# Intonation in metadiscoursal elements of an oral pedagogical task

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## Introduction

Metadiscourse is the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage the readers (and listeners) as members of a particular community (Hyland, 2005, p. 37). Metadiscourse has a dynamic

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view of language as it focuses on the explicit textual devices that speakers and writers use when communicating. Speakers/writers negotiate the meaning of what they are communicating with their listeners and readers. Metadiscourse assumes that communication involves more than the exchange of information, it includes the "personalities, attitudes and assumptions of those who are communicating" (2005, p. 37). As Hyland further points out "metadiscourse options are the ways we articulate and construct the interactions" (2005, p. 3). Thus, metadiscourse allows the speaker/writer to project him/herself into what they are saying; showing his/her attitudes, feelings, personality and credibility but also helps them create a reader-friendly prose with discourse that is related to a given context (2005, p. 3). According to Hyland, metadiscourse offers a framework which takes into account both the text that is created and the audience who is to interpret the message of the text. It helps the writer/speaker become aware of the reader/speaker's need for guidance to achieve a successful understanding of the message. The development of Interactional phonetics has started to study and show how participants of an interaction "systematically manipulate, and orient to, phonetic detail –encompassing rhythm, tempo, loudness, pitch, voice quality, and independent articulatory parameters– in order to structure and interpret contributions to interaction" (Local, 2003, p. 117). The identification of interactional cues –semantic, grammatical, phonological (prosody, stress, rhythm, segments) features– present in spoken discourse or scripted speech constitutes the framework of the analysis of spoken discourse.

It is known that the use of prosodic features shape the structure of a conversation as they may mark re-starts, turn endings, etc. Our aim in this paper is to analyze the use of metadiscoursal elements together with the prosodic choices made by the students. The metadiscoursal elements to be analysed are: interactive discourse-organizing markers and interactional stance/evaluation markers.

## Literature review

Traditionally, research on the presence of metadiscourse and its influence has been carried out on written texts. Only few studies delved into its impact on oral discourse. That is the case of Aguilar Perez and Arnó-Macià, who based their study on the performance of interpersonal and textual markers in the students' ability on lecture comprehension. They concluded that the

presence or absence of metadiscourse is highly related to the students' level of proficiency on the language. Thus, metadiscourse seems to be redundant for more proficient students while it helped those students with lower proficiency in the target language (Aguilar Perez & Arnó Macià, 2002). Yu and Cadman (2009) studied how EFL students applied Metadiscourse in their speech performances within the classroom. The authors adapted Hyland's metadiscoursal elements for oral discourse and oral presentations. Basically, they focused on "frame markers" and "person markers" and they obtained interesting results as there was scarcity of summarising metadiscourse and an overuse of "thank you" as a concluding metadiscoursal element. Wei (2011) studied the use of Discourse Markers (DMs, for short) by Chinese learners of English. The focus of the study was on the oral performance of the learners across different tasks and restricted the research to four functions of the DMs. The findings showed that Chinese students produced fewer and less diverse oral chunks in their oral presentations as compared to native English speakers. The author also found a correlation between the students' proficiency on the target language and the use of DMs. She found that advanced students were able to use DMs effectively by guiding their listeners to the understanding of the hierarchy of meanings conveyed by the speaker's message. Kibler, Salerno and Palacios (2013) cite two studies which show differentiated native/non-native use of discourse markers: Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas (2005) found that non-native speakers used the language closely resembling written texts, resulting in less subtle stance-marking and more interpersonal distance from the audience; Fung and Carter's (2007) based their research on the comparison of English learning secondary students in Hong Kong with native English speakers and the results of the study showed that in classroom group discussions, English learners used discourse markers less fluently.

Focusing on intonation in oral presentations, two researchers, Pickering (2004) and Busá and Urbani (2011) focused their studies on the role of intonation and pitch range to signal paratones. In the case of Pickering, the focus of her study was the deployment of intonation by International Teaching Assistants. The study showed that ITAs struggled to successfully use key and tone choices. Cribb (2017) compared Chinese learners with European learners of English in their use of intonation as a resource in the delivery of oral academic

presentations. This paper also compares the pitch range of professional presenters who are native speakers with the pitch range produced by the non-native speakers of the language. The expected outcome was that native speakers' intonation pitch range was noticeably higher than the pitch range deployed by the students. On the other hand, no significant difference was found between Chinese and European learners' intonation pitch range.

