USE OF ADVERBIAL CONNECTORS IN CHINESE EFL LEARNERS' ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

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Abstract

Based on more comparable corpora, the present study verified some of the previous findings about the use of adverbial connectors by Chinese learners. Also some new insights have been gained on the overuse of resulative and listing adverbial connectors implies that the learners adopt different ways of argumentation from the native speakers. The use of adverbial connectors is relevant to the learners' proficiency. The command of a small variety of adverbial connectors is possibly one of the causes for the overuse of the high frequency ones. Comparisons with learners of other L1 backgrounds indicate that the following two features are common to EFL learners: 1) they tend to rely heavily on the top ten adverbial connectors for linking purposes; 2) the overuse and underuse reflect a general stylistic uncertainty about the use of adverbial connectors by the EFL learners.

Key words
adverbial connectors, use, corpus

1 Introduction

It has been well documented that adverbial connectors are one of the important devices for signaling the connections between clauses or beyond in textual communication. Biber et al. (1999) observe that the primary function of adverbial connectors is to state the speaker's or writer's perception of the relationship between two units of discourse and thus help to create textual cohesion. Appropriately used adverbial connectors are considered to be contributable to the clarity and comprehensibility of discourse. However, a number of studies in Europe and America have shown that the use of adverbial connectors is problematic for foreign language learners. Two related studies by Pan (2004) and Luo (2003) indicate that academic writings of Chinese postgraduates have confirmed some of their findings. They have successfully revealed various types of shortcomings in the use of adverbial connectors in the Chinese learners' writing. However, there exist at least two limitations. Firstly, some of the findings, especially about the amount of the use of adverbial connectors, are contradictory. Secondly, both of the studies investigated the use of adverbial connectors only by the learners at postgraduate levels without touching on the use by undergraduate students.

As a supplement to the two previous investigations, the present study following Altenberg and Tapper (1998) attempts to examine the use of adverbial connectors by Chinese university students and tries to find out the features common for other EFL learners. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1) To what extent do Chinese university students use adverbial connectors as compared to native English speakers?
2) Do they use adverbial connectors to express the same semantic relations as native speakers?
3) What is characteristic of the use of adverbial connectors by Chinese university students?
4. How different is the use of adverbial connectors by university students from that of the
postgraduates [as suggested in previous studies]
5. Are the features unique to Chinese learners or common among other EFL learners

2. Data and methodology

The present study is duplicate in nature but different from previous studies [two more comparable
corpora (COCUSE, the Corpus of Chinese University Student English) and COCNUS, the Corpus of
Canadian Native University Student English were compiled by the present researcher for the purpose of
the study]

COCUSE [the learner corpus under investigation] contains 200 argumentative essays totaling 56,933
words written by Chinese learners of English while COCNUS [the reference corpus] contains 127 essays
 totaling 52,015 words written by Canadian native speakers of English. All the writers of the essays are
second or third year students from more than ten universities in China and Canada. The essays were all
finished in class without reference to any dictionaries. What is unique is that the essays in the two corpora
share five identical topics: On Love, War and Peace, Importance of Reading, No Pains, No Gains, and
Capital Punishment. Therefore, the comparability of COCNUS and COCUSE is whether in writers’
education level, topics of essays, or writing environment is expected to improve reliability of the results
of the present study.

For the convenience of comparison with previous studies, the present study also adopted the
classification scheme of adverbial connectors by Quirk et al. 1985 with an addition of corroborative
category. That is, all adverbial connectors in the present study are classified into seven categories
according to semantic relations: Resultive, Listing, Contrastive, Appositive, Corroborative, Summative,
and Transitional.

Data analysis was completed by the following steps:

