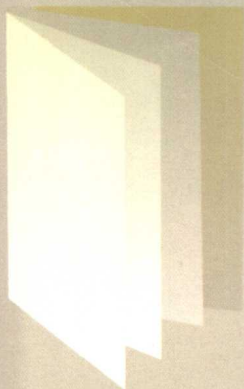# Contrastive Discourse in Chinese and English
— A Critical Appraisal

汉英
篇章对比研究

RON SCOLLON [美]

SUZANNE WONG SCOLLON [美]　　著

ANDY KIRKPATRICK [澳]

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Preface

I first came to know Ron Scollon through his studies in anthropology. Then I was fascinated by his exciting research in cross-cultural communication, most of which is carried out in collaboration with Suzanne Wong Scollon. But at that time I was quite ignorant of their work on Chinese rhetoric and composition. It was quite by accident that I discovered my ignorance when I visited the English Department of City University of Hong Kong, where Ron and I exchanged a few of our writings. On my way to hotel, I was secretly pleased with myself, because I got more papers from Ron than he from me. While I was thumbing through the papers in the taxi, I saw titles bearing things like 'Chinese rhetoric', 'Chinese composition', and my gaze was virtually frozen! 'Unbelievable!' I found myself repeatedly murmuring to myself.

Almost in the same fashion I came to know Andy Kirkpatrick. It was at an international conference. After my talk Andy came to 'congratulate' me—I am not sure about the appropriateness of this term in my case, but anywhere he said so and also gave me a couple of his papers. I was a bit embarrassed because I didn't have any with me to return his kindness. I was almost seized with amazement while leafing over the papers. Chinese rhetoric and composition too!

Those readers who are used to writing prefaces for others or who are interested in scrutinizing the way prefaces are written may feel disturbed with the previous narrative. 'Keep the history to yourself and tell us what you think about the book!' I can hear a voice challenging me. My defense is that this narrative is quite relevant here in this context. Inside me I used to have the inclination of resistance towards a foreigner, an 'outsider', writing about Chinese, which is not his or her mother tongue. The research in this volume bears the evidence that my resistance is groundless.

Initially I suggested to the three authors that they simply put their studies together as a collection of independent papers, considering the fact that they have a lot more exciting things to write about. They didn't take my suggestion and have spared no efforts in inte-

grating them to make them more or less a coherent whole. As a result the finished product is a pleasure to read.

Some Chinese readers may find the notion *ba gu wen* ' disturbingly' appearing from time and time. It was considered dead long time ago. However, if we examine it critically as a sort of macro discourse structure, as it is dealt with in this book, and examine it in the context of naturally occurring discourse, e. g. news discourse, there is a lot to be said about it.

I don't think I fully agree with the three authors in all their details, as no academic writing can please everybody. But I do find it stimulating, thought provoking and rewarding to read their analysis. I have little doubt that their work should be made known to Chinese readers. And I do hope that you will share my experience!

Gu Yueguo (M. A. , Ph. D.)
  Research Professor of Linguistics, The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
  The British Academy K. C. Wong Fellow
  Pro-President of Beijing Foreign Studies University
  Dean of the School of English Language Communication
  Beijing, China

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CHAPTER ONE

Contrastive discourse :
The problem of setting functionally contrastive frames

The problem of comparative structure in student writing

The study of the structures of discourse is a specialist study; people do not ordinarily give much thought to how they will plan what they say to others, how they will introduce their main topics, and how they will draw to a conclusion when they are finished. Language teachers, therefore, have been puzzled by the difficulties they encounter in trying to get learners of their language to organize their discourses in a way that strikes native users as natural.

For at least three decades researchers have worked to come to some understanding of what remains an unresolved question: Are learners of languages influenced in structuring discourses by the discourse structures of their first language? More generally we might ask: Are speakers and writers of languages other than English influenced in structuring discourses in English by the discourse structures of those other languages? This is not a new issue, of course. As early as Watters (1889) it was observed that Chinese speakers and writers organized their discourses in ways which presented interpretive difficulties for English users. More recently following upon Kaplan's (1966) statement of the problem, systematic studies have worked at uncovering the major lines of analysis.

