

Exploring dominance linked reflexive metadiscourse in moderated group discussions

Abstract

This paper qualitatively examines the use of reflexive metadiscourse by moderators and participants seeking to achieve communicative dominance in moderated group discussions. Specifically, it explores how the use of what we call dominance linked reflexive metadiscourse contributes to effective group performance (defined here as the achievement of sustained, on-topic, interaction amongst research participants). In doing so, we identify and map the communicative functions of reflexive metadiscourse onto a stage model of group development. We identify three key stages in a typical group life cycle where dominance linked reflexive metadiscourse plays a seminal role in the outcome of a given moderated group discussion (i.e. the forming, transition, and performing stages). In adopting a micro-interactional, contextually sensitive approach, we question the role of high explicitness as identification criteria in the analysis of reflexive metadiscourse in spoken data. We conclude with a discussion of the practical and methodological implications arising out of this paper and make recommendations for future research.

Keywords: Metadiscourse; Reflexive Approach; Dominance; Spoken Language; Explicitness.

1. INTRODUCTION

The reflexive ability of speakers to use language in reference to themselves, interlocutors, or the ongoing communicative situation is a unique property of human language (Mauranen, 2010). How speakers explicitly achieve this (i.e. the linguistic articulation) and the pragmatic purposes for which they use such references form the central foci of metadiscourse. Early research devoted attention to defining metadiscourse and delineating the boundaries between individual markers and neighbouring categories. This resulted in the emergence of two distinct schools: the narrow school (i.e. that which is only concerned

with explicitly reflexive language) and the broad school (i.e. that which is concerned with explicitly reflexive language but also inclusive of aspects of stance, intertextuality, and evidentiality). Although differences exist between the two schools of metadiscourse, in terms of early conceptual development, both largely relied on the use of written, monologic data (Hyland, 2017). The extent to which early conceptualisations are relevant to other forms of language use remains to be seen. For instance, Mauranen (2012) notes that the key parameters of analysis change when interactive, spoken language is the object of metadiscursive analysis. Although researchers are beginning to pay greater attention to the use of metadiscourse in interactive forms of written communication (Ho, 2018) and spoken language (Ädel, 2010), Mauranen's (2012) claim that there are disproportionately fewer studies of spoken metadiscourse (when compared to studies of written metadiscourse) remains true of the literature today.

As well as a preference for the examination of written material, researchers into metadiscourse have also preferred the use of quantitative, corpus-led approaches. Whilst this has had obvious benefits, there is a danger that 'only those forms the researcher already knows exist and therefore actively looks for' (Sanderson 2008: 200) are considered in the study of metadiscourse. Indeed, there is a need for studies in which metadiscourse 'may be captured in all its diversity' (Sanderson 2008: 200). The reliance on corpus approaches has also caused a tendency whereby metadiscursive findings are presented as isolated sentences or concordance lines, which tends to neglect the use of the phenomenon over extended, interactional sequences (see also Abdi et al., 2010: 1672). In the analysis of our data, we will utilise a contextually sensitive, micro-interactional approach (Gafaranga, 2012), i.e. one which considers the use of language, on a turn by turn basis, in relation to the ongoing discourse goals.

Recently, researchers have begun to enrich the concept of metadiscourse through the application of different lenses with which to view the use of the phenomenon (e.g. metadiscourse and relevance-theoretic considerations, Aguilar, 2008; metadiscourse in the realisation of Gricean principles, Abdi et al.,

2010; and, metadiscourse in ELF strategies, Mauranen, 2012). In a similar vein, we enrich the understanding of metadiscourse by exploring it through the dynamic of dominance. Whilst metalanguage¹, in general, has been conceptualised as an attempt by a producer to dominate the signifying aspects of communication (Žižek, 2008), research observations have specifically noted the use of metadiscourse in relation to interactional dominance (Mauranen, 2001) and antagonistic communication (Smart, 2016). Despite the expression of research interest (Ädel, 2010), dominance has not yet formed the central focus of a metadiscourse study. Although we will expand upon the concept in greater detail below, it should be noted that we do not only equate dominance with volubility (as in Sharma, 2015) but also include a wider range of interactional behaviours.

The empirical data in which we explore the use of metadiscourse to achieve interactional dominance comprises a set of minimally structured, moderated group discussions (henceforth MGDs). The MGDs were conducted as part of an ongoing project into students' experiences on the internationalised campus (AUTHOR, 2017). The project utilised MGDs for their power to grant access to the meanings that emerge from interaction amongst participants. Generating such data relies on the creation of a 'synergistic environment that results in a rich and insightful discussion' (Dörnyei 2007: 144). Achievement of such a state of interaction cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, in terms of our chosen line of enquiry, MGDs are particularly interesting sites of study as the very goal of an MGD (i.e. the achievement of sustained, on-topic, interaction amongst participants) is vulnerable to the kinds of interactional dominance that can be concerted by moderators and participants. We are particularly interested in the function metadiscourse plays in such dominance. Whilst other papers that have come out of this project have focused on the internationalisation of university education and other intercultural issues, this article is not concerned with the substantive content of the conversations but focuses on the explicit linguistic performance by moderators and participants. We also use a stage model of group development to aid the understanding

of the dynamics which impact the goal of getting a group to do 'what it has been set up for' (Dörnyei and Murphy 2003: 54).

In sum, in the present paper, we seek to add to the small but growing literature which examines the use of metadiscourse in spoken language. In doing so, we adopt a micro-interactional, contextually sensitive approach which allows for an understanding of metadiscourse as it occurs in extended interactional sequences. We further seek to explore the insight which links metadiscourse to interactional dominance and how this impacts upon the specific interactional goal of the MGDs examined here. In the context of MGDs, we specifically focus on:

- a) the use of reflexive metadiscourse by moderators, seeking to achieve dominance, within MGDs;
- b) the use of reflexive metadiscourse by participants, seeking to achieve dominance, within MGDs;
- c) how the use of dominance linked reflexive metadiscourse supports or frustrates the achievement of sustained, on-topic, interaction amongst participants (i.e. effective group performance).

