

A Review on the Studies of Shanghai Pragmatic Prosody

Qianni Xu*, Huangmei Liu#

College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Email: 825652481@qq.com, #lauraliu4321@163.com

How to cite this paper: Xu, Q. N., & Liu, H. M. (2023). A Review on the Studies of Shanghai Pragmatic Prosody. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 11, 32-38.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2023.112003>

Received: January 5, 2023

Accepted: February 6, 2023

Published: February 9, 2023

Copyright © 2023 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

The unique charm of the study on Shanghai pragmatic prosody lies both in the fact that Shanghai culture is a melting pot culture where maritime and immigrant cultures meet and rub shoulders, and in the prosodic variation in the rapid development of the city. The following features of Shanghai pragmatic prosody research are evident: 1) The predominance of individual pragmatic prosody. The study of Shanghai pragmatic prosody focuses on individual linguistic phenomena, and does not systematically investigate pragmatic prosody as a single object. 2) The pragmatic prosody contexts are usually divided into greetings and farewells, invitations, suggestions, refusals, and complaints. 3) Mostly descriptive. That is, the existing Shanghai dialect pragmatics research is dominated by descriptive pragmatics and focuses on recording pragmatic phenomena.

Keywords

Shanghai Wu, Socio-Prosody, Pragmatics, Prosody

1. Introduction

Shanghai is an ancient city with a land history of about 6000 years and a culture of tolerance, openness and acceptance. The Shanghai dialect is the essence of the Wu Yue Jiangnan language and culture, and it reflects the sea culture and inclusiveness of Shanghai. The development history of Shanghai in the past hundred years is closely related to the modern history of China, and all the influential historical and cultural celebrities or political guests have been active in Shanghai and are closely related to Shanghai Wu. However, in the past two to three decades, the rapid development of Shanghai has attracted a large number of migrant

*First author.

#Corresponding author.

workers, which has gradually reduced the scope of Shanghai Wu to the family unit, affecting the heritage and development of Shanghai culture. The youth group has a much lower chance to use Shanghai Wu. In Huang & He (2013) research shows, 83.33% of the 162 local Shanghai students interviewed used Shanghai Wu basically in their childhood home environment, while in terms of the frequency of using Shanghai Wu in their daily life, only 29.01% and 25.93% used it frequently and more often, and 5.56% did not use it anymore. The preference for Mandarin in everyday language other than family communication is 72.22%, indicating that many Shanghai students already prefer Mandarin for conversation. Nowadays, there is a lack of cultural media for Shanghai Wu, there are few pure Shanghai language TV programs and radio programs, Shanghai operas and Shanghai nursery rhymes are less acceptable for young people, and young Shanghai Wu speakers are being lost. The construction of a Shanghai Wu audio database led by Qian Nairong, an expert in Shanghai dialect, has already begun, and the construction of this corpus will certainly play an important role in the study and transmission of the Shanghai Wu. However, its corpus uses a single audio recording as the corpus. A multimodal corpus should be built, and a rhyming section can be added to enrich the content of the database and attract learners of Shanghainese in a lively form.

As the number of new Shanghainese is increasing, a database of Shanghai dialectal pragmatic linguistics can be used to create a more youth-friendly way to show the daily usage of Shanghai Wu and its prosody as guidance for speaking Shanghai Wu.

The theory of social pragmatics can help to study the rhythm of Shanghai Wu. Therefore, this paper tries to give a critical review on the research of Shanghai Pragmatic Prosody by examining the stages of its development, current situation and future value.

