

“LETTER FROM THE EDITOR” AS A WAY FOR STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION: A STUDY OF THE IMAGE OF A JOURNAL

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ABSTRACT

Journals provide an open area for transferring and creating knowledge which can be treated as social activities mediated by text. Where researchers submit their studies, however, it depends upon their perception of a journal's image as to which one they send it to. Although journal ranking is an index of a journal's image as perceived by the readers, a journal can be pro-active and create the desired image through the use of "Letter from the Editor" messages. This study tries to understand how editors produce this image of credibility, and how they promote their idea to the community by writing these letters. In our study, we collected sixty "Letter from the Editor" letters from MISQ, ISR and CACM, and applied a metadiscourse analysis to examine the linguistic forces. Our findings suggest that the editors of these journals adopt different strategies to establish or modify their image by adopting different linguistic devices in their letters to their readers, based on the existing image of their journal.

Keywords: Image, 'Letter from the Editor', Metadiscourse

INTRODUCTION

Academic journals play a critical role in both knowledge acquisition and the recreation process. This often makes it confusing for researchers when deciding as to where to submit their papers. Many factors influence their decision, and one of them is the perceived image of the particular journal. Dutton et al. (5) defined the organizational image as a member's beliefs about the perception by outsiders regarding the organization. When this definition is extended to journal image, the image of a journal is specifically involved with perception, identity and evaluation of a particular target.

A journal's image can be understood by its readers, but at the same time it can also be proactively created by the editor of the journal. For editors, their 'Letter from the Editor' reveals the question: "how do researchers think of this journal because of its association with this field?" According to the speech act theory, speech or written discourse is essentially a social and communicative activity. By addressing readers in their discourse, the editors therefore inevitably

offer explicit assistance in extracting information, rather than provide only specific domain knowledge employed in the Management Information Systems (MIS) field. In this regard, the letter from the editor is in fact not only presenting some sort of discourse, but also becomes a popular scientific forum in which editors personalize their writing by going beyond the discourse. By adopting certain speech acts, the editors can influence the perception of readers toward a journal’s image. Thus, the ‘Letter from the Editor’ can be treated as a persuading style, with which editors try to influence the image the community has toward their journal.

In persuasive writing, metadiscourse is suggested as a useful tool with which to guide and direct readers by means of text, by helping them understand the text itself as well as the author’s perspective (7). Specifically, an author can use various meta-discourse forces for engaging readers, drawing their attention to the act of discoursing, alerting them to varying degrees of certainty, and guiding their reading (10). Therefore, the analysis of metadiscourse provides an opportunity to reveal how editors create or enhance the image of their journal.

This study examines speech acts in the letters from editors, in order to explore how these writers project themselves into their texts in order to present a particular image for their journal. . In other words, we try to understand how the journal’s image is “sold” to the readers by means of a linguistic tool, named metadiscourse. By analyzing metadiscourse forces in sixty Editor’s letters from MISQ, ISR and CACM, this study investigates the images the editors intended to construct and promote for their journals , in terms of their role-play and role-taking in the MIS discipline.

THE CONCEPT OF METADISCOURSE

Metadiscourse is a text-based rhetoric tool for analyzing a written genre. It refers to the aspects of text structure going beyond the subject matter and signaling the presence of the author (9;10). It has been applied in various areas, including written genres in business (8), in science (4; 6), and persuasive writing (3). Metadiscourse categorizes linguistic tokens that can be divided into textual and interpersonal forces (9; 4; 3). The textual metadiscourse refers to those devices which reveal the writer’s intention by explicitly establishing preferred interpretations of prepositional meanings (10). It involves the following five main functions.

1. Logical connectives: It helps readers to interpret pragmatic connections among ideas and prepositional phrases by signaling additive and contrastive relations in the writer’s thinking.
2. Sequencers: It includes enumerative items like first, then, and finally, as well as numbers and letters used for listing.
3. Frame markers: It labels stages in the text structure (e.g. to conclude), draws attention to the writer’s discourse goals (e.g. I argue here), or indicates topic or argument shifts (e.g. well).

4. Endophoric markers: It refers to information in other parts of the text, such as “as we mentioned above.”
5. Code glosses: It is a further elaboration by explaining, comparing, or expanding what has been said, in order to ensure the writer’s intention is clearly understood.

