

A Cross-Cultural Characterization of Chinese and English Written Discourse

Li Xue & Meng Meng
Harbin Institute of Technology, China

This paper examines the significant ways in which Chinese and English are different and how the conventions of Chinese and English written discourses are distinguished from each other as a consequence. Several cultural differences have been identified between Chinese-speaking and English-speaking countries: relative dependence on contextual information, patterns of social interaction, and patterns of thinking. In light of these differences, this paper identifies English as a writer-responsible language and Chinese as a typical reader-responsible language. A contrast of inductive organization and deductive organization is also found between Chinese and English writings. The textual differences between Chinese and English written discourses are also illustrated in examples from the English compositions of Chinese and American writers.

Contrastive rhetoric has evolved into a cross-disciplinary study, which is relevant to a wide array of interests entertained by different disciplines, and it has undergone significant changes since its emergence several decades ago. It is believed that it has offered contributions to different fields of applied linguistics such as ESL writing theory and instruction, composition and rhetoric, and second language acquisition in general. Some of its recent developments are also owed to the recognition of its ally in cross-cultural communication. The goal of cross-cultural communication research to describe and explain verbal behaviors and their consequences in cross-cultural contexts provides motivation for at least two major trends in contrastive rhetoric research: contrasting Chinese writers' English compositions with NSE (native speaker of English) writers' compositions, focusing on the peculiarities of Chinese and American cultures that are accountable for the divergence of the former compositions from the norm of English writing. For example, many rhetoricians and linguists have proposed that rhetorical differences between Chinese students' English essays and essays composed by NSE writers can often be revealed and explained by investigating the cultural differences between China and English-speaking countries (Connor, 1996; Jia, 1997). In this paper, these two trends will both be accounted for. To put it in specific terms, this paper aims to identify the major ways that Chinese and American cultures are different from each other and then relate these differences to the noticeable divergences between Chinese writings, English writings by Chinese speakers, and English writings.

Major dimensions of divergence between Chinese and American cultures

The Social Dimension: Power and Solidarity as Different Underlying Intentions of Interpersonal Communication

Chinese and American cultures show significant divergences along a social continuum of

power and solidarity. Power and solidarity comprise in a measure of interpersonal relationships between members of society and, more importantly, people's perception of these relationships, which is demonstrated by the way that they adapt their social behavior to people they are in contact with. Power is used to describe the social distance or the hierarchical difference between participants of an interactive event. One is supposed to assume more prestige and dignity than the other, where power is the predominant relationship between two people. The relationships between teacher and student, and boss and subordinate are both good illustrations of such a relationship. Unlike power, solidarity represents a fairly flattened system of interpersonal relationships. Where equality and intimacy are recognized, solidarity comes into play and leads to a tendency towards informality. We might well consider two college classmates of the same gender who behave towards each other in conformity with solidarity.

While power and solidarity are universal realities in all cultures, they are not emphasized equally in terms of people's verbal and nonverbal behaviors in these cultures. In fact, Chinese culture is mostly identified as a culture in which power is greatly represented by social codes. With a long history of patriarchal society and a hierarchical social system, the Chinese are rather sensitive to even the subtle difference in their social statuses. The Chinese tend to have strictly defined roles according to certain power over subordinates or the responsibility to show obedience to superiors (Scollon & Scollon, 1995). By contrast, America has a society in which solidarity and equality are greatly admired. This has its cause in the firm belief that everyone is equal. As a result, the power relationship between two people is only ambiguously reflected in their interactions. For example, first-naming (FN) is frequent even between a boss and his or her employees.

The Informative Dimension: Different Degrees of Dependence on Context in Verbal Communication

The argument that there is a contrast between high-context culture and low-context culture was first proposed by Hall (1976), according to whom an important aspect of communication is the degree to which the information that is delivered is woven into the cultural context and the situational context of the communicative event. Hall points out the universal principle that not all information is given to the audience through verbal codes; that is, absolutely explicit communication is impossible.

In particular, in a high-context culture substantial information is found beyond the spoken words. At the same time, the listener may resort to the knowledge of the context shared between him/her and the speaker for accurate interpretation of the speaker's intention, and such contextual knowledge may include similar experiences with culture, required conformity with certain social norms, similar educational or occupational backgrounds, etc. In this case, the words spoken and the text written bear a relatively low value of information, and "indirect" and "implicit" expressions are the rule rather than exceptions. A good illustration of high-context culture is China.

