Chapter 2
Metadiscourse as discourse reflexivity

Our understanding of humans as a unique species has received serious blows over the last hundred years or so. Other species build sophisticated dwellings and complex social systems, benefit from symbioses with other species, use and make tools. In important respects the distinction between humans and many other species looks like a matter of degree, including communicative systems (N. Lee et al. 2009; Tomasello 2014), as recently posthumanism has emphasised, including linguistics (Evans 2014; Pennycook 2017). Some traits are nevertheless particularly highly developed in humans and characterise our species: the tendency to collaborate more than other species, and the tendency to communicate more than other species. Both characteristics relate to the fundamentally social nature of humans, and the vital importance of social interaction to their life and success. Many researchers in different fields have made similar observations about collaboration, and Mercier and Sperber (2017) make both.

Communication is thus inextricably intertwined with collaboration. We need to understand, or make good guesses about, each other’s intentions, meanings, and emotional states to collaborate successfully. Not only that, but above all, we need to work towards shared and new meanings jointly, largely if not exclusively through language, in other words collaborate to communicate and create new understanding and knowledge in the process. In brief, we must communicate to collaborate, and collaborate to communicate. To achieve this, we rely on communicative resources that are sophisticated, flexible, and amenable to change and adaptation. One of the properties of human language that may not find equivalents in the communication systems of other species and may therefore give us some communicative advantage is its capacity to talk about itself self-reflexively while the same system can also be used for talking about other matters. There is a meta-level of communication, a reflexive possibility in human discourse that enables us to indicate how we intend our interlocutors to take what we are saying and how it relates to what they are saying. This, in short, is the domain of discourse reflexivity, or reflexive metadiscourse.

2.1 Metadiscourse and the ongoing discourse

The idea of metadiscourse has not been without its critics. Objections have been raised to the concept altogether. One is that the whole notion is trivial, the other that it is misuse of the prefix meta-. The triviality objection holds that there is
nothing remarkable about discourse talking about itself, because we can speak about language just like we speak about anything else. This is of course true in that everyday talk is concerned with language as a matter of course: not only do we talk about different languages we know or have encountered (we all speak one language which is Swahili) or what is talked about (we mostly speak about politics) but we also make category distinctions (creative language, technical vocabulary), pass evaluative comments (rich vocabulary, funny expression, heavy accent), or talk about rules and rights of using language (you can’t talk about content without talking of a process; women couldn’t speak in church), or address the complicated relationship between a referent and its linguistic expression (can ‘Bildung’ be translated in any other language?). Besides, we can deliberately exploit metalanguage for instructional purposes, and use it to talk about texts in a writing class, for example (Myhill et al. 2020). While these examples illustrate just a few of the purposes for which language is talked about, they indicate an awareness of language in our ordinary lives. Language is not only a transparent means of communication, but also an object of thought in itself, a site of emotional and aesthetic responses, as well as of linguistic theorising. Abundant vocabulary and terminology exist for talking about language, and we can call it metalinguistic speech. This way of talking about language does not, however, capture the reflexive potential of language.

Reflexive metadiscourse is distinct from mere references to and comments on language: it is a way of speaking about the ongoing discourse that organises, specifies, and modifies the discourse at hand. Thus, we can insert linguistic comments directly into the ongoing discourse by performing a number of discourse regulating acts, such as indicating what we are going to say (I’m going to talk about; I’d like to say that . . .), monitor the way others may understand our communicative intentions (that’s not what I was going to say; I want to ask what you mean by that), prompt others to speak (what were you about to say; do you want to answer the question) and regulate our interlocutor’s speaking (we can’t just pass it and talk about these; can you please speak louder). What we see in these examples is a different kind of awareness of language from the metalinguistic comments above, and an engagement with language as an ongoing process rather than as a separate object.

Reflexive metadiscourse is part of the discourse that is being (co-)created, updating and changing it in the same way that any other part of the discourse does, but its distinct contribution is to promote specific perceptions about the state of the discourse up to the moment of speaking and the discourse ahead. Even if the boundaries between metalinguistic comments and discourse reflexivity may occasionally become blurred, the difference remains clear: reflexive discourse is discourse about the ongoing discourse, while metalinguistic comments refer to ‘language objects’ outside the current discourse.
Seen in this light, as an integral part of the discourse it participates in while simultaneously creating a new layer onto it in a kind of self-aware commentary, reflexive metadiscourse is part of our more general capacity to reflect upon our own experiences and actions. We are able to distance ourselves from immediate experiences, identities, attitudes, and gut reactions, and subject them to conscious reflection and monitoring (e.g. Bandura 2000; Fleming & Frith 2014). Even though the processes we can bring to consciousness are only fragments of our entire mental activity, we are nevertheless able to think about our own thinking, that is, to make thinking an object of thought itself. This constitutes metacognition. It can be divided into implicit and explicit metacognition (Fleming & Frith 2014), the former of which is available to infants as well as animals, again reminding us of how thin the line is that divides humans from other living things. Processes that allow us to talk about our talking are analogous to metacognition: we can be aware of our verbalisations, and we can indicate this by means of the very act of verbalising.

A second objection to metadiscourse applies to the term, notably by Sinclair (e.g. 2005), who contends that this is a misuse of the prefix meta-, which, as the argument goes, usually refers to something external to a notion or object, or an abstraction from it, a higher-order concept. In this philosophical sense, then, if we postulate an object language, which is used for talking about the world, then a metalanguage would be a separate system for talking about that object language. Basically, this implies metalanguage is a formal language for analysing an object language. This sense of meta- is employed in some disciplines, so that we speak of the ‘metalinguage of mathematics’, for example. Analogously, we might talk about formal systems of linguistic analysis or the terminologies of theoretical linguistics as the metalinguage of natural language. This is not how we usually talk about metalinguage in linguistics as already noted, and neither is the meta- prefix limited to the metalinguage of describing objects or systems in other sciences. For example, in cognitive sciences we find not only metacognition, but concepts referring to its subsystems like ‘metamemory’, which refers to our awareness of our memory processes. In biology the prefix is used quite differently again, and metapopulation refers collectively to dispersed but interacting populations of a species (Hanski 1999). Thus, although Sinclair is undoubtedly right in arguing that there is no way of getting outside language by using language, it is not possible to get outside cognition to contemplate on one’s cognition, either.

2.2 Metadiscourse as reflexivity and the rest of the discourse

If we take metadiscourse to be part of the discourse in a self-referential sense, similar to metacognition, discourse reflexivity can most naturally be conceptualised as
discourse about the discourse it participates in and is constructing. If we put the idea as briefly and generally as possible, discourse reflexivity is discourse about the ongoing discourse. Definitions of metadiscourse along these lines have been put forward in approaches that talk about “text reflexivity” (Mauranen 1993a), “discourse reflexivity” (Mauranen 2001, 2003, 2012; Smart 2016), or “reflexive metadiscourse” (Ådel 2010). As a group they have been called the reflexive model of metadiscourse. Reflexivity captures the conceptualisation of metadiscourse as self-reflexive discourse. It is an expansion of the notion of ‘text reflexivity’ that I used in 1993 for expressions in texts that refer to the texts themselves as opposed to expressions that refer to other texts for, say, analytical or critical purposes. From another angle, we can draw an analogy with the logical modalities of de re and de dicto, where references to texts other than the one currently unfolding are de re from the point of view of the current text (thus metalanguage), and those referring to the current text itself are de dicto (thus metatext) (Mauranen 1993a).

