



Interactional Metadiscourse in Doctoral Thesis Writing: A Study in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Scientific writing especially doctoral dissertation writing commands a high level of objectivity, room for new knowledge, and involvement of the reader. This is manifested in the way the writers demonstrate commitment and detachment to the claims they make and how they position writer-reader relations. Commitment and detachment in a writer's claims are linguistically shown by the use of interactional metadiscourse markers. Interactional metadiscourse markers are, therefore, important metadiscursive resources for writers to mark their epistemic stance and position writer-reader relations. To effectively achieve this, doctoral thesis writers need to use interactional markers appropriately and proportionately. Using a descriptive analytic design and following Hyland's (2005) taxonomy and Kondowe's (2014) categorization, this study investigated how doctoral students at JOOUST use interactional markers in their doctoral thesis writing. The paper analysed the extent, form, and function of interactional markers in the introduction and discussion sections of doctoral theses deposited at JOOUST library across all disciplines. The results showed that the use of interactional markers in doctoral thesis writing among JOOUST students was skewed. Boosting appears recurrently compared to hedging, with the other interactional markers being used minimally. Boosters were used to persuade readers of the validity of claims. Hedges were used to persuade readers of the detachment from the claims made. These findings suggest the need for awareness raising on the usefulness of hedging and boosting devices in moderating the claims made in thesis writing because research theses are academic documents that must adhere strictly to impersonal and formal writing conventions..

Keywords: Hedging; Boosting; Doctoral thesis writing; Interactional markers.

1. Introduction

Research theses writing as a genre requires effective use of metadiscourse markers. This is because research theses are academic documents and therefore must adhere strictly to impersonal and formal writing conventions for the contributions made therein to be acceptable. In this regard research theses writers need to organise their writing in specific ways and at the same time use cautious language as they write. To organise their writing in order to help guide the reader through the text, writers use interactive metadiscourse markers such as transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials and code glosses (Hyland, 2005). When writers use cautious language, they are

able to moderate the strength of the proposals they are making. Moderating the strength of the proposals being made increases or decreases the proposal's illocutionary force. This is achieved through the use of interactional metadiscourse markers such as hedges, boosters, attitude markers, selfmentions and engagement markers (Hyland, 2005; Mojica, 2005; Vassileva, 2001). The use of interactional metadiscourse devices as cautious language by writers serves three main functions according to Salager-Meyer (1997). First, they help minimise threat by signalling distance and avoiding absolute statements. Second, they serve to accurately reflect the certainty of knowledge. Third, they show politeness between writers and editors.

Interactive aspects of academic discourse that help to guide the reader through the text have been discussed in some detail (Alghamdi, 2014; Hyland, 1994; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Nasim, Tahereh & Mohammad, 2016; Rahimi, 2011; Taboada, 2006; Ying, 2009). On the other hand, interactional markers that deal with writers' expression of opinion and their relationship and interaction with the readers have not been looked at in equal proportion. More attention has been paid to hedges and boosters in a variety of discourse (Alward, Mooi & Bidin, 2012; Atmaca, 2016; Doyuran, 2009; Gillaerts & Velde, 2010; Hyland, 2005; Kondowe, 2014; Mojica, 2005; Nivales, 2010; Salager-Meyer, 1997; Vassileva, 2001). Other types of interactional markers (Attitude markers, Self-mentions and Engagement markers) have relatively been ignored in the literature. Given that doctoral research theses are avenues for researchers to publicly propose new ideas; and the ideas expounded in these theses are likely to support or contradict findings of other scholars in the same field; doctoral theses writers need to employ cautious language as they write. This is because the acceptance of their research contributions depends largely on how they present them to the academic community. The present study, therefore, investigated how doctoral theses writers at JOOUST use interactional metadiscourse markers as cautious language to make their contributions acceptable. The study did not restrict itself to hedges and boosters. Instead, it analysed how all the interactional markers (Hedges, Boosters, Attitude markers, Selfmentions and Engagement markers) as postulated by Hyland (2005) are used in the introduction and discussion sections of 20 PhD theses, across all disciplines, deposited at JOOUST main campus library in Bondo.

