

The Study on Thematic Progression Patterns of English News

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Abstract

As one of the important ways to analyze discourse, thematic progression is an important way to organize news. It combines the thematic structure and textual coherence, revealing the dynamic distribution of theme and rheme in the discourse and the organization form of the discourse. As the carrier of information, news plays an essential role in people's daily life. The importance of news has drawn the attention of academic world. Thus, this paper aims to analyze the theme structure and thematic progression patterns in news reports to find out the preferred theme structures and thematic progression patterns. According to the analysis, it can be found that the simple theme is used more than the multiple theme, that the unmarked theme takes up the majority of all themes, and that the most frequently used pattern is the parallel pattern followed by the linear pattern. This study hopes to help editors and readers understand the inner structure of news deeply for effective news reading and news writing.

Keywords: News report, Theme structure, Thematic progression patterns

1. Introduction

At an age of information explosion, news plays an undeniably crucial part in our daily life. Facing a flood of news, readers often catch the focus of the news, and get the most valuable point due to limited time and energy. So, it is important for readers to have a comprehensible understanding of the structure of news and know about the characteristics of the news. As one of the important ways to analyze discourse, the theme system is an important way to organize the news.

The theme theory is firstly proposed by Vilem Mathesius (1939) of Prague school. He proposes the theory of Theme-Rheme, and makes an actual division of a sentence. He thinks that a sentence consists of theme and rheme. Theme is the first element of a sentence and the starting point of a sentence, and also it is concerned with the topic of the sentence. Rheme, the residual part, is the specific description of theme and the core of narration. The representative of functional grammar, Halliday, inherits this concept and develops it. With the development of the theme theory, theme has been widely studied. The researches are mainly about theme, thematic structure, and thematic progression. For example, Halliday (1985) probes into the classification of themes such as the simple theme and multiple theme. Danes (1970,1974) is interested in the relationship between theme and rheme. He is the first one to put forward the concept of thematic progression. Also, he summarizes five types of common patterns. Many scholars have done researches on different patterns of thematic progression. Eggins (2004) emphasizes the importance of thematic progression in his book *An Introduction to Systematic Functional Linguistics* and also proposes three types of patterns. In China, Xu Shenghuan (1982,1985) is the first to introduce the concept of theme and thematic patterns to China. He summarizes four basic thematic progression patterns. On the other hand, there are also various and abundant studies on news reports. For instance, Francis (1990) conducts researches on different sub-styles in *The Times* and *The Guardian*. He finds some dissimilarities between them from the perspective of functional grammar. Qiu Yanping (2003) studies the initial sentence of VOA news with the help of Halliday's theory, and she finds that the first sentence plays an important role in constituting the whole news content, and confirms the related information to the topic of news reports.

Although there have been many studies on news reports, they are not enough. Especially, the study of the news reports from the perspective of thematic structure and thematic progression is lacking. Thus, this paper will focus on the study of the thematic structure and thematic progression in the news reports aiming to testify the supposition of

Fries that there are some inner relations between thematic structure, thematic progression and genres, and news reports have their preferred theme structures and thematic progression patterns. What's more, through analyzing the news, it hopes to help readers and editors have a better view of the organization and characteristics of the news texts for better understanding of them and for effective production.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this part, it mainly introduces the theme theory about thematic structure and thematic progression, which are the theoretical basis of the present study.

2.1 Types of Theme

Themes can be classified into different types from different angles. According to the complexity of the theme, it can be divided into simple theme, multiple theme and clausal theme. Halliday (2000) believes that simple theme contains only one structural constituent. While a multiple theme consists of two or more than two structural constituents. Based on Halliday's three metafunctions, the multiple theme can be further divided into textual theme, interpersonal theme, and ideational theme, called experiential theme as well. The textual theme links one part to another, and it has the function of textual cohesion. It mainly includes continuative elements, structural elements and conjunctive elements. The interpersonal theme is used to express one's mood or subjective judgment, and keep communicative meaning. It can be realized by vocatives, modal words, or mood-marking words. Experiential element represents the topic of the sentence, and it can be performed by participants, circumstances, or processes in transitivity, which is a system in ideational function. It divides people's outside world and inner world into several processes. The clausal theme means that a clause acts as the theme in the sentence. It usually contains only one kind of elements, that is, experiential elements. Therefore a clausal theme is essentially a simple theme in structure. To make it clear, some examples will be given.(T represents theme)

- (1) I (T) am a student. (simple theme)
- (2) In 1969, (T) he was born. (simple theme)
- (3) If it rains tomorrow, (T) I will not go to the park. (clausal theme)
- (4) Well but then Ann surely wouldn't the best idea (T) be to join the group? (multiple theme)

The theme in sentence (4) is a multiple theme, which consists of textual element, interpersonal element and experiential element. The textual theme is performed by a continuative element "well", a structural element "but" and conjunctive element "then". The interpersonal theme is performed by a vocative element "Ann", a modal word "surely" and a finite word "wouldn't". The topical theme is realized by the participant "the best idea". The last part, "be to join the group", is the rheme.

