

Context Matters in AI-Generated Academic Writing: Metadiscourse and Source Grounding

Meshari Alsairi

University of Bisha

Abstract

Large language models are increasingly used to draft academic prose, but their outputs are often evaluated as decontextualized text rather than as situated scholarly communication. This one-page abstract reports a corpus-based comparison of metadiscourse in 18 Saudi-affiliated human-authored applied linguistics research article introductions and 18 ChatGPT-4-generated introductions on matched topics. The study asks whether machine-generated academic discourse can reproduce the reader guidance, source grounding, and epistemic positioning found in expert L2 scholarly writing. Using Hyland's interpersonal model, interactive resources, including transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials, and code glosses, and interactional resources, including hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, and engagement markers, were manually coded. Normalized frequencies were compared with log-likelihood analysis and interpreted through qualitative concordance analysis. Results show similar overall metadiscourse density across the two corpora, but a sharply different distribution. Human-authored introductions used more interactive resources, especially evidentials, indicating stronger integration into retrievable disciplinary literature. ChatGPT-4 texts used more interactional resources, driven mainly by frequent hedging, indicating an over-cautious epistemic stance under an academic-style prompt. The findings are relevant to socially aware natural language processing because they show that surface genre conformity does not guarantee contextual adequacy. Evaluation of large language model-generated academic writing should therefore move beyond fluency and structure to include source grounding, epistemic calibration, and discipline-specific pragmatic expectations.

Keywords: large language models, ChatGPT, metadiscourse, academic writing, source grounding, discourse analysis, pragmatics, L2 scholarly writing