

Cohesion Studies in the Past 30 Years: Development, Application and Chaos

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Abstract

*Cohesion is a concept put forward by Halliday and Hasan (1976), who classify cohesion into five categories: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion. After the publication of *Cohesion in English*, scholars from different fields and all over the world focused their attention on cohesion and studied cohesion from different perspectives and approaches. The past three decades have witnessed the quick development of cohesion theory; however, there are some problems in cohesion studies. The present article will make a review of the notion of cohesion, its development and wide application, with special attention paid to cohesion studies in China. At the same time, the present article will explore chaos in previous cohesion studies and limitations of previous research on cohesion.*

Key words: Cohesion studies, Development, Application, Chaos

Introduction

In 1976, Halliday and Hasan made a detailed study of cohesion in English and classified cohesive devices into five categories: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. After the publication of *Cohesion in English*, scholars from different fields and all over the world focused their attention on cohesion and studied cohesion from different perspectives and approaches. The past three decades have witnessed the quick development of cohesion theory. The present article is a review of cohesion studies in the past three decades. This review on cohesion studies is divided into two main parts. In the first part, the notion of cohesion, its development and wide application in different fields will be introduced, with special attention paid to cohesion studies in China by scholars such as Wang Li, Lu Shuxiang, Hu Zhuanglin, Zhu Yongsheng and Zhang Delu, who made great contributions to the development of the cohesion theory. The second section of the literature review will deal with chaos in previous cohesion studies and limitations of previous research on cohesion.

The Notion, Development and Application Cohesion

According to Traugott and Pratt (1980, p. 21), the earliest study of cohesion in English was conducted by Jakobson (1960), who analyzed syntactic structure and parallelism in literary texts with reference to poetry. In 1964, it was Halliday who first divided cohesion into grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. Later, Hasan (1968) made a detailed exploration into grammatical cohesion.

Before the publication of Halliday and Hasan's *Cohesion in English* (1976), a number of other relevant cohesion studies became available. One of these studies by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1972) gave a description of cohesion and studied features that ground a sentence in its context. Their concept was later expanded in their *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (1985). Gutwinski (1976) attempted to root cohesion in a stratificational framework; its focus on the potential stylistic applications of cohesive studies has since provided a starting point for some research studies in stylistics. But for the moment, the best-known and most detailed model of cohesion available is that outlined by Halliday and Hasan in *Cohesion in English* (1976). It was this book that made cohesion an important concept in many fields and has evoked wide discussion and application ever since.

In 1976, Halliday and Hasan published *Cohesion in English*, which marked the establishment of cohesion theory. In Halliday and Hasan's opinion, the concept of cohesion is described as "a semantic one;

it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text and that define it as text" (p. 4). For the occurrence of cohesion, they explain that:

Cohesion occurs where the INTERPRETATION of some elements in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one PRESUPPOSES the other, in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by recourse to it. When this happens, a relation of cohesion is set up, and the two elements, the presupposing and the presupposed, are thereby at least potentially integrated into a text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 4).

After the publication of *Cohesion in English* (1976), Halliday and Hasan continued to study cohesion and further developed their theory of cohesion in their subsequent works. For instance, in Halliday's book *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (1994), Halliday gave up the original classification of conjunction and adopted logic-semantic relations to divide conjunctive elements into elaboration, extension and enhancement. Besides, he regarded substitution and ellipsis as "variants of the same type of cohesive relation" (p. 317) and put them into one category. Hasan (1984, 1985) enlarged the concept of cohesion and divided cohesion into structural and non-structural cohesion. The former includes parallelism, theme-rheme development and given-new organization. The latter includes componential relations and organic relations. In componential relations, there are grammatical devices (such as reference, substitution and ellipsis) and lexical cohesive devices (such as general and instantial relations). In organic relations, there are grammatical devices (such as conjunctives and adjacency pairs) and lexical cohesive devices (such as continuatives).

There are two branches developed from Hasan's model of cohesion (1985). One is Martin with his system of cohesion and the other is Hoey with his theory of lexical cohesion. Martin's *English Text: System and Structure* (1992) introduces text-forming resources in English, along with practical procedures for analyzing English texts and relating them to their contexts of use. He reconstructs Halliday and Hasan's cohesion from the perspective of discourse semantics and forms an integrated system of cohesion. Hoey's theory of lexical cohesion was put forward in *Patterns of Lexis in Text* (1991). In this book, Hoey insists on the importance of lexical patterning and believes that much of coherence as well as cohesion of text is created by the lexical ties of individual words with each other. Just as Hoey said, "the study of the greater part of cohesion is the study of lexis, and the study of cohesion in text is, to a considerable degree, the study of patterns of lexis in text" (1991, p. 10). In addition to Halliday, Hasan, Martin and Hoey, many Chinese scholars also study cohesion and apply cohesion theory to many different fields.

