

## A Study of Interactional Metadiscourse Markers and Gender in the Defense Seminars of Persian Speakers

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to analyze the relation between a linguistic behavior, namely interactional metadiscourse, and a non-linguistic variable, namely, gender in thesis defenses of Persian speakers. Based on the model of community of practice, a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the metadiscourse markers employed by male and female candidates in thesis defenses have been carried out. The data include eighteen thesis defenses of nine males and nine females in humanities and social sciences. The quantitative analysis represents a statistically significant difference in the use of interactional metadiscourse markers by male and female candidates. The qualitative analysis, however, indicates the existence of some similarities among these two social groups in using the types of metadiscourse markers in the defense seminars of Persian speakers.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Community of practice, Thesis defenses, Interactional metadiscourse markers.

### 1. Introduction

The interpersonal nature of academic communication has been stressed in the last few decades (e.g. Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas, 2005). However, such studies are rather overlooked as far as Persian language is concerned, in particular in area of the spoken Persian. The current study, then, is focused on one of the unexplored subcategory of spoken language, namely thesis defenses (hereafter TDs). Iranian researchers have directed their attention toward the written academic discourse (see for example Abdi, 2009; Abdollahzadeh, 2007; Simin, 2004), the spoken academic discourse in Persian presents then itself as a new area for investigation.

Furthermore, the study of gender metadiscourse phenomenon has also been underexplored in Persian language. Adel (2006: 198) emphasizes that gender of the writer could influence how much or what type of metadiscourse is used. This study then aims to redress the issue by dealing with this aspect of Persian linguistic behavior. The research addresses issues such as the extent in which similarities and differences can be found in the use of interactional metadiscourse markers by male and female candidates in thesis defenses. To this end, the paper adopts the model of community of practice suggested by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) with the aim of providing a more accurate interpretation of discourse interaction in contrast to other approaches (dominance and difference approaches).

### 2. Theoretical Preliminaries

There have been at least two approaches for the study of language and gender over the last few decades: dominance approach and difference approach. In the former approach (Lakoff, 1975), some pre-established characteristics such as speaking indirectly, rapport talk, and cooperation are attributed to women's talk. By contrast, characteristics such as speaking directly, report talk, and competitiveness are attributed to men's talk. In the latter approach, the differences between men's and women's talk are treated as a result of different subcultures and different ways of socialization. Recently, however, many scholars (e.g. Mills, 2003) in the area of language and gender, believe that types of practice is the most important factor which affects the interactions of interlocutors. They have employed the term "community of practice" for their study of language and gender. "Community of practice" has strong link with social constructionist

approaches which concentrate on the dynamic construction of gender with other factors such as identity and face in interactions. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 464) define a "community of practice" as:

*An aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations– in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor. As a social construct, a "community of practice" is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages.*

This study will be then focused on the investigation of gender communication based on the model of "community of practice" to explore the metadiscourse markers employed by either gender. Metadiscourse has been defined as 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 with readers [or audience] as members of a particular community (Hyland, 2005: 37). Crismore (1984: 280) believes that the aim of metadiscourse is to direct rather than inform the readers [or audience]. Metadiscourse features have traditionally been divided into textual and interpersonal. However, Hyland (2004, 2005) and Hyland and Tse (2004: 157) propose a stronger interpersonal function for metadiscourse: "...all metadiscourse is interpersonal in that it takes account of the reader's [or audience's] knowledge, textual experiences and proposing needs".

Although the current study has benefited from a number of studies in area of metadiscourse (Vande Kopple, 1985; Crismore et al, 1993; Hyland, 1999, 2000, 2005), it mainly rests on the analysis of Hyland and Tse (2004). They adopt Thompson's (2001) description of interactive and interactional resources as two inter-related aspects of interaction. They divide metadiscourse into two categories: interactive metadiscourse and interactional metadiscourse. The focus of interactive metadiscourse centers on the content of the text and some resources such as transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials and code glosses. While interactional resources focus on the participants of the interaction and seek to display the writer's [speaker's] persona and a tenor consistent with the norms of the disciplinary community. The following table illustrates these subcategories and their functions.

