

SMOOTHING THE ROUGH EDGES: TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF DISCLAIMERS IN RESEARCH ARTICLES

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Abstract

Disclaimers are generally defined as devices employed to ward off and defeat doubts and negative typifications which may result from intended conduct (Hewitt & Stokes 1975). In academic prose, writers also take advantage of disclaimers to remove any probable infelicities that could occur as a result of their research or language choices in an attempt to promote the precision and persuasive power of their text. In order to develop a clearer understanding of disclaiming in research articles (RAs), a sample of 120 RAs was selected to identify and discuss different types of disclaimers. The qualitative analysis of the corpus led to introduce six disjunctive types of disclaimers employed by writers of RAs: *overt* vs. *covert*, *excluder* vs. *includer*, *internal* vs. *external*, *antecedent* vs. *subsequent*, *warning* vs. *clarification*, and *local* vs. *global*. Each has been discussed with reference to authentic examples from various journals. Furthermore, a list of formal varieties is developed along with an opinion of what they typically target and where they tend to occur. The paper concludes with a definition of disclaimers in RAs.

Keywords: Academic writing; Disclaimers; Metadiscourse; Propositions; Quality.

1. Introduction

The rhetorical structure of academic prose in general and research articles (RAs) in particular has attracted many researchers in an attempt to characterize the less visible dimensions of this highly valued academic genre (e.g., Abdi 2002; Guinda 2003; Hyland 2005, 2007; Kanoksilapatham 2005; Koutsantoni 2006; Varttala 1999; Vassileva 2001; Williams 1999; Zarei & Mansoori 2007). Overall, it is expected that analyzing implicit aspects of discourse could provide a better understanding of the nature of authoring RAs, primarily, to the benefit of potential writers, specifically from EFL and ESL contexts.

One interesting area of rhetorical structure is metadiscourse, which can be roughly defined as self-reflective linguistic expressions referring to a communication triangle; the evolving text, the writer(s) and the imagined readers of that text (Crismore 1989; Hyland 2005). The concept was introduced in 1980s (e.g., Vande Kopple 1985; Williams 1981) and continues to develop to date (Abdi 2009; Adel 2006; Hyland & Tse 2004).

Abdi, et al. (2010) introduced a new model of metadiscourse employment taking Grice's cooperative principle (CP) as the point of departure. In this model, metadiscourse was conceptualized through the four main categories of *quantity*, *quality*, *manner*, and *interaction* (see Table 1 below). The model was not claimed to contribute

to the Gricean CP; rather it was adopted as a helpful base to explain metadiscourse phenomenon. It is obvious that the Gricean CP was originally developed to serve a fundamentally different purpose.

In the new metadiscourse model, *disclaimers* were introduced as a metadiscursive rhetorical strategy to enhance the *quality* (i.e., *sincerity*, according to Guinda 2003) of propositions in RAs. Abdi et al. (2010: 1676) defined disclaiming as a strategy to help writers forestall any untenable interpretation that potentially threatens the quality of their immediate and later propositions. To give an example, in "*The findings of this study cannot be generalized to other settings in that only a small number of participants was sampled for the purpose of this study*", a disclaimer (*the findings of this study cannot be generalized to other settings*) is used to avoid any unsupported application. In other words, disclaimers are employed to smooth any rough edges that may have come about as a result of research method and diction choices.

Although widely studied in non-academic genres, mostly from a sociological perspective (e.g., Bell, Zahn, & Hopper 1984; El-Alayli, Myers, Petersen, & Lystad 2008; Erickson, Lind, Johnson, & O'Barr 1978; Hewitt & Stokes 1975; Sarangi 2002), the details of which are beyond the scope of this study, disclaimers in RAs have received little or no attention. Interestingly, this strategy has mostly been a topic of interest and/or concern for researchers in the areas of health (Dodge & Kaufman 2007), advertising (Wicks et al. 2009) and law (Jurinski 2005).