According to the markedness of the theme, it can be classified as marked theme and unmarked theme. Markedness usually means that the use of a certain linguistic form is less typical or frequent compared to the common usage. Therefore, when a theme is marked, it means that it is less typically or frequently used. The opposite is unmarked theme. When the theme of a clause is at the same time the subject of the clause, then it is unmarked. As is shown in example (5). On the contrary, if the theme is not the subject, it is unusual and uncommon, it is marked. Example (6) shows the marked theme. Here, it is necessary to mention that whether a theme is marked or unmarked, it is the experiential theme that can be talked about markedness. The examples are as follow:

- (5) He (T) is my best friend. (unmarked theme)
- (6) After class, (T) my mother and I went shopping. (marked theme)

2.2 Thematic Progression

The theme and rheme in the former and latter clause have some connections. This connection is called progression by Mathesius. With the progression of the theme in each clause, the whole discourse gradually spread until the formation of the texture with complete meaning. It is not hard to find that the theme and rheme of a cohesive and clear-structured texture have some connections. They form some thematic progression patterns. Different scholars have concluded many different thematic patterns. Zhu Yongsheng (1995) proposes four types of thematic patterns, which are adopted in the present study of discourse analysis to identify different TP patterns. The following part will give a detailed description of the TP patterns. (T represents theme, and R represents rheme.)

- (1) Parallel pattern. In parallel pattern, themes of each clause are the same, but they have different rhemes. The theme of the first clause is the central point of the discourse. The rest of the themes in the following clauses are the same with the first one.

T1--R1 T2(=T1)--R2 ... Tn(=T1)--Rn

e.g. A lot of people (T1) live in this city. Some of them (T2) are from China. Some (T3) are from the United States. And the others (T4) are from India.

(2) Linear pattern. This type is the most common one. In one clause, its rheme or part of its rheme turns to be the theme or part of the theme of the following clauses.

T1--R1 T2(=R1)--R2 T3(=R2)--R3 ... Tn(=Rn-1)--Rn

e.g. We (T1) are going to a shop (R1). The shop (T2) is on the South Street (R2). The street (T3) is not far from our school (R3).

(3) Concentrated pattern. All the rhemes following the first clause are the same with the first rheme or part of the first rheme. Namely, clauses have different themes but the same rheme.

T1--R1 T2--R2(=R1) ... Tn--Rn(R1)

e.g. The number of people found driving while drunk (T1) has dropped sharply across the country since harsher punishments took effect on May 1 (R1). The number (T2) was down 45 percent compared to the same period in 2010 (R2).

(4) Crossing pattern

The theme of the first clause becomes the rheme of the second one, while the theme of the second clause becomes the rheme of the third one, and so on for the rest of the discourse.

T1--R1 T2--R2(=T1) ... Tn--Rn(Tn-1)

e.g. Drivers found with 80 milligrams or more of alcohol per 100 milliliters of blood (T1) are considered drunk under the law. (R1) Starting May 1, (T2) drivers found drunk can face prison terms of between one and six months as well as have their licenses revoked for five years (R2).

3. The Analysis of the News Report from the Perspective of Theme System

This study focuses on news reports based on thematic structure and TP patterns. So, the author collects 20 pieces of VOA news from January 2015 to June 2015, then picks out and analyzes the theme of each clause. Besides, TP patterns in clauses are identified.

3.1 The Thematic Structure of the News

By analyzing the data, the simple theme and multiple theme, the marked theme and unmarked theme are distinguished, and the number is counted. Now, look at the table below:

Table 1. Simple theme vs. Multiple theme

	Simple theme	Multiple theme	Total
Number of different themes	324	40	364
Percentage	89%	11%	100%

From Table 1, it can be seen that the total number of themes is 364, which includes 324 simple themes and 40 multiple themes. The simple theme accounts for 89%, and the multiple theme accounts for 11%. This result indicates that in the present study, simple themes take up the overwhelming majority in the news reports. Now let's look at an example.

