



Personal Metadiscourse: A Comparative Study of Pakistani English with the British and American Varieties

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ABSTRACT

Personal metadiscourse makes direct reference to the writer or reader of current text by means of pronouns and nouns. The pronominal forms act as visibility markers in the text and/or an attempt to evoke reader's involvement in textual interaction. This research aims to paint a comprehensive picture of the patterns of personal metadiscourse used in written texts by Pakistani learners and native speakers of English. The data used for this research consists of argumentative essays written by Pakistani advanced learners of English and compared with the essays written by British and American university students. The data has been taken from the International Corpus of Learner English. The data was analyzed to get the frequency of personal metadiscourse across the corpora. The concordance lines of personal pronouns were also studied to analyze the functions of personal metadiscourse in Pakistani corpus. The results of the study reveal considerable difference across these corpora. Pakistani learners use more than twice as much personal metadiscourse as the American university students, in turn the American university students' use twice as much personal metadiscourse as British university students. The analysis of this research shows that British students' texts are fact-oriented, Pakistani learner's texts are more expressive and explicit. On the other hand, the AmE learners are more concerned with their imagined reader.

1. Introduction

The concept of metadiscourse was first introduced by Zellig S. Harris in 1959. He used the word metadiscourse to describe text elements which comment about the main information of text but themselves provide no essential information. In the mid of 1980s, the term metadiscourse was adopted in discourse studies by some scholars. William (as cited in Hui and Na, 2008) was among those who used the word metadiscourse quite early on. He defines metadiscourse "as a stylistic variable" (p. 226) and claimed that it was an important level of structure in the description of writers' style.

Review of Literature

According to Hui and Na (2008), metadiscourse is abstract in nature, talking about metadiscourse involves a discussion of discourse features, they are basically linguistic markers which are apparently not necessary related to the topic but show the extent of writer awareness of the needs of audience in order to communicate. So, the metadiscourse is recognized as “an important means of facilitating communication, supporting a writer’s position and building a relationship with the audience” (Hui and Na, P.2).

Different scholars have interpreted discourse and metadiscourse in various ways. Discourse refers to the “pragmatic use of language (including nonverbal signs such as paralanguage and gestures in discourse) in extended texts or episodes of communication, (whereas) Metadiscourse refers to the pragmatic use of language to comment reflexively on discourse itself”. (Craig, 2005, p.1)

Some Scholars believe that discourse and metadiscourse are mutually interchangeable terms. Iranian scholars Abdi, Rizi & Tavakoli (2009) believe that discourse and metadiscourse are interlinked. In their research they have followed a model that combines the concept of cooperative principle and metadiscourse marking in an attempt to map discourse and metadiscourse under same infrastructure. They have successfully proved that these terms are directly related and their research findings support the conclusion that there could be a unified base between both discursive and metadiscursive markers. Taylor (2000) also believed that metalanguage and metadiscursive properties of language, that is called second order language (metadiscourse), are not supplemental and inessential, but without them first-order language (discourse) could not exist.

However Chef and Steffnson (as cited in Abdi, Rizi & Tavakoli, 2009) negate this concept. They distinguish between the concepts of discourse and metadiscourse by categorizing them into two levels: “explicit goal of producing written text and implicit goal of reaching an audience” (p. 144). On the first level, discourse expands propositional content about a topic, on the other level metadiscourse comments on the text and directly comments to the imagined reader. Crismore (1983) also defines metadiscourse as a level of discourse which marks the author’s intrusion into the ongoing discourse and is used to direct rather than inform the reader.

Metadiscourse is an interesting field of inquiry which plays an important role in organizing and producing persuasive writings, based on norms and expectations of people involved. It incorporates the idea that writing and speaking involve not only the communication of ideas, but are also considered as social acts. They induce the learners, readers, speakers and listeners to interact with each other to affect the ways in which ideas are presented and understood. (Rasekh, 2010)

Adel (2006) describes metadiscourse in terms of ‘personal’ or ‘impersonal’ types. Metadiscursive expressions may include explicit linguistic references to the current writer and/or their imagined reader. In personal metadiscourse, the main focus is how learners and readers relate to the world of discourse (or text), and how they relate to each other within that world. Impersonal metadiscourse, on the other hand, does not make explicit reference to the discourse participants. It avoids explicit self-presentation in a text by different ways. Personal metadiscourse makes direct reference to the writer and/or reader of the current text by means of pronouns (primarily I, we, you) or nouns (such as “writer” and “reader”). It is important to stress that in personal metadiscourse, the current discourse participants are explicitly referred to as qua discourse participants. The aim of Adel’s (2006) study was to find out the patterns of personal metadiscourse in written texts by Swedish learners and native speakers of English. The results of this study reveal great differences across the corpora. The main pattern was that “the Swedish learners use more than twice as much personal metadiscourse as the American university students. The American university students when in turn, use twice

as much personal metadiscourse as the British university students” (p. 93). Compared to the British university students, the Swedish learners use five times as many expressions of personal metadiscourse as American university students. (Ädel, 2006)