By contrast, people from a low-context culture seek more information in verbal codes than the Chinese usually do. While hints and intuition have a great role to play in talks and writings in Chinese, Americans, who are considered to be members of a low-context culture, avoid putting information into context. As a result, they appear to be more direct and even a

little bold when giving expression to their thoughts. The code itself delivers the most information, and less appeal is made to shared knowledge when Americans are involved in conversations.

The Ontological Dimension: Holistic and Structural Perceptions

The view of the world is believed to vary from culture to culture, which may result in potential differences in people's thinking patterns related to problem-solving tasks. Americans in particular and Westerners in general are known to be better at analytical and logical thinking than Chinese people. Unlike their counterparts in the Western hemisphere, ancient Chinese philosophers were prone towards a perception of the world as a holistic, integrated entity, and their dialectical thinking is marked by a preference for harmony rather than dividedness. For this reason, the Chinese find it unnatural to analyze things into parts or extremes. Rather, they believe in a mechanism of self-control and autonomous government, which is ideal for the universe, and which is inherent in things and demands no investigation. In a word, harmonious, holistic, and intuitive thinking conditions the Chinese to a great degree.

On the other hand, analytical and inductive thinking seem to be earmarked for people from Western cultures. For them, dividing things into components is a scientific way of discovering the world, and the clear-cut dichotomies pervasive in their various textbooks are exactly illustrative of this analytical approach to all subjects of study. For example, the relation between human and nature is believed to be that of eternal conflict, with nature being constantly conquered by humanity. The Cartesian coordinate system, another example of such thinking, embodies the same idea that division is the primary tool of sound research. Also, human language was traditionally considered by Western linguists and philosophers to be a bundle of units well-organized at various levels where they are studied as disintegrated items. To sum up, dividedness, analysis, and empirical thinking distinguish Americans from the holistic-thinking Chinese. This difference, of course, is often known to be what makes Chinese people disinterested in making scientific investigation and justifies Americans' enthusiasm for problem-solving tasks.

Divergences between Chinese and English Written Discourses

Writing as a Contract: Reader-responsibility and Writer-responsibility

Hinds (1990) first proposed a typology of language which distinguishes "writer-responsible" languages from "reader-responsible" languages. This relative reader/writer responsibility is meant to be the responsibility for ensuring successful communication between the writer and the reader, which actually means the reader's recognition of the intention of the composition. With this postulation, Hinds raises two questions that lie at the heart of the research of contrastive rhetoric: How much responsibility does the writer assume, and how much contextual knowledge does the writer rely on when composing articles? As the latter question suggests, the essential difference between a writer-responsible approach and a reader-responsible approach to composition presupposes the notion of dependence on context, which links this textual difference with the above-mentioned contrast between high-context

and low-context cultures. That is, writings produced in a high-context culture tend to be reader-responsible, whereas writers from a low-context culture are likely to assume a writer-responsible approach to writing tasks.

In a writer-responsible language, the writer assumes very heavy responsibility, and the presumption of shared knowledge is severely constrained. In this case, the communication via writing starts with the writer's belief that the reader is equipped with the least background knowledge of the topic, as well as the writing convention. In consequence, it is the responsibility of the writer to provide maximum assistance for the reader, which may include excessive guidance to the structure of the text through the use of transitional phrases, patient explanation of many slightly puzzling propositions, and direct and clear organization of the text. Besides, it should be pointed out that the writer of a writer-responsible language tends to be quite aware of his/her reader and, because of this, finds it essential to analyze the needs and specific knowledge of his/her reader. In this sense, people would agree that the English rhetoric is largely writer-responsible.

On the other hand, Chinese is a typical reader-responsible language. In Chinese, heavy responsibility is placed on the reader to understand what is said, and a very high degree of shared contextual knowledge is assumed. Chinese writers entrust readers with good knowledge of the background of the topic, and therefore much is said without clear explanation in reference to the reader's potential for comprehension. They write intuitively and subjectively to a larger degree than English writers, as if the function of Chinese writing is primarily expressive or poetic rather than informative or persuasive. Generally, Chinese writers seem to be socially and academically closer to their readers because they assume much more connivance from the readers about their writing, which signals the shared code of social interaction and exchange of thinking in China.