**Table 1:** Interactional Metadiscourse

Category	Function	Examples
Interactional metadiscourse	involve the reader [audience] in the argument	
Hedges	withhold writer's [speaker's] full commitment to roposition [utterance meaning]	<i>might / perhaps / possible / about</i>
Boosters	emphasize force or writer's [speaker's] certainty in proposition [utterance meaning]	<i>in fact / definitely / it is clear that</i>
Attitude markers	express writer's [speaker's] attitude to a proposition [utterance meaning]	<i>unfortunately / I agree / surprisingly</i>
Engagement markers	explicitly refer to or build relationship with reader [audience]	<i>consider / note that / you can see that</i>
Self-mentions	explicit reference to author(s) [speaker(s)]	<i>I / we / my / our</i>

**Source:** Hyland & Tse, 2004:169.

As it is mainly the interactional metadiscourse, that reveals the relationship between the speaker and the audience, the present study is then focused primarily on the gender linguistic behavior related to ways of employing interactional metadiscourse.

### 3. Data and Method

In order to carry out the description of gender-related interactional metadiscourse, the data were collected from a number of MA TDs in Shiraz University, July- August 2011 at the Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty. The time allocated to each candidate to defend his/her thesis was about thirty minutes. On the whole, eighteen defenses (nine by men and nine by women) were selected. All of them were tape-recorded. Next, these defenses were transcribed and were carefully read and examined for different features of interactional metadiscourse. Once it was determined that a given feature qualified as interactional metadiscourse, it was assigned to one of the subcategories. Next, each feature was carefully analyzed based on the context of situation to ensure that it actually functioned as an interactional metadiscourse marker and could be incorporated into the counts. The study was conducted to investigate the role of gender in relation to the quantity and quality of interactional metadiscourse in TDs.

#### 4. Results

Table (2) shows the frequency differences of interactional metadiscourse by male and female candidates. As the table shows, female candidates (FCs) tend to use more interactional metadiscourse in their defenses in comparison to male candidates (MCs). The figures in table (2) also illustrate that both MCs and FCs strongly emphasize their roles as the researchers and the audience as active participants in the negotiation of new scientific knowledge. These interactive roles are emphasized through the greater use of self-mentions and the use of engagement markers in their defenses. Although both groups, male and female, employ the same metadiscourse markers such as attitude markers, boosters, engagement markers, hedges and self-mentions, their frequency order is quite different. In other words, the frequency order of interactional metadiscourse markers in the male group is self-mentions, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers and hedges, while they hold a different frequency order such as attitude markers, self-mentions, boosters, hedges, and engagement markers in the female group.

Table (2) provides the frequency order of each interactional metadiscourse marker in the two different groups under investigation.

**Table 2:** The frequency of interactional metadiscourse markers in TDs

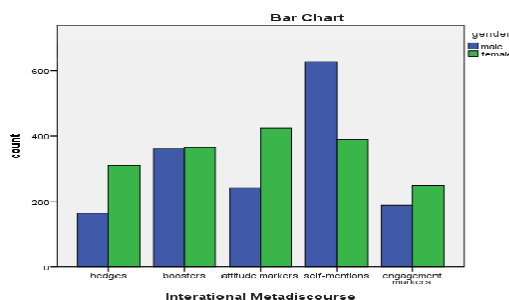
Types of Metadiscourse	MC (No of occurrence)	Total percentage	FC (No of occurrence)	Total percentage
Hedges	164	10.3	310	17.8
Boosters	363	22.8	366	21
Attitude markers	243	15.3	424	24.3
Engagement markers	189	11.9	250	14.3
Self-mentions	627	39.5	390	22.4
Total	1586	100	1740	100

To see if there was any statistically significant difference in the use of interactional metadiscourse by MCs and FCs, a chi-square test was run. Table (3) shows the summary of this chi-square.

**Table 3:** Results of chi-square test of MCs and FCs' use of interactional metadiscourse

	value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	150.999 <sup>a</sup>	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	152.572	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	32.841	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	3326		

As table (3) shows, the observed chi-square ( $\chi^2=150.999$ ) is significant at  $\alpha$  level ( $\alpha=0.05$ ), which indicates that there is a significant difference between these two groups in their use of interactional metadiscourse. This is illustrated in Figure 1. There is a significant difference between the use of hedges, attitude markers, self-mentions and engagement markers in these two groups (Figure 1). Also, Figure (1) shows that both MCs and FCs strongly underscore their roles as researchers. This interactive role is emphasized through a greater use of self-mentions.