(1) Authorities Still Looking for Two Convicted Killers Who Escaped from Prison in Northern New York

Police in New York state (T1) searched Tuesday for two convicted killers after they (T2) were reported walking along a road in a driving rainstorm the night before. Dozens of police armed with rifles (T3) walked through farms and fields near the town of Willsboro as they (T4) tried to apprehend David Sweat and Richard Matt. Authorities (T5) believe the two men are on foot after a daring escape last week from a maximum security prison farther north in Dannemora, located near the Canadian border. Officials (T6) say Sweat and Matt (T7) used power tools to carve out their escape route from their cells to a manhole cover in a nearby street. Questions (T8) have been raised about how the inmates (T9) obtained the tools, and why the noise (T10) did not draw the attention of prison staff or other inmates. Sweat (T11) was serving a life sentence for the 2002 death of a sheriff's deputy. Matt (T12) faced 25 years to life in prison on murder, kidnapping and robbery charges following the 1997 killing of a man. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo (T13) said the duo "definitely had help" in their escape.

Here, in this news, all the themes are simple ones. From this title, it can be seen that it is mainly about the authority's searching for the killers. So, the key points are what happened to the authority and the killer. Readers want to know some information about them. In each clause, the theme is either the authority or the killer. They are given directly and briefly. Topic theme at the very beginning of the clause can efficiently provide the information that the readers are eager to know. From the perspective of genre, it has correlation with the characteristics of news reports being brief and direct. With limited time and energy, readers often grasp the key point of the news, and neglect the redundant information.

Table 2. Marked theme vs. Unmarked theme

	Marked theme	Unmarked theme	Total
Number of different themes	74	290	364
Percentage	20.3%	79.7%	100%

Table 2 shows that the total number of themes is 364, including 74 marked themes and 290 unmarked themes. The percentages of the marked ones and unmarked ones are 20.3% and 79.7% respectively. Obviously, it can be seen that the majority of the themes are unmarked themes, which proves the notion of "marked" and "unmarked" themes as what they are called, unmarked ones are regular and typical in most cases and marked ones are particularly and purposefully set. Although the marked theme is uncommon and irregular, it is used in news report to emphasize or to draw readers' attention. Most of the time, the adjuncts act as marked themes in news reports, such as the adjunct of time, place, condition, etc. It can be easily concluded that in the discourse of news reports, time, places and conditions of the events and facts would be the most important information. With putting these kinds of information, i.e. adjuncts of time, place and condition, at the beginning of the clause, news reports can effectively convey the core message and catch the readers' eyes as quickly as possible. An example is given below.

(2) Obama Signs Law Ending NSA Collection of Phone Calls

...Earlier Tuesday, (T1) the Senate passed the bill 67-32. The House of Representatives (T2) had previously approved it. Under the new rules, (T3) U.S. telephone companies and not the super-secret National Security Agency will collect and hold on to the phone call records of American citizens. Federal investigators (T4) would then need a court order to examine those records if they suspect anyone of contacting known or suspected terrorists....

This example is selected from a piece of news. It is about a bill signed by U.S. President Barack Obama. The bill is designed to end the government's massive collection of telephone call data, which is intended to prevent terrorist attacks. In the news, T1 and T3 are both marked themes. The former is the adjunct of time, and it tells readers when this event happened, which is certainly what readers concern about. For the American citizens, they expect the new bill, and they want to know when this bill has been passed. For T3, it is a kind of condition. Under the new rules, readers know how things go on, particularly what benefits they get from the new bill. The information conveyed by T1 and T3 is both important for readers. They would catch the readers' eyes as quickly as possible.

3.2 Thematic Patterns of the News

Table 3. Number of different thematic progression patterns

Total number of patterns	Parallel pattern	Linear pattern	Concentrated pattern	Crossing pattern
158	78	45	21	14
100%	49.4%	28.5%	13.3%	8.8%

Table 3 shows the total number of the patterns is 158, including 78 parallel patterns, 45 linear patterns, 21 concentrated patterns and 14 crossing patterns. The percentages are 49.4%, 28.5%, 13.3%, and 8.8% respectively. It can be concluded that parallel patterns are the most frequently used ones followed by linear patterns. All these patterns play an essential role in textual cohesion and textual coherence. But writers prefer to use the parallel pattern and the linear pattern. Thus, this paper will mainly focus on these two patterns.

Now, let's take an example as an illustration. The news is the one mentioned in 3.1. The theme of each one is recognized and the thematic patterns can be drawn as follows: (The double slash means the boundary of thematic progression patterns.)

1)T1--R1--T2(=R1)--R2//--2)T3(=T1)--R3--T4(=T1)--R4--T5(=T1)--R5--T6(=T1)--R6//--3)T7--R7--//4)T8--R8--T9(=T8')--R9--T10(=T8'')--R10//5)T11(=R1')--R11--T12(=R1'')--R12//6)T13--R13

This news is about the police's searching for the killers. Four thematic patterns are identified in this news. The first pattern is a linear pattern, and it describes two subjects of the event, the police and the killer. Also, it gives the background of the event. The second pattern, the fourth pattern, and the fifth pattern are all parallel structures. For the second pattern, it clearly lists the information around the core content, that is, what the police have done. It is easier for readers to get the important information about the police. What the police do and their opinions about this affair are exposed to readers. Parallel pattern here functions as a skeleton of the plot, and every time the clause starts with the same theme, it adds a layer of new information to it. It is the same in the fourth pattern, although T8' and T8'' (T8' and T8'' stand for parts of T8) are not completely the same with T8. T8 shows the questions raised by people. Then, the specific questions are listed through T8' and T8''. It conforms with people's logical thinking. The information stretches around one central topic. It is true of the fifth pattern. Since the themes and rhemes in 3) and 6) have no relationship with their former or latter themes or rhemes, no pattern forms.