In the same way, Hyland (2002) worked on the first personal pronouns, but his research aims to detect authorial identity in academic writings. He explored the concept of identity in L2 writings by investigating the use of personal pronouns in 64 Hong Kong undergraduates’ theses, comparing with large corpus of research articles, and interviews of students and their supervisors. The study depicts considerable use of an authorial reference by students and clear preferences to avoid these forms in the contexts which involve making arguments or claims. He concluded that the personal identity implied in the use of ‘I’ is problematic for L2 learners. His work is directly related to the present study as he examined the use of personal pronouns and the present study is also going to compare the argumentative essays of Pakistani advanced learners with the essays written by the British and American university students.

Toumi (2009) reviewed the early models of metadiscourse presented by different researchers and highlighted the major shortcomings in those studies. He introduced a model of reflexive metadiscourse based on the works of Mauranen (1992) and Adel (2006). His study aims to identify similarities and differences in the use of reflexive metadiscourse between the two cultural groups, the two types of sciences and across the research articles sections.

This research aims to find out the functions of personal metadiscourse and compare the data of Pakistani English with that of American and British English. We have included two taxonomies of the functions of metadiscourse given by Vassileva (1998) and Kou (1998) for the analysis of essays. Vassileva’s (1998) study is concerned with exploring the functions of personal pronoun ‘I’. She claims that ‘I’ performs ten functions whereas Kou (1998) found twelve functions for first person plural ‘we’. Vassileva’s study is based on research articles in linguistics in English, German, French, Russian and Bulgarian, whereas Kuo’s study is based on English-language scientific journal articles in Computer Science, Electronic Engineering and Physics. Kou’s main concern is epistemology and transmission of knowledge in discourse but Vassileva is more concerned with textual structure.

Our study is based on the findings of Vassileva (1998) and Kou (1998). Adel’s (2006) study is also concerned with the implementation of Vassileva and Kou’s model. So her study, along with the two previously mentioned researches, serves for us as a basis to ground our research. The objective of this research is to find out the extent of Pakistani learners’ awareness of personal metadiscourse functions and how they structure their text. We also aim to find out how Pakistani learners involve their readers and themselves in their text and how they evaluate their own writings.

Methodology

Three different portions of ICLE i.e. Pakistan, America and British, have been used in this study. One feature (personal pronoun) of personal metadiscourse is selected for study. Three units, I-unit, We-unit and You-unit, have been identified in the text. Different contexts of these units are analyzed and further arranged into different categories according to their functions. This categorization is based on the taxonomies of Vassileva (1998) and Kou (1998).

Adel (2006) used the same method to study and compare the use of metadiscourse in the essays of British,

American and Swedish post graduate students. The present study compares its findings with those of Adel's. For that purpose, I have compared the discourse functions found in the British and American learners' essays, as discussed by Adel, with the functions found in Pakistani learners' essays.

Data collection

The essays chosen for our study are available in electronic format. The size of all the three corpora is given in Table 3.

TABLE 1: Sizes of the Corpora

Corpus	Variety	No. of words	No. of essays
Pakistani learner	L2 English (L1 Punjabi)	202,261	304
<i>AmE</i>	American English	150,000	175
<i>BrE</i>	British English	95,500	118

The Pakistani learner's material consists of approximately 304 essays comprising of 202.261 words. The essays are full length with an average size of about 650 words per essay. The writers are all advanced learners of English. The native-speaker corpus consists of around 247,000 words altogether and comprises of 290 essays written by American and British university students.

Instrumentation

We have analyzed the data by using AntConc 3.2.1 software to find frequencies of the use of personal metadiscourse. We have also used this programme to investigate the functions of metadiscourse in Pakistani corpus by studying concordance lines of the data.

Results

The findings of our research are as follows.

