Discourse Coherence in Ancient Chinese Texts: A Case Study of the Tao Te Ching

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Abstract: Taking the *Tao Te Ching* as the object of study, this research explores the role of chapter coherence in the study of ancient Chinese texts and its theoretical significance. Based on Hume's three principles of association (similarity, spatial and temporal proximity, and causality), the article analyses how chapter coherence helps to reconstruct the logical structure and philosophical connotation of the text in the light of the experimental interpretation of the sentence reading controversy of the *Tao Te Ching*. By analysing the sentence-reading controversies of the passages *'Namelessness is the beginning of heaven and earth; name is the mother of all things', 'There is always no desire to see its beauty; there is always a desire to see its mere existence', and 'The Tao is impulsive, but the use of it is not in abundance'*, this paper reveals how chapter coherence helps to reconstruct the logical structure and philosophical connotation of the text, and explores its deeper significance for understanding Laozi's philosophical ideas of 'to have' and 'to have not'. The study suggests that although sentence reading may affect readers' intuitive understanding, chapter coherence analysis allows for a more rational treatment of the text, optimising its readability while preserving its core philosophical connotations. In addition, the article also explores the value of chapter coherence research in the interpretation of implicit logical relations in ancient Chinese, pointing out its importance in lowering the threshold of textual comprehension and facilitating the dissemination of ancient ideas.

Keywords: Discourse coherence relationship, languages, *Tao Te Ching*, Hume

1. Introduction

Hume once proposed in his A Treatise of Human Nature that the coherence of human thinking originates from the natural connection in people's ideas. He put forward three principles of connection: *'Resemblance', 'Contiguity in Time or Place'* and *'Cause and Effect'*. Building on these categories, researchers have further subdivided *'Resemblance'* into Parallel, Overview, Example, Elaboration, Exception and Contrast; *'Contiguity in Time or Place'* into Occasion and Background; and *'Cause and Effect'* into Explanation, Result, Violated Expectation, and Denial of Preventer [1-3]. This kind of textual coherence study, which makes a distinction according to the coherence of thinking, helps to restore people's thinking to the author's logic, and makes it easier for readers to approach the work itself when they have a certain understanding of the background of the work's time.

The use of punctuation in Chinese writing emerged much later than the composition of its literary and philosophical works. Early readers had to be trained in the practice of 'sentence reading' in order to comprehend the text, as one key feature of many ancient Chinese works—such as The Analects of

Confucius and *Tao Te Ching*—is the absence of explicit sentence boundaries. Obviously, this could easily lead to misinterpretation and misunderstanding by later generations and even by the readers of the time. Based on the three principles of connection proposed by Hume, we may attempt to re-interpret these ancient texts from a new perspective.

2. An experimental interpretation of the translation debate in the Tao Te Ching

2.1. "The beginning of nothing, the mother of all things"

In a work that attempts to communicate reason to the masses, the first chapter often carries the burden of presenting a central argument. In the first chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*, a major debate arises concerning the placement of sentence breaks. Two key arguments are frequently discussed: the first concerns "there is a name for the beginning of all things, and no name for the mother of all things", and the second concerns "there is always no desire to see the marvelous, and there is always a desire to see the mere". There are two common interpretations: The first reading is: *"Nothing is the beginning of all things; something is the mother of all things"*[4], which should be translated as *"nothing is the beginning of all things;" "something is also the beginning of all things"*[4]. This is a very reader-friendly way of understanding, and it is often difficult for people to understand what something and non-being really stand for. Interpretation 2 is *"having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth; having a name, it is the Mother of all things".*[4]

The core difference between Interpretation 1 and Interpretation 2 is the understanding and distribution of the term "name", and the break between "something" and "non-being" highlights Laozi's emphasis on the idea of having and not having. Laozi's central idea, that "everything is born from existence, existence is born from nothing", aligns more intuitively with the interpretation that breaks the sentence between the famous and the nameless. In my opinion, this way better fits the discourse system of sentence structure, as Laozi's statement, *"the name can be named, the very name"*[4] this sentence can be used to understand the "name" understanding and distribution. This sentence can be understood as the background of the following namelessness and namelessness in the next sentence. After Laozi put forward "name" he paved the way for the connection between namelessness and all things in the following text, which leads to the following section.

