourse comes from a paradox. For this articulate constellation of second-degree, anti-mimetic resources –eccentric with respect to language’s ‘primary’ ideational mission–, by centripetally drawing us towards the centre of semiosis, contributes to a more sophisticated representation of empirical reality. As it happens, one may add, with Jan van Eyck’s “ALC IXH XAN” motto in the frame moulding of his wife’s portrait. By refracting and perspectivizing reality, metadiscourse co-constructs it in its multifaceted social and epistemological complexity. It operates not to the detriment, but to the dialectical advantage of language’s representative mission, precisely because it returns discourse to the material universe of intersubjective relations it is always and inevitably produced in. In lieu of an answer, another paradox may therefore result from the above question. Metadiscourse’s anti-referential cleverness may in fact be but the surface manifestation of as a subtler form of epistemological wisdom.

Interestingly, encouraging developments in this direction may come from the ‘third wave’ of metadiscourse studies, also known as the (narrower) ‘non-integrative’ strand. A bright bifurcation in the genealogy of metadiscourse research (Mauranen, 1993a, 1993b), it pivots on what Ädel labels “reflexive turn” model (2006, 2010). Assuming metadiscourse to be “discourse about the ongoing discourse” (Mauranen, *forthc.*) –thus covering verbalizations on “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” (Ädel, 2010: 75)– this model reintegrates the metatextual component expunged by the interactive tradition. And by doing so, it gives even more prominence to the epistemological ‘creativity’ of metadiscourse. In Jakobson’s terms (1960),

metadiscourse triangulates the expressive function (material expressing the speaker/writer's persona), the directive function (material expressing the envisaged or material reader/listener's persona) and the metalinguistic function (Jakobson, 1985), covering 'discourse-internal discourse', i.e. verbalizations of the semiotic code itself. And yet, referentiality being the great absentee in the reflexive triangle does not prevent metadiscourse from performing key cognitive functions. Quite the contrary, in fact, as this model even further unveils the semiotic mission carried out by this explicit, discourse-internal and intratextual second-degree order of language: the very making of language *into discourse*, that is, into an "interpersonal activity whose form is determined by its social purposes" (Leech & Short, 1987: 168).

Anything but detrimental to the ongoing development of this research area, the bifurcation between the interactive and the reflexive model has brought about productive methodological distinctions, and even more interesting hybridizations. On the one hand, the devising of 'thin' analytical approaches, typical of second-wave studies (Vande Kopple, 1985; Crismore, Markkannen & Steffensen, 1993; Hyland, 1998, 2004, 2005) allowed pioneering quantitative surveys of the phenomenon, whose insight into the occurrence and distribution of markers across extended corpora and heterogeneous discourse domains and genres has instantiated the large-scale charting out of a previously unexplored territory that is typical of the taxonomical strand of research in the 1990-2000s. 'Thick' methods of analysis, usually data-oriented, are on the other hand typically used in the later reflexive model, and translate into qualitative discourse-analytical approaches, smaller in scale but more focused on contextual, social and cultural variables (Ådel, 2006, *forthc.*; Pérez-Llantada, 2010; Bondi, 2010; Rodway, 2018; Mauranen, *forthc.*). Needless to say, approaches can also be interwoven, so as to combine both larger-scale and context-specific analysis (Akbas & Hatipoğlu, 2018) –which adds to the reasons why metadiscourse proves a multifaceted, complexifying lens through which the epistemology of culture and discourse may be fruitfully observed.

Through the thick and thin, forty years after its inauguration, the field of metadiscourse is still in a flux, and very much so. Today's rapidly changing contexts, media and modes of communication –and particularly the inception of digital culture, as well as of multi-semiotic literacy practices in all domains of discourse, public and private, scientific and popular– indeed seem to bestow even more relevance on the study of metadiscourse, and call, now more than ever, for theoretical flexibility and analytical eclecticism.

