

## **METADISCOURSE ANALYSIS AS AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING PHILOSOPHICAL TEXT COMPREHENSION**

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**Abstract.** *Philosophical texts, even when aligned with contemporary academic standards, often retain a complex structure that poses a significant challenge to students of philosophy – particularly beginners. This paper explores the potential application of a text-analytical framework based on metadiscourse markers to the field of philosophical propaedeutics, with the aim of enhancing specific aspects of philosophical text comprehension. The focus will be on sentence connectors and markers of propositional attitude, and their role in understanding relationships between textual units and their place within the text as a whole. This approach rests on the assumption that recognizing and analyzing metadiscourse markers – alongside an awareness of the diverse functions, relations, and modalities of smaller textual units within philosophical texts – can positively influence the development of the specific reading competencies required for engaging with philosophical literature. Consequently, the paper positions itself as an interdisciplinary contribution to improving philosophy instruction through a methodologically innovative and practically applicable approach.*

**Key words:** *methods of teaching philosophy, reading comprehension, applied linguistics, metadiscourse analyses, metadiscourse markers*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses a potential strategy for helping beginner students become more competent in reading and comprehending philosophical literature. Although we usually take students' reading and comprehension skills for granted, the teaching practice – especially in philosophical reading seminars – often proves us wrong and reminds us that philosophical text comprehension is an acquired competence.

Numerous authors suggest that there is a persistent and troubling problem with the quality of students' reading and understanding of philosophical literature – e.g. McGinn (2016), Skipper (2005), Smith (2011). Moreover, there is a vast body of propaedeutic literature intended to help students understand specific texts, either from assigned readers or particular philosophical fields; see, for example: Bernecker (2006), Beebe and Dodd (2007), Guttenplan, Hornsby, and Janaway (2002), among others.

All this highlights the need to address this issue *systematically*. Although “local solutions”, like those cited above, can help students better understand a specific set of philosophical papers, they do not seem to contribute much to the development of comprehension skills – which should be regarded as, at least, an equally important goal.

## 2. PHILOSOPHY PAPERS AS DEEPLY STRUCTURED TEXTS

It is almost impossible to offer a *one-size-fits-all characterization* of philosophical texts. The classics of philosophical literature are so diverse that it is difficult to identify anything that underlies this diversity while still being informative and significant to point out. We have classical philosophical works in the form of fragments, poems, dialogues, confessions, aphorisms, structures composed of discrete numbered statements, strings of syllogistic arguments, and so on. However, the essay form seems to have become the most prominent type of philosophical writing in the last few centuries, if not longer. Moreover, from the students' perspective, it is the most common form of text they encounter during their studies. Having all this in mind, the focus of the analysis in this article is on philosophical papers in essay form.

Generally, essays are structured pieces of written discourse – even more so when they are philosophical essays. Typical philosophical texts are far from being plain, simple discourse like stories, news articles, or novels. They are not narratives, where each compound paragraph is a part of the story, an element of a wider picture, that follows the same modality as the previous and the next one. Instead, they have a rich structure with parts that play very specific roles and serve diverse modalities, forms and purposes. A typical philosophical paper may begin with an exposition of the problem it addresses, presentation of some earlier takes on it, reasons why those are not satisfactory (perhaps even counterexamples), reports of already offered objections, and citations or analyses of other authors... It may then proceed to offer new perspectives on the problem, provide examples and explanations, consider potential challenges, propose possible replies, and highlight certain concerns or weaknesses, and so on.

To summarize, philosophical texts can be broadly conceived as deeply structured units of written discourse aimed at presenting and making plausible the author's view on a given philosophical issue. They are usually structurally rich and diverse compositions, with each part playing a specific role within the text as a whole.

Having all this in mind, and considering the abstract, typically conceptual and non-empirical nature of philosophical inquiry, it is rather difficult – especially for beginners – to recognize these textual subunits, understand their roles, and consequently comprehend the text successfully.