In the following two sections, we will outline the major conceptual components of the present study. We will then move on to discuss the data and approach in greater detail. In the findings and analysis section, we will first outline the typical use of metadiscourse in MGDs, followed by a micro-interactional analysis of dominance linked metadiscourse. Finally, we discuss what our findings add to the literature on metadiscourse, and we propose avenues for further research.

2. Model of metadiscourse

We use Ädel's (2006; 2010; 2017) model of metadiscourse which we shall refer to as reflexive metadiscourse. We prefer this term as it distinguishes Ädel's work from the broad school of metadiscourse² (Abdi, 2002; Hyland 2005). The principal strength of Ädel's model is the clear identification principles of

metadiscourse it sets forth. Her model allows for both reliable conceptualisation of the phenomenon, and differentiation from neighbouring categories (e.g. intertextuality and evaluation). However, Smart (2016) criticises Ädel for being overly inclusive of interactive phenomena, e.g. mock-dialogue. Furthermore, her model is closely aligned with written communication and thus reflective of written norms, although Ädel (2010) does, in part, consider spoken language (i.e. university lectures).

Under Ädel's approach, for an item to qualify as metadiscourse, it must refer to either the current communicative situation (including references to the interaction and the language or code in use), or a speaker or a hearer within the current interaction. Indeed, metadiscourse consists this set of metalingual and metainteractional references – subject to two further requirements. Firstly, references to speakers and hearers must involve the participants in a current communicative capacity (e.g. 'I want to tell you'), not as participants in other reported conversations (e.g. 'Last night I spoke to my neighbour'), nor as embodied individuals in the object world ('I went to the shop'). Secondly, Ädel further requires explicitness of metadiscursive references. The concept of explicitness reflects an analytical approach in which researchers treat metadiscourse as 'a linguistically identifiable discourse unit' (Sanderson, 2008: 170). Researchers within the narrow school of metadiscourse have distinguished between degrees of explicitness, i.e. low and high (Mauranen, 2001). Low explicitness comprises discourse items which organise communication and 'indicate the functions of its parts without explicitly referring to the text or the communication process' (Toumi, 2009: 68). High explicitness comprises discourse items which contain overt metalingual or metainteractional references. According to Ädel, explicitness constitutes that which is done in words, such as an explicit verbal reference to a discourse act (e.g. 'I'm saying'), a participant (e.g. 'You just said'), or place in the discourse (e.g. 'As mentioned before'), not paralinguistic factors, like typological markers or tone. In the final instance, explicitness is crucial to determining what is counted as metadiscourse.

2.1. Dominance and reflexive metadiscourse

Mauranen argues that discourse reflexivity is a way of imposing the speaker's authority on the ongoing discourse and that it is 'natural to assume that it is used by dominant speakers in abundance' (2001: 176). Whilst we do not attempt to quantify the use of reflexive metadiscourse by 'dominant speakers', we do build on Mauranen's insight by qualitatively exploring the use of reflexive metadiscourse by those seeking to achieve dominance within a given interactive situation, i.e. MGDs. Again, our principal focus is on how moderators and participants seeking to achieve dominance use of reflexive metadiscourse, and how this supports or frustrates effective group performance. We should also recognise that the achievement of dominance is often the result of several factors such as authority, expertise, and skills, not simply the use of metadiscourse. Likewise, there are communicative situations, like university lectures (Pérez-Llantada 2006), where the extensive use of reflexive metadiscourse does not necessarily result in dominance.

3. Effective group performance and group dynamics

Stage theories of group development posit the idea that small groups which are task based are subject to a number of predictable dynamics (often conceptualised as stages) in the achievement of effective group performance (Wheelan, 2005; Adair and Ganai, 2014). Dörnyei and Murphy (2003), studying the language classroom, note that groups can get stuck in, or skip, certain dynamic processes and so often do not function effectively. In the context of an MGD, this can result in a dependent, highly structured, interactive dynamic in which the moderator asks 'the same question (or list of questions) to each group participant in turn' (Barbour 2007: 2). Although we are not concerned with the language classroom, we use Dörnyei and Murphy's model of group development. The use of such a model allows us to distinguish the various uses of reflexive metadiscourse by moderators and participants across the entire MGD. In other words, it allows for a more holistic understanding of what is going on at any given point in an MGD and how this contributes to effective group performance.

Dörnyei and Murphy (2003) describe four group dynamics (conceptualised as stages): formation, transition, performance, dissolution. The formation stage typically involves introductions, explanations of the purpose of the group and a setting of expectations with regards to how members will work together. This stage is usually characterised by a state of dependency as participants look to the moderator to provide stability and guidance. The transition stage typically begins as members become more comfortable, and a sense of counterdependency begins to prevail. Adair and Ganai (2014), studying multicultural work teams, further highlight the role of conflict in the transition phase as critical in determining the subsequent work culture developed by a given group.

Ideally, the performance stage occurs when having 'resolved many of the issues of the previous stages, the group can focus most of its energy on goal achievement and task accomplishment' (Wheelan, 2009: 250). Failure to reach the performance stage is treated by analysts as indicative of problems or failures in a group's projected development. Finally, the dissolution stage occurs when moderators begin to prepare members for the end, e.g. by signaling the end of the group with an explicit introduction of the final question and by expressing gratitude.

Stage models (like Dörnyei and Murphy), can be criticised for presenting an overly linear and static account of group development. Later researchers, within the tradition, stress the cyclical and flexible nature of the stages (Wheelan, 2005). For instance, the tentative norms negotiated in the early formation and transition stages can be subject to renegotiation later (Adair and Ganai, 2014). It is also possible for groups to regress to earlier stages at a later point in the group's trajectory. Furthermore, whilst the literature has consistently shown groups to go through predictable patterns, the nature and timing of such dynamics can be highly variable from group to group. Stage models have also been criticised for failing to present the actual interaction which underlies the various processes. The micro-interactional approach adopted in the present paper should help redress this imbalance.