Hewitt and Stokes (1975: 3) defined a disclaimer in non-academic genres as a "device employed to ward off and defeat in advance doubts and negative typifications which may result from intended conduct." They argue that the goal of a disclaimer is to dissociate one's identity from one's words or deeds. Similarly, Overstreet and Yule (2001: 46), who examine disclaimers in the context of general social interaction, contend that disclaimers are "used to forestall negative evaluation associated with a potential interpretation". According to Overstreet and Yule, "disclaimers are normally employed prior to potentially problematic actions, and function prospectively to avert anticipated trouble" (p. 48).

While research in various non-academic areas of social psychology suggests that disclaimers could actually backfire, producing stronger impressions of the unwanted trait (El-Alayli, et al. 2008), their extensive employment in the academic genre implies that they do contribute to the highly valued cause of scientific precision. Disclaimers are also likely to reflect the identity of the users and their awareness of their audience, which are important concepts among academia. Nevertheless, valid judgment regarding disclaimers requires that they be examined from different perspectives.

Several scholars have noted that writers of RAs need to make the propositions of an RA as tenable as possible. For example, Koutsantoni (2006) contends that the writers of RAs generally follow gatekeepers' expectations in order to achieve publication and to solicit acceptance for their claims. Furthermore, Silver (2003) maintains that the affirmations of writers in an article are mostly in the form of arguments, which have to be convincing if they are to elicit attention and support. Hyland (1998), on the other hand, argues that writers often attend to "the potential negatability" of their claims to anticipate possible objections (p. 440). However, Abdi (2009) suggests that while soliciting acceptance, eliciting attention and support, and avoiding possible objections are quite plausible, they can all be considered secondary, and, in fact, as consequences of writers' higher level attempts to follow *quality* and to secure accuracy of their propositions.

Table 1. A CP-based Model of Employing Metadiscourse Strategies in Research Articles (Abdi, et al. 2010: 1677)

| Metadiscourse Strategy | Maxims | Cooperation Category | Overall Orientation |
|------------------------|---|----------------------|--|
| Endophoric markers | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Make your contribution as informative as is required. 2. Refer the audience to other parts of the text to avoid repetition. 3. When repetition is inevitable, acknowledge it to avoid inconvenience. | Quantity | Avoid prolixity to make the text manageable and friendly |
| Collapsers | Avoid undue repetition by using proper referents. | | |
| Transitions | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Properly signpost the move through arguments. 2. Be perspicuous. | Manner | Clarify steps and concepts to make the text comprehensible |
| Frame markers | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Be orderly. 2. State your act explicitly. | | |
| Code glosses | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Avoid ambiguity. 2. Avoid obscurity of expression. | | |
| Evidentials | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. 2. Cite other members of the community to qualify your propositions. | Quality | Build on evidence to make the propositions tenable |
| Hedges | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do not say what you believe to be false. 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. 3. Mark if evidence is not enough. 4. Do not use hedges in widely accepted or supported propositions. | | |
| Boosters | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do not say what you believe to be false. 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. 3. Mark if evidence is notable. 4. Do not use emphatics if evidence is not enough. | | |
| Disclaimers | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. 2. Outline the framework within which you would like your propositions to be interpreted. | | |
| | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Explicitly distance yourself from untenable interpretations. | | |
| Attitude markers | Express your feelings or avoid them according to the norms and conventions. | Interaction | Make participants and feelings visible to promote rapport |
| Self-mentions | Enter your text or sidwalk it according to the norms and conventions. | | |
| Engagement markers | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Draw the audience in or ignore them according to the norms and conventions. 2. Give directions to your readers to follow when appropriate. | | |

An axiomatic expectation of the disciplinary gatekeepers and the audience of RAs is that writers formulate their propositions accurately giving due consideration to the available evidence. Biber and Finegan (1988) note that academics are expected to support the findings and conclusions they present with sufficient evidence. Dahl (2008) points to the need for authors to exercise necessary scientific caution when presenting new claims. Even the guide-for-authors sections of most journals explicitly caution authors to be accurate while making claims and arguments based on their findings. Accordingly, authors make every effort to meet the requirements for accuracy in writing RAs. In doing so, they abide by several established conventions. One common convention is to employ metadiscourse strategies of *quality* (Abdi et al. 2010).

