

## INDIRECTNESS: THE GENERAL PREFERENCE OF THE CHINESE IN THEIR ENGLISH WRITING

Yuxin Jia

Hartin Institute of Technology

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Thanks to the establishment and now the ever-increasing in-depth study of cultural diversity in the United States and the increasing recognition of differing speech patterns owing to cultural and contexts in sociolinguistics and cross-cultural communication, the 1990s have witnessed a renewed interest in the study of writing across cultures, and in particular in the study of L2 writing which has raised the awareness of the teachers both teaching English as a second and foreign language. Ever since comparative study of discourse features across cultures started, applied linguistic study in the context of applied linguistics, *is taking a new directions in five domains: contrastive text (comparison of discourse features across languages), the study of writing as a cultural activity ( comparing the process of learning to write in different cultures, contrastive studies of the classroom dynamics of L2 writing), contrastive rhetoric studies conducted in a variety of genres in a variety of situations for a variety of purposes, and contrastive rhetoric studies dealing with the inculcation of culturally different intellectual traditions and ideologies* (Ulla Connor, p24-25, 1996). It is inevitable that the uses of English and even the forms of it in Asia as well as in the other places of the world are to different degrees, influenced by Asian languages and cultures. This paper is sort of mixture of study of writing as a cultural activity and contrastive rhetoric and analysis. On the one hand, the author regards writing as cultural activity owing to the idea that everybody becomes literate in his native language and culture, which shapes the way she or he does in terms of writing. On the other hand, the paper deals with expository writing and writings of other genres, which is quite recent thing in this field. Also, the ever-increasing study of the multiculturalism of world/Asian Englishes, further develops the cross-cultural study of writing between native English speakers and non-native speakers. As Honna points out "*we simply cannot internationalize things and ideas without having them accommodated to the customs of people who are supposed to use them for their own purposes.*" "*The fact is that the internationalization of English has prompted the diversification of English.. The diversification is the cost of the internationalization of English. Here, it is important to recognize that English has become an international common language simply because it is being created as a culturally diverse language.*" (Honna, p10,2002) Writing is cultural activity. Viewed in this light, writing can be seen as a process of the application of cultural conventions or what is called culturally preferred patterns in discourse organization. Then, how do we regard nonnative language

writing such as Chinese English writing? As is known, Chinese English writing or ESL writing is a complicated process. It involves not only what is notoriously referred to as pragmatic transfer of culturally preferred convention from L1 to L2, but also involves cognitive, social, cultural, political, educational, historical, rhetorical factors, etc. To our understanding, due to complex reasons, the influence of the culturally preferred patterns in Chinese writing on Chinese English writing is so strong that the use of the traditional Chinese discourse organizational patterns in English writing is unavoidable and inevitable. In fact, the reality is that in Chinese English writing, Chinese culture-specific patterns and Anglo-American patterns co-exist. The co-existence of these two language patterns may even be found in the same Chinese English writing. On the one hand, influenced by Anglo-American English, people may reconcile their Chinese identity with Anglo-American identity dictated by Anglo-American English patterns in English writing. On the other hand, the Chinese may pertinently cling to their own identity dictated by traditional Chinese patterns and styles in their writing in English. This paper, on the basis of sample and case analysis including the analysis of 46 Prize Essays by non-English majors, 16 model essays by English majors of Peking University, and a considerable number of academic abstracts written in English, attempts to reinforce the assumption that in Chinese writing in English the indirectness or inductive approach is a general preference, and therefore dictating Chinese cultural identity in their communication. As the samples or cases which the analysis is based upon are academic, they may, relatively speaking, likely to be least influenced by social or situational factors. Therefore, they may be representative of Chinese English writing. To make a contrastive study between the patterns in the Chinese English writing and Anglo-American English patterns in English writing, I have also made analysis of 31 essays of American college students, which are pieces selected from a large number of American students' essays.

