

Chinese Cultural Identities Revisited: Reflections upon the Discourse Organization in Chinese English Abstract Writing

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the discourse organization of Chinese English abstract writing for the 2005 Symposium on Intercultural Communication and the Chinese English abstract writing for the 2009 CAFIC (China Association for Intercultural Communication) International Conference¹. The majority of the abstract writers in both academic conferences have chosen the inductive/ indirect discourse organization style and between 30% and 40% of them have adopted the deductive/direct style. This reinforces the assumption that in the current Chinese writing in English the indirectness or inductive approach is a general preference. But the co-existence of the directness or deductive approach shows that the cultural identity of all the writers is hybridized — collectivistic, incorporated with individualistic cultural identity. Their identity, however, is still traditionally distinct. This hybrid phenomenon of using both the inductive and deductive approaches in Chinese English writing sheds new light on teaching and learning English as a foreign or second language. Instead of encouraging students to imitate native speakers of English in their English writing, we should develop their intercultural communicative competence and justify our criteria for evaluating both our own and others' discourse.

Keywords: Chinese English abstract writing, indirectness/inductive approach, directness/deductive approach, identity

Introduction

Scholars of contrastive rhetoric maintain that language and writing are cultural phenomena, and consequently, each language has rhetorical conventions unique to it. Kaplan claimed that the linguistic and rhetorical conventions of the first language interfere with writing in the second language (cited in Connor, 1996, p. 5). Ulla Connor (1996) asserts that writing can be regarded as an activity embedded in the culture of the first language (pp. 100-115). 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.

As nonnative language writing, the Chinese English writing is a complicated process. The Chinese may use patterns of language and stylistic conventions that they have learned in their

¹ This paper is funded by Heilongjiang Education Department Humanities and Social Sciences Research Project No. 11554093.

native language and culture. Their writing involves not only what is referred to as pragmatic transfer of culturally preferred conventions from Chinese to English but also cognitive, social, cultural, political, educational, historical, rhetorical factors, etc. To our understanding, for various reasons, the influence of the culturally preferred pragmatic conventions in Chinese writing on Chinese English writing is so strong that the use of the traditional Chinese discourse organizational conventions in English writing is unavoidable and inevitable. The reality is that in the Chinese English writing, Chinese culture-specific and English conventions are both influential. On the one hand, influenced by English pragmatic conventions, people may reconcile their Chinese conventions with English pragmatic conventions. On the other, the Chinese may pertinently cling to their own conventions in their writing in English.

The idea has in fact been widely discussed that the inductive or indirect style plays a dominant role in discourse organization or reasoning and argument in the Chinese culture while the deductive or direct style plays a dominant role in discourse organization or reasoning and argument in the cultures of native English speakers. Some scholars (Hu, 1999; Jia, 1997; Scollon & Scollon, 1995) claim that Asians favor the inductive style that usually delays the introduction of topics till the end and in contrast to that, native English speakers prefer to introduce topics at the beginning or place their main point early.

According to Scollon and Scollon (1995, pp.74-87), when people talk about inductive argument or rhetoric in the ways mentioned above, they mean that the main thesis is presented at the end of a text and that supportive elements for the thesis — what is called the frame — are presented before the main thesis. When people talk about the deductive or direct style, they mean that the main thesis is presented at the beginning of a text and that supportive elements for the thesis are presented after the main thesis. So, the inductive style is often regarded as being somehow indirect and implicit, or intuitive, while the deductive style is often regarded as being somehow explicit, direct, and to the point. The apparent indirect and direct disparity between Chinese and English written discourses has been noted. Many scholars have come to the consensus that the Chinese somehow prefer the inductive and indirect style while native English speakers prefer the deductive and direct style in writing in general.

