Textual metadiscourse in commercial websites

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Abstract

Commercial websites do not only have to catch the attention of the web surfer, who in the end can also become a potential customer, they are also engaged in the crucial task of guiding the reader through the complex maze of semiotic systems which constitutes a web page. Successful sites are those giving the reader assistance to be able to find the relevant information he or she is seeking. Although we assume that this navigation aid is not exclusively verbal, the aim of this paper is to analyse some of the linguistic means by which this navigation is assisted and, more particularly, to explore the presence of textual metadiscourse. After giving a definition of the concept of metadiscourse, we explore the insights that can be gained from the field of *usability*, within the area of Computer-Human Interaction, which will help us to detect more clearly metadiscursive devices present in commercial websites. Then we categorize the different types of textual metadiscourse and try to find some distinctive features of their presence in digital metadiscourse. Finally, we extend the classification to a group of devices which is restricted to digital discourse, hypertextual links or nodes. In so far as they help readers to navigate through digital documents, links play an outstanding role in commercial websites and can be classified according to the metadiscursive function they carry out.

Key words: digital discourse, metadiscourse, coherence, persuasive language.

Resumen

Metadiscurso textual en los sitios web comerciales

Los sitios web de las organizaciones comerciales no solamente deben atraer la atención de los usuarios, que son los que en definitiva pueden llegar a convertirse en clientes potenciales, sino que también tienen la misión de guiar al lector a través del complejo sistema semiótico que constituye una página web. Los sitios comerciales que tienen éxito son aquellos que proporcionan al lector la ayuda necesaria para encontrar la información que está buscando. Aunque asumimos que esta ayuda a la navegación no es exclusivamente verbal, el objetivo primordial de este artículo es analizar alguno de los medios lingüísticos a través de los cuales esta navegación se realiza a través de la red y, más concretamente, pretendemos explorar la presencia en estos sitios del metadiscurso textual. Después de dar una definición del concepto de matadiscurso, indagamos en el concepto de *usabilidad*, procedente del área de

la Interacción Máquina-Hombre, y en las aportaciones que puede realizar para detectar los elementos presentes en las páginas web de organizaciones comerciales. A continuación, categorizamos los diferentes tipos de metadiscurso textual e intentamos encontrar algunas de los rasgos más sobresalientes de su presencia en el discurso digital. Finalmente, ampliamos la clasificación de los elementos del metatexto textual para incluir elementos restringidos al discurso digital, a saber, los enlaces o nodos. En la medida en que ayudan a los lectores a navegar a través de los documentos digitales, los enlaces desempeñan un papel principal en los sitios web de las organizaciones comerciales y, por ende, pueden ser clasificados de acuerdo con la función metadiscursiva que llevan a cabo.

Palabras clave: discurso digital, metadiscurso, coherencia, lenguaje persuasivo.

Introduction

Internet is becoming an increasingly important medium in the world of marketing and advertising with two main advantages over other media: it has lower costs, and it can reach wider audiences.

However, little is known as yet of the economic and personal factors that affect the use of Internet for commercial purposes and e-commerce can still be considered a puzzle whose complexities and intricacies have not been solved as consumer behaviour is shaped in many ways by the digital medium.

From a linguistic point of view the situation is quite similar. It is true that some preliminary research on the language used on the Internet has been carried out (see for example Herring, 1996; Crystal, 2001; Shortis, 2001; Posteguillo, 2003), as is also accurate to say that the general traits of this special language have already been established, but I consider a lot of work remains to be done on how the Internet affects and, in a way, transforms specific registers and genres used outside the digital medium. To this purpose, a line of research, which is not strictly related to the field of linguistics and whose main focus is the identification and analysis of Internet genres (Crowston & Williams, 1997, 1999; Shepherd & Watters, 1998; Breure, 2001) may be of help.

One of the uncharted areas is the language that companies and businesses use on the Internet. I refer not only to the general process through which the language used in commercial websites accommodates to the standard variations and modifications brought about by the digital medium but mainly to the way the language of business is adapted when used through ICTs .