The major questions which confound most studies of contrastive discourse are the questions of influence and of functional equivalence. For example, Scollon (1991, here revised as Chapter Seven), like Kaplan, claimed that contemporary Chinese in Taiwan wrote essays in English with structures remarkably like the structures of the traditional *ba gu wen* 八股文 examination essay. Unfortunately, as we point out below, that essay was discontinued before the turn of the century and contemporary English students in China have little

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awareness of the structure of these essays. It is difficult to construct an inferential chain by which the *ba gu wen* structures would come to exert an influence on the writing of those students in the late twentieth century. The article by Mohan and Lo (1985) has quickly become the standard citation contra-Kaplan in raising this issue.

In their paper on contrastive rhetoric, Mohan and Lo (1985: 520) cite the Beijing University Chinese Language Research Department as saying: To be concise in writing means that we should not waste our energy in writing anything that is superfluous... [sic] There should be no verbosity and no repetitions. We should write just what we want to say in a concise manner (Cited by Mohan and Lo as Beijing University 1973: 104 − 105). This citation is given as evidence that the same value is placed upon directness and conciseness in contemporary Chinese writing (in the PRC), as in contemporary normative prose in English. That is to say, Mohan and Lo argue that Chinese writers, like writers in English, are equally concerned to be direct and therefore, they argue, there is no basis for claims of rhetorical differences between writers of Chinese and writers of English.

Their purpose in this now rather well circulated argument is to undercut the equally well circulated argument most often attributed to Kaplan's (1966) article that writers in Chinese and English are poles apart in their rhetorical purposes and strategies. On the side of Mohan and Lo are Chen (1986) and Lin (1987) and many others who have either taken issue with Kaplan's early statement, or for their own reasons argued that Chinese writers are no less direct than English writers. Among the arguments made is the quite legitimate argument that traditional forms of rhetorical structure and purpose such as the *ba gu wen or qi-cheng-zhuan-he* 起 承 转 合 cannot simply be assumed to be contemporary influences and that these traditional forms of rhetoric are largely unknown or despised by contemporary Chinese writers. Furthermore, it is argued that much of the evidence concerning such contrastive Chinese-English rhetoric is garnered from the writing activities of young, immature, or uneducated writers, often immigrants to English-speaking countries, whose rhetorical 'differences' might as easily be the outcomes of language development as of culturally organized difference. Nevertheless, there is some sort of a structure which does not seem to wish to disappear. In the writ-

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ten discourse in English of Chinese writers the crucial aspect of this pervasive structure is that the 'main point' (itself a problematic notion, of course) occurs not where a Westerner expects it (also a contentious point) at or near the beginning, but somewhere about the center of the essay (Scollon and Scollon, 1994). In spoken discourse the topic is not presented at the anchor point (Schegloff 1986, Scollon 1998), that is, immediately upon opening up the channel of communication, but later on after a period of facework (Scollon and Scollon 1991, 1994, 1995a).

Kirkpatrick in research which has been revised and included in this volume and Young (1982, 1994) have argued that Chinese writers or speakers characteristically organize their extended arguments — letters of request or a press conference in the case of Kirkpatrick's work, and business presentations in the case of Young's research — so that their main points or crucial arguments are placed toward the end inductively rather than beginning at the outset by deductively giving their main points and then following with supporting arguments. Their research argues that in contexts as varied as letters written from China in Putonghua[1] to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation or business negotiations in English in Hong Kong and San Francisco, there is a pervasive rhetorical strategy of deferring crucial arguments until after an initial period of facework. It is argued by researchers in this camp that this more 'indirect' or 'inductive' expectation is a significant source of intercultural misinterpretation when Chinese speakers or writers communicate with non-Chinese.

Overall there seem to be three major issues debated in these studies. The first issue is whether or not there are, in fact, such broad structural or rhetorical differences between English and Chinese writing. In many cases this is difficult to determine as the writing being compared is not strictly comparable in genre, audience, or rhetorical purpose. The second issue is why there are such differences. As we have noted above, it is difficult to argue from historical forms to contemporary usage, especially in the writing of students. For example, it has been argued (Scollon and Scollon 1991, 1994, 1995a) that the so-called 'Asian' structural preference for inductive or topic-delayed discourses derives neither from historical gen-

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res and belief systems nor from a studied practice of contemporary genres, but from face relationships governing rhetorical situations. The third issue is whether or not such differences are, in fact, significant sources of misinterpretation. Kirkpatrick in several papers which have been revised to appear as chapters in this book shows rather clearly that the writing of Chinese in Chinese reflects a very similar structure which may be influenced by the *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* (Mandarin; *hei-sihng-jyun-hahp*, Cantonese; see also the Japanese *ki-shoo-ten-ketsu*, Hinds 1983, 1992) structure of classical Chinese provenance. To add to the generality of this picture, one finds a very similar structure in the music of the qin (Lai and Mok 1981) and in classical Chinese (Yuan) drama (Schlepp 1970, Shih 1976).

