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A Contrastive Study of Shell Noun Use in English and Chinese Academic Articles

Liang Xiaorui[1]

Abstract

A shell noun (SN) is a type of abstract noun whose pragmatic meaning is encapsulated within the context. The term "shell" suggests its capability to encapsulate and convey information. Previous studies have focused primarily on the textual and interpersonal functions of SNs, often neglecting the comparative analysis of shell noun usage in Chinese and English discourses. To address this gap, this study conducts a comparative analysis of the use of SNs in English and Chinese based on a self-established corpus comprising three groups: 30 Chinese research papers written by Chinese scholars from Foreign Language Teaching and Research (外语教学与研究), 30 English research papers written by Chinese scholars, and 30 English research papers written by native English scholars from Studies in Second Language Acquisition over the past five years. The results are analyzed in terms of the overall distribution of SNs, the structural distribution of shell noun patterns, high-frequency SNs, and the category distribution of SNs. The findings reveal a similarity in the use of SNs by Chinese scholars in their Chinese and English papers, while there is a significant difference in the use of SNs between Chinese scholars and native English scholars in English articles.

Keywords: *Shell nouns, English-Chinese contrast, Research articles*

A. Introduction

Shell nouns (SNs), also known as general nouns (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) and carrier nouns (Ivanic, 1991), are a group of abstract nouns whose pragmatic meaning is encapsulated in their immediate context. The conceptual "shell" endows SNs with a degree of unspecificity. SNs abound in both English and Chinese discourses. As illustrated in example (1), SN "news" ("xiaoxi 消息") is in bold type and its pragmatic meaning is lexicalized by the underlined parts.

> *(Original Chinese version) 她拿了教师技能大赛一等奖，听到这个消息，我们很震惊。*
> *(Word-to-word pinyin version) Ta na le jiao shi ji neng da sai yi deng jiang, ting dao zhe ge xiao xi, wo men hen zhen jing.*
> *(English translation version) When we heard the news that she won the first prize in the teacher skills contest, we were very shocked.*

SNs play an important role in the cohesive and interpersonal function of academic languages. As a kind of lexical cohesive devices, these semantically abstract and inherently unspecific units are believed to add the continuous aspect to a text (Francis, 1986; Gray, 2010; Martínez, 2002). They either cataphorically precede or anaphorically follow the concrete contents they refer to. Some studies have also acknowledged the interpersonal function of SNs,

[1]Department of English, College of Foreign Languages, Ocean University of China, lxr17861437310@163.com

because the choice of various kinds of SNs can preload authorial stance towards certain propositions (Charles, 2003, 2007; Işık-Taş, 2018; Jiang & Hyland, 2015; Lou, 2013; Ozkan & Dagdeviren, 2022; Zhang & Lei, 2018).

Thus extensive researches have been carried out in terms of the textual and interpersonal functions of SNs in discourses. However, contrastive studies between English texts written by native and non-native English speakers indicated that even advanced L2 learners still suffer pragmatic failure in their use of SNs (Aktas & Cortes, 2008; Lou, 2013; Tian et al., 2021). They deduced that first language transfer account for such problems. However, previous studies failed to explore the use of SNs by L2 learners though the comparison between their Chinese and English writings. Thus their conclusion is less convincing. Based on the self-established corpus, this study probes into the use of SNs by Chinese scholars in their Chinese and English academic papers, and compares their writings with those of native speakers, aiming to investigate how L2 learners use SNs to construct cohesion and stance in academic articles, as well as provide corpus-based evidence for L1 transfer in their use of SNs.

B. Literature Review

Studies of SNs in academic settings mainly unfolded through clause relation (Chen & Ma, 2020; Flowerdew, 2003; Finn, 1995; Gray, 2010), their textual function (Flowerdew, 2003; Francis, 1986; Gray, 2010; Gray & Cortes, 2011; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Martínez, 2002) and interpersonal function (Charles, 2003, 2007; Hu & Huang, 2021; Işık-Taş, 2018; Jiang, 2015; Jiang & Hyland, 2015; Lou, 2013; Ozkan & Dagdeviren, 2022). Most of these studies are conducted in contrastive forms, which provide more factors influencing the use of SNs in academic writings:

