

# A Study of Interactional Metadiscourse Bundles in Chinese College Students' Argumentative Writing

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**Abstract:** Interactional metadiscourse involves writer's evaluation of proposition, and communication with readers, while the use of interactional metadiscourse has not been sufficiently explored from a bundle-driven perspective. To abridge the gap, this paper aims to find out the distribution, structures and functions of interactional metadiscourse bundles in Chinese college students' argumentative writing. Research summarizes five structural types with eighteen sub categories in students' writing. Functional analysis of IMBs shows that self mentions and attitude markers cover a large scale to achieve interpersonal communication in written texts.

**Keywords:** lexical bundles, interactional metadiscourse, argumentative writing, corpus-driven

## Introduction

The term 'Metadiscourse' generally refers to the linguistic resources used to negotiate the interactive meaning and express reflexivity, making ideas more readable and persuasive with conscious arrangement in the text<sup>[5]</sup>. Hyland & Tse proposed that metadiscourse falls in two types: interactive and interactional<sup>[4]</sup>. In academic writing, interactional metadiscourse strategies are applied to gain readers' recognition and achieve interpersonal communication.

Previous metadiscourse studies rely heavily on predetermined search items, while this study aims to find out college students' use of interactional metadiscourse from a bundle-driven perspective. According to corpus linguistics, language can be analyzed from the phraseological level rather than the level of individual words. Based on Hyland & Tse's interactional metadiscourse framework, this study is to explore the distribution, structures and functions of interactional metadiscourse bundles(IMBs) in Chinese college students' writing, hoping to find out the writing features in student's writing.

## 1. Research design

### 1.1 Data collection

The corpus is taken from the *Ten-thousand English Compositions of Chinese Learners*. the TECCL corpus is one of the best material resources for linguistic researchers to study Chinese EFL learners' language abilities, consisting of 9,865 texts(1,817,472 words). The transcripts included were produced between 2011 and 2015, covering a wide range of genres: narration, argumentation, explanatory writing, self-introduction, summary and reading report. The writer levels vary from elementary school to postgraduate students, and undergraduates are the overwhelming majority.

Considering the wide range of genres and variation of writers' levels, the research focuses on the genre of

argumentative texts and the level of undergraduate writers. Under these criteria, a sub-corpus is compiled by repeated manual checks, and 2000 transcripts (more than 400,000 words) are selected.

## 1.2 Data processing

Data processing includes three steps: consideration of cut-off frequency and range, identification of the extracted bundles, and categorization of the identified bundles. In this process, AntConc 4.2.4 is used to extract lexical bundles by directly using the N-Gram tool.

The critical criteria for generating lexical bundles are the length of word combinations, the frequency threshold and the breadth of distribution<sup>[3]</sup>. four-word bundles are chosen as target bundles. Biber mentioned that the cut-off frequency of 40 times per million words is suitable for detailed analysis of both structure and functions<sup>[2]</sup>. Considering the size of the sub-corpus, the workable frequency cut-off is 15 times per million words, and the distribution is at least five texts. 260 lexical bundles are extracted in AntConc.

The identification of extracted bundles is necessary, since not all retrieval results can be considered as IMBs. The identified bundles are further categorized under Hyland & Tse's framework. IMBs are context-sensitive, so a linguistic form may not always perform the same function in the context. There is a small proportion of IMBs are multi-functional, so categorizing a specific bundle by considering context is necessary. After these manual checks, the overall statistics are shown in Table 1:

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the corpus

<b>Genre</b>	argumentative
<b>Writers' level</b>	undergraduate
<b>No. of texts</b>	2000
<b>Length of texts (range)</b>	135-496 words
<b>Total tokens</b>	422326
<b>4-Gram types</b>	260
<b>4-Gram tokens</b>	8192
<b>TTR</b>	3.17%

## 2. Data analysis

### 2.1 Frequency distribution

As shown in Table 2, there are 104 IMBs identified and classified from the 260 four-gram bundles.

