A Sociolinguistics Study of “OK” as a Discourse Marker

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Abstract. Language is never an isolated or closed system, which may always related with other languages in different forms. Due to the high degree of contact between Chinese and English, “OK” becomes a frequently used word in spoken language and undergoing pragmatic variations in the Chinese context. Sociolinguistics is the sub-field of linguistics that studies the language and society between the use of language and the social structure in which the user of language live. It is found that there exists differences among different age, gender and occupation groups in the use and understanding of “OK.” By analyzing the questionnaire results from the random samples of 321 people, the paper aims to study the relationships between language usage and social factors, and the use of “OK” as a discourse marker. It is hoped that the study can help people have a deeper understanding of the various pragmatic variation of daily conversation in Chinese context.

Introduction

Under the influence of globalization, more frequent communication among people from different countries and cultures occurs. As the most influential foreign language in China, English exerts great impact on Chinese. In the long process of English-Chinese contact and the influence of some social factors, like many English words, “OK” has been borrowed by Chinese and becomes quite popular in our daily life, especially among young people. Meanwhile, many scholars have started their research on the use of “OK,” but the studies from the perspective of Sociolinguistics are relatively few.

As the leader of the study of language variation, Labov [6] greatly inspired other linguists to explore language variation and social factors, such as gender, age, social status and other influences on language use. Xu Hongliang [15] studied the function of “OK” as a discourse marker from the perspective of Sociolinguistics. Yuan Zhoumin [16] studied Pragmatic Variations on the use of the “OK” in the spoken language contact under the Chinese context through examining the different social classes and its use among different student groups, but there was no specific analysis of the types of variation based on the questionnaire survey. At present, there are still not enough relevant researches on the overall use of “OK.” particularly relating to its specific usage and differences among different social groups. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the pragmatic variation of “OK” in Chinese context, and introduces the social factors such as age, gender, and occupation into the study of “OK” from the aspect of Sociolinguistics.

A questionnaire survey is used as a supplement to this research. The subjects chosen for the research are the people who live around the Hubei Minzu University. After finishing the questionnaire design, the author contacted her friends, classmates, schoolmates, teachers, acquaintances and some strangers who live, study or work in or around the Hubei Minzu University. Since the majority of them are either the author’s classmates or schoolmates, and the questionnaire is anonymous, they were glad to finish the copy with their true attitude. Therefore, the validity of questionnaire was enhanced. All in all, 350 questionnaires were delivered, and 321 copies were returned back, with 15 copies unfinished and 14 not done as required, thus the valid copies accounted for 84.43%. The factors that influences the use of “OK” in China plays an important role in interpersonal communication, consequently the study of the use of “OK” has vital theoretical and practical significance.

Theoretically, the results of the present study are expected to cast a new light on the usage and
function of “OK” under the influence of various social factors, and enhance the research in the field of Sociolinguistics and the variation of loanwords. Practically, the information of the frequencies and pragmatic variation of “OK” across different social factors can be conducive to the proper use of “OK” in interpersonal communication, and are benefit to reveal the influence of different social factors on verbal communication.

Literature Review

The development of the word “OK” has a long history, which was first recorded in the year 1839 [9]. With the increasing economic development and cultural communication, language, as a communication tool, inevitably contacts with each other and leads to language contact between different nations. As one of the outcome of language contact, this discourse marker attracts much attention from scholars both in China and western countries.

Many researchers in China and western countries have conducted relevant studies on “OK.” Cheshire thought that language variation was caused by linguistic factors and extra linguistic factors. Linguistic factors refer to the changes of language itself, such as language structure. The extra linguistic factors that cause language change are social variables such as age, gender and social class [11]. He Ziran [12] once discussed the word “OK” in his article from the perspective of pragmatics and variation, which has pointed out that all the uses of “OK” and the extended meaning is the result of language variation and development.

Language is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a social phenomenon. The Ninth International Congress on Linguistics held in 1964 marked the preliminary establishment of Sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics, as its name implies, is an interdisciplinary study of the relationship between linguistics and sociology. Blaise, an American linguist, put forward the covariance theory of language and social structure. According to this theory, there is a covariant relationship between language and society. They are closely linked and interact with each other [11]. However, there are still few studies that investigate the overall use situation, specific use situation, usage of “OK” in different social groups or as a discourse marker. Discourse marker provides a processing cue on how the unit they accompany is to be understood or interpreted within a given communicative context. It situates an utterance within the communicative context in which it is produced in a wider sense, it is related with linguistic context and may establish relations between action sequences across larger stretches of discourse (Crible and Cuenca, 2017: 153). Therefore, this paper aims to take the English word “OK” as the research object, investigates the difference use of “OK” in Chinese context, and specifically discusses the use of “OK” in difference groups or as a discourse marker, which will be helpful for the study of the acceptance and recognition of “OK” in Chinese context.