The argument in this paper is that in their English academic writing the Chinese overridingly choose the conventions of frame-main sequence or what is called the inductive/indirect style, which is, we may say, traditionally distinct. But, not all of them do so. Influenced by writing styles of native speakers, some have chosen the conventions of the main-frame sequence or what is called the deductive/direct style in their English academic writing.

This paper reports an analysis of the discourse organization of the Chinese English abstract writing for the 2005 Symposium on Intercultural Communication and the Chinese English abstract writing for the 8th CAFIC (China Association for Intercultural Communication) International Conference. The English abstracts were submitted by the Chinese teachers, scholars, postgraduate students and Ph. D candidates who are working or studying in China and abroad. This paper attempts to prove that there is a hybrid of inductive/indirect style and deductive/direct style in these abstracts, with the former playing a dominant role. As the writing which the analysis is based upon is academic, it may, relatively speaking, be less influenced by social or situational factors. In this way, it may be more representative of the Chinese English writing.

We all know that the main function of language is communication. However, we seldom know that a crucial function of language is to provide identity (Kirkpatrick, 2005, p. 164). This paper reinforces the assumption that in current Chinese writing in English the indirectness or inductive approach is a general preference, which therefore demonstrates traditional Chinese cultural identity in the communication. The co-existence of the directness or deductive approach, however, shows that such an identity is incorporated with international identity in the context of cultural globalization.

Such a hybrid phenomenon sheds new light on English teaching and learning as a foreign language or second language. The implications of the hybridization are finally discussed in this paper. To cultivate intercultural citizens, we do not encourage our students to imitate native speakers of English language; rather, we need to develop their ability to look for common ground where possible and to accept difference (Byram, 2009, p. 25).

Indirect/Inductive and Direct/Deductive Styles in Chinese English Writing

Historically speaking, the indirectness or inductive approach in communication and patterns of thinking found their best expression in the “*qi-cheng-zhuan-he*” model² or what was called the four-part structure, which in turn became the rhetorical framework dictating Chinese writing, including contemporary writing of different genres, such as narrative, argumentative, expository, and persuasive genres. Even what is nowadays called the three-part model, formed of *introduction*, *development*, and *conclusion*, underlying contemporary writing, is in fact an extension of the four-part model. This four-part model is the most dominant in contemporary Chinese writing both in Chinese and English not only in mainland China, but also in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore. In the four-part structure, *qi* serves to set up the background framework or prepares the reader or listeners for the topic, *cheng* introduces and develops the topic, *zhuan* transfers to the seemingly unrelated ideas, and *he* concludes the whole statement. Almost all the characteristics of indirectness found in Chinese writing, such as the delaying of the subject till the end and the inductive way of reasoning, programmed by this model, due to the result of transfer as well as other reasons, have automatically become the general cultural preference of the Chinese in English writing.

Indirectness in organizing written discourse seems to dictate the Chinese cultural identity. In contrast, the direct or deductive style is assumed to be the most predominant style in English writings of native speakers. The native English speakers have learnt from their middle school and high school textbooks on composition that an essay or a book should have a thesis. A thesis is a straightforward statement of the main point the essay or the book is written to advance. The textbooks tell them that the thesis should be presented prominently and very early in the text (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992, p. 41). In a short essay of several paragraphs or several pages, the thesis should appear in the first paragraph. In a longer essay or in a book, the

² The “*qi-cheng-zhuan-he*” model was originally initiated and defined by ancient Chinese scholars, such as Fan Deji (范德机) of the Yuan Dynasty and Jin Shengtan (金圣叹) of the Qing Dynasty. They adopted such a model in their analysis of poems. Today it is widely discussed by scholars.

thesis might be delayed until after a bit of preliminary material, but in any case, the main point should be identified by the reader within the first section of the text. Likewise, each section of the essay or the book is expected to be treated deductively as well.

The English writing of the Chinese is indeed greatly influenced not only by traditional Chinese patterns but also by English patterns, especially the Chinese teachers, scholars, postgraduate students and Ph. D candidates who are teaching or learning English language, culture or literature, intercultural communication, or other subjects relevant to those fields.