It is evident, however, that whatever the differences in the process of adaptation, the main goal of a business website is to be persuasive, not informative or aesthetical, and all the instruments are used to achieve this goal. Language is probably a very important tool, perhaps even more important than technology because the latter is nearly always at the service of the former. The consumer will nearly always be persuaded by linguistic means.

One way to aim towards this persuasive goal is to start from well known material, from structures that are already familiar to the reader. As Crystal puts it (2001:198), "the web is an analogue of the written language that is already 'out there' in the paper-world" and it is not surprising that web designers try to use genres and schemas already successful on paper because the reader will be able to recognize patterns and schemas that are well-known to him or her.

Thus, as the following example will show, it could be said that the structure of a commercial website mirrors the structure of what Bhatia (1993) calls promotional genres, among which he includes sales promotion letters and job application letters. To appreciate this similarity, we only have to look at the moves Bhatia proposes and at the structure of a commercial website.

According to Bhatia (1993: 46-48), the structure of a sales promotion letter is made up of the following moves:
1.   Establishing credentials *
2.   Introducing the offer *
3.   Offering incentives
4.   Enclosing documents
5.   Soliciting response *
6.   Using pressure tactics
7.   Ending politely *

Of these moves, only 'Establishing credentials', 'Introducing the offer', 'Soliciting response' and 'Ending politely' are obligatory.

In commercial websites, not all but at least the obligatory moves, are reproduced with slight changes (see figure 1). The page 'about us', also called sometimes 'info' or ' company info', allows companies to provide background information about their activities and history and to establish their *credentials* in the business. The 'product and

services' pages are the place where companies introduce their offer. Finally, the 'contact us' page would correspond to the soliciting response move.

MOVES		PAGES
Establishing credentials *	⟶	'about us'
Introducing the offer *	⟶	'products and services'
Soliciting response *	⟶	'contact us'

Figure 1. Promotional moves in commercial websites.

However, this persuasive means puts the emphasis on cognition and on the schemas the readers of a commercial web site use when accessing it, and, as the work on pragmatics and on argumentation has demonstrated, persuasion can also be achieved by strict linguistic means.

One of the devices also used to accomplish this persuasive function is what we call metadiscourse. The reason is simple: metadiscourse places the reader at the centre of discourse and gives him or her the necessary help to understand either the content or the writer's stance towards that content.

As an example of the use of metadiscourse found in commercial websites, we only have to examine the following sentences:

> **To find information** on the products from our operating companies, **select** from **the categories on the right**. If you cannot find what you are looking for **in this section**, you may **use** *Search* or *Advanced Search* to locate information that may reside **in other sections** of jnj.com or on **related sites**.
> (www.jnj.com/products/categories/index.htm)

As we can see, in this extract the content as such is non-existent, that is, we are not talking business, we are simply being guided through the parts or constituents that intervene in the text: the categories on the right (navigational menu); this section (current web page); other sections (other pages on the site) and related sites. But, at the same time, we feel that everything will be easier on this website, the readers have clearly been persuaded.

Therefore, in the same way that the concepts of schema and genre may be applied to the analysis of commercial websites and may be said to be used with a persuasive goal in mind, the use of metadiscourse can also be considered as a very powerful resource in order to achieve equivalent persuasive purposes. This is precisely why this paper will aim to explore the way in which the insights gained from the theory of metadiscourse can illuminate commercial digital language.

To this end, I will first analyse the definition of metadiscourse and will attempt to associate it to related concepts, which will make it easier to understand in a digital context, then I will classify the different types of metadiscursive devices found in commercial websites and finally I will suggest extending the concept of metadiscourse to hyperlinks, since from my point of view some of these devices perform not merely a technological function but a metadiscursive one.