4. Data and approach

The spoken data in the present study are a sub-sample of a larger dataset including 15 MGDs with four male moderators and 101 students from all over the world. The students were recruited, as part of an ongoing project about intercultural encounters in the internationalising university, through emails from the International Office or from academic departments inviting them to share their experiences of learning and internationalisation on campus. Students were given a Starbucks voucher of HK\$150 for participating in the study. Two MGDs involved local students (conducted in Cantonese) and two groups involved Mainland students (conducted in Putonghua); all remaining MGDs involved international students and were conducted in English. At the time of recording, they were studying in a Hong Kong university either as regular degree students or as exchange students. Before each recording, the students gave their informed consent that the recordings could be used for research purposes (with names and other confidential information removed). Two moderators were English major postgraduate research students and bilingual in English and Chinese; the other two moderators were university lecturers: one of European descent but with 10 years of teaching experience in Asia, and one of Asian descent who had lived in the U.K. for 20 years. All four moderators were male and aged between 35 and 50. The individual sessions contain one moderator and an average of 6-8 participants. They range in length from 65 minutes to 90 minutes. There was no interview guide but moderators were given a list of broad open questions³ that they could use but not necessarily follow rigidly. They were given the same instructions: that the aim of the MGDs was to get students to talk about their experiences of intercultural encounters in the university. All the recordings were transcribed using the CLAN transcription conventions (see appendix). Only examples from MGDs with international students conducted in English and moderated by the two university lecturers will be used in this article.

The students who participated in the study come from a diverse range of countries in Asia (Korea, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines), Australia, Africa (Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique), Europe (e.g. Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, Scandinavia, France, Spain, Italy) and the Americas (the USA, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico). They were recruited from all majors across the university with the majority coming from business, marketing, communication, journalism, accounting, and various humanities disciplines (English, Chinese, linguistics, history). The university is an English-medium university where all subjects (except Chinese and foreign languages) are taught in English. Most programmes in the university require an overall IELTS score of 7.0, and non-local degree students are admitted based on a written test and interview performance. Thus, we can confidently claim that the students who participated in this study generally have high levels of proficiency in English.

Both authors analysed the transcripts with an initial interest in exploring reflexive metadiscourse in spoken data. We were initially struck by the use of the phenomenon in exchanges between the moderators and participants. Particularly striking was the use of reflexive metadiscourse to achieve dominance and the impact this had upon the MGD. This informed our choice to focus on the interactive relationship between moderators and participants. Later in the analysis, we began to search for an overarching model which would allow for an account of the entire interaction as well as the prevailing dynamics of the group. A stage model of group development (Dörnyei and Murphy, 2003) was, therefore applied later.

Two issues of conceptual operationalisation need to be clarified at this point: our approach to explicitness in spoken language; and, the operationalisation of dominance within MGDs.

4.1. Explicitness in spoken language

Although we apply Ädel's identification principles in a manner that is largely consistent with the approach found in (Ädel, 2006, 2010), e.g. a reference to a communicative participant must be as a communicative

participant, the issue of explicitness requires clarification. We treat certain cases of demonstrative pronouns (e.g. This is about...) as well as certain metainteractional references (e.g. the verbalisation of visual cues) as metadiscourse. This choice could be construed as including instances of low explicitness, i.e. markers which do not overtly refer to discourse (Mauranen 1993). As will be seen, when coupled with the use of a more contextually sensitive approach, low explicitness allows for an examination of what actually occurs in spoken language, e.g. is more reflective of the nature of conversational language.

4.2. Dominance within moderated group discussions

We do not attach a technical meaning to the concept of 'dominance' or 'dominant speakers' (e.g. fixing it to the relative status of a speaker). Instead, we adopt a broad, flexible definition of dominance and recognise it as arising where a speaker exerts power, control, or authority over another speaker or the group as a whole. The respective roles taken in an MGD (i.e. moderator and participant) are conducive to different kinds of dominance. Moderators set the objectives of the research and are imbued with asymmetrical rights generally not enjoyed by participants (Briggs 2002). For instance, on a global level, moderators set the rules of the interaction as well as the discussion agenda. On a micro-level, they engage in ongoing conversational management, e.g. selecting participants for questions and ratifying topics for further discussion. Participants can enact a kind of interactional dominance. Kvale (2006) refers to this as 'counter control' (2006: 485). Our data suggest that such dominance manifests in a number of behaviours: assuming control of the conversational floor, and, conversely, silence – essentially refusing to participate, challenging the moderator, and, much less frequently, taking a moderator role (e.g. directing other participants). Even though acts of dominance which originate from participants can often be construed as contrary to the immediate objectives of a moderator, they can be beneficial to the overall effective performance of a group. For instance, challenges involved in the transition stage (see below) can allow a group to develop conflict resolution mechanisms useful in later stages of development (Wheelan, 2005).

As already mentioned, other papers that have come out of this project have focused on intercultural phenomena, such as stereotyping and prejudice, intergroup animosity, ingroup-outgroup distinctiveness, and intercultural competence (AUTHOR 2017, 2018, 2020). We acknowledge that the participants' 'culture'⁴ may have impact on group dynamics and how speakers discursively enact dominance in this multicultural context, but we argue that it should not be applied to the analysis in an essentialist way (see Dervin and Machart, 2015 for a critical discussion). We posit that 'culture' should be considered on a par with other contextual variables and individual differences to explain how discursive dominance is enacted, but we find no evidence in our data that it should be attributed particular salience. It is not the case in our MGDs, for example, that the Asian students are consistently more reticent, or that American and European students are always more vocal. Although many studies have argued for such dichotomous thinking, and thus echoed the claims put forward in Hofstede's (1991) cultural values survey, we only refer to contextual variables to the extent there is evidence in the data for their explanatory potential.