The Use of “OK” by Different Groups

By Different Age Groups

Age as one of the social factors, plays a vital role in language variation study. Age stratification as one of linguistic variables can reflect change in the speech of the individual, and change in the speech of the community as it moves through historical change when he or she moves through age-grading [1]. Labov pointed out how difficult it is to get the right kinds of data on which to base claims about linguistic change in progress and how easy it is to make either incorrect predictions or false claims. In the past, linguists thought that language change cannot be observed directly. Only a comparison of different language states can reflect the changes. However, sociolinguistics find that language synchronic change leads to language diachronic change which results from it [14]. Therefore, the progress of language change and variation is reflected in the social variable. Apart from the most significant social variables above, other social factors such as gender and occupations are also should be paid attention to in the analysis of language variation.

From Table 1, we can draw a conclusion that Age is one of the social factors that influence the
use of the word “OK” in our daily life. In this table, we research the factor of age from four stages. Most people among the age of 12-24 are students that studied at school. They might be affected by their teachers’ pet phrase in their daily teaching process, or from TV shows, English Movies. Thus the younger generation are more active in using the word in their daily life and founded to be with higher frequency. Therefore, people at the age of 12-24 use it much more and show a higher level of acceptance.

![Table 1. The Use of “OK” by Different Age Groups.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12-24</td>
<td>64.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>14.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-55</td>
<td>10.59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;55</td>
<td>9.97%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**By Different Gender Groups**

Gender is a vital social factor that influences language use. Gender differences existing in language are involved in various aspects of language: phonetics, lexicon, grammar, semantics, discourse style, etc. The study of language and gender began in the year 1975. Since then, many scholars have contributed to it. They discussed the relationship between language and gender. Labov’s Socio-phonological surveys, especially his study on Martha’s Vineyard and his New York Study [6] commences the investigation of gender-specific language variation, and observes that men use more non-standard forms than women [1]. Scholars’ views vary on possible explanations for gender difference in language use. Generally speaking, there are three approaches for it, which is deficit approach, dominance approach, difference approach. George Lakoff, the representative of the deficit theory, in her book published in 1975, claims that distinct social roles account for different language use between male and females.

![Table 2. The Use of “OK” by Different Gender Groups.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>75.39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24.61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the Table 2, we can find that about 75.39% of Females use “OK” and 24.61% of Males use “OK”, and we know that gender is one of the social factors that influence the use of the word “OK” in our daily life. In contrast to men, females are more likely to use “OK” in their daily life. We know that females are usually better at speaking than males. Lakoff, the representative of the deficit theory, in her book published in 1975, claims that distinct social roles account for different language use between males and females. The reason why men and women speak differently is that differences are implemented during the socialization process [8]. Thus the use of “OK” is varied in functions according to the influence of social factors, in this process and males use “OK” less frequently than females. Above all, we know that gender plays an important role on the use of some colloquial expression.

**By People with Different Occupations**

Occupation is an important variable in Sociolinguistics. The study of the relationship between language and occupation expands the scope of Sociolinguistics to explore the use of language from the perspective of function. Therefore, its contribution to linguistics and Sociolinguistics itself is self-evident. This paper studies the use of “OK” in different occupational groups randomly surveyed in a selected university, and the results to a certain extent can reflect the use of “OK” and the acceptance and recognition of foreign language in the surveyed area.

From Table 3, we can see that there exists different ratios between the uses of “OK” in different
occupations. Students possess the ratio of 53.58%, teachers possess the ratio of 11.21%, and staff possess the ratio of 17.76%. When refers to the factors of occupation that influence the use of the word “OK” in our daily life. As the popularity of education in English, almost all of the students have learned English or still learn English as their major, when they are college students or postgraduates. Therefore people who are students or teachers in school use the higher proportion of pragmatic variation of “OK” owing to their status awareness.

Above all, there exist differences between the use of “OK” and social factors, which might be resulted from the following factors. Firstly, linguistic internal factor, since the reform and opening up, the close contact between Chinese and English, coupled with people’s attention to English, has strengthened the penetration of English into Chinese, and the use of English loanwords in Chinese has been increasing. As a product of the contact between English and Chinese, the loanword “OK” has undergone corresponding changes under the influence of Chinese context and people's habits of usage. Secondly, psychological motivation factor, “OK,” as a foreign word, has a foreign color. When people use words, they tend to pursue fashion change and simple social psychology because they are not satisfied with the old patterns and forms. For young people, this phenomenon is more obvious. Peer pressure is also a factor contributing to its widespread use or even language variation. As the medium of communication, group members will follow the public to use a language phenomenon because of the pressure of group identity. Thirdly, educational process, TV programs, radio, newspapers and movies also play an indispensable role in the dissemination of ideas and information.

Table 3. The Use of “OK” by Different Occupations Groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>53.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>11.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>17.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retiree</td>
<td>6.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“OK” as a Discourse Marker in Chinese

“OK” as a Transition Marker

Transitional markers are mainly used to connect the logical and semantic relations between clauses and help readers understand the semantic relations of discourse transition. The use of transitional markers involves the author's combing of textual structure and content, which demonstrates the cognitive skills of elaboration, analysis, evaluation and reasoning in critical thinking. Transitional markers also reflect the clarity, logic and profundity of thinking, which is the symbol of speculative ability [13].