Definition of metadiscourse

We usually refer to metadiscourse as "those aspects of the text which explicitly refer to the organisation of the discourse or the writer's stance towards either its content or the reader" (Hyland, 1998: 438). Or to put it more explicitly, metadiscourse consists of:

> non-propositional aspects of discourse which help to organise the prose as a coherent text and convey a writer's personality, credibility, reader sensitivity and relationship to the message. (Crismore et al., 1993, cited in Hyland, 1998: 438)

Of course, this definition is, by no means, undisputed because there are certain authors –e.g. Enkvist (1975), Mauranen (1993) and Valero-Garcés (1996)– who leave out all the elements related to the writer's stance towards the reader and focus on aspects of textual organisation.

However, this has not been a problem and there exists a whole corpus of research showing that these discrepancies have not prevented the application of the concept to many fields. Thus, the study of metadiscourse has been applied to different registers and genres such as conversation (Schiffrin, 1980), school texts (Crismore, 1989), science popularisations (Crismore & Farnsworth, 1990), postgraduate dissertations (Swales, 1990), research articles (Hyland, 1998; Hyland, 2000) and to the field of contrastive analysis (Mauranen, 1993; Valero-Garcés, 1996).

As Swales and Feak (2000: 170) point out, some preliminary conclusions can already be drawn:

1. Longer texts tend to have a greater amount of metadiscourse in order to reduce the greater cognitive load which longer content entails;
2. There is disciplinary variation: the hard sciences use more metadiscursive devices;
3. Complex material –e.g. philosophy– contains more metadiscourse;
4. Metadiscourse is prevalent in monologic rather than dialogic language;
5. Metadiscourse is more likely to appear at the beginnings.

So fertile is the concept of metadiscourse that it has been extended outside the limits of verbal language. As researchers on the field of multimodality have emphasized, it is difficult simply to read the meaning transmitted through linguistic means, given that human beings produce and communicate in a great variety of ways (Kress et al., 1997). Thus, Kumpf (2000) has put forward the concept of *visual metadiscourse*, defined as those elements authors have to bear in mind to meet the visual needs of readers.

According to Kumpf, "authors have many necessary design considerations as they attempt to help readers navigate through and understand documents" (Kumpf, 2000). Note how the author uses the word 'navigate'.

Visual metadiscourse "complements textual metadiscourse in emphasizing the necessity of rhetoric in technical communication" because "visual factors also constitute the text" and writers have to make, in this respect, a lot of decisions, which have consequences on the way the document is interpreted. To give an obvious example, Kumpf explains how "haphazard placement of visuals interferes with the readability of the text" (Kumpf, 2000: 404) which is shown by the way in which many students overdo embellishments such as borders, lines or shading.

According to Kumpf (2000), the categories of *visual metadiscourse* are: first impression, heft, convention, chunking, external skeleton, consistency, expense, attraction, interpretation and style. Obviously, some categories are better defined than others and it must be admitted that the concept needs further refining, but a good example of the understanding categories provide would be the category of chunking, which refers to an strategy we all intuitively acknowledge as having a metadiscursive impact since "by arranging the text into discrete visual parts" (Kumpf, 2000) the writer helps the reader to best decode it.

In conclusion, what Kumpf (2000) shows is that metadiscourse is a productive concept which can be applied to a variety of fields and media.

Extending the concept of metadiscourse: insights from usability

In spite of the extensive literature on metadiscourse, the digital medium has been left outside the interest of researchers and, to the best of our knowledge, no one has concentrated on exploring these textual devices in this specific area.

At the same time it must be acknowledged that specialists in computer science, and more specifically in the subfield of Computer-Human Interaction, have defined and elaborated on a concept which can help us to establish the role of metadiscourse in commercial websites.

This concept is *usability* and is defined by the ISO 9241 (1998) as: "The effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction with which specified users achieve specified goals in particular environments."

The concept is general enough to be applied in the many different situations –i.e. environments: operating systems, applications, etc.– in which the computer is used. But the important point is that it focuses its attention on the user, on the person who is actually making use of the computer because it is he or she who determines how the technology should be developed.

