

Journal of Education and Practice
 ISSN 2222-1735 (Paper) ISSN 2222-288X (Online)
 Vol 3, No 1, 2012

www.iiste.org

The Essence of Thematic Structures in the Academic Translated Texts

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Abstract

Thematic structure and progression play a major role in organizing the message and in enabling it to be communicated and understood clearly. One issue in translation is how translators tackle these cohesive devices when a text is translated into another language. This paper was centered on reviewing the status of thematic development and progression cross-linguistically taking translation into account. Reviewing previously conducted studies attest to the fact that thematic structures are greatly effective and valuable tools in translation process. They let translators to be conscious where they are losing their effectiveness in their arguments in terms of theme/rheme organization. Both writers and translators should have enough knowledge about thematic structures in creation and interpretation of texts. Translators should get mastery over the grammar and structure of both source and target languages at least in terms of thematic structure. Since, as stated by Ventola (1995), in academic texts the theme/rheme patterns are important in guiding the reader through the logical paths constructed by the writer. If little attention is paid in translation to these rhetorical effects, the writer's attempts to help the reader are destroyed (p. 102).

Keywords: Theme, Rheme, Thematic organization, Thematic progression, Translation.

1. Introduction

1.1 Thematic Structures: Theme and Rheme

According to Weil (1844 as cited in Wang, 2007, p. 2), the theoretical principles underlying the study of theme and rheme are derived mainly from the Systemic-Functional Linguistics. To Martin and Rose (2007), Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a big multi-perspectival theory with more dimensions in its theory banks that might be required for any one job. SFL is called systemic because compared with other theories it foregrounds the organization of language as options for meaning and is also functional because it interprets the design of language with respect to ways people use it to live (pp. 21, 24).

Thematic choices and patterning have been discussed widely in the existing linguistic literature, especially within Prague School of linguistics and systemic-functional theory. Theme/rheme structures have been defined by some scholars such as: (Blmonte & McCabe, 2001; Brown & Yule, 1983; Danes, 1974; Firbas, 1964; Fries, 1995; Green *et al*, 2000; Halliday, 1985, 1994; Matthiessen, 2004; McCabe, 1999; McCarthy, 1991).

According to Firbas's (1964 as cited in Davidse, 1987, p. 65), "theme is constituted by the element(s) of sentence carrying the lowest level(s) of communicative dynamism (CD) within the sentence". By degree of CD, he explains that we understand the extent to which the sentence element contributes to the development of the communication.

Fries (1983) establishes two approaches to the definition of theme: the "combining" and the "separating" approach. Combiners merge the concepts of theme/rheme and given/new, but separators believe that these two sets of concepts belong to two different systems. Halliday and other scholars working in systemic tradition represent this last approach, whereas Prague School followers merge the concept of theme as the point of departure with information focus (p. 2).

Halliday (1985) defines theme as:

"An element which serves as the point of departure of the message, what the speaker has in mind to start with, and also organizes the clause as message. The remainder of the message

is called the rheme. Therefore, a clause consists of a theme combined with a rheme and the structure is expressed by order. The order for this is theme followed by rheme (p. 30)."

He also elaborated further by stating that, "theme is what the clause is about and it comes in the first position, but this position is not what defines the theme; it is a means which realizes the function of the theme" (p. 39). Halliday (1994) argues that one of the various structures which makes up clause and gives it its character as message is thematic structure. In all languages the clause has the character of a message; it has some form of organization, giving it the status of a communicative event. But there are different ways in which this may be achieved. In English, as in many other languages, the clause is organized as a message by having a special status assigned to one part of it. One element in the clause is enunciated as the theme; this then combines with the remainder as rheme so that the two parts together constitute a message. This organization is known as thematic structure (p. 37).

There are two important notes in Halliday's work on theme: Firstly, it is not restricted to the level of the clause, but is also found beneath and beyond the clause, e.g. , group rank, complex clause, as well as paragraph. Secondly, the theme must be interpreted as a meaning not as this or that specific item that realizes the meaning.

He also proposes that the choice of clause theme plays a fundamental role in the discourse; it is this which constitutes what is known as the "method of development" of the text (1994, p. 61). As stated by Fries (1995, p. 323), "the way thereby a text develops its ideas is so called as the method of development of the text". It affects the reactions of its readers. The concept of method of development is not a structural idea but a semantic one. Different texts may express single methods of development to varying levels. In other words, some texts develop their ideas in simple ways, while other ones develop their ideas through complicated ways.

