Cataphora in English and Chinese Conversation: A Corpus-based Contrastive Study

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Abstract : This paper combines the corpus-based and contrastive approaches, seeking to provide a systematic account of cataphora in English and Chinese natural conversations. Based on spoken corpus data, the first part of the paper examines a range of characteristics of cataphora in the two languages, including frequency of occurrence, patterns, and syntactic features. On the basis of this exploration, cataphora in the two languages are contrasted in a structured way. The analysis shows that English and Chinese share a similar distribution of cataphora in natural conversations in terms of frequency of occurrence, with repeat identification cataphora higher than first mention cataphora and intra-sentential cataphora much higher than inter-sentential cataphora. In terms of patterns, three types are identified in English, i.e. P+N, Ø+N, and it+Clause, while in Chinese, two types are identified, i.e., P+N and Ø+N. English and Chinese are similar in terms of syntactic features, i.e., cataphor and postcedent in the intra-sentential cataphora mainly occur in the initial subject position of the same clause, with postcedent immediately followed or delayed, and cataphor and postcedent are mostly in adjacent sentences in inter-sentential cataphora. In the second part of the paper, the motivations of cataphora are investigated. It is found that cataphora is primarily motivated by the speaker and hearer's different knowledge states with regard to the referent. Other factors are also involved, such as interference, word search, and the tension between the principles of Economy and Clarity.