5. Findings and analysis

Table 1 outlines the typical use of reflexive metadiscourse by the moderators during the various developmental stages of the MGDs. In the formation stage, moderators typically use reflexive metadiscourse to set group norms and explain the role of the moderator. In the transition stage, as the moderator becomes the target of challenging individuals, the main use of reflexive metadiscourse involves the clarification of meaning. In the performance stage, moderators use reflexive metadiscourse in the articulation of questions (i.e. articulations which explicitly refer to participants as participants within the current communicative situation), to provide glosses to questions, manage participants and conversational drift, and, seek clarification. In the dissolution stage, the moderator uses reflexive metadiscourse to manage the termination of the group. This comprises signaling the imminent end of the MGD as well as expressing interpersonal sentiment like gratitude.

Table 1: *Typical use of reflexive metadiscourse by moderators in MGDs*

Group Process	Typical function of metadiscourse	Examples
Formation	Setting norms of interaction	(a) I mean <an> [/] anyone can (.) you know, just talk (b) so really just anything (.) that you would like to share
	Setting role of moderator	(c) so after this , hopefully I don't even need to speak very much (d) you know, I would really (.) just like to interfere as little as possible
Transition	Clarifying	(e) I mean it's just as a non-Hong-Kong person (f) I said local Hong Kong students
Performance	Asking questions/Setting tasks	(g) so my first question is (h) can I ask about
	Glossing questions/tasks	(i) have you encountered any problems like communication for example? (j) what is your experience with the locals, I mean , have you made friends with the local students?
	Managing the ongoing interaction	(k) oh sorry did you want to say anything Derek? (l) okay guys let me move on to (.) a different topic
	Seeking clarification	(m) that's what I hear you say? Right? (n) you mean in Hong Kong?
Dissolution	Managing expectations (duration)	(o) I have just one more question (p) just (x2) one (x2) last question.
	Expressing interpersonal sentiment	(q) can I just say thank you very much, (r) that's the end of our discussion

Table 2 outlines the typical use of reflexive metadiscourse in our data by the participants during the various developmental stages of an MGD. Unlike moderators, participants do not use reflexive

metadiscourse in any noteworthy sense in the formation stage (as they essentially occupy a passive role). In the transition stage, reflexive metadiscourse features heavily in challenges to the moderator. In the performance stage, participants use reflexive metadiscourse to comment on their contributions, to position their contribution in relation to the emerging conversation; as an expression of self-consistency (i.e. self-initiated glosses and responsive clarifications), and to take the conversational floor. In the dissolution stage, and often in response to a request for final thoughts, participants use reflexive metadiscourse to take a final turn.

Table 2: *Typical use of reflexive metadiscourse by respondents in MGDs*

Group Process	Typical function of metadiscourse	Examples
Formation	---	---
Transition	Challenging	(a) these are such huge questions (b) I don't know how to answer that
Performance	Commenting on own contribution	(c) it might sound like a little bit mean (d) this is gonna sound very narrow-minded
	Positioning own's contribution in relation to that of others	(e) I want to say something more than that (f) to elaborate on that point
	Glossing	(g) an example would be on the soccer field (h) for example (.) on Monday morning I had a meeting at eight o'clock
	Clarifying	(i) I mean (.) like I said before (j) let's put it this way
	Turn taking	(k) I have something to say about (l) I must say
Dissolution	(Final) Turn taking	(m) can I (x2) add one more thing (n) I would like to add one more thing

Our analysis shows that dominance linked reflexive metadiscourse plays a key role in the formation, transition, and performance stages, therefore, we will not focus any further on the dissolution stage.

5.1 The use of dominance linked reflexive metadiscourse in the formation stage

In the formation stage, the moderator has a crucial opportunity to exert dominance by explicitly setting the norms of the ensuing interaction. Our data show that moderators used reflexive metadiscourse to downplay their role and to empower participants by emphasising the spontaneous, non-structured, participant-focused nature of the session. Explicitly setting the norms of the interaction in such a way preemptively encourages the possibility of sustained interaction by conferring on participants conversational 'freedom of movement' (Mauranen, 2001: 175).

Example 1 is taken from a group containing nine participants. The excerpt occurs before the participants engage in individual introductions. The moderator is a university lecturer of European decent who has taught in Hong Kong for 10 years.

Example 1

1. *MOD: so basically this is very much about your experience, it's not a q & a
2. session, there are no right and wrong answers, it's all about
3. what you think and what you've experienced and hopefully this can
4. be very relaxed and ah: I really want you to just be yourself

In the excerpt above, reflexive metadiscourse is used to positively and negatively define the interactive situation, i.e. state what the interaction is and what it is not (Sanderson. 2008: 184). At the outset, we should like to point out, that despite the absence of a labelling noun, we take the pronouns 'this' (lines 1 and 3) and 'it' (lines 1 and 2) as clearly referencing the current interaction and hence tying the propositions in which they occur to the current discourse. Similar constructions have been recognised elsewhere as metadiscourse (e.g. Abdi et al., 2010: 1673; Mauranen, 2012: 193). The presence of metalingual or metainteractional labelling nouns (e.g. this session, today's discussion, this group) didn't reflect the kind of

metadiscourse found in our data, hence raising questions as to the appropriateness of the requirement of high explicitness in spoken language. We should also like to add that we see no reason why pronouns can stand in for discourse participants, as in Ädel (2006, 2010), but not the discourse/communicative situation itself.