From among several options in quality metadiscourse marking, a valuable strategy which helps writers build accuracy into their propositions is the use of disclaimers. While the other three strategies of quality metadiscourse are often incorporated into propositions which are already introduced and/or developed, disclaimers could be used anywhere in a text, adjacent or distant from the proposition(s) they refer to. Since disclaimers are used to knock off the protruding edges of propositions, they are mostly negative statements. In other words, while other strategies often say what something is, disclaimers mostly say what something is not.

Disclaimers share a functional similarity with hedges in that both are specifically employed to promote politeness and reduce threats, (Brown and Levinson 1978), or to contribute to precision (Salager-Meyer 1994), thereby enhancing the quality of communication. However, there is a main discriminating criterion. Hedges are mitigating devices that adjust the propositions to the strength of evidence, while disclaimers are blocking devices that disallow unsupported interpretations.

In constructing formal propositions, academic writers often inevitably resort to diction which may surpass the intended semantic and pragmatic range. Similarly, academics often embark on research studies using the best possible, yet inevitably less-than-ideal, methodologies which could potentially obscure the results. Such problems in authors' own works and also the other works in the literature normally do not evade scholarly attention. This is particularly important in that recent research emphasizes a close connection between writing and the authors' identity (Abdi 2002; Hyland 2010). Authors take appropriate action to iron out any infelicities as they are invariably expected to achieve utmost precision. Disclaimers, as a strategy of quality metadiscourse, are intended to effectively remedy such oversteppings and remove the infelicities.

In view of the above and to further develop the concept of disclaimers as a component of the CP-based metadiscourse model introduced in Abdi, et al (2010), and also inspired by the studies about disclaimers in other settings, this paper intends to examine a small corpus to introduce and discuss different types of disclaimers as employed by academic writers in RAs. In addition, an attempt is made to develop a tentative list of formal varieties accompanied with a conjecture of what they typically target and where they typically occur.

2. Method

To ensure the maximal inclusion of different types of disclaimers, I closely studied 120 recent RAs from a variety of journals from pure and applied as well as social and natural disciplines¹.

Following the definitions provided by Hewitt and Stokes (1975), Overstreet and Yule (2001), and Abdi, et al. (2010), a list of formal realizations of disclaimers was prepared before reading the corpus. Of course, the differences in the definitions are largely functional than formal. On account of the conceptual nature of disclaimers and non-availability of a formally recognized list of disclaimers, programming them into

¹ The sampling was originally motivated by the objectives of a quantitative section of this research, which is not the focus of this paper. That is why the names of all 120 selected journals do not appear in this paper.

concordance software was not possible. So, disclaimers were identified manually in the process of reading the small corpus.

For the purpose of this study, only a few representative examples that were found to form a logical type were selected and discussed. Disclaimers are boldfaced in each example sentence, and the name of the journal is given at the end of each sentence. Note that disclaimers are mostly materialized through complete utterances and sentences, and the boldfaced parts in the following examples are supposed to be the nucleus of such disclaimers. While disclaimers of different types and functions can be found in different genres, this paper focuses exclusively on the metadiscursive function of disclaimers in the genre of RAs.

3. Results and discussion

A rigorous analysis of the corpus resulted in spotting the sentences carrying a variety of disclaimers. A detailed study of these sentences was conducted to arrive at a typology of disclaimers in RAs. In the following sections, six pairs of disclaimers, each pair viewing disclaimers from different perspectives, are presented and discussed with concrete examples. The limited context provided for the disclaimers may not seem cogent, but as this paper is primarily concerned with arguing for the very existence of disclaimers in RAs, a broader context for the disclaimers has been dispensed with.

