

A Comparison of Pragmatic Functions of Discourse Markers in Movies between Chinese and English--- A Case Study of the Movies Pegasus and The Pursuit of Happiness

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Abstract: Discourse markers are an essential component of daily communication and a common language phenomenon. This paper compares the types and usage of discourse markers in the movies *The Pursuit of Happiness* and *Pegasus* through qualitative and quantitative analysis. The study explores the differences in the pragmatic functions of language in the two movies and summarizes the characteristics of discourse marker usage and the reasons for the differences. The results of this study can help readers better understand the pragmatic functions of discourse markers and promote cross-cultural communication between Chinese and English.

Keywords: discourse markers; pragmatic functions; comparative study; movies

Introduction

Discourse markers or discourse connectives refer to lexical expressions that represent logical or temporal relationships between utterances, including conjunctions, adverbs, prepositional phrases, and other syntactic categories. Discourse markers are a very common discourse phenomenon and have become a new topic of discussion in conversation analysis and pragmatics research in recent years.

Foreign scholars in the field of discourse marker research are mainly divided into two schools: the “coherence school” represented by Schiffrin and the “relevance school” represented by Blackmore. Since the 1980s, domestic scholars have studied discourse markers from the perspectives of syntax, pragmatics, semantics, and other fields. Compared with foreign scholars, domestic scholars’ research on Chinese discourse markers is relatively weak and lacks a systematic theoretical foundation. There is still room for improvement in the comparative study of the pragmatic functions of English and Chinese discourse markers.

The study of the pragmatic functions of discourse markers has strong practical significance. This paper selects discourse markers from the movies *Pegasus* and *The Pursuit of Happiness* for research and explores and analyzes the rich usage of discourse markers at the pragmatic level. It studies the differences between English and Chinese discourse markers, analyzes the reasons for the differences, and provides some modest contributions to enriching the research direction of discourse markers.

1. Differences in Pragmatic Functions of Discourse Markers in the Two Movies

There are many similarities in the pragmatic functions of discourse markers between English and Chinese, but there are inevitably significant differences in discourse markers between the two languages due to their different linguistic systems. Therefore, the pragmatic functions of discourse markers in English and Chinese are unique in many ways. Learning about these differences can help learners use discourse markers in the target language more naturally, and also facilitate comparative studies to avoid negative transfer from the native language and narrow the gap between language learners and native speakers.

1.1 Communicative Effect

In addition to connecting adjacent utterances, discourse markers can also connect information before and after the appearance of a topic, and even indicate the relationship between implicit information and the current discourse. The position of discourse markers in English and Chinese is often different in context. Some Chinese discourse markers are only used at the end of an utterance, such as “吧 (ba)”, “吗 (ma)”, “呢 (ne)” and “啊 (a)”. In certain specific contexts, the meaning of an utterance without these final markers can be completely different. Furthermore, the order of discourse markers in Chinese can change the sentence structure. With the function of a final marker, an affirmative sentence can be transformed into an interrogative sentence, while this situation is almost non-existent in English.

Example 1:

这种不确定性，可能也是拉力赛的魅力吧？

Example 2:

张弛：但这并不代表爸爸骗了你，也不代表这件赛车服就是假货，懂了吗？

张飞：懂了。

In Example 1, “吧” is a discourse particle that appears at the end of the sentence, indicating the speaker’s confident assumption. If “吧” is removed, the sentence becomes a declarative statement with a more certain tone, which conflicts with the meaning conveyed by the previous sentence “这种不确定性”.

Similarly, in Example 2, “吗” serves as a marker of interrogative mood, indicating that a response from the listener is expected. In summary, Chinese discourse particles used at the end of a sentence have a grammatical function that helps to modulate the strength of the sentence’s tone, thereby achieving different communicative effects. This is a unique feature of Chinese discourse particles. However, English discourse particles are rarely used in this way.

1.2 Structure of Language

English has many single adverbs that are used as discourse markers, such as “actually”, “personally”, etc. There are also adverbial phrases that connect preceding and following sentences, and they all play a role in structural connection, transitioning, and semantic buffering within the discourse. However, the use of single Chinese adverbs as discourse markers is not as common.

Example 3:

A: Just to look at and study, so I can choose better

B: Okay, well, that’s smart. Yeah, make a list.

In the above examples, “So”, “okay”, “well” and “yeah” are all used as discourse markers, reflecting the unique usage of English adverbs. These independent adverbs make the meaning and structure of the sentence more complete. “So” here is a topic marker, indicating further confirmation of information to the listener; “okay” is a situational discourse marker, indicating agreement with the other person’s action; “well” is used to connect the topic, providing the speaker with a thinking buffer; “yeah” in its position and interactive relationship in spoken language can improve the fluency of the conversation, promote smooth conversation, and further explain one’s point of view, and offer suggestions. Through the use of discourse markers in the examples, the conversation becomes coherent, and the situational effect of the conversation becomes more authentic and natural.