In China, many scholars develop cohesion theory from different perspectives. Wang Li made great contributions to the development of cohesion in Chinese. As early as 1943, Wang mentioned the phenomenon of cohesion in his book *Zhongguo xiandai yufa (Modern Grammar of Chinese)* and provided a detailed analysis of reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and reiteration, classes of cohesive devices later mentioned by Halliday and Hasan (1976). However, Wang's work was written in Chinese and was only known in China. It was not until 1976 when *Cohesion in English* was published and introduced to China that Chinese linguists began to realize the importance of cohesion. Some scholars (e.g. Hu, 1993) claim that Halliday inherited and developed his teacher Wang Li's academic achievements because Halliday studied modern Chinese under the guidance of Wang, and Halliday's theories, such as cohesion and transitivity had been written about by Wang long before. Apart from Wang, Lu Shuxiang (1979) is another scholar who has noticed the phenomenon of cohesion and coherence at the textual level.

Three important scholars have made great contributions to cohesion studies in China and paved the way for other scholars to further cohesion studies. They are Hu Zhuanglin, Zhu Yongsheng and Zhang Delu. In 1989, the three scholars introduced Halliday and Hasan's cohesion theory and its classification in their book *Xitong gongneng yufa gailun (A Survey of Systemic-Functional Grammar)*. What is more important, they used examples from the Chinese language to show the applicability of cohesion theory. Since then, they have continued to study cohesion and have developed cohesion theory from different perspectives.

In his book, *Yingyu de xianjie yu lianguan (Discourse Cohesion and Coherence)* (1994), Hu Zhuanglin follows Halliday and Hasan's model but distinguishes four types of cohesion in Chinese, namely, the referential, structural, logical and lexical cohesion. He tries to categorize cohesive ties according to structural features of Chinese. Drawing on some of the progresses in the traditional model, Hu believes that cohesive relations can also be found in other functional categories, such as transitivity at the semantic level, the thematic structure at the syntactic level, and intonation and sound patterns at the phonological level. What's more, he describes the development of the theory from cohesion to co-

herence, in which context, pragmatics, and the relationship between discourse structure and discourse elements are also discussed. Based on these developments, Hu comes to the conclusion that textual cohesion and coherence should be analyzed at various levels and develops a multi-level model of discourse cohesion and coherence.

Like Hu, Zhang Delu (2003) also focuses on the relationship between cohesion and coherence and extends the scope of cohesion to include cross-type cohesion, explicit cohesion, implicit cohesion, etc. Different from Hu, who mainly focuses on the cohesive effects created by ideational and textual relations, Zhang argues that interpersonal relations can also play an important role in creating cohesion and mood; modality, and other devices which realize interpersonal meaning can also contribute to discourse cohesion and coherence.

Another book in the field of cohesion studies in Chinese is *Yinghan yupian xianjie shouduan duibi yanjiu* (*Contrastive Study of Cohesion in English and Chinese*) (2001) by Zhu Yongsheng, Yan Shiqing and Miao Xingwei. Based on Halliday and Hasan's classification of cohesive devices, the authors investigate the features of cohesion in Chinese (reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, reiteration, and so on). In addition, they attempt to explain causes of differences behind the general preferences in Chinese and English for certain cohesive devices.

After the publication of *Cohesion in English*, the concept of cohesion has been applied to different fields such as stylistics, discourse analysis, language teaching and learning, translation studies, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. Take language teaching, psycholinguistics and translation studies for example, in the field of language teaching, many scholars have investigated cohesion in language teaching (e.g. McCarthy, 1991; McCarthy & Carter, 1994; Liu, 1999; Zhang & Liu, 2003; Hyland, 2005; Rost, 2005; Zhang, Miao & Li, 2005). In the field of psycholinguistics, many scholars study the use of cohesion in discourse production and comprehension (e.g. Garrod & Sanford, 1994; Sanford & Garrod, 1994; McCabe, 1998; Carroll, 2000; Gui, 2000; Dong, 2005). In the past three decades, the field of translation studies has provided a good opportunity for cohesion theory and has become a fertile area for cohesion theory. In the field of translation studies, scholars conduct a great number of studies on the integration of cohesion with translation studies (e.g. Blum-Kulka, 1986; Newmark, 1988; Hatim & Mason, 1990, 1997; Bell, 1991; Baker, 1992; Neubert & Shreve, 1992; Hatim, 1997, 2005; Wang, 1998, 2005; Ke, 1999; Li, 2001; Munday, 2001; Xiao, 2002; Xu, 2002; Wang, 2003; Zhang & Liu, 2003; Hatim & Munday, 2004; Pochhacker, 2004; Malmkjaer, 2005; Zhang, 2005; Zhao, 2005). It is clear that cohesion theory has wide application in many different areas.