As a transition marker, the use of “OK” is at a more global level of conversational organization, that is well along with okay and so are used as a pre-closing device, offering its recipient a chance to reinstate an earlier or an unexpanded topic, or to open another round of talk, prior to conversational closure (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). It is suggested that “OK” can also shift conversation to shared topics of mutual concern in the whole process of conversation.

No matter whether “OK” is employed to begin a new topic, and is used to proceed to a topic which he or she left just now, or even close a topic, it all can be classified into the same category as a transition marker, which structures the frame of the discourse, during which “OK” is always used as a marker to arouse the audience’s attention to the speaker’s further utterances. The Chinese equivalents of “OK” with such function are mainly “Come here,” “OK,” or “That’s it,” etc.

“OK” as an Introduction Marker

“OK” can also act as an introduction marker in drawing forth a question, an explanation or even a conclusion, in which the speaker or hearer aims to unfold his or her interest in their partner’s words by asking something or answering the partner’s questions. In such a context, “OK” is always equivalent to “Okay,” “good,” “sure,” “all right,” “actually,” “in fact,” “it’s fine,” “so,” etc.
In this part, we will have a general introduction about “OK” from the following three aspects, introducing a question, an explanation, and a conclusion. Firstly, “OK” can be adopted to introduce a question, which usually signals that the speaker has received the information and is interested in the ongoing topic. In other words, he or she concerns their partner’s former words and expects to get the detailed answers from the hearer. Secondly, many linguists have proved that “OK” can be used to introduce the speaker’s explanation when he or she tends to make something clear in order that the audience will pay much more attention to what the speaker will say next. In such a case, the use of “OK” is usually used to answer a question with a lengthy explanation in the forthcoming discourse, and quite often, it is followed by a series of plans or reasons, such as in the sequence of “first,… second,…third,…etc.” Thirdly, being similar to the pragmatic function of introducing questions and explanations, using “OK” to introduce a conclusion also suggests the receipt of the information from the speaker. The difference lies in the fact that, in the present case, the speaker tends to perfect his or her utterances by a conclusion drawn from the former information. Besides the conclusion that “OK” introduces in an utterance or an activity, sometimes, there always follows some evaluation of the speaker.

“OK” as a Contemplation Marker

In our daily conversation, language is not perfect but with flaws and pauses. When the speaker is uncertain about what to say next or hesitates in continuing the conversation for some reasons, he or she would like to employ “OK” to mark the pause in conversation and also to suggest that the speaker is not ready to offer the information yet. In this way, the use of the “OK” can successfully avoid a long pause in the conversation, and most importantly, enable the speaker to think over or consult themselves before proceeding, concerning the hearer’s response toward the coming utterances. In such a context, the function of “OK” is equivalent to “em,” “so,” “well,” “actually,” “and then,” etc.

One subcategory of contemplation is the pragmatic function of the DM “OK” as a filler. In other words, “OK” can probably be adopted when the speaker actually has nothing to say, or is seeking a word to indicate a procedural meaning to the hearer, during which “OK” suggests the hearer that the speaker’s own competence to make the optimally relevant response is compromised in some way, therefore the hearer had better think about it during the process of their inter-locution. In this respect, the concept of insufficiency or failure to achieve the type of coherence normally anticipated by the hearer is always clear-cut.

However, in most of the cases, the hearer tends to recognize that any inadequacy in the response mainly attributes to the speaker’s ignorance or verbal incompetence. What’s more, the frequency of occurrence of “OK” on close proximity to uh, er, or um, etc. is highly likely to further reinforce this interpretation, that is to say, “OK” is a frequent marker of uncertainty, which can provide the speaker with more time to contemplate. This function is always displayed after a question, and often collocates with perhaps, maybe, or I think, etc.

“OK” as a Turn-taking Marker

In the process of communication, the right to speak is called the floor. Having control of this right to speak at any time is called a turn. Turn-taking refers to anyone that can attempt to get control of any situation where control is not fixed in advance. Conversation system is necessarily a set of conventions for getting turns, keeping them, or giving them away. This system is needed mostly in the situation where there is a possible change in someone who has the turn. Any possible change-of-turn point is called a TRP, or Transition Relevance Place [3].

The discourse marker “OK”, which frequently appears in transitional positions, can possibly achieve the pragmatic function by virtue of bidding for the floor, holding the floor, and relinquishing the floor as a turn-taking marker. In this environment, the Chinese equivalents of “OK” are mainly “good,” “nice,” “well,” “sure,” “it’s enough,” “actually,” “forget it,” etc.
Conclusion

With the development of the Globalization, the use of “OK” has greatly varied under the influence of the mandarin Chinese as well as the Chinese social context. Thus the pragmatic variation of OK, used within Chinese spoken language context, occurs in people’s daily life.

Based on previous study, this research analyzed the actual use of “OK” as a discourse marker from the perspective of Sociolinguistics and the pragmatic variation of “OK” in Chinese context. This paper also explored the social functions of “OK” as a transition marker, a discourse marker, an introduction marker, a contemplation marker, and a turn-taking marker.

The use of “OK” is varied in functions according to the influence of social factors. This study will offer reference to the development of pragmatic variation and the non-native speakers’ receptivity of the loanwords in Chinese context.

References