In lines 1, 3 and 4, the complements of the metadiscursive elements detail the fact that the participants are the focus of the session. In lines 1 and 2, the exclusive metadiscursive comment, i.e. where producers 'explain what they will not be doing' (Sanderson, 2008: 184), negatively defines the MGD by contrasting it with a more formalised interactive situation (i.e. a 'q & a session'). The metadiscursive reassurance that there are 'no right and wrong answers' functions to bolster the participants' trust in the ensuing interaction, thus increasing the likelihood of contribution. The moderator's desiderative assertion in line 4 (i.e. 'I really want you to just be yourself') is an interesting borderline case. It is possible to interpret the reference to the participants as embodied individuals in the object world and thus discourse external. It is also possible to see the utterance as primarily about the individuals as participants within the current interaction (i.e. metadiscursive). Under such an interpretation, 'be yourself' is not a genuine (or even phatic) invitation to do as one pleases (e.g. sit in the corner and not participate) but is very much embedded within the expectations of the current communicative situation. Indeed, we see the utterance as addressing the issue of impression management, i.e. the invitation directs participants within the current discourse to engage in authentic communication when expressing thoughts and recounting experiences.

In the following example, the potential dominance involved in the structuring of the MGD is both downplayed but also explicitly recognised. Example 2 is taken from an MGD containing six participants. The excerpt begins immediately after the participants introduce themselves to the group. The moderator is of Asian descent but has lived in the U.K. for 20 years before relocating to Hong Kong.

Example 2

1. *MOD: so basically I've just got, you know ten questions, it's not really
2. meant to be structured in any way, just really free to, say anything
3. about your experience so, I'll just go through these and let anyone
4. uhm: talk at any time, I'm not going to try and uhm: structure
5. Anyway

Across lines 1-5, the moderator explicates the nature of the MGD with the use of two metadiscursive disclaimers (Abdi, 2012), i.e. 'it's not really meant to be structured in any way' (line 2) and 'I'm not going to try and uhm (.) structure anyway' (lines 4-5). Both co-occur with targeted metadiscursive invitations to 'say anything' and 'talk at any time'. We take the explicit reference to structure in both cases as referring to the ordering of participants, i.e. the MGD will not be conducted like a group interview where individual respondents take turns to answer a question and minimally interact (if at all) with one another.

Whilst downplaying structure, across the excerpt, the moderator both foregrounds the underlying (albeit minimal) structured nature of the MGD and refers to a possible need for greater structure. The 'discourse collocation' (Mauranen, 2012: 170) of the downgraders ('basically', 'just', and 'you know') with the metadiscursive announcement that the moderator has 'ten questions' convey tentativeness. Nevertheless, the moderator reveals that the group will indeed be subject to a set of fixed questions, i.e. minimal structure. In line 3, he further undertakes to 'just go through' the questions. In doing so, it could be argued that the discussion guide is set up like a structured questionnaire. In lines 4-5, the moderator explicitly states his intention with regard to the imposition of structure, i.e. 'I'm not going to try and uhm (.) structure'. In proactively allowing for 'a less than ideal methodological' (Abdi, 2012: 366) choice, the moderator further recognises structure as a contingent need.

The approach of the two moderators in the example above makes for an interesting contrast. In Example 1, despite having the same discussion guide, the moderator does not allude to it and so downplays

dominance. Our data show that the particular session subsequently proceeds along the lines of the initial simulation offered by the moderator. In Example 2, the role of dominance in the simulated interactive situation is more ambiguous. The 'freedom of movement' (Mauranen, 2001: 175) that is granted to the group is revealed as subject to condition, and in presenting himself as potentially having to structure, the moderator is revealed as occupying a controlling role. Interestingly, the data show that a highly structured, dependent MGD, similar to a group interview, transpires in that particular session.

5.2 The use of dominance linked reflexive metadiscourse in the transition stage

Typical conflictual behaviours in the transitional stage include signaling uniqueness from other members of the group, pairing off into separate conversations, asking challenging questions of the moderator, and expressing antagonism towards a given task. The following two examples demonstrate how reflexive metadiscourse features in the transition stage. Our data show that it is used by participants to challenge moderators, and by moderators to deal with such challenges. Our data further show that the moderator's response is key to dealing with challenging behaviour and returning the group to the desired state of interaction.

The following example features a particularly contentious issue in the transitional stage in our data, i.e. the explicit supply of meaning. Example 3 is taken from an MGD containing six participants. It features the most talkative member of the group, Thomas (responsible for 21% of the data excluding the moderator's contribution). The excerpt begins close to the opening of the MGD just after the participants have introduced themselves. The moderator is the same as in Example 2; the student (Thomas) is a postgraduate degree student from Germany.

Example 3

1. *MOD: so I'm just going to have some really general open questions for
2. anyone to jump in at any time, so ahm: really, how [/] how have
3. you guys found the environment at [University name] <as> [/] as
4. international students (2.0)?
5. *THO: how do you define environment?
6. *MOD: [very open, you can take that any [/] any way you want to]
7. *THO: [academic environment? or social environment?]
8. *MOD: up to you, you could just tell us what you are describing and then
9. describe it (2.0)
10. *THO: the hall is straight-out fascist
11. *MOD: <the> [/] the what?
12. *THO: the student halls, that is my spiel that I always talk about and
13. complain about

Across lines 1-9, the use of metadiscourse by the moderator and Thomas evinces their different expectations as to the norms of the interaction. In line 5, Thomas attempts to procure an explicit supply of meaning with a metadiscursive code check (i.e. 'how do you define environment'). He then subsequently builds on the code check with quickly uttered 'machine gun questions' (Tannen 1987: 258) which overlap with the moderator's (procedurally focused) response and can be taken as indexical of interactional dominance, i.e. over-talking. In lines 6 and 8-9, the moderator's use of reflexive metadiscourse functions to limit his role in the provision of help. In line 6, the moderator's procedural answer (e.g. 'any way you want to') functions to metadiscursively transfer responsibility of interpretation onto Thomas. In lines 8-9, the moderator further gives an elementary explanation as to how Thomas should proceed within the current interaction but does not provide the required clarification (i.e. an explicit definition of 'environment').

