

**Larissa D'Angelo / Stefania Consonni (eds.)**

# **New Explorations in Digital Metadiscourse**

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Larissa D'Angelo / Stefania Consonni  
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New Explorations in Digital Metadiscourse

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## Dissemination, interaction and negotiation: Exploring digital metadiscourse (*cont'd*)

### 0. Volume overview

Most of the contributions collected in the present volume can be considered a product of the international conference entitled 'MAG 2019 – Metadiscourse in Digital Communication: What has changed?', hosted by the Research Centre on Languages for Specific Purposes (CERLIS) of the University of Bergamo, in June 2019. The conference proved to be an inspiring opportunity for many scholars who had been working on the many facets of metadiscourse theory. So many were the contributions received after the conference, that two volumes have been published since then: a collection of essays devoted to *Digital Communication and Metadiscourse: Changing Perspectives in Academic Genres*, published as volume 9 in the CERLIS series (Consonni / D'Angelo / Anesa 2020), and an edited volume entitled *Metadiscourse in Digital Communication: New Research, Approaches and Methodologies* (D'Angelo / Mauranen / Maci 2021).

Which makes this volume the third (and final) book dedicated to new explorations in the relationships between metadiscourse and digital communication. Much like the previous ones, it is a collection of works that interprets metadiscourse in different and innovative ways. As noted by Mauranen and Ädel (2010; see also, among others, Crismore 1983; Vande Kopple 1985; Mauranen 1993; Crismore 1989; Hyland 2005; Ädel 2006; Mauranen 2010; Hyland 2009, 2017), metadiscourse has maintained a steady critical interest among scholars since the 1990s. Its core conceptualisation can be said to 'centre around discourse about discourse'. This is the *fil rouge* that connects every researcher involved in metadiscourse studies, because it is almost always included in definitions and interpretations of the very object of study. Despite its established status and enduring attraction, over the last forty years metadiscourse has been managed and reinterpreted in eclectic and interesting ways, so that still today new, thought-provoking studies continue to emerge, driving researchers towards uncharted territories (see D'Angelo / Consonni 2020). The contributions contained in this volume are an example of the diversity found in this evolving field of study.

This volume is organised in three main sections. Part 1 contains three chapters focusing on digital metadiscourse and the (vertical and/or horizontal) dissemination of scientific knowledge. These studies concentrate on the multiliteracy and multifunctional potential that is deployed by metadiscursive resources, both verbal and visual in nature – irrespective of their being applied in such diverse genres as posters,

infographics and visual abstract – in specialised contexts, whereby the sharing of key and sensitive expert-to-expert (and expert-to-laymen) contents seems to draw much of its rhetorical efficacy from non-propositional aspects of the communication.

A second section follows, with three contributions concerned with the relationships between the surface features of digital metadiscourse and their pragmatic function in the patterning of social interaction. These studies investigate the various ways in which metadiscursive strategies can impact on (and actually shape) different models of interaction between and among people in the digital environment. Be it with respect to different genres such as promotional social network posts, informative ‘hard’-science blogs or instructional Google search results, and in regard of stance or frame markers – as well as of other typical interactive and interactional resources –, these studies provide insights into an even more radical social function of metadiscourse, one that decisively impinges upon the ways in which issues like global marketing policies, sexual and gender politics and the conceptualization of death are dealt with by people in daily interaction.

The three final chapters revolve around digital metadiscourse and the cultural negotiation of people’s experience in a variety of practical domains. In each of the contributions, we can see how metadiscourse devices interlock and interact with more broadly cultural issues to an even greater extent. Be it in matters of analysing labour policies (and power relationships) within new markets, such as the ride-hailing business; of narrating and sharing

experiences of cultural shock and trauma, such as migration; or of teaching young scientists how to boost their results so that they reach out to the whole world within a (post-COVID) global effort to reinforce medical competence and communication skills, these contributions once again prove metadiscourse as a key factor to our understanding of the multiple ways in which the negotiation of complex meanings takes place in the human environment. Especially – as MAG 2019 has collectively and fruitfully illustrated, and as these new explorations will further show – in digital communication.

The chapters will be hereby presented, divided by section.

## 1. Digital metadiscourse and the dissemination of scientific knowledge

The first part of the volume opens with Michela GIORDANO and Maria Antonietta MARONGIU's contribution. For their study they have used a multimodal perspective to analyse an *ad-hoc* corpus of 30 public information posters selected from English-speaking institutions and health care associations, published on the Internet during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and 2021. At one level, this study explores the multimodal character of inspirational ads, educational posters and fact sheets, by identifying their verbal-visual interplay and how

the two parts might be interacting with one another. From this perspective, intertextuality is also considered at different levels within these genres. On another level, metadiscursive features are examined through the lens of rhetoric, in order to identify the linguistic devices that guide and orient the audience in the interpretation of the message. In their analysis, we see how the multimodal discourse that merges visual and verbal elements contributes to the logical, credible and affective appeals which make posters and advertisements both persuasive and influential, as well as instructive and educational acts of communication.

The following chapter, by Stefania CONSONNI, analyses a taxonomy of linguistic and graphical strategies used for the encoding of epistemicity in scientific discourse, in particular regard to verbal-and-visual co-semiotization and within a corpus of 40 traditional research articles and matching digital synopses, published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2017-18. Words and visuals deploy different protocols concurring in the discursive validation of evidence-based knowledge. While the scriptural mode constructs reality using written, abstract, discontinuous and temporal resources, visual language, coaxing data into patterns, frames and visualizes phenomena and processes using signs that are sensorial, contiguous and spatial. This may facilitate the quantification and analysis of scientific data, along with pattern recognition and comparison, and further cognitive functions. Within the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar, and drawing from social semiotics and medical linguistics, this paper looks at cross-semiotic epistemic metadiscourse, with a view to

discussing the main boosting and hedging strategies used for modalizing meanings in analogue *vs.* digital communication.