1.3 Modesty Maxim

Both English and Chinese cultures follow the “humility principle,” but Chinese places greater emphasis on it, especially in the use of praise language and response. In English, when receiving compliments, people often use the agreement principle and rarely give negation. The general response is a simple “thank you” to protect the positive attitude of both parties and promote smooth communication. In Chinese, the principle of “self-deprecation and respect for others” is followed, using self-deprecation and denial. When praised, people often respond with “where, where” to show humility. The responses of Chinese language and cultural groups may seem excessively humble or insincere to English language and cultural groups, or they may not agree with the speaker’s judgment, all of which are considered impolite.

Example 4:

教练：你到底什么人啊你？

张弛：你马上就知道了，献丑了（开车）。

Example 5:

Jay Twistle: Chris, I don’t know how you did it dressed as a garbage man...but you pulled it off.

Chrise: Thank you, Mr. Twistle.

In Example 4, before demonstrating his skills, Zhang Chi humbly said “献丑了” to show respect to others and to belittle himself. The Chinese people often add “献丑了” before or after showing their skills in order to achieve the goal of respecting others while disparaging themselves. Rejecting the authenticity of praise is a way of showing politeness. When communicating with others, Chinese people pay more attention to modesty and politeness, considering it a virtue.

In Example 5, Chrise only replied with “Thank you” after being praised by his boss. In the West, when an individual receives someone else’s approval, people naturally respond with “Thank you” to show that they accept the other person’s praise and to avoid hurting the other person’s face. This is an active etiquette concept, and directly rejecting or denying the other person’s praise is extremely impolite to Westerners.

Based on the analysis above, there are differences between Chinese and English in terms of language structure and humility standards when using discourse markers, and they are not completely equivalent. Additionally, since discourse markers have multiple functions, the same marker may have different meanings in different contexts. Therefore, in the translation process, the use of discourse markers in a specific context cannot be overlooked, as discourse markers are highly dependent on the context. Translation of discourse markers is also a challenge in English-Chinese translation, as it requires flexible handling based on the different cultural characteristics of both Eastern and Western societies.

2 Causes of Differences

Due to differences in the living environment and cultural background of their users, Chinese and English have developed different ways of thinking and gradually formed their own linguistic characteristics. The research in this chapter focuses on the use of discourse markers in two films and the reasons for the differences in discourse markers between English and Chinese.

2.1 Features of language

The difference between Chinese and English is the use of linguistic devices. Morphology refers to the use of linguistic forms between words or clauses of a sentence to express grammatical meaning, while ideograms are the opposite. The speaker’s words do not depend on the use of linguistic devices, and the meanings of the words are linked together by the natural logical relations of the words.

Fraser (1996) argues that discourse markers include conjunctions, prepositional phrases, adverbial phrases, etc., which can be classified into four subcategories of statement, transformation, contrast and inference according to their linguistic functions. According to Chinese linguist He Naturally, discourse markers include conjunctions, adverbs, exclamations, and some phrases (such as after all, in other words, etc.).

Table1: Discourse marking of two inspirational movie subtitles

	The Pursuit of Happiness	Pegasus
Conjunctive discourse marker	34	96
Adverb discourse markers	18	6
Preposition discourse markers	19	71
Phrase discourse markers	0	3
Total	71	178

Through the analysis, it is found that there are 178 discourse markers in *The Pursuit of Happiness* and 71 discourse markers in *Pegasus*, and the overall usage is quite different. Among them, conjunctions and prepositions are used most frequently; In *Pegasus*, adverb discourse markers are used more than in *The Pursuit of Happiness*, but conjunctions discourse markers are used less. The use of phrase discourse markers in *The Pursuit of Happiness* is less than that in *Pegasus*. To sum up, there are some differences in the use of discourse markers in movies between China and the United States, and there are still differences in the use of specific four types of discourse markers.

2.2 Cultural Background

Different cultural backgrounds lead to different language usage. For example, modesty word is a unique language of Chinese. It is necessary for both the speaker and the listener to maintain a harmonious and moderate interpersonal relationship. Speakers try to be polite when using this tactic to make the conversation successful. However, there are no words similar to modesty in Chinese in English. China is a civilized country with a history of 5000 years. The long history has formed the accumulation of culture in the process of development. The relationship between language and culture is inseparable. Language is the product of society and the carrier of culture. So, Chinese can also reflect Chinese culture. As I mentioned, Chinese people pay attention to etiquette, and the national spirit must be reflected in the language itself.

The key to fully understanding the characteristics, similarities and differences between Chinese and Western cultures is to compare the macro history of the two cultures, that is, to compare the diet, clothing, art, architecture, customs, polite expressions, etc. of the two cultures, as well as the deep cultures, such as social customs, value orientation, way of thinking, social conventions, humanistic spirit, etc. However, cultural differences between China and the West must exist. The fact tells us that the single culture with national boundaries no longer exists. Therefore, when carrying out intercultural communication, it is necessary to have a comprehensive understanding of the Chinese and Western cultural backgrounds, so that the differences between Chinese and Western cultures can penetrate into all aspects of communication, and not simply be limited to the inherent cultural stereotypes, but to have a comprehensive understanding of both cultures as much as possible, so that communication activities can be easily realized.

Conclusion

Although this paper presents a qualitative and quantitative analysis of discourse markers in the two films, some aspects may be overlooked in this study due to the limited number of subjects and not much corpus in the text. It is hoped that future researchers can use corpus tools to study and analyze more in-depth discourse markers from more perspectives.

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