It should be noted that in a multicultural context (as here), users have been frequently shown as 'striving for greater explicitness' (Mauranen, 2012: 184) in the achievement of understanding. This potentially creates tension with approaches to qualitative research, which see rigour as involving a minimal role for the moderator. Throughout the remainder of the session featured in Example 3, the moderator continues to adopt a procedurally focused approach. For example, in response to a similar question from another respondent (not reported here), he responds 'take it any way you want to'. This impacts upon the

achievement of sustained interaction amongst participants by precipitating constant metadiscursive challenges, directed towards the moderator, such as 'these are the hardest questions to answer in the world', 'I don't know what you mean by that', and 'how do you even begin to answer that'. Wheelan (2005) highlights the role of conflict in allowing the group to negotiate divergent expectations in the wider achievement of a unitary direction. In many respects, the moderator and the group in Example 3 do not establish a mutually preferred mode of operation.

As an aside, the moderator's request for clarification ('the what?' line 11) is interesting in terms of metadiscourse. We regard it as having metadiscursive status. The determiner ('the') and the pronoun ('what') function to contextually index a specific aspect of the previous utterance that is not clearly communicated (i.e. the subject). To be clear, we are not simply treating the pronoun 'what' as a case of fuzzy encapsulation (Moreno, 2004), but as indexical of incomprehensible communication in spoken language. Thomas clearly understands the request and supplies the required clarification in line 12. Again, under an approach which requires highly explicit metadiscursive forms (e.g. Smart, 2016), the marker would not be admissible as metadiscourse.

The moderator's approach in the example above can be contrasted with that of the moderator in the following example. Example 4 is taken from an MGD containing nine participants. It begins as the moderator introduces a new cognitive task: asking the participants to grade their overall experience as international students. The moderator is the same as in Example 1; the student (Danny) is an American exchange student who, at the time of recording, had spent almost a year in Hong Kong.

Example 4

1. *MOD: if you could give it a grade?
2. *DAN: why do we have to do that?

3. *MOD: no I mean, think, not in terms of give it a grade then but say overall
4. has
 it been very good, good, reasonably good, not so good, I mean
 overall
5. no [x3] forget about giving it a grade, give it an assessment which
6. would give yourself and us an idea about this whole experience (1.0)
7. whether it was very good, reasonably good, good, below average,
8. whatever (2.0)
9. *DAN: everything that has happened, ah: good or bad, has made me into
10. *DAN: a more reflective person and I have learnt from it and I'd say the
11. majority of things that have happened were very good, very
 stimulating
12. *MOD: Yeah
13. *DAN: I mean the bad things really stand out
14. *MOD: what are the bad things that have stood out?
15. *DAN: I mean what we talked about today, the teaching
16. *MOD: okay, okay

In line 2, Danny boldly challenges the moderator by making a literal request for the rationale behind the task ('why do we have to do that?'). We regard Danny's request as a metadiscursive comment indexical of the current interaction: the pronoun 'we' is taken as inclusively referring to the group as participants within the current interaction, the modal predicate 'have to do that' is taken as referring to the discursive task required of the group. In line 3, the moderator immediately responds with a metadiscursive act of clarification ('I mean'). In line 4, he uses the metadiscursive marker a second time to modify his position. As an aside, the use of 'I mean' in close succession, as in lines 3 and 4, may also function as a floor holding device (Mauranen, 2012) similar to an explicit act of saying.

The subtle shifts in the metadiscursive personal pronouns are interesting in terms of the way the participants explicitly align as communicators in the achievement of immediate interactive goals. Across the excerpt, the moderator and Danny essentially switch positions. In line 2, Danny's use of the inclusive pronoun 'we' positions the metadiscursive challenge as one made on behalf of the group. This sets up an 'us' versus 'you' dynamic with regards to the group vis-à-vis the moderator and creates a risk that the

group could withdraw cooperation and join Danny's challenge thus, potentially compromising effective group performance. In line 3, the moderator initially responds as an isolated individual (note the use of the first person pronoun in the explicit clarification markers). However, in line 6, he indexes the respondent as an individual speaker ('you' and 'yourself'). He also indexes himself and the other participants as collective listeners (note the use of the inclusive pronoun 'us'). Danny subsequently responds with the use of the personal pronoun 'I' in the first three metadiscursive devices in lines 10, 13 and 15. Interestingly, in the metadiscursive anaphoric construction in line 14 ('what we talked about today'), Danny uses an inclusive pronoun ('we'). The use of such a pronoun could be taken as recognition of solidarity with the moderator and as a signal that the process of individuation has subsided. After one more turn by Danny (not reported here), the group resume a state of sustained interaction (i.e. evaluatively discussing their overall experience as international students).

5.3 The use of dominance linked reflexive metadiscourse in the (non)performance stage

As already mentioned, in the performance stage, the group should ideally be working well with members constructively engaged in a seemingly spontaneous conversation. However, group dynamics can occur such that the performance stage is heavily directed by the moderator and characterised by low engagement. The following examples highlight the function of metadiscourse in both scenarios.

In a relatively unstructured MGD, there is ample opportunity for the group to veer into off-topic conversation, particularly if the group is enthused and energetic. The use of reflexivity to shift topics and manage discourse flow is well documented in both monologic (Adel, 2006) as well as dialogic/polylogic (Smart, 2016) communicative situations. Our data show that reflexive metadiscourse offers a means to shift topics when conversational drift occurs.

Example 5 is taken from a group containing six participants. The excerpt begins as the moderator intervenes to guide the participants from talking about the respective lengths of their exchange programmes to a topic of greater interest (i.e. interactions with local students). The moderator is the same as in Examples 2 and 3.

Example 5

1. *MOD: I mean I'm just going to <go back> to [x3] the, local students so,
2. apart from classes in your course, I mean have you managed to
3. [/] are there many opportunities for you to sort of ahm: you know,
4. interact and mix with locals, <have you> [/] have you made friends
5. with any locals?