Despite the great amount of research on cohesion and the wide application of cohesion to different fields, the concept of cohesion is yet not fully understood and is still a matter of continuing debate. The following section will seek to understand the chaos in cohesion studies.

Chaos in Cohesion Studies

The concept of cohesion came into wide use after the landmark publication of Halliday and Hasan's *Cohesion in English* in 1976. Since then, the notion of cohesion has been widely accepted as a useful concept for the analysis of text beyond the sentence level. However, because researchers view cohesion from a number of different theoretical and research perspectives, there is a chaotic scene in cohesion studies, full of divergent opinions.

First, thirty years ago, when the publication of *Cohesion in English* in 1976 marked the establishment of the cohesion theory, to the present day, when cohesion has become an important concept in discourse analysis, cohesion research has made great achievement. However, for various reasons, there is little consensus as to the nature of cohesion. Halliday and Hasan (1976) points out clearly that the concept of cohesion is "a semantic one; it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text" (p. 4), but researchers have different understandings of cohesion (e.g. Widdowson, 1978; de Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981; Quirk, et al, 1985; Schiffrin, 1987; Bell, 1991; Hoey, 1991; Baker, 1992; Mey, 1993; Cook, 1994; Thompson, 1996; Verschueren, 1999; Cao, Song & Yang, 2003; etc.). For example, Baker (1992) regards cohesion as a surface relation and "connects together the actual words and expressions that we can see or hear" (p. 180). Similar to Baker, Thompson (1996) believes that cohesion refers to "the linguistic devices by which the speaker can signal the experiential and interpersonal coherence of the text, and is thus a textual phenomenon: we can point to features of the text which serve a cohesive function" (p. 147). However, Schiffrin (1987) argues that "cohesion has to do with semantic meaning" (p. 62). Like Schiffrin, Cao, Song and Yang

(2003) state clearly that cohesion refers to “semantic relations or threads that link the elements of the text together and tie them into a whole” (p. 209). Among these different understandings, some researchers tend to confuse cohesion and cohesive devices, thus treating cohesion and cohesive devices as the same thing. In their studies, they only focus on the surface features of cohesion, which can be regarded as cohesive devices rather than the more general features of cohesion, thus seeing cohesion as an element of text explicable in terms similar to those of formal linguistics. Others such as Halliday and Hasan (1976) tend to look deeper and treat cohesion as a semantic concept. It is clear that, among these understandings, there are some distorted understandings of Halliday and Hasan’s concept of cohesion. Of course, researchers can choose to use whatever definition they wish as long as they make it clear what they mean by the definition they are using.

Secondly, some researchers mainly study cohesive relations at the inter-sentence level; others tend to study cohesive relations both at the intra-sentence and inter-sentence levels. In Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) account of cohesion and its fourth device—conjunction, many scholars have questioned the line drawn between grammar within a sentence and conjunction between sentences. Other scholars, even some working in the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar (e.g. Martin, 1992; Hu, 1994; Peng, 2000), argue that there are “very clear and close parallels to be drawn between intrasentential and intersentential types of relationship” (Butler, 2003b, p. 337). Martin (1992), for example, believes that Halliday and Hasan’s account “fails to bring out the continuity between the structural [...] and non-structural [...] resources” (p. 19) and puts forward a model that is able to generalize across environments to include structural and non-structural relations. Others such as Schiffrin (1987) stand in between and argue that “the principles governing the use of conjunctions in discourse do not totally parallel those for conjunctions in sentences” (p. 319). Generally speaking, this chaotic scene reflects in part a territorial dispute over how much work the grammar is expected to do in discourse analysis.