1. Using WordSmith tools, a wordlist was made for each corpus used in the present study to get the
   frequency for each adverbial connector.
2. Concordances were made for the adverbial connectors which also have usages other than linking
   and the irrelevant items were deleted.
3. The overall frequencies of adverbial connectors were compared in COCUSE and COCNUS to find
   out how learners overused and underused the adverbial connectors.
4. The difference in the distribution of semantic categories between the two corpora were compared
   and chisquare tests were conducted to see whether the differences were significant or not p < .05.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Overall frequencies of adverbial connectors in COCUSE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Overall frequency of adverbial connectors in COCUSE and COCNUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COCUSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tokens</td>
<td>727</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tokens</td>
<td>10,000 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>types</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows the numbers of adverbial connectors that occurred in COCUSE and COCNUS. For
comparison, the rate per 10,000 words of either corpus was also given. From this, we can see that
Chinese learners used adverbial connectors not less frequently than the native speaker writers as Pan and Feng
(2004) suggested, but slightly more frequently whether in tokens, 129 vs. 111 or in types, 38 vs. 32. The
higher frequency may reflect the efforts that Chinese learners made for the clarity and coherence of their
argumentative texts with as many adverbial connectors as possible. Our result is consistent with Luo
(2003), which further confirms the possibility that the writing courses that the Chinese English learners
attend place too much emphasis on the power of adverbial connectors in coherence and cohesion.
The discrepancy between the result of the present study and that of Pan and Feng (2004) is possibly due to the differences in the corpora adopted for either study. Though Pan and Feng (2004) emphasized that the reference corpus used for their study was comprised of Standard English including scientific articles and literary readings, they did however give any information about the topics for the essays in the learner corpus. Therefore, little is known about whether the two corpora are comparable in terms of the contents of the essays. It is assumed that the non-comparability of the two corpora in Pan and Feng (2004) may be one of the major reasons for the discrepancy of the results.

3.2 Semantic relations

Table 2: Distribution of semantic categories in COCUSE and COCNUS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Resutitive</th>
<th>Listing</th>
<th>Contrastive</th>
<th>Appositive</th>
<th>Corroborative Summative</th>
<th>Transitional</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COCUSE</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>727</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COCNUS</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>579</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To answer the second research question, the distribution of semantic categories in the two corpora was compared. The result is listed in Table 2 and visualized in Figure 1. As shown in Figure 1, the distribution is roughly the same in both corpora; resutitive listing and contrastive relations are used most frequently. Summative and transitional relations are used least. Appositive and corroborative relations stand in between.

Figure 1: Distribution of semantic categories in COCUSE and COCNUS

However, striking differences in frequency can also be observed in Table 2. Five out of seven semantic categories are used less frequently in COCUSE although chi-square tests conducted indicate that the differences are confined to three categories. The Chinese learners tend to use much more resutitive listing and contrastive relations than native students, $X^2 = 11.366$, $p < .001$, and $X^2 = 24.87$, $p < .001$, respectively, but fewer corroborative adverbial connectors, $X^2 = 8.11$, $p < .05$. Furthermore, the most frequent semantic category in COCUSE is resutitive relation, while in COCNUS, the contrastive category tops the list.

The overuse of resutitive and listing adverbial connectors in COCUSE implies that the Chinese learners possibly adopted different ways to mark the superstructure of the essay. It is believed that the listing relations suggest that the reasoning is constructed with the enumeration of arguments for a certain standpoint and the resutitive relations suggest that the underlying logic applied in the argumentative texts is deduction. The high numbers of contrastive adverbial connectors indicate that the texts contain frequent references to the opposing standpoint. While the native speakers seem to draw their conclusions by deduction after differentiating two opposing ideas with the overt use of significantly more contrastive connecting items, the Chinese learners prefer to come to the conclusion after laying much more emphasis on highlighting the quantity than the sum total of their arguments that decisively justifies their standpoints.

Different from Lu (2003), the Chinese university students did not show a tendency to overuse the six categories except corroborative category of adverbial connectors in their texts. Four categories concerning contrastive appositive summative and transitional relations are not found to be used more but less frequently. This difference may be due to the gaps in language proficiency between the two groups of learners for the studies. The more proficient the learners are in the target language, the more
adverbial connectors they may use. It seems that the learners attempt to make their texts more coherent through the frequent use of adverbial connectors [though not appropriate in some cases].

Although the present study confirms the underuse of corroborative connectors by Chinese learners [it is however inconsistent with Altenberg [Tapper 1998] results based on Swedish learner data]. It seems to be due to L1 transfer [but further comparisons are needed based on learner data with different L1 backgrounds].

3 Individual connectors

The top ten adverbial connectors are listed in Table 3. It can be seen that eight of the ten items are identical in the two corpora [although their rank order differs somewhat]. This is similar to the results of Altenberg [Tapper 1998] and Luo 2003 [though the proportion of the ten adverbial connectors to the total number around 84% is much higher than those in the two previous studies]. This means that [like the Swedish learners] [the Chinese learners depend heavily on roughly the same connecting devices as the native speakers]. It also suggests that these high-frequency adverbial connectors are compulsory for the argumentative writing and deserve more attention in instruction.