In line 1, the use of reflexive metadiscourse frames the subsequent question. The moderator first uses a metadiscourse marker ('I mean') to take the floor (he was not clarifying or modifying any previous statement), and a metadiscursive anaphoric construction which reintroduces a topic previously discussed, i.e. local students. In line 2, the moderator uses the metadiscursive 'I mean' a second time perhaps as a means of holding the floor (as discussed in Example 4 above). Although the moderator in the example above uses tentative language (e.g. the modifier 'just') which could be construed as tentatively paving the way for the question, the ability to exert such dominance exposes his ultimate control over the group. The supposed *laize-faire* nature of the session is revealed as somewhat illusive in such instances of conversational management as moderators direct their 'interlocutor's attention towards the speaker's topics and points of focus and, at the same time, away from other potential topics and foci' (Mauranen, 2001: 170).

The following two examples are taken from the same session. This MGD is the only one in all of the groups, in which a talkative individual, Clare, an exchange student from the U.S.A, dominates the floor. Excluding the moderator's contribution, Clare's contribution accounts for 37% of the data (5,314 words of 14,306);

question'). Moving from the use of subtle signals to explicit conversational management allows the moderator to shift the topic and arguably prevents Clare from further occupying the conversational floor.

In lines 8-13, the moderator articulates the next line of enquiry. In line 14, Clare interjects in order to self-censor. The turn is notable in several respects. Clare uses a metadiscursive expression and explicitly directs the other participants ('I'll ask somebody to start this'). In doing so, she effectively takes a moderator role for herself. Clare was the only respondent in the MGD to use metadiscursive expressions in this way. Such an act could be construed as a threat to the moderator (i.e. as a usurpation of his power) as well as that of the other members of the group (i.e. does she have the right to direct the other participants?). In line 14, Clare provides a grounder explanation: 'cus I talk a lot'. We see this as a potential reference to both her general behavioural tendency as well as a reference to her behaviour in the current conversation (hence a metadiscursive reference that she effectively uses to negotiate power). In line 16, the moderator once again engages in metadiscursive conversational management in the selection of another respondent ('shall we go to' clearly indexes the current interaction). The use of reflexive metadiscourse thus allows the moderator to manage Clare's contribution, albeit temporarily. Indeed, as we can see in the following example, later in the session, the moderator indulges Clare's relative monopoly of the floor.

In Example 7, the moderator deals with a talkative individual, Clare, and a reticent individual, Steven. All three use reflexive metadiscourse in the negotiation of their conversational roles. The following excerpt occurs later in the session than the excerpt featured in Example 6. It begins with a question regarding the transformational experience of spending time in Hong Kong as an exchange student. The moderator is the same as in Examples 2, 3, 5 and 6; the students are Clare, the American exchange student from Example 6, and Steven, an exchange student from Singapore.

Example 7

1. *MOD: has being in Hong Kong changed <who> [/] who you are (1.0), how
2. you're gonna deal with things in the future?
3. *CLA: I've got a lot in response so I'll let everybody else go first
4. *MOD: [laughs] okay (3.0).
5. *CLA: or not
6. *MOD: [laughs]
7. *CLA: [laughs]
8. *MOD: I'll [x 3] <stare> [/] stare out people, I mean, I'll start with Steven,
what
9. do you think, Hong Kong's (1.0) <maybe> [/] maybe has xxx
10. *STE: I think, I need more time to think about this question
11. *MOD: this is very deep question
12. *STE: I have not, thought of this before
13. *MOD: and when you leave Hong Kong, has Hong Kong done something to
14. you (1.0) that you think might have changed you?
15. *CLA: I'm going to enjoy my personal space when I go home (1.0) a lot
more.
16. *MOD: I'll [x 3] let you talk about that cus I think xxx
17. *CLA: [laughs]
18. *MOD: how has it changed your personal perspective?
19. *CLA: ahm: I've become a more suf- [//] self-sufficient person I think
20. Overall

[omit 31 turns in which Clare, with minimal backchannels from the moderator, details her experience of learning to be self-sufficient]

The excerpt above begins with a similar series of turns to that found in Example 6, i.e.

Clare answers a question with a self-censoring act, which also involves the assumption of a moderation role. Clare's utterance in line 3 is particularly interesting in two respects. Firstly, the opening metadiscursive announcement functions not only as a grounder explanation for the subsequent directive but also allows her to negotiate a kind of conversational credit to be spent later. In other words, it allows for her specific contribution to be temporarily held in abeyance but not ignored. Secondly, the force of her utterance is arguably stronger than the request in Example 6, in that it is permission granting vis-à-vis the other participants ('I'll let everybody go first'). In line 4, the moderator acknowledges her act of self-censorship.

This is followed by a three-second pause in which no participant elects to answer the moderator's question.

After indulging in an episode of shared humour with Clare regarding the group's silence, in lines 8-9, the moderator uses reflexive metadiscourse to elicit participation from other members of the group. He first reflexively verbalises his use of an interactional cue (i.e. visual gaze). The explicit references to visual gaze (i.e. 'I'll stare') are regarded as metainteractional. Ädel (2010: 81) discusses the use of visual references to direct audience attention. We see the verbalization of visual cues in the example above as an attempt to elicit a response from an otherwise unresponsive group. The moderator then changes tact, indicated by the metadiscursive use of 'I mean' (Mauranen, 2012), and explicitly selects an individual respondent, i.e. Steven. At this point in the conversation, Steven's overall contribution accounts for just 8% of the data. In line 10, Steven metadiscursively negotiates (note the explicit metalingual reference 'this question') a respite from having to answer immediately. Elsewhere in the conversation, not reported here, Steven also uses reflexive metadiscourse to negotiate an abstention, i.e. 'I think I have shared my part'. In line 11, the moderator metadiscursively comments upon the nature of the question ('it is quite a deep question') effectively granting Steven the desired pass. Interestingly, this does not precipitate a greater contribution by Steven later in the discussion. When he answers the question; he does so with a minimal response ('I think it hasn't changed me much'). In violation of her earlier injunction, in line 15, Clare responds to the moderator's question. In line 16, the moderator, structurally echoing Clare's earlier act of self-censorship metadiscursively grants her permission to proceed ('I'll let you talk about that'). The data show that Clare's further occupation of the conversational floor does not increase participation from the wider group.