As a matter of fact, there are some misunderstandings towards Halliday and Hasan’s line drawn between grammar within a sentence and conjunction between sentences. It seems that Halliday and Hasan (1976) focus on the principles governing the use of conjunctions at the sentence level and the textual level. In their opinion, “the task of conveying meanings (semantics) is so different from the task of building sentences (syntax) that discourse is fundamentally different in kind than sentences” (Schiffrin, 1994, p. 43). Hoey (1991) and Schiffrin (1994) point out the limitations of only treating discourse as a unit above the sentence. Schiffrin (1994) believes that such treatment often ends up “deriving the syntax of sentences from the properties of texts” (p. 28) and researchers may neglect that “discourse structures are not always the sort of hierarchical structures to which linguists are accustomed at other levels of analysis” (p. 29). Verschueren (1999), shares Halliday and Hasan’s approach and argues that:

[...] structuring at the suprasentential level is mostly a matter of organizing content. This does not mean that content organization is not a driving force at the sentence level, but only that more purely ‘formal’ criteria are more clearly operative at the lower levels of structure. This phenomenon follows from human processing capabilities which already diminish the role of grammatical rules within the boundaries of a sentence when it becomes structurally more complex, not only because it becomes more difficult to keep track of grammatical correspondence in more complex structures but also because meaning itself soon takes over as a principle of organization. (pp. 134-135)

Halliday and Hasan (1976) admit that “cohesive relations have in principle nothing to do with sentence boundaries” (p. 8) and can be found both within a sentence and between sentences. However, cohesive relations within a sentence attract less notice “because of the cohesive strength of grammatical structure; since the sentence hangs together already, the cohesion is not needed in order to make it hang together” (*ibid.*). Unlike cohesive relations within a sentence, cohesive relations between sentences are “in no way determined by the grammatical structure” (*ibid.*) and could represent “the variable aspect of cohesion, distinguishing one text from another” (p. 9). In other words, cohesive devices, rather than grammatical structure, play a more important role in the organization of a text at the suprasentence level. That is why Halliday and Hasan do regard inter-sentence cohesion rather than intra-sentence cohesion as significant and only take inter-sentence cohesion into consideration in their study.

Thirdly, researchers have proposed different classification schemes of cohesive devices in the past decades, and divergences outnumber consensus in regard to the cohesive devices adopted in discourse analysis. Although there has been a popular notion that cohesive devices can be classified into several groups, there seems to be little agreement among researchers as to the number or the classi-

fication of the cohesive devices. Despite this, many classification schemes have been proposed to account for different types of cohesive devices (e.g. Halliday and Hasan, 1976, 1985; de Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981; Huang, 1988; Halliday, 1994, 2004; Hu, 1994). Since these classification schemes use different criteria, they are not directly comparable. For example, Thompson (1996) regards substitution as a kind of ellipsis whereas Halliday (1994/2004) treats ellipsis as a special type of substitution. Of course, there is nothing wrong with using different criteria to classify cohesive devices commonly found in discourse. The problem with the existing classification schemes is that some devices in one scheme are not to be found in another. Sometimes the same cohesive device in one scheme is used in other schemes with different names. For example, “repetition” in Halliday and Hasan’s *Cohesion in English* (1976) becomes “recurrence” in de Beaugrande and Dressler’s *Introduction to Text Linguistics* (1981).

Fourthly, every language has its own battery of certain cohesive devices for creating links between textual elements and there are different devices in different languages for achieving cohesive effects. Just as James (1980) says, “while every language has at its disposal a set of devices for maintaining textual cohesion, different languages have preferences for certain of these devices and neglect certain others” (p. 109). Many Chinese scholars have applied Halliday and Hasan’s cohesive devices into Chinese languages, and found out the general preferences for certain cohesive devices in Chinese and English languages (e.g. Qian, 1983; Zuo, 1995; Xu, 1996; Li, 2001; Luo, 2001; Zhu, Zheng & Mi-ao, 2001; Zhang & Liu, 2003). However, given the text types they used and the methods they adopted, there are different opinions as to the general preferences for certain cohesive devices in Chinese and English. For instance, in a comparative study of a Chinese essay “The Sight of the Father’s Back” by Zhu Ziqing and its English translation by Zhang Peiji, Zuo (1995) argues that Chinese makes more use of reiteration and ellipsis, while in English reference and substitution are more common. In contrast to Zuo’s study, Xu (1996) selects six Chinese and six English essays and, after comparison and statistical treatment, concludes that Chinese uses fewer cohesive devices than English. The only exception between Chinese and English in the use of cohesive devices is that Chinese uses more cases of ellipsis than English.