Clearly, most discourse is about de re, that is, matters other than itself. This has not been an issue in metadiscourse research, whereas where to draw the line between metadiscourse on the one hand and the rest of the discourse on the other has been a major concern. Hyland (2005) notes, quite rightly, that separating the ‘propositional’ and the ‘meta’ has been difficult for most researchers. It has nevertheless been attempted all along. Underlying the distinction seems to be a false dichotomy between ‘the interactional’ and the ‘propositional’ (or ‘ideational’, or some other similar term more linguistic and less directly derived from truth-conditional semantics than ‘proposition’). In the early days of metadiscourse research in applied linguistics, Crismore and Farnsworth (1990: 120–1) distinguished the referential or informative plane, and the expressive, attitudinal plane, which they took to correspond to Halliday’s ideational and interpersonal metafunctions. However, their classification divides metatextual subcategories into Halliday’s textual and interpersonal metafunctions. This is at odds with Halliday’s concept of ‘textual’, which includes thematic development and other organising and cohesion-creating language (e.g. Halliday 1985; Halliday & Hasan 1976). Metadiscourse has no place in Halliday’s system, which probably explains the confusion among scholars who have sought to fit their models into his theory. Some Hallidayan categories are nevertheless included in metadiscourse approaches of the ‘broad’ kind. These include conjunctive relations, which are part of his textual metafunction, and modality, which he subsumes under the interpersonal function.

The issue of ‘meta’ vs. the ‘propositional’ has not been confined to confusions about Hallidayan categories. Mauranen (1993a), Hyland (2005), and Ådel (2006) have each discussed it in turn along very similar lines. The early scholars’ idea that metadiscourse was separate from a ‘primary’ propositional discourse cuts no ice with any of them. Rather, they see metadiscourse as an integral part of the
text, on a par with the rest. Similarly, all three argue for a functional interpretation whereby metadiscourse is ‘meta’ relative to something else in its specific context, not a set of inherently metadiscursive items. Finally, all three have drawn a distinction between ‘content’ and ‘meaning’ so that ‘meta’ elements are recognized as contributing to meaning, while not necessarily to content. The total meaning of the text, then, is understood to be holistic and to consist in the interplay of all its elements. These notions seem to be now widely accepted in metadiscourse research at a general level, but the issue of what constitutes ‘the rest’ in the text, the ‘other-than-metadiscourse’, is less clear and less consensual, as is evident from different scholars’ choices of the linguistic elements they subsume under metadiscourse.

2.2.1 Texts and readers

The conundrum of the content-metadiscourse dichotomy relates to two things: the nature of text, and the role of the reader. Let us try to untangle it by starting from the text and postpone tackling the issue of the reader to Section 2.4. For the sake of simplicity, I will confine the discussion to written text in this section, because the discussion around metadiscourse vs. the rest of the text have hitherto been predominantly concerned with writing.

To try to envision metadiscourse as part of the text, it is perhaps useful to start by a brief look at what texts do in the bigger picture – how they interact with their readers. Many texts of course inform their readers about something and could on that basis be regarded as having propositional value (indeed, in the age of disinformation and ‘fake news’ this is constantly an issue). It is nevertheless not easy to find texts that merely inform us, with no additional purposes – such as regulating our behaviour by instructing, warning, or advising us about something, persuading us to buy products or services, or to accept research findings. Texts conform to tacit rules about what is relevant to talk about, such as being useful, newsworthy, surprising, scandalous, or awe-inspiring, or, at the very least, filling a gap in our knowledge. If you ask people to summarise what a text said, they tend to report not only what we might call its content matter, but usually merge this with its illocutionary force (We must wear safety helmets when we go down; Neanderthals had a sophisticated culture). Texts thus build up shared experience (Sinclair 1981[2004] between the writer and the reader, but more things than the ‘content’ contribute to this shared experience.

The unspoken rules that guide our reading of a text result from our socialisation in literate societies into the world of texts from an early age. Such tacit rules, like social norms generally, are acquired through observation, experience, and
education. Well socialised competent members of literate communities come to know to expect certain things from texts. They are, in other words, primed to read texts in certain ways (Hoey 2001). Like other social norms, text norms change with time and vary with circumstances, and our expectations adapt accordingly. Similar expectations hold for text-external matters, which orient our reading before we even start. Texts appear in various physical and visual contexts: pinned on noticeboards, printed on menus, leaflets, stuck on doors, printed in books or learned journals, digitally on webpages or social media. Our actual reading is further guided by images, subheadings, abstracts, tables, captions, translator’s prefaces, footnotes, diagrams, bullet points, or font style alterations. There is evidence of the visual context affecting the ease of anticipation of how a text continues (Ankener, Sekicki, & Staudte 2018).

In the text itself, as we read it from left to right (or depending on the writing system, in some other order) some of the reader’s experience at any moment builds directly on the wording of the text, while a substantial proportion emanates from the pre-existing mental representations the reader brings to bear on the process. The text material guides the reader’s meaning-making in countless ways, many already revealed in early text linguistic research. Some are simply common patterns we expect to find, like cause and effect, general and specific, claim and denial, or temporal sequencing (Winter 1977; Hoey 1983). Among pioneering studies on relevant linguistic indicators that trigger expectations in readers, Winter (1977) identified lexis that helps anticipate the pattern of the rest of the text, and Tadros (1985) detected advance labelling structures that involve lexical and grammatical elements for similar purposes. Many other scholars have followed suit, for example Hoey, who in his later work informed by cognitive science (2005) returns to the central role lexis plays in recognising and anticipating what a text is going to be like and how it will continue. Various sequencing and ordering practices, such as theme-rheme order and other coherence and cohesion-creating means (e.g. Daneš 1974; Halliday & Hasan 1976) depend on linguistic cues involving the level of text and discourse rather than only smaller units like the sentence or parts of it. In brief, then, texts are imbued with external and internal cues that guide our reading, help us make sense of them, anticipate what they are going to be like and how they will continue once we have started reading. Metadiscourse is one of them, but by no means the only one. Its unique qualities are fascinating, but it is important to bear in mind that it combines with a myriad of other cues that mediate writer-reader interaction.
2.2.2 Prospection

At this point, it may be useful to take speaking on board along with written text, alternating or integrating them as the topics allow. A fundamental higher-level concept that articulates the basis of the reader’s textual anticipation is **prospection**. This concept applies to writing and speaking alike, and it was first put forward by Sinclair as early as 1966, but elaborated mainly in the 1980s and 1990s (see, e.g. Sinclair 2004). His claim is that “a major central function of language is that it constantly prospects ahead” (2004:12). This implies that the state of the discourse at any point is contained in the current utterance or sentence, and as he puts it, “the scene is set for each new utterance by the utterance that is going on at the moment” (ibid.:13). This dynamic view of discourse was (and still is) virtually entirely missing from other approaches to text analysis, and many scholars have instead emphasised the nature of speech as dynamic in contrast to the written text, which is static (e.g. Halliday 1985; Chafe 1980; Brazil 1995). While true in the physical sense, the recipient’s experience may not be static in either case. Sinclair started from speech, but subsequently extended the notion to written text (e.g. 1985[2004]; 1993[2004]), calling for an integrated description of the two.