The problem in all of this, of course, is that of showing how one imagines that young Chinese in Beijing, Guangzhou or Taichung, in Hong Kong, San Francisco, Sydney, or London, writing in English are likely to have come under the influence of such indirectly experienced forms of organization. It is rather like arguing that the A-winning essays of native-using English writers in Freshman Composition have been influenced by the string quartets of Beethoven or the vanishing point perspective of Michelangelo.

The second issue, the issue of functional equivalence, has arisen as researchers have become more specific in trying to pin down the actual structure of discourses. If the purpose is to compare the structure of essays, for example, then certainly it remains somewhat absurd to compare the structure of a student essay in an English class with the examination essay of a would-be Mandarin of the Ming Dynasty, much less compare that essay with a newspaper story, a business letter, or a job interview. One wants, as much as possible, discourses which have been undertaken in closely similar circumstances and for closely similar purposes. If one adds to this that they be 'real' in the sense that they are not experimentally contrived, but actually undertaken voluntarily and non-reflectively, it is clear that such strictly comparative discourses are relatively rare.

Comparative journalistic texts
In attempts to answer the questions raised in these contrastive rhetorical studies, a number of researchers have turned to the analysis of

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journalistic texts. This is for several reasons. Perhaps the main reason is that such texts are readily available and appear to form a relatively similar genre across languages and cultural groups. A second reason is that they are examples of a highly salient genre of public discourse which, it is often felt, must exert some non-academic or out-of-school influence upon the academic writing of students. A third reason is that journalistic texts are generally thought to exemplify widely accepted standards of form which is less variable than the more flexible and varied academic essay. In addition, as we will show below, we can compare 'the same' news story as it appears in different languages.

Two positions have been taken regarding the structure of journalistic texts across languages. One is that they do not differ in significant ways. The structure of such texts is normally regarded to reflect the inverted pyramid of newsworthiness (Evans 1976, Bell 1991), that is, such texts are assumed to focus upon a single issue (the 'story'), to put that into lead position, and then to array further details following that in the order of descending importance. Of course, analysts allow that there are a large variety of differences reflecting the difference between hard news and soft news or features. Further, it is accepted that there are also differences across newspapers which reflect reader or recipient design. Nevertheless, on the whole the position taken is that across the world's languages and newspapers, journalistic discourse represents a relatively homogeneous genre or set of sub-genres. While writers such as Evans (1976) and Bell (1991) largely presuppose this notion, more discourse-oriented researchers such as van Dijk (1988) in early research in this area have tended to lend support to the notion that journalistic discourse reflects more commonality across languages than difference. This position is further supported by journalists and journalism analysts (Zhang 1988, Li 1989, Xu 1992) who analyze Chinese language newspapers in Hong Kong, Taiwan and elsewhere as following largely western practices in most matters ranging from text structure to newspaper layout and formatting.

In contrast to this position are a set of studies, some of newspaper columns and other forms of expository essays which argue for rather significant differences across languages, especially the lan-

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guages of East Asia. Many of these contrastive discourse or rhetorical studies do not focus on news stories as such. Hinds (1983, 1992), for example, argues that essays in English and in Japanese are structured significantly differently. The most significant point made by Hinds, but also supported by Young (1982, 1994) is that texts in English are structured in a deductive format, not unlike the inverted pyramid, in which the main topic comes at the beginning with supporting material following, but Japanese (Hinds) or Chinese (Young) discourses are structured inductively. That is, in these latter texts the most significant point is delayed until a considerable amount of background material has been presented. For our purposes, the point these studies have made is that at least in some cases there are significant differences in the structuring of texts, including news texts, which goes against the global journalistic principle of the inverted pyramid design.

While these analysts do not make extreme claims, their material makes it difficult to know to what extent their findings can be generalized. Some authors such as Young (1982, 1994) have a tendency to suggest that all discourses in Chinese, or even perhaps by Chinese using English will reflect a binary opposition to discourses in English. Others such as Mohan and Lo (1985) have argued that because prior studies have left it difficult to make generalizations no contrastive analysis is valid.