Besides Halliday, other scholars such as Brown and Yule (1983, p. 126) regard theme as a formal category in the analysis of sentences or clauses in a complex or compound sentence. For Brown and Yule (1983),

Theme is not only the starting point of the message, but it also has a role of connecting to what has been said. They assume that it is the left-most constituent of the sentence which has two important functions:

- 1) It maintains a coherent point of view by connecting back and linking into the previous discourse.
- 2) It serves as a point of departure for the further development of the discourse (p. 133).

They also point out that sometimes theme is referred to as object, idea's notion, topic entity or main character. To them, thematization happens when a referent is established in the foreground of consciousness and the other referents remain in background. Theme does not refer to a constituent directly but to the referent of the constituent coming to develop as the central subject of the discourse. These parts of discourse which are about a main character are referred to by noun phrase acting as syntactic subject (p. 135).

McCarthy (1991) states that the front position of a clause signals a framework. The rest of the clause transmits what we decide to say within this framework. He calls the item brought to the first place as theme or topic (p. 52).

Green, Christopher, and Mei (2000) define theme as a material immediately preceding the main verb of the main clause. The material which includes the main verb and all other remaining constituents of the sentence constitutes the rheme (p.100).

1.2 Thematic Organization

Halliday (1985, p. 54) categorized the elements which occur in initial position of the clause as follows:

1. **Topical theme** which is presented by a nominal group (e.g., everyone), a prepositional phrase (e.g., with ships continually at sea), or an adverbial group (e.g., by the middle of 15th century).
2. **Interpersonal theme** which consists of any combination of vocatives (direct addresses such as: personal names), modal adjuncts and mood marking elements (finite verbal operator (temporal & modal), WH-interrogatives and imperative *let's*).
3. **Textual theme** that includes continuatives (small set of discourse items which signal that a new move is beginning, such as: yes, no, oh...), structural elements (coordinates & subordinates) and conjunctive adjuncts which relate the clause to the preceding texts (e.g., in other words).

proposed by Danes, since it appears that Danes employed a standard for theme specification which accords more with the notion of “given”. Therefore, it is necessary to modify Danes’ model in order to apply it in other analyses which use a different standard for theme specification (p. 270). What’s more is that, Danes’ model was only tested on English texts and a few other languages. So, more evidence is needed from other languages to see whether other systematic patterns emerge in texts in other languages.

2. Thematization and Translation

Indeed, one way of achieving cohesion in text and even translated texts is through thematic patterning, which involves the relationships between clauses based on the information contained in their theme. Ventola (1995) states that there is no question about the usefulness of the analytical devices --thematic structures, but these tools are not expected to function in the same way in various languages. Contrastive linguistics has paid some attention to these differences. But an area that is relatively unexplored is what happens to the texts' thematic organization and their thematic progression when the text goes through a translation process (p. 85). This area is a fruitful one if investigated extensively. She suggests that “what is needed by is a more thorough investigation of the theme/rheme issues and the role they play in creating textuality and cohesion in translation of texts” (1995, p. 102).

In recent years a number of researchers have incorporated the issue of thematic structures and translation, and how thematic structures change when they go through a translation process. Researches have shown that thematic structure, organization, and progression are not quite the same among various languages. With respect to this notion, Matthiessen (2004) asserts that, for example, in Japanese, as in Tagalog, interpersonal theme is realized positionally by initial position; and the same is true about textual themes. Japanese, in contrast to Tagalog, tends to place topical theme early in the clause, after textual and interpersonal themes, but in line with Tagalog, Japanese may mark topical themes segmentally by a ‘postposition’ such as *wa* or *mo* (p. 550).

Ghabanchi (1990) performed a contrastive analysis of the target sentences of English and Persian texts. The corpus used in his study consisted of 40 short English and Persian texts written for the beginners by the native speakers. The total number of the English sentences was 237 ones, and that of Persian sentences was 315 ones. The English texts were drawn from the book *Practice and Progress* and the Persian texts were selected from *Taalimat Dini*, and *Farsi Reading* selection for second, third, fourth, and fifth grades of elementary school. He found three types of theme-rheme structures existing in his data: the reciprocal type, type (R), which indicates the simultaneous relationship between theme and rheme of a sentence with theme and rheme of the subsequent one; theme omission, type (O), which exists in Persian texts, and type (E) which is rare in both languages, the relation of the preceding theme to the subsequent rheme. Findings showed that most of the common references to theme in English are pronouns whereas in Persian most of the common references to theme are pronouns and synonyms.