In the application to web contexts, in what is called *web usability*, a number of factors have been identified (Becker, 2002). The most important of these are the strategic goals of the organization using the web, the profile of the user (age, gender, education, impairments, computing and typing skill levels, etc.), the computing environment (browser type, browser version, network access, monitor size) and other generic usability factors such as navigation (e.g. breadth and depth of search paths and transversal mechanisms), design standards (e.g. ensuring standard font size), personalization (attending to the format of names, addresses, telephone numbers, etc.), design layout (colour, icons, symbols, etc.), performance (wait time), customer satisfaction (customer service), design consistency (consistent location of web objects), reliability (site crashes, downtime, error messages), security (access to private information), information content (reading level) and accessibility (effective use).
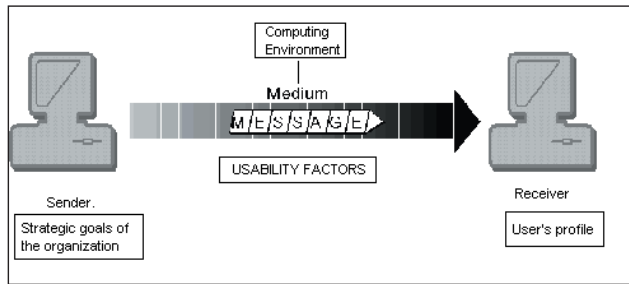
Figure 2. Web usability factors in computer mediated communication.

As can be seen, web usability takes into account the key elements of the communication process: the sender is represented through the strategic goals of the organization; the receiver is embodied by the user with his or her profile; the medium appears in the analysis of computing environment; and finally the message is present in the analysis of usability factors.

In other words, the concept of usability can be defined as an instrument to identify the key elements intervening in the communication process that takes place when reading a commercial website with an emphasis on the user and the effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction with which his or her goals are achieved.

To see the practical bearing of this theoretical framework we only need to read the following excerpt, from which it becomes clear that even the language that commercial organisations choose (language choice) is important from the point of view of web usability:

> Many e-businesses implicitly target a collective user who speaks English, has a moderate to high English reading level, has basic typing and computer skills, is within a specified age range and income level, and has little or no visual or physical impairments. This implied user profile excludes a significant portion of the global market, and as such has a major impact on web usability. Many India and other Asia-Pacific Web sites, for example, are in English though for much of this population English is a second language or unknown. (Becker, 2002: 271)

But although this general introduction to usability makes clear that both usability and metadiscourse have in common their attention on the user/reader, which in itself is worthy of note, we still need to draw our attention to one of the tenets of web usability

with a greater impact on our subject. I refer to the premise, today widely accepted in the world of web usability, that reading on the web is different from reading on paper.

According to Nielsen (1997) web readers do not follow traditional reading strategies but instead, when reading a web page, they scan pages, avoid long scrolling documents and prefer factual language. Obviously, these preferences have to do with the fact that reading on the computer is more tiring and is determined by the physical need to have a screen in front of you.

As a consequence, web texts have to adapt to the demands that come from this type of reading or, to put it from another perspective, commercial websites copywriters will have to attend to the demands the new type of reader puts on them. This means that they will use a greater number of highlighted key words, meaningful subheadings, more bulleted lists, they will stick to one idea per paragraph, which will have half the word count, they will also make use of the so called 'inverted pyramid style', and finally they will normally introduce paragraphs with one-sentence taglines (Nielsen, 1997).

And it is here that usability theory has something more to offer to the concept of metadiscourse since, in as much as these guidelines are addressed to helping the user, i.e. the reader, to process the text as well as to highlight ideas and order materials in ways that the potential audience will find appropriate and convincing (because they suit their reading skills), we can say that these guidelines can be referred to as *metadiscursive strategies*. This essentially is nothing different to what van Nus (1999: 199) refers to when she says that subject lines of business letters can be considered as metadiscoursive acts.