This study was based on three objectives as follows:

- 1.To determine the frequency at which interactional markers are used in doctoral thesis writing.
- 2.To classify the interactional markers used in doctoral thesis writing.
- 3.To explain the functions of the interactional markers used in doctoral thesis writing.

Therefore, the study sought to answer the following three questions:

- 1.How frequent are interactional markers used in doctoral thesis writing?
- 2.What types of interactional markers are used in doctoral thesis writing?
- 3.What functions do the interactional markers used in doctoral thesis writing play?

2.Literature Review

Discourse markers provide information at the discourse level and not at the sentence level (Matras, 1997). Therefore, the focus of the functions of discourse markers in this study is based on the text as a whole, which views connected discourse as central to understanding language and grammar (de Beaugrande, 1994; Brown & Yule, 1986; Cumming, Susanna & Tsuyoshi, 1997; Grimes, 1975; Halliday, 2004; Hatim, 1997; Hoey, 2001, 2002; Longacre 1996; Morgan & Sellner, 1980). This is contrary to the traditional view that limits the understanding of language to the sentence level but supports the modern view that argues that textual units have a lot to offer in language use and understanding (Longacre, 1976).

In functional linguistics, where this study falls, the understanding of grammar goes beyond the level of the sentence to the level of the text as a whole (Halliday, 2004). This is because certain factors are needed for the understanding of elements in sentences, which lie outside the sentences themselves but are found elsewhere in the discourse (Grimes, 1975). The essence of this is that dissociating grammatical phenomena from the structure of texts underscores their use. The

importance of discourse in studying language is that it brings out the valuable information that the interrelations of individual words express when they are joined with one another.

Written discourse, just like spoken discourse constitutes a text that should have texture as its defining principle (Brown & Yule, 1986; Halliday & Hasan, 1976). To communicate, every text needs to be cohesive and coherent, and every coherent text has some sort of structure (texture), which ties the segments of the text together, so that the text as a whole is perceived as one unit (Brown & Yule, 1986; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Reinhart, 1980). Therefore, the interpretation of what a writer is talking about is arguably based on how the writer structures what s/he is saying. In this way, a text is not just strings of sequences of language items that are linearly produced and received. Instead, it follows a hierarchy of content, so that as each new part of the message is transmitted, it is not added on the end of a string, but rather takes its place in a complex interrelated structure (Callow, 1998). This points to the fact that every writer is faced with the problem of how to organize and present his/her non-linear message in a comprehensible linear form.

The structure of written discourse is governed by cohesion and coherence of the text. Cohesion explicitly ties together related parts of the text. It combines with both intra-sentence structure and inter-sentence cohesion to provide the total text-forming resources (Graustein & Thiele, 1987; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Hinds, 1979). Coherence, on the other hand, provides an abstract semantic description of the global content of the discourse (VanDijk, 1983). This is because, the meaning of texts cannot be adequately described at the local level of sentences and sentence connections alone but it should also be specified at more global levels (Van Dijk, 1983). It is, therefore, assumed that what is communicated in a text is more than the semantic content of the individual text segments. Part of the meaning of discourse is the relationship between sentences and larger discourse units (Cawsey, 1990; Hovy, 1990).

A text is a communicative event. This implies that its structure is not a static entity but a dynamic one that is interactively produced and processed (de Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981; Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Given that texts are communicative events that involve interaction between the writer and the reader, they can be said to be intentional and inferential (Hoey, 2001). In this sense texts can be seen as a result of a dynamic process in which writers express meaning and achieve intentions and readers recognize these intentions (Schiffrin, 2001). As a result, writers are engaged in more than merely conveying propositional content. When they write, they present the propositional content as making sense, and at the same time present the same content as fulfilling their purpose. Therefore, each segment of text encodes pragmatic information that signals the writer's communicative intentions and contributes to achieving the overall discourse purpose (Fraser 1990; Grosz & Sidner, 1986). The reader, on the other hand, has no access to the writer's intended meaning in producing a given text. The reader's interpretation of the coherence of a text only depends on a process of inferences of what the writer means (Brown & Yule, 1986).

