



A cross-disciplinary corpus-based study on English and Chinese native speakers' use of linking adverbials in academic writing



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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a comparative investigation into the differences and similarities in the use of linking adverbials (LAs) by English and Chinese native speakers (ENSs and CNSs) in their academic English writing. Using a corpus of research articles (RAs) from the fields of Physics, Computer Science, Linguistics and Management written by ENSs and CNSs, we present data to reveal that: (i) there is no significant difference in LA use between CNSs and ENSs in terms of density; (ii) the writing of CNSs is characterized by a pattern of relative underuse of additive and adversative LAs; (iii) soft non-science disciplines have higher use of LAs than hard science disciplines; and (iv) CNSs and ENSs share a repertoire of high-frequency LA items, but differ greatly in individual LA usage. These findings may have implications for the teaching of academic writing, as well as for cross-cultural understanding among academics.

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1. Introduction

Linking adverbials (LAs), as part of the cohesive devices, serve as an explicit means by which a writer can articulate the structure of his argument and influence a reader's interpretation of a text. Over the past decades, numerous studies have been conducted on LA use in academic writing either to investigate variations across genres or disciplines (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999; Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Liu, 2008; Peacock, 2010) or to compare learners' use of LAs in academic writing (their essays or theses) with the native norm (native-speaker students' essays or research articles (RAs) usually) (Altenberg & Tapper, 1998; Bolton, Nelson, & Hung, 2002; Eia, 2006; Field & Yip, 1992; Granger & Tyson, 1996; Ishikawa, 2010; Leedham & Cai, 2013; Lei, 2012; Milton & Tsang, 1993). The interplay between disciplinary and cultural factors has been examined by Mauranten (1993) on a Finnish and an American economist's academic writing in English, Dahl (2004) on metatextual features across three disciplines and three languages (English, French and Norwegian), and Gardezi and Nesi (2009) on British and Pakistan economics students' writing in English. To date, however, no work has focused exclusively on Chinese scholars' academic English writing and how it differs from or conforms to the native norm. This paper contributes to the debate by examining the use of LAs such as *also*, *however* and *as a result* in English RAs written by English and Chinese native speakers (ENSs and CNSs) across four academic disciplines (Linguistics, Management, Physics and Computer Science). We presume that CNSs will have been influenced by their disciplinary, academic and cultural context and hence use rhetorical devices in their own ways different from their native counterparts. Interdisciplinary differences in LA densities and functions

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are also studied to explore which factor—the disciplinary norm or the writers' native language (cultural backgrounds)—exerts more influence on the use of LAs in academic writing.

We start with a brief review of prior corpus-based research on the use of LAs in academic prose, before focusing on what earlier analysts have said about differences in their use across disciplines and cultural backgrounds in particular. We then outline the procedure and methodology behind the construction of our comparable ENS and CNS corpus of RAs. We move on to illustrate usage differences across disciplines and writer groups with quantitative data. Subsequently, we discuss the relation between writer groups and LA use with results from a correspondence analysis; finally, we consider the pedagogical implications of our results.

2. Previous empirical studies on the use of LAs

There exists some confusion of terms for linking devices in English. Liu (2008) categorizes them into two groups. The terms in the first group, “ending with either ‘adjuncts’, ‘connectives’, or ‘connectors’, are generic in nature covering all linking devices including adverbial and conjunctions (i.e. coordinators and subordinators like *and*, *but*, and *although*)”. The terms in the second group, “ending with ‘adverbials’, ‘adverbs’ or ‘conjuncts’ refer only to one group of linking devices—those functioning as adverbials” (Liu, 2008, p. 492). This paper deals with the latter group and adopts Conrad's (1999) definition of LA: “those adverbials that serve to connect two stretches of discourse” (p. 3). Here the units of discourse can be of different sizes to include “phrases, sentences, paragraphs or longer” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 549). As LAs “explicitly signal the connections between passages of text” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 875), they play an instrumental role in making a text logically cohesive. They are therefore vital for EFL learners, whose writings are often said to lack logical lucidity, to learn.