Moreover, when we understand this sentence from the perspective of having or not having a name, it seems to be talking about the name, but in fact, the central idea has never been separated from having or not having, and such an understanding is in line with the continuity of space and time, and it only takes a little bit of thought not to hinder people from understanding the core idea. In fact, regardless of how the sentences are broken, Laozi's understanding of existence and non-existence remains intact. This is also the essence of the sentence less reading of the *Tao Te Ching*, that no matter how the sentence is broken, it can be restored to the core idea, that is, to distinguish between existence and non-existence.

2.2. Always have no desire to see the good, always have the desire to see the bad

There are two ways to interpret the sentence break in this passage. One version renders it as "Always without desire we must be found, if its deep mystery we would sound; but if desire always within us be, its outer fringe is all that we are"[5]. Another version is "Always without desire we must be found, If its deep mystery we would sound; But if desire always within us be"[5], Its outer fringe is all that we the key to this divergence lies in how the word "desire" connects with both the preceding and following elements of the sentence. If the translation is "always without, desire to see its wonderful; always with to see its mere"[5], the interpretation is "We often want to understand the mystery of the Tao from "nothing"; and we want to understand the end of all things from "something"[5]. In this mode of translation, the word "desire" acts as a logical conjunction. This not only aligns with the

overarching theme of distinguishing between being and non-being, but also reflects a structure of the logic of dispersion. Here, the word "desire" leads the following phrases to play the role of additional explanation. "Always without desire we must be found, If its deep mystery we would sound; but if desire always within us be, its outer fringe is all that we shall see"[5] is to be understood as "From the absence of desire we must sound, if its deep mystery we would sound; but if desire always within us be, its outer fringe is all that we shall see"[5]. To understand the phrase in this way is to explore the impact of desire and non-desire on human understanding of nature. In fact, after further reflection, Laozi's core idea of the difference between having and not having has not changed with the position of the word "desire", but has merely moved from the surface of the word to the back of the text, requiring deeper reflection to understand the text. The difference between the two lies only in people's first intuitive understanding of the text, but even so, the translation mode formed by different people's understanding of the coherent relationship between the words still creates people's divergent thinking about the text, but this phenomenon is not bad, it enriches the diversity of human thinking.

2.3. The way is impulsive and the use of it may not be abundant

Several paraphrases are "The Tao is (like) the emptiness of a vessel; and in our employment of it we must be on our guard against all fulness" and "The Tao is (like) the emptiness of a vessel; and in our employment of it we must be on our guard against all fulness" and "The Tao is (like) the emptiness of a vessel; and in our employment of it we must be on our guard against all fulness"[5]. Here the word The word "冲" is translated as "vessel", comparing the Tao's essence to the hollow part of an empty vessel, indicating that it is empty and formless in itself, but the Tao's effect is indeed infinite. Another way of breaking up the sentence is to separate the Tao from its original meaning, which is still the same as that mentioned by Laozi in the fourth and fifth chapters of the Tao Te Ching, "Of greatest fulness, deemed a void"[5]. The discursive coherence of the fourth chapter of Tao Te Ching, "The Tao is impulsive but not full"[5], is established through three core mechanisms: syntactic contrast, metaphorical extension and negative logic. The linguistic strategies are deeply isomorphic with philosophical expressions. From the syntactic level, the contrastive juxtaposition of Dao Chong (道冲) and yong zhi huo bu ying (用之或不盈) is formed through the conjunction er(而). The former uses Chong (冲)-interpreted via zhong (盅), a metaphor for a hollow vessel, to point out the emptiness of the Dao, while the latter uses bu ying (不盈) (inexhaustible) to highlight its functionality. The reader is forced to understand the dialectical nature of Tao in the semantic tension. At the semantic level, "Chong" serves as the core metaphor throughout the chapter. Its container metaphor (emptiness can hold everything) and dynamic metaphor (the continuous generation of "use") jointly explain the causal chain of "emptiness-functionality", while the negative metaphor of "emptiness-functionality" is the most important one in the chapter. While the negative expression ("or not full") reinforces the transcendental character of the Tao by subverting the mundane cognition that "fullness is usefulness". At the chapter level, this sentence constitutes an exemplary progression with the later phrase "The abundance is like the origin of all things", which extends from the abstract attribute of "Chong" ("rushing") to the original status of "the origin of all things". Through the behavioural metaphor of "thwarting its sharpness and resolving its disputes", the reconciliatory function of the Dao is visualised as a dynamic process of dissolving oppositions and restoring balance. Together, these elements construct a coherent argumentative structure that moves from attribute → function → essence. In addition, the whole chapter echoes the paradoxical logic of the first sentence with the repetition of the negative word ("seems or exists"), which not only strengthens the transcendental nature of the Dao, but also maps the generation-restoration law of the Dao through the circularity of the linguistic structure (virtual→use→virtual), and ultimately achieves the in-depth unity of the discourse forms and philosophical connotations [6].

