Meta-discourse: A Cross-cultural Perspective

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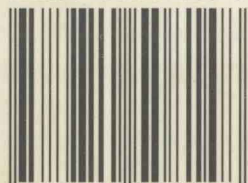
徐海铭　著

跨文化交际与英语教育丛书

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内 容 提 要

语篇(discourse)由主语篇(primary discourse)和元语篇(meta-discourse)构成。主语篇是关于命题或思想内容的;元语篇则是关于命题或思想内容的组织结构、作者对命题或思想内容的态度、与读者的交流等方面的,是"语篇的语篇(discourse about discourse)"。

本书钩沉了西方学界关于元语篇理论和应用的研究,并在此基础上构建了一个理论框架,试图阐释在非母语语境中影响元语篇学习和使用的主要因素。此外,作者通过大样本的实证调查,描述了在汉语语境下英语专业学生在作文中使用元语篇手段的模式,并揭示了形成这些模式的内在原因。作者还探讨了在语篇中元语篇的使用与语篇质量的相关性。

本书是中国学人就此问题向西方学界作出的一个初始回应。

Acknowledgements

When the finishing touch has been wielded with tremendous efforts to a hard-wrought picture, the time is ripe for an apprentice painter to extend his heartfelt and long-lasting gratitude to his tutors.

My indebtedness goes to Professor YUE Meiyun and Professor TING Yenren, whose professional devotion to the students' growth and style of seeking true scholarship have always been a point of reference every time I take up my research and spurred me to work harder both in my research and teaching career. I also owe my gross gratitude to them, as their one-year instructions on "Theories of Applied Linguistics", "Schools of Linguistics", and "Philosophy of Language" have deepened my understanding of the nature of language and expanded my vision of SLA.

My special thanks go to my tutor, Doctor WEN Qiufang, professor of applied linguistics, whose trenchant acumen and penetrating insight preempted me from experiencing more twists and turns on the experiential, psychological and intellectual Odyssey. Her rigid logical thinking has impressed and enlightened me much. She has taught me the course "Research Methodology", which now constitutes an integral part of this research. And it is she who sent me to the University of Hong Kong where I gleaned much literature central to the present study. Without her patient and meticulous guidance, it would have been impossible for me to get the book completed. I will always owe

communicating with her. To my father who has been lingering on this world for years since he suffered the stomach cancer and who should enjoy my care, I know that, as his son, I can do nothing to return his tacit but understandable love throughout my life.

As a novice painter, I always frown upon the already finished work for its inbuilt defects. I know that these defects can only be overcome in future research when my craft becomes sophisticated. And I know that I can find no other better way to repay my tutors' instruction in the Department of English of Nanjing University than to persistently pursue the true scholarship and turn out more decent academic works.

Finally, but importantly, I should admit that whatever faults remain in the book must be laid entirely at my own door, not someone else's.

序 1

3月末,春意渐浓,我在北京审阅徐海铭君的博士论文,后又应邀去南京大学参加他的答辩,甚感荣幸。"荣幸"一词,可有多种解读。能在陈嘉、范存忠、吕天石等前辈执教过的南京大学,能在全国论文发表数量多年名列前茅的南京大学,参加博士生答辩,固然"荣幸",但我一直认为,博士生导师不是全知的,相反的,我们常能从年轻学者的工作中学到不少新的知识,得以不断更新知识,这才是真正的"荣幸"。

徐海铭君在南京师范大学工作,是该校青年教员中佼佼者,擅长语言学理论;在南京大学攻读博士学位后,又得名师文秋芳教授指导,将理论应用于实践方面,成绩卓然。

本书如实记录了徐君攻读博士期间的工作和收获。他所研究的是国外语篇分析中的一个重要方面——元语篇理论。说实在的,我对这个选题也很陌生。为了读懂他的论文,我不得不翻遍书架,有时需施展我应用不很自如的上网术,查找有关资料。不入虎穴,焉得虎子?要审阅别人的文章,自己先要敢学,敢于探险。上天不负有心人,读后才发现,元语篇理论原来涉及哲学、社会语言学、教育学、建筑学、认知科学等多种学科,这方面的研究对各学科发展有重要价值。作者在本书综述中已有反映。读者不妨扫描一番,长长知识。

徐君没有淹没在他渊博的理论知识中,而是沿着教学和修辞这一脉络,将选题锁定在中国学生在写作课中如何使用元语篇的特征上,这个目标是合理的,明确而又实际。徐君对材料所做的归纳整理工作,为这项课题研究奠定了基础。

徐君的研究方法总的来说是实证性的,如他对200名分属不

同年级的英语专业学生的作文进行了收集和分析。同时,结合学生的反思笔记和中外老师的反馈,定量和定性相结合。透过这方面细心分析的工作,我们不难发现,徐君深得其导师的真传。

