

Stefania Consonni / Larissa D'Angelo / Patrizia Anesa (eds.)

Digital Communication and Metadiscourse

Changing Perspectives in Academic Genres

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Stefania Consonni / Larissa D'Angelo / Patrizia Anesa (eds.)

Digital Communication and Metadiscourse
Changing Perspectives in Academic Genres

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Digital Communication and Metadiscourse: Changing Perspectives in Academic Genres

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STEFANIA CONSONNI / LARISSA D'ANGELO

Screening knowledge – Academic metadiscourse goes digital¹

1. Screens vs. mirrors

This collection of essays focuses on the interface of three key terms in today's linguistic, semiotic and cultural framework: academic language, metadiscourse and digital communication. Specifically, it investigates dynamics of knowledge production and dissemination in international academia, by looking at recently established pure screen genres, as well as at the increasing digitalization of traditional genres. Boosted by the growingly extensive use of ICT in educational and techno-scientific contexts, on the part of both researchers (Lillis/Curry 2010; Kuteeva 2016; Kuteeva/Mauranen 2018;) and students (Street 1995), today's academic writing practices showcase a number of rhetorical, lexico-grammatical, multimodal and pragmatic strategies that seem to call for a multifaceted methodological approach. The essays in this volume therefore broadly incorporate critical discourse analysis, corpus linguistics and literacies research, with a view to studying metadiscourse strategies in a variety of genres and corpora that range from hybridized analogue products (e.g. research papers and abstracts, MA dissertations, slides, etc., which are nowadays produced, both materially and cognitively, with the mediation of computers, databases, etc.) to intrinsically digital (i.e. synchronous and online) resources, such as – for instance – university websites, platforms, MOOCs, blogs, etc. (Jones/Chik/Hafner 2015; Pérez-Llantada 2016).

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

From a systemic-functional standpoint (Halliday 2002, 2004), as well as within the genealogical and materialist perspective founded by Michel Foucault (1966, 1972), academic discourse may be considered as an interrelated system of communicative practices and products, both written and spoken, which coagulate, instantiate and propel the mission pursued by modern universities: the reification and transmission of disciplinary research through structured hierarchies of knowledge. Not only does academic discourse allow core concepts and categories to be linguistically formulated and divulged through specialized publications – thus codifying reality in the very act of questioning and representing it. It indeed ideates and irradiates the truth matrix of a culture. From theoretical abstraction down to formulaic popularization, academic language, which “began as the semiotic underpinning for what was, in the worldwide context, a rather esoteric structure of knowledge”, has come to coincide with “the dominant mode for interpreting human existence” (Halliday/Martin 1993: 11). It has evolved into an epistemological and cultural paradigm.

Academic discourse guarantees legitimate, statutory shape to “the creation of knowledge itself”, while at the same time designing the whole stratified geometry of “roles and relationships which create academics and students” (Hyland/Hamp-Lyons 2002; Hyland 2009: 1). As a consequence, scientific authoritativeness, influence and power are asymmetrically distributed in a social hierarchy of interrelated and interdependent functions – the esoteric core proving as essential as peripheral regions to the functioning of the academic acculturation system (Hofstede 2001). Serving a cognitive as much as social function, academic discourse therefore provides the ideational and interpersonal scaffolding of the power relationships that constitute the modern order of knowledge (Foucault 1966). As a result, the issues of literacy, pedagogy and epistemology overlap and intertwine to such an extent that they form a communicative continuum, or better still, a compound that cannot be broken down, unless by critical dissection of the various functions simultaneously performed by discourse itself.

Crucially, at stake in the discourse-knowledge-power nexus – along with the rethinking of the self-determining Cartesian subject as the historical outcome of a subjectification process that moulds him/her into a disciplined, self-governing conscious agent (Foucault 1982) – is

the anti-mimetic nature of disciplinary discourse vis-à-vis empirical reality. This only seemingly challenges the post-Galilean foundations of experimental science, and John Locke's seminal trust in the naturalised (i.e., conventionalised) communicability of knowledge via the capacity of words to stand in for ideational contents "in proper and immediate signification", thanks to the "voluntary imposition" that is settled and corroborated by shared usage, "whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea" (1690: 405). For academic language performs a constant crystallisation of disciplinary knowledge by means of the shared rules and conventions represented by its communicative genres. Irrespective of their being historical (as research articles, stemming from Robert Boyle's seventeenth-century reports; Gotti 2003) or recent – as abstracts (Sala 2019), posters (D'Angelo 2016; Maci 2016) and infographics (Consonni 2019) –, academic genres do not purely and plainly function as vessels of an *a priori* reality that is supposedly unveiled and mirrored by science. The crystallised knowledge they disseminate at all levels of the cognitive and social hierarchy is all but unrippled by the common stock of lexical, grammatical, rhetorical and multimodal strategies constituting disciplinary discourse.

