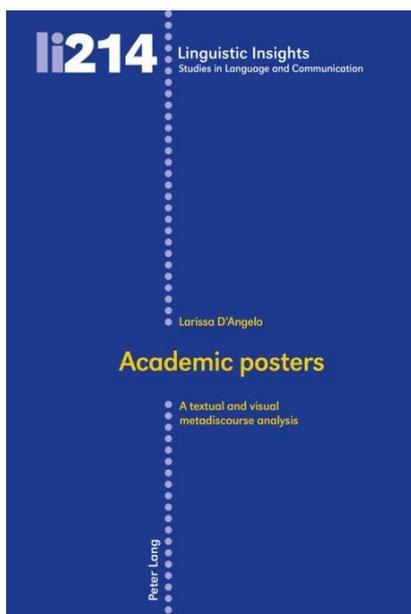


BOOK REVIEW



METADISCOURSE IN POSTERS IS BOTH TEXTUAL AND VISUAL

Larissa D'Angelo. ACADEMIC POSTERS. A TEXTUAL AND VISUAL METADISCOURSE ANALYSIS (2016), Bern: Peter Lang. 367 pp., ISBN 978-3-0343-2083-2 (PBK).

122

Interest in genre analysis is far from declining. Just as information technology is moulding communication and how people communicate in the twenty-first century, scientific communities, academic members and other knowledge-dissemination means are also changing. Because academic and professional genres are not an exception, the impact of visual information on scientific communication is rendering multimodal analysis an increasingly necessary aspect for genre analysis to consider. This book responds to this new reality in the sense that it presents a multimodal genre analysis of academic poster presentations at conferences. The study aims to explore the textual and visual metadiscourse strategies used by poster presenters in order to make their research clear and to interact and engage with their readership. Due to the inexistence of reliable and representative data of the academic poster genre, a corpus of 120 posters from three disciplines (Law, Clinical Psychology and High Energy Particle Physics) had to be created by the author to find out whether there were any cross-disciplinary differences in the linguistic and visual metadiscursive resources of this rather under-researched genre.

The volume is divided into six chapters and has six appendices. After the conference poster session is first presented and the rationale and general aims of the study are put forward in the Introduction, chapter 2 offers an overview of the main theories in academic discourse and genres as well as a definition of academic poster presentations, differentiating the textual, visual and spoken components of this genre. Following this, a literature review of the most important studies on metadiscourse and modality is summarised, and the four main criteria underlying the corpus design – purpose, representativeness, size and balance – are explained. The research questions of the study are subsequently outlined, closing the chapter.

Chapter 3 constitutes a very detailed methodological explanation about poster selection and retrieval procedures as well as the tools used in the study. Accurate information is given about the corpus design principles, the selection of the three disciplines and the survey sent to researchers from universities around the world to contact prospective poster presenters. In addition, information about the interviews held with some informants is also given because it was necessary to elicit researchers' views and motivations to answer one of the research questions.

In chapter 4, the author sets forth a framework of analysis for metadiscourse in academic posters. For this purpose, on the one hand D'Angelo draws upon Hyland's (2005) classification of metadiscourse to examine the textual organisation of posters. On the other, the author follows Kress (2010) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) to study the visual metadiscourse resources from a semiotic analysis and to explain how visual parts, and the relationship between text and image, create meaning on the interactive plane. The two models, the textual and the visual, are integrated in the framework because both share the interactive plane of metadiscourse – although no mention is made of the interactional plane in visual metadiscourse resources. After the theoretical framework of both textual and visual metadiscourse is depicted, an example of how the textual metadiscourse of a poster was tagged and analysed is deemed very pertinent because it helps readers to better understand the two broad metadiscourse categories and their functions: (i) interactive items help writers adapt to the readers' needs in terms of knowledge, interest or processing abilities by making the text comprehensible and clear; and (ii) interactional items allow writers to express their attitude and personal point of view and engage with the audience. In a similar vein, several examples are given of how different visual interactive resources, such as graphic elements, font, framing, and connective elements, are analysed using a binary code criterion. In the last section of the chapter, where the limitations of the analysis are acknowledged, the reader is made aware of the intrinsic difficulty in analysing metadiscourse in natural speech in general and in interpreting visual metadiscourse in particular.

The results of the analysis of textual and visual metadiscourse in academic posters are explained and discussed in Chapter 5. First of all, discipline-by-discipline results are set forth. By and large, in the High Energy Particle Physics subcorpus, textual interactive and interactional metadiscursive items are seen to