## **2. RECENT STUDIES OF INDIRECTNESS IN CHINESE WRITING IN ENGLISH**

Many scholars including those in the West (Kaplan, 1966; Ron Scollon, 1991; Carolyn Matalene, 1985; Cai, 1993; Yuxin Jia, 1987, Fagan and Cheong, 1987; etc.) on the basis of observation, empirical data analysis, and investigation, argue that Chinese text structure has a strong influence on Chinese writing in English, as well as on other Oriental English writing and the result is that Oriental English writing has the tendency of being indirect. They share the assumption that indirectness seems to be the general preference in the Chinese writings in English, though it might be inappropriate to conclude that there exists a direct-and-indirect or deductive-and-inductive dichotomy between Eastern and Western discourse organizational patterns. Kaplan's pioneering study (1966) based on the analysis of five types of paragraph development suggested that Anglo-European expository essays followed a linear development while essays written in Chinese and other Oriental languages follow a configural development, using an indirect approach, thus coming to the point only at the end. According to Kaplan, "*Some Oriental writing ... is marked by what may be called an approach by indirection. In this kind of writing, the development of the paragraph may be said to be 'turning and turning in a widening gyre'. The circles or gyres turn around the subject and show it from a variety of tangential views, but the subject is never looked at directly...*" Even though Kaplan's claim was disputed by some scholars who claim that Chinese text organizational patterns do not differ markedly from those of the Anglo-American English text,

his hypothesis of the preference of indirectness in Chinese writing was supported by many researchers and scholars, such as Carolyn Matalene (1985), Ron Scollon (1991), Cai, (1993), Yuxin Jia (1997), and Wenzhong Hu (1998). Matalene (1985) demonstrates in sample essays written by Chinese ESL students in China that arguments are often delayed, include narration, and use statements that seem unconnected in the eyes of the Western reader. Linda Wai Ling Young (1982) indicates that even in the forms of request and business negotiations, Chinese style is indirect. The overall consensus seems to be that one always states one's request or main point last and "...*Put in capsule form, the difference between Chinese and English expectations of discourse norms boils down to the distinction between 'where the argument is going' and 'where the argument is coming from.'*" Or put in a different way, Chinese writing arrives at where Anglo-American writing started.... Wenzhong Hu in his paper (1998) suggests that Chinese learners of English in China have general preference for inductive style in their writing of letters and request, though many variables may help determine to what degree the writing of request could be indirect or otherwise, when and where one could be inductive or deductive. According to the research conducted by Fagan and Cheong (1987), of sixty English compositions written by Chinese ESL students in Singapore 50.9 percent of the total followed this indirect model. In the extensive contrastive rhetorical research dealing with Japanese, Chinese, Thai, and Korean English, Hinds (1990) argues that the Oriental writing follows an organizational pattern which he calls "quasi-inductive ", in the sense that the thesis statement is often buried in the passage which means that the topic is often not explicitly stated but implied. As a matter of fact, quite some Chinese scholars had recognized the aforementioned indirectness or inductive or quasi-inductive approach in Chinese writing in English long before the Western scholars did. They had claimed that the English writing of the Chinese, just like their Chinese writing, tends to be indirect, ambiguous, cyclical, and often the main idea is delayed till the end and their English writing often places at the outset long introductory remarks or what might be called situational remarks or emotional build-up or face work or statement of justifications (for one's request, etc.) so as to minimize the weight of imposition on and confrontation with the reader/listener.

In summary, numerous research work and contrastive rhetoric studies have discovered differences between Chinese writing in English and Anglo-American English writing and the overall consensus is: indirectness seems to be the generally preferred organizational pattern in Chinese writing in English.

### 3. CASE STUDY

#### 3.1 Indirectness in Chinese Essay Writing in English

Historically speaking, the indirectness or inductive approach in communication and patterns of thinking found their best expression in the "*qi-cheng-zhuan-he*" model or what was called four-part structure, which in turn became rhetorical framework underlying Chinese writing including contemporary writings of different genres, such as narrative, argumentative, expository, and persuasive. Even what is nowadays called three-part model, formed of *introduction*, *development*, and *conclusion* underlying contemporary writing is in fact the extension of the four-part model. This four-part model is most dominant in contemporary Chinese writing both in Chinese and English not only in the mainland, but also Hongkong, Taiwan, and Singapore. In the four-part structure, *qi* serves to set up the background



I find both inductive and deductive styles are used in these essays. However inductive style seems to be the general preference. The indirectness in the expository essay writing do not only lie in the fact that there is no place for a preview of the thesis in the opening remarks or the main point is delayed until the end, but also in the fact that the main point or claim is arrived at on the basis of the explanations of specific or particular instances. Besides, personal feelings, involvement, and opinions, which might be considered to be not directly relevant by the Westerners, appear almost in every paragraph and serve as important support for the authors' claim. Then, it is also found that in at least three or four essays clinging to inductive approach, the main point is either implied (left to the reader to guess) or stated in too general or vague terms at the end. It is also found that in one essay both inductive and deductive approaches are used, inductive for the whole essay and deductive for one paragraph. Interestingly, I found that whether inductive or deductive approach is preferred may likely have something to do with topics selected. Those essays (four in all) with the topic of *Has Art Passed Its Prime* all follow inductive approach while all the essays with the topic *Knowledge Is Power* (altogether six) all keep to deductive approach.