Paradoxically enough, 'crystallised' refers in this case to the merely imaginary transparency (i.e., referentiality) – which is in actual fact a blatant form of opacity – of academic writing. For not only is reality mediated by science's linguistic constructedness. Far from being mirrored by discourse, disciplinary knowledge is designed by a grid of cognitive categories that derive from academic genres, which redraws – and to some extent strains – our ordinary perception of the world in function of its own taxonomies, conventions and expectations. In radically anti-mimetic fashion, reality thus comes to be configured "by a glance, an examination, a language" (Foucault 1966: xxi). As mentioned above, literacy therefore emerges not simply as a standardized set of technical skills that is shared among experts and that novices need to learn (Scarcella 2003), but as an all-pervasive discursive technology of power, serving the construction of epistemologies and allowing the very possibility of knowing, as it forges the domain of intelligibility itself.

Needless to say, the adjective 'disciplinary' deploys here its semantic density, as it refers to both specialised understandings stemming from scientific research and the categorizing, controlling and self-governing (albeit non-coercive) function that academic discourse performs in regard to the reification and propagation of research into 'truth'. Discourse therefore works as a screen, not a mirror, of reality. It does not reflect it. Rather, it selects, frames, interprets and exposes it. It refracts reality, instead of conducting it. It produces no one-to-one duplication, but a variable scale projection – in the fully representative, geometric (if not somewhat cinematic) sense of the word – of experiential or empirical phenomena. In Foucault's words, "language is knowledge only in an unreflecting form" (1966: 95), for it makes truth possible in the very act of *screening* it.

The concept of academic discourse as a perspectival screen refracting reality – and, precisely because of this, cognitively configuring it – is precisely the intersection point between academic language and metadiscourse on the one hand, and between academic language and digital communication on the other. For the anti-mimetic nature of academic discourse may be said to significantly feed on non-propositional strategies of rhetorical persuasion (and on the social dynamics of competition and negotiation that go with it). Managing the time and space of one's text, or governing the expectations, hypotheses and reactions of a discourse community (Hyland 2009: 10) – for instance, maximising the impact of one's findings or neutralising possible objections, drawing in and motivating readers or listeners –, is in fact a core task of academic discourse, one that reveals the "cognitive style and epistemological beliefs" of academia (Hyland 2009: 13). Interactive and interactional negotiation resources (Hyland 2005) prove ideal dialogical tools for putting forward one's ideas. For this reason, the concept of metadiscourse as a system of (more or less foregrounded) non-propositional or intersubjective meanings has been a constant in the critical debate about this category. It has often been referred to as "text" or "discourse reflexivity" (Mauranen 1993; Bunton 1999; Ädel 2006; Mauranen 2010), in the sense of both writers' expressed awareness of textuality and authorship (Crismore 1983; Vande Kopple 1985) and hermeneutical concern about readership and meaning

reception and negotiation (Crismore 1989; Crismore/Markannen/Steffensen 1993).

It seems that much of the fascination with metadiscourse lies in the fact that this articulate constellation of seemingly accessory resources exceeds the ‘primary’ ideational mission of language, that is, the symbolic capturing of a reality standing outside of sign systems (Halliday 2004). And yet, the clear second-degree, anti-mimetic attitude of “language about language”, or “discourse about ongoing discourse” (Mauranen 2010: 14; 2021) is one that – exactly because it centripetally draws us towards the inside of semiosis itself – crucially contributes to the putting through of messages, as well as to the paradigmatic codification of reality into disciplinary knowledge. As a matter of fact, the interactive and/or interactional effects of metadiscoursal resources pivot on a concept of ‘reflexivity’ that, again, does not point to a mirroring (or duplicating) function of discourse in regard to reality, but to a more sophisticated process of refraction, perspectivization and projection – a *screening* process. That is to say, to an overtly angled, non-mimetic relationship towards reality. One that, by showcasing the constructedness of language, perception and knowledge – and before that, of human subjectivity and cognition, to recall Foucault’s perspective –, brings about an incredibly propagative and hegemonic complexification of discourse.