3.1. Overt vs. covert disclaimers

An important point about disclaimers in RAs is that most of them are worded to suggest a disclaimer covertly (1-3) rather than to directly mention the disclaimed point (4-6). Academic writers often disclaim indirectly by precisely outlining the scope of their works and propositions, and also acknowledging the limitations of their adventure. In contrast to overt disclaimers whereby authors clearly refer to what is disavowed, in covert disclaimers the audience is expected to deduce and construct the intended disclaimer. That is why usually covert disclaimers are not negative statements. Given that members of academic discourse communities share certain threshold knowledge, such deduction and construction is normally expected from academia. For instance, from the first example below, the audience clearly recognizes that the writer does not consider his\her investigation adequate for the purpose of *elucidating the mechanism*.

- [1] Nevertheless, **further investigations on VODipic would be appropriate and may be helpful** in elucidating the mechanism of Bax-mediated Cyt c release. *Journal of Inorganic Biochemistry*
- [2] Finally, we obtained the data through retrospective recall by subjects, potentially **introducing errors and biases in reporting**. *Addictive Behaviors*
- [3] Nonetheless, it should be noted that these conclusions are **based on uncontrolled, retrospective case reports** in patients who may have other risk factors for epileptic seizures. *Seizure*
- [4] The competence resulting from this language training **cannot be expected** to fit all types of communicative functions with equal effectiveness, even in comparatively restricted academic settings. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*

- [5] In addition, based on the homogeneity of study participants, **the results cannot be generalized** to all women. *Body Image*
- [6] The observed dissociation **does not mean** that responses to procedural and distributive injustice rely on completely distinct neural substrates. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*

Occasionally, covert and overt disclaimers may co-occur. That is, sometimes an overt disclaimer immediately follows or precedes a covert one to obviate any deduction of the function of the disclaimer by the audience. The following examples (7-9) illustrate this point.

- [7] Despite the importance of the study, the findings must be interpreted with caution. The data for different mobile TV adoption intentions was collected from a relatively small sample as well as only from college student populations. *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*
- [8] For instance, this study **cannot be generalized** to other educational settings, **as a relatively small number of participants was sampled** from one Intensive English Program in the USA. *System*
- [9] Thus, **the current data should be considered preliminary** and **caution is urged in generalizing** to other samples. *Brain & Language*

Writers assume that the intended disclaimer will be inferred, thereby signifying the presence of the cooperative principle framework within which members of academic discourse communities operate. It is interesting to note that although the intended function of covert forms often vary from the viewpoint of authors and readers, such a convention is still welcomed by many writers.

3.2. Excluder vs. includer disclaimers

Viewed semantically, disclaimers can be excluders or includers. The former outlines what falls beyond the range of a proposition, while the latter describes what falls within it. Excluders are employed in two ways. They block untenable interpretations (10-11), or exclude exceptional cases (12-13) that do not belong to the category under discussion. Even though includers specify what is allowed (14-17), in a strict sense, they can also be considered as a type of excluders. While excluders are specific in what they disclaim, includers are specific about what they claim, virtually disavowing all other possible alternatives.

