

# A Pragmatic Study of the Usages of Chinese Parenthetical Expression ‘wo shuo shen me lai zhe’

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**Abstract:** Parenthetical expressions are non-negligible in second language learning. By making a questionnaire survey and doing online interviews to 20 foreign students who are intermediate and advanced Chinese learners in China, the writer tried to find answers to two questions about a special Chinese parenthetical expression ‘wo shuo shen me lai zhe’. The writer pointed out what the literal meaning and implicature of this PE were and how Gicean cooperative principle and the theory of implicature could analyze it. Finally, possible methods of teaching and learning Chinese PEs were proposed in the paper.

**Keywords:** Chinese parenthetical expressions, wo shuo shen me lai zhe, cooperative principle, the theory of implicature

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Parenthetical expressions are an interesting language phenomenon, often utilized to make additional explanation, summary or conclusion of a sentence, sometimes to express the speaker’s attitude or opinion, at other times to emphasize and draw the listener’s attention, or to change the topic, all of which can help to achieve the cohesion of an utterance. Grubb (2016) claims that each parenthetical, though not contributing to the proposition itself, does contribute to the utterance.

Parenthetical expressions (PEs), parentheses or parentheticals, though defined in varied ways, are considered to possess similar meanings for many scholars, and most of the definitions begin with their pragmatic or semantic functions. According to Rouchota (1998), parenthetical expressions are linguistic constructions, words, phrases or sentences, which occupy a syntactically peripheral position in a sentence, are typically separated from their host clause by comma intonation, and which function as a gloss or comment on some aspect of the meaning (or the form) of that sentence. Dehe (2009) proposes that parentheticals are expressions of varying length and complexity, syntactic category and function, which are interpolated into the current string of the utterance. For Kodah (2013), parenthetical expressions, by their nature, can be found in parentheses, in opposition, separated from the main clause by two commas, or by dashes, if in the middle of a clause; or by either a comma or a dash and a full-stop, if put at the end of a main clause.

In China, scholars’ study of Chinese parenthetical expressions could date back to the 1950s. Most of the early Chinese scholars agreed that Chinese PEs are a special grammatical part, which are different from other syntactic components in a sentence, independent to the main sentence structure and can be utilized in our communication. Wang (1952, 1958) classified parentheses as a special sentence pattern, which seemed redundant in form, but made language more affettuoso full of twists and turns. Lv and Zhu (1952) mentioned three forms of parentheses in modern Chinese, like ‘mou mou shuo’ (*According to sb.*), ‘ju shuo’ (*It is said that*), ‘te bie shi’ (*especially*). In the past 20 years, more scholars mentioned parentheses in the study of discourse markers. Li (2010) and Li et al (2018) have included parentheses in their study of discourse markers and published several articles. However, limitations still exist.

First of all, there are more than 300 parentheses in modern Chinese, which makes it difficult to analyze each specific one, so scholars will have difficulties obtaining an understanding of the panorama of parentheses, including their structure types, semantic categories, etc. What’s more, parentheses are a collection of more individuality than commonness, which is mainly manifested in the imbalance of its

internal constituents. Some parentheses have simple and clear meanings, which are the summation of their component meanings, while the meaning of some others is not simply the sum of their constituent meanings, but the complexity of their meanings influenced by various factors. Researches on aspects like above ones are not detailed enough. In addition, research methods are limited. Saussure put forward the most basic two relations of linguistic symbols - combination relation and aggregation relation. Combination relation is the relation between symbols in the chain of linguistic symbols, and aggregation relation is the relation between linguistic symbols with some common characteristics. In the past, only one parenthesis itself was studied, such as its structure, position and function, which is one-sided and isolated. We should also study its position in the language system, such as its co-occurrence with which language components, and its semantic connection with the clauses before and after; in addition, in terms of aggregation, what are the differences between it and the parenthesis with the same function, and what are the similarities between it and the parenthesis with the opposite function, From a macro perspective, how does it relate to other types of parentheses. Finally, at present, there is no much research on the parenthesis '*wo shuo shen me lai zhe*'. The writer attempts to study the usage conditions, semantic patterns and functional origins of this parenthesis, so as to have a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the parenthesis.