The distinction between reader-responsible Chinese and writer-responsible English accounts for the propositional structures of the two languages. Chinese readers expect to supply some significant portion of the propositional structure, while English readers expect that most of the propositional structure will be provided by the writer or that it is clearly defined in all paragraphs. In fact, with the responsibility resting with the writer, paragraphs in English are said to be easy to understand, while Chinese texts are very differently organized, adding difficulty to the reader's comprehension.

To begin with, this divergence can be illustrated by how Chinese writers and English writers paragraph their texts. Paragraphing by English writers is accomplished only on logical or informational grounds. All sentences organized into an English paragraph are expected to hold to each other on the basis of the semantic information they encode and the logical relation that ties them together. To put it simply, they are carefully treated as a parcel in order to center on a single idea. This is exactly what the concept of unity is intended to be in English. The primary reason for this tradition is that the writer is set to the task of maintaining a clear way of expressing his or her ideas, and logical paragraphing is the best approach to this end. Consider this example offered by Cai's *A Contrastive Study of Chinese and English Writings* (2001):

Even at a prestigious educational institution like Harvard, anti-intellectualism is widespread: many students are ashamed to admit, even to their friends, how much they study. Although most students try to keep up their grades, there is but a small

group of undergraduates for whom pursuing knowledge is the most important thing during their years at Harvard. Nerds are looked down upon while athletes are made heroes of.

The same thing happens in U. S. elementary and high schools. Children who prefer to read books rather than play football, prefer to build model air planes rather than idle away their time at parties with their classmates, become social outcasts. Because of their intelligence and refusal to conform to society's anti-intellectual values, many are deprived of a chance to learn adequate social skills and acquire good communication tools. (Cai, 2001, p. 39)

Clearly, these two paragraphs deal with two topics: anti-intellectualism in American institutions of higher education and the similar situation in American elementary and high schools. It's hard to deny that this is an effective way of getting across the information to the reader.

By contrast, paragraphing in Chinese is said to be a lot more arbitrary and is conducted on emotional or intuitive principles. For Westerners, reading Chinese paragraphs is notoriously difficult because they don't stand up for single ideas. Unusual overlapping of information across paragraphs and excessive complexity of ideas are rather common in the writings of Chinese. This is because a Chinese writer demands great cooperation from his or her reader, who is supposed to be able to understand most of the clutter of paragraphs with the help of his or her background knowledge. Look at the following example:

Finally, honesty serves as a pragmatic way of handling domestic and international relations. What people are to their government is like water is to boats. While water can bear boats, it can also sink them. If the government gets used to telling lies to its people, people will feel cheated, and become increasingly aware of the dishonesty, which may eventually lead to the decline and fall of the government itself. The same principle applies to the relations among countries as well. "Diplomacy requires honesty," said Kissinger when he was in power. If one country is dishonest with others, no one will get along well with her, and her reputation and reliability are naturally thought to be flawed.

Both for people and for government, honesty is necessity and key to survive develop and perfect – it is really the best policy. (Cai, 2001, p. 21)

These two paragraphs are classic in that they deliver the same theme, except that the latter paragraph is a more condensed form of this central idea. It should be noted that unlike a concluding paragraph in an essay produced by an English speaker, this shorter paragraph is not intended to be a summary of the whole essay. Rather, the latter paragraph voices the writer's emphasis on the repeated theme and adds to the emphatic tone of the text, making the text emotionally appealing. This phenomenon can be mostly interpreted as a consequence of the transfer of emotion-governed paragraphing from Chinese into English composition.

In addition to the divergence in paragraphing, the dichotomy of reader responsibility and writer responsibility is also reflected in the contrast between parataxis and hypotaxis. To be

specific, there is a general tendency in English to mark all logical development at the super-sentential level with a large variety of devices of logical conjunction. On the other hand, sentences in Chinese remain rather isolated without many logical conjunctives created as their cohesive ties. While semantic relations between the propositions in Chinese are rather intuitive and implicit, they are much more marked in English, owing to the presence of logical conjunctives. Clearly, the dichotomy between high-context culture and low-context culture is taking its toll on Chinese students' English writing, in which they demonstrate problematic employment of conjunctive adjuncts and paragraphing techniques.

Writing as Structured Texts: Inductive Organization and Deductive Organization

A second major textual difference between Chinese and English writings centers on the contrast of inductive organization and deductive organization between Chinese and English writings. As the following analysis will demonstrate, this contrast partially lies in the even more important dichotomy of reader responsibility and writer responsibility, and this divergence can also be better understood as the consequence in social and ontological differences between Chinese and American societies.