Cross-disciplinary differences in the use of SNs have been studied by several researchers. Jiang and Hyland (2015, 2021) explored the interpersonal use of SNs across various disciplines and considerable variation was found in the way of building knowledge across different disciplines. Zhang and Lei (2018) also investigated the use of SNs in different disciplines. Their findings were that soft disciplines used SNs twice more frequently than hard disciplines. Dong et al. (2020) investigated the sub-disciplinary variation in the use of SNs between science and engineering with a two-million-word corpus. Their findings revealed the fundamental differences in disciplines. Benitez-Castro (2021) investigated the use of two frequent SNs, problem and way, from Year 3 undergraduate native writing in three disciplines: Sociology, Business and Engineering, which also reported significant disciplinary differences. In brief, cross-disciplinary studies were mainly carried out through the comparison between soft disciplines and hard disciplines since SNs were significant manifestations of cognitive construals underpinning linguistic variations across the two disciplines.

Differences in the use of SNs by native and non-native speakers are also reported by several studies. Lou (2013) probed into the features of SNs used in Chinese graduates' thesis and native speakers' EAP writing in Charles study in 2003. her results showed that Chinese learners lacked the consciousness of using shell nouns in their academic writing and and there existed misuse and omission of SNs in learners' writing. Kirmizi and Kirmizi (2022), Ozkan and Dagdeviren (2022) both compared the use of SNs as stance markers by L1 Turkish writers of English and L1 English writers regarding academic writing. Their results indicated that cultural factors influenced how writers weaved their stance in academic writing. Yuvayapan and Yakut (2022)

also observed cultural variations in SN usage between native and non-native academic writers of English through a corpus of 1,148,992 words.

Level of L2 proficiency plays an important role in L2 learners' use of SNs. Işık-Taş (2018) explored the use of SNs by L2 learners at three proficiency levels in the Writing Task 2 in IELTS test. Results indicated that Level 8 writers employ SNs with greater frequency and variety. Jin (2019) examined L2 learners' use of anaphoric pattern "this/these + SN" in academic essays focusing on the variation of use across the skill levels. The results suggested several meaningful discrepancies in lower versus higher-level writing. Numerous contrastive studies have proved that there still exists significant difference in the use of SNs between L2 learners and native speakers. Even texts written by learners at higher L2 proficiency may use SNs inappropriately. However, previous researches failed to reveal the underlying reasons for L2 learners' difficulty in using SNs through English-Chinese contrast. With this in mind, this study tends to explored the use of SNs by Chinese scholars in their English and Chinese academic writings, as well as compare their shell noun use with native English scholars, aiming to find out evidence for L1 transfer.

C. Methods

Research Questions

Based on the present research gaps, this study addresses two research questions: 1) What is the distribution of SNs across the three groups? 2) Is there any significant variation in the use of SNs across the three groups? If so, what does such a difference indicate?

Classification of SNs

Based on the meanings of SNs themselves, Schmid (2000) came up with a classification of SNs into 6 categories, namely, factual, linguistic, mental, modal, eventive and circumstantial SNs. Some investigations have proved that SNs of different categories show significant variation in terms of their complementing options, restrictions and tendencies (Flowerdew & Forest 2015; Vergaro 2015, 2018; Vergaro & Schmid 2017). Based on systemic functional grammar, Flowerdow and Forest (2015) proposed a classification model dividing SNs into five categories: locution, idea, factual, modal fact and circumstantial fact. Though it was a terminologically divergent classification from Schmid's, it still supported Schmid's previous classification (Schmid, 2018). In addition, previous studies have shown that such classification is also appropriate for shell noun use in the Chinese context (Chen & Hu, 2019). Thus the present study choose the semantic classification model of SNs by Schmid (2000) for the investigation of shell noun use by Chinese scholars and native speakers, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification of SNs

Classification	Description	Examples
Factual	facts, states of affairs	*fact, thing, point*
Linguistic	utterances, linguistic acts and products thereof	*news, message, rumour*
Mental	ideas, cognitive states and processes	*idea, notion, belief*
Modal	possibilities, abilities, permission, obligations, etc.	*possibility, truth, permission*
Eventive	activities, processes, states	*act, move, measure*
Circumstantial	situations, times, locations, manners of doing things and conditions for doing things	*situation, context, place*

(Schmid, 2000: 88)

Corpus

Generally, the corpus was comprised of three parts: 30 Chinese research papers written by Chinese scholars (group a) from *Foreign Language Teaching and Research* (*外语教学与研究*), 30 English research papers written by Chinese scholars (group b) and 30 English research papers written by native English scholars (group c) from *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* in the past 5 years. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research* and *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* both gain high impact factors in the field of linguistics.