'*wo shuo shen me lai zhe*' in Chinese has the same literal meaning of '*what did I say*' in English but with the implications as '*I told you so*' or '*Just like what I said*'. Zhu and Guan (2016) studied '*wo shuo shen me lai zhe*' as a discourse marker in perspective of its function and forming mechanism and proposed that the use of this parenthetical expression was to make the listener aware that the actual situation is consistent with the speaker's expectation. The formation of this expected message marker has been much influenced by the Cooperative Principle (especially the maxim of quantity), pragmatic inference, and the solidification of the inferred meaning. Lv (2011) analyzed it in terms of its pragmatic function of expressing the speaker's complaint to the hearer by repeating his word. However, in learning Chinese as a foreign language, foreign students will inevitably encounter these language phenomena, which will affect the effectiveness of our communication. This study takes implicature as its main theme and expands the discussion on second language learners' comprehension of them, especially through the example of '*wo shuo shen me lai zhe*'. Bouton (1988, 1992) and Roever (2005) have made thorough studies on the use of implicature for second language learners. However, detailed discussions need to be conducted about comprehension strategies. Smaller studies on implicature in second language settings have been conducted by many researchers like Murray (2011), Kubuta (1995), but they also did not adequately address the strategies of second language learners. This study attempts to fill the gaps by explaining, in detail, the strategies second language learners use to understand conversational implicature of Chinese PEs. By conducting interviews to foreign students of different Chinese levels, the writer tried to answer the following two questions: Q1. What are the literal meaning and implicature of '*wo shuo shen me lai zhe*'? Q2. How can Gricean cooperative principles best analyze '*wo shuo shen me lai zhe*'? By answering the two questions, possible suggestions will be proposed to improve efficiency in teaching and learning Chinese parenthetical expressions.

## **1.2 Theoretical Framework**

The theory used in this paper was Gricean cooperative principle (CP). And the theory of implicature which derives via the CP was utilized to explain those learners' failure to understand Chinese CPs correctly.

### **1.2.1 Cooperative Principle**

In *Logic and Conversation*, Grice (1975) observed that when people are talking, what they mean goes beyond the utterance. What's more, the additional meaning is not constant, but means differently in different contexts. *And* is a good example to illustrate this.

Example 1.

- A) He comes in *and* sits down.
- B) Yesterday, I ate three meals *and* took two naps.
- C) Jane was late for school *and* got punished.

In Example 1 A), we can find the addressee can infer that he first comes in then sits down, so *and* expresses the order of two actions. However, we can't find the same function of *and* in B). Here *and* doesn't refer the sequence of the three meals and two naps. While in C), not only sequence of two incidences can be inferred, but also a causation between them can be concluded. To solve this problem,

Grice introduced the Cooperative Principle and four conversational maxims. The four conversational maxims are Maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner which Birner (2013) roughly paraphrased as follows:

- 1) The Maxim of Quantity: Say enough, but don't say too much.
- 2) The Maxim of Quality: Say only what you have reason to believe is true.
- 3) The Maxim of Relation: Say only what is relevant.
- 4) The Maxim of Manner: Be brief, clear, and unambiguous.

She stated that speakers could behave in four ways concerning the CP: observe the maxims, violate the maxims, flout the maxims, and opt out of the maxims. Thomas (2013) states that an implicature stems from the observation that the speaker has said something which is manifestly untrue, combined with the assumption that the CP is in operation. When the second language learners are learning Chinese PEs, the observance and non-observance of the above maxims will affect their understanding of Chinese PEs.

### ***1.2.2 The Theory of Implicature***

Linguists have shown interests in meanings for a long time and most of them agree on what Grice proposed about meaning. Grice (1957) proposed that meanings of a word usually contained a natural meaning and a non-natural meaning. Birner (2013) points out that there exists a distinction between natural and non-natural meaning. According to Grice (1957), implicatures fall into conventional implicature conversational implicature. The observing and violating of the four maxims will result in different conversational implicatures. 'Wo shuo shen me lai zhe?' serves as a good example to illustrate this.

Example 2.

A: 昨天 我 说 什么来着? (*Zuo tian wo shuo shen me lai zhe?*)

Yesterday I said what?

B: 你 说 你 要去 邮局. (*Ni shuo ni yao qu you ju.*)

You said you wanted to go to the post office.

Here in Example 2, the speakers follow the maxim of quantity, in which both of them say enough but not too much, and from this we can infer that 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe' is just an interrogative expression showing no emotion of the speakers.