The obvious differences between the two sets of adverbial connectors in Table 3 are marked by the overuse of so, also for example, in fact and the underuse of however, actually, though and yet in COCUSE. Further examination of the use of these items confirmed one of the findings by Altenberg [Tapper 1998] and Luo 2003 — lack of register awareness in the use of adverbial connectors. According to Biber et al. 1999, so as an adverbial connecter is extremely common in conversation [while however and yet are typical markers in academic prose] p. 886. Table 3 shows clearly that [compared to the native speaker writers] [the Chinese learners use so more frequently twice as many as the native speakers], but use however significantly less [their proportion in COCUSE is only half of that in COCUNS].

As for the use of yet, the difference is even more striking. It is beyond the top ten items in COCUSE. So it is obvious that although the Chinese learners tend to use more adverbial connectors from a less formal register on the one hand, on the other hand, they avoid using those connectors typical of a formal register. It is a matter of register confusion. The underuse of though [an informal adverbial connector] and the overuse of in fact [a formal connector] can provide more evidence for this claim from two different perspectives. As Altenberg and Tapper 1998 pointed out, it is not necessarily contradictory to the claim, rather, it seems to suggest a general stylistic uncertainty about the use of connectors in argumentative writing. p. 885. Furthermore, the overuse of in fact results in the underuse of actually. The Chinese learners tend to use in fact where actually is more appropriate when they want to introduce a new topic or to express an opinion that other people might not have expected.

Table 3 Top ten adverbial connectors in COCUSE and COCUNS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>COCUSE</th>
<th>COCUSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AC</td>
<td>n</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>so</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>2 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>also</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>1 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>still</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>1 87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>then</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>1 43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for example</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>however</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1 90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>finally</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of course</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1 93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in fact</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1 89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>though</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1 61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>610</td>
<td>8 91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

35
The underuse of however, though, and yet are also identified in Altenberg & Tapper 1998. It seems that lack of register awareness is a general problem common for all EFL learners. It is worth more attention in language teaching.

In-depth analysis of the 4 overused items brought out another feature which is not yet reported so far. That is, the overuse phenomenon results from the fact that the adverbial connectors that the Chinese learners can use fluently are limited in types. This is clearly reflected in the instances of so and for example.

### Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>COCUSE</th>
<th>COCNUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>for example</td>
<td>n 41 6% 08% 4% 4% 21% 3% 59%</td>
<td>n 21% 3% 59% 2% 3% 1% 25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for instance</td>
<td>3% 76%</td>
<td>9% 1% 25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>such as</td>
<td>19% 3% 16%</td>
<td>29% 4% 15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 indicates the distribution of for example as well as alternatives in COCUSE and COCNUS. It can be seen clearly that besides for example and for instance such as is also used frequently as an exemplifying device by the native speakers. Although it is regarded as an adverbial connector in Quirk et al. 1985. However, what is typical of the use by the Chinese learners is that the significant overuse of for example twice as common in the native English essays and the underuse of the other two, a third and a half times respectively as common in COCNUS. Hence, the Chinese learners tend to repeatedly use one or two items which they are familiar with and avoid using those they feel difficult though they are also frequent in native speaker corpus.

### Conclusion

Based on more comparable corpora, the present study not only clarified the controversial issue on the amount of the use of adverbial connectors by the Chinese learners but also confirmed some of the findings from previous studies. Furthermore, some new insights have been gained about the use of adverbial connectors by the Chinese learners. Firstly, the overuse of resultive and listing adverbial connectors by the Chinese learners implies that they adopted different ways of argumentation from the native speakers. Secondly, the use of adverbial connectors might be relevant to the learners' proficiency. Thirdly, the command of a small variety of adverbial connectors is possibly one of the causes for the overuse of the high frequency ones.

By comparing with many EFL learners of other language backgrounds, two features are found to be common, which may be a reflection of their general language development. The EFL learners tend to rely heavily on the top ten adverbial connectors for linking purposes. Besides, the phenomenon of overuse and underuse reflect a general stylistic uncertainty about the use of adverbial connectors by the EFL learners.

Though the possibility of L1 transfer has been implied in the present study, yet more evidence needs to be found in cross-linguistic comparisons and comparisons of learner data with different L1 backgrounds. In addition, a future comparative study of texts written by expert academic writers would probably reveal whether the features of overuse and underuse of adverbial connectors is confined only to EFL learners or also shared by the native students which can provide us more chances to understand the prominent features of students' writing.

### References


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