Researchers differ in how they classify LAs. For example, Sinclair (2005) categorizes LAs into two types according to their form: lexical LA (e.g. *therefore*) and phrasal LA (e.g. *in conclusion*). Functional or semantic categorizations of LAs are various as the discourse semantic relationships they convey vary greatly. Among others, Biber et al. (1999) divide LAs into six “semantic categories”, namely enumeration, summation, apposition, result/inference, contrast/concession and transition; Sinclair (2005) classifies them into seven groups, namely addition, causes, conjunctions, contrasts and alternatives, ordering points, parallel, and sequence in time; and Carter and McCarthy (2006) propose a more complex taxonomy of nine types—additive, concessive, contrastive, inference, listing, meta-textual, resultative, summative, and time. Some terms employed in these categorizations, though different, may overlap with each other to convey the same semantic relationship, while others, same in names, refer to different categories. This naturally renders it almost impossible to directly compare the results of analyses based on these taxonomies.

Previous empirical studies on the use of LAs in academic prose largely fall into two broad categories: (a) micro-level studies based on ENS corpora—targeting the cross-generic or cross-disciplinary differences; and (b) macro-level studies based on comparisons between learner and ENS corpora—aiming to elucidate the gap between native and non-native speakers' use and assess whether there are linguistic challenges and where they lie for learners writing in English. Some studies (Biber et al., 1999; Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Liu, 2008; Peacock, 2010) have set out to explore the variations in LA distribution and usage patterns across genres and disciplines and found that “LAs are more common in conversation and academic prose” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 880) and that non-science disciplines use LAs more often than do science disciplines (Peacock, 2010). The use of different types of LAs is register/genre-sensitive or discipline-specific. For example, the sequential type of LAs is most common in fiction, whereas news contains the highest use of simultaneous LAs (Liu, 2008, p. 491). Neuroscience uses LAs of contrast/concession and apposition significantly more often, while Materials Science uses those of result/inference and apposition significantly less often (Peacock, 2010, p. 23). These findings are helpful in particular for scholars who wish to publish in international venues and for EAP teachers who aim to inform students of appropriate patterns of RA writing.

Extensive contrastive work has been done on the use of LAs in academic texts written by ENSs and EFL learners from different cultural backgrounds, including Swedish (Altenberg & Tapper, 1998), Norwegian (Eia, 2006), Chinese (Bolton et al., 2002; Field & Yip, 1992; Leedham & Cai, 2013; Lei, 2012; Milton & Tsang, 1993), and Japanese (Ishikawa, 2010; Narita, Sato, & Sugiura, 2003), and among EFL learners from different backgrounds (Granger & Tyson, 1996). The results of these studies do not present a consistent picture: patterns of overuse (Bolton et al., 2002; Field & Yip, 1992; Leedham & Cai, 2013; Lei, 2012; Milton & Tsang, 1993; Narita et al., 2003), underuse (Altenberg & Tapper, 1998; Eia, 2006) and no significant difference in LA use (Granger & Tyson, 1996; Ishikawa, 2010) have been observed between learners and their native counterparts. Learners' first language may be an important factor impacting their LA use in English writing, with European learners using fewer tokens but more varied types of LAs (Altenberg & Tapper, 1998; Eia, 2006) but Asian learners tending to overuse LAs (Bolton et al., 2002; Field & Yip, 1992; Lei, 2012; Milton & Tsang, 1993; Narita et al., 2003).

These interesting and contradictory findings indicate that the strategic use of LAs in international academic writing in English deserves special attention and that further exploration of this area is needed “to empower non-native writers with knowledge that will allow them to make informed decisions which may facilitate their participation in the academy” (Martínez, 2005, p. 176). Previous contrastive rhetoric studies have been based mainly on comparisons between learners' essays or theses and native-speaker students' essays or ENSs' published RAs. Variations in the rhetorical structure of different kinds of writing or the inappropriate control in terms of writing conditions may be reasons for the lack of consistency in published findings. It may also be noted that of this prior research, little is focused on CNS scholars who have succeeded in publishing RAs in English in an international journal. Thus, the present study intends to fill this void and is designed to

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