2. The Development of Studies on Pragmatic Prosody

Levinson's 1983 book "Pragmatics" built a complete and systematic theoretical framework for the study of pragmatics, including "reference", "speech act", "conversational implication", "presupposition", and "conversational structure". Subsequent research has built on Levinson's work to expand, supplement, and refine pragmatics. Rhythm refers to the rhythm, stress, and intonation contained in a discourse. Usually, rhythm corresponds to duration in acoustics, especially the duration of pauses; stress refers to the repetition in words or sentences, which is acoustically represented by the accentuation of the duration and pitch of the repetition part; and intonation emphasizes the pitch trend and change curve of the whole sentence or paragraph. Also rhythm can be reflected in the intensity of the tone and the rate of change of intensity and pitch. The physical quantity corresponding to rhythm in experimental phonetics is the Fundamental Frequency (F0), and rhythm is usually measured in terms of pitch, intensity, and time & pause. Pragmatic Prosody focuses on the "pragmatics-prosody interface",

i.e., the patterns in which prosodic strategies are presented in the rhythmic parameters of pitch, intensity, and pause. Pragmatic prosody focuses on the “pragmatics-prosody interface”, which analyzes the rhythm, stress, and intonation of a complete conversational structure. The study of the pragmatics-prosody interface is new and interdisciplinary, as it directly involves acoustics, psychology, cognitive brain science and machine learning.

The study of pragmatics-prosody interface the study of rhythmic pragmatics directly involves acoustics, psychology, cognitive brain science, and machine learning, and has a new and interdisciplinary character.

Since the 1950s, linguistic research has turned to disciplinary interfaces, such as the “semantic-syntactic” interface and the “syntactic-prosody” interface, which have produced a large number of excellent results and have provided a large number of theoretical and empirical bases for the correlation of linguistic disciplines. It also provides a large number of theoretical and empirical bases for the correlation of various linguistic disciplines. The study of the interface between pragmatics and other disciplines has also developed rapidly, with the “pragmatic-semantic” and “pragmatic-phonological” interfaces receiving the most attention. The “usage-phonology” interface is more interdisciplinary than other types of research. The study of the “pragmatic-phonological” interface has gone through three stages of development, forming the basis of a relatively complete interface study today.

The first stage is the “prosody of speech” stage. During this period, the research on the interface between discourse and prosody focused on the role of prosody in the transmission of emotion (Couper-Kuhlen, 1986; Culpeper, Derek, & Wichmann, 2003; Nilsenova & Swerts, 2012) and the function of constructing communicative context (House, 2006; Wilson & Wharton, 2006). The former has demonstrated through numerous experiments that different discourse emotions have corresponding rhythmic intonation in regular situations, e.g., native English-speaking judges always use decreasing pitch as a way to convey the emotion of justice and solemnity in their judgments, while native English-speaking speakers who join a new context always use increasing pitch in the opening sentence as a rhythmic strategy to increase their likelihood of popularity. The latter is achieved by comparing different communicative intentions, where speakers use the same text with different prosodys to construct different communicative contexts in order to accurately convey communicative intentions. For example, House (2006) takes “I didn’t vote Labour because of Tony Blair.” as the target and finds that in two contexts (context 1: “I have voted Labour” and context 2 “I have not voted Labour”) In both contexts (Context 1: “I have elected Labor” and Context 2: “I have not elected Labor”), the speaker’s prosody differ in pitch position and in the position of significant pauses. This is the speaker’s use of prosody stress strategies to change the meaning of the same text in different ways. We therefore refer to this stage as the “discourse of prosody” stage, which focuses on exploring the effects of prosody on discourse implementation.

The second stage is the “prosody in speech” stage. With the development of

research, some scholars in the exploration stage turned to the study of the interface between pragmatic units and prosody strategies in the framework of pragmatics theory. In other words, they focus on the prosody phenomenon of speech in the framework of pragmatics and the influence of prosody on the perception of pragmatic units, exploring the prosody of “referent”, “speech act”, “conversational implication”, and “presupposition”. The interactions between prosody, including “reference”, “speech act”, “conversational meaning”, “presupposition”, and “conversational structure”, are explored. For example, experimental studies have shown that in the absence of request markers (e.g., “please, may I”), request speech acts cause consecutive modal verbs in the utterance to be pronounced lightly and the immediately following real words to be pronounced heavily, with a signature rise in intonation at the end of the sentence. Wichmann’s (2004) findings are in line with socio-pragmatic scholars’ accounts of power-influenced speech acts, who have found that the same request-like speech act by power decreases intonation at the end of the sentence, but retains the feature that successive modal verbs in the sentence are read lightly and immediately followed by real words that are reread.