In the following section, this paper is going to analyze the discourse organization of the Chinese English abstract writing to show there is inductive/indirect style, incorporated with deductive/direct style, with the former playing a dominant role, in these abstracts.

Indirect/Inductive and Direct/Deductive Styles in Chinese English Abstract Writing

Being academic in nature, the abstracts of papers may provide persuasive and convincing evidence for our assumption about pragmatic conventions that operate in written discourse.

Data collected in this part are abstracts for the 2005 Symposium on Intercultural Communication held at Nanjing Normal University in Nanjing, China, between May 19 and May 22, 2005, and the Chinese English abstract writing for the 8th CAFIC (China Association for Intercultural Communication) International Conference held in Beijing, between June 11 and June 14, 2009. Those who attended the 2005 Symposium and the 2009 Conference are college teachers and postgraduate students. Most of them are Chinese college teachers of English language, culture or literature, intercultural communication, or other subjects relevant to those fields; some are postgraduate students from colleges in China; a few are famous scholars from China and foreign countries.

Our hypothesis is that there is a predominance of the indirectness, or inductive style, in these abstracts of the Chinese, however, there is an incorporation of directness, or deductive style in a certain number of abstracts of the Chinese.

Except five abstracts whose English version and Chinese version do not correspond with each other, all abstracts for the 2005 Symposium are examined. The majority of the attendants of the symposium submitted abstracts both in English and Chinese; some submitted abstracts only in English, while some only in Chinese. The former two kinds of abstracts are put into two categories in the analysis. Totally there are 176 abstracts analyzed. For the 2009 Conference, there are 221 abstracts written by Chinese participants (not including the abstracts for special panels). Among them, 180 are written by the Chinese from mainland and 41 are written by the Chinese studying or working abroad. Abstracts from mainland and from abroad are analyzed separately.

To determine whether the indirectness/inductive style, or the directness/deductive style, is adopted, here we have used the theme summary notion introduced by Tirkkonen-Condit and Lieflander-Koistinen (1989). According to this notion, if the theme summary is in the first one-third of an abstract, it is considered to be in the beginning; if the theme summary is in the second one-third, it is considered to be in the middle; and if the theme summary is in the final one-third, it is considered to be in the end position. When the theme summary is located in the beginning of an abstract, the abstract is considered to follow the deductive style. When the

theme summary is delayed until the middle or the end of an abstract, the abstract is considered to follow the inductive style. Besides the two categories, there is another category. For a certain number of abstracts, the theme summary is buried or implied instead of being clearly and directly stated in the passage. Those abstracts are considered to follow the quasi-inductive style.

From Table 1 we can see that for the 2005 Symposium, among the 176 abstracts, 70 have the theme summary in the beginning, adopting the deductive style, with a percentage of 39.8%. Totally 70 abstracts have the theme summary delayed until the middle and 22 abstracts until the end, both adopting the inductive style, with a percentage of $(39.8\%+12.5\%=) 52.3\%$. Totally 14 abstracts have the theme summary buried or implied in the passage, adopting the quasi-inductive style, with a percentage of 7.9%. So totally $(70+22+14=)$ 106 abstracts adopt the inductive and quasi-inductive styles, with a percentage of $(39.8\%+12.5\%+7.9\%=) 60.2\%$.

