

Parenthetical Inserts in Spoken Mandarin Chinese

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Abstract

The study investigates how parenthetical inserts are realized in spontaneous Spoken Mandarin Chinese (SMC) within the framework of Language into Act Theory in comparison with previous findings on Italian.

From a prosodic and information-structural perspective, previous research on Italian has mainly examined the semantic functions of parenthetical inserts, showing that canonical Parenthetical Units (PAR) frequently convey informative and narrative content. By contrast, previous research on Chinese parenthetical expressions has focused primarily on structural properties, particularly the way such expressions interrupt otherwise compositional syntactic structures.

The analysis is based on spontaneous SMC data from the C-ORAL-ZHONG corpus, comprising approximately 70 minutes of speech with diaphasic and diastratic variation and annotated according to L-Act principles. Parenthetical units were identified through perceptual and instrumental analyses conducted with WinPitch and Praat, based on prosodic isolation and characteristic cues such as local pitch-range lowering, reduced prosodic prominence, and temporal compression. The analysis identified 35 parenthetical cases, including 29 canonical PAR units and six higher-level discourse structures classified as COB-p.

The results reveal an asymmetrical distribution of parenthetical inserts from a semantic perspective (15 modal, 8 metalinguistic reformulation, 5 connective, only 1 informative/narrative). Canonical PAR units are therefore predominantly associated with discourse-management functions such as modality and speech planning, as in:

zhǐshì /^{DCT} zěnmē shuō nē /^{PAR} cháoshàn guō /^{TOP} hǎoxiàng yǐjīng xíngchéng le yì zhǒng /^{SCA} móshì //^{COM}

“Well —let’s say— chaoshan hotpot seems to have already developed into a kind of pattern.”

By contrast, informative and narrative parentheticals occur only in complex structures (COB-p) as in: wǒmen

chī nàge /^{COB} jiùshì /^{SCA} nǐ [/] /^{EMP} wǒ bù zhīdào nǐmen chī bu chī /^{COB-p} jiùshì nàge fàn //^{COM}

“We eat that — well, I don’t know whether you eat it or not — that rice dish.”

This contrasts with Italian data, where informative and narrative parentheticals constitute the prevailing functional domain of canonical PAR. These preliminary results suggest that SMC constrains the realization of informative content within canonical PAR, while primarily using such units for discourse-management functions. Informative parenthetical content, by contrast, tends to be organized through higher-level discourse structures.