## 5. Data Analysis

### 5.1 Hedges

According to Hyland (1996: 261), in science, hedging is predominantly an element of persuasion, enabling claims to be expressed with precision, caution and humility and to meet audience expectations of accuracy and negotiation. As can be seen in Figure (1), women use hedges more than men. Also, as Table (3) shows, there is a significant difference in their manipulation. However, all candidates employed content-motivated and speaker-motivated hedges in a similar way. This can be illustrated by looking at 1(a) which belongs to an MC and 1(b) which belongs to an FC:

1 a)

agar	mā	yek	kelidvāzhe-ye	khās	bekhāhim	shāyad	estelāhe
if	we	one	keyword-Ez <sup>1</sup>	special	want	perhaps	expression
mokhātereh		estelāh-e	monāsebi	bāshe			
risk	expression-Ez	appropriate	be				

"If we want a special keyword, perhaps risk would be an appropriate expression" (MC)

1 b)

aval	in	ke	ghavānin	tu-ye	dāneshgāh	mesl-e	har	sāzemān-edige
first	this	that	rules	in-Ez	university	like-Ez	each	institution-Ez
tāhododi	enetāfnāpazire							other
to some extent	fixed							

"Firstly, rules in university are almost fixed like other institutions" (FC)

In 1(a) the MC uses a modal verb (*bāshe*) and an adverb (*shāyad*) and in 1(b) the FC uses an adverb (*tāhododi*) as content-motivated hedges to show how they understand, evaluate and respond to the utterance at hand (Hyland, 1996). Content-motivated hedges mitigate the relationship between what the speaker says about the world and what the world thought to be like (Hyland, 1996: 258). The candidates use this kind of hedges to present claims as accurately as possible which affect their evaluation in this community of practice.

The candidates also use speaker-motivated hedges. This point can be illustrated by looking at 2 (a, b) below.

2 a)

in	tahghigh	modaeiye	ke	do	no'	avāmel	yeki	dākheli	va
this	research	claimed	that	two	kind	factors	one	internal	and
yeki	khāreji	monjar	be						
one	external	leads	to						

"This research claimed that two kinds of factors, internal and external, leads to..." (MC)

2 b)

tā	hodudi	mishe	goft	hattā	mahdud	shode	be	bāft-e	ejtemāei
to	extent	can	say	even	limited	become	to	context-Ez	social

"It can be said that even it is almost limited to social context" (FC)

In 2 (a), an MC have used 'abstract rhetor' (in *tahghigh*) and an FC have used passive construction (*tā hodudi mishe goft*) to avoid assuming direct personal responsibility for a claim and attribute claims to the data. As Chafe (1982) mentioned that traditionally the passive construction has been one of the principal means of achieving impersonality and distance in a text as it enables the removal of any explicit agency. Overall, by using hedges, the candidates (MCs and FCs) imply that the utterance is based on plausible reasoning rather than certain knowledge, indicating the degree of uncertainty involved (Hyland, 2005). Moreover, hedges in academic discourse reflect the critical importance of distinguishing a fact from an opinion (Hyland, 1998: 445). This behavior should not be viewed as a kind of uncertainty typical of women's character (Ochs, 1992).

### 5.2 Boosters

Both MCs and FCs tend to highlight the certainty they feel toward the proposition being made by the heavy use of boosters (Table 2). Examples 3 (a, b) illustrates this tendency:

3 a)

<sup>1</sup> *ezafe construction*

hoviya-t-e melli	daghghan māhasale	enghelabhāye	san'ati	va
identity-Ez	nationally	exactly	result	revolutions
makhsusan	zohur-e	dulatha-ye	meliye	
specialy	appearance-Ez	government-Ez	national	

"National identity is exactly the result of industrial revolutions and specially the appearance of national government". (MC)

3 b)

chenānke dar	band-e	panj	in	nokte	kāmelan	peydā	hastesh
as	in	part-Ez	five	this	issue	completely	visible
						is	

"As in part five, this issue is completely obvious" (FC)

In 3(a, b), the MC and the FC use adverbs (daghghan, kāmelan) to express their confidence in what they are about to say (Hyland, 2005: 179).