Carmen SANCHO GUINDA concludes this part of the volume by exploring the recent changes imposed on the rhetoric of the graphical abstract by Elsevier, a pioneer publisher to demand the genre in its high-ranking scientific journals' guidelines to authors. After reviewing the chief challenges posed by the graphical abstract in science dissemination, particularly that of stylisation, and having examined the rhetorical contribution of Elsevier's new exemplars, she pays special attention to the possible repercussions on metadiscursive practices and ultimately on the democratisation of scientific content. Her conclusion is that Elsevier's new guidelines may brand editorial identity, but also leave some crevices for stylisation (which may jeopardise correct interpretation), and incur in visual redundancy in predominantly verbal summaries, while simultaneously stifling authorial creativity.

## 2. Digital metadiscourse and the patterning of social interaction

The second part of the volume opens with a chapter by Elena MANCA, who investigates how the use of social media as a promotional tool in the wine industry has attracted the interest of scholars particularly in the

marketing field. Very little attention has however been paid so far to the way interactive and interactional devices have been used in the promotion of wines and wine events. To fill this gap, she collected eight months of Facebook posts by nine wine companies based in Australia and in California (US). The posts were analysed in their metadiscursive resources with the help of Corpus Linguistics methods, in order to identify and discuss the many linguistic features of Facebook promotion as well as the influence of cultural factors on the linguistic strategies that are employed.

Girolamo TESSUTO's contribution sets out to describe and interpret how evaluative stance-making linguistic features and gender identities go side by side in disciplinary blogs dedicated to 'hard' science research-related content and dissemination, and approached from the perspective of information, text, and genre. The author considers, on the one hand, how evaluative stance features used by male and female writers compare in the open format of academic science blogging and disciplinary practices; on the other hand, he explores how evaluative stance-making meanings and resources allow male and female bloggers to articulate particular aspects of their academic and disciplinary identities and roles. The empirical data source for this study came from a randomized corpus of social media texts from 100 blog posts on medicine and biology, 'hard' disciplines sanctioned by the UK-based BioMed Central (BMC) publishing platform, and collected over a five-year period (2015-2020). These findings not only reveal that the patterns of text meanings, roles and identities are grounded

in the discursual choices of argumentative stance features available for social goals of the genre, but they also emphasize that gender impinges on disciplinary discourse and accounts for how research issues can be discussed in agreed ways.

Michele SALA's chapter ends the second section of the volume by investigating the function performed by hyperlink titles in Google result pages as metadiscursive frames markers. By functioning as pre-sequences with respect to the associated texts, they perform an important cognitive function for preparing and introducing sensitive topics – e.g. end-of-life practices – and the relevant discussion carried out in online contents. The main assumption of this study is that such pre-sequences may metadiscursively function as framing devices. By positing data (i.e. the topic) and anticipating claims they can be considered as argumentative resources guiding readers in processing the associated anchor. The aim of the author is to see how this potential function, inherent in hyperlink titles, is used to rhetorically stimulate meaning negotiation when assessing culturally relevant and possibly ideology-laden contents.

### 3. Digital metadiscourse and the cultural negotiation of experience

The contribution by William BROMWICH opens the third and last section of the collection by exploring how the

advent of the so-called sharing, gig or platform economy, in particular the spread of ride-hailing firms such as Uber and Lyft, has given rise to new forms of digital communication. Bromwich explains how the use of signup bonuses, ratings, promotions, competitions and non-monetary rewards is intended to provide incentives for drivers to work longer and longer hours while companies progressively cut pay rates, with the online discourse intended to manage relations with the drivers primarily for the benefit of the digital platforms. The result is what has been characterized as the “gamification” of ride-hailing, with the terminology of hiring, employment contracts and wages being displaced by the discourse of video game techniques, graphics and non-cash rewards. This study examines the ride-hailing discourse in terms of the use of metadiscourse devices such as hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers and self-mention, casting light on their pragmatic functions and on the ongoing process of gamification in the digital economy.

Cinzia SPINZI’s study investigates English and Italian digital campaigns on migration, developed and run by international organizations, in order to debunk false myths and stigmatization of migrants and refugees as either victims or threats to society. Spinzi’s contribution looks at micro-level features of the rhetoric of the text, in order to explore how voice is given to otherness and how migrants engage the public for inclusion and integration purposes. Despite the two small datasets being translated texts, the analysis uncovers some patterns of variation across the two languages, with English texts deploying

elements of cautiousness while the Italian ones appearing more assertive.

A chapter by Larissa D'ANGELO concludes the third and last part of the volume by presenting an exploratory analysis involving 1<sup>st</sup>-year medical students enrolled in the International School of Medicine and Surgery of the University of Milan Bicocca. These students were exposed to current guidelines in academic poster production within the medical field and were asked to produce a poster following a short field research of their choice. With their data at hand, they each designed a poster whose readability and salience was 'tested' using a mobile eye-tracking lab. By observing the scan paths and heat maps obtained thanks to the eye tracker, and how these involved specific visual and textual metadiscourse elements, each student obtained important information regarding the readability and the careful positioning of salient elements and redesigned their posters accordingly. In this chapter, the theoretical assumptions regarding multimodality and visual metadiscourse that led to the exploratory study are discussed, followed by two examples of poster analyses, drawn from the activity carried out in class. The chapter then provides some educational insights and a brief discussion on poster formats.

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