Discourse Markers in Oral Narratives by Mandarin NSs and NNSs

Discourse marker (DM) use is generally agreed to be a feature of oral discourse (Brinton, 1996), so the ability to use and appropriately apply DMs is undoubtedly one aspect of sociolinguistic competence that second/foreign language (L2) learners need to acquire. DMs in English have attracted considerable attention from researchers (Schiffrin, 1987; Schourup, 1985). However, there have been very few studies of DMs in Mandarin and even fewer of DM use by learners of Mandarin as an L2 (MSL).

Based on Schiffrin’s (1987) definition of DM and her discourse model, the present study investigates the DM use in elicited narratives, The Pear Stories (Chafe, 1980), by nine Mandarin native speakers (NSs) in China and nine MSL learners in a U.S. university. The quantitative analysis demonstrates: 1), Mandarin NSs produce far more DMs than MSL learners; 2), the two groups of speakers use different DMs in their narratives and the most frequent DMs for NSs are ránhòu (然后) and nèigè (那个), but ránhòu and suǒyī (所以) for MSL learners; and 3), the result also suggests that extra-curricular exposure to target language (TL) environment and interactions with TL NSs promotes the use of DM.

Then a qualitative analysis is presented of the meanings and functions of the most frequently used DMs by both groups. The core meaning of ránhòu is then and ránhòu can function primarily on the plane of Ideational Structure within discourse. Secondarily it can function on the other realms of discourse such as Exchange Structure, Action Structure, Participation Frame and Information State separately as well as simultaneously, depending on the particular context. The core meaning of nèigè is a demonstrative that. It also functions primarily on the Ideational Structure. Secondarily, it has functions on levels of Action Structure and Information State. The core meaning of suǒyī is so. It primarily functions on the ideational level indicating a cohesive relationship between ideas and secondarily on Exchange Structure and Participation Frame. It can also function on informational level since it is used to connect the prior information with the upcoming information.

The author argues that frequent use of ránhòu and nèigè by NSs is due to the conformation of their core meanings with the nature of narrative structure and organization. In addition, the multi-functionality of these expressions also makes them convenient for the speakers to use. On the other hand, ránhòu and suǒyī are used frequently by MSL learners because of the formal introduction in MSL classes and the learners’ native language transfer.

Finally, implications for MSL and L2 classroom teaching are discussed. For example, the integration of functions and meanings of DMs into L2 classroom instructions is necessary.

References