## **2. Methodology**

### ***2.1 Participants***

The writer originally designed face to face interviews to foreign students who studied Chinese as a foreign language in a Chinese university in Hubei. However, due to the COVID-19 crisis and lockdown, face to face interviews were unrealizable. Instead the writer chose to do questionnaire surveys and online interviews to the same objects who were in their second-year and third-year study of Chinese, regarded as intermediate learners and advanced learners respectively. The writer chose intermediate and advanced learners as objects of research mainly because in China PEs wouldn't be taught until in the higher level of Chinese teaching. 20 students were engaged in this research, in which 10 were intermediate learners and the other 10 were advanced learners. They came from different countries, including Japan, Korea, Iran, Indonesia, Thailand, and Germany, of whom 8 were male students and 12 were female students.

### ***2.2 Research Procedures***

In doing the research, both questionnaire surveys and interviews were conducted. The research procedures were designed as follows.

First of all, all the students were asked to answer the questionnaire. In the questionnaire, the following 10 questions were required to answer with each one given three options.

- 1) Do you know what Chinese parenthetical expressions are?  
A. Yes                                      B. No                                      C. Know a little

- 2) Do you know what the functions of Chinese PEs are?  
 A. Yes                                      B. No                                      C. Know a little
- 3) How much attention do you pay to the new PEs in your textbooks?  
 A. Much                                      B. No                                      C. A little
- 4) How often do you utilize PEs in your daily conversation?  
 A. Often                                      B. Never                                      C. Seldom
- 5) How much can you understand when others utilize PEs in their speech?  
 A. Much                                      B. No                                      C. A little
- 6) How important do you think PEs are?  
 A. Very                                      B. Not                                      C. A little
- 7) What is the best way for you to learn new Chinese PEs?  
 A. Daily communication      B. In-class teaching      C. Other ways
- 8) What does 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe' mean?  
 A. What did I say                      B. I told you so                      C. I don't know
- 9) When can you utilize 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe' ?  
 A. To ask a question                      B. To remind others      C. I don't know
- 10) When utilizing 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe', what should we pay more attention to?  
 A. Its literal meaning                      B. Context                                      C. I don't know

Secondly, in order to get a comprehensive understanding of their proficiency in Chinese PEs, the same questions were asked in an online interview for more details and explanation. Those learners could tell as much as they knew about the related topics.

Lastly, the interviews were transcribed and the results from both the surveys and the interviews were analyzed.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Questionnaire Surveys

Of all the 20 surveys, 19 were collected and 11 were from female students, the rest were from male students. All of the 19 surveys were perfectly answered. The survey was designed to show how much those students learned about Chinese PEs, especially the one 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe'.

*Table 1: Students' answers to the questionnaire survey.*

|            | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q5 | Q6 | Q7 | Q8 | Q9 | Q10 |
|------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|
| Student 1  | A  | C  | C  | C  | A  | C  | A  | C  | C  | C   |
| Student 2  | A  | A  | C  | C  | A  | C  | A  | C  | C  | C   |
| Student 3  | C  | B  | C  | B  | C  | C  | B  | C  | C  | B   |
| Student 4  | A  | A  | C  | C  | A  | C  | A  | C  | C  | B   |
| Student 5  | A  | A  | C  | B  | A  | C  | B  | C  | C  | B   |
| Student 6  | A  | A  | C  | C  | C  | C  | B  | C  | C  | C   |
| Student 7  | A  | A  | C  | C  | A  | C  | B  | A  | A  | B   |
| Student 8  | C  | C  | C  | C  | A  | C  | B  | A  | A  | B   |
| Student 9  | A  | A  | C  | C  | A  | C  | B  | A  | A  | B   |
| Student 10 | A  | A  | C  | C  | A  | C  | B  | C  | C  | C   |
| Student 11 | A  | A  | A  | C  | A  | C  | A  | A  | A  | B   |
| Student 12 | A  | A  | A  | A  | A  | A  | A  | B  | B  | B   |
| Student 13 | A  | A  | A  | C  | A  | C  | A  | C  | C  | B   |
| Student 14 | A  | A  | A  | C  | A  | C  | A  | A  | A  | B   |
| Student 15 | A  | A  | A  | A  | A  | C  | B  | A  | A  | B   |
| Student 16 | A  | A  | A  | A  | A  | C  | B  | B  | B  | B   |
| Student 17 | A  | A  | A  | A  | A  | C  | B  | A  | A  | B   |
| Student 18 | C  | C  | C  | C  | A  | C  | A  | A  | A  | B   |
| Student 19 | A  | A  | A  | A  | A  | C  | C  | B  | B  | B   |

Table 1 shows how the learners answer the questionnaire survey. Student 1 to student 10 are intermediate learners and student 11 to student 19 are advanced learners.