The second metadiscourse is concerned with interpersonal relationship. Interpersonal metadiscourse “reveals the author’s attitude towards both the propositional information and the reader, thus contributing to the development of a writer-reader relationship”(p.229) (9). It influences the author’s intimacy or remoteness, expression of attitude, commitment or propositions, and the degree of reader involvement. There are also five subcategories in interpersonal metadiscourse (4), and they are listed as follows:

1. Hedges mark: It indicates the writer’s decision to present propositional information tentatively. The items “possible,” “might,” and “perhaps” are belong to this category.
2. Emphatics: It expresses the writer’s assurance, such as “it is obvious” and “clearly.”
3. Attributors: It indicates the source of information, such as “according to...” and “John Doe says”
4. Attitude markers: It expresses the writer’s attitudes toward particular information, converting surprise, judgments of importance, agreement, and so on.
5. Relational markers: It explicitly seeks to involve the reader by selectively focusing their attention, emphasizing a relationship, or by including them as participants in the text situation. Devices include second-person pronouns, first-person pronouns, imperatives, questions, and asides that interrupt the ongoing discourse.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Sampling

Editor’s letters from MISQ, ISR and CACM were collected. These three journals were selected because of the following two reasons: First, they represented those journals which enjoy a successful, positive image as to journal quality and status. These three journals are ranked within the top 5 by surveys of previous years (12; 8). They were recognized as having a positive image for the quality of the journal. Previous studies ranked MISQ as the leading-edge journal but CACM was ranked in various positions among different studies across the years (12; 8). It was interesting to compare the speech acts adopted by MISQ versus CACAM, to see if the editors took different positions and strategies to reinforce their journal’s image. Second, they represented studies in MIS discipline. According to Alavi and Carlson (1), research in MIS discipline can be

divided into three types: management science, information systems, and technical-oriented publications. Most studies in the MISQ journal, focused on managerial theories and behavioral practices of information technologies; while the papers of the journal ‘ISR’ emphasized theories on the IS field; and research with technical-oriented concerns appeared in the CACM journal (11;12).

There were sixty editor’s letters collected for this study. Specifically, the editors’ letters that appeared in MISQ and CACM were collected for the years 1990, 1995 and 2000. On the other hand, those that appeared in ISR were collected for the years 1993, 1995, and 2000 because editors’ letters were a lack until 1993. All of the ‘Letter from the Editor’ letters were written in English, and their average length was about one page in CACM, one to three pages in ISR, and six pages in MISQ. Table 1 lists the editors who wrote this genre in these three journals.

Table1 Sample description

Journal	Year/Issues	Editor
MISQ	1990/March,June, Sep, Dec	Allen S. Lee,
	1995//March,June, Sep, Dec	Robert Zmud
	2000//March,June, Sep, Dec	James C. Emery
ISR	1993/March,June, Sep, Dec	John I. King
	1995//March,June, Sep, Dec	John I. King
	2000//March,June, Sep, Dec	Izak Benbasat
CACM	1990/January~September	Denning, P.J. (Editor Chief)
	1990/October~December	James Maurer (Executive Editor)
	1995/January~December	Cohen, J. (Editor Chief)
	2000/January~December	Crawford, D. (Editor Chief)

Data Analysis Method

Content analysis was adopted based on the meta-discourse markers. The specific procedure for the data analysis was as follows. First, the analysis unit was each single sentence in this study. All of the editor’s letters were analyzed sentence by sentence. Second, coding was based on the categories of the integrative model of meta-discourse (8). Although some sentences could be concluded to belong into more than one category, only the major one was represented in order to reduce the complexity. Third, the coding process was compiled by two coders independently, and then the different clarifications were discussed in order to arrive at consistent results. Finally, reliability of the coders was assessed by measuring the inter-rater reliability. The inter-rater

reliability means that the results of content classification are invariant over time. The inter-rater reliability could be ascertained when the same content was coded more than once by the same coder. In our study, the inter-rater reliability of the textual category was 89.7 percent; the interpersonal one was 87.5 percent. This meant that the combined reliability index of textual and interpersonal categories reached 85 percent, and this coding data is acceptable.