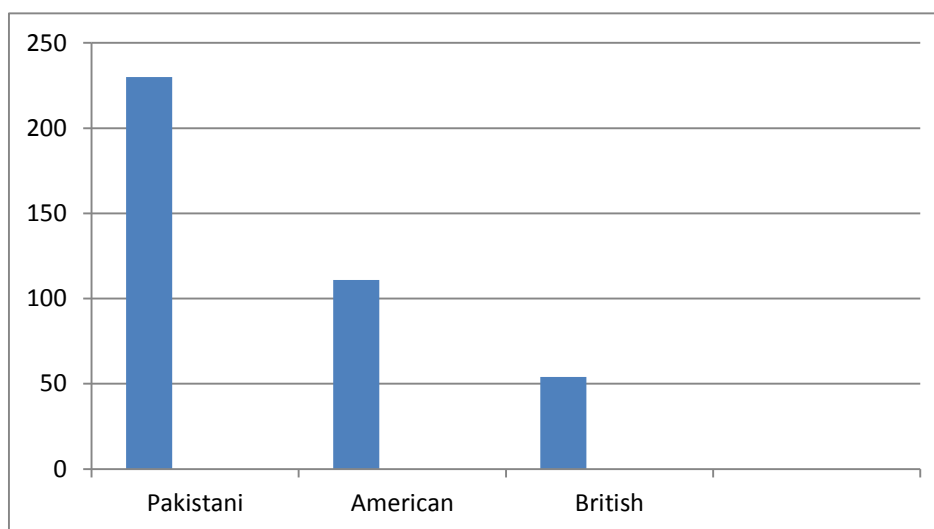
TABEL 2: Total frequency of personal metadiscourse

Variety	Corpus size in words	Raw frequency	Frequency per 100,000 words
P.E	202,261	480	230
AmE	149,767	167	111
BrE	95,5085	52	54

This frequency table shows that Pakistani learners use twice as much personal metadiscourse as the American learners; in turn the American learners use twice as much personal metadiscourse as the British learners do.

Compared to British learners, the Pakistani learners use four times as many expressions of personal metadiscourse. The results are shown graphically in Figure 1. The three bars in the figure show considerable difference in the use of personal metadiscourse across American, British and Pakistani corpora.

Figure 1: The frequency of metadiscourse across the corpora



TABEL3: Frequency of 'I', 'we' and you in metadiscursive units

	I		We		You	
	Total Frequency	f/100,000	Total Frequency	f/100,000	Total Frequency	f/100,000
P.E	121	60	211	104	67	33
Am E	72	48	38	25	57	38
BrE	20	21	29	30	03	03

Out of three pronominal forms, first person 'I' displays the greatest difference across the corpora with highest frequency (f.60). Frequency of Pakistani learners is the highest as compared to AmE and BrE learners in case of "I" unit.

Personal metadiscourse involving 'we' presents quite different picture. Proportionally, differences are much larger than I-unit. The frequency of 'we' unit as shown in table (f.104) presents slight difference between AmE and BrE. But PE marks a greater difference in the use of we-unit.

According to the above mentioned frequency ranking, Pakistani learners use ‘you’ unit more frequently than the British and American learners. You- unit is used more frequently in AmE but rarely in BrE data.

Table 4: Frequency of subject, object and possessive forms of the three personal persons studied in metadiscursive expressions

Personal Pronoun	P.E		AmE		BrE	
	Total Frequency	f/100,000	Total Frequency	f/100,000	Total Frequency	f/100,000
I	121(310)	60	72(649)	48	20(83)	21
Me	(70)	1	7(77)	5	1(6)	1
My	(191)	19	10(209)	7	0(11)	0
We	211(1416)	104	38(426)	25	29(262)	30
Us	(361)	14	10(90)	7	3(55)	3
Our	(1073)	3	1(325)	1	1(114)	1
You	67(267)	33	57(317)	38	3(73)	3
You (obj.)	(114)	1	11(57)	7	0(5)	0
Your	(109)	7	4(82)	3	0(21)	0

When we measured the frequencies of personal metadiscourse, the objective and possessive forms of the pronouns of writer and reader visibility were also taken into account. But the aim of this study is limited only to subjective form of personal metadiscourse, because subjective forms of personal pronouns are more in numbers in our corpora and they play very important role in structuring the text.

Frequency of ‘our’ is very limited across the three corpora. Frequency of you is ‘zero’ in British corpus. British writers have avoided the use of second person pronoun ‘you’ (possessive and objective forms) whereas the American and Pakistani learners show similar frequency of non-subject forms of this unit.

So, the frequency table confirms that Pakistani learners are at the top with the highest frequency of subject form usage; American learners come midway while British learners make least use of subject forms.

Discussion

This research identifies the units which perform metadiscourse functions as well as the units which do not perform metadiscursive functions. As mentioned earlier, Pakistani learners have overused personal metadiscourse. In the British sub-corpus, explicit writer visibility is very rare with low frequency (f. 21). It

shows that British writers avoid giving explicit expressions. These observations are strengthened by the results shown in table 5.