In addition to the fact that each language has general preferences for certain cohesive devices, it also has specific preferences for certain cohesive devices that are sensitive to text type. Different genres and registers are characterized by particular kinds of cohesive devices and may make different uses of those cohesive devices. For example, it is much less likely for reference, substitution and ellipsis to occur in texts such as legal texts, while synonyms and super-ordinates—two kinds of lexical cohesion—are generally considered unsuitable for scientific and technical texts. While Halliday and Hasan (1976) and other scholars mainly use literary texts in their study, to the exclusion of non-literary texts, specific preferences for certain cohesive devices in non-literary texts have attracted attention of another group of scholars (e.g. Carter, Goddard, Reah, Sanger & Bowring, 2001; Cook, 2001; Huang, 2001; Yu, 2004). Carter et al. (2001) focus on cohesive devices in different texts. Similarly, Cook (2001) and Huang (2001) mainly study cohesive devices in advertisements and Yu (2004) examines cohesive devices in academic introductions from the perspective of genre. Nevertheless, the study of cohesive devices in non-literary texts is still a neglected area which needs further explorations.

Fifthly, some scholars believe that cohesive devices exist in the Chinese language (e. g. Wang, 1943/1957; Lu, 1979; Hu, 1993, 1994; Xu, 2002) while others even question the applicability of cohesive devices into Chinese language (e.g. Xu, 2001). Some scholars show their doubt on the applicability of cohesive devices in the Chinese language based on the assumption that Chinese is a paratactic language which does not need to depend on cohesive devices. The different opinions towards the typological adequacy of Halliday and Hasan’s modal of cohesion in Chinese are especially reflected in the use of conjunction in Chinese. When discussing conjunction in Chinese and English, scholars seem to come to agreement that Chinese uses fewer conjunctions than English based on the assumption that English is mainly a hypotactic language and Chinese predominantly a paratactic language. However, the answer to the extent to which languages are hypotactic or paratactic in given text types is “still surprisingly impressionistic” (Fawcett, 1997, p. 97). In the previous contrastive studies of conjunction between Chinese and English, based on the assumption that Chinese is predominantly a paratactic language and English mainly a hypotactic language, most scholars believe that Chinese uses fewer conjunctions than English (e.g. Hu, 1993; Lian, 1993; Zhu, et al, 2001; He, 2002; Wang, 2003). Given the text types selected and methods adopted in the previous studies, it is not certain whether this opinion—that Chinese makes use of fewer conjunctions than English—can be widely accepted. Moreover, it is still not certain whether the use of conjunction between sentences in Chinese

and English can be explained by parataxis and hypotaxis, which were used in the past to mainly take account of conjunctions between clauses within a sentence.

Finally, the relationship between cohesion and coherence is perhaps the most debated issue in the past three decades because “the distinction between cohesion and coherence is basic to many contemporary understandings of discourse” (Ding, 2000, p. 211). Halliday and Hasan (1976) point out that a text is coherent in two regards: “it is coherent with respect to the context of situation, and therefore consistent in register; and it is coherent with respect to itself, and therefore cohesive” (p. 23). In their opinion, “neither of these two conditions is sufficient without the other, nor does the one by necessity entail the other” (*ibid.*). Scholars hold different opinions towards the relationship between cohesion and coherence and the ongoing debate on their relationship has produced more confusion than consensus in both the field of cohesion studies and that of coherence studies. Roughly speaking, there are three different understandings towards the relations between cohesion and coherence. In the first understanding, scholars claim that the presence of cohesion does not necessarily lead to coherence (e.g. Enkvist, 1978; Brown and Yule, 1983). In the second understanding, scholars argue that coherent texts do not need to be cohesive (e.g. Widdowson, 1978). Most systemic functional linguists, however, side with the third understanding; that is, cohesion is a necessary but not a sufficient condition in achieving coherence. In one word, scholars have not yet reached consensus on the relationship between cohesion and coherence.

Conclusion

In sum, despite the fact that the past three decades have witnessed the development of the concept of cohesion and its wide application into different disciplines, there are still many issues that remain unresolved, especially those issues in connection with the Chinese language. Halliday and Hasan’s cohesion theory sheds new light on how language works at the textual level, at the same time, there are still many areas which need improvements and explorations in order to better understand our languages and further develop cohesion theory.

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