Prospection has not been widely adopted in language studies, apart from a related concept of predictive activity in spoken interaction, **projection**, which was later developed in Conversation Analysis (CA) to refer to the way conversational participants predict conversational structures (Schegloff 2013). Projection is also studied in Interactional Linguistics (IL), (e.g. Auer 2005; Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2018), which largely overlaps with CA, but with a specific interest in language, while CA’s prime concern is the structuring of social interaction. In these twin research traditions, projection is what enables a conversation participant to predict the completion of a conversational structure by foreshadowing its later trajectory on the basis of its earlier part (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2018). Like prospection, projection is understood to operate at different interdependent levels of language (Schegloff 2013), of which Auer (2005) distinguishes several, all supporting a holistic view of anticipating what is to come in the ongoing discourse: action projection, sequential, content-based, syntactic, and phonological projection. A further similarity is that like prospection, which is not normally assumed to make an exact set of predictions, but to function as a practical aid to quick and efficient interpretation, like a heuristic (Sinclair & Mauranen 2006), projection is understood to work in the same way (e.g. Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2018). Where CA seems to come closest to metadiscourse is in ‘projector constructions’ (Pekarek Doehler 2011), which seem to overlap with certain kinds of metadiscourse.

Prospection and projection do not differentiate between the speaker’s (or writer’s) and the hearer’s (or reader’s) perspectives, that is, between production and
reception. In cognitive linguistics, the related term concerned with the processing of ongoing language is prediction, which refers only to the recipient's processing. It would seem to clarify matters to make a distinction between the speaker's and the hearer's perspectives. In the first case, we talk about what we can see in the language, in the second, what we can observe in the human listener. I will therefore talk about prospection when properties of the stimulus, i.e. language, are concerned, and about prediction when the hearer's processing is in focus. It follows that metadiscourse is what we find speakers use, and insofar as it facilitates listener processing this means it helps them predict.

2.3 A cognitive viewpoint

When text linguistics first began to embrace a holistic understanding of text, similar thinking was gaining ground in cognitive research. These developments took place around the same broad time frame, the 1970s and the 1980s, but they seem to have developed largely independently (though with some exceptions, e.g. Sanford & Garrod 1981), judging by the almost non-existent inter-references between the two fields. Holistic and top-down ideas must somehow have been in the air, even though the general concepts of Gestalt theory date back to early twentieth century, and one might have thought it was staple in the study of cognition. Notwithstanding, schema theory (Rumelhart 1975) and other related concepts like scripts or frames influenced thinking in the 1970s, as did experimental findings showing that connected sentences, or texts, are remembered better than series of unconnected sentences (Kintsch 1974). Texts were seen to represent a higher level of psychological organisation than less structured collections of language items. Some researchers began to investigate both top-down and bottom-up processing in text comprehension (e.g. Morgan & Sellner 1980), which meant a reorientation from the previous exclusive attention to sentences and their structural permutations. At the intersection of cognitive and linguistic interests, text grammars began to emerge, some influential ones based on generativism (e.g. van Dijk 1972), thus quite disconnected from the purely linguistic and mostly functionalist developments based on the Prague School (Daneš 1974) and Hallidayan functionalism (Halliday & Hasan 1976). Perhaps it was in American functionalism, or "West Coast functionalism", that the cognitive determinants of discourse became most prominent. Narratives became a central topic of research, and notably Chafe (e.g. 1980) investigated their production in speech. Much of his work sought to analyse consciousness and language in an integrated way and take temporal development on board in both, and he has continued to develop the notion of linguistic and cognitive temporality in his later work (e.g. Chafe 1998[2014], 2018). However, neither cognitive nor text models in the 1970s
generally assumed Chafe’s perspective of temporal flow or Sinclair’s dynamic, prospection-based orientation. Talking about top-down processing has largely given way to predictive processing in more recent cognitive approaches to language, but arguably the concept is the same (see, Seth 2021).

Although Sinclair’s notion of prospection arose purely from contemplating discourse theoretically, independent developments in experimental cognitive linguistics and cognitive neuroscience emphasise similar activity in brain functioning. In these fields, processes of prediction and anticipation have surfaced at the centre of interest in recent years, although they have paid little attention to authentic natural language. Many neuroscientists now emphasise the proactive nature of the brain (e.g. Friston 2010; Willems 2015; Northoff 2018; Buszáki 2019), meaning that the brain reaches out to predict, to anticipate, and to test hypotheses, instead of being essentially a reactive organ that solely responds to external stimuli, as it was largely depicted until quite recently. As Clark (2013) puts it: the brain is a prediction machine. Researchers talk about predictive processing (Friston 2010), or predictive coding, assuming that since the brain operates in uncertain conditions, it is likely to maintain probabilistic models of environment, updating them on the basis of sensory information (Hari et al 2015:183). This probabilistic view of prediction falls particularly well in line with the notion of prospection. Interestingly, it has recently been shown to be a relevant concept to language processing. Heilbron et al.(2022) showed that the brain spontaneously predicts upcoming language at multiple levels of abstraction. Although their data was read-aloud text, it gives a fair indication that processing authentic speech may be similar.

Anticipation and prediction are thus well-established perceptual processes, but the predominant research interest in the cognitive and neurolinguistic study of language has been restricted to very small units (phoneme, word, syntactic structure) in constructed examples, and until recently, continuous language or natural language use has been dismissed out of bounds. It seems, however, that in processing conceptual stimuli, including continuous events, humans are likely to rely on top-down, or predictive, processing that integrates the representation of the current event with previously stored knowledge (Kurby & Zacks 2008), and recent studies of more naturalistic, continuous discourses such as narratives, have provided evidence of the brain’s predictive activity under continuous language comprehension (e.g. Willems et al. 2015), for example by relying on situation models similar to those in processing continuous event stimuli (Kurby & Zacks 2015). Situation model is a term typically used in reading research (Sandford & Garrod 1981; Van Dijk & Kintsch 1983) and recently also applied to dialogues by Pickering and Garrod (2021) and is essentially coextensive with event model (Radvansky & Zacks 2014). I shall mostly employ the term situation model in this book, because it fits both dialogue and monologue.
These lines of research resonate also very well with for example Chafe’s pioneering work (e.g. 1994, 1998[2014], 2018) analysing discourse from a cognitive viewpoint, but once again, there is surprisingly little interconnection between experimental cognitive neuroscience and recent developments in linguistics, with few exceptions, such as Tomasello’s (2014) “cognitive-functional perspective” (see also papers in Tomasello 1998[2014], 2003[2014]). Metadiscourse is of course consonant with the processes of anticipation and prediction, as one of its generally recognised functions is to provide explicit clues about how the current holder of the floor envisages the discourse moving on. Characteristically it performs communicative acts that set up expectations of what is going to happen next in the discourse (I’m going to talk about . . .). These contribute to recipients’ predictive processing, their hypotheses about which way the discourse is moving. Much of processing consists in confirming hypotheses – or discarding them, in which case we need to update our event or situation models (e.g. Radvansky & Zacks 2014; Pickering & Garrod 2021). It is likely that metadiscourse supports the formation of felicitous predictions and pertinent situation models.