In this way we see how the concept of metadiscourse is enriched by the insights provided by an apparently distanced and strange area such as that of web usability.

Classification of textual metadiscourse in commercial websites

In order to classify the different metadiscursive devices used in commercial websites, I draw on Fuertes et al. (2001), who have explored the presence of metadiscourse in another promotional genre, print advertising, although it must be acknowledged that the classification we both follow is the one elaborated by Hyland (1998, 2000), which I have also consulted. Fuertes et al., however, offer a more fruitful perspective for our subject given the closeness of genres and subject matter.

As is well known, these classifications make the basic distinction between textual, which will be defined below, and interpersonal metadiscourse, which comprises those elements expressing the authors' "perspective towards their propositions and their readers" (Hyland, 2000: 112). However, as the title shows, in this paper I will only deal with the former group for obvious reasons of time and because I would like to focus on how commercial website designers direct their customers in the correct management and understanding of the messages they convey in their pages. I will leave for another occasion, the analysis of the linguistic devices through which these designers try to convey attitudes, evaluation and opinions towards the products they sell and towards their customers.

According to Hyland (Hyland, 1998: 442), the main function of textual metadiscourse is "to help form a convincing and coherent text by relating individual propositions to each other and to other texts".

This main function is carried out by five subgroups of metadiscursive devices. They are: logical connectives, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials and code glosses. Let us examine them in some detail.

Logical connectives

In the group of logical connectives, we find "conjunctions and adverbial phrases which help readers to interpret pragmatic connections between ideas" (Fuertes et al., 2001). However, useful as they may be, commercial websites do not seem to favour their use. In fact, we could say that they are very infrequent.

From a corpus of virtual banks' websites collected at the University of Extremadura1 –made up of nearly 100,000 words (97,804)–, the frequency of the most important logical connectives is extremely low (see Table 1).

Suffice it to say that whereas, as Hyland has shown, the average frequency of logical connectives in academic textbooks is approximately 25 per thousand words, in our corpus the average does not reach 2.5 connectives per the same amount of words.

The reasons for this discrepancy in figures are diverse, but the first one may lie in the nature of commercial websites as hypertext documents. When readers jump from page to

Frequency in corpus of banks' websites	Logical connectives used
More than 50 times	*and; but*
More than 10 times	*in addition* (22); *because* (22); *however* (43); *as a result* (13); *while* (11)
More than once	*therefore* (8); *result in* (5); *although* (4); *though* (1); *accordingly* (3); *also* (3); *since* (2); *yet* (2); *thus* (1)
Not used	*similarly, equally, likewise, moreover, furthermore, in contrast, consequently, as a consequence, on the other hand, on the contrary, besides, whereas, even though, nevertheless, nonetheless, hence*

Table 1. Logical connectives in sample corpus (Fernández, 2003).

page across links, logical connectives, even if present, may be meaningless because they may refer to something the reader has not read. As Spyridakis (2000: 366) points out:

> Hypertext ... removes much of the coherence and cohesion that printed texts have, and places the responsibility for 'connecting the dots' on the reader. Writers can help readers find coherence and retain information by placing known, or old information before new information.

A second reason has to do with the specialist audiences commercial websites, among them those we call Business to Business, are intended for. As Hyland (2000: 117) has put forward "texts intended for a specialist audience... have fewer textual devices."

Finally, the guidelines advocated by usability experts emphasize, as we have already mentioned, the use of bulleted lists to facilitate scannability and this implies the removal of connectors.

Frame markers

The second group of devices is the one consisting of frame markers, and these can be defined as "explicit references to text boundaries or elements of schematic text structure, either introducing shifts in the discourse or preparing for the next step in the argument" (Hyland, 1998: 443). They provide information or clues about "longer elements of the discourse" and their main functions are sequencing, indicating topic shift and announcing discourse goals.