### 3. TYPICAL PROBLEMS WITH READING PHILOSOPHY

There are many different problems that beginner students encounter while reading philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Some of them are related to a limited philosophical vocabulary, insufficient or inadequate background knowledge (contextual, general, or field-specific), while others concern motivation (e.g. Cenić, Petrović, and Cenić 2019) and the general reading habits and abilities of students. All these problems are important and must be addressed in some way if teachers wish to improve students' reading performance in their seminars.<sup>2</sup>

However, the focus here will be on *structural problems*, that is, those difficulties which can prevent students – even those with good vocabulary, motivation, and background knowledge, from adequately comprehending a text because they fail to follow its structure in a satisfactory way. A persistent difficulty students encounter when reading philosophical texts is their tendency to overlook the *functional and argumentative roles of different sections* of a text. Rather than tracing the author's reasoning, students often reduce complex passages to a superficial catalogue of claims – e.g., “First, the author discusses *A*, then introduces *B*, and finally touches on *C*.” This way of interpreting the text misses the purpose behind its structure, leading to fundamental misunderstandings. It also means that students will not be able to evaluate the given text or incorporate its theoretical significance and impact into their philosophical understanding.

Regarding the same problem, David Concepción notes that the most frequent “complaints” he receives from students after their engagement with philosophical literature are: “Why does the author contradict herself?” and “Why does the author repeat himself so much?” (Concepción, 2004: 366). While it is, of course, possible for authors to occasionally contradict themselves, the prevalence of these remarks among beginners in philosophy indicates, once again, a failure to comprehend the structure of the text – specifically, the roles and functions of its sections. The author almost certainly did not assert both a *given claim* and *its negation*; rather, he or she may have explored a promising idea, analyzed it, confronted counterexamples, and ultimately decided to abandon it. Similarly, what may appear as “repetition” in a classic philosophical text is more likely a deliberate refinement of a thesis – sharpening it, testing it from different angles, or seeking the most precise formulation through an analysis of potential objections. Both student complaints highlighted by Concepción, in fact, *symptoms of inadequate textual comprehension* or, more precisely, a lack of specific *structural* reading skills.

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<sup>1</sup> This pertains primarily to students of philosophy, but also to students of other vocations who have philosophy courses within their studies. The purpose of these courses – although we have reason to believe they are significant for these students (e.g. Dimić, Gorgiev, & Jovanović, 2021; Јовановић, Димић, Ристић Горгиев 2023) – can easily be called into question if their reading and understanding of philosophical literature is not at a satisfactory level.

<sup>2</sup> As said earlier, there are different strategies for dealing with those problems – differing in their primary target.

The absence of these skills is directly responsible for students' frequent inability to recognize and clearly state the *main thesis* of a paper they have read, as well as its *supporting claims*, *main arguments*, *analyzed obstacles*, and cited *objections*. Closely related to this, students often fail to perceive a paper's *coherence* and its *communicative aims*. They tend to overlook how sections of the text are connected (and why certain passages are included at all), what the intended purpose of the paper is (or what the author's aspirations in writing it are), and how to engage in discussion with the author: for example, why to agree or how to disagree.

These problems are serious, and can persist throughout one's studies even with a great amount of carefully read literature.<sup>3</sup> They are *methodological* and *structural* in nature, and should be addressed accordingly – meaning that we need a specific kind of model that targets these particular structural reading comprehension competences.

One promising (although somewhat unconventional) way of addressing this prominent and pressing issue is – as I would like to suggest – through the attention to *metadiscourse* and more specifically to *metadiscourse markers*. With carefully designed exercises in metadiscourse analysis students can be guided to develop a sensitivity to the roles and functions of a text's subunits. Furthermore, the benefit of this tacitly developed knowledge should extend even to papers with little or no metadiscourse – which is often the case in philosophy.

In what follows, I will briefly present the theoretical framework surrounding metadiscourse and then proceed to demonstrate how it can be used to enhance reading comprehension of philosophical texts.

#### 4. METADISOURSE AND METADISOURSE MARKERS

Let us begin with a brief introduction to metadiscourse. Metadiscourse, fundamentally conceptualized as “writing about writing” (Williams, 1985), encompasses the range of rhetorical devices and linguistic features within a text that do not directly contribute to its propositional content. Instead, these elements relate to the author's management of the discourse itself and their strategic engagement with the anticipated reader. This includes explicit authorial commentary on the level of commitment to presented assertions, as well as direct addresses and rhetorical questions aimed at guiding the reader's reception of the text (Hyland, 2005; Williams, 1985).