Given that the main criterion for generating effective text is to achieve the communicative objective of the writer, the writer's intentions play a major role in explaining discourse structure and defining discourse coherence (Grosz & Sidner, 1986). The writer is significantly involved in how the reader will perceive the relations between the segments of the text according to his/her intentions. In order to successfully communicate his/her message, the writer seeks to make these intentions clearly recognizable and inferable from the text. Discourse markers are useful linguistic tools for clarifying the writer's communicative intentions. They signal how the writer intends a message to relate to the foregoing or following discourse or to a particular aspect of the communicative situation (Kroon, 1997). Underlying the description of discourse markers in this study, therefore, is the assumption that they perform not only connective but also communicative functions. This implies that the writer uses discourse markers to signal to the reader what s/he is doing in the text and to influence the reader's understanding of what s/he saying. The reader, in turn, uses these linguistic expressions to postulate the writer's goals and intentions, which guide his/her interpretation process. The present study, therefore, investigated how Doctoral students at JOOUST use metadiscourse markers to signal their intentions and influence their readers' recognition and understanding of these intentions in their research theses.

3. Methodology

3.1. Theoretical framework

The study adopted two frameworks: Hyland's (2005) taxonomy of metadiscourse markers and Kondowe's (2014) categorization of hedges and boosters. Hyland's (2005) taxonomy, as presented in table 1, was chosen for this study on the basis that it is considered by Abdi (2011) as the highly preferred taxonomy in modern metadiscourse studies for being recent, simple, clear and comprehensive. This study only focused on the interactional category of this model. On the other hand, Kondowe's (2014) categorization of hedges and boosters as outlined in table 2 was considered relevant in this study as it outlines a comprehensive classification of hedges and boosters as used in academic texts.

Table 1. *A model of Metadiscourse in Academic Texts*

Category	Function	Examples
Interactive	Help to guide the reader through the text	Resources
Transitions	Express relations between main clauses	In addition; but; thus; and
Frame markers	Refer to discourse acts, sequences or stages	Finally; to conclude; my purpose is
Endophoric markers	Refer to information from other texts	Noted above; see figure; in section 2
Evidentials	Refer to information from other texts	According to X; Z states
Code glosses	Elaborate propositional meaning	Namely; e.g.; such as, in other words
Interactional	Involve the reader in the texts	Resources
Hedges	Withhold commitment and open dialogue	Might; perhaps; possible; about
Boosters	Emphasize certainty and close dialogue	In fact; definitely; it is clear that
Attitude markers	Express writers' attitude to proposition	Unfortunately; I agree; surprisingly
Self-mentions	Explicitly reference to author(s)	I; we; my; me; our
Engagement markers	Explicitly build relationship with readers	Consider; note; you can see that

Table 2. *A Model of Hedges and Boosters in Academic Texts*

Category	Type	Resources
Hedges	Type 1: Low commitment modal auxiliaries	May, Might, Could, Can, Would
	Type 2: Introductory verbs	Seem(s), Suggest(s), Appear(s), Believe, Assume(s)
	Type 3: Adjectives and adverbs	Possible/possibly, likely, probably, presumably, perhaps, Apparently
Boosters	Type 1: High commitment modals	Must, Should, Have to, Need to
	Type 2: Adjective and adverbs	Certainly, definitely, obviously
	Type 3: Solidarity features	It is a well-known, It is a fact, We all know