Table 1. 2005 Symposium Abstracts

Abstracts Examined	Deductive Style	Inductive Style		Quasi-Inductive Style
Position of theme summary	Beginning	Middle	End	Buried/Implied
English & Chinese abstracts both submitted	55	58	19	10
English abstracts submitted	15	12	3	4
Total 176	70	70	22	14
Percentage	39.8%	39.8%	12.5%	7.9%

From Table 2 we can see that for the 2009 Conference, among the 180 abstracts of the Chinese participants, teaching or studying in China, 59 have the theme summary in the beginning, adopting the deductive style, with a percentage of 32.8%. Totally 59 abstracts have the theme summary delayed until the middle and 50 abstracts until the end, both adopting the inductive style, with a percentage of $(32.8\%+27.8\%=) 60.6\%$. Totally 12 abstracts have the theme summary buried or implied in the passage, adopting the quasi-inductive style, with a percentage of 6.6%. So totally $(59+50+12=)$ 121 abstracts adopt the inductive and quasi-inductive styles, with a percentage of $(32.8\%+27.8\%+6.6\%=) 67.2\%$.

Table 2. 2009 Conference Abstracts of the Chinese Teaching or Studying in China

English Abstracts Examined	Deductive Style	Inductive Style		Quasi-Inductive Style
Position of theme summary	Beginning	Middle	End	Buried/Implied
Total 180	59	59	50	12
Percentage	32.8%	32.8%	27.8%	6.6%

From Table 3 we can see that for the 2009 Conference, among the 41 abstracts of the Chinese participants, teaching or studying abroad, 16 have the theme summary in the beginning, adopting the deductive style, with a percentage of 39%. Totally 16 abstracts have the theme summary delayed until the middle and 8 abstracts until the end, both adopting the inductive style, with a percentage of $(39\%+19.5\%=) 58.5\%$. Totally 1 abstract has the theme summary buried or implied in the passage, adopting the quasi-inductive style, with a percentage of 2.5%. So totally $(16+8+1=)$ 25 abstracts adopt the inductive and quasi-inductive styles, with a percentage of $(39\%+19.5\%+2.5\%=) 61\%$.

Table 3. 2009 Conference Abstracts of the Chinese Teaching or Studying Abroad

English Abstracts Examined	Deductive Style	Inductive Style		Quasi-Inductive Style
Position of theme summary	Beginning	Middle	End	Buried/Implied
Total 41	16	16	8	1
Percentage	39%	39%	19.5%	2.5%

From the data collected we can see that the use of indirectness in the Chinese abstract writing is common among professors, teachers and scholars who undoubtedly have a high level of proficiency in English or those who have been using and learning English for years. In fact those who have been staying in English-speaking countries and have been influenced for long by the English 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.

The following is one of the abstracts for the 2005 Symposium adopting the inductive style, with the theme summary in the middle. The author is a teacher of English at a famous Chinese college.

A Comparative Study of Political Humor in America and China

In the modern world, intercultural communication is getting more and more frequent. As a primary form of social communication, now and then, humor may become one of the most difficult problems in intercultural communication. It is common that a joke works well in one language and falls flat in another. What's more, humor breakdown in intercultural communication may occasionally lead to puzzlement, misunderstanding and even conflict between native speakers and non-native speakers. Therefore, bilingual study of humor is necessary and important. *This paper attempts to discuss the features of American political humor and Chinese political humor with an effort to explore why political humor booms in America, but not so much develops in China. It is argued that sociocultural knowledge is crucial for the appreciation of humor.* For a non-native speaker, humor on shared conventions is easy to understand, while humor on absent referents and different stereotypes is hard to appreciate.

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

1. The beginning (the first one-third of the abstract): Situational framing statement or background information.
Intercultural communication is getting more and more frequent and humor may become one of the most difficult problems.
2. The middle (the second one-third of the abstract): The development of the subject and the beginning of the theme summary.
 - 1) The development of the subject: *humor breakdown may lead to conflicts and bilingual study of humor is necessary.*
 - 2) The beginning of the theme summary: *This paper attempts to discuss the features of American political humor and Chinese political humor.*
3. The end (the final one-third of the abstract): the continued discussion of the theme summary.
Sociocultural knowledge is crucial for the appreciation of humor.

The indirectness in the organization of the abstract is evident: there is no thesis or preview in the opening lines, the main point is delayed until the middle, and the statement in the framing remarks and the statement of the development of the subject appear to be irrelevant to the subject.