3. A new wave: Metadiscourse in digital communication

As the previous section has illustrated, the field of metadiscourse can be easily perceived as a busy forge from which new, thought-provoking studies continue to emerge, driving researchers towards uncharted waters. Underpinning this continuously innovative inclination is current research work on metadiscourse, along with the development of new research methodologies, including visual research methods and combinations of qualitative ('thick') and quantitative ('thin') approaches with special focuses on discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, and genre analysis. In particular, we are starting to realise that as digital and social media have gradually entered our daily lives in the past two decades, our academic and non-academic communication practices have also changed. Along with the linguistic practices in which people engage, and the nature of the social networks they construct, there is a strong and growing interest in how people create meaning not just through language, but through a range of digital resources. It has become clear that the communicative immediacy of digital media, and the spectrum of genres (or hybridised forms) now available, dictate the way we engage in meaning-making practices in a multimodal environment.

The growing interest in digital discourse on the part of researchers is exemplified by the biannual *Metadiscourse Across Genres (MAG)* conference that in June 2019 gathered a substantial group of researchers at the University of Bergamo (Italy)² to discuss the latest metadiscourse developments and the move towards digital forms of communication. All this excitement on the part of metadiscourse scholarship, however, should not come as a surprise. As previously discussed, metadiscourse is largely viewed as an aspect of language that is highly dialogic and interpersonal (Hyland, 2005; Ädel, 2006). Since the field was established in the 1980s, most of the research work has revolved around written, monologic academic genres, leaving behind those modes where synchronous/asynchronous communication with one's readers and listeners is central (Garzone et al., 2007; Jones, Chik & Hafner, 2015; Pérez-Llantada, 2016). An interest in those oral and written forms that offer academic and non-academic writers extensive space for self-expression and engagement with readers was therefore long due.

Researchers such as Miller and Dawn (2004), Davies and Merchant (2007), Mortensen and Walker (2002) and more importantly, Luzón (2006, 2010) have been pioneers of one of the digital genres that has been studied most since its appearance: the academic blog. Once again, we see that the interest

is still centred on the academic world and how scholars engage with readers, how they disseminate results, express opinions and build an academic persona, but the leap had finally been made. From that point on, it has been clear that the Web, together with the explosion of digital technologies, is the driving force that changes the way scientific knowledge circulates and how the public accesses scientific information (Buehl, 2015), for example through websites (Alejo González, 2005), microblogs and blogs (Bondi, 2018; Kuteeva & Mauranen, 2018; Zou & Hyland, 2019), open-source materials, podcasts (Pérez-Llantada, 2016), Wikis (Kuteeva, 2011, 2016), Vlogs (Ädel, orthc.) and Tweets (Sclafani, 2017; Aitamurto & Varma, 2018; Zappavigna, 2018).

Soon enough, a significant number of studies primarily focused on academic blogs (Luzón, 2006, 2010, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2018; Walker, 2006; Trench, 2008; Mauranen, 2013; Kuteeva, 2016; Bondi, 2018; Malavasi, 2020) revealed the intimate, highly dialogic nature of this digital genre, where a popularization and democratization of scientific discourse takes place and where the scholar is held immediately (and sometimes vehemently) accountable for what s/he writes. As Zou and Hyland (2019) note, the blog offers the immediate advantage of enhancing one's visibility, constructing one's persona and disseminating one's research work to a wider, more diverse type of audience, which goes beyond one's disciplinary field. However, the immediacy of response and the uncertainty in the type of audience reached through digital genres forces him/her to correctly implement and manage strategies of recontextualization (Puschmann, 2013; Yus, 2015; Bondi, 2018), in order to linguistically adjust and rhetorically repackage a scientific text, so that it can be understood by non-experts too (Myers, 2010; Campagna et al., 2012). Not only does the author have to carefully consider how to present material, but s/he will also have to possess a firm command of interactional strategies and a range of language and discourse features to manage the dialogic speech that takes place within a digital environment (Puschmann, 2015; Zou & Hyland, 2019). Specific writing abilities have to be cultivated to pursue this pragmatic goal, which may confirm the 'creative' affordances of metadiscourse, as discussed above. On the other hand, this trend immediately shows how digitalization is straining the whole domain of academic and scientific communication in ways that twenty years ago were unimaginable.

