ABSTRACT

It is well-recognized among discourse researchers that spoken discourse of all languages is produced in prosodically definable segments, termed "intonation units" (IUs). This honours thesis attempts to explore the relation between intonation units and grammatical units (GUs) in Mandarin narrative discourse. It is hoped that by observing the speech patterns of Mandarin, we would be able to gain a better understanding of the nature of its grammar. A comparison of the speech patterns of Mandarin with those of English, obtained from recent similar studies, would give a new perspective for examining cross-linguistic similarities and differences in discourse and grammar.

A corpus of Mandarin oral narratives with a total of 791 IUs was used for this study. We focused the analysis on the following two aspects: the kind of GUs which typically corresponds with IUs, and the kind of GUs which regularly spreads across IUs.

Our results show that the typical constituents of the IUs of Mandarin narratives are the elliptical clause and the nominal structures. A substantial number of mismatches occur between arguments and their verbal predicates, and between modifiers and their modified heads of the nominal. We observed that the two major factors which contribute to the above phenomena are human cognitive constraints in terms of information quantity and the stylistic characteristics of narratives.

The comparison of the speech patterns between Mandarin and English shows that while the typical constituents of Mandarin IUs are the clause and the nominals, there is only one typical constituent of English IUs, i.e. the clause. The factors contributing to such a difference are firstly, differences between their grammatical structures; and secondly, mismatches which occur at different levels of GUs. However, cognitive constraint is recognized as the one common factor which underlies the mismatch and the correspondence between IUs and GUs in both languages.

We conclude that in order to have a better understanding of grammar, we have to go beyond linguistic structures and put language in actual context. We also suggest that in order to understand cross-linguistic regularities, a cognitive-discourse approach is highly desirable.