3.2. Data collection

The study analysed the introduction and discussion sections of a corpus of 20 PhD theses distributed across all disciplines as follows: Linguistics, History, Geography, Education Administration and Management, Guidance and Counselling, Educational Psychology, Pure Mathematics, Applied Mathematics, Planning, Finance, Health, Strategic Management, Informatics, Information Technology, Food Security, Botany, Logistics and Supply Chain Management, Agribusiness Management, Special Needs Education, Early Childhood Development and Education. These were selected randomly from the 74, hard copy, PhD theses deposited at JOOUST library, at the

main campus in Bondo from 2014 to 2018. Those not deposited in the JOOUST library at the main campus were not considered in this study. The University had its first graduation as a fully-fledged university with its own charter in May 2014. The introduction and discussion sections of the theses were chosen because it is in these sections that writers of PhD research theses express their stances, make claims and engage readers the most.

The interactional metadiscourse devices used in the introduction and discussion sections of the theses were identified manually according to type: Hedges, boosters, attitude markers, selfmentions and engagement markers. The number of these markers in the two sections was recorded separately in each thesis. The percentage of each type of these markers with respect to the total number of all the interactional metadiscourse markers in the two rhetorical sections in all the twenty (20) theses was then computed.

In order to identify interactional markers from the texts as accurately and precisely as possible, a rigorous contextual analysis of these markers was carried out from a linguistic standpoint and as per the taxonomy adopted in this research. The identified interactional markers were then described in terms of their form, quantity, distribution and function.

4.Results

The details of the findings of the study are summarised in Table 3 below

Table 3. Distribution of Interactional Markers in the Corpus

Category	Type	Resources	Frequency	Total and %	
Hedges	Type 1: Low commitment modal auxiliaries	May	76		
		Might	84		
		Could	80		
		Can	335		
		Would	73		
		Total	648		
	Type 2: Introductory verbs	Seem(s)	07		
		Suggest(s)	21		
		Appear(s)	10		
		Believe(s)	04		
		Assume(s)	04		
		Show(s)	343		
		Imply	322		
		Expect	24		
		Feel	04		
		See	187		
		Indicate(s)	152		
		Tend to	18		
		Suppose	07		
		Infer	17		
		Hope	26		
		Reveal	114		
		Offer	03		
		Help	10		
		Interpret	13		
		Emphasises	15		
		Postulate	22		
		Total	1,323		
		Type 3: Adjectives and adverbs	Possible/possibly	22	
			Likely	30	
	Probably		21		
	Presumably		07		
	Perhaps		04		
	Apparently		02		
	About		04		
	Usually		07		
	Partly		11		
	Potentially		04		
	Generally		186		
	Reasonable		08		
	Foreseeable		10		
	Less likely		23		
Similarly	201				
Is problematic	83				
Total	623				
Total Hedges				2,594 = 34%	

Boosters	Type 1: High commitment modals	Must	03
		Should	18
		Have/has/had to	83
		Need to	27
		Will	23
		Total	154
	Type 2: Adjective and adverbs	Certainly	03
		Definitely	02
		Obviously	05
		In fact	14
		Mainly	149
		Largely	78
		Highly	71
		Widely	61
		Common	15
		Primary	18
		M o r e / M o s t important	68
		Increasingly	51
		Widely	61
		Matters a lot	15
		More naturally	19
		Greater	28
		More likely	72
		Crucial	52
		Wide spread	50
		Central	61
	Most significant	63	
	Total	956	
	Type 3: Solidarity features	It is a well-known	11
		It is a fact	18
		We all know	05
		It is clear that	26
		The fact that	135
		In agreement	460
		Of particular importance	29
		To our knowledge	16
It is our view		39	
Beyond all doubt		13	
A great deal of research		52	
It is important		45	
G r o w i n g literature		131	
Growing belief		14	