Table 2 Frequency Distribution of IMBs

	<b>Type</b>	<b>Token</b>	<b>TTR</b>
4-Gram bundles	260	8192	3.17%
IMBs	104	3333	3.12%
%	40.0%	40.6%	/

In Table 2, the distribution of IMBs accounts for 40.0% of the total four-word lexical bundles. The number of tokens refers to the frequencies of these IMBs. TTR(=3.12%) reflects the low vocabulary variation within the written texts, so there are a large number of bundles being used frequently by undergraduate students. For example, *as far as I* appears 249 times (range=245), ranking the first in all IMBs. It proves that college students are able to apply interactional metadiscourse in their writing, but they prefer a certain set of formulaic expressions to finish their writing.

Based on Hyland & Tse's theoretical framework, these 104 IMBs are classified into four categories: Boosters, Attitude markers, Self mentions and Engagement markers. Manual checks of each category are repeated by three times to ensure correctness.

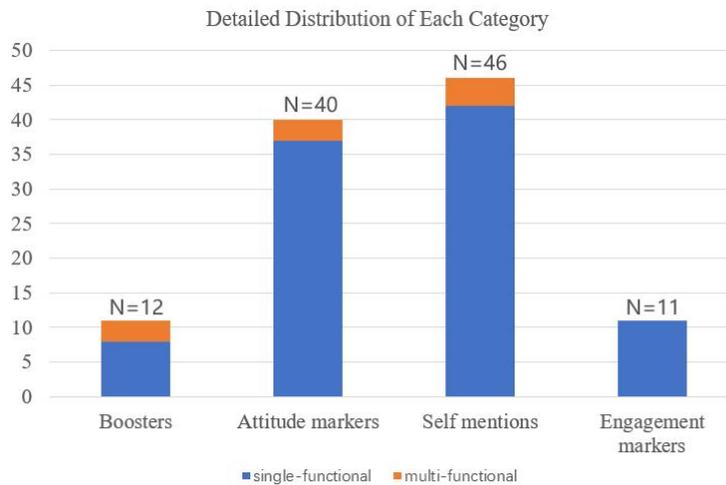


Figure 1 Detailed Distribution of IMBs' Categories

Figure 1 shows the number of types in each category. It is noteworthy that five bundles are multi-functional (*we all know that, we all know the, important for us to, necessary for us to, the most important reason*), acting more than one single type of interactional function. For example, *we all know that* can be categorized as both boosters and self mentions, so it is allocated and calculated into two categories. boosters, attitude markers, self mentions and engagement markers account for 11.0%, 36.7%, 42.2%, and 10.1% in the total number of types (N=109), with a raw frequency (f) of 364, 1030, 1593, 325 times respectively.

Accounting for 42.2%, IMBs of self mentions are the most widely used in undergraduates' writing, and the most frequently used bundles are *as far as I* (f=249), *As we all know* (f=126), *in our daily life* (f=79), *try our best to* (f=61).

## 2.2 Structural analysis of IMBs

Structural analysis is conducted to summarize certain formulaic forms. Based on Biber et al.'s structural classification of lexical bundles<sup>[1]</sup>, the 104 IMBs are identified into 5 structural types, with a total number of 18 sub-categories. Table 3 shows the detailed structures with corresponding types and token frequencies.

Table 3 Structural Types of IMBs

Structural types	Form	Type	Token
<b>1. Noun structure</b>			
(1) Noun phrase with <i>to/in/of</i> phrase fragment	<i>a good way to; an important role in; important role in our; the importance of the</i>	4	120
(2) Noun phrase	<i>the most important thing; my point of view; a matter of fact; the most important reason</i>	4	135
(3) Noun phrase with pronoun	<i>a college student we; point of view I; a college student I</i>	3	50
		11	305
<b>2. Verb structure</b>			
(1) 1st/2nd person pronoun+VP fragment	<i>I think we should; we should try our; we all know the; we should have a; I would like to; we should learn to; we are supposed to; I think it is</i>	8	215