The structure of the book
The chapters in this book fall into three broad groups. Following this introductory chapter, Section One contains four chapters (Chapters 2 − 5) in which we outline arguments that were constructed over several years by Kirkpatrick in an attempt to elucidate principles of information sequence and structure in Modern Standard Chinese. Then in Section Two (Chapters 6 − 9), we turn to a discussion of the influences of traditional rhetoric structures on contemporary composition, proceeding more or less chronologically. In Chapter Seven, we provide a narrative of R Scollon's teaching experience which led to some of the studies which have been presented here. It was his somewhat naive first thoughts about the role of the *ba gu wen* which led into the body of research the Scollons have been engaged in now for

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about a decade.

Section Three focuses upon the analysis of news discourse as a useful genre for the study of contrastive discourse. Chapters Ten through Thirteen provide a basis for showing both how traditional rhetorical patterns may be found in news discourse and alerting the reader to a number of dangers which arise when ***data are*** not carefully controlled for both genre and function.

Introduction to Section One

Communication difficulties in interethnic relations that occur in key situations such as committee meetings, job interviews and industrial disputes are often due to different perceptions and interpretations of discourse and rhetorical conventions (Scollon and Scollon 1995a). As Gumperz (1990) has shown: neither participant knows enough about the strategies employed by the other to maintain conversation and to reliably evaluate the attitudes and abilities of the other (236 – 7).

The transfer of the rhetorical conventions of the first language to a second language can therefore cause serious breakdowns in communication. In the context of language learning, Odlin notes that: If native language patterns influence language learners in inappropriate ways, then language that a learner uses may seem impolite or incoherent (1989:48).

The impetus for the chapters of Section One comes from several years working with Chinese speakers in a variety of contexts, but primarily in education in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore by both Kirkpatrick and the Scollons. It represents a desire to explain cross cultural breakdown and stereotyping between speakers of English and Chinese in terms of differing rhetorical and discourse conventions. For example, we have noted Chinese speakers are often stereotyped by speakers of English and their speech conventions can occasion comments such as 'they never get to the point', 'they are too passive', 'they are too deferential'. Interestingly, this prejudice is often reinforced by contact with Chinese speakers. Contact with speakers of Chinese strengthens rather than weakens the stereotype.

Evidence for this stereotyping is not entirely anecdotal. Below are two examples where communication between Chinese speakers of

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English and English speakers can be seen to have broken down. These examples both come from Kirkpatrick's work and the first example presents the dialogue between a Chinese police constable (CPC) of the former Royal Hong Kong police (as it was then called) and his senior expatriate (English) officer (EO). The interaction took place in the office of the senior officer in a Hong Kong police station. The constable wants to request a day's compassionate leave to take his sick mother into hospital.

CPC: Sir

EO: Yes, what is it?

CPC: My mother is not very well sir.

EO: SO?

CPC: She has to go into hospital sir.

EO: Well, get on with it. What do you want?

CPC: On Thursday sir.

EO: Bloody hell man, what do you want?

(At this point, the police constable mumbled something like 'Nothing sir' and left the office.)

While questions such as rank and sensitivity may have been important in explaining this breakdown in communication, equally important was the apparent, in the mind of the EO, inability of the CPC to get to the point. For when asked how he would prefer someone to ask for a day's leave, the EO said he would want him to ask first and explain later. In other words, the EO would have preferred the interaction to have followed this sequence:

CPC: I'd like to request a day's leave for Thursday this week please sir.

EO: Why?

CPC: Well, my mother has to go into hospital on that day and I'd like to go with her to make sure that everything is all right.

The most obvious difference between what the CPC actually said and what the EO indicated he would prefer is the sequence in which the request is carried out. In the Chinese PC's version, the request

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comes at the end. In the English EO's version, the request comes at the front. Clearly then, the problem is not simply lack of knowledge of the language. The problem stems from the sequence in which the language is presented and not from grammatical structure.

Chapters Two through Five represent an attempt to elucidate the principles of information sequencing in Modern Standard Chinese. Chapter Two looks at this at the level of the sentence and the following three chapters attempt to apply the principles established in Chapter Two to see whether these also operate at the levels of discourse, text and reasoning in Chinese.

The original articles upon which these revised chapters are based were published over a period of several years and over that time Kirkpatrick had naturally refined his thinking on the principles behind sequencing in Modern Standard Chinese. In many instances in these articles he referred to a principle of MSC sequencing as the 'Because-therefore' sequence. He now far prefers the term 'frame-main'.