		Most well established	20
		There is a clear revelation	23
		It is worth noting	42
		It is not clear	31
		A g a i n s t this backdrop/background	56
		Very little (comprehensive)	121
		If nothing is done	114
		Paid little attention	224
		Little is known	225
		Total	1,850
	Type 4:	Concur	179
	Introductory Verbs	Support	193
		State(s)	21
		Claim(s)	89
		Differs	132
		Observe	21
		Consider	08
		Conclude	237
		Argue	186
		Affirm	13
		Assert	09
		Establish	10
		Accept	17
		Reject	16
		Total	1,131
	Total Boosters	4,091 = 54%	
Attitude markers	E x p r e s s writers' attitude to proposition	Unfortunately	02
		I agree	02
		Surprisingly	06
		Contrary	88
		This is the way to go	09
		Total	107
Self-mentions	E x p l i c i t l y reference to author(s) and/or the work	I	0
		We	8
		My	0
		Me	0
		Our	18
		We argue	21

			The writer/ researcher	224
			The study (present)	369
			Total	640
Engagement markers	Explicitly build relationship with readers		Consider	21
			Note	8
			You can see that	12
			Look at	19
			As shown	84
			Total	144
Total interactional markers	other	891 = 12%		
T o t a l		7,576		
Interactional Markers in the Corpus				

5. Discussion

As the data in Table 3 shows, doctoral theses writers in JOOUST use boosters more than any other type of interactional markers. A total of 7576 interactional markers were identified from the corpus distributed as follows:

Hedges	2,594	34%
Boosters	4,091	54%
Attitude markers	107	
Self-mentions	640	12%
Engagement markers	144	

The fact that doctoral theses writers at JOOUST use boosters more (at 54%) than any other type of metadiscourse markers to interact with their readers, and examiners by extension, may not be surprising. Thesis writing is part of an examination process for doctoral students in JOOUST and Kenya at large. In Kenya, PhD studies have been being conducted and assessed mainly through the research component only that culminates into thesis writing. It is only in the recent time that PhD studies in Kenya are starting to involve the course work component. For doctoral thesis writers to earn the PhD degree, they must write a research thesis that is assessed by experts in the field of study and then defended before a board of examiners, who are also experts in research. To convince the examiners in both cases, doctoral thesis writers adopt defensive stances both in their writing and in the oral examination during defences. In this way, to convince the examiners doctoral thesis writers in JOOUST result to boosters, which in their opinion helps them defend their theses and render them acceptable.

Boosters in this study were classified into four classes:

High commitment modals	154
Adjectives and adverbs	956
Solidarity features	1,850
Introductory verbs	1,131

The last class, introductory verbs, was not incorporated in the framework postulated by Kondowe (2014), which only had the first three.

As the data above shows, doctoral thesis writers in JOOUST use solidarity features (1,850) more than any other class of boosters. This is to help them build rapport with the readers hence persuade them to have or take the same point of view or stance with them. The phrase *in agreement/ I agree*

is used the most. There were 460 instances of this phrase in the corpus followed by *little is known* at 225 and *paid little attention* at 224. All these help the writer to justify the relevance, significance and importance of what they are propounding in their thesis. These writers could probably prefer solidarity features over other types of boosters as a way of occupying a niche and urging readers of their theses to see the importance of their study. Appealing to readers, in this case high profiled academicians, to see the need of their study, is a strategy to assert their identity and their originality, as well as the possible contributions their studies could make, hence have their theses approved.

Introductory verbs/phrases (1,131) are also used more frequent, by doctoral thesis writers at JOOUST, compared to the other boosters. The verbs that were used often include: *conclude* (237), *support* (193) and *concur* (179). These were used to strongly and positively affirm the claims the writers were making in their theses. Among the category of boosters, adjectives and adverbs come in third position (956). The words that were most preferred in this class are *mainly* (149), *largely* (78) and *more likely* (72). These were used to show the extent or magnitude of the issues that were being propounded in the writing, hence justifying its importance. High commitment modals come in the fourth and last position (154) in the category of boosters. The most preferred modals here were *have/has/had (to)* (83) and *need (to)* (27) as opposed to *will* (23), *should* (18) and *must* (03). These were used to show how highly committed and convicted the writers were about what they were advancing in the writing. The intention was to make their research output highly unopposed and easily acceptable.