论文所得的研究结果是有趣的,徐君注意到英语专业3年级学生作文中元语篇手段应用最少,而四年级学生有再行上升的现象。本书也报告了元语篇知识和作文质量之间的关系。徐君就目前认识所做的解释,对如何进行作文教学颇有启迪,是原创性的。

短短3年时间,我们不可能要求徐君做更多的跟踪调查。对徐君个人来说,本书的出版,可以把它看作是自身一个研究阶段的小结,就治学道路而言,也许这仅仅是起步。愿徐君继续努力,为我们写出更完美的、更精彩的、更具有科学性的篇章。元语篇理论追求的不是形式上的句号,而是思想的深邃、连贯和完美。

胡壮麟
2001 年 6 月 30 日
北京大学蓝旗营宿舍

序 2

大庙里都有一个行当,那就是知客僧。其职责不是洒扫,而是接待访客,无论是还愿的香客,还是挂单的和尚。当然,这知客僧虽不是最德隆望尊的大师,却也是颇知世事掌故的人。

半个月前,海铭兄给我打电话,说他的博士论文即将付梓,嘱我作序。这就把我推上了知客僧的位置。而他却端坐在大殿上,拈花微笑。

海铭是一个很率性的人。这种毫不掩饰的素面朝天,从骨子里透露出他的狂狷和自以为是,因此,他有一种竹林七贤寄啸于天地之间的放浪形骸。即使是偶尔"虚伪"地朝人一笑,也让人不久就回味出某种讥讽的意思,酸酸的。也许正是因为他这种与生俱来的恃才傲物,所以能够在学术上不落俗套,另辟蹊径。

他很用功。我第一次接触他,是在我去美国之前,他帮我强化英文。那时,坊间流行的手机呼机他一概不用,晚上也从不在家。但只要到南师大校园里那座重檐翘角的楼里,准能在楼梯口的一间陋室里捉到书堆半掩的他。他似乎习惯于独处了。

对于专业,海铭兄却很虔诚。有时问起他做什么论文,他总是说,很无聊的,说了你也没兴趣。可是言下之意,却给人不容置喙的感觉。于是也就不去追问,任他独自窃喜去罢。后来知道他在搞"元语篇",对这么一个枯燥的问题,能面壁三年,颇有一种苦行僧的样子。但那心中喜悦,岂是外行所能体悟。记起庄子与梁惠王在濠上的一段对话,海铭兄真有一种"子非鱼,安知鱼之乐乎?"的况味。所以他从来不承认自己的苦。如今,他的博士论文终于出炉了,海铭兄也算是修成了正果。

这是一部语言学专著,其内容自然由不得我多说。但是语言

本身也只是世间各种符号之一种，如今学术界常用的"话语"一词就显然带有某种语言学色彩。透过这些自觉不自觉表达出来的符号，发现其微言大义，确实不仅是语言学者的专利。人类的科学史实际上也正是人们揭示自然、社会语言真谛的历史。无怪乎语言学理论能发展为现代哲学的一支显学，并对科学发展起到如此重要的影响。

通过对英专学生作文的实证研究，海铭兄找出了学生使用元语篇的某些规律及其背后的原因。从方法和结论上来说，都是值得称道的。其论文在其业内的价值已经得到同行专家的认可和嘉许。这里，我只想说，任何研究，其实都要讲求科学性，自然科学、社会科学、人文科学概莫能外。但反观国内文科研究，仍然缺乏格物致知的科学态度，才子气与市侩气流行，很少有人真正能物我两忘地精益求精。

而海铭兄正是这样一个真诚的人。

李向民
2001 年 7 月 21 日
于闲云小筑

Table of contents

Introduction

0.0 Introduction

This book attempts to document the patterned developmental changes the use of meta-discourse devices by Chinese learners of English, to explore the causes that underlie the observed changes and to examine the relationship between the use of meta-discourse devices in argumentative writing and the writing quality. The theoretical construct "meta-discourse" in this study only encompasses two major categories: textual meta-discourse and interpersonal meta-discourse, which principally encompasses illocutionary markers, validity markers as well as attitudinal markers. The study adopts a cross-sectional design and a developmental perspective to chart the path of development in the use of meta-discourse devices Chinese learners of English undergo from Year 1 to Year 4 in university. The relationship between the use of meta-discourse devices and the quality of writing is concretized as the one between the use of the tokens of each type of meta-discourse per one hundred words in each composition and the writing quality, which is operationalized as the average of the ratings given to the composition of argumentative type.

To be specific, the study addresses the following two major ques-

tions:

(1) What are the patterned developmental changes in the use of meta-discourse devices by Chinese learners of English? This question is approached by addressing three sub-questions. They are: (a) What are the patterned quantitative changes in the use of meta-discourse devices in argumentative writing by Chinese learners of English? (b) What are the observed qualitative changes in the use of meta-discourse devices in argumentative writing by Chinese learners of English? (c) What are the causes for both quantitative and qualitative differences among the learners from different groups?