Metadiscourse can also serve for example to confirm readers’ or hearers’ interpretations of what has passed (as I said) as one of its roles in the communicative dynamism of language interaction. Moreover, it involves a perceptible element of planning. Planning, again, is a particularly pronounced cognitive activity in human behaviour (e.g. Radvansky & Zacks 2014: 169) compared to other species. Among other things, it includes breaking down larger goals into smaller sections, which has also been evinced in metadiscourse research (see also Chapter 7).

2.4 The active reader

Let us now return to written text and the role of the reader for a moment, to address the role of the reader in relation to discourse reflexivity as anticipated in Section 2.2.1. A corollary of predictive discourse processing is that we must assume reading is a proactive process like listening. Adopting this active predictive conceptualisation would require a change of viewpoint in typical metadiscourse research, where the presumed reader-writer interaction in effect stays entirely in the writer’s court, and the reader, by implication, is allocated a peripheral, receptive role. Research is heavily based towards the writer’s use of metadiscourse while the reader’s uptake is usually simply assumed.

If we wish to understand how texts mediate interaction and how metadiscourse comes into the process, we must adjust our models of both text and the interactive process. For text, it is essential to acknowledge the complexity of interpretation and the multiple levels at which we accomplish it, instead of simply
Positing the existence of metadiscourse and ‘the rest’. I see no major principled disagreement about this in the research community, but a more nuanced understanding of what role metadiscourse plays in text requires more serious thought than a cursory reference to holistic meaning or an unsupported prioritisation of metadiscourse as the principal or even sole carrier of the interactional potential of text (note that throughout this book, I am not making the distinction between ‘interactive’ and ‘interactional’ that Thompson (2001) makes, though relevant to written monologue, because my main focus is on speaking). Metadiscourse must eventually be seen in the context of other textual means that writers employ to influence, convince, or relate to their readers. For the interactive process, a deeper understanding of the interaction between readers and writers and the various means that affect readers requires rethinking the reader’s role. Hitherto, the reader has not only remained an imaginary creature, but also been assigned a perplexingly reactive, almost passive role in the literature. Metadiscourse is generally conceptualised as the writer facilitating the reader’s task: helping, assisting, guiding the reader. While all this may well take place, such a view also entails a reader who is constructed as somewhat helpless without explicit guidance from the writer, thus essentially reactive. What comes across is a kind of ‘needy reader’.

The alternative is to posit an active reader. If we do this, then other clues in the text besides metadiscourse are potentially equally – or more – relevant to the reader. This is also in line with current neuroscientific research. Assuming an active reader shifts our angle and necessitates reconsidering the place of metadiscourse relative to the whole text and invites us to revise our current models accordingly. For one thing, such revision would lead the way towards more reader-oriented metadiscourse research by adding the reader’s perspective to the much-investigated writer’s perspective. For investigating the writer’s activity, the implication is that in principle any means of organising or patterning discourse can be taken to manifest recipient design or interactionality, which the active reader may or may not engage with.

The active reader (or their brain), then, seeks out multitudinous clues in the text in order to reduce uncertainty and prospect ahead in anticipation of what is likely to follow. For proficient readers this will be successful most of the time. Fluent reading consists largely in confirming hypotheses based on the evolving representation of the text in the reader’s situation model. Surprises also occur: the text can contradict the reader’s expectation and necessitate immediate updating of the representation. Surprises momentarily raise the cognitive load (e.g. Frank 2013), but can also be pleasurable, as in reading fiction. It is not self-evident that maximal guidance is the optimal solution for the reader.

One of the assumptions often made in text analyses is that readers expect point-to-point signalling, for example with metadiscourse, of how the text is going,
or what the argument is. Actual readers may not, however, read all of the text, let alone in the order in which it is presented, but often simply look for something specific, and then move on to other texts (e.g., Edge 1986). This is, of course, quite common with academic texts. They may also abandon reading in the middle if they realise they are not members of the intended audience, or if they disagree with the premises, the viewpoint, or the argument. Altogether, as Hoey (2001) points out, texts gain their meaning from readers’ interactions with them. In this sense, the reader is as important to the text and successful interaction as the writer.

2.5 Interaction and the concept of metadiscourse

From the position of the writer, the reader of a published text (as opposed to, say, a personal letter or text message) is of course an imagined reader, or an implied reader. This is the case in Hyland’s conception of metadiscourse, even though the cornerstone of his model is “writer-reader interaction”. It would seem to be something of a misnomer, being more like writer-to-reader interactive signalling. Hyland is well aware of the reader’s position as the writer’s construction but supports his notion of interaction by arguing that the writer constructs their awareness of the audience in a relevant way based on their previous knowledge of similar texts and circumstances (e.g., Hyland 2005:12). While it is reasonable to argue that such audience awareness lies behind recipient design when speakers or writers shape their discourse, it is less reasonable to predicate actual interaction on one party alone.

The lack of bidirectionality is an important issue: to what extent can we postulate interactionality in communication if our knowledge about the uptake is missing, and one of the parties not only silent but unknown? One answer is to pin it onto recipient design, like Hyland (2005). Recipient design is central to other accounts of interaction and communication, and it is posited as a universal of language use in conversation analysis and interactional linguistics. Couper-Kuhlen and Selting (2018) point out that it is not limited to the most evident expressions like those referring to person, place, and time (e.g., Sacks & Schegloff 1974), but “present in all linguistic forms for building turns and implementing actions in talk-in-interaction.” (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2018: 554). Seen in this light, recipient design implies a holistic approach to text: while it is possible to identify specific elements with particular functions, the whole act or its total effect emerges from their complex interactions. Recipient design is also recognised as an aspect of interaction in cognitive neuroscience of language. For example, Baggio (2018: 214) describes it as adaptive signalling behaviour on the part of the sender, or mentalising (Baggio 2018: 237), that is, forming an idea about what the receiver does or does not know. As an umbrella term for this activity, we can talk about
the theory of mind that a speaker or writer forms about what their audience has in mind, knows, or does not know. In terms of both cognitive neuroscience and interactional linguistics recipient design can be seen as a facet of ongoing social interaction with co-present interlocutors, “the particular other(s) who are the co-participants,” as Sacks & Schegloff (1974) put it.

Of course, it is possible to extend the notion metaphorically to a collective, imagined recipient as in writer-to-reader interaction, perhaps along the lines of Goffman’s (1981) ‘bystanders’, but the nature of this latter, unidirectional interaction, is dramatically different from one where two or more parties relate to each other alternating in the roles of speaker and hearer. Moreover, non-verbal cues from listeners are available to speakers even in monologic situations (see Chapter 7). The speaker’s theory of mind about their hearer(s) can therefore continuously adapt to the dynamically unfolding situation, which is of course inaccessible to a writer.

If we cannot reduce writer-to-reader interaction to metadiscourse but have to recognize a plethora of linguistic phenomena involved in bringing it about, then investigating this interaction exclusively through metadiscourse, however broadly defined, becomes restrictive. Alternatively, if we broaden the scope of metadiscourse to include all possible interactionality in text, the concept becomes either empty or redundant, because we could just as well say that we investigate writer-to-reader interaction mediated by text. Even if we should add a reader perspective onto the research agenda, it is still asymmetrical as well as asynchronous: the actual readers are not the ones the writer envisages, and the processes of composing and reading are separated in time.