Metadiscourse is what allows us to produce representations that go “beyond the referential function of language” (Mauranen 2021), to cover semiosis itself – i.e. the whole semiotic spectrum, from its origin to its arrival point – as part of the communicative package. In Foucauldian fashion, metadiscourse thus works as an “act of power” (Mauranen 2021). It frames, contextualizes and validates the writer’s position inside the discourse, and it directs, restrains and legitimizes the reader’s understanding of it. As a consequence, it works by juxtaposing an epistemological grid with the ideational contents of texts, and by governing the conduct of all social actors that operate within the semiotic environment represented by the texts themselves (and within the hierarchy of disciplinary knowledge). By attending to itself, by casting a disciplining gaze upon itself, metadiscourse works as a self-restraint, self-regulation device – as a self-discipline device (Foucault 1982).

Unsurprisingly, a wide variety of metadiscoursal resources has often been investigated in academic writing across languages and disciplines (e.g. Bunton 1999; Hyland 2005; Ädel 2010). Indeed, as shown by Ädel's (2010: 75) "reflexive turn" model, metadiscourse focuses on any verbalization concerning "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". In terms of Jakobson's linguistic functions (1960), metadiscourse operates on a functional triangulation among expression (when awareness about the material source of discourse is conveyed), direction (when dynamics of hermeneutics or meaning reception and negotiation are implied in the discourse) and reflexivity (when 'discourse-internal discourse' is at stake, that is to say, the semiotic system in use represents the code itself; see Jakobson 1985). Clearly, this triangulation excludes referentiality, i.e. language's ideational capacity to stand for referents in the experiential world. Which appears as an interesting fact, when it comes to academic discourse and the 'truth' it crystallizes, especially if we bear in mind the epistemological mission of this communicative domain. And yet, as mentioned above, far from undermining the veridical status of disciplinary discourse, the cognitive affordances brought about by metadiscourse – an intersubjective, second-degree order of phenomena – carry a significant portion of the semantic load inherent to the discourse itself. They reveal the disciplinary self-surveillance of discourse's anti-mimetic, reflexive function.

The discourse-as-screen-metaphor, as well as the concept of reflexivity as discourse's self-governing and anti-referential design, also indicate a salient common denominator between academic discourse and digital practices. As mentioned above, new screen genres are increasingly being used in academic communication, such as blogs, wikis, social networks, etc. (Clark 2010; Lea 2013; Pennington 2013). Moreover, traditionally analogue products – e.g. abstracts, theses, peer reviews, editorials, etc. – are nowadays transitioning towards the digital format, as they are increasingly becoming dependent on the mediation of ICT. This clearly impacts their informative and rhetorical structure, along with their lexico-grammatical features and pragmatic purposes, in ways that extend beyond the materiality of production processes. As

observed by Jones/Chik/Hafner (2015: 3), on account of the increased multiliteracy competence it both requires and stimulates, which involves assemblages of “modes and materialities”, digital media has both opened up the possibility of new social practices (e.g. posting, tagging, ‘liking’ materials, reviewing products or services, etc.) and altered “the way people engage in old ones” (e.g. finding information, commenting on materials or sharing them with others). Which of course affects academic discourse, too. For digital communication represents a front assault to, and an evolutionary opportunity for, the “alien, specialized and privileged” nature of academic discourse (Hyland 2009: 6).