The third stage is the “prosody and cognitive science” stage. Along with the extensive experimental evidence that prosody serves a pragmatic function in speech, conforming to, enhancing, and even ensuring that the pragmatic meaning of speech is correctly conveyed, researchers in the third stage have sought to explore the cognitive implications of pragmatic prosody. For example, German researchers have used cognitive experiments to find that prosody has a significant effect on the negation of “common sense presuppositions” in German. Using behavioral experiments, Swiss researchers found significant differences in the position and number of pauses in the prosody scheme for both narrative and instructional speech acts.

3. Studies on Shanghai Dialectal Pragmatics

3.1. New Trends of Experimental Studies

The study of Chinese pragmatics has flourished and provided important materials for the revision and supplementation of international pragmatics theories. However, the development of Chinese pragmatics has lagged behind the international studies of the same kind. This is closely related to the fact that in the past, the study of Chinese pragmatics was “theoretical but not experimental”; it is also related to the fact that pragmatics requires researchers to have the ability to study pragmatics theoretically, experiment phonetically, and even experiment psycho-cognitively. At present, more and more researchers are turning to the study of Chinese pragmatic rhythm, and the results are becoming more and more abundant.

3.2. Pragmatic Features of Shanghai Wu

The Shanghai dialect has a high status among Chinese dialects and differs greatly

from the northern official Chinese phonology. The Shanghai dialect has received a lot of attention from scholars because of its phonological features. The phonological studies of Shanghai dialect have been rich in domestic and international phonological researches, including a large number of research results containing the phonological use of Shanghai dialect (Qian, 2003; Xu, 2006; Xu and Tang, 1988), which provide a solid corpus basis for this study. According to the previous studies (Qian, 2003; Xu, 2006; Xu and Tang, 1988), Shanghai Wu has the following well recognized special pragmatic features when compared with Putonghua pragmatic features: 1) a much higher frequency for the use of politeness technique; 2) preferring of prosodic emphasis as pragmatic cues; 3) less sensitivity to pragmatic power from age or social status.

At the same time, another group of study has focused on study the development of pragmatic features of Shanghai Wu. The unique attraction of Shanghai pragmatic prosody research lies in the fact that Shanghai culture is a melting pot culture where the culture of the sea and immigrants meet and rub shoulders, and also in the phonological variation in the rapid development of the city. For example, Qu Weiguo and Chen Liufang (2001) point out that the use of direct thanks is significantly more frequent in Shanghai Wu than in the past; and indirect thanks also appears to be used in combination with direct thanks.

However, till now the studies of Shanghai dialect's pragmatics related issues share the following disadvantages in common: 1) Lack of systematic design. Compared to the systematic nature of Mandarin pragmatics research, Shanghai pragmatics research focuses on individual linguistic phenomena and does not systematically investigate pragmatics as a single object. 2) Lack of psychological explanation. Pragmatic contexts are usually divided into greetings and farewells, invitations, suggestions, refusals, and complaints. Shanghai discourse pragmatics studies usually focus on recording the words used in the above contexts, focusing on the recording of lexical expressions. Experimental pragmatics, on the other hand, requires exploring the meaning and behavioral goals of speech in various pragmatic contexts. 3) Descriptive, rather than experimental. The existing studies on the pragmatics of Shanghai Wu are mainly descriptive, focusing on recording pragmatic phenomena, but not relating them to psychology and human brain cognition, which separates pragmatic phenomena from human cognition and Shanghai cultural cognition and loses the linguistic ecology.

4. Future for Shanghai Pragmatic Prosody

In terms of theoretical research, no systematic and experimental research has been conducted on the rhythm of Shanghai dialects. The study of Shanghai pragmatic rhythm is of great theoretical importance for the improvement of Chinese pragmatic theory, and is an integral part of the study of Chinese dialects. By comparing Shanghai pragmatic rhythm, Mandarin pragmatic rhythm, and the pragmatic rhythm of other languages, it is important to build a systematic theory of the pragmatic rhythm interface. At the same time, the experimental study of Shanghai pragmatic prosody in the context of social culture and

urban ecology is important for the construction of a systematic pragmatic prosody interface theory.