Metadiscourse does not, then, equal interactionality in writing, because it covers too little, and is therefore too narrow. To say something meaningful about explicit (usually forward-looking) metadiscoursive commentary on the text, the comprehensive conceptualisations of Crismore, Vande Kopple, Hyland etc. are too broad. If we want to capture the particular kind of contribution that is conveyed through the self-commentary of text to its interactionality, we have to define it more precisely. For this purpose, the concept of discourse reflexivity is more appropriate. It is better suited for grasping a specific facet of discourse – its capacity for reflexivity – than a broader, unfocused one, which nevertheless ignores much of the interactive potential that language bestows.

The broad notion of metadiscourse is also problematic in that unlike reflexivity, it does not stand in a ‘meta’ relation to the discourse, that is, it is not about the ongoing discourse in a way that is analogous to how metacognition or metamemory relate to cognition and memory. If we consider discourse elements like hedges, boosters, and attitude markers, they can certainly be conceived as interactional, but not reflexive in the ‘meta’ sense. Finally, the broad notion misses out on the complex interactions between elements of different kinds, that is, effects
that interactionally relevant text elements can adopt in combining with each other. For example, hedges tend to co-occur with metadiscourse (Mauranen 2001). This is intriguing, because metadiscourse arguably narrows down interpretation options for the reader or listener (Mauranen 2001) to the point of expressing speaker dominance (McKeown & Ladegaard 2020), while hedges convey epistemic openness (e.g. Mauranen 1997; Hyland 2005). Lumping together too much in a single concept thus leads to a failure to perceive interrelationships between different interactionally relevant elements, while there is the possibility of unintentionally excluding those elements that are not regarded as part of metadiscourse. As we saw in 2.2.1, numerous textual elements and properties have been discovered that can reasonably be regarded as relevant to writer-to-reader interaction, but which are not in a meta relationship to the rest of the text.

The idea of depicting the written text as far more rhetorical and interactional than previously thought was a major step forward in the early 1990s, inspired by a shift in linguists’ attention towards speaking and spoken interaction over the previous couple of decades. This was part of a general ‘interpersonal turn’ in applied linguistics. In studies of research-related texts, which was common in metadiscourse scholarship, a further source of inspiration came from the revolutionary ideas put forward in the new approach to science studies: the sociology of science (Gilbert & Mulkay 1984; Latour & Woolgar 1986). This new discipline challenged the traditional fields of the philosophy of science and the history of science, which had largely sustained the idea of science being pursued almost untouched by the human hand. Now research was scrutinised in the daily toil of researchers and research publications were viewed through the lens of rhetoric, persuasion, and audience awareness. The shift of perspective was substantial in applied linguistics, too, but analysing written text from a more interpersonal angle overlooked some essential limitations that follow from exclusively attending to the written medium.

Clearly, we must assume all communication is interactional, because without interaction there would be no communication or even a need for it. If utterances are not taken up, they do not communicate, however skilfully formulated. Interaction is fundamental to all human language use and meaning is co-constructed by communicating parties. So far speaking and writing are alike. However, while spoken interaction negotiates meanings between co-present participants, writers and readers are separated from each other, and the interaction is in a significant way disembodied and unidirectional: writers do not know how, when, where, or whether their text will be read and what meanings may be made of it. Readers make their own meanings from the text, but the outcome is not negotiable with the writer, who will by and large not be aware of readers’ reactions. The writer can construct a target recipient in their mind, and the text may imply one, but the actual readers of a text cannot be conjured up by the author’s imagination.
They may be unexpected, outside the intended audience, located anywhere, and are inevitably removed from the author in time.

Time on shorter scales also constitutes a relevant difference between the spoken and the written medium. Temporal rhythms in co-present social interaction and written communication are substantially dissimilar: while face-to-face interaction unfolds in hundreds of milliseconds, written communication proceeds in seconds or more (Hari et al. 2015). If we add to this the larger scale asynchrony of written communication, the temporal discrepancy between the two modes of communication gets even more striking. There are thus severe limitations to writer-to-reader interaction: the disembodied nature of the communication, the lack of bidirectionality, the discrepancy between imagined and actual readers, and the temporal mismatch.

2.6 Monologue and dialogue

The considerations of linguistic and cognitive factors hitherto point towards the possibility that not only writing and speaking, but also monologue and dialogue present seriously different challenges and affordances to discourse reflexivity. They have important contrasting characteristics (e.g. Chafe 2018). ‘Dialogue’ in the present context is used as an umbrella term, subsuming dyadic as well as polyadic spoken interaction. Human language emerges from dialogue, that is, verbal interaction in the first place: N. Lee et al (2009) talk about the interactional instinct, which Tomasello (2003, 2014) assigns to an innate drive to communicate. Thus, spoken interaction is where language originated for the species and where it originates for every individual. Mutatis mutandis, the same applies to interactive sign language. This central position of dialogue in shaping language and social interaction was the point of departure for conversation analysis in the 1970s and more recent thinking along similar lines has sparked off fresh theoretical and empirical approaches in many other strands of linguistic research, such as dynamic systems theory (N. Lee et al 2009), usage-based linguistics (Du Bois 2014), and construction grammar (Goldberg 2019). The notion of ‘distributed cognition’ (Clark 1997) is also readily applicable to dialogic interaction, since “interactive language use is ‘distributed cognition’ par excellence” as Levinson (2013: 158) puts it.

In usage-based linguistics the dialogic turn has meant for example conceptualising linguistic constructions as by-products of ongoing dialogic interaction: interlocutors cooperate to achieve intersubjectivity and produce linguistic functions and forms in joint activity. Importantly, alignment and priming are crucial components of the joint construction of linguistic expressions and meanings (Pickering & Garrod 2021; Tantucci 2021; Tantucci & Wang 2022). We can also envisage them as indicators of these processes.
As speakers engage with each other’s talk, they mesh their own contributions into the evolving discourse, which progresses from its initial settings towards unforeseen outcomes. In this way, we can envision dialogic speech functioning as a dynamic complex system. The question for metadiscourse is how, if at all, it participates in such co-construction of linguistic form, function, and meaning.

First engaging with dialogic data in the then incipient MICASE corpus, I observed that uses of discourse reflexivity went beyond those familiar from written discourse, and I divided the principal ones in terms of targeting, i.e., whose discourse they seemed to be talking about or aiming at (Mauranen 2021b). The tentative labels reflexive, dialogic, and interactive were perhaps not the most fortunate, but the attempted distinctions hold up reasonably well (see Chapter 4 for elaboration).