In their papers on English compositions of Chinese college students, Scollon, Scollon and Kirkpatrick (2000) made a much repeated point that "the crucial aspect of the pervasive structure of the written discourse in English by Chinese writers is that the 'main point' occurs not where a Westerner expects it at or near the beginning, but somewhere about the center of the essay" (p. 3). What is rather amusing is that the evidence they quote is from their study on Chinese students' spoken discourse, where the topic is not presented at the anchor point – that is, immediately upon opening up the channel of communication – but later, after quite a period of time has been spent on establishing intimacy between the speaker and the listener. While this questionable source of data may obscure the persuasive power of their argument, the point they make has been supported in other more convincing studies by a great number of rhetoricians in China and abroad (Kaplan, 1967; Chen, 1986; Jia, 1997). All of this research has invariably pointed to the conclusion that Chinese writers tend to have their main points or crucial arguments placed toward the end inductively rather than beginning at the outset by deductively giving their main points and then following with supporting arguments. In a word, Chinese writers and writers using English as their native language are distinguished from each other in their choices between inductive organization and deductive organization: Chinese writers tend to write inductively with the main point delayed or even implied, while native speakers of English write deductively making clear statements of the thesis or the points they will explain or argue.

A specific divergence of this kind is in the placement of topic sentences in paragraphs. In fact, English compositions by Chinese writers are marked by the placement of the topic sentence toward the end of the paragraph in accordance with their preference for the overall inductive organization. By contrast, English writers find it rather obligatory to clarify the main idea of the paragraph with a topic sentence at the beginning that usually functions as a summary of the sentences that follow. The paragraph below is written by a Chinese writer, and it is an example of paragraphs organized inductively:

I have been learning English for almost eight years. Although I have made lot

efforts, and spend much time on it, I do not make very obvious progress. One of the reasons, I think, is because we have few opportunities to practice what have learned. How can I memorize it if we learn a new world without any chance to use it? But if we encounter or use it in real life many times, things will be quite different. Therefore, it is not easy to learn English.

Obviously, the last sentence serves as the summary of this paragraph, and therefore is considered the topic sentence. For a native speaker of English, however, this paragraph would appear unusual in that it violates the habitual placement of the topic sentence at the beginning. The information structure of this paragraph makes itself a barrier that prevents the reader from making predictions about what will be written in the next few sentences. A clearer way of presenting the information contained in the paragraph would be to place the topic sentence at the beginning:

To Chinese, it is not easy to learn English because of several important reasons, few chances to use English being the most important one. Although I have been learning English for eight years and made a lot of efforts, I have not made noticeable progress. The reason, I think, is that I have few opportunities to practice what I learned. It is rather clear that things would be quite different if I had been in situations where real communications in English can be conducted.

Both the placement of topic sentences towards the end of the paragraph and the inductive organization of Chinese writings coincide with the 'BECAUSE-THEREFORE' sequence of discourse levels, which was first discovered by Kirkpatrick (1997) as an important sequencing principle of Modern Standard Chinese. This sequence can be explained as the tendency to open a statement with reasons that justify a claim rather than to begin with a claim or summary. It is believed that this structure is pervasive in both spoken discourse and written Chinese. Again, this sequencing principle should be considered as it adds to the plausibility of Chinese as an inductively organized language. As a matter of fact, a rather obvious 'BECAUSE – THEREFORE' is employed in the example cited above:

BECAUSE: I have been learning English for almost eight years. Although I have made lot efforts, and spend much time on it, I do not make very obvious progress. One of the reasons, I think, is because we have few opportunities to practice what has been learned. How can I memorize it if we learn a new word without any chance to use it? But if we encounter or use it in real life many times, things will be quite different.

THEREFORE: Therefore, it is not easy to learn English.

Several arguments have been made to account for Chinese students' obsession with this inductive organization. One of the often repeated arguments is based upon the contrast between reader responsibility and writer responsibility (Hinds, 1987; Hatim, 1991). Since Chinese readers assume more responsibility for gauging the contextual knowledge shared between them and the writer, they have to be tolerant of the absence of opening statements that serve as content statements. While American readers depend on opening statements in

order to provide a smooth reading of a paragraph, Chinese readers have little trouble with the delay of the topic sentence because it is rather a rule for them to read without the assistance of a topic sentence from the writer. Generally speaking, for a Chinese reader his or her contextual knowledge should compensate for the ambiguity caused by the inductive organization of the paragraph. However, a topic sentence placed at the beginning of the paragraph is important in writings from writer-responsible languages, for it informs the reader of the content or semantic structure of the rest of the paragraph.