exist in very similar frequencies, with graphic elements being the most common visual resources. In the Law subcorpus, textual interactive items are used less frequently than interactional ones and regarding visual resources, framing, connective elements and fonts are the top three visual resources in terms of frequency. Finally, Clinical Psychology posters deploy a much higher percentage of textual interactive items in comparison with interactional items while among the visual metadiscursive resources, interactive fonts stand out as the most widely used. A cross-disciplinary comparison of academic posters in the three subcorpora under study follows. This second strand of analysis focuses on a comparison of distributions of the two types of textual metadiscourse as well as of visual metadiscourse. Here other features not related to metadiscourse are also taken into consideration in the analysis, like the average number of words per poster, the average length of sentences, the vertical or horizontal orientation of posters, and the amount of posters that follow the Introduction-Method-Results-Discussion (IMRD) research article format. As in the previous analysis, differences are found across disciplines. Clinical Psychology posters by far contain the largest amount of words and longest sentences and seem to adhere to a horizontal orientation while Law posters are the most succinct, with the lowest average of words per poster and per sentence. As to the IMRD layout, Clinical Psychology posters also differ from the other disciplines because most of them (65%) deploy a clear organisation: content is clearly separated into titled sections and is organised according to the IMRD format. In a similar vein, Law posters also tend to fully or partly follow the IMRD organisation format whereas only 5% of High Energy Particle Physics posters are clearly organised; some of them divide text into many separate sections but others do not, thus leaving the burden of guessing how the discourse unfolds to the reader. Finally, the chapter closes by providing the distribution of textual and visual metadiscourse resources across corpora. In this way, Law posters are seen to have the highest amount of textual interactive and interactional metadiscursive items, which renders more reader-friendly texts. No differences are found in the use of visual metadiscourse resources across disciplines, though slight differences are identified in the types of visual resources as preferred by the authors. These differences are described but not interpreted.

Finally, the last chapter discusses the results. These are interpreted in terms of the different communicative strategies used by poster presenters across disciplines and are discussed by answering the research questions of the study and resorting to data gathered from the interviews in order to interpret poster presenters' motivations. Thus, brevity and clarity in content organisation are reportedly the driving factors in poster design in all disciplines although the results obtained show that not all posters manage to achieve this goal in the same way. An interesting finding is that even though many authors claim to usually rely on poster templates, the use of templates does not seem to be the cause of significant cross-disciplinary differences concerning amount of words and poster layout. Important cross-disciplinary differences in textual interactive and

interactional metadiscourse hint at the conclusion that Law poster presenters stand out as the most successful and efficient writers, capable of facilitating communication and engaging with their audience and making the highest use of bolder statements and controversial arguments. By contrast, High Energy Particles Physics poster presenters emerge as the least reader-friendly writers, with the lowest percentage of textual interactive and interactional metadiscourse, while Clinical Psychology posters stand halfway between the two extremes. In terms of visual interactive metadiscourse, these resources seem to be important in the three subcorpora, given their role in helping readers understand content and manage the flow of information with ease. This, according to interviewees, is their first priority. As for the distribution patterns of types of visual resources, it is not surprising to find that High Energy Particles Physics posters contain the highest number of graphic elements, useful to convey numerical information in a clear and concise way, while Law and Clinical Psychology posters, more prone to working with abstractions, favour framing and interactive fonts respectively. In the last two sections of the chapter the small size of the corpus, made up of traditional academic posters but lacking e-posters, is said to be a limitation to overcome in future research. The author concludes by pointing to the lack of interest paid in research to this “invisible ‘second-class status’” genre (p. 257) in spite of being an interesting alternative to paper presentations, in particular for novice researchers at the beginning of their academic career and who look for opportunities for networking.

An important contribution of this study is that it integrates a multimodal analysis of metadiscourse, which helps us to gain a deeper understanding of the “telling” and “selling” tasks (Yakhontova, 2002) that poster presenters in the scientific community may be engaged in. Having identified a gap in the literature, this book also contributes to pointing to the need for further work. For example, one reads that Law posters emerge as the most reader-friendly texts and that most Law presenters in the corpora were tenured, experienced faculty members (in contrast to the novice researcher profile of poster presenters in the other two disciplines). Bearing this result in mind, it can be guessed that textual and visual metadiscourse in academic posters could also be studied and correlated with the novice or expert status of poster presenters in order to determine the role played by enculturation and research article writing experience. Another aspect that could also be addressed in future multimodal research of metadiscourse refers to whether visual interactional resources can be integrated in a metadiscourse analysis along the lines of Miller’s (1998) work and, most interestingly, how the use of different types of visual resources can be interpreted in a relative way.

In brief, the analysis of poster presentations represents a novel strand of research for several reasons. First, it is necessary to further our knowledge about a “‘marginalised’ genre” (p. 15) that has not received so much attention as other academic genres. Like other research process genres (e.g. peer seminars, Aguilar, 2004, 2008), academic posters play an important role in the dissemination of on-

going and intermediate status of research and therefore this accrued knowledge certainly helps us to gain deeper insight into the scientific and academic community. Second, this study encompasses a multimodal perspective within the metadiscursive analysis carried out and offers an alternative to integrate multimodality in genre analysis. Finally, the creation of a multidisciplinary corpus of 120 posters increases our data sources and paves the way for further research. For all these reasons, the book can be a very useful tool not only for researchers and students in the field of genre analysis, metadiscourse and English for Academic Purposes in general but also for faculty members from any discipline that need some guidelines on how to prepare a conference poster.

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126

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