Abstract

The aim of the present research is to make a contribution to (i) the theory of metadiscourse, (ii) the application of computer-assisted methods to studies of metadiscourse, and (iii) L2 English composition. The use of metadiscourse in argumentative texts is analysed, based on corpora of argumentative essays written by three groups of university students: advanced learners of English whose L1 is Swedish, native speakers of American English, and native speakers of British English.

'Metadiscourse' refers to the writer's explicit commentary on her own ongoing text. Features of metadiscourse include 'explicitness', 'world of discourse', 'current discourse', 'writer *qua* writer' and 'reader *qua* reader'. An alternative model of metadiscourse is presented, based on three of Roman Jakobson's (Jakobson 1998) functions of language: the *metalinguistic, expressive,* and *directive* functions.

Various ways to use computer-assisted methods in analysing metadiscourse are demonstrated. For a study of 'personal metadiscourse', personal pronouns are taken as a starting point; *I, you,* and *we* are potentially metadiscoursal in that they may function as visibility markers of the writer and/or the imagined reader. For a study of 'impersonal metadiscourse', a selection of 70 potentially metadiscoursal words were analysed (e.g. *essay, word, conclu*, question* and *answer*).

The discourse functions performed by metadiscoursal expressions are classified and compared across corpora. A study of the textual distribution of metadiscourse supports the hypothesis that first and last sections are the most frequent locations.

The results show considerable overuse of metadiscourse by the learners. They reach very high frequencies of personal metadiscourse: double those of the American material, which, in turn, are greater than those of the British material. Along a scale of writer/reader-orientation, the learner writers are found at one extreme, the American writers in the middle, and the British writers at the other extreme. The learners also use considerably more (40%) impersonal metadiscourse than the native speaker norm.

Several factors are identified as potentially accounting for the differences found across the corpora. These include genre comparability, register awareness, cultural conventions and learner strategies.