The following is an abstract adopting deductive style from the 2009 Conference. The author is from a famous university in China.

Intersection Between Culture and Leadership: An Analysis of the Chinese Leadership Emergence in Non-Chinese Group

This paper is a case analysis of Chinese students' leadership emergence in an American study group and aims to rationalize and contribute to the understanding of Chinese students' reservation in assuming leadership when working with their American group mates.

Against the harmony-oriented Chinese communication context, the other-orientation makes it an imperative for a Chinese leader to understand how he or she is related to the others in his or her group; an emphasis on role relationships prompts the Chinese leader to seek the perfect timing for action to live up to the principle of "doing the proper things with the right people in the appropriate relationships;" in their actions, they are guided by the principle of avoiding conflicts and preserving harmony. In this context, Chinese students tend to see themselves as representatives of their home country and an urge to create a positive image (and to avoid a negative image) of their home country underlies their "play-safe" cautiousness in taking initiatives to assume leadership; an emphasis on the timing of leadership emergence tends to hold the Chinese students back in exercising their influence; an uncertainty about the intervention outcome and about whether the intervention would destroy group harmony deters the Chinese students from exercising their intervention.

The directness in the organization of the above abstract is obvious: the main point is directly and clearly stated right at the very beginning of the abstract, and every sentence in the abstracts is closely relevant to the main point.

The result has confirmed the hypothesis that there is a predominance of the indirectness, or inductive style, in these abstracts of the Chinese. However, there is an incorporation of directness, or deductive style in certain number of abstracts of the Chinese.

Multiple Identities of the Chinese in the Global Context

It is known that one of the most common ways of identifying a person is by his or her language — there is a natural connection between the language spoken or written by members of a social group and that group's identity. By their accent, their vocabulary, their discourse patterns, speakers or writers identify themselves and are identified as members of this or that speech and discourse community (Kramsch, 2000, p. 65). "Ethnic groups regularly use language as one of their most significant identifying features" (Spolsky, 2000, p. 57).

"When we communicate with people in English as a second or foreign language, the English we use also reveals which sort of cultural group we come from. To be more specific, the English we use reveals our cultural and social identity" (Jia, 2007, p. 421).

Fairclough (1993) notes that discourse is a "[way] of signifying experiences from a particular perspective" (p. 138), and is an important form of social practice that "both reproduces and changes knowledge, identities and social relations including power relations, and at the same time is also shaped by other social practices and structures" (1992, cited in Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002, p. 65). According to Hall (1996), identity is discursively constructed (p. 4). Identity must be regarded as processual and never completed. What is more, identity both produces and is produced through discourse practices. Weedon (1997) claims that subjectivity defines an individual as changing, dynamic and contradictory over historical time and social space, and suggests that identity construction "occurs through the identification by the individual with particular subject positions with discourses" (p. 108). To him, discourse is where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed.

We shift our identity positions and discourses to express solidarity with particular groups, using language variation to show membership and to distinguish particular cultural identities. The predominance of the indirectness, or inductive style, in these abstracts, suggests that the writers tend to perceive the direct way of speaking and writing as a sort of threatening act to human relationship, favoring indirectness. They are harmony-oriented and concerned with relationship, avoiding hurting others' feelings or imposing on others. They value the "we" identity over the "I" identity, in-group obligations over personal rights, and in-group needs over individual desires, showing their membership of a collectivistic culture. Hence, their value dimension is collectivism (Ting-Toomey, 2007, pp. 30-31). Since a group's value tendencies underlie the content of their cultural identity, these writers' collectivism values tendencies that manifest their collectivistic cultural identity, the traditional Chinese cultural identity, in contrast to the native English speakers' individualistic cultural identity (Ting-Toomey, 2007, pp. 30-31).

Then, how do we account for the identity of those writers, who adopt directness, or deductive style, in their abstracts?