The analysis above is made upon essays of non-English majors. To make the analysis of essays of English majors, I have chosen a book of model essays of English majors from Peking University. The essays in this book are classified into 3 groups: narration, exposition, and book review. There are totally 16 expository essays. Among them 7 essays have adopted inductive approach, 5 essays quasi-inductive approach, and the other 4 essays deductive approach.

As a matter of fact, the indirectness of this kind is not at all accidental. It could be regarded as a result of education, apart from of cultural, socio-political, historical, and ethical influences. Learners of English are in fact unconsciously taught or encouraged to follow this indirect approach in their English writing.

### **3.2 REQUEST IN PUBLIC PLACES**

The indirectness even finds expression in the writing of request, in which situational or emotional framework or face work is placed at the outset and the main point is delayed at the end. And very often opening framework may be formed of statement of justifications or reasons for reducing the weight of imposition. In organizing request, the use of the culture specific topic-comment syntactical patterns ( pair-connectors, such as because... therefore /so, etc. ), which are typical ways of expressing induction, are non uncommon. The following sample of request/ requirement found in the laboratories on the Hong Kong Baptist University campus may well support this point.

*Dear Users,*

*First of all, thank you for keeping the lavatory clean and tidy. **(Because)** In our pursuit for a clean and healthy environment within the University campus, your participation and involvement are necessary and must be welcomed.*

***Therefore,** should you have any opinion or suggestion on our cleaning service for the lavatories, please write or e-mail our office. Our e-mail address is [eo@hkba.edu.hk](mailto:eo@hkba.edu.hk)*

*Thank you for your attention.*

*Estates Office  
Hong Kong Baptist University*

The sequence of this request discourse may be briefly presented as follows:

↓

Opening/ situational framing/salutation

Reason(s)/ justification for the request

↓

Therefore/ so statement/ statement of main point

This sequence or organizational pattern of request noticeably differs from that of Anglo-American pattern of the same act, which in fact seems to be just the reverse of the Chinese pattern of request. The organizational pattern of Anglo-American request may be presented as follows:

Opening/ statement of main point

↓

Reason(s) for the request

↓

Restatement of main point

In the framing statement of the Chinese request, the writer attempts to justify his request or to get his listeners or readers prepared so that to the weight of imposition might be

reduced.

What deserves more attention to this organizational pattern is the fact the request is implicitly stated--it is embedded in the salutation or the thank-you statement and also implied in the statement that follows. This implicitness, or indirectness in expressing request will obviously strike those otherwise directness oriented people as odd.

However, this kind of discourse organization in English request writing finds parallel in the mainland China. In the toilets on Shanghai Foreign Languages Study University campus we find the following.

*Dear Guest:*  
*Every year, washing detergents add to the pollution of water.*  
*We ask you for your help in minimizing their use.*

*Please kindly place those towels and bathrobes you would like to reuse on the towel racks or hooks, and those you wish to be changed in the towel basket we provided.*

*Wish you a very pleasant stay.*  
*Estate Office*  
*Shanghai International Study University*

In this request, there is also a justification framework, even though it is much shorter than that in the toilets on the Hong Kong Baptist University campus.

### 3.3. ABSTRACT WRITING IN ENGLISH

The use of indirectness in Chinese English writing is even not uncommon among professors, teachers and scholars of advanced level of English or those who have been using and learning English for years. In fact even those who have been staying in native-English countries and have been influenced for long by Anglo-American deductive model are often found falling back on this approach from time to time -- they would unconsciously cling to the traditional Chinese writing model, which they acquired in their early education.

I have recently examined abstracts of over 500 papers presented at the third International Symposium on ELT in China held on May 19-21, 2001 in Beijing. Although the data collection and analysis are still underway, I have already found that of all the abstracts, a considerable number follow the traditional Chinese inductive model and all these abstracts are written by Chinese scholars. In contrast, all of the Anglo-American participants follow the direct or deductive approach, which can be explained by Toulmin model. The following sample is one of the abstracts of papers delivered at the conference and it was written by a scholar who has studied in Britain and now working in a well-acknowledged English department of one of the best universities. The indirectness in the organization of this abstract discourse is most obvious.