A second proposal attributes this phenomenon to intuitive thinking, which is typical of Chinese writers. It is proposed that Chinese readers find the chronological sequence to be the most natural relationship between events, and they reinforce this relationship in their spoken and written discourse by following this sequence to create coherence (Cai, 2001; Jia, 1997). Unlike their American counterparts, who are particularly keen on unraveling the complexity of logical relationships, Chinese writers intend to describe things primarily as they superficially appear to be and may simply dismiss phenomena as chronologically connected in their writings. As a result, the relationship between cause and effect (which Chinese writers who are obsessed with intuitive thinking often closely associate with a chronological event) is commonly used to report much more complex relationships in their writings. At the same time, a 'BECAUSE – THEREFORE' sequence, which is in conformity with the chronological sequence, is considered the most natural way of giving this report. With little interest in making logical analysis, Chinese writers are not disposed to other treatments of these events or processes in either exposition or argumentation. In brief, because of their intuitive thinking, which is incapable of distinguishing between chronological sequence and causal relationship, Chinese writers find it natural to present complex processes as a 'BECAUSE – THEREFORE' sequence.

Another explanation for this inductive strategy is given in the light of the patterns of people's social interactions, which are addressed in the previous section on power and solidarity. It is believed that the delay of the central idea of a paragraph may be traceable to Chinese writers' awareness of the need to honor the reader for the sake of positive politeness. Scollon, Scollon and Kirkpatrick (2000) argued that this structural preference for inductive or topic-delayed discourses derives neither from historical genres and belief systems, nor from a studied practice of contemporary genres but from face relationships governing rhetorical situations. Not unlike an initial period of face work that precedes introductions to central topics in Chinese spoken discourses, the inverse pyramid that frames most paragraphs of Chinese writers actually suggests the writer's belief that presenting his or her opinion in a protrusive way is socially unacceptable. Of course, the faces of the Chinese writer and the reader are considered at stake when the writer communicates to readers who may be superior to him/her in social status. However, because the power relationship is supposed to be carefully respected in Chinese culture, and there is always a risk that the reader may have power of a certain kind over the writer, Chinese writings mostly appear to show a degree of respect for the reader. As a result, to be indirect or inductive has become a rhetorical tradition of Chinese compositions for the purpose of showing politeness to the reader. At the same time, to state his or her opinions directly is abandoned because this may be indicative of rudeness or impolite manners.

Conclusion

Chinese and American cultures demonstrate significant divergences from each other, which have important affects on the writing conventions of Chinese and English and make them two distinguished languages. Cultural differences that have been discovered between Chinese and English include such issues as relative dependence on contextual information, patterns of social interaction, and ontological notions.

In light of these differences, there has been well-quoted literature that identifies English as a writer-responsible language; the NSE tends to be quite aware of the reader and, because of this, finds it essential to analyze the needs and specific knowledge of the reader. On the other hand, Chinese is a typical reader-responsible language. In Chinese, heavy responsibility is placed on the reader to understand what is said, and a very high degree of shared contextual knowledge is assumed. Not independent of the notion of reader and writer responsibility, a contrast of inductive and deductive macro-structures is also identified between Chinese and English writings.

References

- Cai, J. (2001). *A contrastive study of English and Chinese writings*. Shanghai: Fudan University Press.
- Connor, U. (1996). *Contrastive rhetoric: Cross-cultural aspects of second-language writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond Culture*. Nelson, New Zealand: Anchor Press.
- Hatim, B. (1991). The pragmatics of argumentation in Arabic: The rise and fall of a text type. *Text 11*(2), 189-199.
- Hinds, J. (1987). Reader versus writer responsibility: A new typology. In U. Connor & R. B. Kaplan (Eds.), *Writing across languages: Analysis of L2 text* (pp. 141-152). Reading, MA: Addison-Welsey.
- Jia, Y. (1997). *Intercultural communication*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Teaching Press.
- Kirkpatrick, A. (1993). Information sequencing in Modern Standard Chinese in a genre of extended spoken discourse. *Text 1* (3), 423-453.
- Scollon, R., & Scollon, S. W. (1995). *Intercultural communication: A discourse approach*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Inc.
- Scollon, R., Scollon, S. W. & Kirkpatrick, A. (2000). *Contrastive discourse in Chinese and English: A critical approach*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.