Although there is no room here for delving into the ways these changes are radically affecting writing practices, both new and pre-existent, two phenomena need to be mentioned, as they are deeply interconnected with the impact of digitalization upon metadiscourse. On the one hand, digital communication stems from (and contributes to) the deep verbal-to-visual resemiotization paradigm shift that is the overarching hallmark of today’s textual practices (Iedema 2001, 2003). This means that visibility is in charge of a remarkable amount of semiotic labour, even at the level of metadiscourse. Indeed, language in digital media tends to be reflexively attended to (and gazed at) in ways that are mainly intertextual and multimodal (Thurlow/Mroczek 2011). Think for instance of a recent scripto-visual genre, such as memes, where verbal meanings – typically comments or asides of metadiscoursal nature – are incorporated to (and played against) the referential load that is conventionally attached to visual materials. In these cases, metadiscourse appears to be medium- and mode-related. But this no less perpetrates the self-governing, self-surveillance function that has long been a major mission of discourse reflexive strategies. In the case of synchronous online communication, such as blogs or social networks, this aspect is even radicalized, for besides the actual dialogical actors (e.g. bloggers and commenters), the social floor includes the vast anonymous audience of platform users (Barton/McCulloch 2018). The progressive emergence of medium- and mode-related metadiscoursal strategies, we believe, will provide materials and opportunities for further research (D’Angelo 2016; De Groot et al. 2016).

On the side of verbal academic discourse, which is the focus of this volume, it should be noted that digital textuality, especially in the case of synchronous media, includes a monumental apparatus of paratext (Genette 1987) that, far from being peripheral (or parasitical) with respect to the ideational content of the communication, is indeed substantial to it. Intertextual and intersubjective paratext frames the 'main' informative text and governs its pertinent reading, along with the reception and elaboration of its shared meanings (Geraghty 2015). Think of online comments, for instance. Being "a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy" for dynamics of meaning negotiation and influence on/of the public (1987: 5), they simultaneously serve a hermeneutical and a disciplining function with respect to both the text and the discourse community negotiating its boundaries and functions. More often than not, such paratextual apparatus is instantiated by discourse reflexive resources: to stick to Hyland's taxonomy (2005), it is obvious how frame markers, evidentials, hedges and boosters, engagement markers, etc. may serve the cognitive as well as dialogical purposes of bloggers and commenters. Or, in Mauranen's terms (2021), we may think of how situation-management (i.e. orienting, forward-looking) and discourse-management (i.e. retrieving, backward-looking) strategies collaborate in generalizing or recontextualizing propositions, disciplining expectations, bringing formulations into focus, etc., thus co-constructing scientific knowledge along with power relationships within academia.

The changes this paradigm shift is bringing about in digital academic metadiscourse can be observed at different micro- and macro-levels, as the essays in this collection illustrate. To list a few major ones, there is an increasing use of nonstandard or spoken expressions, especially in (the many) contexts where English is used as a lingua franca (Barton/Lee 2013). Written academic practices are more and more structured like unfiltered conversation threads, "with readers being able to 'write back' to writers, and writers shaping their texts in anticipation of an almost immediate response from readers" (Jones/Chik/Hafner 2015: 7). As a consequence, interaction dynamics between writers and readers/commenters (and more implicitly with the floor of anonymous users) are becoming more straightforward and anything but gate-keeping. Private and public communication strategies

are combining and blending, while research- and opinion-based approaches can found side by side (Kuteeva/Mauranen 2018). Logical argumentation is interspersed with emotional persuasion. Popularization schemata are increasingly used (Calsamiglia 2003; Calsamiglia/Van Dijk 2004), whereby generalization is turned into the parcelling, recontextualizing, rescaling and reassembling of information so as to meet the expectations and competences of different audiences. Scientific objectivity is flanked by expressions of attitude. Techno-scientific description is punctuated by narrativity and storytelling. Key structural dimensions of argumentative discourse such as cohesion and coherence (Halliday/Hasan 1976) are being affected by intertextuality and intersubjectivity, multimodality and intersemioticity, and are overlapping and intersecting with each other in ever more intricate and subtle ways (Bou-Franch/Garcés-Conejos Blivitch 2019).

Undoubtedly, since its very inception digital communication has brought down the alethic illusion of human cognition as a mirror of reality, and of language as a transparent tool for communicating ideas, materializing the textuality that Formalism and Structuralism had theorized all along the twentieth century. As shown by Foucault's reading of Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas*, long before digitalization was even envisioned (1966), semiotic systems indeed work as screens where the mirroring of a mirror, or a representation of a representation, is projected. And screens – that is, actual device screens, the ones on which the digitalization of discourse is materially occurring – are playing a key role in the process of democratization of information that has been taking place on a global scale over the last decades. A cultural process that nevertheless is the flip side of a deep institutional crisis being faced by structured systems of thought, including academia, and by traditionally authoritative hierarchies of knowledge, whereby what we have previously referred to as the 'core' and 'periphery' of disciplinary knowledge seem to have lost their boundaries and their *raison d'être*. A cultural process, finally, which shows itself in conspicuous techno-social metamorphoses that, despite the libertarian outcries they sometimes tend to inspire, ultimately prove functional to the disciplinary, self-governing design of modern power. For the

reflexive gaze that language turns upon itself is multiplied into millions of smaller gazes – into millions of smaller screens.