*What language courses haven't prepared us for: A qualitative study of Chinese students' language difficulties during a prolonged stay at a British university*

*X XX, XX XX XXX University*

*With the development of international exchange and the gradual globalization of the world economy, more and more students will pursue studies in countries other than their own. For example, in China, the last two decades witnessed a large upsurge of students and scholars pursuing studies abroad, most of whom chose the United States, the UK or some other English-speaking country.*

*Like many other international students, with a different linguistic, educational and cultural background, it is predictable that these Chinese students may find many areas that they do not feel comfortable with when they arrive in the host country. Perhaps the biggest challenge of all is that they have to use the medium of English to study and do research, considering that English is a foreign language to them. Do they experience difficulties in using English to perform various tasks in the university environment? What specific difficulties and concerns do they have?*

*These are the questions prompting the present study. In addition, the study also aims to find out the learners' perceived causes for their problems, and their suggestions for remedies. The research result will be significant in several ways: on the one hand, the host universities might be interested in getting to know the language problems and concerns the international students have in coping with the study and research in order that some measures might be taken to address them; on the other hand, the research might be beneficial to English language education back in the students' home countries, in what areas it has failed to prepare this advanced group of learners to function effectively in the host environment; finally the learners' perceived causes of their difficulties and concerns will help to enhance understanding of them; their suggestions for remedies will be conducive to making curricular changes.*

We may briefly outline the sequence of this abstract discourse organization as follows:

1. First Paragraph / opening  
Situational framing statement or background information: international situation and International student exchange;



English Essays Examined	Total Number	Inductive Approach		Quasi-Inductive Approach		Deductive Approach	
		Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Chinese Non-English Majors' Prize Essays	46	31	67%	2	4%	13	28%
Chinese English Majors Model Essays	16	7	44%	5	3%	4	25%
American College Students' English Essays	31	0	0	0	0	31	100%

## CONCLUSION

In summary, contrastive studies and discourse analysis have discovered noticeable differences between Chinese writing in English and Anglo-American English writing. Chinese writing in English is indeed greatly influenced not only by Anglo-American patterns but also by traditional Chinese patterns in writing. The most noticeable difference is that indirectness in Chinese English writing is the generally preferred approach while in Anglo-American English writing directness is the general preference, even though both writings share both direct and indirect or inductive and deductive approaches. Presumably, the indirectness in Chinese writing in English is not an accidental but systematic phenomenon. It is systematic in the sense that it is consistently underpinned by culture-specific patterns, which can be explained by a complex synthesis of factors -- historical, cultural, philosophical, social, political, ethical, and educational. I believe that we must go beyond the first language transfer theory to account for this complicated Chinese indirectness in English writing.

## REFERENCES

- Connor, Ulla. *Contrastive Rhetoric: Cross-Cultural Aspects of Second-Language Writing*. Cambridge University Press, 1996: 18-27
- Hinds, John. "Contrastive Rhetoric". *Japanese and English*. Text 3 (2), 1983: 183-195.
- Honna, Nobuyuki. "English as an International Language and Japan's ELT." The Third International Symposium on ELT in China, Beijing, 2001
- Hu, Wenzhong. "Aspects of Intercultural Communication". Proceedings of China's 2<sup>nd</sup> Conference on Intercultural Communication. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1999
- Hu, Wenzhong. "Aspects of Intercultural Communication". Proceedings of China's 2<sup>nd</sup> Conference on Intercultural Communication. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1999
- Jia, Yuxin. *Intercultural Communication*. Shanghai Foreign Studies University Press, 1997: 390-403
- Jia, Yuxin. *Intercultural Communication*. Shanghai Foreign Studies University Press, 1997: 390-403
- Jia, Xuerui and Li, Xiaoshi. "Linear vs. Configural Logic Structures" in *Journal of Foreign*

- Languages*. Heilongjiang University Press, 2001: 94-99 Peking University Press, *Model Compositions by Students of Peking University*. 2002
- Scollon, Ron. "Eight Legs and One Elbow: Stance and Structures in Chinese English Compositions". International Reading Association, 1991
- Scollon, Ron, Scollon W.S. Kirkpatrick, Andy. *Contrastive Discourse in Chinese and English--A Critical Appraisal*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 2000
- Shanghai Foreign Studies University Press. *Prize Essays of College Students Writing Contest*. Shanghai Foreign Studies University, 2000
- World Affairs Press, *American College Compositions*, 1999.
- Young, L. W. "Inscrutability Revisited" in Gumperz, John. J. (ed.) *Language and Social Identity*. Cambridge University Press, 1992: 72-94,
- Yule, George. *Pragmatics*. Shanghai Foreign Studies University, 2000