From Table 1, it is easy to draw the following conclusions.

One, although there exist differences in their proficiency of Chinese PEs and the PE *'wo shuo shen me lai zhe'* between the intermediate learners and advanced learners, the differences are not obvious. Most of them know Chinese PEs and the basics, but for most of them understanding and learning *'wo shuo shen me lai zhe'* seem difficult. In terms of function, although most of them know what Chinese PEs are and their functions, all the intermediate learners pay little attention to those PEs in textbooks, while all the advanced learners pay much attention except one. In the light of utilizing, utilizing PEs seems to be a challenge for all the learners no matter intermediate or advanced. Only 5 advanced learners claim that they often utilize PEs in their daily interaction. However, understanding PEs in others' utterance seems to be not a problem for almost all those learners. One thing worth mentioning is that only one learner believe that PEs are important, though all the rest don't ignore the importance of PEs, they certainly don't attach much importance to them either.

Two, when asked about the means of learning PEs, all the learners show no much difference, all agree that textbook and daily interaction are both important ways, while one mention music and TV shows as a feasible way.

Three, the last three questions are about *'wo shuo shen me lai zhe'*. For intermediate learners, 70 percent claim that they don't know the meaning of this PE, while for advanced learners, only 33.3 percent correctly get its implicature and its pragmatic function, and 44.4 percent understand its literal meaning. Almost all the learners agree that when utilizing *'wo shuo shen me lai zhe'*, what we should pay more attention to is the context.

### 3.2 Interviews

In order to obtain more detailed information, the writer conducted an online interview to each participant to ask the same 10 questions raised above and a few follow-up questions are asked as well. All the 19 learners gave more information about each question. Though in the interview section, they give different answers to Q1 to Q7, which are mainly about the basics of Chinese PEs, most of them know what a parenthetical expression is and some not only know what Chinese PEs are, but also give examples to illustrate their point. Student 12 said that:

*Yes, I know what Chinese PEs are. My teacher often uses PEs in class. For example, jushuo (It is said that) is one often used.*

One reason of this is that in intermediate and advanced Chinese class, teachers have already begun the teaching of PEs. Another one is that in their native languages, it is common to utilize PEs to achieve communication effectiveness.

While some others admitted that even though there are PEs in their native language, it is a challenge for them to learn and use Chinese PEs. Student 3 said in the interview:

*I don't know much about Chinese parenthetical expression. When people used PEs or when I encountered PEs in the textbooks, I always became confused and had to ask my friends or teachers for help. I know it is an important part of learning Chinese, knowing the literal meaning of each word is not difficult, but utilizing them in my daily conversation seems impossible.*

From what student 3 said, we can infer PEs, as a special part in language learning, are challenges for many second language learners. To understand them or to utilize them, one need to find out the meaning goes beyond the words.

Most of the participants seem confused about how to answer Questions 8 to 10 about the PE *'wo shuo shen me lai zhe'*. Almost half of them claimed that they didn't know the meaning of this PE. Eight of them comprehended it on its literal meaning and only three chose the meaning of *'I told you so'*. But when the writer tired to raise some follow-up questions about the functions and usages of this PE. Most of them failed to distinguish one function from another. Student 16 knew the conversational implicature of *'wo shuo shen me lai zhe'* as *'I told you so'*, and she could also figure out it was a reminder to others when applied in some context. But she was baffled when the follow-up questions of this PE concerning implicature was raised by the interviewer.

Student 16: *I think 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe' usually means 'I told you so' in many contexts, and it is used to remind others that something has been mentioned before. I think sometimes it can serve as a warning sign.*

Interviewer: *When do you think it can serve as a warning sign? Can you show us an example?*

Student 16: *No, I don't think so.*

Interviewer: *Do you know the meaning of it in this example? Wo shuo shen me lai zhe? Ni neng gen ta xue me? Gen ta xue neng xue hao me? (I told you so. Should you follow his example? Can you learn well following his example?)*

Student 16: *I think it may warn you that you shouldn't follow his example.*

Interviewer: *Can you explain why?*

Student 16: *Sorry, I can't.*

Student 16 can approximately figure out the meaning of this PE in the context but fails to give reasons. That's very common among many second language learners in learning PEs. If we try to utilize Gricean maxim, the implicature of 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe' in the above example will be naturally drawn.

