Using Theme-Rheme analysis for improving coherence and cohesion in target-texts: a methodological approach

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Abstract

This paper contributes to existing process-based translation studies by putting forward a methodological approach for integrating information-structure theories in the translation process. The approach is based on a three-stage translation method (analysis, transfer and reproduction) and used in translation classes or in real-life translation scenarios, it has the following advantages: it provides a basis for ST understanding and in this way students become aware of different patterns of textual organization; it facilitates the creation of source- or target-oriented texts and shows how the source text may have different target versions in terms of internal organization, structure and focus, all different yet all correct, depending on the writer’s intention, client’s requirements or target language preferences; last but not least, it raises awareness about the fact that inadequate or inconsistent application of translation strategies above word level may lead to instances of incoherence at the global level of discourse.

Keywords: Theme-Rheme analysis, discourse analysis, discourse production, coherence, cohesion, translation process;

1. Introduction

In his article on the principles of discourse structure and content in relation to translating, Nida (1997: 42) claims that the more translators know about the structure and the dynamics of discourse, the more readily and accurately they can translate both the content and the spirit of a text. In the same vein, translation scholars stress the importance of developing information-structure theories of translation (Gerzymisch-Arbogast 2005, Cozma 2006, Gerzymisch-Arbogast/Kunold/Rothfuß-Bastian 2006). More recent studies on the relevance of information theories for translation (Dejica 2009: 97) have shown that knowledge on information theories may prove extremely helpful for translators in that, by applying them, they can identify the information structure of the source text and decide whether to preserve it or change it in the target text according to the requirements of the client, of the target language preferences for particular structures, etc.; label a source text as coherent or incoherent and if necessary, make the appropriate changes in the target text; and identify the chronology of events and identity of referents which leads to understanding the source text better. Additionally, Dejica (2009: 98) claims that most of the studies dealing with information theories in translation were comparative in nature and focused on differences between language structure, ordering of information, etc. in the source text and in the target text, and that none of the analysed theories have been integrated into a translation method.

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In line with these research desiderata, the aim of this paper is to contribute to existing process-based translation studies by providing a methodological approach for integrating information structure theories (Theme-Rheme) into the translation process and show their possible application and relevance for translation. In the first part, the Theme-Rheme theory is briefly presented and exemplified, and in the second part, a suggested stepwise methodology is presented.

2. Information structure theories: Theme-Rheme

The notions of ‘Theme’ and ‘Rheme’ have been extensively dealt with in linguistics during these last decades. The two main approaches to the organization of the sentence into two parts, the ‘Theme’ and the ‘Rheme’, refer to Theme as starting point and Theme as aboutness. Both approaches theorize that each sentence contains one element which is more important or central to the discourse and which is called Theme, and another element which develops the Theme, and which is called Rheme. What is different is that the first approach always considers the Theme to be the starting point of the utterance, whereas the second one sees it as aboutness and relates it to the subject of the sentence.

As early as 1974, Daneš used the term thematic progression to refer to the way subsequent discourse re-uses previous Themes or Rhemes according to an overall textual plan. Thematic progression relates the way Themes and Rhemes concatenate within a text to the hierarchic organization of the text and ultimately to rhetorical purposes. Daneš developed the model of thematic progression and observed different patterns of matching sentence arrangements. The three patterns observed by Daneš are described, exemplified and represented in what follows, with Themes highlighted in italics:

- **Linear progression**: The Rheme of a sentence becomes the Theme of the immediately succeeding sentence, as in the following extract:

  \[
  \text{Chocolate candy contains sugar, plus the naturally occurring } \text{stimulants caffeine and theobromine. The sugar and the stimulants can give you an emotional as well as a physical lift.} \\
  \]

  Figure 1. Representation of linear progression

- **Progression with constant Theme**: The same Theme is repeated at the beginning of each sentence:

  \[
  \text{Smokeless tobaccos are as addictive and carcinogenic as the tobacco in cigarettes, cigars and pipes. Smokeless tobaccos are chewing tobacco and snuff.} \\
  \]

  Figure 2. Representation of progression with constant Theme

- **Progression with derived Theme**: Subsequent Themes are derived from a superordinate item at the beginning of a text, in Theme or Rheme position:

  \[
  \text{Three main groups were selected to take part in the contest. Group 1 consisted of former Olympic champions; Group 2 consisted of persons with no records in Olympic contests but famous for their participation in illegal contests; and group 3 consisted of professional trainers.} \\
  \]

  Figure 3. Representation of progression with derived Theme
Recent studies (Dejica 2010: 48-59) proved that not all the information that comes at the beginning of a sentence is necessarily thematic, and that the identification of Themes and Rhemes of a text from a syntactic perspective, which takes into account the leftmost information unit in a sentence as being thematic, can be inaccurate.