The findings of this study agree with Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, Finegan (1999) who observe that high commitment boosting modals, such as *must*, *should*, *need (to)*, *will* and *have/has/had (to)* are less used in academic writing. Contrary to Kondowe's (2014) observation, high commitment boosting modals are not the preferred form of boosting by doctoral thesis writers at JOOUST, as revealed by the findings of this study. In general terms, the uses of boosting modals of high commitment convey commitment, obligation and compulsion to act perhaps through a sense of duty, self-discipline, or merely through the sense of expediency (Leech, 2005). Boosting modals typically refer to the necessity of actions and events and real-world obligations that can be social, moral, physical, psychological, or emotional that compels one to act (Leech, 2005). Doctoral thesis writers at JOOUST avoid these because they portray them as commanding what should be done and making it forceful which according to them and their academic culture seem domineering and absolute. That is the reason why they use boosting modals *need to* (27) and *have to* (83) more than *must* (03). Though *need to* and *have to* resemble *must* in denoting obligation and necessity, the former are associated with low gradient strength. Doctoral thesis writers at JOOUST, thus, use boosters when they are convinced about the certainty of their claims or when their statements contain ideas that they believe to be true and universally proven.

Hedges come in second to boosters at 2594 (34%), and distributed as follows:

Low commitment modals	648
Introductory verbs	1,323
Adjectives and adverbs	623

Hedges are less used by doctoral thesis writers in JOOUST compared to boosters. In as much as doctoral thesis writers aim to persuade the readers (predominantly examiners) to agree with what they are saying, hence making their thesis favourable or acceptable; they are also cautions of the fact that they may not be absolutely certain of some facts or some of what they are trying to put across to the reader. To express this uncertainty in a manner that favours their aim and agrees well with the readers (examiners), doctoral thesis writers at JOOUST result to the use of hedges. They use hedges when they are not convinced about the certainty of their claims or when their statements contain ideas that they are not sure to be true or universally proven. Given that doctoral theses are meant to be original and are expected to significantly contribute to the growing body of knowledge in the field, doctoral thesis writers at JOOUST trade cautiously when presenting such fluid work to highly experienced professors. The use of hedges helps them tone down their statements and reduce risk of opposition. In this way, they deliberately avoid personal accountability of their claims by deliberately leaving room to accommodate opposing views which may open up a new debate in

the field.

As the data above shows, doctoral thesis writers at JOOUST, use introductory verbs (1323) more than low commitment modals (648) and adjectives and adverbs (623). They thus prefer to use introductory verbs when showing detachment to their claims. Two verbs were predominantly used *show(s)* (343 instances) and *imply/implies* (322 instances). The study disagrees with Kondowe (2014) and Mojica (2005) who observed that modals are the favoured form of hedging highly used in most texts.

Low commitment modal auxiliaries came in second after introductory verbs at (648). Among the five modals identified in the corpus, *can* occurred the most at (335). Though not far from modals, adjectives and adverbs came in third position of the hedges category at 623. The words *similarly* (201) and *generally* (186) were used the most in the corpus.

These hedges, together with other linguistic elements perform a range of textual and pragmatic functions. They often serve to mark evidentiality, possibility and likelihood, strategic vagueness, and politeness in discourse. In the corpus, doctoral thesis writers used such hedges to refer to matters of personal beliefs and knowledge which served as a basis for them to express their judgments about states of affairs, events, and actions in their research output. Their use of low commitment modals represent gradient markers of possibility and tend to have overlapping meanings that can be interchangeable in some contexts. The writers detachedly want their readers to know that they do not claim to have the final word on the subject. Introductory verbs equally perform a similar function to low commitment modals. Their use of phrases like *it shows, it implies, I suggest, it seems, it appears*, does not show confusion or lack of authoritative knowledge. The phrases present the true state of the writers' understanding and may be used to negotiate an accurate representation of the state of the knowledge under discussion. In fact, these writers may wish to reduce the strength of claims especially when stronger statements cannot be justified by the data or evidence presented, which in the end will deter their thesis defence.