(2) Verb phrase with non-passive verb	<i>try our best to; don't want to; should try our best; pay attention to the; pay more attention to; plays an important role; make good use of; are in favor of; should take part in; should pay more attention; should pay attention to; know the importance of; don't need to</i>	13	373
(3) Verb phrase with passive verb	<i>is known to all; is known to us</i>	2	37
(4) Verb+that-clause fragment	<i>is no doubt that; hold the view that; is no denying that</i>	3	112
		26	737
<b>3. Prepositional structure</b>			
(1)Prepositional phrase	<i>the best way to ; as is known to; of the most important; in our daily life; from my point of; in my point of</i>	6	209
(2)Prepositional phrase ( <i>in my opinion</i> ) with other fragments	<i>in my opinion I; in my opinion the; in my opinion we; in my opinion it; in favor of the</i>	5	154
		11	363
<b>4. Dependent clause fragments</b>			
(1) (connector+) 1st/2nd person pronoun +dependent clause fragment	<i>we all know that; we can see that; as we can see; some people think that</i>	4	198
(2) Wh-clause fragments	<i>what we should do; when I was a</i>	2	33
(3) <i>If</i> -clause fragments	<i>if you want to; if we want to; if we don't; if you don't</i>	4	129
(4) <i>As</i> -clause fragments	<i>as far as I; as a college student; as college students we; as we all know; as the saying goes; as for me I; as long as we; as long as you</i>	8	577
(5) <i>to</i> -clause fragments	<i>to pay attention to</i>	1	20
		19	957
<b>5. Other structure</b>			
(1) <i>be</i> +noun/adjective phrases	<i>is a good way; is the most important; is more important than; is important for us; is the best way; is very important for; is necessary for us; is not a good</i>	8	193
(2) <i>It is</i> +adjective phrases	<i>it is easy to; it is not a; it is important for; it is necessary for; it is a good; it is good for; it is necessary to; it is high time</i>	8	160

(3) <i>more and more</i> +adjective phrases	<i>more and more popular;</i> <i>more and more serious;</i> <i>more and more important</i>	3	115
(4) Other expressions	<i>to be a good; for example we can;</i> etc.	18	503
		37	971
<b>Total Number</b>		104	3333

The structure analysis indicates that the number of propositional structure and noun structure are less than that of verb structure and dependent clause fragments. Except for other structure, the token frequency(=957) of dependent clause fragments ranks the first, which shows college students' awareness of using different kinds of clauses to make longer and more complex sentences. The use of verb structure ranks the second, and verb phrase with non-passive verb is much more preferred by students, accounting for 13 types and 373 token frequency. In contrast, passive verbs are far less used but highly identical(*is known to all; is known to us*). College students tend to avoid passive verb forms and apply the phrases *pay attention (to)* and modal verb *should* so as to give suggestions.

Students' dependence upon choosing fixed expressions to accomplish their writing tasks are presented by a set of overused words and phrases. In the noun structure, the word *important* is a key adjective to modify noun phrases, such as *an important role in, the most important thing, the most important reason*. In the prepositional structure, students express their personal stance by repeating the phrase *in my opinion*.

There is a noticeable number of other structure, which can not be classified into any certain structural types. But some of the fixed forms can be obviously favorable in students' writing, such as *be+noun/adjective* phrases, *It is+adjective(+for/to)*. These forms are useful in expressing attitudes, but the problem is the lower possibility towards rich vocabulary and variety of sentence structures.

### 2.3 Functional analysis of IMBs

Thompson & Thetela mentioned that written discourse is function-oriented when the writer attempts to influence the reader's reactions and behaviors<sup>[6]</sup>. IMBs are functionally used to help writers convey their attitudes towards their assertions and establish the appropriate relationship with their readers. In Figure 1, IMBs are categorized into four functional types: Boosters, Attitude markers, Self mentions and Engagement markers. Self mentions and Attitude markers rank No.1 and No.2 in the total functional types, with a percentage of 42.2% and 36.7% respectively. All these functions combine to form the foundation of emotive and persuasive argumentation. Table 4 lists the top 5 IMBs that are most frequently used in each category:

Table 4 The Top 5 IMBs in Each Functional Types

<b>Boosters</b>	is no doubt that, there is no doubt, as the saying goes; is no denying that, a matter of fact
<b>Attitude markers</b>	only in this way; in this way can; more and more popular; a good way to; is a good way
<b>Self mentions</b>	as far as i; as we all know; in our daily life; my point of view; try our best to
<b>Engagement markers</b>	pay more attention to; if you want to; some people think that; pay attention to the; as is known to

#### 2.3.1 IMBs as boosters

Boosters refers to writers' certainty toward claims, explicitly showing arguments with resolve and marking involvement with the main idea. The bundle *is no doubt that* shows high certainty and confidence about a certain issue, ranking the first in the Boosters category. This bundle follows the structure of 'Verb+that-clause fragment'. By using

that-clause, writers can argue about their writing topic in detail.