However, for short texts, as these examples show, thematic progression may prove extremely useful for familiarizing translation students with patterns of discourse organization which ultimately account for discourse coherence and cohesion. Thematic progression may also be used contrastively in the source text (ST) and target texts (TT) thematic analyses to introduce translation strategies above word level such as fronting of time or place adjunct, fronting of an object or complement, and fronting of predictor (Baker 1994: 132-135), like in the following examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clubul Investitorilor (Source text, Romanian)</th>
<th>The Investors' Club (Target text, English)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>La finele anului trecut, la inițiativa conducerei Comisiei Economice a Senatului--respectiv a președintelui Dan Mircea Popescu și a secretarului general Ion Zara, s-a înființat Clubul investitorilor. Asociație nongovernmentală, cu personalitate juridică și apolitică, clubul se bucură de toate drepturile conferite de lege pentru promovarea unui climat favorabil afacerilor și investițiilor în România.</td>
<td>The Investors Club was founded at the end of last year, at the initiative of Dan Mircea Popescu and Ion Zara, president and general secretary respectively of the Senate Economic Commission. A non-governmental, non-Party political association, the club enjoys all the rights accorded by the law for the promotion of a climate favorable to business people and investors in Romania.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. Contrastive Thematic analysis and representation of a source- and target-text at sentence level

Even if in both texts the macro-Themes (expressed in the title of the articles and which in this case are The Investors’ Club) predict what the texts will be about, the difference between the thematic organizations of each text at the sentence level is obvious. The “zig-zag” pattern in the Romanian ST, typical for linear progression, places the importance on when and who set up the club (a fact which might be of importance in a wider context), while the “parallel” pattern in the English TT displays a progression with constant Theme and places the importance of the club itself. These different patterns of information organization clearly create a shift in focus which may alter the writer’s intention expressed in the ST and at a larger level of discourse, may even lead to lack of coherence and cohesion.

As stated above, such analyses are useful for translators in that they became more aware of the internal organization of texts; by applying them, they can (a) identify the thematic structure of the ST and decide whether to preserve it or change it in the TT according to the requirements of the client, the target language preferences for particular structures, etc., and (b) label a source text as coherent or incoherent and if necessary, make the appropriate changes in the target text. Moreover, translation studies researchers can also apply this approach to information structure to draw comparative structural analyses between parallel texts and establish source or target language preferences for particular thematic structures. Last but not least, genre analysts can use it to establish genres’ preferences for particular thematic structures. The following part suggests a stepwise methodological approach for integrating Theme-Rheme analyses into the translation process.

3. Theme-Rheme analysis for translation purposes

The method suggested here is part of a wider theory-building research which aims at proving a methodology for approaching texts for translation purposes. The method aims at integrating the Theme-Rheme analysis into the translation process so as to facilitate the process of ST understanding and help translators take consistent and transparent decisions as to the relevance of ST features in the TT.
Translation is seen here as an activity which transfers into the target text, with a specific purpose in mind, the writer’s intention expressed in the source text (Dejica 2010: 64). Integrated into a three-phase translation method (Gerzymisch-Arbogast 2005: 6), the approach to Theme-Rheme identification and analysis is detailed in what follows. For illustration and discussion, the following example is used:

11 measures are to be financed in Romania under the SAPARD programme between 2000-2006. Out of the 11 measures, 6 are expected to be launched in 2003. The other measures could also be launched depending on their accreditation process.

**Phase 1. Reception.** The first phase of the translation process, synonymous to text understanding, aims at identifying the thematic structure in the ST. As mentioned before, for didactic purposes, the identification of Themes and the establishment of the thematic structure will be used based on syntactic parameters, i.e. Theme as starting point of the sentence.

![Figure 5. Results of ST Theme-Rheme analysis.](image)

**Phase 2. Transfer.** This is the decisional phase of the translation process, where the translator, using the results of the analysis obtained in the reception phase, identifies the writer’s intention and establishes the translation purpose, either in line with the writer’s intention, or according to the client’s requirements or target language preferences. The analysis reveals that the text is built using progression with constant Theme, and that the writer achieves coherence and emphasis by constantly placing the same Theme (i.e. measures) in foregrounded position. Since transfer is a decision-based phase, the translator can now decide whether to preserve the same structure in the TT and implicitly obtain the same effects in the target language as in the ST, or to re-create the TT thematic structure and bring different information into the foreground. This re-creation of the TT using different thematic structures can be achieved by changing the word order at local or global levels of discourse. As mentioned earlier, such strategies may include fronting of time or place adjunct, fronting of the object, fronting of predictor, etc. (Baker 1994). Two such possible thematic structures, with a different focus than the one in the ST are (1) progressing with derived Rheme, with shared focus, i.e., on SAPARD, the financing body, and on the measures to be financed, and (2) progression with constant Theme, but different focus, i.e. SAPARD instead of measures, as in the ST (Fig. 6):

![Figure 6. TT re-creation using different thematic patterns](image)

**Phase 3. Reproduction.** In this last phase of the translation process, the target text is re-created using one of the possible thematic structures established in the transfer phase. It is thus implied that there may be several versions of
the TT, all displaying various thematic structures, all different yet all correct, depending on the writer’s intention, client's requirements or target language preferences.

4. Conclusion

The suggested methodology presented in this paper is intended to contribute to existing process-based translation studies. If used in translation classes, the methodology has the following advantages: it provides a basis for ST understanding and students become aware of different patterns of textual organization; it facilitates the creation of source- or target-oriented texts and shows how the source text may have different target versions in terms of internal organization, structure and focus, all different yet all correct, depending on the writer’s intention, client's requirements or target language preferences; last but not least, it raises awareness about the fact that inadequate or inconsistent application of translation strategies above word level may lead to instances of incoherence at the global level of discourse. In practice, if required, professionals may use the methodology to re-create coherence or to improve cohesion in source or target texts.

References