While elements indicating topic shift are very rare or even non-existent, we can find some examples of the sequencing type. They mainly consist of numbering or listing elements (a, b, c, or 1, 2, 3) to indicate the order in which the text should be read.
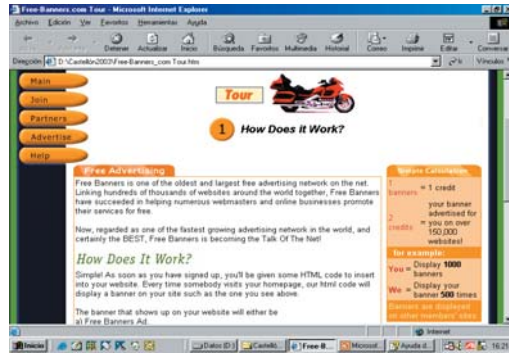
Figure 3. Free-banners website.

Their metadiscoursive role is most prominent in what companies call 'guided tours', which is step-by-step explanation of how the novice customer should use the website (See Figure 3). As Carter (2003: 17) suggests, this and other travel metaphors may be the language web designers use to guide customers through the web site.

The use of sequencing elements is also very important in pages related to business transactions, for example in pages establishing the terms of use or the conditions of the contract and in pages where the actual purchase of the product is performed.

It is also possible that traditional sequencers may be giving way to new metadiscoursive strategies, more appropriate to the digital medium. For example, I would suggest that an expression like "Welcome to," which appears at the top of the home page of many commercial websites, could be considered as a textual element indicating to the reader or customer that he or she is on the initial page of a company.

Obviously, this use can only be explained in terms of the essentially non-sequential nature of Web documents given that the page through which a customer may reach the website may not be the home page and customers need an indication of when they are at the beginning.

On the other hand, the remaining frame marking function, that of announcing discourse goals (traditionally expressed in academic texts with expressions such as 'my purpose is'; 'the aim'; 'I intend', etc.) are not used at all, among other reasons because in commercial websites the author persona disappears.

This does not mean that this function is not fulfilled. In fact, usability researchers have identified an element in web pages, which very easily may be said to replace these devices. I refer to Nielsen's (2001) taglines, which have a capital role in commercial websites. See the explanation he gives:

> Well designed B2C sites can easily explain their products and services in a text that is short enough that users will actually read it online. AutoTrader.com, for example, tells us to 'search the largest inventory of cars and trucks on the Internet. More than 1.5 million listings updated daily.' Given this information, **most people can figure out what the site does**. (my emphasis)

Sometimes, however, the authors opt for the open expression of the goals of a web page. See the following examples:

> This site map will link you to the different areas of the Dioran web site.
> (www.dioran.com/guide/info/setguide.jsp)

> Upright Communications has one purpose –to evolve your traditional marketing practices into an efficient, integrated, and results-driven approach that builds lasting relationships across a global network.
> (http://www.walkupright.com/)

The linguistic structures that predominate in this group are imperatives (search, find, read, etc), which directly address the customer in a similar vein to advertising, and nominalizations, with a predominance of abstract nouns which are used to summarize the page content (information, fact, results, etc). As is well known, Winter (1992) called these nouns metalanguage nouns.

Endophoric markers

Endophoric markers are "expressions referring to other parts of the text" (Hyland, 1998: 443), which draw the customer's attention to important material in the website.

> Users may request no further mailings; **see the "how to refuse further mailings" subsection below**. Demographic and profile data is also collected at our site. We use this data to tailor our visitor's experience at our site, showing them content in which we think they might be interested.
> (everbank.com/online-banking/welcome/hme_pvt_pop)

> Please **refer to the disclosures page in** the **customer service section** of our site for more information.
> (www.ascenciabank.com/CustomerService/CommonQuestions.asp)(my emphasis)

They are not widely used and, generally speaking, the most frequent of all are those using the spatial metaphor (like 'see below' or 'see above'), rather than the temporal one (earlier/later). Their role, however, is not prominent since they tend to appear less frequently in home pages and more in deeper genres such as *privacy statements* or *Frequently Asked Questions*.