The other three types of interactional markers (attitude markers, self-mentions and engagement markers) are the least used by doctoral thesis writers at JOOUST. They come in third at 12%. Doctoral thesis writers at JOOUST use self-mentions (640) more than the other two markers (attitude markers (107) and engagement markers (144)). The use of self-mention phrases: *the present study, the writer or the researcher* are preferred to the direct use of the pronouns: *I, we, me, our, my*. This enables the writers avoid personalising the study and detaching themselves from it, hence maintaining a third party stance. The impetus is that using these phrases rather than the personal pronouns makes the writer avoid mentioning themselves. The reader is expected to look at the work objectively and independent of the writer. In this case talking of *the researcher or the writer* does not identify precisely and overtly who the author is. The use of the phrases *the study or the research* indicates that the piece is self-contained and reference need not be made to the researcher or the author.

It is for the same reason that engagement markers are less preferred compared to selfmentions. If the writer seems to be using engagement markers more (*you can see that, consider, as shown*), it shows the inclination of the writer identification to the work. What this implies is that it renders the work writer oriented than study oriented. The writer would be seen to be persuading the readers to side with and agree with what they are saying hence making the writing personal and subjective as opposed to it being impersonal and objective.

Of all the interactional markers, attitude markers (*unfortunately, surprisingly, this is the way to go, contrary*) are used the least. The writers want to avoid showing their attitudes in the research which may be taken to be personal and hence subjective. This is to help them maintain an objective stance in the writing. The word *contrary* is the most used of all the attitude markers in the corpus. There were 88 instances of this word in the corpus out of the 107 attitude markers identified in the corpus. This was the most preferred attitude marker as used by doctoral thesis writers in JOOUST because it helps them express a contrary opinion of what other researchers in their field have expressed before. This in their opinion is positive as it helps them situate and highlight the relevance of their work or findings in the existing knowledge in the field.

6. Conclusion

Doctoral thesis writers need to be familiar with means of projecting their commitment or detachment in written discourse. How to be imprecise and appear reserved in formal writing is delineated by culturally and socially determined conventions since the author and the reader may not share the same norms and expectations. The study has discovered that doctoral thesis writers at JOOUST boost more than they hedge; favouring the use of the solidarity statement *in agreement*. Doctoral thesis writers at JOOUST opt for boosters as a way of persuading the reader to take their work favourably and acceptable, to show their research originality and to show that they are quite sure that their claims share some universal understanding. They opt for the hedges device they use to help them reduce the risk of opposition, be precise in reporting results, and as a means of being polite and accommodative in their attempt to get their thesis approved and have them passed. All this is dictated by the training doctoral thesis writers at JOOUST take in academic writing courses which lays much emphasis on making academic writing more objective than subjective. Doctoral thesis writers at JOOUST are expected to master such appropriate use of precision and vagueness and acquire judgment of where and how to be appropriately imprecise in their writing of their research output. At the same time there is the demand, in their writing, for them to persuade the reader to take the work favourably and pass it.

We, therefore, agree with Kondowe (2014) and Nivales (2010) in recommending that lessons on interactive metadiscourse markers need to be included in the research writing subjects as well as the need for novice writers to be more exposed to the conventions of research writing. Developing writers need to be aware of the usefulness of metadiscoursal devices in presenting their claims especially on topics that are controversial. Hedges have been widely commended to be very useful resources that students can utilize in their serious academic writing, but using these markers appropriately and proportionately would go a long way in making academic writing better.

We further note that making overt conclusions regarding the writing culture of doctoral students at JOOUST is beyond the scope of a single study. Further researcher can investigate the use of interactive metadiscourse markers in specific disciplines and comparatively in different disciplines. A comparative study can also be undertaken to assess whether PhD students from various parts of the globe use similar linguistic resources' in crafting their research outputs, for instance, comparing African PhD scholars and Americans and investigating factors behind.

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