1) There is no doubt that the unhealthy habits do harm to us. First, ...

2) As for me, it is no doubt that we should help those disadvantaged groups who are in need. showing mercy to victims doesn't need any conditions. However, in order to avoid involving in unnecessary trouble when helping others, we should choose a better way to do it.

3) As a matter of fact, we can acquire more knowledge by consulting a bilingual dictionary.

Boosters indicate writers' confidence, pave the way for giving evidences like example 1), and give a better solution to the setting topic like example 2) and 3), leaving more space for argument and persuasion.

### 2.3.2 IMBs as attitude markers

Argumentative writing is basically connected with feelings, involving evaluation of objects, judgments of actions and response to events. Attitude markers help express the writer's attitude towards the proposition. Through the use of these devices, the audience's affective stance can be manifested.

4) The death penalty a step back. I think only few of Chinese are in favor of it.

5) ... the "pollution tax" policy is a good way to draw more peoples attention to the environment ,which plays a fundamental part in reducing pollution.

6) However, the most important thing is sincerity, if you are sincerity with everything, you will enjoy a happy life.

By using the attitude markers, writers are able to express his/her personal feelings about the given topic, but analysis shows that the expression of feelings and emotions are not specific and catching. Adjectives like *important*, *necessary*, *best*, *good* are widely used, which also form a set of structures like *is a good way*; *is more important than*; *is important for us*; *is the best way*. The problem is the overuse of fixed words will inevitable reduce vocabulary richness.

### 2.3.3 IMBs as self mentions

Self-mention is a device revealing the degree of explicit author presence in the text, including first-person pronouns such as *I*, *me* and *we*. It shows how the writer deals with his/her relationship with the readers, the community and even the propositions. IMBs referring to self mentions account for the largest number. The most frequently used pronouns are: *I*, *We*. There are totally 46 types of IMBs belonging to self mentions. *As far as I* is the most frequently used bundle, with a raw frequency of 249 times; *As we all know* ranks the second.

7) As far as I am concerned, I side with the latter.

8) As we all know, helping others is a virtue which is inherited by Chinese people.

Example 7) shows the writer's experience and preference by clarifying the personal stance, the writer can give his/her judgement about the given topic. Example 8) use the plural form *We* to emphasis the writer's intention to reach an agreement with the readers, which is a useful persuasion. In argumentative writing, writers' point of view is clearly stated by applying self mentions.

### 2.3.4 IMBs as engagement markers

Writers use engagement markers to recognize the existence of readers, and get readers involved in issue discussion. The most frequently used marker is *If you want to, pay attention to the, and some people think that*.

9) If you want to become master of your own destiny, then you need to go to college.

10) Therefore, it's very importance for us to pay attention to the details such as some small things.

11) Some people think that it should be less a month having a car. In my opinion ...

These bundles aim to arouse the readers' interest, and show writers' consideration of different ideas, like example 9), 10) and 11). *If you want to, pay attention to the* aim to instruct readers to concentrate on specific details and follow the writers' ideas. Like oral conversations, Discourse is essentially powerful in making interpersonal communication. These markers attribute to the successful negotiation between writer and the reader, and help abridge the psychological distance of the discourse.

### 3. Conclusion

This study is a corpus-driven research concerning about the use of interactional metadiscourse bundles in undergraduates' argumentative writing. Research shows that the distribution of IMBs accounts for 40% of the overall four-word bundles, but TTR(=3.32%) indicates the undesirable vocabulary richness, which means that college students rely on a set of fixed linguistic forms to express their points of view.

In structural analysis, variable verb structures and dependent clauses are preferred by students to propose possible situations and give suggestions. Propositional phrases and noun phrases are rather stable. College students are aware of making longer and more complex sentence, but they tend to apply formulaic structures to finish their writing. In the functional analysis, bundles of self mentions account for an overwhelmingly large scale, and attitude markers rank the second. Being aware of their self-presence, students prefer using first person pronouns to express ideas or feelings directly. Based on the findings, interactional metadiscourse is an meaningful indicator to investigate students' awareness of communication in discourse, and the overused and underused bundles deserve a closer attention to help students improve their writing.

### Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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