6. Discussion and conclusion

In the present paper, we analysed the use of reflexive metadiscourse in MGDs. We explored how use of the discourse phenomenon reflected dominance and how this supported or frustrated effective group performance. As stated at the outset, effective group performance was defined as the achievement of sustained, on-topic, conversation amongst participants. The use of dominance linked reflexive metadiscourse was shown as a valuable resource available to language users in supporting the achievement of the aforementioned desired state of interaction, as when it was used to set initial norms in the formation stage, cooperatively deal with challenges and renegotiate tasks in the transition stage, and manage conversational drift in the performance stage.

There is evidence in our data to show that metadiscourse was involved in the frustration of effective group performance. We argue that a potential tension exists between approaches to moderation, which seek to limit the involvement of the moderator in regards to meaning negotiation, and expectations of participants in multicultural settings which may necessitate more explicit negotiations of meaning. Indeed, in such situations, according to Penz (2007: 266), 'explicit meaning negotiation may become a more prominent feature of discourse'. As seen in Example 3 above, the moderator's procedurally focused approach clashed with a group that sought greater cooperation with regards to the supply of meaning. The group frequently sought the supply of meaning and the impasse between the moderator and the participants was not resolved. Our data show that moderators in the other groups preemptively provided reflexive metadiscursive glosses when introducing new lines of enquiry which reduced ambiguity and arguably helped avoid the precipitation of challenging behaviour. The use of tentative, indirect language (as in Example 5) to phrase metadiscourse may have also helped quash challenges from the participants.

In all but one of the groups, the moderators used reflexive metadiscourse to manage individual contributions and thus avoided dominance of the conversational floor by a particular speaker. We did not anticipate speaker dominance (through volubility) as potentially problematic at the inception of the project

it turned out to be an issue. Although talkativeness was only troublesome in one of the MGDs, its degree of negative impact upon the objective of the MGD (i.e. to gain insight into how participants, during conversation, represent their experiences of the internationalised campus) warrants raising awareness of the issue. Moderators should be made more aware of group composition and the potential need to control verbosity (however uncomfortable that may feel).

The second implication of the present study is methodological, i.e. whether the requirement of high explicitness in the identification of metadiscourse is appropriate in spoken language. Whilst we recognise the benefits of high explicitness, e.g. certainty of identification, potential comparison across studies, and acting as a stopgap against being 'overloaded with linguistic phenomena to deal with' (Ädel 2006: 27), in the analysis of our data we encountered problems in only admitting highly explicit linguistic forms. The requirement of high explicitness may import a written bias into the analysis of interactive spoken language where different influences are at play. For instance, the cognitive demands of face-to-face communication may put production pressure on the use of highly explicit forms more prevalent in written genres. The requirement of high explicitness may also lead to a neglect of registerial, dialectical, and linguistic variation. Relaxing the requirement of highly explicit forms allowed us to identify novel forms of metadiscourse like demonstrative pronouns as well as several constructions which verbalised visual cues of interaction. Further research into different genres of spoken data may shed light on the relative distribution of highly explicit forms versus those which can be identified as being of low explicitness. Ultimately, this may inform a debate as to whether the trend towards the inclusion of only highly explicit forms is appropriate in the analysis of spoken language.

Notes

- 1) We treat metalanguage and metadiscourse as related phenomena. Ultimately, we see metalanguage as referring to a first order/second order relationship in which language is used to

refer to language. Given the reflexive requirements of Ädel (2006, 2010), we view metadiscourse as is 'an instantiation of metalanguage' (Aguilar, 2008: 57).

- 2) We should recognise that differences exist within both schools. For instance, Abdi et al. (2010) conceptualise the phenomenon in terms of propositional integrity and provide a *how to use metadiscourse* rather than *how it is used* account.
- 3) The questions used in MGDs with non-local students were broad and meant to encourage the sharing of intercultural experiences. They included: 1) What has it been like for you to live in Hong Kong/study at [name of university]?; 2) What struck you the most when you moved to Hong Kong; 3) Did you make friends with local students?; 4) What has been most challenging for you during your stay in Hong Kong?; 5) Do you have any positive/negative experiences you would like to share?; 6) Do you think your stay in Hong Kong has changed you?
- 4) 'Culture' as an analytical concept is notoriously difficult to define. One of the most widely cited (but also most widely criticised) definitions is Hofstede's (1984) conceptualisation of (national) culture as 'collective programming of the mind' (p. 21). We argue against this causal relationship between (national) culture, values and behaviour. Instead we draw on discourse-based, critical scholarship in intercultural communication, which rejects the idea of 'culture' as a causal a priori and argues that it should be seen as a fluid, flexible, multifaceted and ever-changing phenomenon. This social constructionist approach argues that 'culture' is a discursive construction, created, negotiated and re-created in situ as people engage in social interaction (Parker, 1998; see also AUTHOR 2018 for an overview and critical discussion).

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Appendix

Transcription Conventions

Underlined = pronounced with stress/emphasis

[] = overlapping speech

< > [/] = repeated speech

< > [/] = reformulation

[x3] = repeated multiple times

, = short pause, less than 0.5 second

(2.0) = pause in seconds

: (as in ah:) = the vowel sound is prolonged

xxx = incomprehensible

? = question/rising intonation

[...] turn(s) left out