### 5.3 Attitude markers

FCs tend to use attitude markers more frequently than MCs and the difference is statistically significant (Table 3). By using attitude markers, candidates try to interact more with their audience and to express a position and pull the audience into a conspiracy of agreement to the extent that it is often difficult to dispute these judgments (Hyland, 2005: 180). This point is illustrated in 4 (a, b).

4 a)

khoshbakhtāneh	hame-ye	meghyāsha	mizān-e	ghābeleghabule
Fortunately	all-Ez	scales	amount-Ez	acceptable
ro	dāshtand			
Om <sup>2</sup>	had			

"Fortunately, all of the scales had acceptable amount" (MC)

4 b)

moteassefāneh	sath-e	salāmat	dar	iran	besyār	paen	hast	dar
unfortunately	level-Ez	health	in	Iran	very	low	is	in
beyne	sālmandān							
among	agers							

"Unfortunately, the level of health is very low among agers in Iran" (FC)

In these two examples the MC and the FC have used attitude adverbs (khoshbakhtāneh, moteassefāneh) to signal assumptions of shared attitudes and values. Sometimes, the candidates have used intensifiers (kheili and besyār) to convey their attitudes. The following two examples show this kind of manipulation:

5 a)

albatteh	yek	matlab	hast	ke	kheili	jālebeh	ke
ofcourse	one	subject	is	that	very	interesting	which

"Of course, there is an issue, very interesting, which ..." (MC)

5 b)

ān	chizi	ke	besyār	jālebeh	ine	ke
that	thing	that	very	interesting	this	that

"What is very interesting is that ..." (FC)

In 5(a, b), both candidates have employed the structure "intensifier + attitude adjective (jālebeh)" to convey their attitudes and to persuade the audience (Hyland, 1998).

### 5.4 Engagement Markers

MCs do not use engagement markers as much as their female peers do (189 vs. 250). Nevertheless, they use the same strategies to engage with the audience. In a sense, they tend to use audience pronouns, personal asides, and appeals to shared knowledge, directives and questions. For instance, they use similar audience pronouns (6 a, b).

<sup>2</sup> object marker

6 a)

dar	harkodām	az	in	ruykardha	az	chandin	nazariye	estefāde
in	each	from	this	approaches	from	many	theory	use
shode	ke	dar	eslaid	shomā	moshāhedeh		mikonid	
become	that	in	slide	you	observation		do	

"In these approaches, many theories were used which you observe in the slide" (MC)

6 b)

shabake-ye	ejtemāei	ke	shomā	dar	javāni	shekl	midahid	dar
network-Ez	social	that	you	in	youth	form	give	in

"Social network that you make in youth in ...." (FC)

Audience pronouns are perhaps the most explicit way that audience is brought into a discourse. It sends a clear signal of membership by constructing both the speaker and the audience as participants with similar understanding and goals (Hyland, 2005). As it can be observed in 6 (a, b), both candidates have used the same audience pronoun (shomā) for engaging with the audience. The use of personal asides is also illustrated in 7(a, b) below.

7 a)

ke	in	khodesh	mitune	mo'zal		bāshe	barā-ye	vazeiyat-e mā
that	this	itself	can	problem	be	be	for-Ez	situation-Ez we
albatte	dar	āyandeh	inhā	ro	tozih	midim	beyn-e	moteghayyerhā-ye
of course	in	future	these	OM	explain	give	between-Ez	variation-Ez

"That it is a problem for our situation- of course I'll explain them later- in varieties ..." (MC)

7 b)

un	khānandeh	un	tafsirhaei	ro	ke	mitune	az	jomle	dāshteh
that	reader	that	explanations	OM	that	can	from	sentence	have
bāshe	kāhesh	bedeh	albatte	dar	edāme	man	inā	ro	hatman
be	decrease	give	of course	in	continue	I	these	OM	certainly
tozih	midam	yek	matn	barā-ye	inke	shekl	begire		
explain	give	one	text	for-Ez	this	form	give		

"Which decreases the explanations of that reader from the sentence- of course I'll explain them- for forming a text..." (FC)

In 7(a, b), personal asides allow candidates to address the audience directly by briefly interrupting the argument to offer a comment on what has been said. While asides express something of the speaker's personality and willingness to explicitly intervene to offer a view, they can also be seen as a key audience-oriented strategy. By turning to the audience in mid-flow, the speaker acknowledges and responds to an active audience, often to initiate a brief dialogue that is largely interpersonal (Hyland, 2005). As we can see, such comments often add more to the speaker-audience relationship than to the propositional development of the discourse (7a, b).