With regard to markers making reference to pictures and other graphic material, we could say that the preferred option is to let pictures speak for themselves in a very similar fashion to the language of advertising, where non-textual material reinforces the persuasive message by telling a story of its own. That is why we do not see many expressions like "see picture" or "figure 1," etc.

Evidentials

The function fulfilled by evidentials –"to indicate the source of textual information which originates outside the text" (Hyland, 1998: 443)– is indeed dear to a medium like the Web, which has been labelled as the paradigm of intertextuality.

Figure 4. PIMCO group 'about us' page.

Commercial websites establish intertextuality by making reference to non-digital genres known to the customer. Thus, some pages clearly resemble business promotional print

letters (Figure 4), or brochures (Figure 5), others imitate print advertisements (Figure 6), others reproduce the layout of an online newspaper (Figure 7) to give customers the impression they are receiving objective information. Finally, a home page like Nokia's is designed to suggest that the customer is watching a film.

Figure 5. Eboyscouts homepage. Figure 6. Pepsi homepage.

Figure 7. Novartis homepage.

Code glosses

Code glosses are expressions which "supply additional information" to ensure that the reader understands the text.

They are not very frequent, although in relative terms they can be considered the most common metadiscoursive class. In the corpus cited above (Fernández, 2003), we found 1.5 code glosses per 1,000 words which is not far from the approximately 5 glosses per 1,000 that Ken Hyland found in his corpus of academic textbooks.

The most repeated expression in this corpus is 'for example' (84 instances), which is in line with usability recommendations to use specific language. "Show examples of real site content. Don't just describe what lies beneath the home page. Specifics beat abstractions" says Nielsen (2002).

As a summary we could say that in general terms the "convincing" and "coherent" text, which commercial websites form, seems to rely on all five mechanisms of metadiscourse but, at the same time, it would also be possible to claim that the description of the elements is different from those we find in other text types, academic articles for example, and that they are present on a smaller scale than expected, even though there are certain exceptions like endophoric markers and code glosses because they constitute local coherence.

One explanation for the latter fact could be that the conventionalised structure of commercial websites, which as shown at the beginning reproduces the move structure of sales promotional letters, makes metadiscourse less necessary. Coherence is derived from the customers' previous knowledge and extra linguistic help may not be needed.

Hypertextual metadiscourse

The picture of metadiscursive elements present in commercial websites will not be complete, however, until we add another group of metadiscursive devices, greater in number, which will make up for the scarcity of more traditional elements.

This group, which I will call hypertextual metadiscourse, consists mainly of links, which from my point of view have an undoubted metadiscursive function as the following quotation shows:

> Links can also add coherence in a hypertext document, providing direct connections from one node to the next, somewhat like a footnote marker or a 'see above' note in the text. (Carter, 2003: 20)

In other words, links may function as evidentials or as endophoric markers, depending on whether we interpret them as referring to other texts or to other parts of a text. The reasons is simple: they provide readers with cues as to the place where the page being read coheres with other pages or with other parts of the page. As Trigg & Weiser (1986, cited in Haas & Grams, 1998: 101) put it, links "delineate the

author's view of the rhetorical functions of the node," a definition that could not be closer to the concept of metadiscourse.

The classification of links provides further support for this hypothesis and we only have to select one of the many possible classifications of links, for example the one provided by Haas & Grams (1998), to understand it.

Thus, *navigation links* –i.e. "those articulating, … enabling the reader to move from one part to another" (Haas & Grams, 1998: 103)– would have an obvious endophoric marking function because they refer the reader to other parts of the text (see table 2). Of those, the ones preferred by commercial websites have a more dynamic character, usually represented by the use of imperatives, like for example <u>jump</u> or <u>go</u>.

endophoric links	
<u>top of page</u>	<u>return to top</u>
<u>to section</u>	<u>previous</u>
<u>next</u>	<u>beginning of document</u>
<u>next page</u>	<u>jump to</u>
<u>go</u>	

Table 2. Endophoric markers.