(2) Is there any significant correlation between the use of meta-discourse devices and the quality of writing? If there is, what are the possible causes? If not, why not?

0. 1   Need for the Study

This study is carried out for the purpose of (1) uncovering the patterned developmental changes in using meta-discourse devices by the EFL learners, (2) unraveling the causes beneath the patterns uncovered, (3) unveiling the relationship between the use of meta-discourse devices and the quality of writing, and (4) informing and improving the classroom writing instruction in this regard.

0.1.1 Uncovering the Patterned Developmental Changes in the Use of Meta-discourse Devices by Chinese EFL Learners

Studies aiming to explore L2 learners' development in writing are legion. Over the past twenty years, numerous studies have been carried out to determine how L2 writers structure L2 written discourse (Connor, 1987; Kaplan, 1978, 1988). They focus on the comparison of native and non-native speakers' interpretation of English texts and on how L2 learners' different interpretations affect their writing performance (Bloom, 1981; Cushman & Kincaid, 1987; Hinkel, 1994; Kachru, 1988; Yum, 1987). These studies in essence purport to reveal how different textual conventions in different cultural contexts influence the generation of written discourse in L2. Studies in this line can be generally subsumed under the umbrella category "contrastive rhetorical studies" initiated by Kaplan and his associates (Kaplan, 1978; 1983; 1988; 1996). Strikingly, macro perspectives are often adopted to investigate the different discourse patterns produced by L2 writers with different ethnographical and cultural backgrounds. Such studies, unarguably, shed light on L2 learners' learning problems and issues encountered in writing and do service to cross-cultural writing teaching.

Another line of research on L2 learners' development in writing is carried out by meticulously charting L2 learners' development in using aspects of textual features, for example, in meta-discourse markers (Cheng & Steffensen, 1996; Renkema, 1993; Shaw & Liu, 1998). This worm's eye view has furnished insights into what really develops in the development of L2 learners' writing. This view is obviously

3

supplementary to the studies with a bird's eye view.

What merits special attention are the two empirical studies on L2 learners' use of meta-discourse devices in this dimension. One is made by Cheng and Steffensen (1996: 149-181). They examined the treatment effect caused by teachers' instruction on the function of meta-discourse in an experimental class. The time for treatment spanned 16 weeks. At the end of this experiment, they found that this treatment was effective, and that "students in the experimental group benefited from instruction about discourse: students in the experimental group produced essays that received significantly higher grades than those in the control group" (1996: 149). They finally attributed the improvement of writing quality to the students' use of meta-discourse devices which were characterized by higher density and more variety.

The other developmental study is conducted by Shaw and Liu (1998: 225-254). They also examined how foreign language writers used register features at two different stages, that is, before and after summer course in English for Academic Purposes with an emphasis on writing. The time span of treatment ranged from two to three months. Eighty-eight participants were set a prompt, which produced a descriptive comparison. Another seventy-six were set a prompt which produced the persuasive situation. They compared the two groups' changes before and after the training. They found that "the major changes in register features were from features of spoken English to those more typical of formal writing", that "there was less change in complexity of construction or variety of vocabulary", and that "the subjects had been discriminating in their acceptance of academic style and actively sensitive to genre and other requirements" (p. 225). Meta-discourse was considered as part of the register features in their study. Increase and

decrease in meta-discoursal formulae were reported to exist. The study presented a detailed delineation of the participants' changes in the use of meta-discourse devices.

Both studies aim to uncover how L1 and L2 learners' development in writing in terms of the use of meta-discourse devices and so far, they are the most comprehensive of its kind in that they gave very detailed descriptions of how the subjects performed differently after receiving treatment. The two studies, however, suffer defects. First, the length of treatment is short. Often, learning effect fluctuates within a short time span, and, most presumably, the positive effect will attrit over time (Ellis, 1990; Towell et al, 1997). Therefore, it is hard to guarantee whether the observed development is stable or not. Second, these changes do not happen naturally; instead, they are caused by the experimenter's intense instruction. The research methods obviously affect the learners' learning focus (Seliger & Shamony, 1997). So, to observe learners' changes naturalistically or without interruption may bring us much closer to the true patterns of the learners' development in this aspect. The third defect is its methodology. It seems too simple and subjective for them to attribute the improvement of writing quality to the use of meta-discourse devices without reporting how they calculated the correlation between the use of meta-discourse devices and the quality of writing. In addition, the participants are all L1 and L2 learners at American universities where natural learning environment exists.

In the light of these inadequacies, it is of high necessity to observe and record L2 learners' development in using meta-discourse over years in a Chinese context where naturalistic environment of learning English is devoid. The minute description of the developmental