3.   Discussion

One of the fundamental issues in discourse studies is the phenomenon of coherence. In the discourse research system, coherence is described as the way in which discourse "hangs together", where parts are related to other parts. In the English system, such coherence is closely related to grammar, unlike Chinese, which is not a grammar-oriented language [7]. Therefore, the interpretation of Chinese relies heavily on the speaker/hearer's knowledge of the real world [8].According to Li and Thompson, topic is one that satisfies the following conditions: semantically, it sets a 'naming frame for the content of the sentence' and it must be either definite or generic; syntactically, it appears in the initial position of the sentence and it can be separated from the rest of the sentence by a pause or a stopper [9]. This is the problem of sentence reading that we are concerned with. In Chinese, there are a lot of coherent relations that are hidden by connecting words or suggestive phrases, and such hidden relations are very much dependent on the reader's comprehension, which is also known as the Chinese proverb 'Words have an end, but the meaning is infinite'. According to several cases of different sentence breaks and different translations of *Tao Te Ching*, we can briefly summarise a phenomenon: in *Tao Te Ching*, the feature of its non-sentence-reading text creates a lot of debates about its translation, but these debates will never affect people's understanding of Laozi's thought, and the significance of sentence-reading through the analysis of coherent relationships lies in the question of how to deal with the text more in line with the rational and logical approach of people. The significance of sentence reading through the analysis of coherent relations lies in how to deal with the text more rationally and logically.

4.   Conclusion -- the relevance of discourse coherence relationships to the study of old Chinese language

Some years ago, many thousands of years old Pali texts were unearthed at Mawangdui in China, which contain many different versions of the *Tao Te Ching*, and these different versions are another big challenge for the study of ancient Chinese. By examining the logical-semantic connections between adjacent or non-adjacent sentences and paragraphs in the discourse, we can make a more scientific and clearer understanding and analysis of the Chinese language, which relies more on the implicit connections between deeper propositions than the surface grammatical structure, through the means of explicit articulation or implicit logical reasoning. This allows Chinese, a language that relies more on implicit connections between deeper propositions than on surface grammatical structures, to be understood and analysed in a more scientific and clearer way by means of explicit articulation or implicit logical reasoning.

   The examples given in this paper all demonstrate the obvious question: if these ways of reading ancient Chinese texts do not affect people's comprehension, is it meaningless to help texts to be read through discursive relations? It can be argued that such analysis is not meaningless, but it is indeed more helpful to the public's understanding to analyse and disconnect rationally by using the study of discourse coherence based on the principle of connection created in accordance with the coherence of people's thinking. Without changing the subject's mind, the selection of sentences that are more in line with the natural discourse system of human beings can be very useful in popularising and promoting these precious ideas. Simply put, this means lowering the threshold of comprehension of the text by means of a formulaic treatment.

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