Another group of links, *viz. expansion links,* are similar to code glosses as they are meant to serve as side trips or "optional digressions," which allow the reader, or the customer in our case, to obtain definitions, explanations or examples on the current topic by showing pictures, illustrations, diagrams, audioclips, and dictionary definitions. Some anchors for these links would be: <u>definition</u>, <u>more info</u>, <u>full story</u>, <u>pictures</u>, or <u>more pictures</u>.

Finally, *resource links*, which connect pages outside the actual web site, could easily be associated with evidentials because they refer the reader or customer to the source of information from other texts.

The consideration of links as metadiscourse will, in fact, explain why in a new medium like the Web, where there is "a greater navigation load on the reader than with linear text" (Foltz, 1996: 3) and therefore a greater need of linguistic devices to fulfil this navigating function, we find fewer traditional metadiscursive expressions. The place left vacant by traditional metadiscourse has been occupied by a new group of metadiscoursive elements which we have called hypertextual metadiscourse.

The main difference between these two types of metadiscourse, traditional and hypertextual, lies in that in the former the writer so to speak imposes his or her way

of reading the text, while in the latter the reader is free to follow or reject some of the cues or signals that the writer has devised to help him or her read the text.

For commercial websites, this means that we are far from the notion of mass media promoting to a passive audience in a way 'waiting to be persuaded' by copywriters, and are closer to a situation where the consumer feels him or herself to be the protagonist, not only because the language used puts him or her at the centre but because he or she has the possibility to choose the linguistic devices that help him/her most.

In commercial websites "the solidarity between addresser and addressee" (Fuertes et al., 2001: 1305) is thus reinforced because the orientation towards the addressee is secured not only by the use of traditional metadiscourse but also by the use of the more open and less imposing digital metadiscourse. Here addressers only provide the addressees with help that is not forced on them.

In practical terms, this means that readers of commercial web pages can save a lot of time, which completely suits them because they belong to the group of Web users that Spyridakis (2000: 360) calls 'readers to do', who are obviously less patient and more time pressed than the group of 'readers to learn'. The preference for hypertextual metadiscourse will address the needs of the potential consumer and perform a clear persuasive function.

However, this would assume that the picture is homogenous, whereas in fact, although further research is needed, the situation may change in accordance with a set of variables which elaborate on the predictions previously made by Swales and Feak (2000).

Thus, one would expect genres such as the site map or the index, but also the corporate home page, which could be considered as the beginning of websites, to have more metadiscursive elements, though of the digital rather than the traditional kind. The fact that they are peculiar to the Web, 'novel genres' as Shepherd and Watters (1997) call them, may have made this transition easier. On the other hand, longer genres like the page 'about us' or 'privacy statements' and in general those genres adopted from paper, 'extant genres', would be more prone to use traditional metadiscourse. Finally, more complex sites, such as the sites of large companies, would include a greater amount of both traditional and digital metadiscourse.

Conclusion

In this paper I have aimed to analyse the concept of metadiscourse and its application to a new field, commercial webstites, which the literature on the subject had not touched up to the present.

However, further research is needed and the main hypotheses put forward in this article will not fully demonstrated until a more detailed study of corpora designed to that effect is carried out.

Meanwhile, some preliminary conclusions may be advanced:

1. The concept and methodology to study metadiscourse has to be broadened to include the requirements of digital discourse as a multimodal text, and in doing so linguists will be wise to attend to the developments of field, usability, with which they have some connection.

2. The use of what I have called traditional metadiscourse is very scarce, although two groups of metadiscoursive elements, code glosses and evidentials, are less so.

3. Links perform a metadiscursive role which is extraordinarily important because it suits the new digital medium, hence the name we have given them, i.e. digital metadiscourse, and they provide web site designers with a very persuasive tool.

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