In terms of practical application, the establishment of an “acoustic database of Shanghai pragmatic prosody” has contributed to the documentation of contemporary Shanghai pragmatic prosody. English, Dutch, and German all have a tradition of building historical socio-linguistic audio databases, especially in the Netherlands, where the “Centennial Socio-Phonetic Database” was officially completed in 2009. Professor Gu Yuguo also organized the establishment of the “Mandarin Socio-pragmatics Database” in 2015, which includes the “Socio-prosody Audio Database”. However, there is still no “Shanghai dialect socio-pragmatics database” and no “Shanghai dialect rhyming audio database” in Shanghai dialect research. In the long run, the development of Shanghai in the past hundred years has led to the establishment of an “acoustic database on the rhythm of Shanghai dialects”, which has a positive application.

In terms of contemporary significance, this kind of research can help AI to participate in cultural propaganda and take on a more “transmission discourse ecology” and “leading discourse governance” role in the era. The Shanghai dialect is constantly appearing in movies, and cultural propaganda using Shanghai dialect is taking over the world. The dialect is not a barrier, but a vitality and enthusiasm of culture. How to make the speech output of AI have the rhythm of Shanghai dialect, so as to be more in line with the character of Shanghai, is the key point to be tackled, and is the road to cultural development of Shanghai mega-city.

To sum up, the study of Shanghai dialect’s pragmatic prosody and its mechanism of action, relying on social pragmatics and experimental phonetics, has the property of neo-descriptivist interdisciplinary research. The study of Shanghai pragmatic prosody is of great theoretical significance for the improvement of Chinese pragmatic theory, and is an indispensable part of the study of Chinese dialects. Therefore, future studies would benefit by the following aspects, which is of great significance for the construction of a systematic pragmatic prosody interface theory: 1) Developing more production and perception based experimental research on pragmatic prosody of Shanghai Wu; 2) Discussion about the systematic theoretic frame of pragmatic prosody of Shanghai Wu; 3) Construction of “Shanghai Wu’s socio-pragmatics database”; 4) The comparison of Shanghai pragmatic prosody, Mandarin pragmatic prosody, and the pragmatic prosody of other languages.

Acknowledgements

Funds of University of Shanghai for Science and Technology for College Students’ Innovative Entrepreneurial Training Plan Program.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Couper-Kuhlen, E. (1986). *An Introduction to English Prosody*. Niemeyer
- Culpeper, J., Derek, B., & Wichmann, A. (2003). Impoliteness Revisited: With Special Reference to Dynamic and Prosodic Aspects. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35, 1545-1579. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(02\)00118-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(02)00118-2)
- House, J. (2006). Constructing a Context with Intonation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 38, 1542-1558. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2005.07.005>
- Huang, L. H., & He, A. W. (2013). Research on the Use of Shanghai Language by Students in Shanghai Universities and Its Preservation and Transmission. *Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, No. 2, 30-31.
- Nilsenova, M., & Swerts, M. (2012). Prosodic Adaptation in Language Learning. In J. Romero-Trillo (Ed.), *Pragmatics and Prosody in English Language Teaching* (pp. 77-96). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-3883-6_6
- Qian, N. R. (2003). *History of Shanghai Language Development*. Shanghai Educational Publishing House.
- Qu, W. G., & Chen, L. F. (2001). A Contrastive Pragmatic Analysis of Chinese-English Speech Acts of Appreciation. In *Proceedings of the Seventh National Pragmatics Society*.
- Wichmann, A. (2004). The Intonation of Please-Requests: A Corpus-Based Study. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 36, 1521-1549. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2004.03.003>
- Wilson, D., & Wharton, T. (2006). Relevance and Prosody. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 38, 1559-1579. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2005.04.012>
- Xu, B. H., & Tang, Z. Z. (1988). *Shanghai Regional Dialects*. Shanghai Educational Publishing House.
- Xu, D. M. (2006). *Language Variation in Change*. Shanghai Educational Publishing House.