Also, only the body parts of the articles were incorporated into the corpus. To make the comparison between groups more representative, the nationality of writers was also checked one by one: for papers written by native English speakers, the name of their authors must be of Germanic or Roman origin; for papers written in Chinese, the author of them must come from Chinese mainland. The detailed description of the present corpus was as follows:

Table 2. Description of The Corpus

	Group A	**Group B**	**Group C**
Source Titles (Language)	*Foreign Language Teaching and Research* (Chinese)	*Studies in Second Language Acquisition* (English)	
Nationality	Chinese Scholars	Chinese Scholars	Native English speakers
Number of Texts	30	30	30
Number of Word Tokens	226,428	276,406	252,775

Data Collection and Analysis

The retrieval of SNs from the self-established corpus was conducted manually since the identification of the software AntConc was always subject to errors and the size of the present corpus was not big enough. Two postgraduates majoring in linguistics identified SNs respectively and discussed the results with each other. Then a professor of foreign language department examined and confirmed the final data.

In determining significance, the independent-samples T test were employed. In general, there were two pairs of comparisons: the comparison between group a and group b, as well as the comparison between group b and group c. The former aimed to check whether there exists L1 transfer in the use of SNs by Chinese scholars, while the latter was used to find gaps in the use of SNs by Chinese scholars and native English scholars and check whether the transfer was positive or negative.

Findings and Discussion

Overall Distribution of SNs

The results of the overall distribution of SNs in the corpus are shown in **Table 3**. Generally, 983, 2170, 3426 SNs are retrieved from group a , group b and group c respectively. In determining significance, these raw frequencies are converted to normalized frequencies (reserved integer, per 1000 words). And the independent-samples T test shows that there are significant differences between group a and group b ($F=11.652$, $p=0.001$), as well as between group b and group c ($F=13.571$, $p=0.000$).

The overall results show that Chinese scholars use less SNs in their Chinese papers than in their English papers, while in English discourses, Chinese scholars use less SNs than native English scholars. This indicates that negative transfer affects the use of SNs by Chinese scholars. The frequency of using SNs in English academic papers is generally higher than that in Chinese academic papers. Thus Chinese scholars use less SNs even in their English papers because of the influence of Chinese. In this regard, Chinese scholars lack the awareness of using SNs to construct coherence and stance in English academic writings.

Table 3. Overall Distribution of SNs Across The Three Groups

	A	**B**	**C**
Freq.	983	2170	3426
SNs per 1,000words	4.341	7.851	13.554

Structural Distribution of Shell Noun Patterns

Since the present study involved the comparison between two languages, it is inappropriate to employ Schmid's summary of four English lexico-grammatical patterns of SNs like other studies did. Given that shell noun patterns commonly used in Chinese and English are quite different, the present research divides shell-noun patterns into two categories—cataphoric patterns and anaphoric patterns—according to whether SNs precede its shell contents or not. As illustrated in example (1), in cataphoric patterns, SNs precede the shell contents (1a), while in anaphoric one SNs come after their shell contents (1b).

Apart from differences in position, cataphoric patterns and anaphoric patterns have different influence on the interpersonal function of SNs because stance construction of authors and construal operations of readers is an interactive process and different perspectives may lead to various understanding. In cataphoric patterns, SNs "interactively refer forward to the content of the clause and interactionally label the stance that writers take towards this content" (Jiang & Hyland, 2018). Thus cataphoric SNs can convey the author's opinion in a concealed way and allow the reader to participate in the construction of viewpoint with the presupposition. Cataphoric patterns integrate the release of new information of shell contents into the interpersonal expression of SNs, and eventually makes the reader and the author share common emotion, view and judgment. In anaphoric patterns, SNs are used to summarize the authors' opinion towards what they point back and provide a reference for the construal of the new information. And only by retrieving back to the former context can readers construe the pragmatic meanings of certain SNs, which does not conform to the usual order of construl tasks that is oriented in right. And such construal process is author-oriented. Thus the order between SNs and their shell contents is important for the cohesive and interpersonal function of SNs.