And yet, in times of populism, competence dilution and conceptual approximation, a reflexive and self-disciplining re-articulation of scientific research and academic discourse seems to find a possibly renovated degree of significance. Whichever way we come across it – through the hybridization of traditionally analogue genres transitioning from page to screen, or through screen-ready, fully digital genres – *this* seems a good reason why academic communication should nowadays be investing so much in metadiscourse, as the chapters of this book bear witness to.

2. Page vs. screen, analogue vs. digital: Academic metadiscourse between hybridization and digitalization

This book has been organised following the genealogical and material distinction proposed in Section 1 above. The first part of the volume, entitled *Page to screen: Transitioning genres*, gathers contributions that investigate progressively hybridized academic genres that have migrated, or are in the process of migrating, from analogue to digital format. Interestingly, all considered genres have a clear pedagogical matrix, belonging as they do to the universe of students' writing practices: MA dissertations, internship reports, undergraduate research papers and upper secondary pupil essays. That is to say, they are typically produced by learners as a unidirectional and standardized product meant for assessment at school or at university. The second part of the volume, under the title *Screen-ready: Digital genres*, analyses writing practices in which the hybridization between different modes and media is stabilized, and where a number of pragmatic functions and communicative expectations have fully been taken over by digitalization: e-mails, university websites and MOOCs. These are bidirectional screen genres mainly used for student-professor or student-institution communication, i.e. for more structured dialogical

exchange between the two parties involved in academic knowledge dissemination.

In the opening chapter, JAMES JACOB THOMSON focuses on traditional novice writing practices across educational contexts (Norway, Sweden and the UK) and different argumentative genres. In particular, the study analyses 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 a corpus of upper secondary school essays in three different countries. While scantily used in academia, attitude is a key resource in certain types of journalism discourse (e.g. newspaper language) and in popularization discourse (e.g. popular scientific genres), which may stem from different degrees of visibility and different types of audiences, also (possibly) due to analogue *vs.* digital modes of circulation. As students are exposed to traditional argumentative tasks in different subjects pertaining either to strictly academic discourse (e.g. literature and linguistics) or more broadly to journalism discourse (e.g. commentary and opinion essays), patterns of commonality and difference are evidenced across different uses of this rather untheorized interactional resource.

The related issue of how undergraduate students' citation practices are being impacted by the growing shift towards on-screen dissemination contexts is the core of the next contribution, by ROBERT MACINTYRE. The growing need for English for Academic Purposes pedagogy, especially in EFL contexts, suggests academic discourse not as a rigid standardization of restraining measures, but as a more engaging set of tools for the articulation of one's ideas. But as the Internet rapidly replaces libraries as the main source of information, and the process of knowledge formation becomes more expedite and concise, the issues of how to make students aware of the credibility and reliability of the knowledge they use, as well as of the pitfalls of (possibly involuntary) plagiarism, come to the foreground. The study compares and contrasts two corpora of research papers written by Japanese sophomore students, only one of which received explicit instructions of how to use evidentials. The chapter questions the extent

to which this interactive resource may help novices build a solid authorial self, and the limits of the digital format with respect to the development of critical competences.

In the contribution that follows, EMNA FENDRI examines the ways in which young Tunisian academic writers use metadiscourse to structure their identity as researchers through different literacy practices, both in analogue (i.e. traditional on-page MA dissertations) and in digital contexts (i.e. online internship reports). Finding one's sense of authorship and authority – even more so in an English-as-a-third-language context – entails in the former case the building of a particular voice and stance that has to be rated by institutional assessors, while in the latter it means using strategies that may help novices deal with the radically different degree of visibility implied by online publication. Fendri's qualitative and quantitative analysis contrasts how interactional resources are used in both corpora of texts, investigating established *vs.* emerging techniques for intellectual self-perception and identity performance, as well as for building discourse ownership, scientific independence and (in the case of digital communication) even a sense of one's private self. Results show how differently on-page and on-screen personae can be structured, and the different role that writing can ascribe to the student him/herself and to his/her reader(s). While analogue genres seem to frame the figure of the author in the periphery of a knowledge system s/he still has to familiarize with, digital genres appear to boost his/her self-promotion and power to produce legitimate knowledge.