- [10] The idea of an activation gradient does not involve associations with positions or between consecutive items, and thus **does not imply** different predictions for number probes versus word probes. *Acta Psychologica*
- [11] However, **it does not necessarily suggest that** teachers believe such practice is working. *ELT Journal*
- [12] Molecular mechanics, semi-empirical and DFT methods give similar results for side chain parameters **with one exception of** the dihedral angle α_2 . *Journal of Molecular Structure: THEOCHEM*
- [13] The results were consistent with regard to the energy industry, **with the exception that** customer relations were also evaluated as important, as well as technology knowledge, business knowledge and skilled personnel. *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*

- [14] The **only** straightforward prediction for SPR that follows from the primacy gradient view is a primacy effect, because the more activated items should be more easily accessible. *Acta Psychologica*
- [15] The weight residue obtained from thermogravimetry (TGA) which can be attributed **only** to the silica content was respectively higher for the sample containing ... *European Polymer Journal*
- [16] Furthermore, our data **merely** reflected the partial situation of inadequate postoperative analgesia in China, ... *Acute Pain*
- [17] **When I say** that the innovations in computerization, miniaturization, telecommunication and digitization have democratized technology, **what I mean is that** they have made it possible for hundreds of millions of people around the world to get connected and exchange information, ... *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*

However, sometimes excluders and includers co-occur for maximum precision, and to obviate the need for the hidden disclaimer to be deduced by the readers (18).

- [18] These findings **should not be viewed holistically** as a strict linear progression from the concrete to the abstract, **but**, more importantly, **as the** development of a range of available lexical choices. *Language Learning*

3.3. Internal vs. external disclaimers

Some disclaimers employed in an RA have internal reference (19-21) in that they refer to the immediately developing paper, while other disclaimers may refer to other studies (22-24).

- [19] Also, it should be noted that **this study included only** two distinctive task types, the picture narration task and the picture difference task. Future studies might examine other types of tasks by manipulating different task complexity variables in Robinson's framework. *System*
- [20] Thus, the lack of significant associations between social anxiety and disclosure for men **found in the present study should be considered cautiously**. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*
- [21] Nevertheless, **this study did not aim to** identify all metaphors in the corpus but rather to shed light on the textbook metaphors and some other metaphors used in business discourse so as to find possible similarities. *English for Specific Purposes*
- [22] However, **they conclude, this does not imply that** 'task characteristics might have a DETERMINISTIC impact on performance'. *Language Teaching*
- [23] However, **in their study**, the accented condition included **only** stressed syllables, whereas the unaccented condition included both stressed and unstressed syllables, which might have given rise to more extreme accent-induced differences. *Journal of Phonetics*
- [24] **Patthey-Chavez and Ferris (1997)**, on the other hand, **only** examined a subset of content exchanges in their study, and Goldstein and Conrad (1990) did not distinguish between language and content exchanges, **so it may be premature** to say attention to content will always generate more learner participation. *Journal of Second Language Writing*

External disclaimers could be originally stated on the part of the cited researchers and reiterated in the citing writers' study (22). However, occasionally the citing writers

add their own disclaimers to other studies. The newly added disclaimers could be motivated either by changing a covert disclaimer of the cited researchers into an overt one or by a scholarly conjecture of the citing writer as a result of his/her evaluation of other studies (23-24). Such external disclaimers are similar to a reviewer's evaluative comments which appear more frequently in literature reviews and dialectic papers. Although it appears implausible to think of someone disclaiming on the part of others in the general sense of disclaimers, this is found to be the case in RAs as far as it contributes to the arguments in the ongoing paper.

3.4. Antecedent vs. subsequent disclaimers

Disclaimers sometimes refer to what is stated later (25-27), while more often they address what was already mentioned (28-30).

- [25] This study will examine the growth of lexical hypernymic relations in L2 learners. **It will not analyze** the growth of L2 hypernymic concepts because the data examined in this study come from adult L2 learners, who, ostensibly, have fully developed conceptual knowledge of the world. *Language Learning*
- [26] But **these findings do not exhaust** the solutions to improve the efficacy of FCW. *Transportation Research*
- [27] The **study does not address** how intellectual capital and organizational learning capability simultaneously affect new product development performance. *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*
- [28] **The views expressed in this paper do not** necessarily reflect those of the National Institute on Drug Abuse or any other governing agency. *Addictive Behaviors*
- [29] **This study did not address** the possibility that certain pre-/ perinatal risk factors potentially affect the fetus more than other pre-/perinatal risk factors because there is a lack of basis for such weighing. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*
- [30] The findings and conclusions in this article are those of the authors and **do not necessarily represent** the views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Health Policy*