Table 4 shows the structural distribution of shell-noun patterns in the corpus. The proportion of Chinese scholars' use of anaphoric patterns in Chinese papers is lower than that in English papers, while in English articles, the proportion of anaphoric SNs used by Chinese scholars is lower than that by native speakers. And the independent-samples T test shows that both of the two differences are significant (p1=0.000, p2=0.000).

Table 4. Structural distribution of SNs across the three groups

		A	B	C
Cataphoric patterns	Freq.(%)	777(79.044%)	1627(74.977%)	2398(69.994%)
	SNs per 1,000words	3.432	5.886	9.487
Anaphoric patterns	Freq.(%)	206(20.956%)	543(25.023%)	1028(30.006)
	SNs per 1,000words	0.910	1.965	4.067

The low frequency of anaphoric use by Chinese scholars indicates that influenced by L1 transfer, they are not aware of using anaphoric patterns in academic writings and their ability to construct an author-centered stance is insufficient. Hu (2018) and Huang (2020) held that when clauses were used as noun modifiers, Chinese preferred to use pre-modifiers while English was inclined to use post-modifiers.

Ways of thinking, the Figure-Ground Theory and the BS (basic sentence) expansion are account for such differences. (1) As for the way of thinking, Chinese is topic-prominent, in which the grammatical features are implicit and the new information is always placed before what is already known. While English is a language of hypotaxis, in which the grammatical features are explicit and modifiers are often placed after the head nouns. (2) The Figure-Ground Theory indicates the order of the center of things and the background. When it comes to language, it defines the order of the head nouns and their modifiers. Under such model, the order of English is “central word + modifier” while Chinese “modifier +central word”. (3) In terms of the BS (basic sentence) expansion, English sentence is a cis-linear left-to-right (LR) extension, whose modifiers are placed in the end of sentences. Chinese sentence is an inverse linear right-to-left (RL) extension whose modifiers should be placed at the beginning of the sentence.

Distribution of High-Frequency SNs

Table 5 displays the top 20 frequently used SNs by the three groups. It is obvious that group a and group b share a common interest in their choice of SNs: in terms of the top 10 SNs, 8 of them (*problem, way, aspect,result, reason, process, order, ability*) are employed by Chinese scholars in both their Chinese and English academic papers; among the top 20 SNs frequently used, 14 of them (*problem, way, aspect,result, reason, process, order, ability, study, view, task, analysis, conclusion, view*) are employed by Chinese scholars in both their Chinese and English academic papers. In terms of the comparison between group b and group c, results show that in English academic writings, SNs used by Chinese scholars and English native scholars are quite different. Only 5 SNs (*way, fact, problem, order, view*) are commonly used by the two groups.

Table 5. The distribution of high-frequency SNs across the three groups

No.	Group a		Group b		Group c	
	SN	Freq.	SN	Freq.	SN	Freq.
1	问题（problem）	65	result	178	time	212
2	方法（way）	52	order	155	way	174
3	方面（aspect）	41	way	132	place	171
4	影响（influence）	37	reason	119	part	166
5	结果（result）	37	question	97	thing	153

No.	Group a		Group b		Group c	
	SN	Freq.	SN	Freq.	SN	Freq.
6	原因（reason）	33	process	80	case	139
7	过程（process）	27	study	77	power	117
8	目的（order）	19	finding	69	point	114
9	能力（ability）	17	fact	63	fact	113
10	因素（factor）	17	ability	63	problem	106
11	研究（study）	13	hypothesis	60	right	103
12	观点（view）	11	view	55	job	100
13	任务（task）	9	purpose	51	interest	97
14	分析（analysis）	9	conclusion	47	area	95
15	标准（standard）	9	method	43	order	64
16	讨论（discussion）	9	problem	41	information	60
17	结论（conclusion）	9	task	33	report	52
18	理论（theory）	7	paper	21	idea	49
19	看法（view）	5	aspect	20	action	33
20	特征（feature）	5	analysis	13	view	29

Results indicated that in terms of the high-frequency SNs, most of the SNs frequently used in Chinese papers are employed in the English papers written by Chinese scholars. Chinese scholars' choice of English SNs is influenced a lot by their L1. As for the comparison between group b and group c, there is great difference in the use of high-frequency SNs between Chinese and English native scholars. Chinese scholars do not use SNs as native speakers do.