## Video tutorials
### *Main generic features*
A video tutorial is a sample of spontaneous spoken interaction. It resembles an instruction monologue of unplanned but controlled speech regarding its semantic content. This semantic content is determined by the actual instructions and unconstrained by interactional features, such as turn-taking, collaborations, and feedback. The presenter of the video tutorial imagines a possible target audience, mainly based on the topic of his/her video tutorial and accommodates linguistic and paralinguistic features to convey his/her message and guide the listener to the understanding of the meanings and social intentions of his/her discourse.

The usual opening structure of this new discourse type or genre is the following:

Introduction:

-Greeting: addressed to the audience
-Identification: Name of the instructor
-Credentials: Who the instructor/presenter is, and/or why (s)he was appointed to create the tutorial or by whom.
-Pragmatic features: Use of conversational routines of spontaneous interactional language, e.g. as an informal greeting to open the channel of communication, which shows that the speaker is conscious that (s)he is addressing an audience in the introductory part.
Closing (generic structure):
-Shorter than the other parts or optional.

### *Conversational features of video tutorials*

Features of textual metafunction:

-Use of DMs 'er', 'erm', repetition of connector 'and' are features of unplanned discourse, which indicate that her message has not been prepared, that she is thinking carefully what to say in her self-introduction.

-Use of the conjunction 'how' as an independent tone unit in level tone with the intention of gaining time to find an appropriate mitigator for the challenge of performing the task, of following instructions without the direct, face-to-face feedback from the instructor.

-Use of level tone in the connector 'so' and the DM 'erm' as independent tone units to initiate the end of the introduction and announce the beginning of another topic, the body of the instruction monologue.

Features of interpersonal metafunction:

-Pre-closing sequences: use of the vocative 'you guys' with rising tone as an addressee.
-Channel subscription reminder: "don't forget to subscribe..."
-Shut-downs: "goodbye".
-The repetition of the same phrase with equal prosodic pattern also has the argumentative function of convincing the audience to perform the task.
-Dominant tones show that the presenter is in control of the situation and the discourse. (S)he knows better, and she is moving on to the next stage of the tutorial.

Thematic structure:

-Recap of instructions, summary.
-Revision of initial objectives.

## Methodology

This research was a corpus-based study which analyzed the production of video tutorials as an online task. The participants were *English Phonetics III* students attending the 3rd year in the Teacher Training Programme at Universidad Nacional de Tucumán. They were asked to produce a video tutorial which was assessed as their second oral term test during the course. Fifty-four tutorials were produced during the school year 2016, but only forty-two were selected for this study, because they contained the metadiscoursal features that were the focus of the research.

The video tutorial is the final product of a process which included the following pedagogical tasks:

a) A lesson on video tutorial generic features was given,
b) an assignment in our educational platform was created with instruction,
c) the students rehearsed and then recorded their video tutorials,
d) they uploaded their production to the internet and sent us the link,
e) their production and performance were evaluated using assessment criteria which had been explained to the students beforehand.

For the data analysis, our taxonomy was based on Rui and Xin's (2009) taxonomy and a selection of Hyland's (2005) metadiscoursal elements (MDEs, for short). The structural components in focus were the introduction and closing parts of the video tutorials. The tokens that were selected from those parts were then analysed using Wordsmith Tools© 4.0 and two functions were exclusively employed: the concordancing and word list functions[3]. We completed the analysis with by tracking the prosodic pitch in Praat© to locate nuclear stress and another prosodic feature: prominence (or the lack thereof).

Hyland's (2005) metadiscoursal elements were divided into two groups: the interactive discourse markers (e.g. *now*, *well*, etc.) and the interactional discourse markers (e.g. *guys*, *really*, etc.).

## Results and discussion

All the metadiscoursal elements which were examined in the corpus showed a similar percentage of use (Appendix, Figure 2), with a slight preference for interactive metadiscoursal elements. This may mean that the students were concerned with the text-organizing aspects of their message but they still provided a phatic contact with their audience. Yet, when the distribution of the metadiscoursal elements was further examined, the result was a more restricted (and more frequent) usage of interactional MDEs, as opposed to the assorted deployment of text-organizing MDEs (Appendix, Figure 3).