Building on this foundation, metadiscourse can be understood as a distinct textual layer or an interpersonal plane that operates alongside the primary discourse. At this level, the author does not introduce new information but rather interacts with the existing propositional content. Its primary function is to scaffold the reader's experience by providing explicit cues that facilitate the organization, interconnection, and interpretation of information. This involves guiding the reader in structuring arguments, resolving ambiguities, evaluating evidence, and ultimately aligning with the author's intended interpretation and rhetorical purposes (Vande Kopple, 1985; Crismore, 1989). In essence, metadiscourse represents the

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<sup>3</sup> Moreover, these problems are particularly insidious because they can easily remain obscured from instructors on certain courses, often as a direct consequence of how assessment and the monitoring of student progress are organized. Consequently, it is entirely possible for even upper-year students, and indeed graduated philosophers, to continue to exhibit a deficiency in these aforementioned structural reading skills.

author's linguistic manifestation of a reader-aware writing process, making the text more persuasive, comprehensible, and responsive to the norms of its discursive community.

The study of metadiscourse is situated within the domain of applied linguistics and has gained particular significance among scholars concerned with academic writing instruction and analysis. Additionally, contrastive (or cross-linguistic) analyses have examined the variable deployment of metadiscourse markers across different languages. These studies frequently reveal profound cultural and rhetorical predispositions, illustrating how specific linguacultural communities display distinct preferences for either explicit, reader-oriented strategies or more implicit, writer-responsible approaches (see, e.g. Blagojević, 2008). Consequently, metadiscourse analysis has become an invaluable tool in the field of second language pedagogy, aiding in diagnosing learner difficulties and informing the teaching of pragmatic and rhetorical competence in writing (Hyland, 2005; Ädel, 2006).

## 5. METADISOURSE MARKERS AND PHILOSOPHICAL LITERATURE

The primary objective of this paper is to propose a deliberate expansion of this analytical framework beyond its traditional applications. My intention is to strategically direct metadiscourse analysis toward the examination of philosophical texts. This application is not conceived as an end in itself but rather, in a certain sense, as a form of propaedeutics – a preparatory exercise in reading comprehension for philosophy students.

In the following section, I will outline a series of teaching strategies designed to cultivate students' structural reading skills in the context of philosophical literature. These strategies are intrinsically linked to – and fundamentally enabled by – metadiscourse analysis, which I posit is a critical resource for mastering these structural competencies.

Prior to engaging directly with metadiscourse, a preliminary exercise for students involves familiarization with the fundamental variety of paragraphs and their specific functions within a text. This can be effectively introduced through a discussion of paragraph typology. An excellent resource on this subject is Hurley and Watson's book (2018), which provides a concise yet impactful overview of paragraph types and their functions. In their logic textbook, the authors note that paragraphs within an argumentative or expository text can serve diverse roles, such as: presenting an argument, stating a belief or opinion, providing an expository passage, delivering a report, offering an illustration, or giving an explanation (Hurley & Watson, 2018). For each type, they offer practical heuristics for identifying them within continuous text. This theoretical framework is complemented by practical exercises in the book, which can be highly beneficial for student training.

It is precisely through the discussion of *paragraph-type recognition* that students can be seamlessly introduced to the concepts of metadiscourse and metadiscourse markers. While numerous classification systems for metadiscourse exist (e.g., Vande Kopple, 1985; Hyland, 2005), for the purposes of this specific pedagogical application, a combined taxonomy, such as the one presented by Blagojević (2008: 91-95), is perhaps most suitable. Students should be first provided with a clear explanation of metadiscourse and metadiscourse markers, followed by a presentation of this classification, which can be outlined as follows:

Markers of textual connection

- for expressing logical relations
- for expressing temporal-spatial relations
- for marking the sequence of propositional content

- for reminding of the presented propositional content
- for announcing the presentation of propositional content
- for emphasizing the theme
- for reformulating propositional content

Interpersonal metadiscourse

- Epistemic markers of doubt and the author's hedging
- Markers of the author's categorical assertion
- Markers of the author's attitude towards the propositional content
- Markers of the author's commentary. (Blagojević, 2008: 95)

As competent speakers of their native language, students can readily identify examples of metadiscourse markers for each of these categories. This exercise is a valuable tool for raising awareness of metadiscourse's role and illuminating its structural significance.