Only a handful of metadiscourse studies have so far focused on the alterations that are increasingly visible in the interpersonal dimension of

academic discourses the more they become digitalised. These are explored by Yus (2015), for example, who looks at the use and frequency of interpersonality markers in academic discourse located and communicated on the Web *vs.* offline academic discourse, finding that as the text becomes more digitalised, common-ground markers seem to decrease, while similes, boosters and direct addresses to the audience increase. His study underlines the difficulties academic digital writers face when trying to predict the audience's background knowledge and the impulsivity of readers' interpretations. Similar issues also emerge in Bondi's (2018) empirical study of three economics blogs, in which academic economists commonly engage. In Bondi's corpus-based study, the participant-oriented dimension of posts clearly suggests that the prominent use of reader engagement markers, self-mentions, as well as text-oriented and action-oriented elements, is justified by the will to guide readers through the text, making sure the argument is understood and the writer's position and ideas are commonly shared along the whole spectrum of communication. Along the same lines, Zou and Hyland's (2019) corpus-based analysis compares blog posts and traditional journal research articles, using the stance and engagement model (see Hyland, 2005), emphasising how academic writers create a different writer persona and apply different rhetorical choices when their research is recontextualised online.

These initial metadiscursive studies have started to delve into the complex ways the communicative immediacy of digital media, along with the spectrum of genres (and progressively hybridised forms) now available, have inevitably influenced the way we communicate and the way we make meaning in a more widespread, less homogeneous, multimodal environment, the common notion of an academy perceived as an 'ivory tower', out of reach to a non-expert readership (Puschmann, 2015).

In particular, several contributions in this direction have stemmed from the 2019 *MAG* conference, investigating progressively hybridised academic genres that have migrated –or are in the process of migrating– from analogue to digital format. Some have a clear pedagogical matrix, belonging to the universe of students' writing practices: from MA dissertations to internship reports (Fendri, 2020; Thomson, 2020), undergraduate research papers and upper secondary pupil essays (MacIntyre, 2020). That is to say, they analysed material produced by learners as a unidirectional and standardised product meant for assessment at school or university. Thomson's (2020) study, for example, focuses on traditional novice writing

practices across educational contexts (Norway, Sweden and the UK) and different argumentative genres. In particular, he looks at the interactional expression of attitude in pre-tertiary essays of five different kinds. Attention is paid to how different proportions of individual value-laden lexis and grammar *vs.* impersonal presentation of propositional content and logical argumentation may serve the communicative purposes of academic *vs.* professional writing, as exemplified by upper secondary school essays in different countries. McIntyre's (2020) study investigates the related issue of how undergraduate students' citation practices are being impacted by the growing shift towards on-screen dissemination contexts. The study questions the extent to which explicit training in the use of evidentials may help novices to build a solid authorial self, and the limits of the digital format for the development of critical competencies.

Also worth further investigation are writing practices in which the hybridization between different modes and media is more or less stabilised, and where various pragmatic functions and communicative expectations have fully been taken over by digitalization, such as for instance e-mails (Bogdanovic & Gak, 2020), university websites and MOOCs (Giordano & Marongiu, 2020). These are bidirectional screen genres mainly used for student-professor or student-institution communication, that is, for more structured dialogical exchange between the two parties involved in academic knowledge dissemination. Interestingly, as in the case of blogs, these digital academic genres function as a vantage point from which we may observe both sides of the phenomenon, thus tracing the different ways in which scientific or pedagogic contents may effectively be conveyed with the specific chain of communication (and ecosystem) that is represented by academic discourse communities.

Despite the ongoing and ever-increasing democratization and popularization of knowledge that are being boosted by digital technology, the changing conventions of asymmetric, peer-to-peer scientific communication are still a favourite area of research for metadiscourse scholarship. Mauranen (orthc.) for example, after extensively researching discourse reflexivity in spoken dialogues (e.g. Mauranen 2002, 2003, 2005), and ascertaining that it diverges considerably from metadiscourse in the written mode, decided to consider research blog discussions, as they provided her with a combined perspective on discourse reflexivity, one that is dialogic but also written. She found evidence that there is more open and direct evaluation in digital than spoken dialogues, especially when participants engage in debates and negotiate

disagreement: a phenomenon that may only be interpreted by taking into account the specific communicative affordances of online dialogicity. She then reveals the limitations of monologue-based models and calls for more adequate metadiscourse models to further the field of study. Finally, she firmly believes that the greater explicitness found in digital forms of communication, driven by many lingua franca situations, offers an ideal opportunity for exploring metadiscourse as a potential discourse universal. Ylva Biri (orthc.) corpus-based analysis examines instead the usage and functions of metadiscourse in English-speaking online communities. She recognises that different social networking sites (SNSs) have different technological features or affordances, which is why metadiscourse is here considered in different settings. A working metadiscourse framework is developed to illustrate how metadiscourse is used in twelve online communities, taken from three social media platforms –Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr– and four polarised political topics of interest are considered: alt-right, red pill, feminism, and the resist movement.