RESULT

The result of data analysis in each category was represented as Table 2. It showed that interpersonal devices were used more than textual ones in all of the journals. In the interpersonal devices, relational markers were the most frequently used devices (CACM: 23.1%; ISR: 17.1%; MISQ: 9.4%). Attributors were the second most frequently device used in CACM (13.8%) and ISR (8.7%), but attitude markers and Hedges markers were more likely to be used in MISQ (7.4% and 7.1%, respectively). Regarding textual devices, logical connectives and code glosses were the most two frequent devices used in all of the three journals, although in different proportions (CACM: 15.3%; ISR: 22.2%; MISQ: 14.8%).

ANOVA tests were applied to examine the difference of using metadiscourse devices among the three journals. In textual devices, the analysis showed a significant difference of using the five categories among the three journals ($F=7.042$, $p=0.000<0.05$). Regarding the interpersonal devices, there was also a significant difference among these journals ($F=27.086$, $p=0.000<0.05$). This indicated that the editors of these journals adopted different strategies to maintain reader intimacy.

Table 2 the frequency of metadiscourse forces in three journals

Textual metadiscourse devices				Interpersonal metadiscourse devices			
	CACM	ISR	MISQ		CACM	ISR	MISQ
Code glosses	67	37	91	Attitude markers	18	43	64
Endophoric	2	1	1	Attributor	78	63	23
Frame markers	11	2	18	Emphatics	10	19	53
Logical connectives	87	161	127	Hedges markers	29	51	61
Sequencer	14	8	59	Relational markers	131	124	81
Subtotal	181	209	296	Subtotal	266	300	282
Total sentences	567	724	861	Total sentences	567	724	861
Devices per 100 sentences	31.9	28.9	34.4	Devices per 100 sentences	46.9	41.4	32.8

DISCUSSION

Applying a metadiscourse analysis, it became clear how the editors helped establish their journal's image. First, all of the Editor's letters in these journals emphasized the rationality of the argument they were making. Adopting logical connectives and code gloss devices made it easier and clearer for guiding their readers to interpret their argument.

Second, it was found that interpersonal devices were used more frequently than textual devices. This data provided a counter evidence for the myth that professional scientific writing should be impersonal statement (2). However, all of the editors of these journals built their credibility and affective appeal through the frequent use of interpersonal devices .

Third, the existent image and the writing style influenced each other. For example, letters from the editor in MISQ used more emphatics, while those in both CACM and ISR adopted more attributors to increase the convincing powers of their arguments. Being ranked as the top journal in the MIS field for years, MISQ was perceived to be the leading image in the MIS community. This image offered the credibility for the editors to play as a director and giving guidelines to the MIS field. By making a certain and emphatic statement (e.g. I am sure that, I believe ...), the editor reinforced the journal's image about being the leader in the field. In addition, CACM used a different strategy from both MISQ and ISR in their use of affective appeals. CACM used up to 50% relational markers and only 5% attitude markers in their letters from the editor, while MISQ used 31% relational markers and 20% attitude markers in their discourses. As the ranking of CACM varied over the years, the editor often assumed the role of introducer of the MIS research in the "Letter from the Editor." Typical examples were "*We hope you find their ...*" and "*let me point you to...*" All of these sentences were involved with the distinguishing of three groups of participants- you (i.e. the readers), we (i.e. journal editors and the readers), and they (i.e. the writers). This implied that the editor saw himself as a guide to introduce others to what had been studied , or was new, in the MIS discipline.

CONCLUSION

This study applied a metadiscourse analysis to examine letters from editors as written in the journals CACM, ISR, and MISQ. The data analysis showed that editors in these three journals applied different strategies to communicate with their readers, although all of them were concerned with rational appeals in their writings. MISQ used more emphatics than the others to build and reinforce their leading-edge image. CACM and ISR used lots of attributors to frame their credibility. In addition, MISQ and ISR adopted more attitude markers to implicitly engage the readers , while CACM used relational markers most frequently to identify the different stands

of various groups.

This study made two major contributions. First, applying the concept of metadiscourse opened up a new perspective for research in the study of journal image. Editors might want to consider how to apply appropriate metadiscourse to help them create the image for their journal they are looking for. Next, this study extended the application of metadiscourse into studying journal image. It suggests that preferred uses of metadiscourse might contribute to rhetorical patterns which reflect broad areas of intellectual inquiry and knowledge. The journal editors, therefore, need to be aware of the effects of the speech acts in their letters on their journals' image.

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