So, it can be seen that the parallel pattern has an obvious function as laying information framework for information. All the themes are around one core content to give a detailed description of the topic. With this function, reading of news reports can become clearer and more effective, because what all readers want to know in the discourse can be clearly listed with a parallel pattern.

Next example will be given to discuss mainly about the linear patterns.

(3) China, Taiwan Discuss Relations

Chinese President Xi Jinping (T1) has met with Eric Chu, the visiting head of Taiwan's ruling Nationalist Party, to discuss the continuing development of cross-Taiwan Strait relations. Mr. Xi (T2) is also the head of China's Communist Party.

Chu (T3) said before the meeting at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing Monday that he (T4) hopes Taiwan and China will continue to work for peace in the region and cooperate on issues such as environment and economy.

Chu, who is a likely presidential candidate in Taiwan next year, (T5) did not mention China's building of air strips and infrastructure in the disputed Spratley Islands, which (T6) are also claimed by several of China's neighbors, including Taiwan, the Philippines and Vietnam.

Chu (T7) met Sunday with China's Politburo Standing Committee member Yu Zhengsheng in Shanghai. Yu (T8) suggested discussions related to Taiwan's role in the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

China (T9) wants Taiwan to participate, but not under its name, which would suggest the island is an independent country.

The thematic patterns can be drawn as follows:

1)T1--R1--T2(=T1)--R2/--2)T3--R3--T4(=T3)--R4/--3)T5--R5--T6(=R5)--R6/--4)T7--R7--T8(=R7)--R8--/5)T9--R9

This news tells readers that Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Eric Chu to discuss the continuing development of cross-Taiwan Strait relations. Four patterns are identified except the last sentence. That is because the theme and rheme of the last sentence don't have any relations with the previous sentence. For the first and the second pattern, they are parallel patterns. They center on president Xi and Eric Chu respectively. Both of the third pattern and the fourth pattern are linear patterns. In the third pattern, the theme of the first clause is Chu, and the rheme is Spratley Islands. In the following clause, the theme is Spratley Islands. Chu talks about something in the place Spratley Islands. Then some background information about this place is also mentioned here. In the fourth pattern, the first sentence gives some information about Chu, that is, he met with Yu Zhengsheng. Then, what Yu did is described. The linear pattern enables news writers to gradually provide a series of detailed messages and build up a stock of information. By stretching the message already presented in the preceding rhemes and taking it as given information in the following theme, the information progresses and moves on. In this way the description of events or stories is completed. With the linear patterns, readers of news reports can follow a smooth logic order while getting more information about what they care. As information flows, readers can have a macro understanding of the main procedures of the events or stories.

4. Conclusion

Theme system is an important way to organize the discourse, making the topic prominent, and the passage cohesive and smooth. The analysis can testify the supposition of Fries that there are some inner relations between thematic structure, thematic progression and genres, and different genres have their preferred theme structures and thematic progression patterns.

According to the analysis, some findings can be summarized. Firstly, the simple theme is used more than the multiple theme, which is related to the characteristics of news reports to be brief and direct. With limited time and energy, readers often grasp the key point of the news, and neglect the redundant information. Secondly, the unmarked theme takes up the majority of all themes, and the marked theme has a small proportion. Unmarked themes are common and typical ones, while the use of marked themes is uncommon. The use of marked theme aims to emphasize or to draw readers' attention. In the news, the adjuncts usually act as marked themes, such as the adjunct of time, place, condition, etc. Writers tend to put this kind of information in the initial position, because they are important information about events and facts which can catch the readers' eyes as quickly as possible. Thirdly, for the thematic patterns, the most frequently used pattern is parallel pattern followed by the linear pattern. Parallel pattern has an obvious function as laying a framework for information to center on the core content, which makes news reports clearer and more effective. The linear pattern can provide large amounts of information. Rhemes in the preceding clauses become themes in the following clauses and will be stretched. In this way, themes and rhemes move forward. Readers can follow writers' logic and have a clear train of thought about the topic.

This study provides a new perspective for news appreciation and news writing. Through analyzing the news, this paper can help readers understand the content of news easily and help editors write news effectively.

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