ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to examine the correlation patterns between prosodic unit and three basic syntactic structures in Mandarin Chinese, namely: nominal coordinations, modifier-head nominals, and prepositional phrases. It also aims to seek for possible discourse patterns that correspond with the prosodic-syntactic correlations.

A corpus of over three hours of recorded conversations was used for the analysis. The prosodic unit that we based our study on is the intonation unit (IU) - a definable segment of intonation contour in natural spoken language. The analysis placed its focus on examining whether the syntactic structures are frequently uttered within an IU or spread across IUs.

Results of the analysis show their significance on two levels. On a more basic level, they provide empirical evidence for conventional notions on the degree of structural integration among constituents. It is found that single-modifier nominals and prepositional phrases are highly integrated structures which have a high frequency of being uttered within an IU. Multiple-modifier nominals are less integrated structure, and they have a higher frequency of being spread across IUs, owing mainly to constraints caused by its heavy information load. As for the nominal coordinations, the degree of integration varies according to their discourse properties. Their prosodic-syntactic correlation patterns reflect a continuum on the conceptual proximity of the constituents, and this is an exemplification of the principle of iconicity at work behind linguistic features.

On a more profound level, the results demonstrate that factors beyond linguistic structures have important roles to play in shaping the grammar of a language. Among these, human cognitive constraint and interactional facility are recognized as determining factors that underlie the prosodic and syntactic features.

In conclusion, we propose that examining the correlations between prosodic and syntactic features and their corresponding discourse patterns is a highly viable approach for gaining a better understanding of grammar.