In direct dialogue with this rapidly changing landscape of literacy competences and cognitive practices, the second section of the book opens with a contribution co-authored by VESNA BOGDANOVIĆ and DRAGANA GAK. The focus of their analysis is the use of e-mails as a preferred means of communication, for both pedagogical and institutional purposes, between university students and academic staff. Combining written and oral discourse features, as well as a high degree of formality and a lesser amount of direct social contact, digital exchanges tend to be perceived differently by students and professors. On the one hand, concerns about adequacy, correctness and netiquette may emerge, while on the other, advantages – such as directness and less direct facework – seem to outbalance the possible difficulties that

students may encounter when learning how to interact with staff members. In this chapter, the use of an interactional resource such as engagement markers is measured against the high power distance index that is typical of the academic environment. A corpus of initial e-mails written (in Serbian and English) by undergraduate and graduate students from Serbia and Slovenia is analysed quantitatively and qualitatively, so as to investigate how lexico-grammatical expressions of engagement may contribute to students' construction of their persona in a positive and reliable way, and the different shades of power and trust that academic life may produce in different cultures.

The following contribution, co-authored by MICHELA GIORDANO and MARIA ANTONIETTA MARONGIU, focuses on yet another interrelated aspect of academic communication, that is, the use of metadiscourse in two online teaching methodology courses. The study looks at transcripts of spoken discourse from an online corpus of filmed lectures aimed at teachers from a well-known British MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses) platform. This open-access, purely digital genre, offering the only example of speaker-listener interactivity in this book, is analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Interactive and interactional markers are quantified and discussed in regard, on the one hand, to pedagogical needs such as managing the propositional content of lectures in a coherent and convincing way (e.g. transitions). On the other hand, they comply with a need to codify the different social relationships existing between speakers and instructors *vs.* speakers and the anonymous online audience (e.g. self-mentions), to signal openness to debate, communicate inclusivity, etc. While interactive markers appear to satisfy the parameter that classical rhetoric labels as *logos*, i.e. persuasion through logical argumentation, interactional resources may be said to respond to the principles of *ethos* (persuasion through personality, stance and credibility) and *pathos* (persuasion through empathy and emotion).

Communication flows in the opposite direction in the corpus of university admission homepages analysed by HMOUD S. ALOTAIBI, whose contribution focuses on how a number of leading US universities use different arrays of metadiscoursal strategies in order to inform and attract prospective students. Applying metadiscourse analysis to different semiotic systems – i.e. the scriptural, hypertextual and visual

modes – the study shows how different combinations of interactive and interactional resources are used in different areas of the webpages under investigation, therefore serving different rhetorical functions within the framework of digital promotional discourse. Results indicate that there are three different types of metadiscourse – i.e. textual, hypertextual and visual –, which appear to rely on different parameters and result in different kinds of impact on the public. While introductory statements (which present institutions' philosophy of recruitment mainly through the use of words) pivot on the persuasive functions of self-mentions and engagement markers, hypertextual sections (which are used to package practical information), privilege the use of interactive resources, such as endophorics and evidentials. Pictures finally represent an interesting case, as they appear to be multifunctional and polypragmatic, working as code glosses as well as attitude and self-mention markers, and therefore complexifying the debate on the theoretical and pragmatic parameters of metadiscourse.

As this volume will demonstrate, four decades after metadiscourse studies started to emerge, the field is still in a flux and new, thought-provoking studies continue to emerge, driving researchers towards uncharted territories. Reinforcing this continuously innovative inclination on the part of metadiscourse scholars is the development of new research methodologies, including visual research methods and combinations of qualitative and quantitative approaches with special focuses on discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, and genre analysis. In particular, we are starting to realize that as digital and social media have gradually entered our daily lives in the past two decades, our 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 and engage in academia not just through language, but through a range of digital resources. It has become so clear that the communicative immediacy of digital media, and the spectrum of genres (or hybridized forms) now available, dictate the way we engage in meaning-making practices in a multimodal environment, that we cannot but welcome further research in hybridized and digitalized academic genres.

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