As a systemic functional linguist who has investigated different aspects of the thematic structure, Ventola (1995) carried out a study in which she compared the role of thematic structure in German philosophy texts produced by German authors and their parallel texts in English, their translation. She analyzed 19 paragraphs as sample texts drawn from two philosophy texts produced by a German author. Both texts were translated twice by different translators into English. Results showed that thematic patterns change in translation, and this change is likely to complicate the reading process of translated academic texts.

McCabe (1999) compared the thematic patterning in both English and Spanish history textbooks. She analyzed the ideational, textual, and interpersonal themes in both corpora and concluded that the similarity in content, purpose and audience results in texts which show similarities in textual features.

Belmonte and McCabe (2001) worked on the notion of theme from a cognitive perspective. They also explored whether a cognitive approach to the notion of theme can contribute to different fields like translation and contrastive rethoric. They believed that the thematization of particular constituents throughout a text partly reflects the speaker perception of reality. They also added that cognitive-communicative motivations together with contextual extralinguistic factors are determining in the selection of thematic options in each text, and these motivations are not culturally specific (p. 21).

They selected texts written in both Spanish and English. Results revealed that the same global spatial strategy of thematization was chosen by writers both in English and Spanish when dealing with place relations in descriptive texts, and this strategy was generally marked by the selection of locative themes every time there is a change from one place to another. They found that the way in which text procedures view the field of discourse is a contributing factor in motivation for theme selection, for theme choice is linked to the contextual configuration of the text. They also concluded that theme choice was managed by several different factors: textual concerns, interpersonal concerns, grammatical constraints, and experiential iconism or a desire to present the order of constituents of the clause in a way which reflects the text producers' perceptions of reality.

Williams (2005) performed the analysis of thematic items referring to research and researchers in the discussion section of Spanish biomedical articles and English-Spanish translation. The corpus used in his study contained approximately half a million words and consisted of 192 research articles with Introduction, Method, Result, and Discussion (IMRD) format. The results showed that the Spanish texts had more integral references and more general researcher nouns in their themes whereas the translations had more singular research nouns associated with more propositional adjuncts in the Spanish texts but with more subject themes in the translations.

Jalilifar and Khedri (2011) scrutinized thematic development and progression in English academic texts and their translations in Persian. Applying Halliday's (1994) thematic organization and McCabe's (1999) thematic progression, they analyzed sample academic texts selected from the first three pages of the first chapters of nine English applied linguistics books and their translation versions that were representatives of applied linguistics books taught in the Iranian universities at undergraduate and graduate levels. Analyses of original texts and their Persian counterparts indicated that there were significant differences between the two text types regarding thematic development and progression especially in terms of unmarked and multiple themes.

3. Conclusion

Ventola (1995) contends that "the analysis of theme/rheme structures in the clauses and the thematic progression helps us to see whether the text is unsuccessful in its realizations" (p. 98). Analysis of texts and their translations in other languages in terms of thematic structures would enable one to see how texts unfold in different languages at the micro-structure level.

She adds that sometimes readers may find texts fuzzy since they consider some odd thematic structures that are not typical of the target language. The fault in these texts is very often placed on the author's failures of argumentation and rhetorical skills; it is presumed that the author's logic is not functioning well and his/her argumentation and rhetorics are seen to fail. But often the original argumentation is clear and well-structured rhetorically in the source text; it is the translation that fails and distorts the argumentative and rhetorical patterns (p. 91).

Finally, the obtained findings taken from reviewing previously done researches attest to the fact that thematic structures are greatly effective and valuable tools in translation process. They let translators to be aware where they are losing their effectiveness in their arguments in terms of theme/rheme organization. They increase and highlight the relationship between ideas in the text. Both writers and translators should have enough knowledge about thematic organization and progression in creation and interpretation of texts. Translators should get mastery over the grammar and structure of both source and target languages at least in terms of thematic structure. Since, as stated by Ventola (1995), in academic texts the theme/rheme patterns are important in guiding the reader through the logical paths constructed by the writer. If little attention is paid in translation to these rhetorical effects, the writer's attempts to help the reader are destroyed (p. 102).

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