Long conversational turns can occasionally acquire monologic characteristics, but in academic discourses monologues and dialogues tend to be kept apart by genre conventions. For monologues, the speaker has normally prepared for an extended delivery, and others are restrained from taking the floor during the presentation. The speaker’s challenge is to keep listeners interested, sufficiently updated, and reminded of the goals of the presentation as well as how what is being said at a given moment fits into the whole and is relevant to it. This can include reminders or brief summaries at interim stages, to maintain listeners’ interest and signpost their navigation through the course of the speaker’s delivery. The listeners, in turn, predict the continuation of the delivery by all available means, many of which overlap with those used in reading, but where paralinguistic means like prosody, gestures, or voice quality not only substitute some written text devices like punctuation, but add to and modulate the meanings that can be constructed from the talk. Sustained attention during listening to long monologues is an arduous task and augments the listener’s cognitive load.

Temporality functions differently from the written mode, since references to previous stages of the discourse cannot be retrieved verbatim unless very recent (up to about 10 seconds ago), and there is no going back: new speech is continually streaming in, replacing the previously heard. By contrast, in dialogic interaction the roles of speaker and hearer keep alternating, and each participant may find themselves occupying either role in rapid succession. From a neuroscientific viewpoint, Hari and her associates emphasise the swift pace of interaction, which includes temporal overlap:

True social interaction occurs at a fast pace and the responses can overlap in time. Examples include the very quick turn-taking during conversation and the unconscious mutual adaptation during a joint motor task, such as carrying a big heavy object. (Hari et al. 2015: 185).
In embodied interaction individuals communicate not only with language, but through paralinguistic means like prosody and multiplex nonverbal ways such as facial expressions, gestures, and glances. We even respond to our interlocutor’s blinks quite sensitively, as neurocognitive processing reveals (Mandel et al. 2015).

Mutual expectations in spoken interaction require constant updating for effective functioning. Mercier and Sperber (2017) approach updating from the angle of the characteristic flexibility and creativity of humans in their coordination activities. These properties enable the fine-grained coordination that underlies the multifarious forms of cooperation. To achieve this, mutual expectations must be constantly updated so that they remain reliable (see also Hari et al. 2015; Pickering & Garrod 2021). Pickering and Garrod (2021) argue that interlocutors’ representations of the language as well as the situation must be aligned for successful dialogue. If this be the case, both parties need rapid updates of the discourse at all levels as it develops.

If we think of a context like academic discussion, which can be cognitively quite demanding to follow or participate in, we see a prime example of discourse in need of constant updates. The processes can be particularly complex in the polylogues that academic discussions typically are, with or without regulated turn-taking. In unregulated turn-taking, like everyday conversations or informal discussions, participants attend to the interaction itself simultaneously with incrementing shared experience, to keep the conversation going, and to follow or initiate new directions as the need or opportunity arises. Regulated turn-taking, like in moderated conference discussions, does not necessarily lighten the participants’ cognitive load: prospective speakers will have to wait for their turn while simultaneously attending to the intervening speakers so as to fit in their own turns with not only what they originally had in mind but also with what has occurred between that point and their turn to speak. For this, they must attend to the twists and turns in the interaction more intensely than when listening to extended monologue.

Any means of facilitating this complex processing and updating are eagerly taken hold of. As discussed, language has many means of making this happen. Among them, reflexive metadiscourse is a good candidate for managing ongoing updates by relating the current state of the discourse to what has preceded and what is likely to follow. It is the current speaker who articulates reflexivity, but it is their interlocutors who update and adjust their expectations to align with the speaker’s reflexive remarks. In other words, speakers make prospections and hearers make predictions. At the same time, it is possible that discourse reflexivity may also help speakers themselves to stay on course, by punctuating longer stretches of speech, as self-reminders of where the argument is heading, or perhaps playing for time at difficult junctures.
Academic discussions may be particularly demanding for rapidly updating situation models. They are unpredictable like any discussions, in addition to which they have specific properties, including co-constructing knowledge by bringing together different findings, interpretations, and viewpoints. This incorporates offering and seeking clarifications, showing respect to other viewpoints while holding one’s ground, and seeking to resolve mismatches and conflicting evidence or interpretations while presenting one’s position as consistent: in short, negotiating perspectives.

In brief, then, spoken interaction is embodied, very fast, and a joint achievement of co-present participants. We may reasonably expect that it offers such roles for discourse reflexivity as may not be evident in monologues, be they written or spoken.

If we accept that spoken interaction is fundamental to human language and substantially different from writing, is this not something that has been well known and thoroughly studied in linguistics for a few decades now? There is no shortage of research into dialogue and social interaction. An abundance of studies has been and is being devoted to the progression and contingencies of conversation, while the roles of repetitions, repairs, particles, structures, and a myriad of constructions are being scrutinized in a vast number of languages and in an enormous range of contexts. We are learning that nonverbal signalling like blinks have interactional significance (Mandel et al. 2015), as do phenomena on the borderlines of the verbal and the nonverbal like hesitation markers (Clark & Fox Tree 2002). There is, however, a notable gap: metadiscourse has not been investigated in dialogic discourse, with a mere handful of exceptions, as we saw in Chapter 1. There is thus a huge space to be explored of discourse reflexivity in interaction.

### 2.7 What discourse reflexivity includes

At this point, operationalising the notion of discourse reflexivity in dialogic interaction is in order. The analyses in the chapters that follow will show how it works, but to go about the analyses, a baseline is needed to pin down the phenomenon that will be observed in different types of events. At this stage the question is, then: what goes into discourse reflexivity? A complete model or a full taxonomy of reflexive expressions is not attempted, first of all because it is not possible even in principle to provide an exhaustive list of all language that can be used in a discourse reflexive function. Importantly, this is unlikely to be the case with any linguistic phenomenon because linguistic categories are inherently fuzzy, which analysts of natural language must take into their stride. The crucial matter in exploring discourse manifestations of a category that is definable and
identifiable at an abstract level is to prioritise the search for prototypical cases (Rosch 1978) instead of seeking to satisfy the formal rules of classical categorisation and focus on the necessary and sufficient features that determine sharp boundaries. For metadiscourse specifically, it is generally agreed that is not reducible to a closed class of expressions but is inherently context-dependent (e.g. Mauranen 1993a; Hyland 2005, 2017; Ådel 2006; McKeown & Ladegaard 2020; Zhang 2022).

The second reason for not attempting even a rough taxonomy let alone an exhaustive list in this chapter is that my analytical approach is exploratory and data-driven, and therefore proceeds from the bottom up: categorisation develops reflecting the data. The material that I use is selected for exploratory research, for capturing different uses in different kinds of discourse – spoken and written dialogue, spoken monologue – and is therefore not suitable for imposing an a priori taxonomy. An exploratory approach is motivated by the novelty of the topic area.

Previous research on spoken metadiscourse has, understandably, largely resorted to writing-based categorisations, because it has mainly investigated monologues. It has nevertheless provided interesting insights into the divergent weighting that categories adopt under varying circumstances of speaking. Most studies of monologic speech add some subcategories of their own, even though overall, the research has not come up with many entirely novel categories. By contrast, what I want to do here is to start from the pivotal data, spoken interaction, derive tentative categories from its analysis, and compare it to other datasets adjusting the categories to fit the new samples as the need arises. The data selection and more detail about the analytic procedures are discussed in Chapter 3, and an overview of the major categories in the whole data with cross-sample comparisons is drawn together towards the end of the book (Chapter 8). At this point, I am setting the scene by a general outline of what is included and what is ruled out.