A closer insight into the corpus reveals some group-like and idiosyncratic usage of the MDEs. For instance, most students use the same interactional

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[3] Figure 1 in the Appendix shows an example of how those functions were used for each particular metadiscoursal element.

relational (i.e. *guys*, *everyone*) marker in both the introduction and closing parts of their tutorials. In addition, sometimes two (e.g. *so yeah*) or three (e.g. *Ok so first thing*) MDEs could be assigned an independent tone unit. At times, their use of the MDEs may not carry the illocutionary force that was intended or may be non-prototypical for this type of genre (e.g. *Today we are dealing with a new topic*, *Have a nice day!*). In general, students did not reveal a varied exploitation of the MDEs available for the parts of the conversation which were analysed; rather, an overuse of the same MDEs was quite conspicuous.

In relation to the prosodic mechanisms employed by the students, the following ones can be mentioned: a) There was a general appropriate match between the textual MDEs (like *now* or *well*) and their required intonation patterns, but some (4) students produced anomalous combinations between the MDEs and the expected prosodic pattern; b) whereas most students de-accented the relational MDE *guys*, others would assign prominence to it or nuclear stress, instead of assigning it to the greeting expression; c) the pitch movement patterns (i.e. tones) are still L1-based for the majority of the MDEs used.

Given that there existed an excessive selection of particular MDEs, a closer study to the seven most used MDEs (Appendix, Figure 4 and Table 1) was made with the following results: a) there is a tendency to give tonality (i.e. assignment of a tone unit grouping) and tonicity (i.e. selection as tonic syllables) to the interactive MDEs (i.e. *now*, *well*, *OK* and *so*) but not to the Interactional relational markers (i.e. *guys* and *everyone*); b) the Interactional emphatic MDE *really* was performed with prominence but less tonality or tonicity; c) the large number of tokens for the Interactive connective *so* reveals not only that it is one of the most used MDEs, but also that it was used with both appropriate and atypical prosody.

## Conclusion

This study sought to probe into the most usual metadiscoursal units that university students exhibited in their oral production of video tutorials. As a corpus-based research study, some patterns of usage emerged and connections were established between the frequency of use, the type of MDEs employed and the typical prosodic characteristics. This resulted into very interesting outcomes. The first is that students display a certain degree of acquisition of the MDEs for oral communication. However, there are still constraints regarding their spontaneous

use of language for communicative purposes. For example, students combine several discourse markers or use them to frame speech acts or to mark generic structure, but the rules behind their performance may be idiosyncratic.

This can similarly be explained by hypothesizing that they are not only acquiring the required MDEs for this online task, but they may also be experimenting with their multifunctional features and, in turn, that experimentation is also reflected in the variational use of prosodic features.

Regarding the type of MDEs that were found, interactive markers are more frequent and varied than interactional ones. Therefore, students may be aware or more concerned about guiding their audience to understand their speech rather than working on commenting or evaluating their text to forge a link with their viewers.

It is worthwhile mentioning that due to the multimodal nature of the task, some students chose to insert some on-screen (non-verbalized) MDEs for the materials section, the greeting sequence or the closing section. These MDEs were not included in the corpus, as they lack a prosodic representation.

A probable limitation of the present study is the fact that the body of the tutorials were not analyzed and, therefore, some MDEs employed in that part may be worthwhile analysing.

Since the video tutorials represent a semi-authentic instance of spontaneous language, it allowed us to examine the production of the students in their attempt to communicate ideas in meaningful and relevant way.

# Appendix



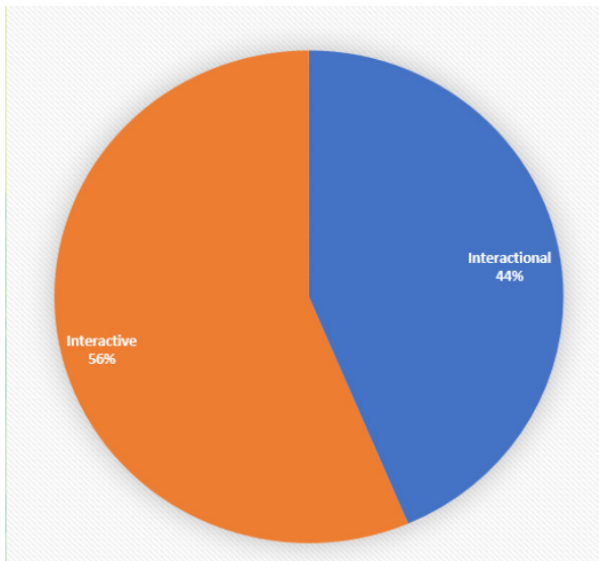Figure 1. The examples of the interactive transitional connective *so* in the corpus.