### 5.5 Self-mentions

Self-mentions seem to be the only subcategory which MCs use more than FCs (Table 2). The candidates show their professional identities by self-mentioning, as illustrated in 8 (a, b).

8 a)

chārchub-e	tahghigh-emā	ma	az	se	nazariye	tashkil	shode
framework-Ez	research-Ez	we	from	three	theory	form	become

"Our research framework has included three theories" (MC)

8 b)

dar	in	tahghigh	mā	barānim	ke	vizheghihā-ye	kenāya
in	this	research	we	want	that	characteristics-Ez	irony
ro	barrasi		konim				
OM	investigation		do				

"In this research, we want to investigate the characteristics of irony." (FC)

The self-mention "mā" in 8 (a, b) reveals the speakers' persona, establish their credentials and present them as original contributors. Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas (2005) state that the frequent use of pronouns can be related to certain contextual constraints of the academic speech environment; secondly, speakers have to adapt to the high

informational content of their talks in a live delivery (Hyland, 2005: 60). Moreover, since the complex nominal subject groups are both difficult to produce and understand in real time, initially placed subjects facilitate real time processing (Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas, 2005:60).

## 6. Discussion

As the quantitative analysis of the data reveals, there seems to be some gendered differences in the use of interactional metadiscourse markers. FCs use interactional metadiscourse markers more than MCs. The only subcategory which MCs use more than their female counterparts is self-mention. It shows that the professional identity of being constructed as researchers is more important for MCs. In contrast, FCs have used hedges more than MCs. By using hedges (content-motivated and speaker-motivated), they try to avoid bare assertion in academic discourse, albeit not being an indication of uncertainty which is the characteristic of women talk in previous approaches (Ochs, 1992). There is almost no difference in the frequency of boosters by MCs and FCs. They tend to highlight the certainty they feel toward the proposition being asserted. A greater use of attitude markers and engagement markers by FCs also reveals that the interpersonal communication for them is more important in this community of practice. So, the quantitative analysis shows a difference in the use of interactional metadiscourse markers by MCs and FCs. However, the qualitative analysis helps the authors to identify more similarities than differences. In a sense, both groups have used the same strategies for content-motivated and speaker-motivated hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers and also self-mentions. Overall, in our data, gender does not affect the quality of the use of interactional metadiscourse markers.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the use of interactional metadiscourse in the defense seminars of Persian speakers in order to discern the similarities and differences of gendered linguistic behavior. The study is conducted both quantitatively and qualitatively to answer the research question: what similarities and differences can be found in the use of interactional metadiscourse by male and female candidates in the sessions of thesis defenses? The quantitative analysis shows that there is a significant difference between MCs and FCs in using the interactional metadiscourse markers. Nevertheless, both MCs and FCs are heavy users of self-mentions. A high frequency of employing this category by the both groups clearly establishes their credentials and highlights their professional identity. FCs tend to use attitude markers, boosters, engagement markers and hedges (content-motivated and speaker-motivated) more frequently than MCs which reveals that the interpersonal communication for them is more important in this community of practice. However, qualitatively, they use the same strategies for showing content-motivated and speaker-motivated hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers (by using the same audience pronouns and personal asides) and also self-mentions. It seems that the power of the genre (TD) and the interactional purposes strongly influence the speakers' performance; consequently, some similarities can be observed in their use of interactional metadiscourse markers.

Based on the results of this study, the claim of some Iranian researchers (such as Aghapour et al, 2009), describing the higher educational system in Iran as a male-gendered organization, cannot easily be accepted; the description of university as a male-gendered organization as it is stated for traditional university like many other old institutions (Acker, 1990; Caplan, 1994), does not seem to be so relevant for the present community of practice in Iran.

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