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Anne Li-E Liu (University of Nottingham)

Concessives in discourse: the case of multi-word discourse markers

This paper describes a corpus-based investigation of how professional writers, native student writers, and L2 learners create a concessive relation via the use of multi-word discourse markers (MDMs) in different discourse contexts. Altenberg (1986) and Liu (2010) investigate patterns of discourse markers (DMs) and propose a formality scale/continuum on the basis of their corpus findings. Both single-word markers and MDMs in the same semantic category can be positioned on the continuum, depending on the corresponding degree of formality. For example, Liu (ibid.) suggests that despite that is the most frequently used concessive MDM in a formal context, whereas but then again is mainly used in a colloquial context. Despite the fact that both Altenberg and Liu include spoken and written corpora in examining the formality of DMs, a perceived flaw is the lack of a direct comparison made, for example, between formal and less formal written data. As concessive relation seems to be the most complex case and it poses difficulties at different points for both NS (Sanders et al., 1992) and NNS (Godó, 2008; Bell 2010), this study aims at offering a fine-grained description of how language users employ concessive MDMs in various registers by including an E-mail corpus, a formal written corpus and a learner corpus.

Four corpora are included, the British National Corpus (BNC), the British Academic Written English corpus (BAWE), the EnroSent Corpus (a collection of 13 million words of E-mail messages), and the International Corpus of Learners English (ICLE). The EnroSent corpus provides the less formal written samples and will be compared with other corpora. Both qualitative (manual examination) and quantitative methods (raw frequency, normalized frequency and the log-likelihood score) are included in data collection and analysis. At the outset, the concessive MDMs in Liu's study (despite this/that, but at the same time, but (then) again/then again, having said that, and but still) are searched in the above-mentioned corpora. A subtle nuance is perceived between the BNC (academic writing) and the EnroSent data. Among the less formal MDMs (Liu, ibid.), but then again, but at the same time, and but still, the shortest MDM, but still, is relatively favoured in the E-mail discourse. That is, a refined formality continuum is formed when the language mode is taken into account. In the second stage, I compare the use of concessive MDMs by professional writers (BNC written texts), by native student writers (BAWE), and by L2 writers (ICLE). The results show that native student writers employ more informal MDMs than the professional writers; yet, they use the formal marker despite that 10 times more frequently than the professional writers. L2 writers, on the other hand, display a similar pattern found in the E-mail corpus.

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