Based on my experience as both a reader and an instructor, markers of textual connection that express logical relations are particularly significant. They include markers of addition, similarity, limitation, contradiction, exception, causation, conclusion, and explanation. It is these markers, likely in conjunction with markers of the author's propositional attitude, that account for the greatest share of the structural difficulties students encounter when reading philosophical literature, as noted earlier.

A guided discussion and close reading of examples of these markers – such as *furthermore*, *however*, *nevertheless*, *for example*, *thus* – is crucial for illuminating the diversity of relationships within a text. In this way, it becomes evident that an author places “in addition to” at the beginning of a specific passage for a reason: to signal that the forthcoming content will extend, strengthen or amplify the preceding point. If one were to experimentally alter the text by substituting this marker with another, such as “in contrast to”, an attentive reader would immediately detect a problem. This dissonance would likely result in confusion or the assumption that a crucial element of the argument has been misunderstood, as their comprehension of the content would no longer align with the text's intended structural and logical trajectory.

The next step, probably the most important for this strategy, is to apply this framework to beginner-friendly philosophical texts (preferably those containing sufficient metadiscourse), and to ask students first to identify the metadiscourse markers, and then to determine the roles of those passages within the text.<sup>4</sup> Peer review, discussion, and feedback are, of course, crucial at this point. The overarching objective of this exercise is the systematic calibration of students' analytical sensitivity to the macrostructure of sophisticated texts and the rhetorical function of their constituent units.

The aforementioned typology of paragraph functions, viewed through the lens of metadiscourse, can be further refined and specifically adapted for philosophical texts. One such refined system is presented by Concepción (2004). In his article, Concepción outlines some of the most typical and crucial functions that paragraphs (or their constituent parts, including individual sentences) can serve within philosophical discourse. These functions

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<sup>4</sup> One could be creative here. An instructor could, for instance, task students not only with identifying markers but also with substituting them for alternatives that preserve the original argumentative function and the text's logical flow – thereby reinforcing their understanding of the marker's precise semantic and pragmatic value. Conversely, a more advanced exercise could require students to perform substitutions that deliberately introduce dissonance and disrupt the textual coherence. Such intentionally *corrupted* texts could then be given to peers who are unfamiliar with the original version, challenging them to diagnose the point of incoherence and identify the nature of the alteration. The potential variations of this exercise are numerous.

include, but are not limited to: providing a definition, making a distinction, presenting an argument or a reason, engaging in discussion, offering an example or a counterexample, raising an objection, formulating a reply, and providing a summary.

A well-designed system for text annotation can also serve as a heuristically useful addition to this process. While such a system can be developed collaboratively with students within a specific course, Concepción's model provides a valuable framework.<sup>5</sup> The practice of annotation itself plays a vital role in acquiring these structural skills, as it compels students to make active interpretative decisions regarding the structural roles of passages and sentences. These decisions are subsequently compared and discussed with the interpretations of their peers concerning the same textual elements. This process of collaborative negotiation of meaning represents a critical moment in the learning process, fostering metacognitive awareness and deepening textual comprehension.

## 6. BROADENING THE APPLICATION

However, a significant portion of philosophical literature is characterized by a sparse layer of metadiscourse. If the proposed strategy for acquiring the structural aspects of reading competence in philosophy were taken at face value – precisely as it has been outlined thus far – one might easily gain the impression that it would be of little use for such texts. Nevertheless, this impression would be mistaken.

A crucial lesson from reading philosophical literature concerns the famous Gadamerian notion of the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1960). In this context, the circle should not be viewed solely as pertaining to the relationship between parts and the whole – although, as a careful reader would have already noted, this is also intimately connected to the proposed strategy – but also as the relationship between understanding a text's *structure* and its *content*. A sound understanding of the structure requires a sound understanding of the content of a given passage; conversely, as emphasized from the outset, a sound understanding of the content requires that it be structurally well-organized within our interpretation. Metadiscourse markers are merely an additional aid, a shortcut that slightly abbreviates this spiral path of understanding, but they are not always available. When they are absent, one must work without them.