Category Distribution of SNs

Table 6 shows the distribution of SNs in terms of their categories by the three groups:

Table 6. Category distribution of SNs

		A	B	C
Factual	Freq.(%)	405 (41.200%)	802 (36.959%)	1057 (30.852%)
	SNs per 1,000words	1.789	2.902	4.182
Linguistic	Freq.(%)	146 (14.852%)	367 (16.912%)	689 (20.111%)

		A	B	C
	SNs per 1,000words	0.645	1.328	2.726
Mental	Freq.(%)	108 (10.987)	282 (12.995%)	585 (17.075%)
	SNs per 1,000words	0.477	1.020	2.314
Modal	Freq.(%)	67 (6.816%)	151 (6.959%)	305 (8.903%)
	SNs per 1,000words	0.296	0.546	1.207
Eventive	Freq.(%)	167 (16.989%)	327 (15.069%)	473 (13.806%)
	SNs per 1,000words	0.738	1.183	1.871
Circumstantial	Freq.(%)	90 (9.156%)	241 (11.106%)	317 (9.253%)
	SNs per 1,000words	0.397	0.872	1.254

Factual SNs, which reveal the states of affairs, have gained the largest proportion across the three groups (41.200%, 36.959% and 30.852%). It has something with the features of linguistic papers. The humanities are based on cognitive understanding and theoretical framework. So learners are prone to use words containing neutral sense and there is no flexible space for negotiation in their writings, aiming to assert the authority of discourses.

In addition, there is no significant difference in the use of various kinds of SNs by Chinese scholars in their Chinese and English academic papers ($p>0.05$), which indicates that Chinese scholars' choice of the category of SNs in their English papers has been influenced by their mother tongue.

However, significant differences are seen between group b and group c. Chinese scholars use more factual SNs that connote a sense of objectivity than native English scholars. This indicates that Chinese scholars tend to hide their identity when using SNs, not assuming higher modal responsibilities. And the use of linguistic and mental SNs by native English scholars is significantly higher than that of Chinese scholars in their English academic papers, which reveals that native speakers are willing to express their own opinions and share their mental process in academic articles. Thus culture is also an important factor affecting the use of SNs.

D. Conclusion

Based on 90 articles from Chinese and English journals with high impact factor, this study investigated the use of SNs in terms of the overall distribution, structural distribution, high-frequency SNs and category distribution of SNs. The comparison between Chinese and English articles written by Chinese scholars has shown some common features, which revealed the great influence of L1 on shell noun uses. However, in English papers, there are significant differences in the use of SNs by Chinese scholars and native English scholars, which indicated the importance of appropriate shell noun uses.

The overall distribution of SNs shows that Chinese scholars use less SNs in their Chinese papers than in their English papers. And in English discourses, Chinese scholars use less SNs than native English scholars. This indicates a negative transfer in Chinese scholars' use of SNs. In this regard, Chinese scholars lack the awareness of using SNs to construct coherence and stance in English academic writings. As for the structural distribution of SNs, the proportion of Chinese scholars' use of anaphoric patterns in Chinese papers is lower than that in English

papers. And in English articles, the proportion of anaphoric SNs used by Chinese scholars is lower than that by native English speakers. Ways of thinking, the Figure-Ground Theory and the BS expansion are account for such differences between Chinese and native English scholars. In terms of the high-frequency SNs, Chinese scholars share a common interest in their choice of SNs across their Chinese and English writings, which indicates that Chinese scholars' choice of English SNs is influenced a lot by their L1. In addition, in English academic writings, SNs used by Chinese scholars and English native scholars are quite different, which shows that even learners with high L2 proficiency do not use SNs as native English speakers do. With the classification model proposed by Schmid (2000), the results report a similarity in terms of the choice of various categories of SNs by group a and group b. However, there is significant differences between Chinese scholars and native English scholars in their English writings: Chinese scholars use more factual SNs, which indicates that they tend to hide their identity when using SNs. Chinese scholars do not assume high modal responsibilities in academic writings. And native English scholars tend to use more linguistic and mental SNs, which points that they are inclined to express opinions and display mental process in academic articles. Thus the use of SNs is also influenced by the academic culture of certain country.

In conclusion, results of the present study display the significant difference in the use of SNs between Chinese and English articles. However, since the size of the self-established corpus is not big enough and there is no systematic study of Chinese SNs, contrastive study of SNs used in Chinese and English articles need further elaboration

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