The data
The data used in these chapters (2 − 5) almost entirely comprise naturally occurring authentic Chinese. They include:

a) Some 5 hours of transcripts made of audio tapes of three mainland Chinese press conferences and the question and answer session of a seminar given in MSC at the Australian National University by a speaker from mainland China. This data forms the basis for the analysis of extended spoken discourse which is carried out in Chapter Three.

b) 40 letters of request written by mainland Chinese to Radio Australia. These form the basis for the analysis of the informal written genre carried out in Chapter Four.

c) Examples of Chinese reasoning, both classical and contemporary, and these form the basis of Chapter Five.

Introduction to Section Two
Western scholars have argued that traditional Chinese text structures still have a strong influence upon the written English of contemporary Chinese students. The two structures most commonly cited in this context are the traditional four-part '*qi-cheng-zhuan-he*' structure

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(beginning-continuing-transition-summary) and the '*ba gu wen*',
the so-called 8-legged essay of the Chinese imperial civil service
exams. Kaplan (1972) has suggested that the English essays of Chi-
nese students follow the form of the *ba gu wen*. Scollon (1991) also
argued that elements of this 8-legged structure can be seen in the
English essays of Taiwanese university students. Liu (1989) has
analysed a piece of contemporary Chinese literary criticism as follow-
ing the traditional four-part *qi-cheng-zhuan-he*. Peggy Cheng
(1985) has similarly suggested that this four-part structure can be
identified in the essays of Singaporean secondary students.

In Chapter Six, we provide a historical account of traditional
Chinese text structures and then in Chapters Seven, Eight, and Nine
we analyse essays written by mainland Chinese and Taiwan students
including those written for the annual university entrance exam and
consider the advice given to students in a number of contemporary
Chinese textbooks on composition. Our purpose in so doing is to
show that much current mainland Chinese student writing is as likely
to be influenced by contemporary 'Anglo-American' models of
rhetoric as it is by traditional Chinese rhetorical styles. Although the
writing of Taiwanese students is considered, we are careful to stress
that our main focus is on mainland Chinese writing. We must re-
member that rhetorical styles reflect the preferences of the times and
are therefore dynamic and subject to change. If the People's Republic
of China is swept up in a nationalistic and patriotic mood symbolised
by a desire to promote things Chinese, in stark contrast to the events
of the 'Cultural Revolution', then one would predict the re-emer-
gence of traditional Chinese rhetorical styles.

Introduction to Section Three
Chapters Ten through Thirteen turn to an analysis of news discourse.
The first of these chapters is an analysis based on a larger contrastive
discourse project in which a single news story was compared in a
six-way design to include Chinese and English versions in newspaper,
radio, and television media. The purpose of that earlier study was to
control for both generic and media differences across versions of the
same news story (Li et al. 1993). Chapter Ten examines just the
Chinese and English news stories and argues that both the traditional

journalistic inverted pyramid and the more classical centrally placed main point can be demonstrated in the Chinese text. This suggests that a single focused structure may be characteristic of Western journalistic tradition while a more complex and varied structure may be used in Chinese.

Research subsequent to the project just mentioned led us to believe that any comparison between just two newspapers was likely to lead to artificial binary oppositions in the analysis. We then undertook a study of fourteen versions of the same news story as it appeared in Chinese and English, in mainland Chinese sources and in Hong Kong newspapers. In chapters Eleven and Twelve we argue that there is no single feature from the classical *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* to point of view which is sufficient to separate these fourteen newspapers into clearly demarcated categories on regional, linguistic, or ideological grounds.

This finding then led to the study presented here in Chapter Thirteen. If it is impossible to clearly demarcate newspapers on ideological, regional, or linguistic grounds in reference to discursive structure, then we asked how much variability would be found within a single newspaper. We studied 'home' and 'overseas' versions of the *People's Daily* and of the *China Daily*, all Chinese government newspapers. Within these newspapers it was relatively rare, actually, to find the 'same' story presented in these different versions on the same day. When 'the same' story was compared it was clear that there were important differences ranging from low-level lexical and syntactic choices to discursive structuring of whole stories. Chapter Fourteen concludes with the caution that even within such a relatively unified and homogeneous genre as the newspaper story there is a very high level of generic variability which frustrates the simple belief that we can make simple comparisons between one language and another.

Based on these findings, Chapter Fourteen then provides a brief recapitulation and moves on to suggest a framework for the continued study of comparative discourse. In Chapter Fourteen we argue that we should abandon the concept of comparative structure as these structures are in effect artifacts of discursive or rhetorical purpose. Comparative discourse analysis should be goal-oriented (Gu 1995,