As noted earlier, when decontextualized, it is difficult to judge whether a disclaimer precedes or follows its referents. However, I wanted to acknowledge the very existence of the variety as it was observed during the analysis. In RAs, antecedent disclaimers are often employed in the *Introduction* section to outline the framework, while subsequent disclaimers most often appear at the end of *Results and Discussions* sections to clarify the already included propositions.

3.5. Warning vs. clarification disclaimers

Disclaimers could be employed to serve as warnings (31-34), especially when dealing with high-stake topics, or clarifications (35-37). In fact, it can be argued that all disclaimers inherently contain some warning or caution remarks, yet by warning here I mean the explicit caution remarks.

- [31] We should however caution that more concrete evidence is needed to consolidate such a suggestion. *Journal of Inorganic Biochemistry*

- [32] First, the insignificant finding concerning the effect of national cultural differences **should be interpreted with caution** taking into account that the study included a small sample of international acquisitions in different foreign countries. *Journal of Management*
- [33] Unfortunately, these results **should be interpreted carefully**, due to several methodological flaws, including their retrospective nature combined with the inclusion of subjective items (e.g. upsetting family circumstances during pregnancy). *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*
- [34] The GEM-CRL **should be applied cautiously** (or not at all) in situations where the macromolecule experiences extremely long rotational correlation times (slow molecular tumbling), for example membrane-bound or immobilised proteins. *Journal of Magnetic Resonance*
- [35] The fact that an utterance is intended as a correction . . . **does not necessarily mean that** a learner will perceive it that way. *Language Learning*
- [36] Significant correlations **do not imply** causality, and associations between factors and performance may well act through associations with factors that have not been measured in this study. *System*
- [37] Although EI scores did not evolve during . . . , **this does not mean that** EI scores cannot change during or after withdrawal. *Personality and Individual Differences*

Warning disclaimers most often appear in *Results and Discussion* section to address the findings of a study as well as any likely applications and implications. Clarification disclaimers, on the other hand, may appear in any section of an RA whenever an ambiguity is suspected. The former mostly points to the internal and external validity of the findings, while the latter could address any diction and argument infelicities.

Clarification disclaimers are very similar to code glossing, which is another metadiscourse strategy mentioned in Hyland and Tse (2004). However, the difference is that code glosses clarify a concept as a whole, while disclaimers are only attempts to remedy any unwanted oversteppings. Conceived this way, disclaimers only contribute to code glossing.

3.6. Local vs. global disclaimers

Disclaimers could be local or global in reference. Local disclaimers (38-40) address immediate referents that occur before or after a disclaimer, whereas, global disclaimers (41-43) refer to one or a group of ideas stated further away in any section of an RA.

- [38] **The observed dissociation does not mean that** responses to procedural and distributive injustice rely on completely distinct neural substrates. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*
- [39] Although EI scores did not evolve during this three-week protracted withdrawal and detoxification program, **this does not mean that** EI scores cannot change during or after withdrawal. *Personality and Individual Differences*
- [40] Although the priming observed here was maximal with encoding times of about 300 ms, **this does not suggest that** all object priming using other procedures would be maximal in this time frame. *Acta Psychologica*
- [41] **In this paper, we do not** explore how the burden of regulations is felt by providers who reduce or discontinue services when unable to meet the requirements outlined in law. *Women's Health Issues*

[42] **The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily** reflect those of the National Institute on Drug Abuse or any other governing agency. *Addictive Behaviors*

[43] Thus, **the data do not provide compelling support** for the idea that priming decreases in our procedure with longer exposure durations. *Acta Psychologica*

Local disclaimers may appear in any part of an RA and address limited ideas, whereas global disclaimers appear at the beginning or (more commonly) at the end of an RA and cover a fairly broader area.