Table 5: Discourse functions of ‘I’ in PE

Aims/procedure/data Analysis	Self-reference	Personal experience	Personal view Point	Focusing	Conclusion
28	18	14	151	6	9

In Pakistani learners’ corpus, expression of personal views by using terms such as ‘I think, believe, feel, hope, and fear’ etc. is frequent. Only 18 occurrences of self-reference were found in the Pakistani component of corpus. 28 occurrences have been used to describe personal aims, procedures and analysis. Vassileva (1998, 170) introduced the term ‘focusing’ in which” she includes cases of employing the ‘I’ perspective in order to narrow down goals, purposes and expectations concerning the outcomes”. She claims that “the aim of focusing is to concentrate the readers’ attention on the specifics of what is to follow” (p. 170). In Pakistani learners’ corpus, we found a few instances where learner had used personal metadiscourse to conclude the topic.

Table 6: Discourse functions of ‘we’ in PE

Explanation	Proposing theory/ approach etc.	Stating a goal and purpose	Showing results and finding	Justifying a proposition	Giving a reason or indicating necessity	Assuming shared knowledge	Expressing wish or expectation	Showing commitment	Comparing viewpoints
17	7	6	65	22	9	11	49	11	14

Personal metadiscourse involving ‘we’ presents a different situation. In Pakistani corpus ‘we’ units are greatly used in the context of showing results and findings, contexts like ‘we found that, we are showing results’ etc. The inclusive ‘we’ is used by the learners to express their desires and wishes. First person pronoun ‘we’ is used to refer to the writer(s) and reader(s) who directly participate in the text.

Similarly, in AmE corpus inclusive authorial ‘we’ is used. The use of ‘we’ includes both the writer and the reader, and emphasizes cooperation. The writer is showing willingness to guide the reader through discourse. This willingness creates a bond between them. In British corpus, the single authors used the plural form for their own discourse actions. Quirk et al. (1985) explain that the motivation for using such type of ‘we’ may be interpreted as a desire to avoid ‘I’ which may be felt to be somewhat egoistical.

Appealing to the imagined reader through the use of we-units seems to be more important to the Pakistani learner than to the British and American university students.

Table 7: Discourse functions of ‘you’ in PE

Referring to intended reader(directive)	Referring to current writer(expressive)	Referring to member of a category defined in the context	Generic you
14	12	14	26

The directive ‘you’ refers to the imagined reader exclusively, we found 14 occurrences in the learner corpus where directive ‘you’ was used explicitly. There are twelve instances where writers addressed themselves. The writers actually referred to themselves as experiencing the real world. All these instances refer to the members of group that was defined in the context. In case of generic ‘you’ it was unclear whether the referents were writer, the reader only, the reader and the writer or the reader, writer and other people.

There are a number of potential referents for ‘you’, and it is often difficult to distinguish between indefinite and definite reference (Adel, 2006). Very few occurrences of ‘you’ in the British and American learners’ corpus exclusively refer to the imagined reader, but many examples of generic and indefinite ‘you’ are used which could have been replaced with ‘we, us, our’ and ‘one’. Pakistani learners use ‘you’ unit more than the British and American learners. The limited use of ‘you’ discourse shows that British learners are fact oriented.

When data was analyzed to find out the functions of personal metadiscourse, the Pakistani learners displayed a high degree of metalinguistic awareness. Pakistani learners comment explicitly on their text. Their focus on personal view point shows that Pakistani learners frequently refer to themselves as writers. It has been expressed clearly in learners’ essays. In British argumentative essays, learners are highly invisible in their discourse, which suggest that their writing norms favor a strictly impersonal style with few or no instance of mock interaction between the writer and the reader. When American writers use personal metadiscourse, their main concern is the relationship between the writer and the reader rather than the structure of text or the use of language. There is a clear difference between Pakistani learners’ corpus and two native speaker corpora in their use of personal metadiscourse. The British students’ texts are fact oriented whereas Pakistani learner’s texts are more expressive and explicit. On the other hand, American students are more concerned with their imagined reader i.e. the audience.

Conclusion

On the basis of these findings, we conclude that three groups of learners differ both quantitatively and qualitatively in their use of personal metadiscourse. The main findings of our study are that the Pakistani learners’ essays contain more personal metadiscourse than the native-speaker groups. Metadiscourse involving ‘you’ is rare in the BrE essays, but quite frequent in the Pakistani learners and AmE essays. Metadiscourse involving ‘we’, on the other hand, shows different results. The Pakistani learners often take the imagined reader into greater account. The British texts show the opposite tendency, being largely impersonal and monologist. There are hardly any instances of direct reader address. The AmE learners tend to make their texts dialogic and show concern for reader, but this feature is less present in American learners’ writings than Pakistani learners’ texts. Although the writer presence is more visible in American corpus than in the British data, they still do not come close to the extreme degree to which the learner makes explicit appearances in

Pakistani texts.

Functions of personal metadiscourse show that Pakistani learners use more personal expressions and they refer to themselves as writers and comment on their own text explicitly whereas British learners are highly invisible in their direct expressions. On the other hand, American writers neither explicitly comment on their own text nor are they totally invisible in the use of direct expression.

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