Precisely for this reason, it is vital to first acquaint students with this specific variant of the hermeneutic circle. Subsequently, it is important to emphasize that the functions and roles of passages and sentences – initially recognized and assimilated through exercises with metadiscourse markers – persist even in texts devoid of explicit metadiscourse. In other words, the analytical register we have adopted (and partially mastered using metadiscourse markers) is characteristic of *all literature*, whether it contains metadiscourse that aids in identifying these roles or not. This skill of recognition must now be further refined, in order for our strategy to be broadened. Using the “broader picture” within a given text and a richer hermeneutic situation, students must test and consider the roles that specific passages have assumed. These interpretative decisions must, of course, be continually tested against the unfolding text, as well as through discussion with peers, or instructor guidance. Ultimately, difficult texts are difficult precisely because these interpretative decisions are not easily made.

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to develop system of easy-to learn abbreviations, so students can use them intuitively, without a constant need to check some sort of index or glossary.

Exercises designed to address this more challenging spectrum of philosophical literature (lacking metadiscourse markers) should involve tasks such as adding appropriate metadiscourse to passages, reformulating problematic excerpts from the literature, annotating difficult passages or sentences with hypotheses about their potential role, testing them against the rest of the text, and also debating these hypotheses with course colleagues. At a more advanced level, the discussion could be guided towards methodological questions, involving debates about what would constitute good indicators that a hypothesis regarding a passage's role is incorrect, what one would expect to find elsewhere in the text that would falsify a given assumption, and how one could recognize and become more sensitive to such "hypotheses-defeaters". These are exceptionally valuable insights, ones that crucially sharpen a student's interpretive sensibilities.

Therefore, although the presented model is fundamentally grounded in the metadiscourse framework – in a specific propaedeutic sense – there are strong and compelling reasons to believe that its applicability is not limited to texts where metadiscourse is abundant and dominant. The exercises involving metadiscourse are designed to heighten students' sensitivity to the recognition of structural aspects of the texts, the roles and functions of their subunits, modalities of narration, the author's propositional attitude, and so on. Through adequate transitional exercises, students should be able to successfully apply this acquired knowledge even to philosophical literature where metadiscourse is less prevalent.

Consequently, the proposed model addresses, in a relatively broad and systematic way, the empirically evident problem with reading philosophical literature that was introduced earlier. As noted above, this problem is fundamentally structural, so the focus of this strategy is on structural competencies. It addresses these issues through exercises derived from applied linguistics that focus on linguistic competencies directly related to the structural aspects of discourse.

Numerous theoretical reasons, supported by anecdotal evidence from teaching practice, suggest that this approach can yield positive outcomes. In other words, such a model of student engagement can contribute to the enhancement of their reading competencies specifically pertaining to philosophical literature. Naturally, it would be highly useful to complement this theoretical and anecdotal foundation with a rigorous empirical analysis of its results in future research.

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## METADISKURSNA ANALIZA KAO INOVATIVNI PRISTUP U NASTAVI ČITANJA FILOZOFSKOG TEKSTA

*Filozofski tekstovi, čak i kada su usklađeni sa savremenim akademskim standardima, često zadržavaju složenu strukturu koja predstavlja značajni izazov za studente filozofije – naročito za početnike. Ovaj rad istražuje potencijalnu primenu okvira za analizu teksta zasnovanog na metadiskursnim markerima u domen filozofske propedeutike, s ciljem unapređenja specifičnih aspekata razumevanja filozofskih tekstova. Fokus će biti na markerima tekstualne konekcije i markerima propozicionalnog stava, te njihovoj ulozi u razumevanju odnosa između tekstualnih jedinica i njihovog mesta unutar teksta kao celine. Ovaj pristup počiva na pretpostavci da prepoznavanje i analiza metadiskursnih markera – uz svest o različitim funkcijama, odnosima i modalitetima manjih tekstualnih jedinica unutar filozofskih tekstova – može pozitivno uticati na razvoj specifičnih čitalačkih kompetencija neophodnih za rad sa filozofskom literaturom. Shodno tome, rad se pozicionira kao interdisciplinarni doprinos unapređenju nastave filozofije kroz metodološki inovativan i praktično primenjiv pristup.*

Ključne reči: *metodika nastave filozofije, čitanje i razumevanje, primenjena lingvistika, metadiskursna analiza, metadiskursni markeri.*