The first reason that most second foreign language learners feel baffled is they can't distinguish meanings when the CP involves. Conversational implicatures are inseparable with Grice's CP (Biner 2013, Verschueren & Ostman 2009, Griffiths 2006). The implicature of 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe' differs when observing or non observing different maxims. In example 2 above,

A: 昨天 我 说 什么来着? (*Zuo tian wo shuo shen me lai zhe?*)

Yesterday I said what?

B: 你 说 你 要去 邮局. (*Ni shuo ni yao qu you ju.*)

You said you wanted to go to the post office.

The utterance observes the maxim of quantity in that the speaker makes their contribution as informative as required for the current purposes of the exchange but not informative than is required (Biner 2013). Here speaker A is completely unaware of what he has said, so he needs speaker B to tell him what he has said in as much detail as possible, and the content of the answer must satisfy the speaker's need for information. Otherwise, communication fails.

'Wo shuo shen me lai zhe' indicates that the speaker has said something about the contents, but the speaker's degree of certainty about the contents varies. 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe' is a true question when the speaker has no memory of what he or she said.

In the following Example 3, to ask the listener a question when he or she knows what he or she said is a violation of the maxim of quality and gives rise to conversational implicature. With the increase of the frequency of this use, the meaning was semantically transformed into the regular meaning of 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe'.

Example 3.

A: 我 说 什么来着, (*wo shuo shen me lai zhe,*)

I said what,

今天 要下雨, 可 你 还不信! (*jin tian yao xia yu, ke ni hai bu xin!*)

Today it is going to rain, but you didn't believe!

When the principle of cooperation is violated, conversational meaning will be generated, which we consider as pragmatic ability, which means to emphasize the speaker's previous words, to arouse or remind the listener's annotation, and to express his own subjective outlook at the same time. This subjective attitude means that the speaker considers the behavior of the listener as unreasonable and expresses dissatisfaction and criticism towards the listener.

Another reason is that the differences between the parenthetical expression 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe' and the interrogative expression 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe' count. First of all, from the perspective of person, the personal pronoun 'wo (I)' of the parenthetical 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe' cannot be changed at will. It can only be 'I', but not 'we', 'he (they)' or other personal nominative words. If it is a common interrogative sentence, then the personal nominative words are not fixed, but can change. Second of all,

the predicate verb of the parenthetical 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe' can only be 'shuo (say)', not other verbal verbs such as 'mention', 'to speak', etc. However, in the interrogative 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe', the predicate verb can be replaced by verbs with speech function without affecting the meaning of the sentence. Lastly, the structure of the parenthetical 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe' has solidified, so no relevant modifier can be inserted before 'shuo (say)', while the interrogative 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe' is loosely structured, so some modifiers can be inserted before 'shuo (say)', as 'just now' in Example 4.

Example 4.

“先生，我 刚才 说 什么来着？”卢克 喘着气 问。

'Sir, I just now said what? Luke out of breath asked.

("Xian shen, wo gang cai shuo shen me lai zhe?" luke chuan zhe qi wen.)

#### 4. Conclusion

The discussion above shows that when foreign learners are learning Chinese parenthetical expressions, they find baffled to learner them well, 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe' serves as a typical example of this. Through analyzing the results of conducted surveys and interviews, the following conclusions could be drawn.

First of all, most Chinese learners have basic concepts of Chinese parenthetical expressions, but for the specific usage of each one, they still require more time to practice. This is understandable, owing to the fact that most Chinese PEs can't be dealt with literally.

Secondly, literally, 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe' serves as an interrogative question to ask the listener what the speaker has just said when the speaker forgets what he said before. While the implicature of 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe' involves Gricean cooperation principle, the observance and non-observance of the four maxims will lead to different implicatures of this expression.

Thirdly, to learn 'wo shuo shen me lai zhe' well, foreign learners are required to realize that this PE can be utilized to express the speaker's emotions, which could be accusation, reminding or discontentment.

Therefore, when foreign learners understand the involvement of Gricean Cooperation Principle in understanding Chinese PEs, learning how to use them will not be complicated for them.

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