3.7. An overall discussion

As it goes without saying, the two parts of each binary disclaimer type introduced above are mutually exclusive, while the six categories (i.e., 3.1 – 3.6) overlap frequently. For instance, while a disclaimer is either of the antecedent or the subsequent type, it could be both a local and an excluder disclaimer at the same time. In fact, each type of disjunctive disclaimer described above should be viewed from different, yet not necessarily exclusive, perspectives (see Table 2). This issue might overshadow the necessity or even plausibility of developing a taxonomy, yet the benefits of such a tentative taxonomy, specifically for applied purposes, justify the endeavor.

Table 2. The Perspectives and Functions of Disjunctive Disclaimer Types

| Disclaimer types | Perspective | Function |
|---------------------------|---------------|---|
| overt vs. covert | pragmatic | points to the (stated/implied) intended meaning |
| excluder vs. includer | semantic | shows the specificity or generality of a disclaimer |
| internal vs. external | referential | indicates the referent of a disclaimer |
| warning vs. clarification | illocutionary | refers to what a disclaimer wants to do |
| antecedent vs. subsequent | directional | specifies the backward or forward direction |
| local vs. global | scope | designates the coverage of a disclaimer |

All in all, it can be concluded that all varieties of disclaimers are linguistic resorts that help academic writers promote precision. As mentioned earlier, the linguistic and methodological choices that academic writers make when investigating different issues inevitably involve unwanted features that require earlier or later explanations to remove the inadmissible edges. Authors employ a variety of disclaimers to confine the reach of their propositions to the evidentially-supported level so as to ward off charges of overstating significance (e.g., 8), to leave room for further work (e.g., 4), and to reveal the inadequacy of previous studies (e.g., 24). It should be reminded that diction and method problems are not limited to one's own work; rather similar problems of cited works may also be perceived and addressed. Therefore, depending on the nature of RAs and the style of writers (see Hyland 2010), a different pattern and distribution of disclaimers can be expected.

While in non-academic settings disclaimers are predominantly employed to "ward off and defeat in advance doubts and negative typifications which may result from intended conduct" (Hewitt & Stokes 1975: 3), and also "to forestall negative evaluation associated with a potential interpretation" (Overstreet & Yule 2001: 46), most disclaimers in RAs are also used to contribute to the *accuracy*, which is normally expected from the academia and strictly monitored by the gatekeepers. Such a function could be considered for other quality metadiscourse strategies as well (Abdi et al. 2010:

1675). Thus, while disclaimers are primarily used to avoid criticism and ill consequences, it is more plausible to say that it is also the inherent commitment of academia to promote quality and exercise maximum precision that motivates employment of disclaimers in academic writing. Viewed from this perspective, disclaimers are indices of scholarly competence that enable academia to take a comprehensive look at the theme under discussion, and hence take appropriate rhetorical action to prevent criticism on the part of gatekeepers and audience.

It might be useful to develop a preliminary list of linguistic forms used as disclaimers in RAs. Although formal varieties of disclaimers can be roughly observed throughout the above examples, a handy list with a suggestion of what they mostly target, and where they generally tend to occur might help understand the nature of disclaiming better (see Table 3 below). In Table 3, the varieties are placed between three dots (...) to signify that they could be preceded or followed by a variety of language depending on the nature of the propositions. It should be noted that Table 3 reflects the author's conjecture only, and more reliable data in this regard may emerge from a quantitative study.