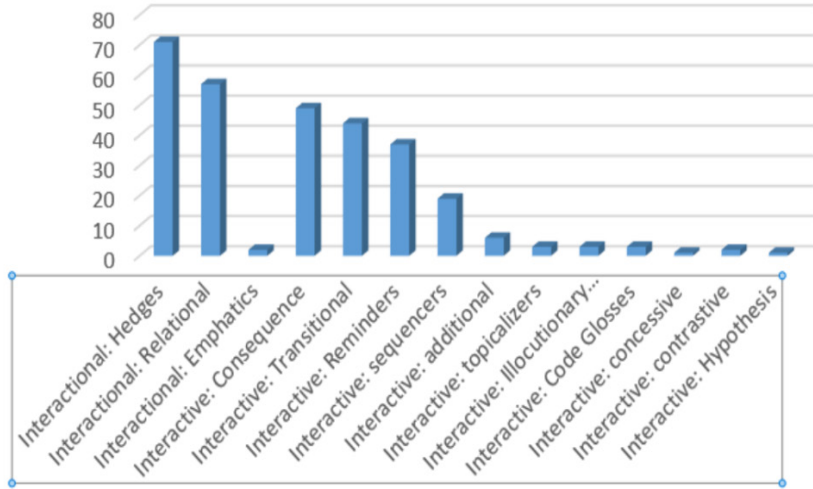Figure 2. Percentage of use of the metadiscoursal units in the corpus.

Figure 3. Percentage of use and distribution of the metadiscoursal units by type, in the corpus.

| | Word | Tonicity and Tonality | Prominence | No prosodic marking | N° of tokens |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Interactive: Textual metadiscourse. Logical connectives: Transitional connective | Now | 6 | 1 | 2 | 9 |
| Interactive: Textual metadiscourse. Logical connectives: Transitional connective | Well | 18 | | 1 | 18 |
| Interactive: Textual metadiscourse. Logical connectives: Transitional connective | OK | 15 | 2 | | 17 |
| Interactive: Textual metadiscourse. Logical connectives: Transitional connective | So | 41 | 1 | 7 | 49 |
| Interactional: Interpersonal metadiscourse: commentaries: Relational marker | Guys | 14 | | 21 | 35 |
| Interactional: Interpersonal metadiscourse: commentaries: Relational marker | Everyone | 4 | | 7 | 11 |
| Interactional: Interpersonal metadiscourse: validity markers: emphatics | Really | 5 | 11 | | 16 |

Table 1. The 7 most used MDEs.
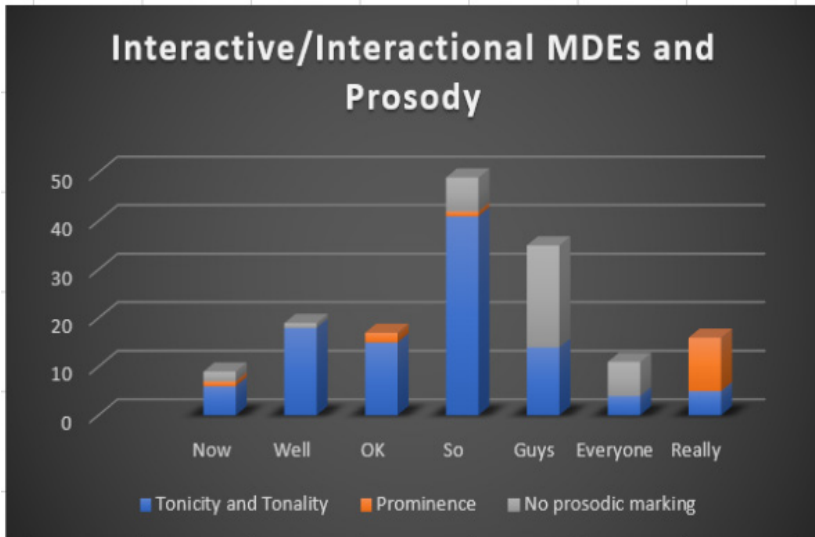
Figure 4. The 7 most used MDEs and their prosodic features.

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