Mandarin-speaking children's use of the discourse markers *hao* 'okay' and *dui* 'right' in peer interaction

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate Mandarin-speaking children's use of two frequently appearing discourse markers – *hao* 'okay' and *dui* 'right' – when interacting with their peers in order to examine how their use of these markers may reflect their communicative skills and the characteristics of peer interaction. The data included 237 min of 5-year-old Mandarin children's conversations with their friends while playing. Schiffrin's (1987) model of discourse structures was used for the analysis.

The results showed that Mandarin-speaking children at age five have acquired several discourse functions of *hao* and *dui*. They used *hao* as an agreement marker and an acknowledgement marker in the exchange structure; they used *dui* to show their agreement in the exchange structure and to mark topic transition in the ideational structure. The children's use of the various functions of *hao* and *dui* reflected their communicative and social competence. These uses indexed their collaborative or supportive stance toward one another, which may further help them establish and maintain their relationships with their peers (Wang et al., 2010). However, the children have their limitation in using these markers. They have not developed the ability to use *dui* as backchannels, which has been shown to be among the last acquired communicative skills (Hess and Johnston, 1988). It is concluded that Mandarin-speaking children's use of *hao* and *dui* not only demonstrates their communicative skills but also reflects the particular nature of peer interaction.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Hao and dui as discourse markers in Mandarin

Discourse markers have been widely investigated by many researchers in the past decades (Fraser, 1990; Halliday, 1994; Schiffrin, 1987). Schiffrin (1987) defined discourse markers as "linguistic, paralinguistic, or non-verbal elements that signal relations between units of talk by virtue of their syntactic and semantic properties and by virtue of their sequential relations as initial or terminal brackets demarcating discourse units" (p. 40). Fraser (1990) specified the characteristics of discourse markers as those that "impose a relationship between some aspect of the discourse segment they are part of…and some aspect of a prior discourse segment…" (p. 938). Discourse markers are linguistic devices used by speakers to make the relations between the previous and the ongoing texts salient in order to build the coherence of discourse units.

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A growing body of research on Mandarin discourse markers has discussed the functions of various discourse markers. Some of these studies focused on two frequently used discourse markers, *hao* 'okay' and *dui* 'right', in conversations (Chui, 2002; Lu, 1980/2004; Lu, 2006; Miracle, 1991; Tsai, 2001; Wang and Tsai, 2005; Wang et al., 2010; Xian, 2007; Yu, 2004). These studies suggested that *hao* in Mandarin expresses different moods, and it is a marker of agreement, conclusion, and counter-expectation that resembles an interjection (Lu, 1980/2004); it also marks three types of relations: (1) the development and closure of social and physical actions, (2) the speaker's assertion of a previous utterance, and (3) the transition to a new topic or social activity (Miracle, 1991). Wang and Tsai (2005) further investigated the meanings of *hao* in spoken Mandarin discourse by adapting Halliday's (1994) three-dimension model, which is comprised of the ideational level, the textual level, and the interactional level. Their results revealed that at the ideational level, *hao* can be an adjective meaning 'good, fine, nice, okay, all right, yes' or a degree adverb similar to 'very' in English. At the interactional level, *hao* functions as an agreement/acceptance marker, and it signals the speaker's positive evaluation of the previous interactional move. Depending on the nature of the previous move, *hao* can mark an agreement, compliance, acceptance, or concession. Sometimes it can be used to acknowledge that it is the speaker's obligation to take the present turn in order to release the other interlocutor from the responsibility to continue his/her turn.

The occurrence of *hao* in discourse also indicates the speaker's intention to end the present exchange and start a new one. Wang and Tsai (2005) found contextual differences in the various meanings of *hao*. In radio interviews, *hao* was used more frequently by the host as a (pre-)closure/transition marker to signal the end of a talk. In daily conversations, it was used more constantly as a marker to convey the speaker's agreement and as a concession marker to negotiate the closure of the current topic.

Among the studies of *dui*, Chui (2002) discussed the ritualization process of *dui*, developing from a verb to a discourse particle in spoken Mandarin. She argued that through conventionalized routines, *dui* has gained pragmatic functions to indicate agreement or strengthen the truthfulness of the proposition conveyed. Tsai (2001) and Yu (2004) both focused on the functions of *dui* in spoken discourse. They suggested that *dui* serves various functions in conversations. In addition to the affirmative meaning, *dui* has pragmatic meanings. *Dui* also indicates the speaker's agreement, acknowledgement, and confirmation, and functions as a device for textual organization. Moreover, *dui* serves as reaction tokens or backchannels to express the speaker's attention and interest in the current conversation. According to Clancy et al.'s (1996) categorization of reactive tokens, these expressions are the "short non-floor-taking words or phrases" (p. 359) a non-primary speaker utters during the interaction. Typical reactive expressions are assessments, such as *zheyang hao* 'such PRT'[1] and *dui* 'right' in Mandarin.

Wang et al. (2010) compared the discourse-pragmatic functions of *hao* and *dui* and found similarities and differences between the two discourse markers. Both *hao* and *dui* function at the textual level and the exchange level of discourse. At the textual level, *hao* is a boundary marker of closure or transition, while *dui* functions as a continuity marker. *Hao* at the textual level marks the closure of a current topic or the transition between discourse topics. *Dui*, as a continuity marker at the textual level, usually appears in the speaker's own turn to affirm and strengthen the truthfulness of his/her subjective beliefs and to imply discourse continuity.

On the other hand, at the exchange level, *hao* is a marker of agreement and acceptance; *dui* signals agreement or acknowledgement. Both markers function as evaluative responses at the exchange level. *Hao* serves as a positive response to requests, suggestions, plans, and proposals to agree with the previous speaker's act or move. *Dui* confirms the truthfulness of the previous speaker's assessment or information and as a result indicates the speakers' agreement; it also signals not only the perception and understanding of the shared information but also the shared orientation toward it. This function of *dui* is similar to that of 'right' in English (Watts, 1989). When *dui* forms a single turn, it acknowledges the speaker's right to continue his/her current turn. In this case, *dui* serves a function very similar to other short verbal responses such as backchannels. When *hao* and *dui* combine with different particles, such as *a*, *ya*, *le*, and *la*, they convey a wider range of interactional functions (Biq, 2004). Generally speaking, both *dui* and *hao* are used by Mandarin speakers to show their involvement in the current interaction. Wang et al. (2010) therefore claimed that *hao* and *dui* in spoken Mandarin are used by the speaker to negotiate with the hearer a consensus on the propositional contents and the relevance of utterances at the textual level, and to establish alignment and coherence of discourse at the interpersonal level.

1.2. Mandarin-speaking children's acquisition of hao and dui

Previous studies have suggested that *hao* and *dui* in Mandarin function as discourse markers and can be used to build an alignment between speakers. While a large and growing body of literature has investigated the discourse functions of *hao* and *dui*, fewer studies have discussed Mandarin-speaking children's acquisition of these markers. Huang (2000) conducted a developmental study on Mandarin children's acquisition of the discourse marker *hao* by using Shiffrin's (1987) discourse model. He investigated casual conversations between adults and peers with 60 Mandarin-speaking children aged three to five years old. His results suggested a developmental process of the children's use of *hao* as a discourse marker. As the children grew older, they acquired the ability to use *hao* in different discourse structures and were able to use more functions of *hao* compared with the younger children. The three-year-old children used *hao* mostly in the exchange structure and the action structure, to acknowledge assertions in request-compliance pairs in the exchange structure and to mark closures of physical actions and other people's complaints in the action structure. At around age four, the children started to use *hao* to mark the

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[1] PRT = particle.