Table 3. Some Formal Varieties of Disclaimers with a Speculation of What They Typically Target and Where They Typically Occur

| Formal varieties | Targeting | Mostly occurring in |
|--|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| ... the study does not cover the study will not analyze this study does not address this study does not aim to in this paper, we do not ... | the goal of the study | Introduction |
| ... we obtained the data through ... introducing errors and biases the data was collected from a relatively small sample, so the data was collected only from as a relatively small number of participants was sampled, it is not plausible it should be noted that this study included only due to several methodological flaws, we cannot ... | the research method | Method |
| ... the results cannot be generalized to these findings do not exhaust the current data should be considered preliminary our data merely reflected the these findings should not be viewed holistically the data do not provide compelling support for ... | findings of the study | Results & Discussion |
| ... can be attributed only to the only straightforward prediction the findings must be interpreted with caution these results should be interpreted carefully should be interpreted with caution taking into account that it may be premature to say ... | discussion/interpretation | Results & Discussion |
| ... further investigations may be helpful we should however caution that do(es) not imply that found in the present study should be considered cautiously should be applied cautiously (or not at all) in situations where caution is urged in generalizing to these conclusions are based on uncontrolled, retrospective case reports, so this study did not address ... | the application/implication | Results & Discussion and Conclusion |
| ... the views expressed in this paper do not ... | overall views | Conclusion |

| | | |
|---|---------------|------------|
| ... in this article are those of ... and do not necessarily represent ... | and arguments | |
| ... do(es) not mean ... | | |
| ... do(es) not necessarily mean that ... | | |
| ... do(es) not suggest that ... | | |
| ... do(es) not necessarily suggest that ... | everything | everywhere |
| ... with one exception of ... | | |
| ... with the exception that ... | | |
| ... when I say ... what I mean is ... | | |

Caution should be exercised when using Table 3, as diverse formats of RAs across journals could give rise to several varieties of disclaimers, differing particularly in terms of place of occurrence. One more interesting point worth noting about the formal varieties of disclaimers is that they are usually followed by metadiscourse markers of transitions (e.g., nevertheless, however, but) and reminder engagement markers (e.g., it should be noted that, note that). Both transitions and engagement markers discursively prepare the ground for disclaimer statements in that they signpost the addition of a constraining remark to what is (or going to be) said.

4. Conclusion

This paper identified and discussed different types of disclaimers employed by academic writers in RAs. The study recognized six types of disclaimers (i.e., overt vs. covert, excluders vs. includers, internal vs. external, antecedent vs. subsequent, warning vs. clarification, and local vs. global) adding to our insight into this important rhetorical strategy. Formal varieties of disclaimers were introduced and categorized in terms of what they target and where they normally occur, thereby providing a convenient reference for pedagogical purposes. The discussion of this paper helps to introduce the following definition for disclaimers in RAs:

As part of an attempt to promote *quality*, disclaimers are utterances in a variety of linguistic forms employed retroactively or proactively to disavow unintended interpretation, generalization, implication and/or application of ideas, which, as perceived by the writers, are likely to occur as a result of self and others' less than ideal linguistic and methodological choices.

As can be seen, several concepts are built into the above definition suggesting that disclaimers:

- are utterances (complete pragmatic chunks),
- appear in a variety of linguistic forms,
- are employed to disavow (mostly including or implying negation),
- could refer back or forth,
- refer to ideas that could be in the form of opinions, arguments, claims, etc.,
- reflect scholarly competence of writers in terms of evaluation, prediction and precision,
- are felt necessary mostly as a result of linguistic and methodological choices of writers, and
- could address the immediate work and/or the work of others.

It should be noted that the disclaimer types and the accompanying discussions introduced here are preliminary and are primarily intended to help provide a clearer picture of the rhetorical structure of RAs in an attempt to help newcomers to academic discourse communities. The findings of this study can help teachers of academic writing to introduce tools of scientific precision. However, the paper only touches the strategy of disclaimers in RAs, an issue that can be addressed from a multitude of perspectives in future work. Apart from replications of this qualitative study, a quantitative study into the distribution of different types of disclaimers in different disciplines and different genres may be worthwhile. Furthermore, various corpora could be studied to identify which functions of disclaimers are more favored among different group of writers in different communities.

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