Sancho-Guinda (orthc.) examines the visual abstract and its graphical format. The author considers the role of visual and filmic metadiscourses as “narrative transformers” and regards ‘stylisation’ as a phenomenon interestingly capable of enriching but also hindering scientific meaning. To this end, Sancho-Guinda comments on samples from science blog archives and JCR journals and draws on a mixed methodological framework, comprising not only Hyland’s well-known metadiscourse model, but also incorporating stimuli from critical genre analysis, multimodal and visual analysis, social semiotics, narrative and positioning theories, and the conceptual theory of metaphor. Her eclectic contribution is particularly relevant, we believe, because it not only considers the regenerating and transduction processes that scientific information undergoes when it is transformed into a condensed visual narrative, but also attempts to tackle and categorise visual metadiscourse, an area of research still underrepresented (see for example Kumpf, 2000; Fehine & Pontes, 2012; DeGroot et al., 2016; D’Angelo, 2016, 2018) and which, in the times of increasing visualization and digitalization we are facing, has become a necessary avenue of research.

Another set of innovative studies have also emerged from the 2019 *MAG* conference, which solidly move away from a scriptocentric tradition, contributing to the theory of metadiscourse and to our understanding of the role metadiscourse and related ‘meta’ phenomena may play in less researched

digital forms of communication. For instance, Delibegović Džanić and Berberović (orthc.) analyse text-image advertisements with idiomatic expressions with the aim of, on the one hand, investigating how visual elements play a crucial role in understanding the cognitive and rhetorical functions of advertisements, and on the other hand, of establishing to what extent hidden cognitive mechanisms involved in the interpretation of advertising can be explained using conceptual blending theory. This leads to the idea that blending contributes to the creativity and effectiveness of pictorial advertisements. As with Sancho-Guinda's work, this is a most welcome contribution, as it seeks to devise a much-needed framework of visual metadiscursive elements that, especially in digital genres, represent significant meaning-making devices that cognitively and rhetorically complement the accompanying text.

It is not by chance that we selected Ädel's (orthc.) contribution to conclude this historical and critical overview of past and present metadiscourse research, for her study is particularly representative of the changes the field has undergone, and the dive into deep waters we are witnessing. In her work, we see her reflexive model (2006) revisited and applied to a sample vlog (video blog), functioning as a case study. Through in-depth qualitative analysis, the uses of metadiscourse in the vlog are illustrated and neighbouring categories are pinpointed, so that crucial delimitations and differences between metadiscourse and related phenomena emerge. What is particularly relevant here is that particular semiotic resources, such as paralinguistic and visual cues, are used to support the (verbal) metadiscourse investigated in vlogs. She coins the term "synchronous intertextuality" to refer to how the intertext (in this case, a simulator game) is operating while the vlogger is interacting with it, revealing a very different type of intertextuality than the one we usually see in academic discourse.

At the end of this journey, we cannot but join Ädel when she concludes that a 'new wave' of metadiscourse studies is envisioned for the future, where the research focus moves more firmly from the non-propositional and interpersonal to the reflexive. Such a move, we agree, would lead to a firmer grounding of metadiscourse in the theory of reflexivity, and to a deeper understanding of the sea change that, today more than ever, our culture is undergoing.

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NOTES

¹ Although this paper has been planned jointly, Stefania Consonni is responsible for Sections 1-2 and Larissa D'Angelo for Section 3.

² *Metadiscourse Across Genres (MAG) 2019: Metadiscourse in Digital Communication: What has changed?* An International Conference hosted by CERLIS, University of Bergamo, Italy (27-29 June 2019). URL: <https://dllcs.unibg.it/it/seminari-e-convegni/convegni-e-workshop/mag-2019>.