Since the implementation of the Open Door Policy and shift towards a market economy in the mid-1970s, China has experienced exceptional economic expansion, becoming recognized as one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. At the same time, China has entered a brave new era of widespread English language learning and teaching, complemented by panoply of significant socio-cultural reforms (Gu, 2010, p. 139). When the world enters into the 21st century which is characterized by globalization, more and more Chinese are influenced by cultures of native English speakers, especially the Chinese teachers, scholars, postgraduate students and Ph. D candidates who are teaching or learning English language, culture or literature, intercultural communication, or other subjects relevant to those fields. Instead of adopting the indirect/inductive style, many of them follow the way of the native English speakers, adopting the direct/deductive style in their academic writings.

In Gu's study (2009), she explores the discursive construction of EFL learners' identity in China and investigates the contextual and social influences on identity development (p. 141). She does not see this identity development as a one-way process. Rather, she recognizes individuals as social agents who create and change things with their pre-positioning in social events and texts (Fairclough, 2003), and who continuously develop a sense of self in and through their engagement with the world (Archer, 2000). In this way, identities are socially constructed and individually established in distinctive ways.

On one hand, cultural identities are dynamic, cultural identity — our sense of the culture to which we belong and who we are in light of this cultural membership — exists within a changing social context. Consequently, instead of being static, fixed, and enduring, the cultural identity of those writers who adopt the directness/deductive style has been dynamic, fluid, conflicting, and has changed with their ongoing life experiences.

On the other, identities are not unified but increasingly fragmented, not singular but multiple — since they are “multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions” (Hall, 1996, p. 4). This doesn't mean, however, our identity has been disintegrated into multiple “selves.” Rather, this means that we may make use of diversity in order to create a distinctive self-identity “which positively incorporates elements from different settings into an integrated narrative” (Giddens, 1991, p. 190). Those who adopt the directness/deductive style have shown their individualistic self-identity among their multiple identities.

What's more, all the writers of the abstracts for 2005 Symposium and the abstracts for 2009 Conference were constructing through their writing, not a permanent cultural identity, but a kind of textual identity (Kramsch & Lam, 1999) or discoursal self (Ivanic, 1998), or we might say, discoursal identity. Some of them have constructed an individualistic discoursal identity.

Our study has shown that there is no pure, singular cultural identity revealed in the discourse community consisted of all the writers of these abstracts for 2005 Symposium and 2009 Conference from China and abroad. The cultural identity of all the writers is hybridized — collectivistic, incorporated with individualistic cultural identity; however, their identity is still traditionally distinct.

Classroom Teaching and Learning

Instead of focusing on teaching writing skills, our goal of teaching abstract writing should be improving our students' intercultural communicative competence. To achieve such a competence as our goal, we need to cultivate our students' critical cultural awareness. We need to awaken their sensitiveness to cultural differences: recognizing the differences in Chinese and English discourse organization. At the same time, we need to develop their competence of differentiating, comparing, and analyzing the Chinese and English abstract writing styles. Our students need to learn to be tolerant with and accept different writing styles.

We will let our students know that different varieties in discourse organization will be accepted for an international conference. For an academic paper, however, we believe, their abstracts need to be explicit about the main topic, instead of having the theme buried or implied in the abstracts. If our students are submitting papers, they need to know what the acceptable style is to follow. For example, for a Western journal, directness/deductive style may be preferred; for a Chinese journal, indirectness/inductive style might be preferred.

In classroom teaching, our objectives should embrace the acquisition of linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence (Byram, 2009, p. 27). In the global context, to cultivate critical cultural awareness, we need to develop the need to be explicit about and justify our criteria for evaluating both our own and others' discourse. In order to become a citizen of the world, we need to learn to respect, appreciate, and value otherness, or differences. Hereby we can help our students become confident in their organization of English discourse as well as in the establishment of their authorial identity.

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