Discourse reflexivity, then, addresses the ways in which elements of discourse are used for talking about the discourse that is currently unfolding. The conceptualisation rules out metalanguage about discourses other than the ongoing discourse and corresponds to the reflexive model of metadiscourse (see, Mauranen 1993a, 2010, 2012; Ådel 2006, 2010; Smart 2016; McKeown & Ladegaard 2020; Zhang 2022). In contrast to my own earlier operationalisation of the concept (Mauranen 1993a), the present framework excludes instances of ‘low explicitness’ such as conjunctions even if their scope extends beyond sentence boundaries, as well as instances of writer-reader or speaker-audience interaction that do not clearly contain an explicit reference to the discourse qua discourse, that is, unless in Ådel’s terms, the action is “carried out within the world of discourse” (Ådel 2006:30). Both subtypes are similarly excluded in Smart (2016). Moreover, the
distinction between high and low explicitness may not have been very felicitous to begin with (see also a recent critique of its questionable applicability to speech in McKeown & Ladegaard 2020), and I would rather talk about reflexive items in terms of their relative context-dependence.

The point of departure is, then, the reflexive approach to metadiscourse, as explained above in Section 2.2 (in contrast to the ‘broad’ view, see Section 2.5): discourse about the current discourse. ‘Current discourse’ in the prototypical case means a continuous speech event with a beginning and an end. Since many academic events have a composite or chain-like character, which maintain manifest continuity despite temporal distribution over smaller sub-events, they can arguably be seen to constitute one macro-event. On this basis they can be regarded as shared experience by participants in the event incorporating the current moment of speaking, and we can assume that material from these events are incorporated in the participants long-term working memory in a similar way that such material works in reading long texts (see, e.g. Ericsson & Kintsch 1995). Typical macro-events would be conferences or conference sections, term-length university courses, or Internet discussion threads (see Chapter 3 for more detail). Clearly, the participants in macro-events may in reality vary to some degree, but the default is that they remain constant (see Chapter 5).

The domain of discourse reflexivity is thus bounded by time and continuity. Metalinguistic references made to the present discourse fall within it, while those made to non-present discourses remain outside (Figure 2.1).

Example (2.1) illustrates the principal distinction. I say this encapsulates the speaker’s (or, in this case the blogger’s) previous several sentences, and is unmistakably about the ongoing discourse, while the discussion refers to non-present (many high-traffic sites) discourses.

Example (2.1)

I say this without fear of being crucified by my LHC colleagues, since the discussion has been raging on many high-traffic sites for a while.
Within a discourse event’s bounds, we can discern varying timescales ranging from different parts of a macro-event (the last presentation on Tuesday er we heard that there’s still a very strong fixation in the region) to event- or sub-event internal, shorter timescales. These can anticipate local or immediate continuation (I just like to make a brief comment on this) or longer-term, global prediction (my talk is going to be on women and politics in Iran). In principle these are further divisible along finer scales, as it seems that speakers can fine-tune the span of their reflexive comments quite flexibly (see Chapter 7). Local and global reflexive expressions can appear alongside each other in longer discussion turns or monologic presentations, where multi-span structuring supports coherence and clarity, much in the way similar devices work in written text. But they can also structure dialogic event types. For example, some PhD examiners like to explain their overall plan before starting (2.2) and as the examination progresses, provide more local indicators of how the discourse is moving along its path (yes and now we come to the the really difficult questions). Structuring of this kind is reminiscent of what we are used to seeing in written texts, for example towards the end of research article introductions.

(2.2) <S3> . . . we start erm with the central questions . . . then that in the second step we discuss the theoretical framework then in the third step we discuss the methodological approach . . . and then we we finish with er part four which is erm a discussion on the findings and the conclusions . . . </S3>

How do we recognise a discourse reflexive expression when we see one? While some expressions seem immediately identifiable as reflexive wherever they appear, with others, making them out is less straightforward. Overall, longer utterances tend to make their reflexive import fairly clear (here we are discussing a missing link; this is as I’ve already pointed out an issue which . . .). However, identifiability can hinge upon the effect of an individual item within the broader co-text (DISCUSS; LECTURE). Some items are relatively context-independent or context-creating and play a key role in their immediate environment for providing clues to meaning-making. Typical examples of discourse reflexive verbs would be SAY, SPEAK, MENTION, TELL, TALK, ASK, ANSWER, COMMENT, CLARIFY, REFER, DISCUSS, or LISTEN. Typical nouns include QUESTION, COMMENT, PRESENTATION, LECTURE, SPEAKER, DEBATE, or TERM. That said, it will not take long for anyone to find counterexamples where any of these items are used in a non-reflexive manner. Their contrast to highly context-dependent items is nevertheless clear: some items, especially verbs known as ‘light’ verbs can be reflexive in co-text, but on their own will not contain much that would help construct reflexive meaning. Their contribution overall to meaning construction is slight: verbs like GO, COME, GET, PUT, HAVE, TAKE, or
GIVE do not give much indication of how to interpret them, but get the point, have a question, or put it this way already do. Some nouns show similar characteristics (THING, POINT). On the whole, the import of individual elements in longer expressions which function as one unit is best viewed as a cline, where the end points are most clearly seen in verbs such as SPEAK, ASK, or ANSWER at one end, and light verbs like HAVE, GET, or GO at the other, but where most items (FOCUS, MEAN, DEFEND, ADD, or EMPHASISE, for example) fall in between.

Thus, even though it is possible to enumerate a small set of individual items that are particularly likely to signal discourse reflexivity, in an overwhelming majority of instances it is longer, multi-word units, clauses, sentences and beyond, which more reliably indicate discourse reflexive functions. Even typical context-creating items depend to some degree on their co-text for their interpretation. It is therefore vital not to rely on decontextualised items for analysing reflexive discourse. As we argue with Ådel (Ådel & Mauranen 2010, see also Chapter 3), how we approach context is a crucial dividing line between ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ approaches to metadiscourse. A thin approach, which begins from a set of potential metadiscoursal items, has been defended on the grounds that an initial search for potential items can be manually weeded out afterwards by contextual cues. This can work well for context-creating items, but the further we go towards context-dependent items, not to speak of rare and innovative expressions, the more unattainable the goal becomes. In line with the thick approach, the point of departure in this book is qualitative and context-sensitive in analyses and category formation.

Context-dependence renders discourse reflexivity somewhat blurred on the edges, but fuzziness in the sense of incomplete determinacy is the rule rather than the exception in language as already discussed. Moreover, expressions can play multiple roles and flip across boundaries. Speakers apply their language resources creatively, which implies that categorisation in natural language must allow the possibility of category flipping.

Moreover, for reflexive metadiscourse, inherent fuzziness is not limited to context-dependence or category flipping. A phenomenon worth noting is what Smart (2016: 229) discusses as “pragmatic reorientation” (Butler 2008) whereby the pragmatic function of a semifixed phrase such as it’s possible to say gets to overshadow the original literal discourse reflexive meaning. Its interpretation as an instance of discourse reflexivity is therefore not straightforward, despite the presence of a strong cue in the typically context-creating say. What we see here is a process of language change whereby items undergo semantic bleaching (Hopper & Traugott 2003) or delexicalisation, which also relate to Sinclair’s late work on ‘meaning-shift’ (e.g. 2007; Cheng et al. 2009). The process of delexicalisation is developed in detail in Vetchinnikova (2019: 212–216) as one where words through frequent co-occurrence get associated with a specific communicative function. In this process, the individual
words start losing their core meanings and adopt the role of one holistic ‘meaning-shift unit’ (Cheng et al. 2009). How this relates to borderlines in discourse reflexivity can be illustrated by considering example 2.3 where say that is used three times.

