



## Metadiscourse

**Richard Buttny**

*Professor of Communication & Rhetorical Studies, Syracuse University*

### What is it?

Metadiscourse is an analytic term indicating the ability of discourse to refer itself, the self-reflexive nature of language use. Most words refer to things in the world (tables and chairs) or non-material objects (numbers or unicorns). But at times speakers reference their own, or another's, words. It is possible to single out something that was said in order to comment on it, to praise, criticize, or joke about it. One kind of metadiscourse is reported speech, where a speaker either directly quotes what was said using presumably the exact words, or indirectly quotes, paraphrasing the idea but not the words. Given that most interactions are conducted in and through language, it should not be surprising that participants want to talk about what was or will or could/should be done with words.

### Who uses the concept?

Metadiscourse has been studied by communication scholars, discourse analysts, sociolinguists, anthropologists, and psychologists, among others. It has been labelled in different ways as "meta-talk," "metapragmatics," "metalanguage," "meta-linguistics," or simply "going meta." These different approaches have in common an interest in the interactional work or consequences of noticing what has been said.

### Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Surprisingly, metadiscourse has been little used in studying intercultural dialogue to date, but Mikhail Bakhtin offers a promising direction. In his view, each utterance stands in dialogic relation to prior utterances, positions, or contexts. Most likely, any one speaker is not the first to address a particular

issue; it already has a history, it has been formulated, discussed, and evaluated by others in various ways. Each utterance occurs within a stream of ongoing communication, and so needs to be seen as a response or "rejoinder" to prior viewpoints. This may be in response to an interlocutor or peer group, to something from the media, or to an historical event. A response is always an evaluation of the prior as shown in the expressive aspects of our utterances. Speakers position themselves in relation to others' views as agreeing, disagreeing, adding to, being ironic, and so forth.

### What works remains?

Following up on Bakhtin's insights is an obvious starting point. Metadiscourse has particular value for the study of language teaching and learning, and intercultural training programs. In addition, studying the metadiscourse of different cultural groups may allow us to uncover the assumptions being made by participants engaging in intercultural dialogue.

### Resources

- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination*. Trans. C. Emerson & M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Buttny, R. (2010). Citizen participation, metadiscourse and accountability: A public hearing on a zoning change for Wal-Mart. *Journal of Communication*, 60, 636-659.
- Craig, R.T. (2008). Metadiscourse. In W. Donsbach (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of communication*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Jaworski, A., Coupland, N., & Galasinski, D. (Eds.). (2004). *Metalanguage: Social and ideological perspectives*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.