(2.3) . . . did I understand you correctly when you said that . . . then one can say that Russia is a kind of unitary actor is it is it true er maybe maybe you can say something more about that

The first instance (when you said that) is undoubtedly discourse reflexive, as is the final one (maybe you can say something more about that). Both refer to the discourse at hand, and a co-present addressee. The middle one, however, (one can say that) is less clear, because it is a fixed multiword unit similar to it is possible to say and has undergone a measure of delexicalization. The reference in both cases is to a generic or abstract entity, which can be seen as resulting from a depersonalisation process. Whether we regard one can say as discourse reflexive is an analyst’s decision, and likely to be made differently by different analysts – even differently by the same analyst in different contexts. The reference is not explicitly to the current discourse, but it does mark the onset of a general statement within the ongoing discourse, and thus feeds into prospection, at the same time indicating the discourse function of the upcoming statement as the speaker’s assessment of the state of affairs (as opposed to, say, a statement of fact). In this context, even though it is in the middle of a longer discourse reflexive utterance, I am inclined not to regard it as discourse reflexive, but I can see that another interpretation could also be defended.

In addition to delexicalization, a similar, if seemingly reverse process is in evidence on the borderlines of discourse reflexivity, namely relexicalization. In this process, a multi-word unit that has become to be associated with one holistic meaning with its parts semantically bleached, is broken down so that the constituent parts of the unit are used as independent items with their individual senses. Relexicalisation has been observed in ELF writing by Vetchinnikova (2019), and earlier in ENL by Partington (2006), who shows how it is used for humorous effect. Along similar lines, Pitzl (2015) talks about creative ‘re-metaphorization’ in ELF. But if exploiting relexicalization for humorous effect is deliberate, both Vetchinnikova (2019) and Pitzl (2015) note that relexicalisation or re-metaphorization can also take place unconsciously, and that this is what seems to be happening in ELF contexts. To complicate matters further, delexicalization and relexicalization are tendencies rather than fully fixed phenomena and appear mostly as preferences (or dispreferences) for a whole with a given sense. If we take a frequent fixed expression like generally speaking, which usually means that a statement holds at an abstract level, disregarding particulars or exceptions, its frame -ly speaking can also be adopted
for productive use. The productive option is not very common, but in ELF contexts speakers seem to exploit the possibility fairly freely (e.g. historically/ linguistically/ legally/ formally speaking) without showing a clear preference for general in the frame (Mauranen 2012). Nevertheless, most linguistic processes take place in the same way whether speakers are using their first or their additional languages. Thus, we can also detect collective fixing (see Vetchinnikova 2014) on certain novel preferences in ELF, for instance (saying) some words about X instead of (saying) a few words about X (Mauranen 2012).

Altogether, then, fluctuating processes of change, such as delexicalization and relexicalization, are constantly going on in language, facets of its indeterminacy. The ensuing ambiguity with regard to interpreting specific instances as discourse reflexive or too much semantically bleached, or too unusual, does not, however, shatter all boundaries in metadiscourse any more than other manifestations of the inherent fuzziness of linguistic categories do; it is the prototypical instances that matter most. Certain boundaries are more determined than others, but hardly any are absolute. For example, references to non-present discourses are out of bounds for reflexive discourse, but there are situations where this is difficult to determine. What we should take away from this is that we should indeed take context seriously and approach large-scale quantitative findings and inter-study comparisons with some caution. Additionally, most analyses even on a smaller scale contain some measure of inaccuracy.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the concept of discourse reflexivity adopted in this book. The term discourse reflexivity has been used in part synonymously to the term metadiscourse, but where it has been deemed necessary to make a distinction between broader, and in my view less motivated usages of the latter term, discourse reflexivity or reflexive discourse have deliberately been chosen to refer specifically to discourse about the ongoing discourse. Reflexive discourse was further contrasted to metalanguage, which also talks about language, but in the sense of referring to ‘language objects’ outside the current discourse.

The specific contribution of discourse reflexivity, or metadiscourse, to speech and writing was discussed in relation to other linguistic cues that also provide stimuli for anticipating what is to come in the discourse. It was noted that a myriad of clues has been identified in both conversation and written text that help communicating parties make sense of what they read or hear, and that meanings arise from communicative collaboration as co-constructed by participants. There is thus no opposition between metadiscourse and the rest of the text, often
somewhat misleadingly conceptualised as the propositional content, because discourse is a holistic entity where complex interactions of a plethora of elements come together in sophisticated collaborative meaning making. Discourse reflexivity is one among them. Discourse, including reflexive metadiscourse, works at all levels of language.

To capture the specific contribution that reflexive discourse can make to the ongoing discourse, it was necessary to consider cognitive processing. Readers and listeners come to discourses with expectations that build upon their accumulated experience and the context in which the discourse takes place. They take an active role in making sense of the discourse, with prediction as a key concept in the process. Predicting ahead (or anticipating, projecting) is what readers and hearers engage in, making probabilistic guesses amongst all the uncertainties of linguistic communication about what is likely to follow. The predictions may or may not be confirmed and need to be frequently updated. Altogether, the picture emerges of a dynamic process which requires active participation of all communicating parties. Discourse reflexivity contributes to generating expectations of what is likely to follow, how it is meant to be taken, and confirming or altering predictions.

Interaction has been a basic notion in metadiscourse studies throughout, and of course there is no communication without interaction. This chapter raised questions about the usefulness of positng metadiscourse as essentially writer-reader interaction because written communication is asynchronous, disembodied, and unidirectional. Authors may envision a target audience of their texts, but that need not be the actual audience. Moreover, readers do not participate in the interaction. In fact, we know very little about readers and metadiscourse. We should posit an active reader and re-orient attention from the exclusive interest in the text to find out more about what readers do with regard to metadiscourse. Above all, metadiscourse research should also embrace spoken language more seriously. Not only do speech and writing differ on many vital accounts, but there is reason to believe that so do monologue and dialogue. Spoken interaction is co-present, embodied, and very fast. To get a grip on how metadiscourse is involved in typical bidirectional interaction, dialogic interaction must be taken on the agenda.

How discourse reflexivity is to be delimited for analysis hangs on the conceptualization of discourse reflexivity as discourse about the discourse it participates in and is constructing, in other words as part of the discourse that is currently being co-created by interacting parties. Reflexive discourse updates and changes the ongoing discourse with its specific contribution to predictions about the discourse ahead and interpretations and confirmations about its import up to the point of the utterance. It is important to bear in mind that reflexive discourse cannot be reduced to a closed class of expressions, because it is inherently context
dependent. Some expressions are more readily recognizable as instances of reflexivity than others. The borderlines remain fuzzy on account of contextual interpretation and the continually changing nature of language, but prototypical cases of discourse reflexivity are identifiable and separable from those that are less typical, like for example metalinguistic or delexicalized expressions.